

## XIV—SEXUAL ORIENTATION: WHAT IS IT?

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I defend an account of sexual orientation, understood as a reflexive disposition to be sexually attracted to people of a particular biological Sex or Sexes. An orientation is identified in terms of two aspects: the Sex of the subject who has the disposition, and whether that Sex is the same as, or different to, the Sex to which the subject is disposed to be attracted. I explore this account in some detail and defend it from several challenges. In doing so, I provide a theoretical framework that justifies our continued reference to Sex-directed sexual orientation as an important means of classifying human subjects.

### I

*Introduction.* Here's a collection of erstwhile truisms about sexual orientation; statements that many people formerly understood as fairly unexceptionable, and even banal. Call this the 'Orthodox Account' (OA). To avoid confusion, I'll use 'sex' to refer to sexual activity, and 'Sex', capitalized, to refer to biological sex.

(OA) A sexual orientation is a feature of a person, differentiated from other sexual predilections or preferences. Its possession causes a person to be sexually attracted to (sexually desire, be aroused by, and exhibit other sexually motivated behaviour towards) those people of a particular Sex. The nature of a subject's sexual orientation, in a particular case, is type-identified in virtue of two features: (a) the Sex of the desiring subject; (b) the Sex of the type of person typically desired by the subject. A heterosexual or straight orientation is one which causes one to be sexually attracted only to people of the *opposite* Sex to oneself. A homosexual (gay or lesbian) orientation causes one to be sexually attracted only to people of the *same* Sex as oneself. A bisexual orientation is one which causes one to be sexually attracted to people of both the *opposite and same* Sex to oneself.

OA is currently treated by many as, at best, quaintly old-fashioned, and at worst, ethically unacceptable and pernicious. This treatment is a mistake, I'll argue. In what follows, I seek to bolster OA, by surrounding it with a theoretical framework that both justifies it as a means of classifying human subjects and reveals its still-vital explanatory importance across a range of domains.<sup>1</sup>

## II

*Sexual Orientation as a Disposition.* As a first step towards vindicating OA, I propose to follow others (for example, [Stein 1999](#), p. 45; [Dembroff 2016](#), p. 7) in treating a sexual orientation as a disposition. A disposition is, roughly, a capacity of a thing, under certain conditions, to exhibit some further particular behaviour or other characteristics. Call these outcomes the 'manifestations' of a disposition. Archetypal dispositions include fragility—the capacity to produce the manifestation of *breaking*—and solubility—the capacity to produce the manifestation of *dissolving*.

Desires generally are sometimes characterized as dispositions (for instance, [Ashwell 2014](#)). But whether or not that's right, treating a sexual orientation as a disposition fits well with OA's construal of an orientation as a feature of a person, causing them to experience desire, and to exhibit arousal and other arousal-related behavioural outcomes, as associated manifestations.

For a disposition to be activated, it has to encounter the right sort of stimulus. For a fragile glass to shatter, it must meet force; for a soluble pill to dissolve, it must meet liquid. Being sexually oriented towards a particular type of person has multiple potential stimuli: particular encounters; flights of fantasy; pornographic representations; and even unconscious brain-events, as where one simply 'finds oneself' aroused. Hence, if a sexual orientation is to count as a disposition at all, it's apparently 'multi-track'. A multi-track disposition

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<sup>1</sup> The issue at hand is classification, and so has consequences for who counts as gay, as straight, and as bisexual, and under what circumstances. I take it that to classify someone in one of these ways, in virtue of their actual sexual desires and behaviour, is not thereby to suggest that they should alter those desires or behaviour or are in any way deficient because of them.

is associated with multiple stimuli or manifestations or both (Bird 2007, p. 21).

A great advantage of thinking of sexual orientation as a (multi-track) disposition, is that generally, a disposition is ontologically distinct from its stimulus and manifestation, and in fact may never be manifested (Alvarez 2017). This fits with many of the ways we ordinarily think about sexual orientation.<sup>2</sup> For instance, there might be cases where a person has a sexual orientation yet doesn't exhibit arousal or other relevant behaviour. This might be explicable as a case where no relevant stimulus is present (for example, no prospective partners around; no suitable material for fantasizing coming to mind), and so no relevant manifestations either. In such cases, a person might even be unaware of their orientation, given a lack of evidence of it.

Another advantage of analysing an orientation as a disposition is that generally, a disposition requires certain particular background conditions in order for its associated stimulus and manifestation actually to correlate. In other conditions, the stimulus can occur but without manifestation, while the accompanying conditions 'mask' the disposition in question. Where *D* is a disposition to manifest *M* in the presence of stimulus *S*, a mask is, broadly speaking, some additional feature *F* of the situation, co-occurring with *S*, which disrupts *M*, as, for instance, packing material around a fragile vase will inhibit the associated manifestation of breaking when the vase is exposed to the stimulus of striking (Choi and Fara 2018).

