

# Intrinsic Masking and Sexual Orientation\*

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## Abstract

Many philosophers think that it is better to understand sexual orientation as a dispositional concept. But, if so, then what are its relevant conditions and manifestations? In this paper, I provide an important qualification to this question. We should be sensitive to the fact that the manifestation of a disposition can be interfered with. So, when we provide an analysis of our concept of sexual orientation, we should explain the situations in which interference occurs. I do not have a fully systematic explanation to offer. But I argue that cases of internal psychological conflict are cases of interference.

**Keywords:** Social Metaphysics, Sexual Orientation, Dispositions, Masking, Desires, Internal Conflict

## Introduction

Sexual orientation, whatever it is, is a rich concept. But with richness comes a need for examination. Some of the concept's elements that philosophers have examined include: whether it is better to understand sexual orientation as directed toward sex (like male and female) or toward gender (like man and woman); whether it is better to understand sexual orientation as divided into discrete categories or as a continuous "spectrum"; and whether it is better to understand sexual orientation as thickly relational (i.e. as a matter of both the sex/gender of the subject and the sex/gender of the object) or as thinly relational (i.e. only a matter of the sex/gender of the object).<sup>1</sup>

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\***This is a draft.** Try not to needlessly cite or criticize unless your goal is to professionally embarrass me. (If your goal is to professionally embarrass me, then let me know and I'll give you some more effective strategies.) Thanks to many, including Andrew Brenner, Jeffrey E. Brower, Lindsey Brown, Rebecca Chan, Robin Dembroff, Kate Finley, Liz Jackson, Kris McDaniel, Samuel Murray, David Pattillo, Callie K. Phillips, Michael Rea, Fr. Philip Neri Reese, O.P., Alex Withorn, the Notre Dame Metaphysics Reading Group, and the audience at my 2018 Social Ontology conference session.

<sup>1</sup>For more on the sex/gender issue, see: Stein (1999): 31–34; Dembroff (2016): 5, 10–11, 19; Díaz-León (Forthcoming): 3–4; Stock (2019): 6–13. For more on the discrete/continuous issue, see: Stein (1999): 49–61; Dembroff (2016): 11, 22–23. For more on the thick/thin issue, see LeVay (2017): 3–5; Dembroff (2016): 19–20, Díaz-León (Forthcoming): 20–21; Stock (2019): 13–19. There are, of course, many issues related to sexual orientation that I have failed to mention.

I'd like to focus on another element. A consensus is building around the claim that it is better to understand sexual orientation as a dispositional concept. The fact that a person has a certain sexual orientation is not a fact about something that they are actively doing. Rather, the fact that a person has a certain sexual orientation is a fact about what they are disposed to do under certain conditions. Understood this way, the lived realities of our sexuality – the sexual desires we actually feel, the sexual behavior we actually engage in, and so on – are only signs of underlying dispositions. But if sexual orientation is a dispositional concept, then under what conditions does it manifest? Some answers to this question have been given. But I believe there is much more to be said.

In section 1, I motivate the claim that it is better to understand sexual orientation as a dispositional concept. Then, in section 2, I discuss a major choice point regarding how we should understand the dispositional conditions: whether sexual orientation is about what we would do under *ideal* conditions or rather about what we would do under *ordinary* conditions. After discussing some arguments in favor of the ordinary conditions analysis, I turn to a closer examination of these conditions. In section 3 I discuss an argument that – whether or not it succeeds – brings to light a tension within the ordinary conditions analysis. To relieve that tension, in section 4 I introduce some concepts regarding the ways a disposition's manifestation can be interfered with. Finally, in section 5, I use these concepts to categorize different types of cases relevant to the analysis of sexual orientation. I suggest that our analysis of sexual orientation should be sensitive to the fact that we regularly fail to manifest dispositions, not because we fail to meet the relevant conditions but rather because something interferes with the manifestation. Often, this interference comes from within.

A quick note about terminology. Though they inform one another, the concept of sexual orientation is distinct from the conceptual taxonomy of sexual orientations. I will adopt a “standard” taxonomy, whereby people are lesbian, gay, bi, straight, or asexual. This is merely a matter of expediency and the main claims I make in this paper should be adaptable to any taxonomy, so long as it is dispositional.

