5. Cardinal Sin to Capital Vice
The Social Construction of Homosexuality

In our daily lives we assume that words refer accurately and precisely to some part of the real world but this is not necessarily so. Reality, whatever that is, is not divided up neatly into chunks which correspond exactly with the words we use. For example, to which wavelengths of light does the word “green” refer? Or, in another example, at what stage does the lump of clay I put on my potter’s wheel change from being “clay” to “pot” — or “work of art”, if you are really being kind…. And, even if you are very kind and call my pot a “work of art”, someone in another culture might see and classify it very differently. In Northern India, once upon a time, friends and I descended upon a roadside stall selling simple domestic pots, bought as many as our car could hold and left the little girl minding the stall wide-eyed with amazement, not only at the amount of money she had to hand on to her potter dad when he returned, but at the madness of tourists who treasured her pots, normally used for storing stuff or making yogurt, as if they were made of gold.

Nick Yee in Catching The Phoenix: - The Social Construction of Homosexuality gives a neat resumé of the process which might — once our attention is drawn to it — seem self-evident, but the point made by the “social constructionists” is that in daily life we remain blissfully ignorant of the way in which the words we use and presumably the thoughts behind them are made. Yee says that words are our way of labeling parts of our experience of the world, that over time, they become standardized so that we can communicate our interpretation of the world to each other and that:

As this interpretation is standardized, it is laden with assumptions about how the world behaves and how different phenomena are related. Communication is therefore the dynamic process through which social reality is constructed and sustained such that a group of individuals come to share

1 “The sodomite had been a sinner; the homosexual was now a species.” Michel Foucault in The History of Sexuality, 1976.
2 http://www.nickyee.com/ponder/social_construction.html
the same worldview and can coexist. The worldview and assumptions of a culture evolve through time, become encoded in the language, which in turn reinforce the assumptions of that culture.

The phrase “social construction of reality” doesn’t imply that there exists no reality independent of human perception ......... The impossibility of communicating complex ideas without the use of a language forces us to conform to the assumptions of the language that we speak in. As soon as you use a word, you have bought into the assumptions of that word, and how it relates to other words and concepts. As soon as you speak in a language, you have tacitly accepted its assumptions and worldview.

Yee then goes on to examine how “homosexuality” is socially constructed. Following the French philosopher, Michel Foucault he stresses that “homosexuality” is very much a recent concept — remember, the word was coined only in 1868 although the ideas must have been percolating a bit before then. The concept is also surprisingly unique to Western culture in that unlike other cultures, our notion presupposes that same-sex attraction is a life-long predisposition and pretty much exclusive of opposite-sex attraction. For us, people are either “homosexual” or “heterosexual” — what scientists often refer to as a “bi-modal distribution” when they describe human sexuality. Of course we have the term “bi-sexual” to mean people attracted to both sexes, but generally we regard this as referring to a very small minority in our community. We also seem to mistrust the notion: among gay men particularly, “bi-sexuality” is frequently interpreted to mean that the person in question is in the process of “coming out”, and is therefore ultimately “homosexual”.

Rather than assume that homosexuality is a whole-of-life predisposition, other cultures typically see it more as just a part of a much wider repertoire of sexual experiences and often as belonging to a passing or temporary phase in one’s life. So, for example, in many tribes in traditional New Guinea, a youth participating in the initiation rites may spend several years in sexual relationships with one or more other males who are either same-age co-initiates or with older men who act as mentors and models for them and help them attain their own manhood. Often, in those circumstances, homosexual activity declines or even stops altogether when the man has passed through all the stages of initiation and eventually marries.

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Yee draws attention to an even greater divergence from the Western concept of homosexuality when he looks at Imperial China. Right up until the end of the Qing Dynasty, he points out, several Emperors had male harems and favourite male concubines. They even maintained stables of male prostitutes for the use of important visitors to the Court.

Male-male sexual and romantic bonds were construed as relationships between two people as opposed to a psychological essence that defined either person. Moreover, these same-sex bonds were seen as a perfectly acceptable and natural way of life in Imperial China.

There are two serious problems with our concept of “homosexuality”. First, is the assumption of a life-long pre-disposition already mentioned. As Yee says, “The general sense is that if someone figures out that they are gay today, then they must have been gay when they were born, and they will be gay for the rest of their life.”

