

The Desideratum of Discourse: Lessons Learned from a Gay Sheep

WARREN ERSLY

What issue could be compelling enough to drive a host of prominent endocrinologists, bioethicists, animal rights enthusiasts, gay men and women, theologians, republicans, and democrats into a complete tizzy? Two words: gay sheep. In 2005, a member of the Oregon State football team was caught drunkenly speeding into the night with a sheep held captive in the flatbed of his truck. Upon the student's arrest, the police returned his ovine hostage to the university lab from which it was stolen. Perhaps a global scandal could have been avoided, were it not for the fateful words spoken by the lab attendant on its return: "That's one of our gay rams" (Dworkin).

Dr. Charles Roselli, a researcher at Oregon State, was, at the time, running a nationally funded lab devoted to decrypting the mysteries underlying mammalian sexual behavior. It was to him that the gay sheep—one of many—belonged. Dr. Roselli and his colleagues observed that roughly one in ten male sheep exhibit a "male-oriented" sexual leaning, characterized by their refusal to mount females and by their engagement in sexual activity with other males ("Volume" 478). Roselli's research, first brought to media attention by local Oregon news outlets, was eagerly picked up and circulated by national and global news companies. What ensued can only be described as a media flame-war with such participants as PETA, various gay rights activists, and, of all characters, Rush Limbaugh. How could anything generate such a far-reaching controversy? What, exactly, was Dr. Roselli working on?

In their 2004 study titled "The Volume of a Sexually Dimorphic Nucleus in the Ovine Medial Preoptic Area/Anterior Hypothalamus Varies with Sexual Partner Preference," Charles Roselli and his colleagues posited that a specific region of a sheep's brain dramatically influenced sexual behavior and, in rams, partner preference. Roselli observed that male-oriented partner preference among rams is rooted in neither dominance nor in flock hierarchy, nor is it the result of reduced or elevated hormone levels—adult male-

oriented and female-oriented rams share equal basal concentrations of testosterone, and exhibit the same partner preference even after castration (“Volume” 478). Given this absence of social and hormonal factors, Roselli reasoned that there must be a neural mechanism responsible for the observed variations in the rams’ sexual partner preferences. He hypothesized that “the medial preoptic area/anterior hypothalamus [also known as the sexually dimorphic nucleus], a region known to be critical for the expression of masculine sexual behavior in most mammalian species,” is the neural mechanism responsible for the variations in the rams’ sexualities (“Volume” 478).

Roselli used a series of tests to determine the sexual orientations of his rams before euthanizing all twenty-seven of his rams and ewes. Roselli and his colleagues then removed the sexually dimorphic nuclei (SDN) from the animals’ brains, employing various staining techniques and protein assays to measure the size and density of the area hypothesized to be responsible for sexual partner preference. They noticed that the female-oriented rams had the largest SDNs, the ewes the smallest, and that those of the male-oriented sheep were of intermediate size relative to the female-oriented males and ewes (“Volume” 481). Despite this correlation, Roselli and his colleagues were quick to note in their conclusion that “it is impossible to predict the sexual partner preference of any individual on the basis of a single brain measurement. Nor do the present data allow us to determine whether the observed differences in the size of the [SDN] are the cause or consequence of an animal’s sexual partner preference, or whether the size of the [SDN] is influenced by other unidentified variables” (“Volume” 482-83). Roselli and his colleagues also found that the ovine sexually dimorphic nucleus is highly receptive to both estrogen and androgens during fetal development (“Effect” 502) and that prenatal exposure to abnormal levels of testosterone may alter both its size and organization (“Ovine” 4450).

