

# Of Maybugs & Men

*A History and Philosophy of the  
Sciences of Homosexuality*

Pieter R Adriaens & Andreas de Block

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Reviewed by Marion Godman



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*Of Maybugs and Men: A History and Philosophy of the Sciences of Homosexuality*<sup>□</sup>

Pieter R Adriaens and Andreas de Block

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The recent Oscar-nominated film *Maestro*, both starring and directed by Bradley Cooper, concerns the personal life of composer, conductor, and polymath Leonard Bernstein. On the one hand, it depicts a life-long love story between Bernstein and his wife, actress Felicia Montealegre. On the other, it is a story about Bernstein's desire for and affairs with different men throughout his life. I thought about this film and the role of sexuality in Bernstein's life while reading *Of Maybugs and Men: A History and Philosophy of the Sciences of Homosexuality* by Pieter Adriaens and Andreas de Block.

The book is ambitious in that it critically assesses several different (histories of) types of research on male homosexuality—though with more focus on the natural than the social sciences. It is, however, restricted in scope in a different sense: it is almost wholly concerned with discussing male homosexuality, which, as the authors note, has quite regrettably been the almost exclusive focus of the 'gay' sciences, thereby setting aside female homosexuality (as well as bisexuality and indeed heterosexuality). The authors follow the Austrian-Hungarian lawyer and human rights activist Károly Kertbeny's understanding of homosexuality, defining it as 'any kind of sexual state or activity, whether mental or physical, that involves or focuses on one or more persons of the same sex' (p. 7). This definition crucially does not explicate the term 'sexual' and it leaves rather open when sexual activities add up to a sexuality or a sexual orientation. This openness makes it a fitting definition to putatively apply to non-human species but means greater questions about the nature of the sexual and of sexuality (and not just male homosexuality) loom large throughout the book.

The first chapter concerns the origin of homosexuality in human development, covering those psychologists, physiologists, and geneticists who have argued about its innateness. This chapter also covers the vexed philosophical debate about the meaning of innateness, concluding that the term 'innate', just like 'socially constructed', perhaps confuses more than it assists in understanding the ontogeny and ontology of homosexuality. The second chapter discusses different expressions of putative homosexuality in non-human species, ranging from maybugs to orcas to baboons. The third chapter concerns the scientific responses to the so-called evolutionary paradox of homosexuality, addressing different hypotheses about how homosexuality could evolve and be maintained in human populations when it seems to be a reproductively costly trait (I'll describe some different responses below in my discussion of the paradox). The fourth chapter discusses the sciences and theories relating to the medicalization of homosexuality. Finally, in the epilogue, we are provided with some reflections about when we should abstain from research on homosexuality due to its perceived harm and its possible misuse.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, because of the range of historical and scientific ground covered, Adriaens and de Block do not arrive at a unified thesis about homosexuality from these sciences. Nor do they offer a unified philosophy of the gay sciences. In fact, they often observe opposing trends motivating the scientific explanations. They suggest that aversive feelings about human homosexuality may have led some scientists try to explain away male homosexuality in terms of lack of available females (labelled 'Hobson's choice hypothesis'), or of homosexual behaviour fulfilling some non-sexual function. As an example of the latter, diddling is a type of reciprocal genital touching that is common for male baboons, but possibly also found in other species like lions. It is often considered, though without

much argument, to be a form of non-sexual ritualized greeting behaviour (though the authors do allow that such explaining away may be justified in the case of some species and some contexts). But then there are also examples of scientists whose research was influenced by activists. Physician Magnus Hirschfeld was, for example, impressed by Kertbeny's attempts to de-criminalize homosexuality. As part of a 'progressive science' of homosexuality, Hirschfeld tried to establish both its naturalness and innateness.

This comprehensive approach to the science of male homosexuality makes for a rich and valuable overview. It is, however, inevitably a bit disappointing for those hoping for a deeper philosophical synthesis of a how to characterize (male) homosexuality, or for some history and philosophy of science thesis about how to (better) conduct a science of (homo)sexuality. This lack of an overarching thesis is also a problem for a reviewer looking to convey, celebrate, or criticize some central idea.

All the same, the evolutionary paradox of homosexuality discussed in chapter 3 does stand out, even if the authors don't seem to want to elevate the puzzle to a unifying theme. For example, I believe that a more charitable reading of why animal researchers are perhaps overly apt to explain away seeming homosexual behaviour in non-human animals might not (just) be prejudices about gay or queer people, but rather that these scientists are either intrigued or plain dumbfounded by the possibility of homosexual traits evolving. Similarly, both the influential naturalistic understanding of disease proposed by Christopher Boorse ([1975]) and (under some interpretations) the hybrid normative-naturalistic version defended by Jerome Wakefield ([2007]) discussed in chapter 4 seem to inadvertently arrive at a disease verdict for some cases of homosexuality precisely because of the condition appearing to be evolutionarily 'dysfunctional'.

