



Virtually Normal

Andrew Sullivan

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No subject has divided contemporary America more bitterly than homosexuality. Addressing the full range of the debate in this pathbreaking book, Andrew Sullivan, the former editor of **The New Republic**, restores both reason and humanity to the discussion over how a predominantly heterosexual society should deal with its homosexual citizens.

Sympathetically yet relentlessly, Sullivan assesses the prevailing public positions on homosexuality--from prohibitionist to liberationist and from conservative to liberal. In their place, he calls for a politics of homosexuality that would guarantee the rights of gays and lesbians without imposing tolerance. At once deeply personal and impeccably reasoned, written with elegance and wit, **Virtually Normal** will challenge readers of every persuasion; no book is more likely to transform out sexual politics in the coming decades.

Virtually Normal Details

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João says

Andrew Sullivan apresenta ao leitor quatro grupos de argumentos relacionados com a homossexualidade na sociedade americana, expondo uma crítica racional sobre cada um:

Os **Proibicionistas** (com referência a Tomás de Aquino e à Bíblia) argumentam que o comportamento homossexual é anti-natural, pelo que é prejudicial à sociedade e deve ser proibido.

Os **Liberacionistas** (inspirados em Michel Foucault) acreditam que "homossexual" é uma etiqueta artificial que deve ser desconstruída, existindo apenas actos homossexuais.

Os **Conservadores** acreditam que a homossexualidade é um assunto privado e que deve ser admitido desde que não salte para a esfera pública. A política militar americana "Don't ask, don't tell" é um exemplo recente da postura Conservadora.

Os **Liberais**, segundo Sullivan, seguem na linha do movimento dos direitos civis dos negros norte-americanos, defendendo protecção legal para a minoria homossexual com medidas como acção afirmativa.

Sullivan conclui com uma perspectiva pessoal sobre a política ideal em relação à homossexualidade, uma posição intermédia entre a dos Conservadores e dos Liberais, em que o Estado (a coisa "pública") é neutro em relação à questão de orientação sexual (tal como deve ser em relação a sexo, raça, etc.), não se imiscuindo nos assuntos privados dos cidadãos, ao passo que é deixada liberdade total aos indivíduos (o "privado") para se comportarem em relação à orientação sexual tal como entenderem, desde que respeitem a liberdade alheia.

Segundo este ponto de vista todas as leis discriminando os homossexuais devem ser repelidas, sendo concedidos aos homossexuais todos os direitos e deveres dos heterossexuais, incluindo o direito a servir abertamente o seu país como militares e o direito ao casamento. No entanto, o Estado não deve ir mais além, isto é, legislando de forma a promover mudanças culturais que protejam os homossexuais, pelo que, por exemplo, as leis que agravam penas no caso de crimes de conteúdo homofóbico ou as leis que impõem igualdade de oportunidades em contratos entre privados, devem também ser repelidas.

Sullivan defende, no entanto, que faz parte da liberdade individual que cidadãos critiquem e desincentivem outros cidadãos em relação a comportamentos discriminatórios, isto é, é aceitável que uma empresa não contrate um funcionário por ele ser gay e também é aceitável que um cidadão escreva um artigo criticando e condenando essa empresa pela discriminação contida no seu acto; não é aceitável, no entanto, que o Estado legisle para determinar que as empresas devem procurar um equilíbrio em relação a minorias na sua contratação nem sequer para proibir a discriminação como razão para não contratação.

Richard says

As the title implies, Andrew Sullivan (a gay man himself) thinks there is something weird about homosexuals. In this book, he tries to put his finger on it.

Lucas says

As observers of Mr. Sullivan would expect, this book is well-reasoned and argued with great passion.

Certainly worth slipping off the shelf.

Joshua Weichhand says

I'd call this necessary reading on the topic of homosexuality by someone with a vested interest in being understood (Sullivan). Sullivan is Catholic, conservative, and gay -- and more than happy to embrace the peculiarity and seeming contradiction of those descriptions.

I came out with the same conclusions I had going in -- but it helps to have such clear arguments on the outset.

Brilliant book. You'd do well to unlearn everything you've heard and then buy this book.

Ken Rogerson says

This is really one of the best books about homosexual politics that I have read. I really appreciate how Sullivan takes a philosophical look at a variety of explanations for why things are the way they are in law, policy and politics about homosexuals (he is NOT talking about societal norms and values). And, while he does come across as judgmental at times, it is obvious that he has taken great pains to represent the positions as evenly as possible. The only quibble is that, in the concluding chapter, he doesn't really say HOW to make change happen -- just that it should. Maybe the policy geek in me slipping out.

