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What is Sexual Orientation?

KATHLEEN STOCK

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KATHLEEN STOCK
UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

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CONTACT
mail@aristoteliansociety.org.uk
www.aristoteliansociety.org.uk

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B I O G R A P H Y

Kathleen Stock is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sussex. She works in philosophy of imagination and fiction, and has a growing interest in issues of gender, sex, and sexual orientation. She has also published on the nature of sexual and other kinds of objectification. Her most recent major publication is *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation and Imagination* (Oxford 2017).

E D I T O R I A L N O T E

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WHAT IS SEXUAL ORIENTATION? ¹

KATHLEEN STOCK

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

I. INTRODUCTION

HERE'S A COLLECTION of erstwhile truisms about sexual orientation: statements that many people, including academics, formerly understood as completely unexceptionable. Call this collection the 'Orthodox Account' (OA). To avoid confusion, I'll use 'sex' to refer to sexual activity, and 'Sex', capitalised, to refer to biological sex.

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

Perhaps some readers still find these claims banal. They may be surprised to know that, in some academic circles, OA is now treated as old-fashioned - perhaps even pernicious. This treatment is a mistake, I'll argue. In what follows, I seek to bolster OA, by surrounding it with a

¹ Grateful thanks to Sophie Allen, Rani Lill Anjum, Raja Halwani, Holly Lawford-Smith, Teresa Marques, Paul Noordhof, Amia Srinivasan, Ema Sullivan-Bissett, and audiences in York, Southampton and London for helpful discussion.

theoretical framework that both justifies it as a means of classifying human subjects, and reveals its still-vital explanatory importance.

First, though, an important disclaimer. The issue at hand is classification, and so has consequences for who counts as gay, and as straight, and under what circumstances. I take it as given that to classify someone as gay or straight, in virtue of their actual sexual desires and behaviour, is not thereby to suggest that they should alter those desires or behaviour, or are in any way deficient because of them. Additional positive or negative evaluative attitudes, in principle detachable from the act of classification, also have to be present for such conclusions².

Some – particularly those within branches of continentally-influenced feminist philosophy – may dismiss this neutrality as an impossibility. They may argue that language-use, and so classification, is inherently normative, so that evaluative commitments cannot in fact be purged; or that to classify human kinds at all is inevitably to entrench contingent power relations, prioritising the interests of one group over another (Witt 1995, p. 322). Since I cannot address such views directly here, I note only that each rests on controversial general views of language and concept-formation, with implications for a vast number of philosophical questions beyond the narrow one broached here. It would therefore be unreasonable to insist that, in this case in particular, such views must be explicitly rejected in detail before OA can be interestingly defended.

II. SEXUAL ORIENTATION AS A DISPOSITION

As a first step towards vindicating OA, I propose to follow others (e.g. Stein 1999, p. 45; Dembroff 2016, p. 7) in treating a sexual orientation as a disposition. A disposition is, roughly, a capacity of a thing, under ‘ideal’ conditions, to exhibit some further particular behaviour or other characteristics. Call these outcomes the ‘manifestations’ of a disposition. Archetypal dispositions include fragility – the capacity to produce the manifestation of *breaking* - and solubility – the capacity to produce the manifestation of *dissolving*.

Desires generally are sometimes characterised as dispositions (e.g. Ashwell 2014). But whether or not that’s right, treating a sexual orientation as a disposition fits well with OA’s construal of an orientation as a stable

² For this reason, I reject the apparent assumption of Dembroff (2016: 19) that a taxonomy of sexual orientation which focuses only on heterosexuality and homosexuality, as OA does, automatically carries a presumption that other sexual preferences are ‘normatively deviant’. If it’s true that such focusing has the pragmatic effect of removing attention from other sexual preferences, this effect might just as well be reversed by properly explaining to people that taxonomies need not be automatically evaluative.

feature of a person, causing them to experience desire, and to exhibit arousal and other arousal-related behavioural outcomes, as associated manifestations.

