

Why Is The Penis Shaped Like That?

And other reflections on being human

Jesse Bering, PhD

‘His writing is witty and he employs examples and analogies that make his arguments seem like common sense rather than the hard-earned scientific insights they really are.’ *New Scientist*

About the Book

Why do testicles hang the way they do? Is there an adaptive function to the female orgasm? What does it feel like to want to kill yourself? Does 'free will' really exist? And why is the penis shaped like that anyway?

Research psychologist and award-winning columnist Jesse Bering takes readers on a bold and captivating journey through some of the most taboo issues related to evolution and human behaviour. Exploring the history of cannibalism, the neurology of people who are sexually attracted to animals, the evolution of human body fluids, the science of homosexuality and serious questions about life and death, Bering boldly goes where no science writer has gone before.

With his characteristic irreverence and trademark cheekiness, Bering leaves no topic unturned or curiosity unexamined, and he does it all with an audaciously original voice. Whether you're interested in the psychological history behind the many facets of sexual desire or the evolutionary patterns that have dictated our current phallic physique, *Why Is The Penis Shaped Like That?* is bound to create lively discussion and debate for years to come.

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Why Is the Penis Shaped Like That?

**And other reflections
on being human**

JESSE BERING, PhD

For JCQ

An Invitation to Impropriety

For as long as I can remember, I've been sincerely curious, and vocally so, about certain "inappropriate" matters. My most earnest questions, I've noticed, tend to cause other people to back away from me very slowly. You might say I'm a little too analytical for my own good. "Isn't it unusual," I asked the absolutely horrified girl sitting next to me in my sixth-grade homeroom class one memorable day, "that my penis, when erect, is shaped more like a scimitar than a dagger? Certainly that must mean I'm deformed," I confided, whispering in her ear, "since obviously to penetrate a female like you properly, a penis must go straight into a vagina, not approach it from a forty-five-degree angle, as mine stands." Over time, I learned to bite my tongue. But a salacious mind, once stirred, seldom gets rest.

As I very slowly gained some much-needed social skills, I also found myself gravitating increasingly toward the world of science, a world in which nothing was sacred, no question too absurd or off-limits (at least for the sake of discussion, if not necessarily ethical fodder for the laboratory), and one in which I discovered other like-minded souls who didn't look at me as though I had three heads when I asked whether, say, people who prefer to be the recipient in anal intercourse might have a differently configured anal-genital internal anatomy than those who

find it intensely unpleasant. I still don't know the answer to that question, by the way.

Speaking of which, I should probably also add (since it will become obvious enough by my disproportionate focus on male genitalia) that there was something very important to me that was denied full expression in my earlier years and that undoubtedly shaped my view of the world. I was gay. Very, very gay, in fact. I confirmed this incontrovertible truth through numerous experiments in my adolescence, including groping and kissing unwitting "girlfriends," who, in spite of their objective good looks and wonderful personalities, were as arousing to me as a perfumed slab of ham with sparkling white teeth. This wasn't just the virginal jitters, I can assure you, but girls seemed to make my penis positively catatonic, while even from afar boys made it stand at that oddly forty-five-degree angle I mentioned before.

So, let me start by offering a full disclosure: my perspective is that of a godless, gay, psychological scientist with a penchant for far-flung evolutionary theories. Still, although I certainly don't try to hide my own personal convictions, I'm an impolitic person. All I ask is that you try to suspend judgment until after you've read at least a handful of essays. Just lean back, unbutton your pants, and, by all means, get comfortable with yourself. Maybe relax with a glass of Chardonnay. And *think*. I hope to make that last part easy for you. I want you to enjoy learning about your wildly ejaculating penises, your dribbling vulvae, and your own fears, biases, fetishes, and desires. Despite our differences, and there are certainly many in this world, there's one thing we all have in common: we're human.

I'm not interested in sensationalism for its own sake, but many of the questions that appeal to me most are, by definition, rather sensational. If you look at them closely enough, however, you'll notice how often the most titillating topics are uniquely able to raise deeper

philosophical questions and to bring much more substantial issues to the surface. For instance, in reading about zoophiles, you may find yourself, as I did, questioning your own knee-jerk moralistic sexual repulsions; a look at the evolution of pubic hair or acne unexpectedly reveals our close genetic relationship with other apes; masturbation fantasies reveal what makes us unique in the animal kingdom; and foot fetishists expose how our adult turn-ons are permanently calibrated by often-innocent childhood experiences.

