

Closet Doors and Stage Lights: On the Goods of Out

1. Introduction

It is commonplace among LGBT¹ activists and their allies in the West to assume that, all things being equal—and in the absence of severe personal danger—being out is better than not being out, and further, those who have not yet “come out” ought to do so. The idea of an explicit duty to come out has its origins in the tactics of gay political activists like Harvey Milk in the 1970s, and has shown remarkable endurance, taking on forms such as a National Coming Out Day (established in the 1980s and observed in multiple countries to this day) and the still-uttered chant: “Come out, come out, wherever you are!” In present-day activist circles and in wider public discourse, the claim that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people ought to come out is neither surprising nor controversial.² We can hear occasional echoes of it in the personal videos made by celebrities and citizens for gay activist Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” anti-bullying campaign.³ The *moral* nature of this good is not always emphasized, since discussions of coming or being out are most often phrased in the language of political activism or personal psychology and not moral philosophy, but there are clear moral implications to such ex-

¹Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender.

²See, for example, Jamie McDaniel, “Coming Out: A Moral Duty for Gays in America,” <http://www.soulforce.org/article/715> (written January 1, 2004 and last accessed June 23, 2010); Andrew Sullivan, “Why Marriage Equality is Winning, Continued,” http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2009/05/why-marriage-equality-is-winning-ctd.html (written May 29, 2009 and last accessed June 23, 2010); or the ongoing arguments made by activist online presence BlogActive to justify its work outing gay politicians, <http://blog.blogactive.com/> (accessed June 23, 2010).

³Savage began this video campaign in September 2010, following a spate of widely publicized suicides by American gay youth who had suffered at the hands of bullies. The column outlining his rationale can be found in his September 23 syndicated column, <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/SavageLove?oid=4940874>. The “It Gets Better” campaign has received tremendous publicity and, for the most part, enthusiastic support: it now boasts videos by notable celebrities and political officials, though some within the queer community have raised concerns regarding its focus on those for whom it most likely *does* get better after growing up and coming out. Queer working-class people and people of color have not featured prominently in promotions.

hortations. Individuals are encouraged to think of how coming out will advance the political cause of queer rights or help the wider queer community (questions of justice and the common good), or to consider not only their own happiness but also their ability to live authentically and well (ethical *eudaimonia*).

Furthermore, several moral philosophers have argued that the duty to come out is a *moral* duty. Richard Mohr has advocated an argument from dignity in favor of a universal duty to come out for all gay and lesbian people, as well as a corollary duty to out others, with or without their consent. For Mohr, the duty holds in all but the most exceptional circumstances, such as immediate risks to personal safety.⁴ More recently, others have offered accounts of a defeasible or *prima facie* duty to come out, which must be weighed against other moral considerations.⁵ Few besides Mohr have advocated a strong duty held by all nonheterosexual persons, or indeed a duty to out others, but the case that gays and lesbians *ought* to come out has been made from a number of ethical perspectives. Furthermore, Mohr's strong, universal call—whether or not we agree with his conclusions—is admittedly compelling. His approach resonates with many intuitions about moral duties to resist and respond to oppression, and, to a lesser extent, with common-sense views about the need for honesty and truthfulness as ingredients of a good or well-lived life.

While I share many of the intuitions that Mohr and others express, namely, that there are certain moral goods associated with coming and being out, in this paper I argue that these should not be marshaled into a duty. My argument for this position has two parts: the first (sections 2 and 3) makes an ethical argument, and the second (sections 4 and 5) a conceptual one—albeit with ethical implications. Taken together, I claim, these arguments make a strong case against endorsing a moral duty to come out.

The paper proceeds in the following manner. Section 2 lays the conceptual groundwork for my discussion and then, in section 3, I critically

⁴Richard Mohr, *Gay Ideas* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Mohr speaks almost entirely of gay men with occasional references to lesbian women, but his argument could extend to all queer sexualities and individuals, and it seems reasonable to assume Mohr would not object to such an extension.

⁵See, for example, Claudia Card, *Lesbian Choices* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); James S. Stramel, "Outing, Ethics and Politics," in John Corvino (ed.), *Same Sex* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), pp. 284-88; Cheshire Calhoun, *Feminism, Family and the Politics of the Closet: Lesbian and Gay Displacement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 49-74; Raja Halwani, "Outing and Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 19 (2002): 141-54; James S. Stramel, "Coming Out and Outing," in Raja Halwani et al., "What is Gay and Lesbian Philosophy?" *Metaphilosophy* 39 (2008): 433-71, pp. 438-42; and, most recently, Dennis Cooley, "Is There a Duty to Be Out?" presented at the 2010 meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Central Division.

assess ethical arguments in favor of a duty to come out. In doing so, I argue that the best arguments for such a duty tie it to two broad moral goods: living a good or authentic life, and resisting oppression or injustice. I suggest the connection between acts of coming out and these goods is not as strong or direct as proponents of a duty to come out require. At best, the goods generate imperfect duties. These are defeasible in a wide range of circumstances, and are sometimes but not always fulfilled by coming and being out.

In the second part of my discussion, I consider a deeper set of reasons why philosophers may wish to resist articulating and promoting a duty to come out. Insofar as the duty to come out represents a call for a certain ethics of self-disclosure in the realm of sexuality (or other stigmatized identities), I argue in section 4 that practices of coming and being out—at least as they are presently conceived, communicated, and understood—implicitly rely on an explanatorily deficient understanding of sexual identity *and* on an insufficiently subtle account of responsible self-disclosure. In section 5, I outline the ethical implications of these conceptual deficiencies. I conclude, in section 6, by showing how we can continue to value and promote actively what I have called the goods of out, and can make ethical demands on others to do the same, even without endorsing a duty to come out—at least as such a duty is presently understood.

While I focus on the politics of sexuality in making my case, I take my argument to apply more widely to cases of stigmatized identities. Since being taken up by early gay and lesbian activists, usage of “out” terminology has expanded and spread. Traditionally, “coming out” or “being outed” referred to public communications of queer sexual orientation or gender identity, that is, something other than the presumed norm of heterosexuality or cisgender identity.⁶ Now, however, this language is applied to the disclosure and expression of other socially stigmatized identities, such as racial minority identities, psychiatric disabilities or addictions, survivors of past physical or sexual abuse, and even to membership in certain secondary social groups: someone can be out as a geek, as an atheist or a libertarian, or as a country music aficionado. A popular HBO drama, *True Blood*, revolves around the conceit that vampires have recently “come out of the coffin” to broader American society.

Furthermore, the normativity of out—that is, the presumption that certain persons *ought* to come out as themselves, whatever that might mean—has spread alongside the terminology. From within the arena of queer politics has emerged a new call to self-disclosure: to live an au-

⁶“Cisgender” refers to those gender identities formed by a match between an individual’s experienced gender identity and her gender assignment at birth. Cisgender bears an analogous relationship to transgender as heterosexual or “straight” does to gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

thentic life and to resist the false values of oppression, queer and “queered” persons (that is, persons whose identities are stigmatized along the lines that queer sexual identities are stigmatized, such as the examples listed above) must actively and intentionally identify themselves as such, to others, against a horizon of socially normative expectations regarding that axis of identity. Thus, the argument against a moral duty to come out is relevant in contexts beyond gender and sexuality.

2. Getting the Terms “Straight”: Queerness and Outing

The object of my discussion is the demand to come out, and this demand, I have argued, is leveled against many minorities or stigmatized identities. But it is still most recognizable in the context of sexuality, where it refers, first and foremost, to the disclosure and articulation of sexual identity, and in particular to the disclosure of what I will refer to as queer sexual identities.

For the purpose of this paper, I treat “queer” as a sociopolitical umbrella term, encapsulating people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, queer, genderqueer or asexual.⁷ At the same time, I recognize that “queer” is a notoriously difficult term to pin down. While its meaning can be traced to derogatory slang for non-heterosexual and effeminate men, its reclaimed use by activists and academics is often intended to signify that (all) sexual identities are fluid, nonstable and shifting entities. “Queer” also has subversive or “outsider” connotations, and is sometimes employed to emphasize what something is not (i.e., normal, normative, or expected) rather than what it is. The term is thus used by those who wish to emphasize their identification with the culturally non-normative, the forbidden, or with whatever is beyond established and known boundaries—without thus conceding that this outlaw territory even has a definite, stable content.