For a disposition to be activated, it has to encounter the right sort of stimulus. For a fragile glass to shatter, it must meet force; for a soluble pill to dissolve, it must meet liquid. Being sexually oriented towards a particular type of person has multiple potential concrete stimuli: particular encounters; flights of fantasy; pornographic representations; and even unconscious brain-events, as where one simply ‘finds oneself’ aroused. Hence, if a sexual orientation is to count as a disposition at all, it’s apparently ‘multi-track’. A multi-track disposition is associated with multiple stimuli, or manifestations, or both (Bird 2013, p. 21).

A great advantage of thinking of sexual orientation as a (multi-track) disposition, is that generally, a disposition is ontologically distinct from its stimulus and manifestation, and in fact may never be manifested (Alvarez 2017). This fits with many of the ways we ordinarily think about sexual orientation³. For instance, there might be cases where a person has a sexual orientation yet doesn’t exhibit arousal or other relevant behaviour. This might be explicable as a case where no relevant stimulus is present (e.g. no prospective partners; no suitable material for fantasising), and so no relevant manifestations either. In such cases, a person might even be unaware of their orientation, given a lack of evidence of it.

Another advantage of analysing an orientation as a disposition is that generally, a disposition requires ideal background conditions, in order for its associated stimulus and manifestation to correlate. In non-ideal conditions, the stimulus can occur but no manifestation, so that the non-ideal conditions ‘mask’ the disposition in question. Where D is a disposition to manifest M in the presence of stimulus S, a mask is, broadly speaking, some additional feature F of the situation, co-occurring with S, which disrupts M: as, for instance, packing material around a fragile vase, will inhibit the associated manifestation of breaking, when the vase is exposed to the stimulus of force (Choi and Fara 2018).

Just as there are potential masks for dispositions generally, so too there are real-life potential masks for sexual orientations. In the context of sexual orientation, relevant masks might include socially-induced guilt at the direction of one’s thoughts, dampening sexual arousal for a

3 Sometimes, empirical researchers effectively treat a sexual orientation as identical to some sub-set of actual psychological states: in terms of ‘sexual passion’, an ‘urge’, ‘sexual instinct’ and so on. Others analyse orientation in terms of a behaviour: a ‘genital act’; ‘congress’; ‘sexual contact’ (Sell 1997, pp. 646-49). According to the logic of OA, these analyses confuse an orientation with its manifestations.

partner to whom one would otherwise be attracted; or fantasising about an absent other, heightening sexual excitement for a partner to whom one would otherwise have been indifferent. Other possible masks include peer pressure, a desire for parental approval, religious upbringing, alcohol, and drugs. Another is romantic love and/ or emotional attachment. There's generally good reason to differentiate between dispositions to affective or romantic attachment, and dispositions to sexual desire and arousal. Notoriously, attachments often don't track sexual urges: one can be attached to someone who isn't exciting, and excited by someone to whom one isn't attached. Even so, there's evidence that romantic attachment can also inflect sexual arousal, and vice versa (Diamond 2003, p. 183; 2004).

Though there's some controversy about whether dispositions are causes of associated manifestations⁴, nonetheless I'll treat an orientation as a cause of desire and arousal. It's important to note that – of course - this isn't the claim that a person with an orientation towards one category will be caused to sexually desire absolutely everyone in that category. The claim is rather that possession of an orientation (plus associated stimulus, plus ideal conditions⁵) is causally responsible for one's desiring *only* those within a given category. Possession of an orientation causally explains one's attraction to a type of person, broadly construed; but is only part of a causal-explanatory story about why one is attracted to certain particular people and not others. Other causal factors (for instance, to do with appearance, personality, interests, etc.) will be involved too.

Noting the relation between dispositions and their masks helps us to see the redundancy of a historically prominent attempt to conceptualise sexual orientation. In the mid-20th Century, the sexologist Alfred Kinsey objected, against conceptions prevalent at the time, that 'the heterosexuality or homosexuality of many individuals is not an all-or-none proposition' (Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin 1948, p. 638). Kinsey's own research into sexual behaviour suggested that some people who exhibit predominantly 'homosexual' patterns of behaviour and desire, nonetheless sometimes also have 'heterosexual' desires and experiences; and vice versa. Kinsey took this fact to be incompatible with accounts of heterosexuality and homosexuality construed as absolute characteristics, proposing instead a seven-point scale of sexual orientation, construed as a continuum. Points on the continuum include 'exclusively heterosexual', 'predominantly heterosexual, incidentally homosexual', 'equally heterosexual and homosexual', and so on.