I do try to be a good scientist first and foremost, whether I'm investigating female ejaculation, six-month-old infants unexpectedly sprouting pubic hair, or the psychology of women curiously entranced by gay men. Since many of these essays were published originally, in some form, in my columns at *Scientific American* and *Slate* magazines, and therefore survey only the most interesting dimensions of any given topic, I'm certainly not able to cover every aspect and contrary viewpoint surrounding every issue. I encourage you, however, to read further about the subjects that leave you wanting more, and for that purpose I've included endnotes to help get you going.

So, please, join me in impropriety. Let's not subscribe to the some-things-are-better-left-unsaid school of life. How very boring that must be. I invite you to follow along with me on a journey of scientific discovery. Feel free to dip in and out in your reading or read the essays out of sequence. Each stands alone. But do watch your step: it's a slippery one. And note that although the mood is for the most part light, it won't be all fun and games. Some of the essays I've included in this anthology are actually rather sobering—including a *really* close look at the mind-set of a suicidal person. I wrote that particular piece in response to the alarming rash of gay teen suicides in recent years. That was an article that resonated, and unfortunately so, with

many readers, some of whom courageously shared their personal stories with me after stumbling upon it.

There are eight sections in this volume, each one representing a general theme or subject area and sampling the astounding oddities of simply being human. The first of these sections, “Darwinizing What Dangles,” includes everything you didn’t know you always wanted to know about male reproductive anatomy. In part II (“Bountiful Bodies”), we’ll examine how we may be designed by Mother Nature to consume each other’s flesh, why we’re the only ape that suffers from acne, and many other little-known things about seemingly banal body parts. Next, in part III (“Minds in the Gutter”), we’ll explore some very dirty brain science, pushing our common sense into a few uncomfortable corners in the process. This prepares us for part IV (“Strange Bedfellows”), where we’ll take a critical, nonjudgmental look at some of the more intriguing sexual paraphilias, fetishes, and conditions, exploring their developmental origins, theories, and debates regarding clinical diagnoses. If you think having sex with animals is inherently wrong, or that sexuality starts in adolescence with the first flush of hormones, you may come away from this section with an unexpected change of mind.

In “Ladies’ Night” (part V), we’ll turn our attention specifically to the minds and bodies of women. Just note that I’m a gay man looking into and at these minds and bodies, so my take is a bit different from most. Speaking of which—and I’m not sure what Nietzsche would have to say about the content of the following section—in part VI (“The Gayer Science: There’s Something Queer Here”), we’ll then focus on some of the latest and most provocative studies on homosexuality. In part VII (“For the Bible Tells Me So”), we’ll examine how religion stems from our evolved psychology and how our standard burial practices aren’t doing ourselves or the planet any favors. And finally, in the last section of the book, “Into the Deep: Existential Lab

Work,” we’ll dig into some weighty, soul-wrenching questions about suicide, the meaning of life, and the evolution of joy and happiness.

Excited? I hope so. And what better place for us to start than by asking why in the world testicles hang like that—and why does it hurt *so much* to get kicked there?

PART I

Darwinizing What Dangles

How Are They Hanging? This Is Why They Are

A FEW YEARS ago, the evolutionary psychologist Gordon Gallup, whom we'll meet again later in this section, along with his colleagues Mary Finn and Becky Sammis, set out to explain the natural origins of the only human male body part arguably less attractive than the penis—the testicles. In many respects, their so-called activation hypothesis elaborates on what many of us already know about descended scrotal testicles: they serve as a sort of cold storage and production unit for sperm, which keep best at a temperature slightly lower than the norm for the rest of our bodies. But the activation hypothesis goes much further than this fun fact.

It turns out that human testicles display some rather elaborate yet subtle temperature-regulating features that have gone largely unnoticed by doctors, researchers, and laymen alike. The main tenet of the activation hypothesis is that the heat of a woman's vagina radically jump-starts sperm that have been hibernating in the cool, airy scrotal sac. This heat aids conception. Yet it explains many other things too, including why one testicle is usually slightly lower than the other, why the skin of the scrotum sometimes becomes rugose (prune-like and as wrinkled as an elephant's elbow), why the testicles retract during sexual arousal, and even why testicular injuries—compared

with other types of bodily assaults—are so excruciatingly painful.