My use of the term “queer” is meant only to indicate that the question of coming out is not limited to those who identify as homosexual, but is faced by all who fall under the umbrella of non-normative sexual or gender identities. While I am sympathetic to the picture of sexuality that radical queer theorists paint, accepting the strongest version of their claim, that is, that sexual identity is a non-thing, would invalidate arguments for a duty to disclose it. In order to make a strong case against a duty to perform certain kinds of self-disclosure, that is, coming out, I assume that truthful, self-aware disclosures of this kind are potentially capable of re-

⁷This umbrella category is also represented by the relatively vowel-impooverished acronym LGBTQIA2 (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer-Questioning-Intersex-Asexual-TwoSpirited), or sometimes simply by LGBT.

vealing *something* about the discloser. However, as I argue below, to assume that what is revealed is an uncomplicated and stable “fact” about the discloser, in all cases, will disregard many people’s experiences of their own sexuality. In other words, I take it that some people’s sexual identities are fluid—that is, complex, capable of change over time, and at least partly socially constructed. Insofar as sexual identity consists in part of desires, relationships, physicalities, self-understandings, and practices of expression and communication with others, it necessarily depends on how these are socially mediated for a given individual, and such mediation may change over time and in different social contexts.⁸

Finally, the topic of this paper is the idea of “Out,” that is, the set of concepts, practices, expressions, and understandings related to the acts of coming out, being out (or not out), and being outed by another. While in-depth analysis of this concept is the topic of section 4, some working definition is necessary to proceed with the argument at hand. What does it mean to come out—that is, what conditions allow us to recognize one particular speech act or performance as “coming out,” and not another?

To come out is to disclose something about myself; to out someone else is to disclose something about them. For a disclosure to count as outing, three conditions need to obtain: first, the information shared is initially taken—or expected to be taken—by its recipients to be a revelation, and, as a revelation, the information is at least nominally surprising. It stands out against a horizon of now unmet expectations. Of course, often the particular confession is not surprising, to at least some of its intended audiences. “We always knew” or “we suspected as much” are both recognizable responses to coming out, without thereby invalidating the act.⁹ The sense of surprise rather refers to a set of general expecta-

⁸One could be a social constructionist about sexual identity without being a social constructionist about either sexual desire or sexual orientation, that is, sexual desire directed toward a particular object or kind of object, over time. Someone’s desires may be *oriented* toward one gender (women), but her sexual identity (as a lesbian) requires socially constructed practices regulating the ways her desires are oriented. This limited social constructionism ignores the role that interpretation plays in the formation of all but the most brute desires; insofar as my erotic desires implicate my understanding of the object of desire, and myself as the subject of desire, they are also (partly) socially constructed. Indeed, identifying a particular desire *as* erotic may require that I draw on socially mediated distinctions between the erotic and other kinds of pleasure. Social constructionism about sexual desire and orientation is more controversial than social constructionism about sexual identity, and my argument does not depend on the stronger claim—though it is one that I endorse. For more discussion of the role of interpretation in the constitution of sexual desire and sexual orientation, see William Wilkerson, “Is It a Choice? Sexual Orientation as Interpretation,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 40 (2009): 97-116.

⁹Indeed, in these cases, it is presumably the *performance* of coming out (“He finally said it!”), as a speech act, that is both disclosive and revelatory, rather than the specific

tions governing the context in which one is or can be out: it may not be surprising that *you* are X, but in general, one does not predict that a given person will be X and not Y. Thus, individuals who identify or are identified as lesbian or gay, bisexual, transgender are thus potentially able to come out. Heterosexuals and cisgender persons are not generally able to come out or be out.¹⁰

Second, for an expression or disclosure to be taken up as coming out, it must be widely understood that membership in this group is *not* “normal” or normative. The surprising revelation is not made merely against a statistical set of probabilities, as an expression of color preference or the disclosure of left-handedness would be (at least in most present-day societies). The social status of the identity provides the bearer with reason to *hide* it—and in coming out, she implies that what she now reveals was previously hidden.¹¹ Thus, the disclosed identity is at the very least quirky or unusual, and is potentially embarrassing or stigmatizing. More typically, the relevant kind of group membership is a source of social shame and disapproval, and results in some degree of increased vulnerability to undeserved harm.¹² Third and finally, paradigm cases of coming or being out involve disclosures of something the outed person takes to be meaningful, significant, and even (partly) definitive of who she is. Being out represents a significant disclosure and even personal exposure in light of these conditions.

content of what is said, in doing so—at least relative to that particular audience. That the disclosure is also statistically and normatively an aberration, so to speak, also contributes to the claim that coming out is revelatory.

¹⁰I say “generally” because individuals who experience primarily or solely opposite-sex desires, but who refuse to endorse or grant normative status to heterosexual gender roles, may also identify as queer or queer-allied. This identification is controversial within queer communities. Some see “coming out” in these cases as having more in common with the declaration of a controversial political identity or religious affiliation than it does with sexuality. Of course, there are also useful points of comparison and overlap between stigmatized sexual identities and religious groups. See Chris Cuomo, “Claiming the Right to be Queer,” in Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo (eds.), *The Feminist Philosophy Reader* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), pp. 241-48.

¹¹This claim is complicated by the fact that someone may come out to *herself*, suggesting that she had previously been unaware (or self-deceived) about her stigmatized identity. The implication of hiddenness remains here, but the agency of the “hider” is complicated. Full discussion of paradoxes of self-deception and self-revelation—as they relate to questions of outing—are beyond the scope of this paper.

¹²These vulnerabilities include any of the following: increased and unjustified risks of violence and harm, unequal rights (formally or in practice), loss of legal and relational autonomy, little or less political and cultural representation, self-alienation, externally reinforced shame and self-loathing, bifurcations of various roles, and loss of power/control over life possibilities.

3. The Goods of Out?

Why is it good to be out? It is perhaps easier to establish why it is bad not to be out. On one level, the answer to the second is obvious: the closeted person *hides*. Staying in the closet requires that the individual keep a significant aspect of her selfhood separate, concealed from others in her life, including those who matter to her most. And it requires that she do this, in part, based on false and harmful claims, which contributes substantially to circumstances of injustice.

Human sexuality is closely related to our capacities for romantic connection, for close, meaningful relationships (including chosen family relationships), and for many kinds of pleasure. The development of mature sexual identities is partly how we establish adulthood, and our ability to navigate our sexualities requires various forms of recognition and response from others. The closeted individual sacrifices these social aspects of sexual identity, as well as the psychological and relational benefits that come with them.¹³ Indeed, she loses more than these. Since the decision to come out takes place against the expectation that she will inevitably take on a heteronormative sexual and gender identity, being closeted does not mean leaving a blank space or a question mark in place of her correct sexual identity. Rather, the not-out individual must pretend to be heterosexual/cisgender, and refrain from correcting others when they assume that she is. Her ability to relate to others is thus not merely limited in certain ways, but takes on a deceitful or fraudulent character, even if the deceit is limited to lies of omission.¹⁴ The efforts to conceal and to dissemble take a psychological and relational toll.

Finally, not being out is bad because of (at least some of) the reasons for which the queer individual conceals her sexual identity. The secrecy of queer sexuality is bound up in its stigmatization: the sense that it is shameful and wrong. One could argue, as Mohr and others have done, that acceptance of secrecy amount to tacit endorsement of the stigma—certainly, at the very least, it does little to resist or fight it. Not being out requires that one concede to a false moral claim by living as though it were true. Furthermore, cultures of individual concealment contribute to the marginalization of queer communities, as they may prevent individuals from connecting to one another and forming bonds of political soli-

¹³These benefits can be as simple as sharing the delight of a new relationship, or making an offhand reference to one's partner or, more seriously, the need to have communities of support when dealing with heartbreak, grief, betrayal, or violence. They also include the advantage of having cultural references, paradigms, and role models to draw upon in relating to one's self and to others in conversation, and comfort accessing appropriate legal frameworks with which to negotiate complications of sexual life.

¹⁴Talia Bettcher, "On Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion," *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (2007): 43-65.

clarity. They also hinder efforts to increase queer visibility and establish a range of queer role models beyond that community.

If not being out harms the individual and the community, it seems we already have reasons to argue in favor of coming out, even if these are not yet formulated into a duty. Indeed, early gay rights advocates tended to take a broadly utilitarian approach, arguing for the psychological benefits to the individual, the political benefits to the community, or both. These approaches depend on empirical evidence: is this particular individual happier or better off since coming out into what remains, in many places, a relatively hostile environment? What kind of cost-benefit analysis can we perform? Has her coming out actually benefited the community in some way? Answers to these require assessment of the not-insignificant risks of coming out.

Few who advocate a duty to come out would deny that being out incurs a significant personal cost. Even for those in positions of relative privilege, the harms associated with coming or being out can manifest themselves in costs to career, resources, safety, control over self-representation, and available choices. In general, identifying as queer continues to be a politically volatile and vulnerable position.¹⁵ It renders individuals more vulnerable to unfriendly and often vicious judgment, hatred, slander, accusations of corruption, perversion, or simply “having an agenda”—even the peculiarly powerless situation of being prayed for against one’s will. As far as any single individual is concerned, then, the broadly utilitarian case for coming out is at least an open question. From the perspective of subjective experience, the goods of nonconcealment and honesty will not always outweigh these significant risks and harms. Furthermore, arguments for coming out, insofar as they focus on the explicitly political benefits for the wider gay community, face accusations that they use the out individual as a mere means to the end of the community’s greater good.¹⁶ This is particularly distasteful when we consider how closely sexuality is linked to some of our most intimate, vulnerable, and emotional experiences.