Simply stated, the problem with this assumption is that there is just not the evidence to support it. Although everyone recognizes that surveys of human sexuality are always only as good as the answers people give to questionnaires, there have been many studies of sexuality and most, including most famously the Kinsey studies, report very few people remain exclusively homosexual throughout their lives… as a ball-park figure, about 4% of men appear to have exclusively male partners throughout their lives. The remainder are either celibate — which is rare — or have both male and female partners to varying degrees. Australian gay historians, for example, have recorded many oral histories from Australian soldiers who served in World War II which clearly demonstrate that “normal” men can have sex — and do so repeatedly — with other men for a time yet otherwise lead essentially heterosexual lives.

There is really no way of telling, at this stage of our history, precisely what proportion of people would have sex with both men and women because the social conventions against same-sex sex are so strong. Again, Nick Yee makes a good point:

Think about it this way. When someone realizes they are strongly attracted to Asians as sexual partners, they do not have to deal with the anxiety of wondering whether they will only like Asians for the rest of their life because there is no strong social norm for racial preference. But when someone thinks that they
are attracted to someone of the same gender, they are suddenly forced to deal with a life-long decision.

For almost 20 years I counseled young men who were “coming out” as gay. Consistently, one of the most difficult things they had to deal with was the realization that all the things they had earlier taken for granted would be theirs in the future, including marriage and fatherhood, were now ruled out… or so it seemed back then. These days, the expectation is changing, at least towards fatherhood. The young men in the final series of “Queer as Folk”, the Canadian TV series telecast here on SBS, were pretty much exclusively homosexual with very strong identifications as “gay” yet they were contemplating marriage (to other men) and fatherhood — this latter admittedly by virtue of the old-fashioned turkey-baster and the good offices of a lesbian pal.

The other problem with our notion of “homosexuality” is that it has come to be defined as an integral part of the person’s identity in such a way and to such a degree that other personal characteristics do not. For example, we generally acknowledge that a person might be introverted or extroverted, but we don’t yet talk of “the introvert community” or “Extrovert Pride”. The difference between personality characteristics such as introversion or extroversion and “homosexuality” is that these features have not yet been socially constructed in such a way as to be purposefully alienating.

I say “purposefully” but I don’t mean to be quite so consciously deterministic: our civilization, for whatever its reasons to reject same-sex sex, has constructed “homosexuality” as a category of people no one in his or her right mind would want to be like……

As an interesting aside, Nick Yee offers some alternative ways in which sexuality might be conceptualized. For starters, he suggests,

> without the assumption of a universal life-long sexual preference, we could have defined people as being “rigid and set” in their sexual preference versus people who are “flexible and adaptable”. We could have defined people as being attracted to people of their same ethnicity or someone of a different ethnicity.

In fact, gay men do already categorize other men if they have an ethnic preference: men who are noticeably attracted to Asian men are described as “rice queens” while, in America, black men characteristically attracted to
white men are called “snow queens”. And of course, there is the famous category, “size queens”……

We run into difficulties also with the Western construct of “homosexuality” when we stop to consider the difference, if any, between physical attraction and romantic attraction. One of the early complaints by gay activists in the early ‘70s was that “homosexual” focused too narrowly on genital sexuality and ignored all the other affectional and emotional aspects of human sexuality.

We also run into enormous — and probably insurmountable — difficulties when we use the word “homosexual”, or “gay” for that matter, to describe people or events in the past or in other cultures. For example, were Nick Yee’s Chinese emperors “gay” or “homosexual” or did they keep harems of men because sometimes they felt more like having sex with a man than with a woman and there was no one telling them this was “wrong”, “sick” or “sinful”?

For that matter, was Julius Caesar “gay”? How do we describe his relationship with King Nicomedes of Bithynia for which he was taunted, particularly by Cicero, for much of his life? Then there was Marcus Brutus who told the story of a man who apparently didn’t have all his wits about him but who, after saluting Pompey as “King“, greeted Caesar as ”Queen.” And even Caesar’s own soldiers following his chariot during his Gallic triumph, shouted

All the Gauls did Caesar vanquish, Nicomedes vanquished him;
Lo! now Caesar rides in triumph, victor over all the Gauls,
Nicomedes does not triumph, who subdued the conqueror.

As these examples show, the problem for Caesar was not that he might have had sex with Nicomedes but that he had allegedly been the “submissive” partner. The Romans, as we will see when we consider them in detail, didn’t give a fig for sodomy per se but really got their knickers in a twist about a man submitting sexually to another. This they believed reflected badly not only on his personal manhood but also on the pride of the Roman State.