4 See Choi and Fara 2018; Mumford 1998.

5 See Mumford 1998, pp. 126-7.

Now, in fact, OA can accommodate Kinsey's empirical findings, in one of two ways. First, it might explain 'mixed' behaviour as the product of bisexuality. OA says that a bisexual orientation is one which causes one to sexually desire people of the opposite *and* same Sex to oneself. At first glance, this sounds like a third distinct orientation, in addition to homosexual and heterosexual ones. However, on grounds of parsimony I think it preferable to treat bisexuality as a compound orientation, comprised of homosexual and heterosexual orientations simultaneously. That is, the same person can have a disposition causing her to desire only people of the same Sex as herself, and a separate disposition causing her to desire only people of a different Sex to oneself. The 'only' in each case makes the claim sound paradoxical, but just means that each disposition is (partly) causally responsible only for a certain tranche of the bisexual subject's sexual behaviour. The upshot of this move is, perhaps counterintuitively, that (for instance) having a homosexual orientation isn't sufficient to make one a homosexual. Homosexuals are those who have *only* a homosexual orientation. This is slightly messy but trying to make ordinary usage coherent often is.

Aside from bisexuality, there is a second way in which OA can accommodate the facts described by Kinsey, further obviating any automatic need for a continuum to replace it. For depending on the particular case, 'mixed' desires/ behaviour can be accommodated in terms of accompanying masks, interfering with a single orientation. As noted earlier, one's individual history of sexual behaviour can include sexual desire (etc.) towards a variety of partners unrepresentative of one's actual orientation, because of accompanying disruptive causes, as indicated earlier. That's consistent with there still being an underlying disposition – one's actual orientation - which would have contributed to producing different desires (etc.), had those other interfering causal factors had been absent⁶.

To this, we might add: if we used only the Kinsey continuum, without any accompanying dispositional account, there would be an explanatory gap: what causes certain people to behave 'exclusively' or 'predominantly' heterosexually, or 'equally' heterosexually and homosexually, etc.? For these to be meaningful patterns at all, we need some underlying causal story; and sexual orientations, understood as dispositions which are also causes, can be part of that story.

Just now I analysed a bisexual orientation as a combination of both a heterosexual and a homosexual orientation. Equally, I think we

⁶ Hence papers describing the 'plasticity' of women's sexual preferences explain it as a product of surrounding 'sociocultural' factors (e.g. Baumeister 2000).

should analyse genuine asexuality - as opposed to a contingently masked orientation - as possession of neither. Strictly speaking, then, asexuality is not an orientation but the absence of one. This goes against some academic usage (e.g. Brotto and Yule 2017), and also usage in certain contemporary sub-cultures, where asexuality is treated as an orientation, deserving of political protection and advocacy. Since, as indicated earlier, I don't think of classification as automatically normative, I don't assume that denying that asexuality is an orientation entails that it's undeserving of political protection and advocacy. Nor does it seem plausible that the possibility of political protection is practically lessened for asexual people, simply by pointing out that asexuality isn't an orientation. That x isn't an orientation is compatible with x being something else, equally deserving of consideration.

III. SEXUAL ORIENTATION AS DIRECTED TOWARDS SEX

OA has it that possession of a given sexual orientation 'causes a person to sexually desire.. only those people of a particular Sex'. This might seem to require, implausibly, that people must have some special, technical knowledge of a person's genetic status before they feel attracted. Yet this isn't so, as long as we understand Sex relatively non-technically. I follow others in thinking that the concepts of *male* and *female* aren't governed by any essential conditions, but rather are cluster concepts (Stone 2007). In most everyday discourses, and perhaps also all technical ones, Sex is appropriately characterised in terms of a cluster of endogenously-produced morphological, genetic, and hormonal features. None of them are individually essential for femaleness or maleness, though possession of some vague number of them is sufficient for it. This view accommodates the many existing differences of sexual development perfectly well, whilst remaining compatible with realism about biological Sex. Variation can be, and in fact is, endemic to biology generally, without threatening the existence of natural kinds (Dupré 1993)⁷.