To help us all get on the same page, consider an alternate reality, one in which ovaries, like testicles, descend during embryological development and emerge outside the female body cavity in a thin, unprotected sac. After you've wiped that image from your mind's eye, note that the dangling gonads of many male animals (including humans) are no less puzzling. After all, why in all of evolution would nature have designed a body part with such obviously enormous reproductive importance to hang outside the body, so defenseless and vulnerable? We tend to become accustomed to our body parts, and it often fails to occur to us to even ask why they are the way they are. Some of the biggest evolutionary mysteries are also the most mundane aspects of our lives.

So the first big question is why so many mammalian species evolved hanging scrotal testicles to begin with. The male gonads in some phylogenetic lineages went in completely different directions, evolutionarily speaking. For example, modern elephant testicles are deeply embedded in the body cavity (a trait referred to as testicond), whereas other mammals, such as seals, have descended testicles but are without scrota, with the gonads simply being subcutaneous.

Gallup and his colleagues jog through several possible theories of our species' testicular evolution by descent. One of the more fanciful accounts—and one ultimately discarded by the researchers—is that scrotal testicles evolved in the same spirit as peacock feathers. That is to say, given the enormous disadvantage of having your entire genetic potential contained in a thin satchel of unprotected, delicate flesh and swinging several millimeters away from the rest of your body, perhaps scrotal testicles evolved as a sort of ornamental display communicating the genetic quality of the male. In evolutionary biology, this type of

adaptationist account appeals to the handicapping principle. The theoretical gist of the handicapping principle is that if the organism can thrive and survive while still being hobbled by a costly, maladaptive trait such as elaborate, cumbersome plumage or (in this case) vulnerably drooping gonads, then it must have some high-quality genes and be a valuable mate.

But the handicapping hypothesis doesn't quite fit the case of descended scrotal testicles, explain the authors, because if it were true, then we would expect to see these body parts becoming increasingly elaborate and dangly over the course of evolution, not to mention that women should display a preference for males toting around the most ostentatious scrotal baggage. "With the possible exception¹ of colored scrota among a few species of primates," writes Gallup, "there is little evidence that this has been the case." I'm not aware of any studies on intraspecies individual variation in scrotal design, but I'm nonetheless willing to speculate that most human males have rather bland, run-of-the-mill scrota. Anything deviating from this—particularly a set of unusually pendulous testicles suspended in knee-length scrota—is probably more likely to have a woman dry heaving, screaming, or staring in confusion rather than serving as an aphrodisiac.

Again, a more likely explanation for scrotal descent, and one that has been around for some time, is that sperm production and storage are maximized at cooler temperatures. "Not only is the skin² of the scrotal sac thin to promote heat dissipation," the authors write, "the arteries that supply blood to the scrotum are positioned adjacent to the veins taking blood away from the scrotum and function as an additional cooling/heating exchange mechanism. As a consequence of these adaptations average scrotal temperatures in humans are typically 2.5 to 3 degrees Celsius lower than body temperature (37 degrees

Celsius), and spermatogenesis is most efficient at 34 degrees Celsius.”

Sperm are extraordinarily sensitive to even minor fluctuations in climate. When the ambient temperature rises to body levels, there is a momentary increase in sperm motility (they become more lively), but only for a period of time before fizzing out. To be more exact, sperm thrive at body temperature for fifty minutes to four hours, the length of time it takes for them to journey through the female reproductive tract and fertilize the egg. But once the spermatoc atmosphere rises much above 37 degrees Celsius, the chances for a successful insemination consequently plummet—any viable sperm become the equivalent of burned toast. So in other words, except during sex, when it’s adaptive for sperm to be hyperactive, sperm are stored and produced most efficiently in the cool, breezy surroundings of the relaxed scrotal sac. One doesn’t want his scrotum to be too cold, however, since nature has calibrated these temperature points at precisely defined optimal levels.

Fortunately, human scrota don’t just hang there holding our testicles and brewing our sperm; they also “actively” employ some interesting thermoregulatory tactics to protect and promote males’ genetic interests. I place “actively” in scare quotes, of course, because, although it would be rather odd to ascribe consciousness to human scrota, testicles do respond unintentionally to the reflexive actions of the cremasteric muscle. This muscle serves to retract the testicles so they are drawn up closer to the body when it gets too cold—just think cold shower—and also to relax them when it gets too hot. This up-and-down action happens on a moment-to-moment basis; thus male bodies continually optimize the gonadal climate for spermatogenesis and sperm storage. It’s also why it’s generally inadvisable for men to wear tight-fitting jeans or especially snug “tighty whities”; under these restrictive

conditions the testicles are shoved up against the body and artificially warmed so that the cremasteric muscle cannot do its job properly. Another reason not to wear these things is that it's no longer 1988.