Fraser Kinnear says

Wonderful essay. Written in the mid 90's, Sullivan considers four schools of thought on homosexuality that were popular in US culture at the time.

Each of these four philosophies were intentionally or unintentionally suppressing the rights and the dignity of homosexuals, and Sullivan made it his task to dissect and debunk each them in turn.

What's incredible to me is, while reading the book, I found application of many of these philosophies at work around me.

The four are: Prohibitionism, Liberationism, Conservatism, and Liberalism.

Prohibitionism was the least interesting to me, it amounts to those who want to use government to legally punish and socially deter homosexuality, which they believe to be an unnatural abomination. Sullivan defeats the argument by disproving their foundational belief that homosexuality is unnatural or that their original thinkers (he focuses on Jesus and the early church) were against the behavior.

Liberationism dismisses the idea of homosexuality as a historical construct that traps people into thinking about themselves and others in a limited way. Most of this thought was developed by Foucault, who I didn't know much about, but seems to promote abandoning all labels and concepts used to bucket and define people. I'm skipping over a lot, but Sullivan ultimately dismisses Foucault et. al. as promoting their own sort

of authoritarian form of isolation that is regardless totally detached from how people really live. And just when I thought this was too esoteric an idea to be relevant, I watched "I Am Not Your Negro", a documentary about James Baldwin, which had a clip of Baldwin debating some (white) Yale professor on Dick Cavett. The Yale Professor says discrimination shouldn't be a problem because he is closer to black academics than he is to white rural Appalachians. Baldwin's stormy response is incredible, and can be seen here. Baldwin delivers the same response as Sullivan to the same liberationist challenge: you can't transcend discrimination through language or ideas. Discrimination is a physical barrier.

Conservatives are different than the term I'm used to. Instead, Sullivan defines conservatives as "someone who essentially shares the premises of the liberal state, its guarantee of liberty, of pluralism, of freedom of speech and action, but who still believes politics is an arena in which it is necessary to affirm certain cultural, social, and moral values over others." This sometimes manifests in folks who "combine a private tolerance of homosexuals with the public disapproval of homosexuality." This idea proved to simply be dangerous, because of its lack of an early response to the AIDS crisis. I think this mindset has mostly disappeared from our culture, thanks to polarization over the issue.

The final (and most interesting) philosophy was liberalism. Sullivan sees liberalism today as having strayed a long way from its roots.

In a curious twist, as the culture has become more thoroughly liberalized, as more people approve the abstract notions of toleration, freedom of movement, of speech, of religion, of conscience, of choice, liberals have moved into an area where they sometimes seem opposed to these ideas. They have found themselves defending those who inhibit freedom of action (criminals), those who inhibit freedom of speech (antiracist, antisexist censors), and those who inhibit freedom of choice (those who enforce the now elaborate rules governing how individuals can associate with and employ people).

This has resulted what Sullivan deems "a crisis of legitimacy". This perceived crisis is in full force today, and has been totally weaponized in our politics. A great example is Cal Berkeley stopping Milo Yiannopoulos from speaking at their university during his book tour. Those on Milo's side, and (critically) those who are neutral or only leaning towards Milo's side, saw this as an act of hypocrisy for a liberal institution like Berkeley to silence Milo's (racist/mysoginist/disgusting) message. Milo obviously saw this as a big win, both in the "culture wars" but also financially, as the press boosts book sales. What is the solution? Sullivan stresses that liberals should focus on culture and not writing laws that push their values on those who do not share them.

Is Sullivan right? I don't think so. There are countless counter-examples where liberals winning legal/legislative battles have protected minorities. Sullivan seems satisfied to say that those victories are less important than the quiet victories of liberals pushing culture towards greater tolerance. However, I think the perceived hypocrisy is critical for a liberal to understand if we want any sort of dialogue with the rest of the country. This doesn't really exist today.

Cam White says

The author's characterization and explanation of the four main arguments about homosexuality were interesting and rang true, but much of the book was written in political and psychological jargon that went over my head. Definitely a good read if you are interested in law about homosexuality.

Rachel says

An eye-opener.

John says

This book is outstanding. I can't recommend it enough.