¹⁵I say “in general” because for those in Western liberal-capitalist societies who benefit from racial and class privilege, the costs of queer-identification have reduced dramatically over the last 10-15 years, with the advent of certain civil rights, ranging from non-discrimination to the legal protections of marriage. This pocket of comfort is a function of ongoing, dynamic interaction among class, race, and gender oppression, and should not be taken as evidence of their absence. Neither is it the case that queer-identification is without some cost, for anyone.

¹⁶This vulnerability remains when the argument is recast as an incremental rather than group benefit, namely: each individual’s being out has incremental value; insofar as being “out” is a good for the out individual, and insofar as increased visibility makes it easier for others to come out, it may be the case that my being out is a good for you, for many of the same reasons that your being out is a good for you.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the most influential argument for a duty to come out has been cast in other terms. Mohr argues that basic respect for personhood requires that all queer persons come out: that is, that they live in such a way that their sexual identity is known widely, and never hidden, concealed or obscured. To do otherwise as a queer person is tantamount, in Mohr's view, "to accept[ing] insult so one avoids harm" and so failing to respect oneself.¹⁷ It also fails to respect others, since not being out perpetuates the idea that being queer is shameful and thus disrespects other queer individuals. Mohr thus detaches the duty to come out from both the results of doing so and the individual's own considerations and circumstances; in his view, the good of out (respect) and thus the duty hold universally. The personal costs attributed to coming out, Mohr argues, are really the already-existing costs of heterosexism and homophobia. Vulnerability on the basis of sexuality is the reality of being queer, not of being queer and out.

Moreover, the non-out individual fools herself if she thinks she avoids such costs by remaining closeted. She has merely internalized them, where they will manifest in more insidious forms: misplaced shame, self-loathing, and internalized homophobia. This homophobia causes harm to herself and to other queer people. Insofar as we agree with Kant that persons are beings with dignity, Mohr concludes, we thereby endorse a duty not only to come out, but also a duty to out others, even nonconsensually, just so long as doing so does not violate other rights. There is no right to refuse being out, and no good argument for doing so.

Mohr's stance is almost breathtakingly noncompromising, and he has received significant criticism. Raja Halwani has noted that ethical questions of outing cannot be made purely according to considerations of dignity, but must take other virtues, both self-regarding and other-regarding, into account: these may include benevolence, compassion, justice, friendship, prudence, courage, and authenticity.¹⁸ Dignity cannot always triumph. Suffice to say, ethical decisions made on the basis of multiple values—trading off between patience, courage, and compassion, for example—and which attend to individual context and history will not produce anything like a *universal* duty. At best, the claims about dignity that Mohr makes, if they hold true, produce a necessary and even a primary consideration for making decisions about coming out. They do not guarantee the answer.

There is also good reason to question the ease with which Mohr equates being out with dignity. This equation seems especially problematic in instances of coerced or pressured outing. Claudia Card notes that,

¹⁷Mohr, *Gay Ideas*, p. 31.

¹⁸Halwani, "Outing and Virtue Ethics."

in reality, there is very little that is dignified about having one's intimate desires and relationships exposed against one's will.¹⁹ James Stramel remarks on "the 'spiritual' damage that unwarranted access to or distribution of sensitive personal information can cause to an individual's autonomy, identity and dignity."²⁰ The point holds more widely; Mohr assumes that an individual would only refrain from coming out if she consciously or unconsciously accepted false homophobic values. There are two responses to be made here. First, indirectly, we might challenge the implication that not-out queer persons face moral risks of homophobia that others do not, and thus they hold particular duties to repudiate that homophobia, which translates into a duty to come out. There is good reason to think that most people in a largely heterosexist culture have internalized heterosexist and homophobic values, just as all of us in a racist society are likely to have internalized at least some racist norms; this accusation should not be limited to queer individuals who are not out. Neither can we assume that coming out guarantees the eradication or even repudiation of these values. It is, at most, evidence of sincere effort in that direction (though not necessarily), but certainly not one likely to achieve immediate, total success.

Not all resistance to coming out is evidence of internalized homophobia. For one thing, fear of the very real, quantifiable risks associated with being visibly queer is rational in a way that generalized homophobia is not. Mohr draws primarily on the lives of adult, single, professional North American gay men from Western European backgrounds. Impoverished persons, trans persons, and single women with children, for instance, may have a very different set of risks associated with coming out, as will immigrants who face ostracization from their ex-pat community. These risks are not merely to the individual's own physical safety: they include moral commitments to care for and support one's dependents, and to contribute to wider projects and causes—commitments that are significant sources of meaning and self-respect.²¹

In some cases, integration and disclosure of one identity crucial to the individual's sense of selfhood, that is, her sexual identity, may result in the loss of others, for example, her cultural or religious identity or her

¹⁹Card, *Lesbian Choices*, pp. 194-217.

²⁰James S. Stramel, "Coming Out, Outing, and Virtue Ethics," in Raja Halwani (ed.), *Sex and Ethics: Essays on Sexuality, Virtue and the Good Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 162-74, at p. 166.

²¹A version of this argument has been made by queer critics of Savage's "It Gets Better" campaign, arguing that the campaign presents a narrow version of queer identity, i.e., those who possess sufficient privilege such that it *does* get better once they come out. See, for example, Jasbir Puar's column "In the wake of It Gets Better," in *The Guardian*, November 16, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/16/wake-it-gets-better-campaign>.

family and community commitments. There is no reason to suppose that in each case, an individual's sexual identity is more closely tied to the goods of dignity and her personhood than her cultural, religious, class, or social identity is, however problematically heterosexist the latter may be. To argue that the latter are necessarily undignified to begin with, simply in virtue of their nonacceptance of homosexuality, is to set a standard that, first, seems inappropriately high, and second, the queer community and the identities associated with it cannot meet. Requiring that an aspect of my identity express *only* morally best principles for it to be a meaningful component of my personhood—that is, constitutive of my dignity—would eliminate any identity whose communities are tainted by racism, classism, sexism, or other forms of injustice. Few, if any, of our “thick” identities would remain.

These considerations weaken the link Mohr wishes to make between the good of individual dignity and the uncompromising call to be out. Yet the idea of a connection between living openly, especially when this requires courage and integrity in the face of hostility, and the ability to live a life that feels authentically one's own does not seem misplaced—indeed, it seems true that for me to lead a good life, I must lead a life I experience as *mine*.²² The out individual has a better chance of relationships not automatically complicated by secrecy and concealment, and which therefore express who she takes herself to be. She need not compartmentalize different aspects of her existence, or move through a series of “revolving closets” and conflicting social roles—even if this is won at the price of losing some of the social roles she previously had. She has rid herself of a significant disconnect between her own self-conceptions and the pictures reflected back to her in her social relationships to others—again, even if these are now fewer in number. Finally, coming out may be a condition for entry into a supportive queer community, especially as norms within queer communities have changed to become less tolerant of the closeted. Insofar as friendship, solidarity, and community support are necessary components of a good life, coming out *may* facilitate more reliable access to these as well.

Furthermore, there is a second intuition behind Mohr's argument from dignity worth taking seriously: namely, that the oppressed have a

²²By “authentically one's own,” I mean only a life from which I am not significantly alienated or disconnected, and whose major points of decision and general contours I identify as “mine.” As Ami Harbin and Jacquelyn Zita note, there are especial dangers associated with authenticity discourses in the domain of sexuality. Concepts of authenticity “are too often taken to resonate with fixedness, staticity, and genuine representations of stable, coherent truths,” in ways that can exclude or silence bisexual identities, for example. Ami Harbin, “Sexual Authenticity,” *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 50 (2011): 77-93; Jacquelyn N. Zita, *Body Talk: Philosophical Reflections on Sex and Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 119.

duty to resist their oppression by repudiating, wherever possible, the false moral picture that anchors it. This remains true even where such resistance has little hope of widespread success.²³ Bernard Boxill argues that the oppressed person has a duty to resist his oppressors, by “choos[ing] to pit his will against their will in order to frustrate their purpose.”²⁴ The primary ground for this duty to resist lies with the responsibility held by all to repudiate “the insult and falsehood of oppression.”²⁵ Resistance is the form this responsibility takes for oppressed persons.

Like Mohr, Boxill moves a little too quickly from the claim that oppression undermines self-respect to the claim that failure to take any presented opportunity to resist oppression always demonstrates a lack of self-respect, and indeed, that an act or instance of resistance will always reinforce rather than undermine self-respect. Neither move takes seriously the kind of conflicts between identities I described above, which may *each* be a source of self-respect.²⁶ But the basic point is well taken: namely, that being the victim of oppression does not excuse someone from holding some responsibility for rebutting the false claims of her oppression and the attitudes that these claims engender. Indeed, it gives her very personal reasons to wish them rebutted.