Now, I know what you're thinking. "But, Dr. Bering, how do you account for the fact that testicles are rarely perfectly symmetrical in their positioning within the same scrotum?" In fact, the temperature-regulating function governed by the cremasteric muscle can account even for the most lopsided, one-testicle-above-the-other, waffling asymmetries in testes positioning. According to a 2009 report³ in *Medical Hypotheses* by the anatomist Stany Lobo and his colleagues, each testicle continuously migrates in its own orbit as a way of maximizing the available scrotal surface area that is subjected to heat dissipation and cooling. Like ambient heat generated by individual solar panels, when it comes to spermatogenic temperatures, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. With a keen enough eye, presumably one could master the art of "reading" testicle alignment, using the scrotum as a makeshift room thermometer. But that's just me speculating.

From an evolutionary perspective, the design of male genitalia makes sense only to the extent that it adaptively complements the female anatomy, which, I realize, I should really go into more (but there are only so many hours in a day). By contrast to males, unless a woman is engaging in strenuous exercise, the female reproductive tract is maintained continuously at standard body temperature. This is the crux of Gallup's activation hypothesis: the rise in temperature surrounding sperm as occasioned by ejaculation into the vagina "activates" sperm, temporarily making them frenetic and therefore enabling them to acquire the necessary oomph to penetrate the cervix and reach the fallopian tubes. "In our view,"⁴ write the authors, "descended scrotal testicles evolved to both capitalize on

this copulation/insemination contingent temperature enhancement and function to prevent premature activation of sperm by keeping testicular temperatures below the critical value set by body temperatures.”

One of the things you may have noticed in your own genitalia or those of someone you’re especially close to is that in contrast to the slackened scrotal skin accompanying flaccid, nonaroused states, penile erections are usually accompanied by a telltale retraction of the testicles closer to the body. (This is the sort of thing easiest to demonstrate using visual illustrations, and a quick Google image search should provide ample examples. Just choose your own search terms and disable “safe search”—though if you’re out in public right now, you may want to save this as homework for later.) According to Gallup and his coauthors, this is another smart scrotal adaptation. Not only does the cremasteric reflex serve to raise testicular temperature, thus mobilizing sperm for pending ejaculation into the vagina, but (added bonus) it also offers protection against possible damage to too-loose testicles resulting from vigorous thrusting during intercourse.

There are many other ancillary hypotheses connected to the activation hypothesis as well. For example, the authors ponder whether humans’ well-documented preference—and one rather unique in the animal kingdom—for nighttime sex can be at least partially explained by temperature-sensitive testicles. Although the authors note the many additional benefits of nocturnal copulation (such as accommodating clandestine sex or minimizing the threat of predation), this preference may also reflect a circadian adaptation related to descended scrota. Given that our species evolved originally in equatorial regions where daytime temperatures often soared above body temperature, optimal testicular adjustments would be difficult to maintain in such excessive heat. In contrast, ambient temperatures during the evening and at night fall below

body temperature, returning to ideal thermoregulatory conditions for the testes. Additionally, after nighttime sex the female partner is likely to sleep, thus remaining in a stationary, often supine position that also maximizes the odds of fertilization.

Although the activation hypothesis helps us to better understand the functional, if quirky, architecture of the human male gonads, it may still seem odd to you that nature would have invested so heavily in such a precipitously placed genetic bank. After all, we're still left with the curious fact that these precious gametes are literally hanging in the balance in a completely unprotected vessel. Gallup and his coauthors weigh in on this, too:

Any account of descended⁵ scrotal testicles must also address the enormous potential costs of having the testicles located outside the body cavity where they are left virtually unprotected and especially vulnerable to insult and damage. To be consistent with evolutionary theory the potential costs of scrotal testicles would have to be offset not only by compensating benefits (e.g., sperm activation upon insemination), but one would also expect to find corresponding adaptations that function to minimize or negate these costs.