In some ordinary circumstances, another person's Sex can be difficult to determine, just by looking. OA needn't be committed to saying that an orientation causes one to be attracted to those of a particular Sex in a way which inevitably and reliably tracks actual Sex. Rather, it can say that one's orientation causes one to be attracted to those who, *one believes*, are of a particular Sex; where this belief might be wrong. Possessing an orientation towards a particular Sex is consistent with a subject desiring someone –

⁷ Equally, we shouldn't exaggerate talk of variation. Despite much misinformation about it, the number of 'true intersex' in the general population is miniscule: around 0.018% (Sax 2002). The vast majority of people, including those with differences of sexual development, fall unambiguously into 'male' or 'female'.

or indeed a series of people - who are, unbeknownst to the subject, not actually of that Sex. More technically: the content of the subject's sexual desires, and other relevant attitudes, make reference to that Sex, *de dicto* rather than *de re*. This isn't to say that Sex must be an explicit erotic focus for a person, as such. It's the more restrained claim that one's sexual preferences construe partners as of some particular Sex, as part of their intentional content, where that construction might turn out to be wrong, without their ceasing to have the orientation they have.

That Sex is an intentional object of sexual desire, for most people, is an empirical claim. It seems well-evidenced by the first-personal reports in diaries, love letters, memoirs, and novels, throughout history. Many reporters apparently place great emphasis on sexually interacting, not just with body parts that look identical to primary and secondary Sex characteristics, but with actual Sex characteristics, as such - that is, understood as functional parts of a Sexed body. As just noted, by 'biological Sex' I don't mean anything particularly stringent. What makes morphological features, including primary and secondary Sex characteristics, 'male' or 'female' is that a) they belong to someone who fulfils many, most or all of the cluster of criteria for the relevant sex; b) they have been produced via a natural endogenous process. They are part of a naturally-produced functional system, even if there may have been - as there inevitably eventually will be, sooner or later - endogenous disruptions to the smooth functioning of that system, in practice. For many people, it seems part of the intentional structure of their sexual desires to be involved with male or female bodies, in this sense⁸. In other areas of philosophy, it's fairly standard to acknowledge how background knowledge about an entity can inflect our present perceptual and aesthetic responses to it: for instance, in variants of the claim that perception generally is 'theory-laden' (Bogen 2017); or in the rejection of aesthetic formalism (Walton 1970).

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

Depending upon circumstance, this relatively unusual case might be analysed in various ways, consistent with OA and what I've already

⁸ Perhaps not all, since pansexual people claim that the perception of Sex is irrelevant to the structure of their sexual desires. If genuinely true, this seems to be what differentiates them from bisexuals.

said about it. John might be bisexual. Alternatively, John's sexual desires for Jane, after his discovery of Jane's Sex, might not be caused by his heterosexual orientation, but by some other cause that isn't an orientation at all (just as many of our sexual preferences generally have nothing to do with one's sexual orientation). Finally, John's desires for Jane might be caused by his heterosexual orientation, but only in a derivative sense. That is, his general disposition to be attracted to female Sexed bodies has caused him, in this case, to desire a body identical in appearance to a female Sexed body. Given that sexual arousal in many cases isn't directly controlled by conscious decisions, this wouldn't be a surprising result. However, on its own, this wouldn't undermine the idea that most of the time, John's (and other people's) sexual desires pick out Sex as an intentional object. What it would show is that a heterosexual orientation can, in some cases, derivatively cause desires which don't have this sort of object.

The claim that sexual orientations involve attraction towards Sex is increasingly disputed for another reason. In recent times, it has become commonplace, at least in certain progressive circles, to argue that sexual desire, and so indirectly sexual orientation, is directed towards something called 'gender'. Two people of different Sexes can share a gender; and two people of the same Sex might respectively possess different genders. On extreme versions, Sex drops out altogether, and we are left with gender as the only possible intentional object of sexual desire in this area (e.g. Chuck Tate 2012). On more moderate versions, both Sex and gender are both potential intentional objects of sexual desire, but these desires are separate from one another and need not interact (e.g. Stein 1999; Dembroff 2016).