Summing up, Nick Yee concluded:

Tacit in every language is the construction of a social reality that frames individuals and concepts as inside or outside the boundaries of social norms. This is why it's dangerous to buy
into the assumptions of a language and culture without trying to examine its own biases.

And he added as a final word,

*The irony of gay culture is that there is an emerging sense of the correct way of being gay - exemplified by TV shows like "Queer Eye For The Straight Guy". There is a certain way a gay man should dress, certain name brands that are favored, certain ways hair should be cut and styled, and certain skills and mannerisms that they should have.*

**The construction of “normal”**

These days we are perhaps less certain that heterosexuality is “normal” and “homosexual” is abnormal: the boundaries between “insiders” and “outsiders” are blurring to a degree we could not have imagined back in the 1950’s when many other members of U3A, like me, were becoming aware of the sexual norms of our society. It is salutary however, to go back a bit further in history and remember that when our grandparents were young, the world was not divided sharply into “heterosexuals” and “homosexuals”.

The writer and historian Jonathan Katz in his 1995 book, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* writes:

> In the first years of the twentieth century heterosexual and homosexual were still obscure medical terms, not yet standard English. In the first 1901 edition of the "H" volume of the comprehensive Oxford English Dictionary, heterosexual and homosexual had not yet made it. Neither had heterosexuality yet attained the status of normal. In 1901, Dorland's Medical Dictionary, published in Philadelphia, continued to define "Heterosexuality" as "Abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex."

While there were later objections to the use of “abnormal” and “perverted” in this definition (for example, see the OED Supplement of 1933), Katz argues that Dorland definition was correct in that it was arguing this

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“heterosexuality” was not directed to procreation but to pleasure for pleasure’s sake. He goes on:

_The twentieth century witnessed the decreasing legitimacy of (the) procreative imperative, and the increasing public acceptance of a new hetero pleasure principle. Gradually, heterosexuality came to refer to a normal other-sex sensuality free of any essential tie to procreation. But only in the mid-1960s would heteroeroticism be distinguished completely from reproduction, and male-female pleasure sex justified for itself._

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It was not until 1934 that the word “heterosexuality” appeared in the Unabridged Webster’s Dictionary (Second Edition). There, it was defined as the "manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality." Katz comments at that point, “_Heterosexuality had finally attained the status of norm._”

Most of us lived through what followed. In Katz’s words,

_The "cult of domesticity" following World War II — the re-association of women with the home, motherhood, and child care, men with fatherhood and wage-work outside the home — was an era in which the predominance of the hetero norm went almost unchallenged. In the late 1940s and the 1950s, conservative mental-health professionals reasserted the old link between heterosexuality and procreation._

Katz advances an interesting perspective when he suggests that it was the actions of many of the more liberal-minded scientists and others who actually helped set the division between heterosexual and homosexual in concrete. He singles out the famous sexologist Kinsey⁵ as being particularly influential in this way. As most of us know, Kinsey popularized the idea that rather than being separate and discrete phenomena, hetero- and homo-sexual feelings and activities among human beings are actually on a continuum.

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“But that famous continuum”, argues Katz, also emphatically reaffirmed the idea of a sexuality divided between the hetero and homo.”

Kinsey's "heterosexual-homosexual rating scale," from zero to six, sounded precise, quantitative, and scientific, fixing the het/homo binary in the public mind with new certainty. His science-dressed, influential sex-liberalism thus upheld the hetero/homo division, giving it new life and legitimacy.

Kinsey asserted that exclusively heterosexual and exclusively homosexual people do not "represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual." And as Katz reports, goes on to make his point by stressing that

…..the world's population "is not to be divided into sheep and goats." (That revealing Biblical metaphor positions heterosexuals as sheep, coupled with conformity, and homosexuals as goats, linked with licentiousness).

“Not properly masculine”
A constant source of discomfort for homosexual men, at least for the past century or so, has been the nagging thought that we are “not properly masculine”. Perhaps this has come from building into the social construct notions that all homosexuals are effeminate and, despite the fact that many VCs and other heroes were homosexual, that we lack the courage of the proper man.

Gay communities, particularly on the east and west coasts of the United States and other big gay centers, such as Sydney and Amsterdam, responded in the ‘70s and early ‘80s by evolving a life-style and fashions which emphasized (some might say, over-emphasized) our maleness. Remember, until then we had been wearing chunky gold jewelry, long hair and flared jeans……. The new style, commonly known as “Clones” featured blue jeans (worn so as to emphasize the bulge in the crotch which was technically known in the US as “the basket” and in Australia as “the lunch”, short for “lunch box”), a lumber-jack kind of checked flannel shirt, close cropped hair and, above all else, a moustache.