Enter pain. Not just any pain, but the unusually acute, excruciating pain accompanying testicular injury. Most males have some horrific stories to tell on this score—whether it be a soccer ball to the groin or the flailing foot of a sibling—but all of us men have something in common: we've all become extraordinarily hypervigilant against threats to the welfare of our scrotal testicles. According to the authors, the fact that males are so squeamish and sensitive regarding this particular body part can again be understood in the context of evolutionary biology. If you're

male, the reason you probably wince more when you hear the word “squash” or “rupture” paired with “testicle” than you do with, say, “arm” or “nose” is that testicles are disproportionately more vital to your reproductive success than these other body parts. I, for one, had to pause to cover myself even typing those words together.

It’s not that those other body parts aren’t adaptively important or that it doesn’t hurt when they’re injured. Rather, it’s a question of the *degree* of pain. Variation in pain sensitivity across different bodily regions, according to this view, reflects the vulnerability and importance that different adaptations play in your reproductive success. Many children have been born of broken-nosed men, but not a single one has ever been sired by a man with two irreparably damaged testicles. The point is that male ancestors who learned to protect their gonads would have left more descendants, and pain is a pretty good motivator for promoting preemptive defensive action. Or to think about it another way:⁶ any male in the ancestral past who was oblivious to or freakishly enjoyed testicular insult would have been quickly weeded out of the gene pool.

The wonders of the cremasteric muscle don’t end here. It also flexes in response to threatening stimuli, in effect pulling the testicles up closer to the body and out of harm’s way. In fact, the authors point out, Japanese physicians have been known to apply a pinprick to the inner thigh of male patients as a surgical prep: if the patient displays no cremasteric reflex, the spinal anesthesia has kicked in, and he’s ready to go under the knife. Other evidence suggests that fear and the threat of danger trigger the cremasteric reflex. There are a number of ways to test this at home, if you’re so inclined. Just make sure the owner of the fearfully reflexive testicles knows what you’re up to before frightening him.

So, there you have it—an evolutionarily informed account of descended scrotal testicles in humans. Is the

whole thing nuts? Don't leave me hanging, folks. Ball's in your court.

So Close, and Yet So Far Away: The Contorted History of Autofellatio

LONG BEFORE I knew very much about anything regarding sex, I did what many young males do, which of course is to place an empty paper-towel roll over my penis and suck hopefully upon the cardboard end. Okay, perhaps not everyone does this; I was a little confused about the suction principle. And now I'm a bit embarrassed by the story, although it's been a full year since the event and I'm much better informed on the subject of fellatio today. Oh, settle down, I'm only joking.

Well, *kind of*. I did actually attempt this feat, but I was twelve or thirteen at the time, which, to give you a clearer sense of my unimpressive carnal knowledge at that age, is also around the time that I submitted to my older sister with great confidence that a blow job involves using one's lips to blow a cool breeze upon another's anus.

So to avoid similar confusion, let us define our terms clearly. Autofellatio, the subject at hand—or rather, not at hand at all—is the act of taking one's genitals in one's mouth to derive sexual pleasure. Terminology is important here, because at least one team of psychiatrists writing on this subject distinguishes between autofellatio and self-irrumatio. In nonsolo sex, fellatio sees most of the action in the sucking party, while irrumatio has more of a thrusting element to it, wherein the other person's mouth serves as a passive penile receptacle. (Hence the colorful and rather

aggressive-sounding slang for irrumatio—“face-fucking,” “skull-fucking,” and so on.)

In any event, my paper-towel-roll act was simply a Plan B at that puerile age, a futile way to circumvent the obvious anatomical limitations to oral self-gratification. And by all accounts, I wasn't alone in hatching Plan A. Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues reported in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, in fact, that “a considerable portion¹ of the population does record attempts at self-fellation, at least in early adolescence.” Sadly, given our species' pesky rib cage and hesitant spine, Kinsey estimated that only two or three of every one thousand males are able to achieve this feat. There's the story of the Italian decadent poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, who is said to have had a bone removed² to facilitate the act, or that old *Saturday Night Live* skit in which Will Ferrell enrolls in a yoga class only to become flexible enough to fellate his own organ. But truth is often stranger than fiction. In 1975, the psychiatrist Frances Millican and her colleagues described the real case of a “very disturbed” patient³ who learned yoga precisely for this reason.