Just as there are potential masks for dispositions generally, so too there are potential masks for sexual orientations. These might include socially induced guilt at the direction of one's thoughts, dampening sexual arousal for a partner to whom one would otherwise be attracted; or fantasizing about an absent other, heightening sexual excitement for a partner to whom one would otherwise have been indifferent. Other possible masks include peer pressure, a desire for parental approval, religious upbringing, alcohol, and drugs. Another is romantic love or emotional attachment. There's generally good reason to differentiate between dispositions to affective or romantic attachment and dispositions to sexual desire and arousal. Attachments often don't track sexual urges: one can be attached to

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, empirical researchers effectively treat a sexual orientation as identical to a behaviour: a 'genital act'; 'congress'; 'sexual contact' (Sell 1997, pp. 646–9). According to the logic of OA, these analyses confuse an orientation with some of its manifestations.

someone who isn't exciting, and excited by someone to whom one isn't attached. Even so, there's some evidence that romantic attachment can also inflect sexual arousal, and vice versa (Diamond 2003, p. 183).

Though there's controversy about whether dispositions are causes of associated manifestations (see Choi and Fara 2018; Mumford 1998), I'll nonetheless treat an orientation as a cause of attraction, or at least—if this is too strong for some readers—as causally relevant (McKittrick 2005, 2009). This isn't, of course, the claim that a person with an orientation towards one category will be caused to be attracted to absolutely everyone in that category. The claim is rather that possession of an orientation—plus associated stimulus, plus certain conditions; see Mumford 1998, pp. 126–7—is responsible for one's attraction *only* to those within a given category. Possession of an orientation explains one's attraction to a type of person, broadly construed; but is only part of an explanatory story about why one is attracted to certain particular people and not others. Other causal factors (for instance, to do with appearance, personality, interests, and so on) will be involved too.

Noting the relation between dispositions and their masks helps us to see the perhaps unexpected compatibility of OA with the premises of a historically prominent attempt to conceptualize sexual orientation in a different way. In the mid-twentieth century, the sexologist Alfred Kinsey objected, against conceptions prevalent at the time, that 'the heterosexuality or homosexuality of many individuals is not an all-or-none proposition' (Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin 1948, p. 638). Kinsey's own research into sexual behaviour suggested that some people who exhibit predominantly 'homosexual' patterns of behaviour and desire, nonetheless sometimes also have 'heterosexual' desires and experiences; and vice versa. Kinsey took this fact to be incompatible with accounts of heterosexuality and homosexuality construed as absolute characteristics, proposing instead a seven-point scale of sexual orientation, standing for a continuum. Points on the continuum include 'exclusively heterosexual', 'predominantly heterosexual, incidentally homosexual', 'equally heterosexual and homosexual', and so on.

Now, in fact, OA can accommodate Kinsey's empirical findings, in two ways, depending on the case. First, it might explain 'mixed' behaviour as the product of bisexuality. OA says that a bisexual orientation is one which causes one to sexually desire people of the

opposite *and* same Sex to oneself. At first glance, this sounds like a third wholly distinct disposition, in addition to homosexual and heterosexual dispositions. However, on grounds of parsimony I think it preferable to treat bisexuality as a compound disposition, comprising homosexual and heterosexual dispositions simultaneously. This is compatible with treating it as a genuine orientation. That is, the same person can have a disposition causing her to desire only people of the same Sex as herself, and a separate disposition causing her to desire only people of a different Sex to herself. The ‘only’ in each case makes the claim sound paradoxical, but just means that each disposition is (partly) causally responsible only for a certain tranche of the bisexual subject’s sexual behaviour. A consequence of this move is, perhaps counterintuitively, that (for instance) having a homosexual disposition isn’t sufficient to make one a homosexual. Homosexuals are those who have *only* a homosexual disposition. This is slightly messy, but trying to make ordinary usage coherent sometimes is.

Aside from bisexuality, there is a second way in which OA can accommodate the facts described by Kinsey, further obviating any automatic need for a continuum to replace it. For depending on the particular case, ‘mixed’ desires/behaviour can be accommodated in terms of accompanying masks, interfering with a single orientation.<sup>3</sup> As noted earlier, one’s individual history of sexual behaviour can include sexual attraction towards a variety of partners unrepresentative of one’s actual orientation, because of accompanying disruptive influences. That’s consistent with there still being an underlying disposition—one’s actual orientation—which would have contributed to producing different desires had those other interfering factors been absent.<sup>4</sup> (I will return to the issue of masks shortly.)

To this, we might add: if we used only the Kinsey continuum, without any accompanying dispositional account, there would be an explanatory gap: what causes individuals to behave ‘exclusively’ or ‘predominantly’ heterosexually, or ‘equally’ heterosexually and homosexually, and so on? For these to be meaningful patterns, we need

<sup>3</sup> Nothing evaluative is supposed to follow from talk of the ‘masks’ of a disposition. The terminology comes from the wider philosophical discussion of dispositions. If it is plausible that there are psychological dispositions at all, it’s very likely that masks operate sometimes, in all such cases.

<sup>4</sup> Hence papers describing the ‘plasticity’ of women’s sexual preferences explain it as a product of surrounding ‘sociocultural’ factors (for example, [Baumeister 2000](#)).

some underlying causal story; and sexual orientations, understood as dispositions which are also causes/are causally relevant, can be part of that story.

Just now I analysed a bisexual orientation as a combination of both a heterosexual and a homosexual disposition. Equally, I think we should analyse genuine asexuality—as opposed to a contingently masked orientation, which of course is possible and even likely in some contexts—as possession of neither. Strictly speaking, then, asexuality is not an orientation but the absence of one. This goes against some academic usage (for example, [Brotto and Yule 2017](#)), and also usage in certain contemporary sub-cultures, where asexuality is treated as an orientation, deserving of political protection and advocacy. Yet denying that asexuality is an orientation is also compatible with its being deserving of such protection. Nor does it seem plausible that the possibility of such protection is inevitably practically lessened for asexual people, simply by pointing out that asexuality isn't an orientation.