Emilia P says

I wouldn't say I "really liked this", but it was indeed quite well written and fairly reasoned. He lays out different camps --

1) Prohibitionist -- folks who believe, more or less, that by "natural law" homosexuality is against nature (cuz you can't make babies etc) and oppose it on those grounds. My gripe with this section: He's like Jesus and the OT people didn't know about natural law cuz it hadn't been invented yet. Isn't the point of natural law that it existed before it was philosophized? Yes, I think. Basically, I think he's a little obtuse when he's like "oh, something that occurs in only 5% of people isn't by nature abnormal?" But basically, a good lay out of what he considers a basically reasoned, if wrong, position.

2) Liberationist - which I think isn't really the polar opposite of the first. Liberationist is basically ACT UP - Silence=Death, let's try to make progress by being as flamboyant as we can. Oh but then we alienate people. And then we go back to academia. Or something like that. Basically, you can't effect change simply by being a weirdo. Probably true.

3) Conservative - Be friendly with gays socially but ban them from stuff in public. Which is silly. But lots of people have done it, and lots of people probably still do.

4) Liberal - making gays just another special interest group -- focusing on private rights/anti-discrimination (housing, employment, especially), calling anyone who doesn't give gay people everything they want a bigot. This is definitely problematic. I am glad he includes it.

So he says: give gay people the same public rights and responsibilities (military service, civil marriage) and let the private stuff sort itself out. Don't force anybody to love gay people, just don't force gay people to live a life of imposed secrecy. Does this work? I dunno. Is it well argued? Kinda.

I felt like it tried to tow a line between being a personal opinion piece and being a laying out of a political philosophy and in doing so, didn't completely work as either. Also, I thought he didn't really discuss the rights he was proposing within the context of the various arguments, which would have made a much stronger argument for me. Like: don't pull marriage out of your butt in the liberationist chapter! Introduce it to begin with guy! Dang!

So, good, interesting, well-written, but ultimately unsatisfying. (And not really an argument about how gay

people should act normal at all! Deceptive title!) Ah well.

Lillian says

Written in the mid-90s, this book contributed to shifts in the arguments surrounding gay issues. I gained a valuable appreciation of where the gay rights movement has been compared with where it is now. I also gained insight into the philosophical underpinnings of various attitudes towards homosexuals in civil society. I think this is a great read for just about anyone. It offers a sense of perspective and a very coherent argument for the equality of all people under the law.

zaiba official says

Amazing read on Gay/Transgender issues. Although I'm not pro-gay, his arguments certainly shed some light on issues I was previously unaware of.

Mary says

If you've ever tried to figure out how your insignificant, individual homosexual life can possibly equate to the polarizing target of political platforms and terrorizing agendas, Andrew Sullivan's tier-by-tier examination of perspectives helps make sense of it all. A definitive text book of information.

Chase says

I was skeptical about Andrew Sullivan's political argument. His thoughts in the introduction were, at best, mediocre, but then Sullivan fleshed out a rich understanding of the socio-political underpinnings of the conservative/liberal divide in mid-1990s America. To be sure, his survey scratches the surface of political problems shared between homosexual communities and the heterosexual majority; nevertheless, Sullivan's work was likely very insightful for gay men and women at this time (it was published in 1995), and his insistence upon gay marriage and the repeal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' (DADT) is foundational to the current political moment. I was particularly struck by the following passage from the epilog:

'The sublimation of sexual longing can create a particular form of alienated person: a more ferocious perfectionist, a cranky individual, an extremely brittle emotionalist, an ideological fanatic. This may lead to some brilliant lives: witty, urbane, subtle, passionate. But it also leads to some devastating loneliness. The abandonment of intimacy and the rejection of one's emotional core are, I have come to believe, alloyed evils. All too often, they preserve the persona at the expense of the person' (p.189).

Indeed, in a post-AIDS, post-gay marriage, post-DADT moment, the sublimation of emotion comes at the expense of normativity. But then, what is a battle if not surrounded on many sides by many (differing) issues? It's clear that Sullivan is a gay conservative (he would laugh should anyone ever call him queer). As objective as we can view his text, he makes an interesting addition to the political field of the mid-1990s: particularly at a time when much of the focus was turned to HIV/AIDS, disease technologies, and ultimately

finding a cure.

Barrett King says

Virtually Normal provides an excellent and detailed presentation of the arguments surrounding homosexuals. The only issue would be a growing irrelevance surrounding some of the issues Andrew Sullivan focuses on, namely gays in the military and gay marriage. Regardless, the comprehensive analysis of the principles of different viewpoints makes this book worth reading.