Now, you may think that being one of the ultrabendable percent of the population is all fun and games. (We've all heard those quips about never having to leave the house.) But think again. There's a long and unfortunate history of pathologizing this behavior; psychiatrists have described its practitioners as being sexually maladjusted, stuck in an infantile state of suckling dependency, or even motivated by repressed homosexual desires. Take the case described by the psychiatrists Jesse Cavenar, Jean Spaulding, and Nancy Butts, who wrote in 1977 of a lonely twenty-two-year-old serviceman⁴ who'd been fellating himself since the age of twelve. He was driven mad “by the fact that he could physically incorporate only the glans, and wanted to be able to incorporate more.” Honestly, it must have been so—oh, what's the word I'm looking for ... it's right on the tip of

my tongue—*frustrating*, for this poor soldier. This is the ultimate cock tease, its being so close yet so far away.

Since the days of Freud, psychoanalysts have gone to town on the subject of autofellatio. In a 1971 article by the psychiatrist Frank Orland, we see the typical jargon-filled language⁵ used in dissecting the “symbolic” bases of autofellatio, which is conceptualized as a virtual “ring of narcissism”:

Autofellation represents a recreation of the early infantile state in which the intrapsychic representatives of external objects are separated from the self-object, with a coexisting parasitic symbiosis with the external object. Through the autofellatio phenomenon, the ego reestablishes the necessary mastery over the external object representative as a defence against object loss and to restore the parasitic fusion with the nipple-breast.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is unadulterated psychobabble—and I tell you this as a psychologist. Sometimes people are motivated to lick their own genitals because it just feels good. Of course, there are always going to be those, such as the dubious yoga master, who take it a bit too far and for whom autofellatio contributes to mental illness. The foregoing soldier, who couldn’t take it far enough, got so frustrated by his semi-fulfilled fantasy that when he masturbated the old-fashioned way, he could achieve climax only by imagining himself fellating himself.

The very first published psychiatric case⁶ of autofellatio, appearing in *The American Journal of Psychiatry* way back in 1938, was also one of the most outrageous and pathological. The patient was a thirty-three-year-old store clerk who, prior to being referred to the Yale psychiatrists Eugen Kahn and Ernest Lion, had just completed a sixty-day jail sentence for sexual assault. “Among his perverse

practices,” explain the authors, “were pedophilia, cunnilinguism, homosexual acts (fellatio, sodomy and mutual masturbation), exhibitionism, transvestism, fetishism, algolagnia, voyeurism and peeping.” But never mind all those plain vanilla paraphilias. The man’s psychiatrists were especially intrigued by his more unusual habit. He seems to have been a devious wee character, this patient of theirs. The authors describe him as being somewhat effeminate in posture, gait, and mannerisms; he stood only five feet two inches tall—“somewhat thin and with wide hips,” they wrote, with “a female pattern of distribution of his pubic hair,” and “his gag reflex is very sluggish.”

The patient was the third oldest of eight children and grew up in a strict, religious family, which the physicians felt he rebelled against by egregiously breaching their high moral standards. In recounting to the psychiatrists the origins of his interest in auto-fellatio, the troubled clerk recalled being invited at the age of fourteen by a “cripple boy” to engage in oral sex with him. The patient, being shy, had refused this offer, but the thought of it simmered and, lacking the courage to approach anyone else, he took matters upon himself: “He kept trying night after night, managing to bend his back more and more until he finally succeeded in August, 1923.” (Just in case you want to mark the anniversary on your calendar.) It turns out he liked it—so much, in fact, that even amid the long litany of perversions he enjoyed, self-irrumatio instantly became his favorite autoerotic act.

In an odd Pavlov’s dog sort of way, the authors even describe how the man’s sexual arousal had since then been accompanied by a “constricting feeling in the throat.” That must be a terribly annoying feeling, I’d imagine, and apparently also one not easily resolved. “He has attempted to secure substitute gratification,” say the authors, “by smoking, or by stimulating his pharynx with a banana,

vaginal douche or a broom handle. These have yielded various degrees of satisfaction.” And he did apparently get over his adolescent shyness and lack of confidence, too: he particularly enjoyed fellating himself in front of a shocked audience.