### III

*Sexual Orientation as Directed Towards Sex.* OA has it that possession of a given sexual orientation 'causes a person to be sexually attracted to those people of a particular Sex'. This might seem to require, implausibly, that people must have some obscure technical knowledge of a person's physiology before they feel attracted. Yet this isn't so: analogously, alcoholics can long for alcohol without knowing its precise chemical composition.<sup>5</sup>

In any case, I follow others in thinking that the concepts of *male* and *female* aren't governed by any essential conditions whose satisfaction would inevitably be a difficult matter to ascertain. Rather, I take it, they are cluster concepts (see also [Stone 2007](#)). In everyday discourses, and all or most technical ones, Sex is appropriately characterized in terms of a cluster of endogenously produced morphological, genetic and hormonal features. None of them are individually essential for human femaleness or maleness, though possession of some vague number of them is sufficient for it. This view accommodates the many existing disorders or differences of sexual development well, whilst remaining compatible with realism about

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Alex Byrne for the analogy.

biological Sex. Variation can be, and in fact is, endemic to biology generally, without threatening the existence of natural kinds (Dupré 1993).<sup>6</sup>

Still, in some ordinary circumstances, another person's Sex can be difficult to determine just by looking. OA needn't be committed to saying that an orientation causes one to be attracted to those of a particular Sex in a way which inevitably and reliably tracks actual Sex. Rather, it should say that one's orientation causes one to be attracted to those whom *one believes* to be of a particular Sex, where this belief might be wrong. Possessing an orientation towards a particular Sex is consistent with a subject's being attracted to someone—or indeed a series of people—who is, unbeknownst to the subject, not actually of that Sex. That is, the content of the subject's sexual desires, and other relevant attitudes, make reference to that Sex *de dicto* rather than *de re*. This isn't to say that Sex must be an explicit erotic focus for a person, as such. It's the more restrained claim that one's sexual preferences construe partners as of some particular Sex, as part of their intentional content, where that construction might turn out unbeknownst to them to be wrong without their ceasing to have the orientation they have.

That Sex is a partial object of sexual desire, for most people, is an empirical claim. For many or even most people, reference to a male or a female body, as such, seems part of the intentional structure of their sexual desires. I will present some limited empirical evidence for this claim shortly. More informally, it seems well-evidenced by first-personal reports in diaries, love letters, memoirs, and by responses to pornography and erotica, throughout history. Many people apparently place great emphasis on sexually interacting, not just with body parts that look identical to primary and secondary Sex characteristics, but with actual Sex characteristics, as such—that is, understood as functional parts of a Sexed body. And even in less clear-cut cases, an underlying understanding of Sex still seems important to the genesis of the desire. For instance, anecdotally, some men with a sexual preference for males with intact genitalia but 'feminized' artificial breasts and a surgically enhanced female-like face report that they would feel differently towards an otherwise

<sup>6</sup> Equally, we shouldn't exaggerate talk of variation. Despite much misinformation about it, the number of intersex people in the general population is minuscule: around 0.018% (Sax 2002). The vast majority of people, including those with differences of sexual development such as Congenital Adrenal Hypoplasia, fall unambiguously into 'male' or 'female'.

identical female who had retained their upper features but had a well-executed and convincing phalloplasty. This is not unexpected; in other areas of philosophy, it's fairly standard to acknowledge how background knowledge about an entity can inflect our present perceptual and aesthetic responses to it. We find this in variants of the claim that perception generally is 'theory-laden' (Bogen 2017) or in the rejection of aesthetic formalism (Walton 1970).

A critic might nonetheless insist as follows. What about those cases where a person of a given Sex (say, male) has been brought to look very like a member of the opposite Sex (female)? Consider John, who is heterosexual as far as he knows, and who desires Jane. John originally thought Jane was female and desired her as such, but then discovers Jane is male. John's desires for Jane nonetheless persist. Doesn't this sort of case show that sexual desire doesn't, after all, take Sex as an intentional object?

Just now I specified that a sexual desire, deriving from a heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual orientation, takes Sex as a partial intentional object, *de dicto* but not *de re*. That suggests that normally, finding out one was mistaken about the Sex of the person one desired would result in the ceasing, or at least altering, of desire for them. I think this is true for many people, and I will discuss some evidence for it in a moment. Yet there are also clearly cases where sexual desire can persist past the discovery of one's initial mistake. How should we analyse a case such as John's?