Can the duty to come out be framed in terms of a duty to resist heterosexist oppression? Heterosexism is a significant and pervasive form of injustice, which also leads to further individual acts of injustice, including homophobic violence. Insofar as an act of coming out is directed towards the objective described above—namely, repudiating the claim that queerness is shameful—then that act of coming out aims at undermining the injustice of heterosexism, among other goals. It represents at least one *avenue* for fulfilling a duty to resist, and it carries moral worth as a result. But note that the stronger claim, that coming out is a *necessary* part of resistance, has not yet been made. The stronger claim would require us to show either that no other forms of resistance are possible for the non-out individual or that remaining closeted—whatever else one does—so strongly indicates passive submission to oppression that it effectively nullifies all other acts of resistance. Both arguments are problematic. The former faces fairly obvious empirical evidence to the con-

²³“The idea of successful resistance is not redundant, and the idea of unsuccessful resistance is not self-contradictory.” Bernard R. Boxill, “Oppression and Resistance,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41 (2010): 1-12, p. 7.

²⁴Ibid., p. 8.

²⁵Ibid., p. 10.

²⁶Sarah Buss notes this point in her response to Boxill: “Under some circumstances, maintaining one’s self-respect is not only *compatible* with *refraining from resisting* those who oppress one, but is also among the possible *costs of resisting*.” Sarah Buss, “Reflections on the Responsibility to Resist Oppression, with Comments on Essays by Boxill, Harvey, and Hill,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41 (2010): 40-49, p. 45.

trary: non-out individuals can still advocate for equality and nondiscrimination, critique homophobic figures and movements, and express nonhomophobic, nonheterosexist attitudes.²⁷ The strong claim presumes that not coming out is always passive submission or culpable avoidance: it ignores the moral and identity conflicts discussed above, and it presents an implausibly narrow range of options for resistance.

Yet coming out does put the queer individual in a position to undertake further acts of resistance, and insofar as overcoming injustice is a good, this position is also a good achieved by coming out. She may find it easier to educate others, and to advocate for the rights and dignity of queer individuals; at the very least, her motivations for doing so are now easily intelligible to others. Thus, coming out may fulfill a second-order duty to place oneself in a position to fulfill one's first-order duties to resist *well*. And insofar as the morally responsible agent presumably wishes to fulfill her duties, and is frustrated when she is unable to do so, placing herself in such a position is a good achieved by her coming out.

The concept of a secondary duty, namely, to situate oneself to best meet one's first-order duties, recasts the politically strategic argument for coming out as an argument from injustice. Being "out" is good because it has symbolic and strategic value to others, since out individuals offer increased visibility and voice to the queer community. Equally important as overt advocacy, perhaps, they play a role in familiarizing the general public with queerness and normalizing stigmatized identities through increased daily contact.²⁸ In this role, out figures play an epistemologically valuable role; they correct false beliefs. Out individuals also have value to the queer community because they ideally function as leaders and advocates for the voiceless and vulnerable.

All these arguments ultimately tie the act of coming out to two broader moral goods: the good of living a certain kind of life, and the good of resisting oppression. Each of these goods is capable of generating a corresponding moral "ought": first, that every individual *ought* to take steps toward leading a better rather than a worse life, and second, that the op-

²⁷It is true, anecdotally, that some closeted individuals will turn to homophobic language and behavior for fear of being revealed, and such individuals are morally wrong on several counts: first, for their homophobia, and second, for their hypocrisy. But on both counts their wrongfulness is entailed by their homophobia, and not merely their status as not-out. These individuals are only guilty of hypocrisy if they do not actually believe their own homophobic rhetoric (and are merely using it as cover). If the closeted individual genuinely believes her homophobic claims, then she is not hypocritical—though she is self-hating, and also has morally problematic attitudes, for which she may (depending on her history and their source) be culpable.

²⁸Cooley ("Is There a Duty to Be Out?") notes that a 2009 Gallup poll demonstrates that American respondents who knew a gay or lesbian individual are more likely to indicate comfort around homosexual persons, and to be in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage.

pressed *ought* to resist their oppression and the false moral claims such oppression makes.²⁹ Do they, when taken together, generate a duty to come out?

At the most, it seems, they might generate a *prima facie* duty. Living openly may well be a component of the best possible life. When the best life is not an option, however, living openly does not outweigh all other considerations or possible components of the best or adequate life-options that remain. Similarly, the duty to resist one form of oppression cannot outweigh all other concerns, and even the most conscientious of moral agents must sometimes choose between a number of incompatible ways in which she can undermine injustice. Insofar as individuals enjoy certain social protections and privileges, the personal and relational risks they face decrease, and so the presumption that they ought to act to undermine injustice—and, where possible, live openly—increases. But most significantly, when assessing the coherence of a duty to come out, both strands of moral argument depend on an assumption so far untouched: namely, that the practices and language of coming out are always viable methods of living openly and resisting oppressive silence and secrecy. It is this assumption I challenge in the next section, when I tackle the conceptual basis for practices of coming out.

4. The Limits of the Closet

The successful case for a moral call to come out requires that we establish a connection between practices of coming out and being out, on the one hand, and ways of living openly and authentically while resisting oppressive interpretations and valuations of one's identity, on the other. Authenticity and resistance are the putative goods of out. I have argued above that this connection—at best—is weaker than proponents of a duty to come out might like. But now I want to challenge the connection further, and suggest that practices of coming out, as presently conceived, may fail to have *any* connection to these goods for many people presumed to have such a duty. In fact, the act of coming out may function to further deny or undermine them. Without the goods of out, the duty to come out lacks appropriate grounds.

My conceptual case against the duty to come out depends on what I take to be two inadequacies inherent to practices of coming out, as pres-

²⁹This is true of virtue-ethical as well as Kantian and utilitarian arguments for coming out. The virtue-ethical perspective has perhaps the easiest task of the three, when grounding a duty to come out in the notion of a good or a flourishing life, since *any* ethical obligation in a neo-Aristotelian virtue-ethical framework is ultimately grounded in the idea of the good life. But the duty to resist oppression is also present in virtue-ethical arguments: for instance, coming out is valuable as an act of courage, justice, and integrity.

ently understood: first, I claim, these practices are most coherent when presented alongside a “lump” picture of human sexuality that is conceptually and experientially inadequate. Second (and related), practices of coming out presume an understanding of responsible self-disclosure that is insufficiently subtle to account for most people’s self-identifications and fails to appropriately contextualize relevant disclosures. As a result, the practice cannot accommodate the self-understandings and identities of many queer persons—and thus a duty to undertake this practice harms their ability to live authentically and well. Further, it interprets their identity in ways that they may rightly experience as oppressive.

Of course, both claims require that I establish just what is meant by practices of coming and being out. As with many socially mediated, noninstitutional practices, precise and exacting definitions are difficult. In section 2, I claimed that for a disclosure to qualify as coming out, certain conditions must obtain. It needs to be taken up as a revelation about the person who discloses, and further, the revelation must be understood to involve some significant aspect of the discloser’s identity, and must diverge from standard expectations by referring to some non-normative property or group membership. Furthermore, I suggested that for the discloser to successfully come out as something, that “something” must previously have been hidden (though—paradoxes of self-deception aside—it could well have been hidden from the discloser herself). Practices of coming *out* imply an “in”: that is, a previous state of concealment and secrecy.

These are the minimal conditions for practices of coming out. What is particularly remarkable about these practices, however, is how much they continue to revolve around and rely upon a now familiar set of images, framed in a standard narrative; this becomes obvious when we recall that “coming out” is itself shorthand for the slightly longer, phrase, “coming out of the closet.” Much of what we understand by “living openly” or “expressing pride,” when applied to the context of stigmatized identity, is explained via the functioning of a dynamic image: a closed and then opened closet door.