In smaller communities, particularly in the American mid-west, the Clone uniform was not popular. In such places, it could be dangerous to identify your sexuality by wearing a uniform. Also, many men did not like the Clone look: these were often men who were perhaps less concerned to “prove their
manhood” or who, even wearing such a uniform would have not seemed convincingly “butch” (or ultra-masculine) to even their nearest and dearest.

Gay men, even before Stonewall, have been notoriously preoccupied with body image. This may be because, like women, we are conscious of being other men’s sex objects. Perhaps more importantly, most people in Western Society are not really proud of our bodies and the belief it is deficient or deformed in some way soon adds up to body shame.

Either way, concerns over masculine identification and bodily attractiveness led to a new movement within the gay community and this, which set out to make outsiders feel like insiders, has ironically also ended up setting norms which judge some men ineligible. This “movement” came to be known as “Bears”.

A Case Study: Bears

When I was flying home from San Francisco back in 1980 I noticed that most of the QANTAS cabin crew, nearly all of whom were male, were wearing little teddy bears in one or other of their hip pockets. I had no idea at the time what the bears signified, but guessed it had some relation to the fashion, prevalent for the past decade or more, in which gay men out on the town commonly wore variously coloured handkerchiefs in either the left or right back pockets of their regulation jeans. You wore these to signal (a) the kind of sexual activity you were looking for that night and (b) whether you were “dominant” or “submissive”, or in other words, whether you wanted to do it or have it done to you. This was after all the era of “semiotics”……

I learned later that the little teddy bears were an expression of a growing revolt against such a mechanistic attitude to sex. It specifically signaled “I want affection and to get to know you, not just sex”. That was the beginning of Bears… a new construct was being born in which sex is to be personalized, not objectified.

Three years later, the terrible news of AIDS hit us and much of the unbelievably promiscuous gay “scene” of the past twenty years disappeared almost overnight. Now, instead of being a “gay activist” one became an “AIDS activist”, and the big issue was whether to come out as “positive”….. In counseling, I found parents stopped expressing their disappointment their son was gay and said instead told me how terrified they were he would get AIDS….
With the invention and marketing of “Safe Sex”, sex began to re-appear. Among the leaders were some rather burly, hairy men, many of whom wore check shirts because they really were lumberjacks; many too were bikers and blue-collar workers… A group, not exclusively homosexual, called “The Mountain Men” made its appearance in the mid-’80s and contributed the notion of “the natural man” — ie, be proud of your body hair, grow a beard and stop shaving the bits which show above your collar line. A nation-wide American group, known as The Radical Faeries (in its first incarnation — later versions seem to be more drug-inspired) who mistrusted the Clone look and disliked gay bar culture, added “wear whatever makes you comfortable” to the wish-list of men who did not feel they belonged in the Clone culture of the Coasts.

In 1988 a magazine was published in San Francisco called “Bear Magazine”. This contained rather soft porn pictures of hairy men. From its very first issue, “Bear Magazine” gave a name and a focus to the ground-swell against the Clone culture. The following year saw the inauguration of the internet-based “Bears’ Mailing List” which helped spread Bears clubs all round the world.

As it happened, one of the earliest Bears Clubs was Ozbears Inc. which was founded in Sydney in 1990. Shortly after its foundation I took over, first in an “acting” capacity, from the Secretary who died from AIDS. In this role I was instrumental, one way or another, in the foundation of many Bears clubs around the world. For example, in 1996 I came to Canberra from Sydney where I was still living and founded a bears club, BearsCanberra. By then there were similar clubs in Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide and Melbourne as well as “Bears Down Under” which I established on the Internet as a virtual club in 1995.