Depending upon circumstance, his case can be analysed in various ways consistent with OA and what I've already said. One explanation could be that, despite his own self-description, John's orientation is being masked by some other factor. Several possible masks were described above. An alternative explanation could be that he is bisexual. To establish this as true of John, we would have to look at more than one isolated case of attraction. A third possible explanation is that John's desire for Jane is produced by his heterosexual orientation, but only in a derivative sense. That is, his general disposition to be attracted to female Sexed bodies has caused him, in this case, to desire a body very similar in appearance to a female Sexed body. Given that sexual arousal is rarely if ever directly controlled by conscious decisions, this wouldn't be a surprising result. However, on its own, this wouldn't undermine the idea that most of the time, John's (and other people's) sexual desires pick out Sex as a partial intentional object. What it would show is that an orientation



can, in some cases, occasionally derivatively cause desires which don't have the standard sort of object. This, I take it, is a feature of most standing desires for kinds of object, without thereby forcing us to reconstruct the object of the desire. If I generally want water when I'm thirsty, and on one particular occasion knowingly get only some other water-like substance which I like just as well on this occasion, this doesn't show that generally, what I want is only water-like liquid and not water.<sup>7</sup>

The claim that sexual orientations involve attraction towards Sex is increasingly disputed for another reason. In recent times, it has become commonplace, at least in certain progressive circles, to argue that sexual desire, and so indirectly sexual orientation, is directed towards something called 'gender'. Two people of different Sexes can share a gender; and two people of the same Sex might respectively possess different genders. On extreme versions, Sex drops out altogether, and we are left with gender as the only possible intentional object of sexual desire in this area (for example, [Chuck Tate 2012](#)). On more moderate versions, both Sex and gender are potential intentional objects of sexual desire, but these desires are separate from one another (for example, [Stein 1999](#); [Dembroff 2016](#)).

To defend the claims above comprehensively, we therefore need to consider: might something called 'gender' coherently be an intentional object of sexual desire in its own right, as an alternative to Sex-directed desires? I turn to three relevant readings of 'gender'.

The first of these is gender as *masculinity* and *femininity*, understood as the appearances, behaviours, and mental characteristics stereotypical for the two Sexes respectively. It's sometimes said that sexual desire is directed towards 'gender presentation' or 'gender expression': that is (roughly), the extent to which one's body, appearance, deportment, clothing, and so on, chime with culturally contingent stereotypes about Sex. On the posited view, one can be attracted to masculinity or femininity irrespective of whether it is possessed by a female or male. A twist on this view might be that femininity essentially involves oppressive objectification, in a way

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<sup>7</sup> Again, thanks to Alex Byrne for the analogy. If a critic insists that this case shows, precisely, that one's desire *is* for water-like liquid, then by that token, the most we should concede here is that sexual desires take 'apparent Sex' as an object. This concession would still be incompatible with the claim, explored shortly, that sexual desires take something called 'gender' as an object instead.

that males are socialized to find sexually attractive (MacKinnon 1989).

Unfortunately, this doesn't seem a genuine alternative to OA. Nuanced perceptions of another person's masculinity and femininity (or 'gender presentation' or 'gender expression') seem inevitably inflected with prior understandings of the Sex that the person is and what is stereotypical for that Sex. What counts as seeming 'feminine' in a male is very different to what seems 'feminine' in a female. The actress Erika Linder looks very like the actor Leonardo di Caprio—to the extent that she has posed as him in a photo shoot—but where she is read as masculine, he (at least the younger version) is read as feminine. If this is right, then a sexual preference for gender, in this sense, also presupposes some intentional reference to, and accompanying desire for, a given Sex. That is, we can still extrapolate an underlying orientation towards a particular Sex, understood as a partial cause of that further preference.

A second possibly relevant reading of 'gender' is as the possession of a socially constituted body—a body so thoroughly constructed by contingent sociocultural meanings and stereotypes that it cannot be experienced or thought about, or strictly speaking even said to exist, independently of those meanings. For instance, Talia Mae Bettcher rejects the view that 'natural [S]ex exists independently of social interactions' (2012, p. 330). 'Naked-presentation' is just as 'socially constituted' as 'clothing-presentation'. It apparently follows that sexual desire, in so far as it is directed towards naked bodies, is directed towards something thoroughly socially constructed.

Just now I presented an alternative account of Sex as something material and not wholly socially constructed, which seems to me strongly preferable to this one. But what if we were to concede that Sexed bodies *were* thoroughly socially constructed, all the way down? This in itself would be no strong argument against the idea that Sex and Sexed bodies (now both understood as entirely socially constructed entities) are standardly referred to in the intentional content of sexual desires and associated arousal. Hence this isn't a particularly strong alternative to OA either. A different way of making this point is that on this view, in fact it can't, after all, be the case that two people of different Sexes might share a gender and two people of the same Sex might respectively possess different genders. What we used to think of, archaically, as Sex, was in fact always gender, and there was never anything else. So the intentional object

of desire remains the same as before, albeit theorized differently. OA survives.<sup>8</sup>

A third reading of ‘gender’ refers to inner feelings of ‘gender identity’: one’s feelings of ease, or unease, concerning gender (or I would say, Sex), as the category applies to oneself. A gender identity is potentially disconnected from gender presentation or expression, and can only be revealed reliably through testimony. I don’t deny that—conceivably, though surely rarely—someone might have a genuine sexual preference, completely independent of any prior judgement about Sex, only towards an imperceptible, non-sensuous, non-bodily feature of another person such as this. Even so, this cannot plausibly be thought of as a widespread phenomenon, and *a fortiori* can’t be a serious threat to the idea that for most people, sexual desire is Sex-directed.