Thus, the alleged evolutionary paradox seems pivotal for many of the sciences of homosexuality, and the discussion of it in chapter 3 seems equally central to the book. Adriaens and de Block consider several different explanations of homosexuality's persistence in the human population. Could male homosexuality hold some reproductive benefits in terms of being a stable genetic polymorphism (such as in the case of sickle cell disease)? Could the indirect reproductive benefits be identified as part of kin selection (such as is more typically argued for in the case of menopause)? Could it be that male homosexuality emerges in humans and other animals because it allows individuals to build strategic alliances with non-kin, with sex being a reliable signal of vulnerability? Or should we rather think of homosexuality in terms of dual inheritance theories that allow for stable changes of cultural sexual norms, such as in contexts like urbanization?

Adriaens and De Block present all these options, but do not decisively argue for one of them. Personally, I find their most compelling response to be the one that questions the 'paradox' itself: Is it really the case that individuals with homosexual preferences have relatively fewer offspring than those with heterosexual preferences? Some empirical evidence suggesting that this is the case has amassed since the 70s, which the authors discuss, but the case is far from overwhelming. As the authors also suggest, this relative reproductive disadvantage might be both a recent and a Western male trend, connected to the emergence of homosexuality as an exclusive sexual orientation and

identity. So, the paradox might be applicable in the case of modern Western male homosexuality, but why should this be considered a fixed and representative phenotype?

The personal life of Leonard Bernstein suggests something different, and non-paradoxical. After all, Bernstein seemed not only to love his wife and enjoy sex with her, he also fathered three children with her. Indeed, his homosexual preferences or affairs do not seem to have been particularly reproductively costly at all. Bernstein might, of course, be more correctly characterized as bisexual than homosexual, but the point still stands: perhaps it is merely a particular characterization of homosexuality or recent expression of homosexuality as an exclusive sexual orientation that renders homosexuality paradoxical from an evolutionary perspective.

At the same time, I missed the evolutionary perspective when it came to the discussion of homosexuality in non-human species. Adriaens and De Block are clearly not impressed by the charge of anthropomorphism and argue that one might cautiously apply human (sex) terms, such as 'preference', 'orientation', and perhaps even 'identity' to the study of sexuality in non-humans. Moreover, they wisely note that we can often be interested in sex and sexuality in other species in their own right, without making reference to human sexuality.

While I sympathize with these qualifications, the focus of this book is, after all, humans and this inevitably invites comparisons between human sexuality and the sexuality and sexual activity of non-humans. It is a shame that it does not properly address the question of what principles one should use for comparing sexuality or at least sexual behaviour. There are, of course, some suggestions in the book for how one might go about this. In the discussion of the evolutionary paradox, the authors worry about scientists overestimating how important and representative a particular version of homosexuality is, namely, the modern Western male homosexual. They suggest quite convincingly that this may indeed be a distinctive kind of homosexuality, rather than representative of all of what male homosexuality or homosexual preferences are. By implication, it seems that they think that both temporal and ecological dimensions (in humans, the cultural niche or prevalent social norms) should play a role in the classification of (homo)sexuality. If so, the same sort of principle surely ought to be extended to the case of non-humans. We could think in terms of historical kinds of homosexuality, where classification proceeds according to the common ancestry, thereby following the principle of 'homology thinking' (Ereshefsky [2012]; Godman [2021]). With such homological thinking, we start by learning from our close primate relatives' sexual arousal and set aside the case of male bedbugs who get it on with one another (okay, the authors agree that male-on-male bedbug action might actually just be a case of males erroneously mistaking males for females).

Adriaens and De Block typically treat similarity in homosexuality among different species more loosely. For example, they appear to assume the convergence of some functional analogue among different species, such as when 'strategic alliance building' is employed as species-wide explanations of the persistence of homosexuality. This is surely an evocative proposal and of course reflects that such species-wide functional explanations are common currency in the science of homosexuality. Still, to respect the evolutionary history would be to be more upfront about how different apparently

functionally or behaviourally similar phenomenon (for example, diddling or same-sex mounting) might not in fact share a common history, and might therefore not share the same, if any, adaptive function.

The science of homosexuality is intriguing and this is particularly well conveyed in the use of several evocative photos and illustrations throughout that depict homosexual behaviour across the animal kingdom and human culture. This implicitly builds a case for why such science should cut across the biological and human sciences. So, it is a bit surprising that the book ends with a discussion of the conditions under which we should abstain from research on homosexuality. To me it seems that the evolutionary paradox that has puzzled so many, including lay people, might in fact be dissolved by research and theoretical work along the lines discussed in the book. This, in turn, might lead to both scientific and moral progress.

One person who has called for terminating the gay sciences is David Hull ([1986]). He criticized the science for assuming that homosexuality is defective at the same time as treating heterosexuality as normal and in no need of explanation. But the answer to Hull is surely not to stop the research on homosexuality, but instead to steer it toward research on sex and sexuality in general—not least heterosexuality. With the increasing demystification of homosexuality comes the need to demystify other things.

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