The image of the closet—its conceptual structure, so to speak—should be of interest to anyone concerned by the ethical obligations associated with coming and being out. There are several reasons for this; first among them is the closet’s enduring dominance. The expressions “closeted” and “in the closet” are familiar ways of describing those who possess but do not disclose queer identities. They are also not normatively neutral. Rather, they imply that the individual in question has failed to meet certain normative standards. After all, another equally common expression, “skeletons in the closet,” is shorthand for hidden disgrace and shame. In other words, the *idea* of the closet is how the normative force

of coming and being out is most often communicated. Even as queer experiences have diversified, requiring multiple narratives to describe “the” coming out experience, the closet image remains the dominant linguistic and metaphorical model for telling these narratives. Those alternate models that do develop have built upon the basic framework of the closet trope: talk of “revolving” closet doors and “hopping in and out” of the closet are two examples. Even “covering,” a term coined by Kenji Yoshino to describe pressure to minimize an already-disclosed identity, plays on the comparison between sexual identity and material clothing, returning once again to standard contents of a closet.³⁰

The centrality of the closet to the lives, cultures, self-understandings, and growing public awareness of LGBT people has been substantially documented, perhaps most famously in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s groundbreaking 1990 book, *The Epistemology of the Closet*. Sedgwick’s analysis of gay life continues to be taken up as insightful and authoritative (a new edition was re-issued as recently as 2008)—and even the title of her book speaks to the centrality of the closet trope in explaining gay experiences. As Sedgwick notes in her essay of the same name, “the closet has given an overarching consistency to gay culture and identity throughout [the past] century,” and further, “there can be few gay people ... in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence,” even if “there are risks in making salient the continuity and centrality of the closet.”³¹ Sedgwick is not alone here in employing the concept of the closet to make her point; a quick survey of academic literature on gender and sexuality demonstrates how often the closet image is employed to describe and also *explain* the topics in question. That is to say, the closet is not only popular, it also holds conceptual influence over how queer identities, experiences, and normative expectations are articulated and interpreted. Even those who challenge the power of the closet admit it is a socially and politically operative trope, acknowledging, “the era of the closet has not passed ... [it] continues to organize the lives of many [gay]

³⁰Kenji Yoshino, “The Pressure to Cover,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 15, 2006. There is one alternative expression to “closeted” that has an even longer history than the closet trope: namely, the idea of “passing” as what one is not (used to describe nondisclosed racial minority identities as well as gender identities). I do not discuss passing at length because I believe the conceptual structure of passing mimics that of the closet: in this case, the relevant elements are (i) the mask/cover under which the individual passes, (ii) the “face” or stigmatized identity that is hidden, and (iii) the moment of revelation or disclosure, when the mask is lowered. Both tropes draw on visual imagery, and both rely on stable notions of identity over time and limited possibilities for disclosure.

³¹Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Epistemology of the Closet,” in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 45-61, at p. 46.

Americans.”³²

Basic conceptual analysis reveals three main elements to the trope of the closet. First, there is the (social or metaphorical) closet in which the queer identity hides; second, there is identity-as-queer as the “thing” that is hidden and later revealed—this is, alternately, the individual herself or some part/aspect she possesses; third, there is the moment of revelation, expressed as the opening of the closet door, when the individual’s true identity-as-queer is brought into the light and so is shown to her audience. As a result, the closet trope draws on imagery of light/darkness and of expansive/restrictive space to represent the parallel risks and benefits of coming out. The closet is both dark and hidden, safe and protected, but also secret, deceitful, and shaming. As mentioned above, we refer to “skeletons in the closet” when speaking of shameful family histories or the individual’s past misdeeds. One “comes out” into the light of the room, that is, into publicity, authenticity, and recognition. At the same time, one comes out from an enclosed, protected closet into open space—that is, into risk, exposure, and vulnerability.

The materiality of this metaphor has serious consequences, both theoretically and in practice. Closet doors do not make for subtle revelations: they are open (revealing all), partly open (revealing some), or closed (revealing none). That which is effectively hidden by a closet door is exactly that which can be revealed by opening it: things that are potentially visible, material, and that already exist in discrete, measurable form. Closets are not magic, and cannot create or hide what was not already there. One can open a closet door multiple times, of course, producing different items each time (i.e., making different revelations) or producing the same item (i.e., making the same revelation) to different people, but relative to each identity or aspect, the change is measurable and discrete. Furthermore, the closet trope hints at a final condition of total disclosure: as anyone who has conducted a vigorous spring-cleaning knows, it is possible, if arduous, to retrieve and lay bare *all* the contents of one’s closet.

Why should the specific qualities and limits of what is, after all, a *mere* metaphor—however influential—concern those interested in a putative duty to come out? Most use the expression casually, without deeper reflection. Yet there are obvious connections between language and thought, even when the former is used unselfconsciously. We need not subscribe to Freudian theories of unconscious or unintended meaning to hold that how we typically describe something is not only evidence for how we think about it, but can also affect and shape that thinking in turn.

³²Steven Seidman, Check Meeks, and Francie Taschen, “Beyond the Closet? The Changing Social Meaning of Homosexuality in the United States,” *Sexualities* 2 (1999): 9-24.

This is true for metaphorical as well as literal description—especially if, as in the case of the closet trope, a single metaphor or set of metaphors becomes so deeply associated with a given phenomenon as to become almost synonymous with it. If we accept even the very weakest account of what a metaphor can offer, epistemologically—namely, that the metaphors we use to describe a phenomenon tell us *something* about how we regard that phenomenon—then the different range of possibilities offered by the closet becomes significant to the question at hand. Put simply: the ethics of coming out (what we should do) will depend on the conceptual possibilities made available through the practice (what we can do). Whether metaphors bring to mind a set of “associated implications” and “commonplace understandings,” as Max Black argues, or merely provoke certain thoughts in their audience, as Donald Davidson counters, they affect how those who employ them come to understand the principal subject, directing our thinking along the lines of how we already think about the secondary subject or image.³³ And others have gone further than Black and Davidson, arguing that metaphors do not merely direct our attention—they actually persuade us, as an oblique argument might do.

Jan Zwicky compares the argumentative pull of a metaphor comparing two phenomena or concepts (she calls them “contexts”) to that of a geometrical demonstration, remarking that “features of various geometrical figures or of various contexts are pulled into revealing alignment with one another *by* the demonstration or the metaphor ... To ‘see’ a proof or ‘get’ a metaphor is to experience the significance of the correspondence for what the thing, concept, or figure *is*.” Ultimately, Zwicky claims, both metaphors and proofs compel us by demanding: “Look at things like this.”³⁴ Thus, the conceptual possibilities available in a particular metaphor may implicitly, albeit forcefully, appear to be the sole conceptual possibilities for its object.

Furthermore, the persuasive mechanisms operated by metaphor deserve our particular attention when a single metaphorical image—in this case, the closet—has come to dominate, even define, how we speak and think about a phenomenon: in this case, how to live a stigmatized identity with pride. The closet image invites us to look at sexuality like “this” and not “that,” and the possibilities of the closet subtly define what we take to be the possibilities of living openly and queerly. Even for those who remain unconvinced that the metaphor has the kind of conceptual influence I describe, its ongoing popularity may well speak to its *aptness*;

³³Max Black, “Metaphor,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55 (1955): 272-94; Donald Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” in Sheldon Sacks (ed.), *On Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 29-46.

³⁴Jan Zwicky, *Wisdom and Metaphor* (Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press, 2003), pp. 36-38.

that is, we can take the conceptual image of the closet as evidencing ways we are comfortable thinking and speaking about disclosures of queer sexualities. Whether the closet image regulates—or perhaps merely reflects—common understanding of what it means to come out or fail to come out, those who support a duty to come out must pay particular attention to what possibilities the closet trope's conceptual regulation obscures or even precludes.

Analyzing the closet trope reveals some of the crucial limitations of outing discourses. These are, first, the picture of human sexuality presented, and second, the threshold for disclosure implied. Concerning the first: in order to recognize the images, descriptions and claims made in outing as consisting of significant revelations concerning the out individual, we must first accept that sexual orientation or identity *can* be fully revealed in these ways. We must see it as a concrete “lump” of information to be communicated—that is, either hidden in or produced from the closet. This is entirely possible, if we understand sexual orientations as William Wilkerson does, namely, as “an enduring, stable desire *directed* at a particular sexual object” or set of sexual objects, around which an equally stable sexual identity will inevitably develop.³⁵ And certainly for many people, the “lump” understanding of sexuality fits relatively well: nonheterosexual examples from pop culture include gay and lesbian celebrities like singer Elton John, comedian Ellen Degeneres, pop artist Lance Bass, and actor Neil Patrick Harris.³⁶

But there are a number of queer possibilities that the “lump” understanding excludes or distorts. Examples include someone who identifies first as lesbian and then as transgender without taking herself to have been lying or self-deceived during her time as a lesbian; a man who has a passionate same-sex affair (expressing queer desire) without ever intending to pursue a queer life (that is, intending to take on a long-term queer identity or engage in ongoing queer practices and relationships); a woman who identifies as bisexual but whose public persona may include long periods of stable apparent heterosexuality, or who never has a same-sex relationship or experience; an individual whose resistance to heterosexism means that he “refuses a label” altogether; and so on. What these examples have in common is an experience of sexual identity that is una-

³⁵William S. Wilkerson, “Social Constructionism and Essentialism,” in Halwani et al., “What is Gay and Lesbian Philosophy?” pp. 449-53, at p. 450.

³⁶English pop star Elton John has become a gay icon in recent years, but even his iconic status did not emerge in a concrete “lump.” He came out first as bisexual in 1976 and then as gay in the 1980s. American comedian and television star Ellen Degeneres's decision to come out in 1997 made the cover of *Time* magazine. American pop singer Lance Bass is a member of the pop band 'N Sync: he came out in a cover story for *People* magazine in 2006. American television and film actor Neil Patrick Harris also came out in 2006, after rumors of his relationship with his partner began to surface.

voidably complex: better described as fluid, a trajectory of unfolding possibilities than as a set of facts that is completely discernible (to the individual or to others) at a given point in time.