As I hinted at earlier, this claim—that sexual desires, including desires for ‘gender’, nonetheless take Sex as a partial intentional object—looks to be supported by a limited amount of empirical research. Blair and Hoskin (2019) report that, of 958 participants in their survey, only 12.5% indicated that they would consider dating a trans person. The important point for present purposes is that nearly half of this last group of respondents—that is, the subjects who said they *would* date a trans person—were counted by researchers as ‘incongruent’ in their stated preferences about whom, exactly, they would date. For instance, roughly two-thirds of the lesbians in the group said they would only date trans men and not trans women, or would date trans men as well as trans women. The researchers had assumed that, to be consistent with their lesbianism, lesbians should exclude trans men and include trans women. Blair and Ashley put such incongruence down to negative, discriminatory attitudes against trans women and ‘femmephobia’. To my mind, a more compelling explanation of such findings is that female homosexuals have a disposition to be attracted to females.

This discussion has consequences for a further pair of conclusions, both of which draw sustenance from the idea that sexual attraction is directed towards something called ‘gender’, not Sex. I shall focus on the conclusions as they pertain to lesbianism in particular, but the

<sup>8</sup> I leave aside the point that on this view, it seems to follow that two differently socially constructed bodies—such as, on the one hand, a trans woman’s, and on the other, a female’s—could share neither a Sex nor a gender in this sense, since they have different social meanings.

arguments generalize. The first conclusion effectively says that a lesbian, understood as someone disposed to desire others with a ‘female gender’, might, as such, straightforwardly and repeatedly experience attraction to trans women as part of the normal terms of their own orientation, even under conditions otherwise ideal for the manifestation of the disposition (see, for instance, [Chuck Tate 2012](#)).<sup>9</sup> The second is that any trans woman who is exclusively attracted to others with a ‘female gender’, since she herself has a ‘female gender’, counts as a lesbian ([Chuck Tate 2012](#); [Sharpe 2019](#)). In other words, biologically male people can be the objects of genuine lesbian desire, and can even be lesbians themselves.

There are many reasons for would-be conceptual engineers to be wary of such claims, not least because of the multiple harms that might ensue for lesbians—understood as females who are same-Sex-attracted—if such norms were socially enacted in a context which already includes both misogyny and homophobia ([Stock 2019](#)). But the point to take away from present discussion is that such claims look confused. For it seems likely that there is no widespread sexual desire which takes ‘gender’ as an object but not also Sex. Hence there’s no good reason to make the conceptual switch being urged upon us. I don’t deny, of course, that lesbians—correctly classified as such, rather than as bisexuals—can knowingly be in successful relationships with trans women. OA allows for this. Possible candidate explanations we have already seen include (a) the presence of additional causal factors as surrounding conditions, masking the original disposition: romantic love, a desire for companionship, and so on; and (b) a derivative sexual desire for a female-like person, grounded in a homosexual orientation. But still, there’s no reason to think that, absent of masks and in the right sort of conditions for manifestation, there is an interestingly prevalent disposition in any population, gay or straight, to desire ‘gender’ *but not also Sex*. *A fortiori*, there is no reason to think that the category of people with a ‘female gender’ attracted to others with a ‘female gender’, *independently of any reference to Sex*, is a non-negligible one; nor that the category of female people who are same-Sex-attracted has lost any interest or relevance, such that we can afford to lose a conceptual

<sup>9</sup> A similar-looking claim apparently underpins attempts to argue that it would be a good thing if lesbians considered trans women as potential sexual partners (for instance, [Srinivasan 2018](#)). The intended inference seems to be that it’s already within the existing terms of a lesbian sexual orientation to experience such desire.

tool to refer to it. The category of lesbians, understood as female homosexuals, requires neither retirement nor replacement.

#### IV

*Sexual Orientation as Reflexive.* I turn now to a further important feature of a sexual orientation, according to OA, which has so far gone unmentioned. According to OA, what determines a subject's sexual orientation, in a particular case, is the Sex to which the subject tends to be attracted, *in relation to the Sex one is*. The truth conditions of, for instance, 'x is gay' refer to the Sex of who tends to be desired, *and* of who is doing the desiring. Heterosexual males and females both count as heterosexual, despite typically desiring different Sexes. What makes them both heterosexual is their desiring 'the opposite Sex' (to them). Males and females can both be homosexual, though they're attracted to different Sexes; what they have in common is attraction to the same Sex as their own.

In this way, sexual orientation ascriptions have a reflexive relational structure. They essentially involve a reference to a feature of the subject—their own Sex—in addition to their possession of a given pattern of desires for other, specifically Sexed people. This is a different claim from the earlier one, also implied by OA, that a sexual orientation causes one to have sexual desires directed towards a particular Sex category, male or female, *de dicto*. That's a claim about the intentional structure of the relevant desire. This, in contrast, is a claim about the conditions under which a sexual orientation is correctly ascribed. It says that a sexual orientation itself is partly type-identified in relation to a given Sex, but this time understood as 'same Sex' or 'opposite Sex'.<sup>10</sup>

Recently, however, in revisionary mood, it has been suggested by Robin Dembroff (2016) that we drop any reference to the Sex of the subject, or in fact to any further feature of theirs whatsoever, in an account of what determines the sexual orientation of that subject. Instead, orientations should be determined solely in virtue of the type of person desired by a subject, where, moreover, this typology need not refer to Sex at all. Two people should be classified as

<sup>10</sup> I'm not claiming that sexual desire must take 'same Sex' or 'opposite Sex' as an intentional object, *de dicto*, though I think sometimes it does.

sharing a sexual orientation if and only if they are both attracted to the same type of person: a particular Sex, or a particular gender, or a combination of a particular gender and a particular Sex, or perhaps some other characteristic altogether. Dembroff argues that removing reflexive accounts from our taxonomy in this way would get rid of an undesirable ‘othering’ of the sexualities of marginalized subjects, by removing any distinction between their sexualities and those of the mainstream:

The statistical divide between cisheterosexuality and queer sexual orientations simply disappears, because these categories disappear, and their members are reorganized into new categories. (Dembroff 2016, p. 19)

That is, the proposed new configuration allows us to consider a wider range of desires as indicative of sexual orientations, without normatively prioritizing heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality as normal and superior, and by implication, other sexual preferences as deviant and inferior.