In 2006, critical coverage of Roselli’s research was kicked around the local Oregon news circuit for some time, until it finally—and rather mysteriously—made its way to the London *Sunday Times*. According to that publication, not only did Roselli’s research open up a Pandora’s Box of scientifically rationalized homophobia, but Roselli himself was leading the secret charge against homosexuality, conducting his research so that he might eventually uncover the biological basis of homosexuality and eliminate it. The *Sunday Times* speculated that Roselli would someday develop a so-called “Hetero-Patch,” “a ‘straightening’ procedure [such as] a hormone supplement for mothers-to-be, worn like a nicotine patch” (Cloud). The *Times* ultimately went on to put forward the notion that Roselli’s research “could pave the way

for breeding out homosexuality in humans” (Schwartz). This blatantly sensationalist commentary, though, was only the beginning. What started—and could have ended—as nothing more than a passingly interesting piece exploded into a global campaign once the *Times*’ article caught the attention of the animal-rights organization, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).

PETA’s campaign against Dr. Roselli officially began when their spokesperson, the openly gay tennis player Martina Navratilova, declared: “Homophobes are murdering gay sheep” (Cloud). Choosing to de-emphasize the animal research elements of Roselli’s work, PETA’s campaign instead opted to focus on the potentially homophobic aspects of Roselli’s research insinuated by the *Sunday Times*. PETA kicked off its media war against Dr. Roselli by hurling accusations of “sexual eugenics” (Dworkin), backing up the *Times* by publishing a write-up on their website reaffirming that “Roselli has made it very clear that he intends to use the findings of his experiments to ‘cure’ humans next” (“Crosses”). PETA and its allies in the gay community based their claims regarding Roselli’s intentions primarily on an early grant application that Roselli and his colleague Frederick Stormshak had submitted to the National Institute of Health. The grant application stated, “This research also has broader implications for understanding the development and control of sexual motivation and mate selection across the mammalian species, including humans” (“Crosses”). However, PETA failed to make two major distinctions in its interpretation of the grant application: that there are ideological and intentional leaps and bounds between “understanding” and “curing,” and that the NIH, as an institute devoted to funding research with possible human applications and benefits, would not get behind Roselli’s animal studies unless he could show that they relate to humans in some peripheral way (“Crosses”). PETA also decried the liberal use of the word “control” in Roselli’s grant application, while Roselli and his colleagues contended that “the word ‘control’ was used in the scientific sense of understanding the body’s internal controls, not in the sense of trying to control sexual orientation,” and that their experiments were performed in the scientific spirit of discovery and understanding, with no ulterior motives (Newman qtd. in Schwartz).

PETA’s battle against Roselli culminated in an email campaign in which PETA’s supporters sent Roselli and various University of Oregon administrators upwards of 20,000 vitriolic messages, accusing them of being “worthless animal killer[s]” who “should be shot,” begging them in a variety of ways to “please, die” (Schwartz). Yet it wasn’t just PETA and various gay activists

who threw themselves into the fray—based on the *Sunday Times* fringe speculations regarding the research, right-wing activists came roaring to Roselli’s side, despite the fact that their support was neither wanted nor warranted. Spurned by the *Times*’ baseless conjecturing of a “Hetero-Patch,” Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote on his blog, “If a biological basis [of homosexuality] is found, and if a prenatal test is then developed . . . we would support its use as we should unapologetically support the use of any appropriate means to avoid sexual temptation and the inevitable effects of sin” (Zylstra). To add insult to injury, Rush Limbaugh covered the media blitz on Roselli’s work, concluding that “gay activists finally have a reason to oppose abortion” because homophobic mothers might abort their children if they could prenatally determine the child’s sexuality (Cloud). It seemed that everyone wanted a piece of Roselli’s research—taking the *Times*’ speculations and running away with them, bending and contorting the facts in order to serve their own ideological agendas. By 2007, with a flock of critics ranging from republicans to gay activists, animal rights groups, bioethicists, journalists and theologians, the controversy surrounding Roselli’s work seemed to have finally reached its critical mass.

And it had. The public opposition to Roselli and the University of Oregon quickly fell apart due to changing conditions. Accusations regarding the direction of Roselli’s work became more and more extreme. Internal pressure from the gay community mounted as more and more gay supporters defected, and several prominent science bloggers and journalists worked frequently and fervently to cover the media firestorm, dispelling many of the myths and much of the hyperbole released on the part of PETA, thus turning public opinion in favor of Roselli and his work. Soon enough, the negative media that was originally directed at Roselli was redirected towards his opponents in PETA, the gay community, and various bioethics circles. Opposition soon dissipated, prompting PETA and the *Sunday Times* to pull their original criticisms of Roselli’s work from the web.