# 1 Categorical Concept v Dispositional Concept

For any concept we are examining, we can ask whether that concept is categorical or dispositional. The distinction between the two is hard to precisely state, yet it is easy enough to give intuitive examples of each. A categorical concept is, loosely, a concept about how something is in actuality. Fairly uncontroversial examples of categorical concepts are the concept *having a mass of 82kg* or the concept *is to the west of*. More controversially, some categorical concepts are historical, like *having been to Wuhan*. A dispositional concept is a concept about what the thing in question would be like or how it would behave in certain conditions. An uncontroversial example of a dispositional concept is the concept of fragility: a wine glass that is fragile is prone to shattering, even if it never in fact shatters.

Following some helpful terminology from Matthew Andler (Andler (2020): 214–215), we can apply this distinction to the analysis of sexual orientation. On a *categorical* analysis of sexual orientation, the concept is solely about how something is in actuality. Such analyses may focus on some combination of current and past sexual behavior and desires.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, on a *dispositional* analysis of sexual orientation, the concept is at least in part about what a person would do – for example, about what sexual desires they are prone to feel or what sexual behavior they are prone to engage in.

One type of categorical analysis takes sexual orientation to be about observable sexual behavior, past or present. This analysis, *behaviorism*, does have some significant advantages. One straightforward advantage is that behaviorism eschews talk of dispositions. The metaphysics of dispositions is controversial, to say the least, and it is theoretically advantageous for an analysis to avoid needless controversies. Some philosophers, for example, have argued that there are no genuine, fundamental dispositional properties; all apparently dispositional properties can and should be analyzed away in terms of categorical properties.<sup>3</sup> Another advantage is that behaviorism offers a better epistemology of sexual orientation. Behaviors are observable and measurable in a way that dispositional properties and psychological states are not. According to behaviorism, then, knowing a person's

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<sup>2</sup>Another, importantly different, type of categorical analysis focuses on structures of the brain or some other biological feature. I don't discuss this type of analysis in this paper. For one, no one has developed a plausible version of this type of analysis yet. In addition, this type of analysis is unsuitable for broad acceptance; even comparatively well-understood phenomena (e.g. appetite) are rarely analyzed in terms of their underlying biological realizations.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Prior (1985): Chapter 7; Armstrong et al. (1996): Chapter 3; McKittrick (2003).

sexual orientation can be as simple as watching what they do. In contrast, the epistemology of a dispositional analysis is tenuous; it is far from clear how we can know what dispositional properties a person has.

Despite these advantages, behaviorism should be rejected. To start, it seems to supply judgments that wildly conflict with our intuitive judgments. According to behaviorism, a Catholic priest who has upheld his vow of celibacy cannot be straight. Intuitively, though, such a person can be straight, even if he has never been in a relationship with a woman. Similarly, scenarios that involve physical force or coercion should not inform what we say about the sexual orientation of the people involved. Finally, many people adapt their sexual behavior to societal pressures, either intentionally or unintentionally. Some men who are raised in homophobic communities are terrified of what might happen were they to be caught with another man. Other men may have never even entertained the possibility. Sometimes, when they move to a different community, their behavior changes. Intuitively, though, their sexual orientation does not.

A similar line of reasoning can be given against categorical analyses that focus on desires. Admittedly, it's easier to find cases with intuitively misleading histories of sexual behavior than it is to find cases with intuitively misleading histories of sexual desire. But such cases are still well within the bounds of possibility. Tarzan was raised by apes and had never seen another human being. But, intuitively, he didn't *become* straight when he first started to develop feelings for Jane. He also would have the same sexual orientation even if he had never met Jane or any other human woman.

Here's a separate argument against categorical analyses. Each person is an amalgamation of traits: Liz is smart, competitive, nice, and loud, whereas Tim is smart but noncompetitive, curmudgeonly, and quiet. These traits indicate how they would behave in certain situations. In other words, our concept of personality traits is dispositional. Of course, our concept of sexual orientation is in some ways unlike our concept of a personality trait. Yet we seem to use them similarly. For instance, we often appeal to someone's sexual orientation in order to explain their past behavior or predict their future behavior. The more similarities we find between these concepts, the more we should think that sexual orientation is also a dispositional concept.