There are several things to question here. For one, the plausibility of this suggestion partly depends on whether one sees what Dembroff would call ‘queer’ sexual preferences as mutually exclusive rivals to the desires produced by dispositions to Sex-directed attraction. Just now I effectively denied this, arguing that many queer sexual desires are partly inflected by such dispositions, even so. This being the case, there’s no reason to think that calling such dispositions ‘orientations’ thereby politically marginalizes or excludes those with queer sexualities: normally they will have them too. (It should also be remembered that classifying people by sexual orientation makes no pretensions to saying everything interesting or important about their sexual desires.)

Moreover, if it turns out that, nonetheless, there genuinely are some people whose sexual desires don’t take Sex as an object—as, for instance, the desires of ‘pansexual’ people are sometimes said not to—then even so, there seems no reason to think that calling dispositions to Sex-directed attraction ‘orientations’ inevitably politically marginalizes those people. It might turn out that there is a reason for calling such dispositions ‘orientations’ which has nothing to do with the alleged implied superiority of those who have them; and that this reason can be explained to people who mistakenly assume

otherwise, so that the contingent connotation lapses. In the following section, I shall offer such a reason.

But the important point I want to make here is about reflexivity. This is: we cannot make *reflexive* dispositions to Sex-directed attraction disappear by ceasing to classify them or refer to them, as Dembroff seems to think. No matter how we classify things, these dispositions are real. Discussion has revealed no good reason to deny their reality; so reclassifying, in to avoid reference to them, won't make them go away. What this *will* do, rather, is remove our ability to properly discuss them. This would be a significant loss, as I'll now argue.

As things stand, reflexive dispositions to Sex-directed attraction tend to be discussed in multiple contexts. This isn't a coincidence, for they are important to know and think about, from a variety of perspectives people rightly care about. I'll name just a few obvious ones here, attempting to show that we can't easily do without concepts which refer to them. I'll focus on homosexuality and heterosexuality, using 'same-Sex-attraction' and 'opposite-Sex-attraction' to emphasize the reflexive nature of these dispositions as they figure in description and explanation.

*Biology.* Opposite-Sex-attraction is an evolutionary adaptive behaviour: the continuation of the species depends on it. Some argue that same-Sex-attraction also conveys adaptive benefit, albeit indirectly (Vasey and Vanderlaan 2008). There's perpetual academic interest in establishing whether same-Sex-attraction has a genetic or other biological basis (see Stein 1999 for an overview).

*Medicine, including reproductive medicine.* Pregnancy, and so pregnancy-related health issues, are something that happen far more, and more easily, to opposite-Sex-attracted females than to same-Sex-attracted ones. Some sexually transmitted diseases are more prevalent in opposite-Sex-attracted populations than same-Sex-attracted ones, and vice versa. Medicine also includes psycho-social medicine; in a heteronormative context, some psychological disorders disproportionately particularly affect same-Sex-attracted people, especially children and teens.

*Psychology.* There's academic interest in the developmental conditions for the emergence of opposite-Sex-attraction and same-Sex-attraction (for example, Xu, Norton and Rahman 2019). There's interest in the effectiveness of 'conversion therapy' for same-Sex-attraction, its wider

effects on subjects, and its ethical implications (for example, [Bailey et al. 2016](#)).

*Law.* As I write, same-Sex-attracted sexual behaviour is criminalized in over 70 countries, including several where it is punishable by death. The legal right to marry and associated benefits are denied to same-Sex-attracted people in many countries. The ‘promotion’ of same-Sex-attraction is illegal in some education systems. Fertility treatments are sometimes legally denied to same-Sex-attracted people, as such. Homophobic discrimination—discrimination against same-Sex-attracted people, as such—is a crime in some legal systems.

*Sociology and politics.* Opposite-Sex-attraction is often culturally aligned with gender norms: same-Sex-attracted people are seen as gender-non-conforming. Opposite-Sex-attraction is associated with the ‘natural’. Homophobia is analysable as a form of disgust aimed at same-Sex-attraction, specifically, and not just at attraction to a particular Sex. There is a relative lack of political or cultural representation for same-Sex-attracted as opposed to opposite-Sex-attracted people. The demographics of sex slavery and trafficking are almost entirely shaped by the transactions of opposite-Sex-attracted males. Rape of females is mostly carried out by opposite-Sex-attracted males.