So we need to ask: might something called 'gender' coherently be considered an intentional object of sexual desire in its own right, separate from any Sex-based desires? I turn to three relevant readings of 'gender'.

The first of these is gender as *masculinity* and *femininity*, understood as the appearances, behaviours, and mental characteristics stereotyped for the two Sexes respectively. It's sometimes said that sexual desire is directed towards 'gender presentation' or 'gender expression': i.e. (roughly) the extent to which one's body, appearance, deportment, clothing, etc. chime with stereotypes about Sex. On the posited view, one can be attracted to masculinity or femininity, irrespective of whether it is possessed by a female or male. A twist on this view might be that femininity essentially involves oppressive objectification, in a way that males are socialized to find sexually attractive (MacKinnon 1989).

Unfortunately, this doesn't seem a genuine alternative to OA. Nuanced perceptions of another person's masculinity and femininity (or 'gender presentation' or 'gender expression') seem inevitably inflected with prior

understandings of the Sex that the person is, and what is stereotyped for that Sex. What counts as seeming ‘feminine’ in a male is very different to what seems ‘feminine’ in a female. The actress Erika Linder looks very like the actor Leonardo di Caprio, but the former is read as masculine and the latter feminine. If this is right, then a sexual preference for gender, in this sense, must also presuppose some intentional reference to, and accompanying desire for, a given Sex. That is, we can still extrapolate an underlying orientation towards a particular Sex, understood as a partial cause of that further preference.

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

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

A third reading of ‘gender’ refers to inner feelings of ‘gender identity’: one’s feelings about which gender one personally feels most, or least, at ease with. A gender identity is potentially disconnected from gender presentation or expression, and can only be revealed reliably through testimony. Attempting maximal concessiveness, I don’t deny that – conceivably, though surely rarely – someone might have a genuine sexual preference, completely independent of any prior judgement about Sex, only towards an imperceptible, non-sensuous, non-bodily feature of another person such as this. Even so, this cannot plausibly be thought of

as a widespread phenomenon. And even if it were, it could only reasonably be thought of as existing alongside Sex-based sexual desires, rather than instead of them. So far, we have seen no reason to reject OA.

This discussion has knock-on effects for a further pair of conclusions, both of which draw sustenance from the idea that sexual attraction is directed towards something called ‘gender’ not Sex. I shall focus on the conclusions as they pertain to lesbianism in particular, but the arguments generalise. The first conclusion effectively says that a lesbian, understood as subject with a ‘female gender’ who is disposed to desire others with a ‘female gender’, might, as such, straightforwardly and repeatedly experience attraction to trans women as part of the normal terms of their own orientation, even under ideal conditions (see for instance, Chuck Tate 2012)⁹. The second is that any trans woman who is exclusively attracted to others with a ‘female gender’ counts as a lesbian (Chuck Tate 2012; Sharpe 2019). In other words, biologically male people can be the objects of genuine lesbian desire, and even can be lesbians themselves.

There are many reasons to be wary of such claims; not least because of the multiple harms they can cause for lesbians – understood as females who are same-Sex-attracted – when socially enacted in a context which already includes both misogyny and homophobia (Stock 2019). But the main point to take away from present discussion is that such claims look confused. For it seems there is no widespread sexual desire which takes ‘gender’ as an object but not also Sex. Hence, there’s no good reason to make the conceptual switch being urged upon us. I don’t deny, of course, that lesbians – correctly classified as such, rather than as bisexuals - can knowingly be in successful relationships with trans women. OA easily allows for this, in terms of an explanation citing additional causal factors as surrounding conditions, ‘masking’ the original disposition: romantic love, a desire for companionship, etc. Still, there’s no reason to think that, absent of masks and in ideal conditions, there is an interestingly prevalent disposition in any population, gay or straight, to desire ‘gender’ but not Sex. *A fortiori*, there is no reason to think that the category of people with a ‘female gender’ attracted to others with a ‘female gender’, independently of any reference to Sex, is a statistically significant one; and nor that the category of actually female people who are same-Sex-attracted, has lost any interest or relevance. The category of lesbians requires neither retirement nor replacement.