Some argue that our concept of traits is not purely dispositional. For example, for Liz to be nice requires that at some time in the past Liz demonstrated her niceness. Thus, our concept of

traits is about *tendencies*, where a tendency is a dispositional property that has been previously manifested.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, that difference doesn't matter. Tendencies are still partially dispositional, and so there is still a question regarding the conditions relevant to their manifestation. These conditions often vary from trait to trait (the conditions under which Liz can manifest her niceness only partially overlap the conditions under which Liz can manifest her competitiveness). Now, it seems to me that our intuitive judgments about sexual orientation indicate that it is not about tendencies. But, even if I'm wrong and even if sexual orientation is about tendencies, there is still a question regarding the conditions specifically relevant to their manifestation.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Ideal Conditions v Ordinary Conditions

Those who work on the metaphysics of dispositions typically distinguish between *canonical* dispositional concepts and *conventional* dispositional concepts. A canonical dispositional concept has stimulus conditions and manifestations that are obvious to those who use the concept. For example, when we use the concept of water-solubility, we know what will happen (the thing in question will dissolve) and when (when the thing in question is placed in water). The conditions and manifestation of a conventional dispositional concept are not always so obvious. To be sure, we typically have a general idea as to what is involved. We know that, generally speaking, fragility involves some sort of breaking. And we know that the relevant conditions include situations like being dropped and being struck with a hammer, but exclude situations like being the unfortunate victim of a styrofoam-hating fanatic. But we should not assume that every conventional dispositional concept can be uncontroversially analyzed into a canonical dispositional concept.<sup>6</sup>

Sexual orientation is a conventional dispositional concept.<sup>7</sup> So, even if we try really hard, we might never find an analysis of it that would be as uncontroversial and transparent as the concept of water-solubility is. But some analyses are still better than others, and there is value to finding

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<sup>4</sup>See Alvarez (2017); Dinges and Zakkou (2020).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Stein (1999): 48, where Stein introduces a relevant example but just narrowly misses its connection to the dispositions/tendency distinction.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Lewis (1997): 151–154

<sup>7</sup>It is also a *multi-track* dispositional concept, meaning that it permits multiple stimuli or manifestations or both. I leave this fact implicit in the rest of the paper for the sake of expediency. For more, see Bird (2007); Vetter (2013); Stock (2019).

an analysis that is more transparent than what we currently have.

To that end: what are the conditions relevant to sexual orientation? Edward Stein suggests the following:

A person's sexual orientation is based on his or her sexual desires and fantasies and the sexual behaviors he or she is disposed to engage in under ideal conditions. If a person has sexual desires and fantasies about having sex primarily with people of the same sex-gender and is inclined under ideal circumstances to engage in sexual acts primarily with such people, then that person is a homosexual. Conditions are ideal if there are no forces to prevent or discourage a person from acting on his or her desires, that is, when there is sexual freedom and a variety of appealing sexual partners available (Stein (1999): 45).

Stein's *ideal conditions* analysis easily accommodates the cases I mentioned above. We say that the celibate Catholic priest is straight because he would be with a woman if he were sexually free. Because coercion is not ideal (to say the least), what a person is coerced to do is irrelevant to what their sexual orientation is. Similarly, those who live in homophobic societies are discouraged from acting on their same-sex desires. Thus, what they do or do not do in those societies is less relevant to their sexual orientation than what they do or do not do in more tolerant ones. Only later in his life did Tarzan find himself among a variety of appealing sexual partners.

Though Stein's ideal conditions analysis does a better job of matching our intuitive judgments, it should also be rejected. Here, I will sketch two arguments against it.

The first argument is from Robin Dembroff (Dembroff (2016): 15).<sup>8</sup> Stein's analysis is meant to eliminate undue influences on our sexual behavior. But whether ideal conditions themselves are an undue influence is an open empirical question.<sup>9</sup> Dembroff suggests two ways this influence might work. First, someone who is in ideal conditions – and is therefore surrounded by a variety of appealing sexual partners – may experience a significant increase in their sexual desires precisely because they are in those ideal conditions. Alternatively, someone else may experience a significant *decrease* in their sexual desires. Consider an imaginary man, Paul. In his daily life, Paul desires and pursues men and women equally. But Paul is also a highly anxious man and is prone to feeling

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<sup>8</sup>I do not discuss Dembroff's other argument against Stein's ideal conditions analysis here because I do not think it works. For more, see my "How to Project a Socially Constructed Sexual Orientation".