*Economics and business.* In some cities, spending by same-Sex-attracted people, aka the ‘Pink Pound’, props up local economies. Opposite-Sex and same-Sex orientations each bring in separate revenue streams to the pornography industry, resulting in targeted ads for each demographic. The fertility industry too, caters specifically to separate demographics, with distinct provision and marketing strategies. There’s a market for surrogacy amongst opposite-Sex-attracted females in poorer countries, increasingly catering for, among others, same-Sex-attracted males in richer ones who desire to father children.

And so on and so on. As this suggests, for a large number of socially pressing practical questions, to omit reference to the reflexive element in an account of human dispositions to Sex-directed attraction would be to lose an otherwise valuable strategic tool. How do we reduce or otherwise deal with the sex trade, high incidences of rape and sexual assault, sexually transmitted disease transmission, unwanted pregnancies, and other sex-related social issues? Many of the associated issues tend to manifest in different ways for same-Sex-attracted people than for opposite-Sex-attracted people and may well require different local solutions. Or consider the organization of



dating. We characterize orientations reflexively, at least partly to facilitate the coordination of sexual liaisons. When organizing dating sites, or match-making, grouping people simply on the basis of, for instance, ‘people attracted to females’ would be remarkably inefficient, since many of those in the group would not be attracted to others in the group, in principle, given distinct reflexive patterns of Sex-directed-attraction among members. That’s why we have—or should have—distinct dating web resources for gay and straight people, differentiated by Sex.<sup>11</sup>

As further illustrative of the importance of reflexivity, take Dembroff’s own suggestion that law-makers should redescribe discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, as discrimination solely on the basis of a subject’s desiring some particular Sex or gender, removing reference to the subject’s own Sex allegedly without loss (2016, p. 20). To think we would lose nothing by doing this is baffling. For how could a gay male count as discriminated against, simply for having a desire for males which he shares with all heterosexual females—unless, that is, we also were implicitly talking about his Sex too? Halwani (MS) suggests we might cover this and other similar discursive interests by talking only of ‘men-who-are-with-men’, irrespective of their underlying orientations. This might cover some of what we want to describe, but it won’t help with issues around discrimination. Men-who-are-with-men solely because of external, non-psychological reasons—prevalent social norms, or scarcity of females—are much less likely to face social censure. It’s the featuring of males rather than females as the unforced object of male desire *de dicto* which draws social disapprobation and disgust, and consequent harms.

In elaborating upon the explanatory importance of sexual orientations in this way, understood as reflexive dispositions to Sex-directed attraction, it’s easy to get waylaid by the well-known claim that sexual orientations are ‘historical constructs’, invented in the nineteenth century (for example, Foucault 1978, pp. 105–6; Halperin 1989, p. 269); or that ‘being a homosexual’ only exists as a deliberately chosen possibility, once such a kind is explicitly introduced into shared language (Hacking 1986). It’s apparently true that the concept of a sexual orientation, as such, was explicitly introduced for the first time in the nineteenth century as a possible object

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Holly Lawford-Smith for alerting me to this point.

of scientific investigation (Sell 1997, p. 644). But this is compatible with the much more ancient existence of the thing referred to: new concepts can be developed to refer to previously unnoticed existing things. It's also compatible with a folk concept existing previously, referring to that thing.

The claim that homosexuality *itself* was 'invented' in the nineteenth century is most charitably interpreted as referring to a much 'thicker' version of a sexual orientation than the minimal one OA describes (Halwani 1998, 2006). This thicker version understands sexual orientation as determining membership of a cultural stereotype, with presumed associated physical, psychological and cultural aspects (Foucault 1978, p. 43). Yet many social constructionists implicitly acknowledge the existence of a more minimal concept, picking out narrow patterns of sexual activity in people throughout history, shorn of further particular local cultural associations (for example, Foucault 1978, pp. 38–9; Halperin 1989, pp. 269–70; Hacking 1986, p. 225). Indeed, OA allows us to identify something constant between thick social constructions such as 'the catamite', 'the molly', the Uranian' and 'the queer' (Robb 2003, p. 12).

So: there are sexual orientations in the world, understood as reflexive dispositions to Sex-directed attraction, and these figure as explanatory in a range of important areas of human life. It should be noted that the metaphysical commitments behind such points needn't be very onerous. Though mine is a realist position about orientations, there need be no implied commitment to scientific reductionism, taxonomical monism, or essentialism. One might instead endorse the 'promiscuous realism' of John Dupré (1993), according to which different classificatory schemes can respond simultaneously to certain collective interests, and so cross-classify particular entities, without either thereby being 'wrong' or irrealism about those entities automatically following. On this view, classification, generally, is a means of understanding things humans are interested in, and different interests can produce different classifications. It is no coincidence that most languages tend to have far more colloquial ways of discriminating vertebrate organisms than invertebrate, for this fact is indicative of our relative lack of interest in the latter and our great number of interests in the former, from a variety of perspectives (Dupré 1993, p. 19). As a collective, we develop and come to rely upon concepts which allow us fruitfully to analyse interesting fields

of inquiry, sometimes connecting those fields through shared theoretical objects. It seems to me that reflexive dispositions to Sex-directed attraction have more than earned their keep in this respect.

