

# **A GAY HUMANIST MANIFESTO**

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## PROPOSITIONS OF THIS MANIFESTO

Humanism is a rational system of thought in which the primary objectives are human happiness and fulfilment, not adherence to supernatural beliefs. Humanism can be defined as working with others for the common good, or “Being good for goodness sake”.

This booklet is a manifesto - not in the sense of being a political party's pitch for votes - but in the sense of proposing a humanist view of the world specifically relevant to lesbians and gay men. Though written for lesbian and gay humanists, what it says may be of interest to others who are not gay, or who may be religious. Arguments are put forward to support the following propositions:

- human characteristics vary from one individual to another; this variation is natural and desirable - it helps us to adapt and survive in a changing world;
- human sexuality varies a lot; millions are strongly driven by sexual attraction to others of the same gender;
- our sexual desires are deeply rooted in our personalities; with sexual love, as with relationships between human beings generally, variety should be expected to occur;
- we should use observation and reason to develop our understanding of the world around us, testing our ideas out when practicable; we should challenge beliefs based on superstition, supposed messages from a god or gods, or traditions, especially those which conflict with rational understanding;

- we should develop a moral compass to guide our actions; a compass that will help us judge what will be of benefit to ourselves and those around us, and steer us through the difficulties of life;
- living among a heterosexual majority, we are constantly reminded of our own different natures; like other minorities, we may face questions about how we fit in;
- being an identifiable minority, we are vulnerable to discrimination; we need to stand up for ourselves;
- we should promote an outlook of tolerance and respect for individuality and difference in society generally;
- whilst opposing those who condemn us because of our sexuality, we should give credit where credit is due; we should not undervalue kind and helpful actions performed by those with beliefs different from our own.

The following sections of this booklet further explain each of these propositions.

**Human characteristics vary from one individual to another. This variation is natural and desirable. It helps us to adapt and survive in a changing world.**

Darwinian evolution is the scientific theory which explains how different species of living things all developed from earlier forms through genetic variation and natural selection. Variations that help any form of life to thrive are part of the process that brings about new species. Because of the vast timescale and the many thousands of different species on the planet, the way evolution works as a whole cannot be tested and demonstrated in a laboratory. Nevertheless a huge body of evidence does exist; it comes from recorded observations of nature, from the selective breeding by humans of plants and animals, and through links to biology, the fossil record, geology, astronomy, cosmology, physics, chemistry and many other scientific disciplines.

Simple observations and experiments can be carried out by breeding species of plants or small animals to demonstrate that variations occur and are passed on from generation to generation. Some rules to predict how certain traits are inherited were identified by Gregor Mendel in the 1850s. He studied the characteristics of pea plants, and one of the milestones in his research was the discovery of pairs of dominant and recessive genes. Cross-pollination of plants that produced yellow seeds with plants that produced green seeds would result in some later generations having 100% of plants with yellow seeds, and some with 75% yellow and 25% green. No later cross-bred generations contained fewer yellow than green, and Mendel found it was possible to predict the percentages that would occur. He deduced that the traits of seeds being yellow or of being green occurred as a pair, and that the yellow trait was dominant. A plant inheriting one gene of each type, i.e. having the yellow from one parent and the green from the other, would bear only yellow seeds; only when both parents had the green trait would plants bearing green seeds result.

We know now that genetic traits are determined by particular

molecular sequences in the genes of the living cells that make up our bodies. Our species, homo sapiens, shares most of these sequences with other animal species. We have developed in the same way as other living things, through the processes of individual variation and natural selection. Some human traits, such as eye colour, follow the dominant/recessive gene pattern of inheritance. Recent estimates of the numbers of lesbians and gay men in human populations, 5% or so, are much lower than the 25% found when a variation is due to a single dominant and recessive gene pair. Though estimating characteristics in human populations is more complex than counting the seeds of cross-bred pea plants, this suggests that sexual orientation is not determined by anything as simple as a single pair of dominant/recessive genes.

When species spread into new areas, or when the environment changes, some traits become more, or less, useful than they were before. New traits may appear at any time through genetic mutation. The outcome is a slow and continuing process of adaptation, and this has resulted in the huge range of species that has come into existence over the millions of years life has existed on earth. Many species have become extinct, some through dramatic environmental change, others because new species appeared that were better able to survive and breed.

Our brains being so much larger than that of other species, we are uniquely able to alter our environment intentionally. From forest clearances to fresh water reservoirs, we are increasingly working the levers of environmental change.

**Human sexuality varies a lot. Millions are strongly driven by sexual attraction to others of the same gender.**

Differences in physical characteristics abound among our species; our personalities, too, vary in countless different ways. Whether we think of intelligence, feeding, fighting, bodily strength, ability to use tools, entertainment, whatever aspect of human personality we

might choose, individuals vary. These variations are essential to civilisation, enabling people to develop particular abilities and specialise in a range of occupations and activities. They can also be the cause of conflict. Since individuals differ in so many ways, inevitably something one person enjoys may not be liked another, or may even be thought loathsome.

Human sexual desire is as varied as other attributes of our personalities. Same sex attraction has been recorded in different cultures in all periods of history, and in all parts of the world. Other species too exhibit same sex attraction. Sheep farmers, when deciding how many rams are needed to impregnate a flock of ewes, allow for about 10% of males being sexually attracted not to the ewes but to other rams. Horse breeders tell of stallions that are 'gay'. Pairs of water birds of the same sex have been seen making nests, some taking a fertile egg from the nest of a mixed sex pair. In communities of bonobo (a species of chimpanzee), promiscuous sexual acts between individuals of the same and opposite sexes occur frequently and appear to reinforce cohesion within the group. These are a few examples. Many, many more have been observed in the animal kingdom.