Since this initial case report by Kahn and Lion, a handful of others have trickled in over the years, with subsequent investigators attempting to find a set of common personality denominators in those who prefer autofellatio over other forms of sex. In a 1954 article in *Psychoanalytic Review*, for instance, William Guy and Michael Finn saw a theme beginning to emerge.⁷ “In all of the clinical descriptions,” observe these authors, “one finds repeatedly such phrases as sensitive, shy, timid, effeminate, and passive.” This is code for “queer,” I believe, and in fact other writers have more expressly noted the often-suppressed homosexual desires in these autofellators.

In fact, judging by the scant literature, one of the big psychoanalytic questions yet to be resolved satisfactorily seems to be the extent to which engaging in autofellatio—or perhaps simply the desire to do so—signals a latent erotic attraction to the same sex. I suspect, however, that the overrepresentation of gay men in the antiquated case reports is simply a reflection of the cultural ethos of those times. The most recent psychiatric investigations on autofellatio date to the late 1970s (around the time that Freud’s particular grip on psychiatry lost its tenuous hold), and the earlier ones to the 1930s, so as a rule the men described therein faced baseless moralistic proscriptions against homosexuality. This meant other men’s penises were very hard to come by. So it’s not terribly surprising that those too frightened or closeted to perform fellatio on another man would develop severe neuroses after indulging in their own penises.

A 1946 article from *The American Journal of Psychiatry* exemplifies this phenomenon. The case involves a thirty-six-

year-old, highly intelligent, personable, but virginal staff sergeant⁸ (not to be confused with the military man we met earlier) with closeted homosexual desires. According to the official record, he'd first performed autofellatio at age thirteen, but he became so frightened by this "impulse" that he resisted ever doing so again—that is, until a month prior to arriving at the psychiatric ward of the hospital. After giving himself head in private, the sergeant became intensely paranoid that the other soldiers somehow knew of his autofellatio and that every little snigger, whisper, or averted glance concerned this transgression. He suffered a nervous breakdown on hearing the word "cocksucker" floating about so casually and playfully in the military barracks, convinced it was meant just for him.

It's a rather sad ending for him, too, because despite his responding well to the doctors' reassurance that he was being overly paranoid, the sergeant was discharged for being "no longer adaptable within the military service." The therapists assigned to the case, Major Morris Kessler and Captain George Poucher, reached a rather strange conclusion, one that I have a hunch you might disagree with. "Sexual self-sufficiency," they write, "either by masturbation or autofellatio, is tantamount to having an affinity for one's own sex." In other words, if you were a fan of manual masturbation in 1946, my heterosexual male friends, you'd have been branded a secret homosexual pervert who likes penises so much that he gives himself hand jobs. This would have made autofellatio a devil of a case under the Clinton-era "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" ban on gays in the military had it arisen then. And, seriously, good riddance to those ignorant days of yore. To each his own—quite literally in the case of autofellatio.

I know, I know, I didn't even get a chance to talk about auto-cunnilingus in females. Given the even more serious anatomical hurdles in lacking a protruding reproductive device, such behavior in women may not even be possible. I

confess I don't know; and there's no mention of it in the scientific literature. The closest female comparison to autofellatio I stumbled upon is the case of women who suckle from their own *breasts*, for sexual or other purposes. One therapist writes of an especially self-sufficient female patient⁹ who had a habit of doing this. When he asked her why, she merely replied, "I'm hungry." But that's another story for another day.

Why Is the Penis Shaped Like That?

The Extended Cut

IF YOU'VE EVER had a good long look at the human phallus, whether yours or someone else's, you've probably scratched your head over its peculiar shape. Let's face it: it's not the most intuitively configured appendage in all of evolution. But according to the evolutionary psychologist Gordon Gallup, the human penis is actually an impressive "tool" in the truest sense of the word, one manufactured by nature over hundreds of thousands of years of human evolution. You may be surprised to discover just how highly specialized a tool it is. Furthermore, you'd be amazed at what its appearance can tell us about the nature of our sexuality.

The curious thing about the evolution of the human penis is that for something that differs so obviously in shape and size from that of our closest living relatives, only in the past few years have researchers begun studying its natural history in any detail. The reason for this neglect isn't clear. It's hard to imagine that hard-nosed scientists would be worried about the subject stirring up uncomfortable puritanical sentiments. The issue does have an intrinsic snicker factor, so I realize it takes a special type of psychological scientist to tell the little old lady sitting next to him on a flight to Denver that he studies how people use their penises when she asks what he does for a living. In any event, if you think there's only one way to use