

Clifford Bakalian

PHIL338D

Dr. Chris Meyers

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The Discussion of Sexual Orientation

The debate involving the rights of the LGBTQ community has progressed in the past years but it is my observation that the growth has become quite stagnant as of late. I find this unfortunate but I can hypothesize why. The debate primarily focused on if a person could actually be queer, or if being queer was unethical or unnatural. Now that at least the United States government acknowledges there are people who are not heterosexual or people who do not identify as the same sex, they have tabled any further discussions about rights they may receive. I find this unfortunate but I believe that part of this issue lies is the LGBTQ community itself. The LGBTQ community has been so focused on portraying queerness as a part of life and not as a disease or mental disorder, that they have overlooked the need to have a discussion as to how one should define sexual orientation and gender. I believe this to be a indirect point that Dembroff makes. Dembroff points out that various organizations and people have different definitions of sexual orientation (Dembroff 222). Now that our society has gotten past that people of the LGBTQ community are not unnatural (at least in most legal senses) we need a way of establishing social and legal protections for those affected.

Traditionally our society usually defines sexual orientation as a label, dependent on if you find your same gender sexually attractive. At first glance, the surface definition of gender seems

acceptable here however there are many in the LGBTQ community who would disagree. As Dembroff remarks, there is a misalignment of what exactly sexual orientation is and consequently how it should be defined (Dembroff 222-223). This is because there is a discrepancy of what sex and gender mean. Colloquially many use the terms interchangeably however with the acknowledgement of LGBTQ persons, these terms are no longer concrete and all-encompassing. To move forward, we must first define the terms to use. The theory proposed by de Beauvoir of gender being a social construct and sex being more biological in nature is useful in this discussion (Dembroff 226). I will use sex (male and female) to refer to the biological aspect of a person's identity. This by itself has issues due to anomalies in the genome, and those who have both ovaries and testes. I will use gender (man and woman) to refer to how one identifies their role in terms of how their society views them. Hence, traditionally sexual orientation is not whether you are attracted to the same gender but the same sex. Regardless, Dembroff points out there are various issues with this definition. This definition assumes cisnormativity (more on this later), and that sexual orientation depends on sex or gender but not both (Dembroff 226).

With the growth of the LGBTQ community it is noted that there are no longer binary categories for gender and as such we cannot assume cisnormativity. Cisnormativity refers to the observation that most people assume that how one identifies their gender is the same as their sex. Transgendered persons are proof that this assumption is harmful to defining sexual orientation. This being said, Dembroff believes there should be a constraint of compatibility between sex and gender for our definition of sexual orientation (Dembroff 227). In order for this compatibility to exist Dembroff believes it crucial that sexual orientation take into account of both sex and

gender. (Dembroff 227). This seems to make some intuitive sense in the fact that we seem to believe that someone attracted to only female women has a different sexual orientation to someone who is attracted to a transsexual male women or female men. Due partly to these two attributes, Dembroff offers an alternative that relies on one's disposition to those they are sexually attracted to.

There are multiple methods to determine to whom one is attracted. One of which is known as dispositionalism. Dispositionalism states that X has a disposition towards A in response to some condition C if when X was in C then X would do A (Dembroff 229). This disposition concept has emerged from the idea that the person who one is attracted to in a sexual manner is because of factors independent to one's sexual identity, romantic or emotional attraction, and sexual druthers (Dembroff 225). Due to social pressure and cultural norms, it is possible one could be in denial of their sexual identity causing sexual attraction to be independent of how one identifies their sexuality. It is also completely possible for one to be sexually attracted to someone without any emotional or romantic attachment. An example of this could be two people who hook up for a one night stand. The topic of sexual druthers is where most confusion can arise. Dembroff refers that traits that one find attractive such as height or hair color are known as druthers. Sex and gender do not fall into this category of sexual druthers which is why Dembroff believes there must be a disposition to people's preferences when it comes to their sexual orientation.