Historically, in humans many kinds of sexual relationships have occurred and been condoned in human societies, for example child marriage, forced marriage, slaves bought to satisfy the lust of their owners, and harems. What is accepted in one country may be illegal in another. In societies that value human rights and individual freedom, a rule of thumb applicable to sexual relationships is that the informed consent of the participants must be freely given. Many relationships approved of in other cultures, past and present, contravene this rule, but it leaves us free to do what we want with our own bodies, as long as we do not deprive others of the right to decide what to do – or not do – with theirs, providing we do not harm others, especially the vulnerable, and especially children.

Whether in liberal or autocratic societies, the sexual urge is a frequent cause of problems. Those who can be happy without a great investment of time and effort in the bump and grind of physical sex may look with bemusement at those who are

relentlessly driven by desire. They may well be pleased to escape the strife and misery that strong sexual urges sometimes cause. They may though, experience less of the joy that intense sexual love can bring. What they have no right to do is to assume their lower sex drive gives them the moral authority to condemn others who are more strongly driven. One of the most appalling instances of such bogus moralising was the suicide of the father of the modern computer, Alan Turing, who was driven to take his own life through persecution by the British authorities because he had consensual sex with another man, a crime under the laws of the time.

**Our sexual desires are deeply rooted in our personalities. As with relationships between human beings generally, a variety of types of sexual love should be expected to occur.**

Evolutionary arguments can be used to explain some prohibitions against sexual relationships. Inbreeding will, over time, limit the mix of different genes passed on to later generations, and increase the likelihood of offspring having genetic defects. With few exceptions, people who seek sexual partners instinctively look beyond their brothers and sisters and other close relatives.

To these instinctive prohibitions, laws, traditions and religions have added their own concepts of what is acceptable. Many earlier views of what should be forbidden have been contradicted, or called into question, by more recent scientific knowledge of human reproduction, evolution, and psychology. In societies which value human rights and individual freedom, those in power should not use the law to prohibit people from engaging in an activity unless it causes harm.

If sex is important in making us happy or sad, we have the right to decide for ourselves what suits us best, subject always to the rights of others being given due weight. Sex will play a major role in determining who (if anybody) we live with, and we will often make friends with those who share our interests and outlook. We



become aware of physical differences at a very young age, and during adolescence find ourselves being interested sexually in others, some of us in the opposite sex, some of us in our own sex, and some are attracted to both. Some of us discover that our initial desires were mistaken and change tack. We need to discover what is right for us, so as not to spend the rest of our lives fearing we are miserably doing what parents and others wanted, but not what might have brought us happiness. Attraction to the same or the opposite sex is only one factor in our sexual natures. Some arguments for and against promiscuity, and similarly for and against monogamy, are outlined in the paragraphs that follow.

### *Arguments in favour of promiscuity*

Sex is a simple physical pleasure which should be enjoyed freely by consenting adults whenever there is mutual attraction, as long as no harm is done. Engaging with many lovers will enrich our lives. Learning from them will improve our own ability to make love, and make us better able to bring pleasure to others as well as to ourselves. Being promiscuous means that we engage with a greater number of people in a mutually beneficial way, and shows our willingness to cross boundaries and reach out to strangers. It can make us feel we belong to a huge informal club of like-minded people.

An individual's sexual desires can change over time. Promiscuity makes it easy to move on to new experiences.

Whilst promiscuity may not bring everyone all they want, the prospect of a larger number finding at least some satisfaction is greater in a promiscuous world. This reduces sexual frustration, which causes psychological and social problems.

## *Against Promiscuity*

Any highly promiscuous man or woman is rather like someone who answers the question “Do you have any close friends?” by saying “Oh yes, I have thousands!” Their love is fleeting and hedonistic; relationships do not deepen and mature over time. All that matters about a complex human being is whether their appearance arouses sexual desire, and their actions give sensual pleasure. This is a cold way to love, a refusal to see sexual partners as sensitive beings who have hopes and dreams, problems and disappointments.

Between strangers, the understanding of each other's physical likes and dislikes is limited. There is no repertoire of shared sexual pleasures that can be drawn on to enhance love-making.

Promiscuity can lead to a constant hunt for new sexual partners. This predatory activity comes to dominate some people's lives; thousands of new conquests are sought to satisfy what is seen as a purely physical need, when satisfaction can only be found through a broader appreciation, a physical, emotional, and intellectual meeting of mind and body.

Can anyone engaging in an alcohol or drug fuelled orgy truly say that informed consent has been freely given by all the parties? An attitude of “What the hell, anything goes” is likely to predominate, with little regard to the wishes and well-being of others.

Promiscuity brings greater health risks. “Safe sex” will reduce these, but will not eliminate them. There are, too, people on the prowl who are nasty and dangerous.

High levels of promiscuity among gay men, far from being a form of sexual freedom, may be a hangover from oppressive times when gay sex was punishable by imprisonment, and exposure ruined careers and caused social ostracism. Then, brief anonymous encounters were the best way to avoid blackmail or prosecution. Patterns of behaviour that developed during those awful times of persecution have been foisted by older generations onto new.

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