⁹ A similar-looking claim apparently underpins attempts to argue that it would be a good thing if lesbians considered trans women as potential sexual partners (e.g. Srinivasan 2017). The intended inference seems to be that it’s already within the existing terms of a lesbian sexual orientation to experience such desire.

IV. SEXUAL ORIENTATION AS REFLEXIVE

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

In this way, sexual orientation ascriptions have a reflexive relational structure. They essentially involve a reference to a feature of the subject – her own Sex – in addition to her possession of a given pattern of desires for other, specifically Sexed people. This is a different claim from the earlier one, also implied by OA, that a sexual orientation causes one to have sexual desires directed towards a particular Sex category, male or female, *de dicto*. That's a claim about the intentional structure of the relevant desire. This, in contrast, is a claim about the conditions under which a sexual orientation is correctly ascribed.

It says that a sexual orientation itself is partly type-identified in relation to a given Sex, but this time understood as 'same Sex' or 'opposite Sex'¹⁰.

Recently, however, in revisionary mood, it has been suggested that we drop any reference to the Sex of the subject, or in fact to any further feature of theirs whatsoever, in an account of what determines the sexual orientation of that subject. Instead, orientations should be determined solely in virtue of the type of person desired by a subject. Two people should be classified as sharing a sexual orientation, if and only if they are both attracted to the same type of person: a particular Sex, or a particular gender, or a combination of a particular gender and a particular Sex, or perhaps some other characteristic altogether (Halwani MS; Dembroff 2016).

Raja Halwani offers three supporting reasons for this revision. First, reflexive accounts serve no real explanatory or informational purpose. I will tackle this point shortly. Second, the proposed new configuration allows us to accommodate a wider range of desires –for instance, for gender-ambiguous people, or people with differences of sexual development -

¹⁰ I'm not claiming that sexual desire must take 'same Sex' or 'opposite Sex' as an intentional object, *de dicto*.

as indicative of sexual orientations. The plausibility of this point partly depends on whether such desires should be counted as genuinely distinct from Sex-based attraction; I effectively argued earlier that they shouldn't. Third, Halwani argues that a reflexive account such as OA cannot easily accommodate bisexuality, requiring 'two bisexual orientations: male or men bisexuals and female or women bisexuals'. Yet this is false, as long as we characterise bisexuality as I suggested earlier, as a compound of two orientations, one for 'same Sex' and one for 'opposite Sex', which males and females might share.

Robin Dembroff (2016) offers another reason to reject reflexivity. Removing reflexive accounts from our taxonomy would get rid of an undesirable 'othering' of the sexualities of marginalised subjects, by removing any distinction between their sexualities and those of the mainstream:

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

I find this highly dubious. No matter how we classify things, the reflexive patterns of Sex-based attraction described by OA are real. Discussion has revealed no good reason to deny their reality. Not mentioning these patterns won't make them go away, but it will remove our ability to usefully discuss them. And, *contra* both Halwani and Dembroff, we absolutely need to discuss them, as I'll now argue.

I take it that classification, generally, is a means of understanding things humans are interested in. There are classifications available which we do not make. To classify all objects in the world into classes, according to their weights in kilogrammes, would ordinarily be a waste of time, since knowledge of this grouping wouldn't help us understand anything about the world we particularly care about (Dupré 1993, p. 18). Equally, it is no coincidence that most languages tend to have far more colloquial ways of discriminating vertebrate organisms than invertebrate. This fact is indicative of our relative lack of interest in the latter and our great number of interests in the former, from a variety of perspectives (Dupré 1993, p.19). As a collective, we develop and rely upon concepts which allow us to analyse interesting fields of inquiry, unifying those fields through shared theoretical objects.