The claim that *all* personal identity takes narrative form remains philosophically controversial, but few would dispute that we come both to understand ourselves and to explain ourselves to others in large part by the stories we tell about ourselves. These stories, in turn, are reflected back to us in the responses of others, so that they influence and even constitute important features of our characters as they develop.³⁷ For some people, a truthful account of their sexual identity cannot be provided ahistorically; such an individual might choose to say “oh yes, that happened before I was a lesbian” or “... before I became a lesbian,” and not “that was before I knew I was a lesbian.” For these individuals, their subjective experience of change is best (most authentically) described as a change in identity and *not* a change in self-knowledge.³⁸

Insofar as sexuality is a complex of embodiment, gender identity, orientation, fantasies, practices, relationships, and desires, I take it to be at least partly a matter of self interpretation, since this is true of some of its constituent parts. Furthermore, our self-interpretations may change over time; in some cases, we revise or correct past interpretations in light of present ones, but in other cases, we accept that *we* and not merely our understandings have changed. As Lisa Diamond, a psychologist conducting longitudinal research of queer female sexual identity, notes, very few of her subjects’ experiences are straightforward stories of repression followed by revelation, or stories of a conscious “choice” to be gay. Instead, she suggests, many people’s sexual identity changes over time in ways that they experience as beyond their control, and in ways that cannot be accounted for in a single “lump” or label.³⁹ Diamond’s studies of queer female sexuality repeatedly reveal features such as “nonlinear change over time, spontaneous emergence of novel forms, and periodic reorgan-

³⁷For a sense of the ongoing philosophical debate about narrative identity, see Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” *Ratio* 16 (2004): 428-52; and Serife Tekin, “Self-Concept Through the Diagnostic Looking Glass: Narratives and Mental Disorder,” *Philosophical Psychology* 24 (2011): 357-80.

³⁸For example, a recent *Guardian* article notes how more and more women choose to describe their experiences in the former terms: “The notion that she might be a lesbian had never occurred to her before. ‘If you’d asked me the previous year’, she says, ‘I would have replied: “I know exactly who and what I am—I am not a lesbian, nor could I ever be one”’.” Kira Cochrane, “Why It’s Never Too Late to Be a Lesbian,” *The Guardian*, July 22, 2010 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/jul/22/late-blooming-lesbians-women-sexuality> (last accessed July 30, 2010).

³⁹See Cochrane, “Why It’s Never Too Late”; also Lisa Diamond, “A Dynamical Systems Approach to the Development and Expression of Female Same-Sex Sexuality,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 2 (2007): 142-61.

izations and phase transitions within the overall system.”⁴⁰

Can the closet trope—and thus practices of coming out—accommodate the complex experiences of sexuality that Diamond describes? We could say, for example, that these individuals have a duty to come out of the closet as many times as is necessary, or to come out as much as they are able at a given moment, or even to “keep the closet door open,” so that their practices of disclosure continually shift in order to reflect the fluidity of their sexual identity. Indeed, such expressions give the lie to any strong claim that the closet cannot *possibly* model disclosures of complex or fluid sexual identity. Clearly, it can. It is my contention, rather, that it cannot do so without also risking serious damage to the subjects’ authentic experience of these identities—most often in the form of an accusation of ongoing deceit, inauthenticity, or cowardice. If, for example, we describe someone as first coming out of the closet as butch lesbian, and then later coming out as trans, the implication, on the closet model, is that her trans identity was there, in the closet, all along (whether or not she knew it), and her experience of coming out as lesbian was provisional or partial, or even mistaken. This implication may reflect some people’s experiences, but certainly not all.

Further, continually coming out of the closet implies that one is continually *in* the closet. This has damaging implications, given that the term “closeted” is not normatively neutral—especially not in queer circles. When combined with a putative *duty*, stretching the model in this way increases the burden on those with fluid identities, who must now perform a kind of ongoing personal accounting of their self-trajectory to others. Given that sexual identity is partly a matter of self-interpretation, and that such self-interpretations are vulnerable to the reactions, attitudes, and uptake of others, this exposes those with fluid identities to more risk. In other words, the closet model makes the most *sense* if we understand coming out as disclosing straightforward, stable “facts” about the individual (i.e., individual, discrete, objects that can be kept in or taken out of a closet). Incorporating complex identities is possible if we see these as changing “facts,” some true at one time and some at another. But for someone who experiences her sexuality as an ongoing trajectory of shifting possibilities, or as a fluid and changing aspect, engaging in a practice that molds these into a set of facts available at different points in time will likely leave her feeling inauthentic and distorted.

Finally, whether or not the closet model *can* theoretically accommodate those with non-lump sexual identities, in practice it does not. As Diamond’s interviews with her subjects reflect, those with fluid sexual identities often find their experiences accounted for by others as long-

⁴⁰Diamond, “A Dynamical Systems Approach,” p. 142.

term or ongoing denial of their closeted status. Indeed, there is an emerging set of jokes that equate bisexuality with unwillingness to *fully* or completely come out of the closet.⁴¹

The failure of the closet trope to adequately account for non-lump experiences of sexuality is tied to the second limitation of the model to which I wish to draw attention: the simple picture of authentic self-disclosure that it promotes and reflects. I see this picture as being insufficiently subtle in several ways. It provides limited options: totally hidden, partly hidden or totally exposed and thus available. It cannot account for other, more subtle, forms of concealment, as the development of alternative (and, significantly less normative) models like “covering” are designed to do.⁴² It implies that *total* exposure is possible, and further, represents the most authentic form of disclosure in all cases. After all, it is individuals and not merely their sexualities that come out of the closet. If the state of being closeted appears to preclude the possibility of any truly authentic or truthful disclosures about the self, then the state of being out appears almost to guarantee them. Truthfulness, dignity, and courage are equated with maximal light and exposure as when, for example, Mohr argues that the closet represents secrecy and not privacy.⁴³

I see this understanding of disclosure as problematic for several reasons. First, it implies that total exposure is always possible, suggesting that provisional, partial or ambivalent disclosures are lesser, second-best. I have already shown, above, why I think this unfairly burdens those with fluid sexual identities. Second, because it assumes total exposure is possible, it fails to show how, in many cases, responsible disclosure is a matter of responsible choice *between* identities. The model cannot account for the contextual aptness of a particular revelation: why it might appear appropriate to my purposes to share *this* part of myself and not *that*. Yet, surely, one aspect of someone’s identity may become more or less important or salient to who she is.

Indeed, even for someone who experiences her sexual identity as relatively stable, all the various possibilities presented by practices of coming out may still appear deceitful, since it is not clear “what or who [it is] that is ‘out’, made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as a lesbian”—as Judith Butler puts it.⁴⁴ Coming out is a performative speech act. What the individual who comes out succeeds in com-

⁴¹For example, the popular 1990s sitcom “Friends” has the character Phoebe sing a song with the lyrics: “Sometimes men love women/Sometimes men love men/Then there are bisexuals/”Though some say they’re just kidding themselves.”

⁴²Yoshino, “The Pressure to Cover.”

⁴³Mohr, *Gay Ideas*, pp. 11-48.

⁴⁴Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in Ablove et al. (eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, pp. 307-20.

municating about herself depends on her audience's uptake—how they hear, understand, and interpret her disclosure—and this dependence is extremely vulnerable, especially in a society that can seem both sex-obsessed and sex-phobic. In either coming out or being outed, the queer-identified figure risks having her life and her identity “excerpted.” That is, she risks having her whole self equated with or reduced to her sexual self in ways that do not feel authentic, or truthful, or even relatable. As Card notes, such excerption is hardly conducive to human dignity: it means seeing one's identity reduced to a series of snapshots, a single relationship, confirmation of whispered rumors, and so on.⁴⁵

Excerption is particularly harmful to those whose self-conception and life choices do not fit the typical trajectories of gay or lesbian, since public comprehension and acceptance of other queer identities (bisexual, trans, queer-identified) is significantly lower.⁴⁶ Many audiences will misunderstand her performance: taking an out bisexual to have come out as lesbian, on the one hand, or as promiscuous, on the other. In these cases, not only does the out individual face the usual costs, but she also faces them without the relief of feeling whole, truthful, or unburdened.⁴⁷ In many senses, she continues to live what feels like a lie. Is such an individual out, or does she remain in a secondary closet—one in which she “pretends” to be gay, in order to render her queer identity recognizable to others? If coming out means publicly confessing a (i.e., any) queer identity, she is out; if it means anything like the ideal of an authentically or truthfully lived life it is meant to express, then she is both out and not out. The closet—and thus, the possibilities of disclosure allowed by talk of out and outings—fails to account for her experience. In contrast, we might describe her predicament in terms of a harsh, glaring, and also distorting light: one that reveals every detail of the moment, but fails to provide an appropriate long-term likeness of its object.

Furthermore, insofar as the act of coming out successfully reveals something true about the individual, this “something” is her sexuality: a complex that includes fantasies, practices, and desires. Outing reveals erotic desires and imaginings that are stigmatized (i.e., not normal). And it does so against a social background in which sexual desire itself is

⁴⁵Card, *Lesbian Choices*, p. 212.