Dembroff believes dispositionalism could help determine who one is sexually attracted to but admits there is a flaw in the concept. That if one was deprived of some condition C then we do not know their entire disposition about a topic. As such Dembroff offers forth a set of normal

conditions which must accompany the dispositional claim. One condition is that the attraction that X has to a person is at least partially because that person's sex/gender. (Dembroff 230). If a person is attracted to people with beards and the only people with beards are male men, then we cannot say that person's sexual orientation corresponding to liking male men (Dembroff 230). The second normal condition is that the person has a variety of potential sexual partners. If a person grows up in a single sex/gendered society and meets no one of other sex/gender, then we cannot reasonably say who they are sexually attracted to. The last normal condition is that the person is willing and capable of sexual activity with others. If one decides to live a celibate lifestyle there is no reasonable conclusion we can make about their sexual orientation (Dembroff 230). With these conditions linked with dispositionalism, Dembroff proposes a view of how we should classify sexual orientation: bidimensional dispositionalism.

Dembroff's bidimensional dispositionalism proposal states that a person's sexual orientation is grounded on their dispositions towards the sex and gender of the person they are attracted to under normal conditions (Dembroff 231). This account pertains to both the sex and gender of the people one is attracted to which does not assume cisnormativity, and it takes into account of the dispositions one has under the aforementioned normal conditions. This means that a male man, and a female woman, if both attracted to male men, have the same sexual orientation. This has the added value of allowing one to not be attracted to either sex and gender as well as being attracted to both sexes and genders (taking into account of asexuals and bisexuals). This point is quite important for the whole discussion about sexual orientation because it pertains directly to the purpose of the discussion.

An important point brought up is why we care about sexual orientation, that there is some purpose fulfilled by labeling one's sexual orientation (Dembroff 223). Dembroff claims the purpose is to help provide and establish legal and social protections for those that have queer sexual orientations (Dembroff 224). Having a singular and straightforward definition of sex, gender and sexual orientation is critical to establishing legislation to protect this minority group. Dembroff's argument for bidimensional dispositionalism is that it fulfills this purpose of legal and social protections and reduces the presumption that queer sexual orientations are deviant (Dembroff 223-224). It also helps clear up the disagreement of criteria needed to make a claim about one's sexual orientation. One way it clears this up is by giving an easy way to easily describe one's sexual orientation independently of one's own sexual identity. By taking out one's own sexual identity from the process, it makes things less complicated and easier to follow. This has the added benefit of getting rid of potential discrimination on the subject's part. If a female woman and a male man both like female women, they are both categorized the same way, which discrimination could only occur here in a roundabout and blatant way (Dembroff 233).

I can see merit in Dembroff's idea of taking out one's own sexual identity when evaluating their sexual orientation. I mostly agree with this because it is less confusing as the status quo and it does make creating discriminatory laws difficult. I do however, disagree with Dembroff's dispositional aspect of sexual orientation. Dispositionalism tends to imply that one is looking for the dispositions of another, rather than themselves. I always thought of sexual orientation and gender identity as something that is one's own label. I identify as a male man. I think it would be rude or absurd if my gender identity was decided by someone else, or how I was supposed to come to this conclusion was dictated by rules made by others. I have has

instances of this when my ethnicity is discussed. I was born in China but adopted by an Armenian. Despite never learning Chinese culture and growing up for as long as I remember in America, I identify as Chinese American. By having this dispositional aspect, it appears to me that I am only attracted to female women if and only if I abide by the normal condition constraints Dembroff places. I fail to see why we need some concrete system (dispositionalism) to determine one's own sexual orientation. I do not believe I used dispositionalism when concluding that I am attracted to female women, but rather some internal association of feeling and labels. If the goal of the LGBTQ is equality for their group, then I would think the long term goal would be to have society devalue one's sexual orientation when making decisions about rights. This does not mean we devalue sexual orientation itself, but no longer have sexual orientation influence injustices. As such, allowing people to identify themselves or perceive themselves having a certain sexual orientation should not be restrained. One may raise the objection that without dispositionalism, they may mislabel their sexual orientation. An example is a female woman who is only sexually attracted to male men identifying as someone who is attracted to male women. I believe that while possible, it appears to me that sexual orientation is an important identifier many have about themselves and as such are going to be motivated to obtain the label they feel comfortable with which does not go against the convention of bidimensionality. After all, we don't seem many occurrences of this misidentification with something like race, although I must admit that race is more phenomenological than sexual orientation.