Bears clubs were described as clubs for “hairy men and men who liked hairy men” but this was just a catchy slogan: most importantly, the Bears ethos stressed that all gay men no matter what age, colour, shape or size were welcome. Up until the early ’90s, being a Bear meant meeting your fellow members, usually in a member’s home or some other private place, sitting down in reasonably comfortable surroundings and eating a meal together and talking personally to each other. For many gay men, the hardest thing they have to learn is to trust other gay men (after all, we were brought up to not trust the deviant) and so, sitting and chatting about your personal life to another member was a very valuable experience, especially since many men had only had rather impersonal sexual experiences in bathhouses or even in public toilets for much of their lives.
However, by the mid-‘90s, the Bears movement was already changing, becoming less inclusive, more exclusive and doing so for several reasons. First, because of the sudden popularity of the bears movement, clubs expanded to the point where they could no longer meet in private homes and cater by pot-luck dinners. Security also became a problem, especially so in the US mid-west where many fundamentalist Christian groups increasingly turned their hostility onto gays — and abortionists — when they no longer had the USSR to hate. The upshot was that Bears clubs moved to gay bars as venues for their meetings but this brought with it many of the problems which had prompted the Bears’ Movement in the first place – gay bar culture, including the meat-rack mentality and music so loud you cannot make conversation, men standing up, drinking rather than sitting down together to eat and chat…. A night out with the Bears started to be like just another night out “on the tiles”……

But there was another and just as significant change. Back in the 1976 a popular movie comedy called “The Ritz”, directed by Richard Lester and based on a play by Terrence McNally, had audiences in stitches as they watched the antics of a plump straight man who was trapped in a gay bathhouse and pursued by a so-called “chubby chaser”… While most people probably believed the terms “chub” and “chubby chaser” were invented for the movie because stereotypically no one could possibly be sexually excited by a fat man, that very same year a social group called “Girth and Mirth” was founded in San Francisco to cater for fat men and men who were attracted to fat men,. The following year, a similar club was formed in Boston, and another in New York in 1978. Later, conferences were held across the United States. The Seattle conference of 1986 used the title “Convergence” which has been the name ever since of the Girth and Mirth annual get-together of thousands of fat men and their admirers.

At some point in the early ‘90s, many fat and obese men found it perhaps more acceptable to identify as “bears” rather than as “chubs” and converged on the bears clubs instead. This was no problem for bears: their charter welcomed all shapes and sizes of men…. But over the years, fat has become the norm and these days, bears are generally identified not so much as “hairy men”, the catch-cry of the earlier period, but as “fat men”. “You can’t be a bear,” my partner was once told when we went to a function run by the bears club in Lisbon where we were living. “You’re not fat enough!”.

There is also now a practise of categorizing men: a “cub” is a young bear; a “daddy” is usually an older bear”; an “otter” is a slim bear; I am a “polar bear” because of my white beard….. And whereas once you could wear
your floral Hawaiian shirt over pink lycra shorts if you wanted to, now bears clubs expect members to dress “masculine”.

So what was once a gay men’s movement which started because men rejected body fashion, dress codes and sex objectification now has almost gone in the opposite direction and become exclusionist, rather than inclusive in its outreach.

The Metrosexual

Nowadays the social construct “gay” is changing and some argue, is already on the way out. In recent times, the hedonistic aspects of “gay” have been emphasized, and “gay” has come to mean to many a life-style which includes sex, drugs — but definitely not rock-and-roll which is far too passé. High on the list of what makes one gay is a good disposable income, a sense of sexual freedom, lots of hi-tech appliances and above all else, “looking good”, by which of course is meant the right haircut and designer clothes.

In an article in the gay magazine DNA, Don’t Shove Your Metrosexuality Down Our Throats, writer Matthew Denby argues that “We are being told that gayness is irrelevant now straight men are increasingly happy to shop like queens.”

He goes on:

*Have you heard? Gay is over. David Beckham is wearing nail varnish, straight guys are buying cosmetics and so, according to those in the know, gay is gone and “metrosexuality” is now in. This new phenomenon is, apparently, making our previous sexual identity redundant.*

*We're gasping and clutching our string of Ian Thorpe pearls.*

The word “metrosexual” was invented by a writer, Mark Simpsom, in an attack on modern gay identity and culture. Noting the huge increase in narcissism in men’s fashion and other magazines, he described the typical metrosexual as

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6 “DNA” magazine for June 2003 p.46
"......... a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis — because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are..... He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference."

To quote Matthew Denby again,

“Mass-market metrosexuality is separating traditionally gay areas of interest like narcissism and shopping-as-fun from the 'yuck factor' of homosexuality and its unpleasant associations with anal sex.”

But does this mean that sexual orientation no longer matters? Is this really the end of gay? Denby quoted a 33-year old Sydney gay business man, whom he called Daniel:

“As long as men are attracted to men, a gay identity will exist. The gay identity is changing along with the rest of society. It's not going to stay the same while everyone else moves on.”