⁴⁶Again, popular culture provides a wealth of examples on which to draw. Iconic queer or bisexual actors and musicians (for example, alternative folk star and activist Ani DiFranco) have documented reactions of betrayal from fans upon entering romantic relationships with members of the opposite sex (another example is Ellen Degeneres's former partner, actress Anne Heche).

⁴⁷For further discussion, see Alice MacLachlan and Susanne Sreedhar, “Complicating ‘Out’: The Case of Queer Femmes,” forthcoming in Dennis R. Cooley and Kelby Harrison (eds.), *Passing/Out: Sexual Identity Veiled and Revealed* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012).

highly regulated, tightly channeled, and only acceptable in certain (heteronormative and often male) subjects. Accepted and acceptable erotic desires are so completely normalized as to become unremarkable and even invisible. Such desires are not notable; they are as unremarkable as a beer commercial or a casual joke. In comparison, queer desires appear startling, exaggerated, and extra-sexualized.⁴⁸

Thus, choosing to perform the act of coming out may mean accepting a disproportionately *sexualized* identity. However many activists insist that orientation is both conceptually and experientially separate from one's actions and behavior and that outing discloses "facts, not acts," and however much we point out that people constantly make identifications of heterosexuality without thought of sex and sexual behavior, it continues to be the case that the meanings of "gay," "lesbian," "queer," "trans," and perhaps especially "bisexual" are sexualized and made salacious, in a way that "heterosexual" is not.⁴⁹ As Chris Cuomo notes, it is not clear that we can "make an analytical distinction between being and doing," and separate queer identities from queer desires.⁵⁰ For members of groups whose identities and bodies are already sexualized in disproportionate and demeaning ways (e.g., men and especially women of color, femme women, or very young women—and, increasingly, very young men), who find themselves in industries that trade upon, exploit, and exaggerate that sexuality for mass consumption (arguably, any arena of public celebrity), even the claim to be a desiring subject, let alone a queerly desiring subject, is potentially transgressive. This increased risk of sexualization may be a significant and rational deterrent to coming out, and may lead to self-alienation rather than authenticity.

In this section, I have argued, first, that how we understand what it

⁴⁸Indeed, this point is brought out nicely by popular (queer) sex columnist Dan Savage, in typically tongue-in-cheek fashion: "I am often asked—*confronted*—about gay pride parades when I speak at colleges and universities. Usually it is a conservative student, typically someone who isn't happy about my being invited to campus in the first place ... The exchange almost always ends with this: Conservative student: 'Straight people do not flaunt our sexuality like that. We do not have straight "pride" parades.' Me: 'You should.'" Savage's point is subtle: sometimes, the invisibility of one's desire is a privilege, if that invisibility is the consequence of their ubiquity, and not forced silencing. Dan Savage, "Happy Heterowe'en: In Defense of Sexy Pirates, Sexy Nuns, and Sexy Cadavers," *The Stranger*, October 27, 2009.

⁴⁹"Facts not acts" is an expression used by Richard Mohr (*Gay Ideas*, pp. 15-17). I have left out "cisgender" from the list above, because it is arguably the least well known of the terms for gender identity and sexuality; in fact it is so little known that hearing it probably *does* bring questions of sex/gender to the front in the same way that various queer terms do. The point is, most people assume the fact of being cisgender without sexualizing or problematizing the body of the cisgendered individual, even if they do not have access to this particular explanatory term.

⁵⁰Cuomo, "Claiming the Right to be Queer," p. 244.

means for someone to come out or fail to come out is inextricably bound up with the conceptual structure of the closet trope. Second, I claim, the interpretive limitations of the closet make the picture it presents of coming out as authentic, truthful disclosure accurate *at best* only for a minority of the queer people who could reasonably be expected to hold a duty to come out. By minority, I mean those who experience and understand their sexual identity to be definite, stable, and identifiable over time (what I have referred to as the “lump” picture of sexuality). Furthermore, the picture of responsible disclosure promoted by the closet-modeled discourses of coming out is simplistic, in ways that fail to account for predictable failures of uptake, for exception, for increased sexualization, and for the need to make difficult choices to disclose one identity at the expense of another.

Thus, analysis of the closet trope reveals the practices and concepts associated with coming out—the conceptual basis for any *duty* to do so—may rely on concepts of sexuality and of disclosure that are inhospitable, even hostile, to the norms of acceptance, diversity, and individuality these practices are meant to promote. Indeed, the trope of the closet may actually perpetuate and even reinforce an increasingly problematic set of binaries: in or out, homosexual or heterosexual, overly sexualized or nonsexual, the revealed or the concealed self. Broader concepts of truthful disclosure hold a much wider range of possible extensions: an individual can reveal aspects of her sexuality to herself, to other queer people, to her close friends and family, to some but not all social contexts and—if she is a public figure—she can be open in her private life without thereby disclosing details to the wider public.⁵¹

For many queer people, managing one’s identity in a heterosexist society is a matter of degree: how and when to continue disclosing, how much to “cover” or minimize one’s queerness for the comfort of others or to avoid distraction, and when to shock, maximize, reclaim, and disrupt for strategic political purposes.⁵² That we can recognize these nuances might be evidence that the power of the closet trope, however problematic, is already dissipating—but I suspect, rather, that they are evidence of a disconnect between how queer individuals actually *live* certain possibilities and how those possibilities are recognized and taken up in ethical, political, and public discourses. As queer issues continue to dominate both domestic American and global politics, from issues of military service to same-sex marriage, the language of the closet remains recognizable and influential.

⁵¹These distinctions are made far more easily in theory than in practice, of course.

⁵²Yoshino, “The Pressure to Cover.”

5. Complicating the Goods of Out

How do the conceptual limitations of the closet trope, and the outing practices associated with it, affect the goods I described in the first half of this paper? I have already highlighted the ways in which coming out language distorts and misrepresents a number of queer possibilities: namely, those that cannot be communicated at one time or in “lump” form. The demand that such an individual come out may prevent her from leading an authentic life rather than enabling it. A duty to come out, if the metaphor is left un-deconstructed and the practices unexamined, becomes a duty to fit oneself into the possibly more liberated side of a nevertheless restrictive dichotomy. For example, for many transgender people, being out represents half of an insidious binary that continues to construe their identities as either “pretend,” “fraudulent,” or “deceitful.”⁵³ If overcoming oppression on the basis of sexual or gender identity requires that we not exclude or dismiss multiple possibilities for both, then insofar as the coming out discourse cannot explain or even allow for them, it too contributes to their incoherence and invisibility—just as heterosexism does. And if engaging in practices of coming out (for example, narrating one’s experiences in terms of that language) reinforces the conceptual power of the closet metaphor, then, to some extent, coming out is also an act of complicity with one oppressive structure and not purely resistance to another.

Second, equating authenticity and honesty with the kind of total disclosure promoted by the closet metaphor leaves the individual with little control or choice over how and when she chooses to disclose. No one has total control over what others see of her, how they interpret what they see, and what they learn of her as a result. But given the staunch risks of excoriation and over-sexualization present for many individuals who come out, the loss of control is particularly acute in their cases. Moreover, this is a moral and not merely a personal cost; some degree of control over one’s identity is a plausible component of an authentically lived life, insofar as it enables the individual to see choices as her own and not forced upon her. Having something one has intended to disclose become distorted and made alien by that very act of disclosure can also feel like perpetrating a lie, or even creating a new one. Thus, what began as a duty motivated by the goods of integrity and authenticity reveals a practice that is sometimes incapable of responding to those goods, and which may contribute to their loss.

Finally, formulating the notion of a duty to come out as a necessary condition for further acts of authenticity or resistance leads us to exclude

⁵³Bettcher, “On Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers.”

prematurely certain moral possibilities, for example, a choice to remain closeted that is *motivated* by authentic choices, rather than leveled against them. But such a choice, while peculiar, is not unimaginable: “Forget about your so-called integrity and moral courage,” someone might think, “I want to continue to fight for electoral reform/make blockbuster action movies/win the World Series/become bishop. These goals are most valuable to me and represent the best expressions of who I am; they are life projects just as central and meaningful as my sexual orientation is. Ideally, I should not have to choose between them, but practically, I do. The authentic choice for me is to not risk them, and to not come out. I accept that this comes at a personal cost, namely, the opportunity to live openly in my sexuality, but many moral choices come with costs.” Such a person is not necessarily trading off the demands of authenticity against other moral goods; he may well be following them.