With Dr. Roselli’s arguments grounded in rational objectivity and PETA’s in fear mongering and rancor, one may feel compelled to ask why there is such a stark divide in rhetorical approach. PETA’s foreboding and cautionary language fully reveals their aversion to and apprehension of science. With such language as, “if we learn how to recognize gay brains in development, look out” (“Brokeback” 2), “the more we play God or try to improve on Mother Nature, the more damage we are doing” (Navratilova qtd. in Schwartz) and “resentment [of homosexuality] will give way to pity. We’ll come to view homosexuality as a kind of infertility—a disability,”

(“Brokeback” 2), it is evident that scare tactics, bleak futurism, and inflammatory prose dominate the articulation of PETA’s case; whereas Roselli, his colleagues, and his supporters seem to stick to more objective presentation of the research, as well as exposure and refutation of the opposition’s more absurd claims.

Perhaps the asymmetries in the opposing sides’ approaches to this debate are the results of *mediacized* science—the compression of complex scientific research into digestible news tid-bits that are to be communicated and marketed in a highly competitive and fast-paced media environment. So long as Roselli and his colleagues were receiving funding from the NIH, it is most likely that public opinion would not be a huge factor in how they chose to conduct their research. Roselli naturally had to defend himself to ensure that the NIH would not cut his funding due to public outrage, as well as safeguard his scientific reputation, but he and his colleagues had much less to lose than their opponents in the media war. On the other hand, the *Sunday Times* had papers to sell, and PETA had funds to raise and donors to please. The volatility of their arguments reflects the fact that they had potential revenue on the line, whereas Roselli’s stoic restatement of the research and its conclusions suggests lower monetary stakes. Emptypockets—an anonymous blogger who vigorously defended Roselli—perfectly summed up the degree of mediacizing in this debate when he blogged, “PETA picked Dr. Roselli because sheep are adorable, unlike mice or flies [on which sexual orientation research is also performed], and because gay-rights is a hot-button issue” and “a fuzzy lamb is a better fund-raiser than a rat” (“Crosses,” “Wolf”). This conflict demonstrates that when science enters the realm of the media business, facts are vulnerable to being truncated and cherry-picked to suit the tastes and opinions of the audience.

Despite the fact that PETA’s claims and supporting arguments may have been affected by a deliberate stretching of the truth and mediacizing, their sincerity is not diminished. PETA and its allies in the gay community had every right to be concerned about the direction and possible implications of Roselli’s research. The concern that any scientist could abusively tamper with the sexual aspects of identity is a legitimate one. Though it does not necessarily validate PETA’s extreme reaction, it does give them grounds to be scared. However, this concern infers that mechanism and motive are separable, something PETA and its supporters failed to recognize. They feared that the only thing that could possibly be driving Roselli’s quest to *understand* the mechanisms behind sexual behavior was a motive to *correct* sexual behavior; in

their minds, scientific research on such a controversial topic could not be done simply for the sake of discovery—everyone must have a motive.

In late 2007, after the public debate had died down, William Saletan of *Slate* magazine—who covered the controversy extensively—published a post-debate analysis and reflection entitled “Wool and Graze: Gay Sheep Revisited,” in which he noted the tricky pitfall of thought that motive presents. “You can’t infer Roselli’s motives, nor can you predict the motives of people who might exploit, in a later technological program, the mechanisms he’s clarifying,” for “scientists such as Roselli don’t focus on achieving a preferred outcome. They focus on learning mechanisms” (“Wool”). Saletan goes on to argue that one is always justified in being worried about scientific research that one believes to be “going too far,” but that research without a visibly vile motive has no reason to be stopped—even if the public disapproves. It seems as if the resolution to this conflict lies in conceding to one of the two opposing camps: PETA’s position (stop all sheep research now) or Saletan’s (all science must go on). However, Emptypockets offers us a middle ground:

Which experiments are worth it? The answer is not just up to the scientist—vertebrate research is heavily regulated, with lengthy approval processes from the government, the state, and the university. In many places, your experiments need to be approved not just by administrators and fellow scientists, but also by members of the community, regular people without scientific training who are put there to make sure that your experiments not only make scientific sense but also make common sense, that they are consistent with what your neighbors would find reasonable. (“Crosses”)

Emptypockets presents a balanced approach to conducting scientific research, one in which neither the public at large nor specific interests groups have complete control over the scientific approval process. Science, he points out, is much like democracy with its checks and balances. Organizations like PETA are just one voice among many in the republic of science, one check in a much larger, self-regulating community. Yet PETA failed to recognize the extent of its role in the scientific process; by failing to approach the debate from a position of *informed democracy* and instead favoring a position of *moral superiority*, PETA did not communicate rationally or realistically with its opponents and the public.

Morality is not always at odds with rationality, but as Steven Pinker points out in his essay, “The Moral Instinct,” it certainly can be. Pinker argues in favor of exploring the science and psychology that form the basis of

our moral conceptions. Just as Roselli argues that research into the biology of sexuality fosters tolerance towards homosexuality (“Wool”), Pinker posits that “the science of the moral sense can instead be seen as a way to strengthen . . . [and clarify] what morality is and how it should steer our actions,” thus fostering an analogous sense of moral tolerance (Pinker). In his discussion of alternative and divided conceptions of morality, Pinker accurately depicts the moral underpinnings of PETA’s bellicose reaction to Roselli’s work. He writes:

The moral sense, we are learning, is as vulnerable to illusions as the other senses. It is apt to confuse morality per se with purity, status and conformity. It tends to reframe practical problems as moral crusades and thus see their solution in punitive aggression. It imposes taboos that make certain ideas indiscussible. And it has the nasty habit of always putting the self on the side of the angels. (Pinker)

Purity, status, conformity, avoidance of harm, fairness, and community are all elements influencing the concepts of morality that Pinker points out. He notes that some people have a moral sense that is more in tune with some of these elements than that of others; thus, there are varying forms of morality. Controversies such as the Roselli debate stem from differences in morality. Communication breakdowns occur when these varying moral conceptions fail to level with one another, dissolving discourse and instead taking the form of “moral crusades.”

Pinker also points out that the point of all public discourse is mutual agreement, consensus-making, and “practical problem solving.” However, the conduct of the participants in this debate—perhaps with the exception of Dr. Roselli—clearly demonstrates that they weren’t at all out to solve any problems, let alone agree on a preferred course of action. PETA’s aggressive email campaign and the high degree of simplified, rhetoric-rich media coverage suggest a lack of communication between Roselli’s supporters and those of PETA. The latter group, though, reasonably concerned over the direction of Roselli’s research, unreasonably did nothing to create any sort of informed dialogue with their opponents. Instead, they held this debate in the court of public opinion, employing harsh and bombastic prose to bully both the public and their opponents into accepting their position unequivocally. A lack of communication and moral leveling in conjunction with a stripped down, media-centric approach to debate resulted in the partial collapse of democratic discourse.

Science is unpredictable. The unforeseen applications of new research can lead us down unexpected and unexplored paths. Motivated by a fear of the unknown, many choose to shy away from the complication and uncertainty that science presents. By dismissing PETA's reaction to Dr. Roselli's research, one risks falling into naïveté by failing to recognize the potential dangers of science. However, by blindly acquiescing to the organization's strict ideology and moral crusading, one also risks denying and even fearing the more progressive elements of science. Rarely does a debate demonstrate science, media, and morality intersecting so clearly. In order to successfully navigate these crossroads, one mustn't commit oneself solely to any one of these three perspectives, but instead should remain able and willing to negotiate in active discourse and dialogue among them. Even if Roselli's gay sheep fail to teach us the mysteries and complexities of sexuality, at least we can say we learned a thing or two about the desideratum of discourse.

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