<sup>9</sup>While Dembroff does not say that the empirical evidence is decisive on this question, they do seem to be more confident about it than I am. I think this is a mistake. Even setting aside more general concerns about methodology and generalizability in the social sciences, the study that Dembroff cites (Gebauer et al. (2014)) does not examine conditions that are ideal in Stein's sense of ideal. The empirical point is largely irrelevant to their argument, though, since the ideal conditions analysis still conflicts with our intuitive judgment of the case I mention.

overwhelmed. In fact, this is exactly what happens to him when he is in Stein's ideal conditions. Because of the overwhelming number of available partners, Paul's sexual desires diminish. In these conditions, Paul settles for whatever feels easiest. Let's suppose that it just so happens that what feels easiest to Paul leads to him only being with men. According to Stein's analysis, Paul is gay. But Paul is bisexual – or at least it seems intuitive to me to say that he is.

The second argument against an ideal conditions analysis extends the argument from analogy I gave in section 1. The concept of sexual orientation is in many ways like the concept of a personality trait. We should therefore look to the analysis of traits for insight into the conditions that are relevant. In those cases, an ideal conditions analysis seems inappropriate. Of course, precisely what conditions are relevant vary from trait to trait. Yet few, if any, traits focus on what people would do in conditions that are in the relevant sense ideal. In fact, in many cases it seems like the opposite is true. Someone who is nice acts nicely even – especially – in conditions where it is difficult to act nicely. So, if we extend the analogy, we should say something similar about sexual orientation. What is relevant is not what someone would do under ideal conditions, but rather what they would do in conditions that more closely resemble real life.

Dembroff offers just such an analysis. They suggest that it is better to understand sexual orientation as being about the sex or gender of the people someone is disposed to sexually engage with under *ordinary conditions*. Dembroff does not claim to offer necessary and jointly sufficient list of such conditions. But they do give us the following list:

- (I) [The person is attracted] to persons of a certain sex or gender (at least partially) because they are that sex and/or gender.
- (II) [The person is attracted] to certain persons while having a reasonable diversity of potential sexual partners.
- (III) [The person is] willing and able to sexually engage with other persons.

For Dembroff, these are the sorts of conditions we look for when observing a person's sexual behavior. When Paul has a reasonable diversity of potential sexual partners, his anxiety is kept in check and he pursues men and women equally. Thus, these conditions cohere well with our intuitive judgment that Paul is bisexual, not gay.

### 3 Dispositions to Behave v Dispositions to Desire

It is better to understand sexual orientation as being about what people would do under ordinary conditions. As I mentioned, Dembroff does not claim that (I)–(III) is a necessary and jointly sufficient list of those conditions. But for the sake of philosophical examination let’s assume that it is. Call this analysis *Ordinary-RD*.

Is Ordinary-RD an adequate analysis of our concept of sexual orientation? Well, Ordinary-RD is an analysis of the *conditions*. Whether or not it is an adequate analysis depends on what analysis of *manifestation* it is combined with. Dembroff combines it with a behavioral manifestation. For them, sexual orientation is about dispositions to behave.

Esa Díaz-León argues against this combined analysis (Díaz-León (Forthcoming): 10–14). She offers two cases where behavior-based Ordinary-RD’s judgments about those cases seems to conflict with our intuitive judgments. Furthermore, Díaz-León argues, behavior-based Ordinary-RD cannot be modified to accommodate both cases at the same time. Thus, behavior-based Ordinary-RD is extensionally inadequate in a way that shows it to be unacceptably divergent from our ordinary concept of sexual orientation.

Here are the two cases. Alicia identifies as a bisexual woman, has had relationships (sexual and romantic) with women in the past, and currently on occasion experiences sexual desires for other women. But Alicia is also in a long-term monogamous relationship with a man and takes the exclusivity of the relationship very seriously. Counterfactually speaking, Alicia would not sexually engage with women. Cary identifies as a straight man and has never had any sexual or romantic experiences with other men. Yet Cary has an adventurous spirit and in certain situations would experiment with a man. Thus, in many nearby possible worlds Cary sexually engages with men.