The reflexive orientations described by OA are frequently mentioned in multiple discursive contexts. This isn't a coincidence: for they're important to know and think about, from a variety of perspectives many

of us care about. In what follows, I'll name just a few obvious ones. I'll use 'same-Sex-attracted' and 'opposite-Sex-attracted' for homosexuality and heterosexuality respectively, to emphasise the reflexive nature of these orientations, and how we can't easily do without concepts which refer to them.

Medicine, including reproductive medicine. Pregnancy, and so pregnancy-related health issues, are something that happen far more, and more easily, to opposite-Sex-attracted females than to same-Sex-attracted ones. Some STDs are more prevalent in opposite-Sex-attracted populations than same-Sex-attracted ones, and vice versa. If medicine is expanded to psychosocial medicine, then, in a heteronormative context, a number of psychological issues disproportionately particularly affect same-Sex-attracted people, especially children and teens.

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

Psychology. There's academic interest in the developmental conditions for the emergence of opposite-Sex-attraction and same-Sex-attraction (e.g. Xu et al 2019); and in the possibility of 'conversion therapy' from same-Sex-attraction, its effects on subjects, and its ethical implications (e.g. Bailey et al 2016).

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

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

catering for same-Sex-attracted males in richer ones who desire to father children.

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

In examining the explanatory importance of reflexive orientations in this way, it's easy to get waylaid by the well-known claim that sexual orientations are 'historical constructs', invented in the 19th Century (e.g. Foucault 1978, pp. 105-6; Halperin 1989, p. 269); or that 'being a homosexual' only exists as a deliberately chosen possibility, once such a kind is explicitly introduced into shared language (Hacking 1986). It's apparently true that the concept of a sexual orientation, as such, was explicitly introduced for the first time in the 19th Century as a possible object of scientific investigation (Sell 1997, p. 644). But this is compatible with the much more ancient existence of the thing referred to. It's also compatible with a folk concept existing previously, referring to that thing.

The claim that homosexuality *itself* was 'invented' in the 19th Century is most charitably interpreted as referring to a much 'thicker' version of a sexual orientation than the minimal one OA describes (Halwani 1998; 2006). This thicker version understands sexual orientation as determining membership of a cultural stereotype, with presumed associated physical, psychological, and cultural aspects (Foucault 1978, p.43). Yet many social constructionists implicitly acknowledge the existence of a more minimal concept, picking out narrow patterns of sexual activity in people throughout history, shorn of further particular local cultural associations (e.g. Foucault 1978, pp. 38-39; Halperin 1989, pp. 269-70; Hacking 1986, p. 225). Indeed, OA allows us to identify something constant between thick social constructions such as 'the catamite', 'the molly', the Uranian' and 'the queer' (Webb 2003, p. 12).

A more radical criticism is that, prior to modernity, there were only men who had sex with men, but no men who had sex with men *because they were men, de dicto*; no cases where a man was the intentional object of the sexual desire, as such (Halperin 1989; see also Halwani 1998, 2006 for discussion). But this seems pretty unlikely. After all, equally, there must

surely always have been cases where men had sex with women, because they were women (*de dicto*). If so, it would be easy enough for desires to sometimes change objects.

In any case: say that reflexive sexual orientations *had* been invented only lately. The fact would remain that they are, right now, of great human interest, across a range of contexts and discourses. Their existence has empirical consequences in a range of areas, and we continue to need adequate concepts to pick these out. For instance, for a large number of socially pressing practical questions, to omit reference to a reflexive aspect of orientation would be to lose an otherwise valuable strategic tool. How do we reduce or otherwise deal with the sex trade, high incidences of rape and sexual assault, STD transmission, unwanted pregnancies, and other sexually-related social issues? Many of the associated issues tend to manifest in different ways for same-Sex-attracted people than for opposite-Sex-attracted people, and may well require different local solutions. Or just look at the organization of dating! We characterise orientations reflexively, at least partly to facilitate the coordination of sexual liaisons. When organizing dating sites, or match-making, grouping people simply on the basis of, for instance, ‘people attracted to females’, would be remarkably inefficient and wasteful, since many of those in the group would not be attracted to others in the group, in principle, given distinct patterns of Sex-based-attraction among members. That’s why we have distinct dating web resources for gay and straight people, differentiated by Sex¹¹.