## V

*Sexual Orientation as Different from Mere Preferences.* The main aspect of OA it remains to defend says that ‘a sexual orientation is differentiated from other sexual predilections or preferences’. This puts OA further out of step with the Zeitgeist. In contemporary academic writing about sex, there are frequent attempts to reduce the distance between homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual orientations and other sexual preferences. Candidates variously offered as ‘orientations’ include sexual preferences for children (Seto 2012); for animals (Miletski 2017); and for multiple partners simultaneously (Tweedy 2011). It’s sometimes even argued that *any sexual arousal patterns at all*—even those patterns of blood flow registered by Vaginal Pulse Amplitude, but not registered or self-reported at all by the subject—might be manifestations of a subconscious sexual ‘orientation’ (Bailey 2009).

This presents OA with a challenge. There are lots of different patterns of sexual interest. Why don’t *they* count as orientations too? What makes homosexual and heterosexual dispositions so special?

Here are some failed prospective explanations of the ‘specialness’, taking a homosexual disposition as our example. A homosexual disposition isn’t differentiated from other preferences by being stable, though it is stable (Mock and Eibach 2012), or by early onset. Other preferences can be stable and have early onset, for instance, fetishes (Imhoff, Banse and Schmidt 2017).<sup>12</sup> Nor is it distinct for being unchosen, or immune to deliberate change: arguably the same is true for some other sexual preferences. Evidence remains inconclusive about whether homosexuality is endogenous (Stein 1999), and it may well turn out that some preferences are endogenous too (Ponseti et al. 2014). Equally, it isn’t distinguished by being personally important to its possessor. Many people don’t care about

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<sup>12</sup> Arguably, any disposition, including preferences, must be relatively stable and non-fleeting to count as such.

their homosexuality, or feel it plays any important role in their identity.

It's sometimes argued that homosexual and heterosexual dispositions, unlike ordinary preferences, 'organize' other preferences in choice situations (for example, Imhoff, Banse and Schmidt 2017; Halwani MS). For instance, a heterosexual male who also likes redheads normally prefers 'redhead only if female', rather than 'female only if redhead'. But this doesn't seem a particularly deep feature of the desire-patterns. Rather, it looks like a function of their typical relative strength. In effect, for most heterosexual males who like redheads, a female non-redhead is sexually preferable to a redhead non-female. But, were there someone who genuinely desired *only* redhead females, then for them, a preference for redheads and a preference for females would be equally 'organizing'. Fetishes and paraphilias might be equally 'organizing' in this sense.

The fact, explored earlier, that a homosexual or heterosexual disposition is conceptualized in terms of a reflexive relation to a subject's own Sex differentiates it from most other sexual predilections, fetishes, and so on. One may be attracted to redheads or muscled male bodies or legs-in-fishnet-stockings, but characterizing these sexual desires involves no essential further reference to a feature of oneself. However, even this isn't thoroughly differentiating from some paraphilias, since, for instance, ascribing hebephilia to a particular subject requires a reference to a further feature of that subject—namely, their adulthood. Teenagers sexually involved with other teenagers are not thereby hebephiles.

About the only remaining difference to explore is that, with the exception of genuinely asexual people, most people in the general population have a homosexual or heterosexual disposition (or, as bisexuals, both), whereas no sexual preference is widely shared to that extent. The trouble here is that statistical prevalence on its own doesn't seem to justify the supposedly special status of Sex-directed sexual dispositions. The prevalence of homosexual and heterosexual dispositions undoubtedly contributes to their social significance, since it means that any empirical consequences will be correspondingly large, but this doesn't seem meaningful enough.

In fact, though, I think this last point gives a clue to what really differentiates homosexual and heterosexual dispositions from other sexual preferences. To look for some further *inherent* differentiating

factor is, I think, the wrong approach. Instead we should recall that homosexual and heterosexual dispositions, singly or in combination, are ones we collectively care about, across a range of contexts, such that names and accompanying concepts for them have eventually emerged, staying in prominent use amongst language-users. *Calling them 'orientations' is just a way of demarcating them from other relatively less interesting or important preferences.* That is, 'orientation' doesn't denote any special inherent feature of a disposition. It's therefore pointless to ask why these dispositions 'orient' whilst other preferences don't; or to argue that other preferences are orientations too, because they too 'orient' in some privileged sense. Rather, the use of the concept denotes a contextual difference: linguistic communities are more interested in those dispositions than in other preferences, as entities operating within and across many fields, for reasons I've already given.

This isn't, of course, to deny that there are many legitimate theoretical and practical interests concerning other sexual preferences. Where there are, we must develop and maintain adequate concepts for them too. For particular explanatory ends, we undoubtedly need, for instance, concepts of fetishes; paraphilias; asexuality; polyamory; and of preferences for distinct categories of trans people too. In fact, we already have one concept for the latter: *gynoandromorphophilia* (Hsu et al. 2016). In some contexts, we might also need concepts which factor in other variables: degrees of strength of psychological attraction (Storms 1980) or number of partners (van Anders 2015). This is not a competition where only one kind of preference, along one dimension, can ever be tracked. But the fact remains that homosexual and heterosexual dispositions have the largest range of interesting causal consequences out of all the sexual preferences, and so are of the most interest and likely to remain so.

## VI

*Conclusion.* Contemporary and historical challenges to the idea of a Sex-directed sexual orientation have provided a welcome opportunity to clarify their central and ineliminable role in many theoretical and practical discourses. Talk of the demise of the concept has been overstated, in both academia and contemporary popular culture. It

turns out that if we got rid of the concepts of Sex-directed orientations, we'd only have to reinvent them.<sup>13</sup>

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