Intuitively, how Alicia and Cary self-identify match the realities of their situations: being in a relationship with a man doesn’t erase Alicia’s bisexuality, and being open to trying something once to experience how it feels doesn’t make Cary bi – at least, not any more so than an openness to trying durian makes someone a gustatory omnivore. Yet behavior-based Ordinary-RD says otherwise. Alicia’s situation satisfies conditions (I)–(III). But she does not seem to be disposed to sexually engage with anyone other than her partner. Similarly, Cary’s adventures satisfy conditions (I)–(III) and so it seems that he is disposed to sexually engage with both women and men. Thus, behavior-



based Ordinary-RD's judgments about Alicia and Cary conflict with our intuitive judgments.

Perhaps behavior-based Ordinary-RD can be modified in a way that makes its judgments consistent with our intuitive judgments? Díaz-León argues that this cannot be done. The problem is that Alicia's case and Cary's case pull in opposite directions. In Alicia's case, we need to expand what is considered ordinary to include possible worlds where she is not monogamous. But in Cary's case we need to *contract* what is considered ordinary to exclude the possible worlds where Cary's adventurousness leads him to experiment with men. So, Díaz-León concludes, behavior-based Ordinary-RD cannot accommodate both cases at the same time.<sup>10</sup>

On the basis of this argument, Díaz-León rejects the behavioral element of Dembroff's analysis. She thinks that the two cases should be accommodated by analyzing sexual orientation not as about dispositions to behave but rather as about dispositions to desire (Díaz-León (Forthcoming): 18–20). Because of Alicia's commitment to monogamy, she is not disposed to sexually engage with other women. But she is still disposed to have sexual desires toward women. Consequently, *desire*-based Ordinary-RD's judgment seems to match our intuitive judgment. Similarly, because of Cary's adventurousness, he is disposed to sexually engage with men. Yet, according to Díaz-León, Cary is not disposed to have sexual desires for men. On the surface this seems contradictory. After all, condition (I) states that the person must be attracted to persons of a certain sex or gender (at least partially) because they are that sex and/or gender! Díaz-León concedes that Cary does, in some situations, desire that he sexually engage with a man because that man is a man. But according to Díaz-León a sexual desire for men is more than that. The sexual desire is also partially constituted by a disposition to be psychologically aroused by men. Cary lacks this disposition. In some situations, he might not be aroused at all, as when someone who acts on their desire to eat durian comes to discover that they don't like the taste. But even in the situations where Cary is psychologically aroused, it is misleading to describe his arousal as an arousal for men. Rather, Cary is psychologically aroused by the sense of adventure rather than the men who are part of that adventure.

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<sup>10</sup>Not that Dembroff says otherwise. Dembroff acknowledges – and welcomes – the fact that their account would categorize someone like Cary as not straight: “someone with the psychological features of a ‘heterosexual’ but queer behavioral dispositions can and should be protected from anti-queer prejudice. . . the questions of whether or which psychological states ground the behavioral dispositions at issue are interesting questions for neuroscientists, but not ones that should guide a politically motivated account of sexual orientation” (21). This places Dembroff and Díaz-León in a seemingly insurmountable dialectical stand-off. But see Andler (2020) for a potential way forward.

Unfortunately, the shift to desire-based Ordinary-RD fails to address the real issue. To see why, consider a variation of Díaz-León's own case. Felicia is very much like Alicia: she also has had relationships with women in the past and is also in a long-term monogamous relationship with a man that she takes very seriously. But Felicia is unlike Alicia in that Felicia thinks that even desiring anyone other than her partner is a violation of their monogamy. She consequently avoids forming these desires. (Maybe to do so she avoids dining alone with anyone who isn't her partner.) Importantly, Felicia does not think that there is anything immoral or inappropriate about sexual desires toward women in general. She would have acted similarly if her long-term monogamous partner had been a woman. Intuitively, Felicia is bisexual. Yet she is not disposed to form sexual desires for women, nor is she disposed to form sexual desires for men in the scenarios where she is partnered with a woman. So Díaz-León's analysis also conflicts with our intuitive judgments.