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

11 Thanks to Holly Lawford-Smith for alerting me to this point.

V. SEXUAL ORIENTATION AS DIFFERENT FROM MERE PREFERENCES.

The main aspect of OA which it remains to defend says that ‘A sexual orientation is .. differentiated from sexual predilections or preferences.’ This puts OA further out of step with the *Zeitgeist*. In contemporary academic writing about sex, there are frequent attempts to reduce the distance between homosexual and heterosexual dispositions, and other sexual preferences. Candidates variously offered as ‘orientations’ include sexual preferences for children (Seto 2012); for animals (Miletski 2016); and for multiple partners simultaneously (Tweedy 2011). It’s sometimes even argued that *any sexual arousal patterns at all* - even those patterns of blood flow registered by Vaginal Pulse Amplitude, but not registered or self-reported at all by the subject- might be manifestations of a subconscious sexual orientation (e.g. Bailey 2009).

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

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

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

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

females would be equally ‘organizing’. Fetishes and paraphilias might be equally ‘organizing’, in this sense.

The fact, explored earlier, that a homosexual or heterosexual disposition is conceptualised in terms of a relation to a subject’s own Sex differentiates it from most other sexual predilections, fetishes, and so on. One may be attracted to redheads or muscled male bodies or legs-in-fishnet-stockings, but characterising these sexual desires involves no essential further reference to a feature of oneself, over and above the fact one has desires at all. However, even this isn’t thoroughly differentiating, since, for instance, ascribing the paraphilia of hebephilia to a particular subject requires a reference to a further feature of that subject – namely, their adulthood. Teenagers sexually involved with other teenagers are not thereby paedophiles.

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

In fact, though, I think this last point gives a clue to what really differentiates homosexual and heterosexual dispositions from other sexual preferences. To look for some further *inherent* differentiating factor is, I think, the wrong approach. Instead we should recall that homosexual and heterosexual dispositions are ones we collectively care about, across a range of contexts, such that names and accompanying concepts for them have eventually emerged, staying in prominent use amongst language-users. *Calling them ‘orientations’ is just a way of demarcating them from other less interesting or important preferences.* ‘Orientation’ doesn’t denote any special inherent feature of a disposition. It’s therefore pointless to ask why homosexual and heterosexual dispositions ‘orient’ whilst other preferences don’t; or to argue that other preferences are orientations too, because they, too, ‘orient’ in some relatively arbitrary shared sense. Rather, the use of the concept denotes a contextual difference: linguistic communities are more interested in those dispositions than other preferences, as a valuable causal explanandum across many fields, for reasons I’ve already given.

This isn’t, of course, to deny that there are many legitimate theoretical and practical interests concerning other sexual preferences. Where there are, we must develop and maintain adequate concepts for them too. For

particular explanatory ends, we undoubtedly need, for instance, concepts of: fetishes; paraphilias; asexuality; polyamory; and perhaps, as Dembroff insists, preferences for distinct categories of trans people too. In fact, we already have at least one - 'gynoandromorphophilia' (Hsu et al. 2016). In some contexts, we might also need concepts which factor in other variables: degrees of strength of psychological attraction (e.g. Storms 1980); or number of partners (van Anders 2015). This is not a competition, where only one kind of preference, along one dimension, can ever be tracked. But the fact remains that homosexual and heterosexual dispositions have the largest range of interesting causal consequences, out of all the sexual preferences; and so are of the most interest, and are likely to remain so.

VI. CONCLUSION

Contemporary and historical challenges to the idea of a Sex-based sexual orientation have provided a welcome opportunity to clarify their central and ineliminable role in many theoretical and practical discourses. Talk of the demise of the concept has been overstated, in both academia and contemporary popular culture. It turns out that, if we got rid of the concepts of Sex-based orientations, we'd only have to reinvent them.

Kathleen Stock
Department of Philosophy
University of Sussex
Falmer BN1 9QN
k.m.stock@sussex.ac.uk

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