These dangers do not immediately affect the wider, symbolic value of out: the ambivalently out figure can still be visible and vocal, albeit (perhaps) a less enthusiastic role model. But if being out is *not* taken to be a good for the individual—indeed, if out is experienced primarily as a significant burden or cost to his integrity and authenticity—then its strategic value for the queer community and wider social education becomes morally questionable, as it treats the out individual as a means to a desirable end, even if it is an end (social transformation) he presumably shares. Indeed, this is why so many in the queer community promote voluntarily coming out without advocating forced outings.⁵⁴ That certain duties to the community are experienced as a subjective burden is not always a conclusive argument against them, but such an argument has more weight in the realm of sexuality. To experience one’s sexuality as alienated is an intimate burden to carry. If we are to talk about how “out” matters, ethically, it is hard to dismiss the relevance of its contributions to or subtractions from the individual’s flourishing.

6. Conclusions: From Closet Doors to Stage Lights

Advocates of a duty to come out are not wrong to associate practices of disclosure, openness, confession, and pride with the range of obligations we have to live well and to resist false and oppressive claims made against us. Practices of coming out have played an important historical role in queer resistance to heterosexist oppression. Even today, for some

⁵⁴Margaret Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Gary Hicks and Hillary Warren, “Whose Benefit? Gay and Lesbian Journalists Discuss Outing, the Individual and the Community,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 13 (1998): 14-25.

queer persons coming out will be the most empowering and morally courageous act they will ever undertake. But, as the idea of coming out gets dispersed across a wide range of contexts and struggles, and as the intuition that oppressed persons have an *obligation* to participate in these practices endures, the limitations of the closet trope governing these practices become increasingly problematic. The negative argument against a duty to come out is thus also a positive claim: we require a new ethics of disclosure to stretch and fill the horizon of possibilities for resisting the “bads” that are presently associated with a closeted (i.e., secret, shame-filled, bifurcated) life, as well as the false values that lead to these. We need new ways to identify and express the very real goods of out.

This second endeavor—that is, the positive project of constructing a new, more appropriate model for an ethics of self-disclosure—is beyond the scope of a single paper. But reflecting on the lasting power of one, problematic, metaphorical model hints at one possible avenue.

I described the closet as problematically *limited*, but not all visual metaphors for disclosure are limited in this way. Consider a very different image of space and light: changing stage lights in a theater production. As the audience, we undergo one of several experiences. First, if the lights are raised, we may see something that was previously hidden completely. Or, we might continue to see something to which we already had dim access, only now we see it under some new description: what first seemed to be a lumpy set piece is now an actor under a cloth, or what seemed to be a person turns out to be a statue after all. The new light in which we see it may correct a *false* belief about the object, but it may also add new information (detail, color, perspective), or may change what we thought we already knew, or may leave things much as they were, now transfigured in mood or emphasis, making different aspects of the scene appear salient.

As lighting directors are well aware, different levels of overall lighting are appropriate at different moments, as is the focus and direction of the light, its color, and its quality. Determining whether, in a given case, one kind of lighting is *better* or more revealing than another will always require that we first determine *what* is being revealed and why. A bright and wide light, which reveals the footwear of every chorus member in a crowd scene but distracts audience attention from a crucial conversation between the principals, is not necessarily *better* or more revealing than a focused spotlight with a dim background. The quality of light (i.e., revelation) can only be assessed if we first decide what, in a given scene, is most salient and most resonant for the ongoing narrative. It may require that we take a wider, contextual perspective: that we inquire as to the *nature* of the play, as well as the plot, mood, and atmosphere of a given scene.

What insight into the ethics of self-disclosure does this crash course in lighting design offer? Like the closet trope, this model presents disclosure (revelation) in visual terms that allow us to make normative evaluations. But we can also now recognize several kinds of revelation, each of which may have different ethical significance: the addition of new information, changes to our present comprehension, or more subtle shifts in emphasis, affect, and salience that change how we understand, connect, and prioritize what we know. Furthermore, the stage-light metaphor also provides us the tools to acknowledge three important truths: first, some phenomena can only be disclosed truthfully over time and through a series of individual revelations that may themselves appear to be lesser, partial, or even apparently deceptive (thus accommodating fluid sexual identities). Second, increased exposure or detail does not always lead to more effective communication—it may muddy the water or confuse the issue, depending on the purpose of the confession (as excerption, for example, and increased sexualization do). Finally, responsible decisions about what and how much to disclose require that we pay attention to the particularities of the immediate context and of the subject's longer-term goals. Judgments about the quality of a revelation/exposure (i.e., the quality of light shone on the object) are always at least partly indexical to the nature of the play (i.e., the individual and her life) in question.

This model keeps the ultimate grounds for a duty to come out—that is, the claim that the *quality* of our self-disclosures to other people is both morally significant and tied to deeper values of authenticity and resistance—while complicating what it means to demand and evaluate such disclosures. These complications preclude the development of anything like a straightforward duty to come out. Instead, they point to a normative ethics of responsible disclosure that reflects the complexities of personal identity (sexual or otherwise) and the ways in which disclosures are always interpretations, subject to audience uptake, and affected by their broader context. Within such an ethics, one of the first responsibilities is to figure out how and when these broad obligations manifest themselves in relation to sexuality. How do we cast appropriate light on various aspects of our identity, stigmatized or otherwise, in a given context and over the course of a life? For those who face oppressive and false valuations of their sexuality, as queer individuals do, these responsibilities will certainly include a responsibility to resist and repudiate those false valuations, both internally and in relation to others. Strategic and proud revelations of queer sexuality, whether dramatic or quietly matter-of-fact, will most likely play a role in efforts to assume and fulfill this responsibility. So, under certain conditions, may strategic and nonshameful refusals to disclose.

Rather than endorsing a duty to come out, therefore, we are better off

promoting an ethics of responsible disclosures, one which recognizes coming out as gay, lesbian or bisexual as one possible, but by no means the only, route by which some individuals take responsibility for their sexual agency under conditions of oppression. But so might the following possibilities: a queer Muslim or Christian politician lobbying for the rights of political detainees who makes the strategic choices to conceal his sexuality in order to reach key constituencies and forge bridges between them; a young actress who resists a highly feminized, sexualized identity and chooses to downplay her sexuality in order to insist that tomboy identities should not be equated with lesbianism; a heterosexual male athlete who keeps his heterosexuality a secret and uses mysterious pronouns to undermine public assumptions about masculinity, or indeed a public figure who resists labels and confessions altogether and refuses to engage in practices of overt disclosure while nevertheless refusing to conceal or minimize a joyous, loving same-sex relationship.⁵⁵ These kinds of choices are all candidates for what it might mean to live responsibly as a sexual agent, without necessarily prioritizing that aspect of one's identity. Some refusals to disclose are not simply understandable failures to meet one's all-things-considered duty because of personal costs, or understandable failures to meet one prima facie duty because of overriding duties, but alternative routes to successfully meeting one's duty in the first place.

The ethics of responsible disclosure allows us to identify and assess the original goods of out through a wider lens: the multiple values involved, the particular details and texture of the individual's life, and her sexual agency as an ongoing, unfolding—and not necessarily stable—phenomenon. This is not an anything-goes approach. We retain the conceptual and normative resources to demonstrate that some instances of darkness or secrecy hide what is important, and what ought to be shown, exposed, and embraced. We can still recognize that some decisions to “turn down the lights” are nothing more than expressions of cowardice and fear, an understandable if regrettable capitulation to the norms of heterosexism or a refusal to sacrifice the nonmoral goods of comfort and

⁵⁵The example of the heterosexual athlete points to an exciting implication of this shift in imagery: the idea of taking responsibility for one's sexual identity need not be restricted to those with queer sexualities. Indeed, it may be particularly important for those with normative sexual identities to take responsibility for how these identities affect, express, and reinforce harmful norms. Since both oppressors and complicit bystanders also have duties to cease and resist oppression, we might think of how non-queer individuals can take up the challenge of that responsibility—perhaps by *refusing* to disclose their sexuality (dimming the lights), on the one hand or by subversively performing the decision to “come out” as heterosexual, on the other. Such avenues to responsibility might mean re-sexualizing normative identities in politically appropriate ways to shift the burden of excess sexualization from others.

privilege—and we can respond appropriately. Only now, we can make these judgments without the further claim that *all* instances of nondisclosure are culpable secrecy, and require a similar response.

The approach I have sketched allows for the now commonplace intuitions that there is no one way to be gay, and that some individuals with stigmatized sexual identities face multiple, intersecting forms of oppression. It also leaves room for considerations of other responsibilities alongside one's queerness: responsibilities to dependents, communities, projects, and other political struggles. These conclusions are framed within an acknowledgment of heterosexism as a source of oppression, and the need for social change through resistance to oppression. We can engage in more subtle practices of disclosure and disclosure-assessment. We can also admit the truth contained in the original consequentialist case—that it is good that there are out public figures, for example, and good that they made the choices they did—without either succumbing to incoherence, outright relativism, or inappropriately harsh judgments towards all who do not make that choice. Some people who do not come out may well express cowardice, self-loathing, or fear in their failure to do so; others may be taking responsibility in ways not always evident to the observer. We value and promote the goods of out best when we leave the framework of the closet, and not merely the closet door, behind us.⁵⁶

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