Perhaps we can accommodate these cases by modifying the analysis of ordinary conditions? By adding a new condition that explicitly rules out situations where the person is in a monogamous relationship, we can avoid giving the intuitively wrong judgments about Alicia and Felicia. Similarly, we can add a new condition that rules out situations where the person is acting with a sense of adventure. Yet this strategy seems *ad hoc*. And as soon as we add the new conditions, we will find more cases that will require us to add more conditions, and so the process will go until our analysis looks like a gerrymandered mess. Furthermore, each condition we add risks producing its own counter-intuitive results. If we are supposed to only look at situations where the person is not in a monogamous relationship, then does that mean people who only have sexual desires in the context of a monogamous relationship are somehow asexual?

I'd like to suggest another strategy. If Alicia and Felicia were not monogamous, they would have sexual desires for and engage sexually with both men and women. If Cary were not adventurous, he would not experiment with both men and women. In both of these cases, the person is in a fairly ordinary situation. Yet something *interfered* and thereby altered what the person did or felt. On the strategy I suggest, such interference does not automatically entail a change in the underlying dispositions. In other words, a person can have a disposition even if they would not manifest that disposition in the relevant conditions.

## 4 Interlude: Dispositional Interference

Wine glasses are fragile. They would break if they were dropped. But the wine glasses I ordered off Amazon didn't break when the delivery-person dropped them because they were protected by bubble wrap. In some sense, we could say that a wine glass protected by bubble wrap is no longer fragile. But it seems more intuitive to say that the wine glass remains fragile and the manifestation of the fragility (i.e. the shattering) is interfered with by the bubble wrap.

More precisely, the bubble wrap *masks* the glass's fragility.<sup>11</sup> A mask interferes with the manifestation of an object's disposition by disrupting the process that otherwise would have led to the manifesting behavior. Yet that disruption does not alter the underlying dispositional nature of the object.

Masking is not the only kind of dispositional interference. A *mimic* is like a mask in reverse: a mimic interferes with the normal process in a way that makes the object appear to be manifesting a disposition that it in fact does not have. A styrofoam cup is not fragile. But imagine that there is a styrofoam-hating fanatic who becomes enraged at the sound of styrofoam being struck. When he is near a styrofoam cup, the cup will mimic fragility by being torn to pieces.<sup>12</sup> Other kinds of interference do change the object's dispositions, but only at the moment of potential manifestation. A *fink* makes an object acquire a disposition right at the moment that the disposition manifests. Imagine, for example, a witch who carefully observes a metal cup and, at the moment it is struck, casts a spell that changes the molecular structure of the metal. The metal cup always shatters when struck, but intuitively it only becomes fragile when the witch casts her spell. Similarly, a *reverse fink* makes an object lose a disposition right at the moment that the disposition would have manifested.<sup>13</sup> That same witch may also have a prized wine glass that she is ready to enchant the moment it is struck, strengthening the glass and thereby preventing it from shattering.

While the conceptual differences between masks, mimics, finks, and reverse finks is clear, it is at times difficult to determine to which a particular case belongs. Suppose the aforementioned witch protected her wine glass by casting a spell that created a thin magical film that adhered to the outside of the glass. Does the witch remove the glass's fragility or merely mask it? On the face of

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<sup>11</sup>This terminology is from Johnston (1992). A mask is sometimes called an "antidote", as when a person consumes a poison with its antidote.

<sup>12</sup>This example comes from Lewis (1997), who got it from Daniel Nolan.

<sup>13</sup>Finks and reverse finks were first discussed in Martin (1994).

it, there is no easy answer to this question and the process of justifying one answer over the other quickly devolves into a game of intuition swapping.

Some philosophers (e.g. Lewis (1973): 148) claim that dispositions are intrinsic. If two things are perfect duplicates, then they must have the same dispositions.<sup>14</sup> Such a claim, if true, might help us distinguish between different kinds of dispositional interference. The styrofoam-hating fanatic does not change the intrinsic nature of the styrofoam cups (prior to tearing them apart, anyway), and so the cups are not fragile. The witch does change the intrinsic nature of the metal cup, and so she makes the metal cup acquire the disposition of fragility. Whether or not the witch's magical adhesive bubble is a mask or a reverse fink then seems to depend on whether the magical adhesive film is part of the intrinsic nature of the wine glass – whether it has become a genuine part of the glass or is rather a separate object in contact with the glass.

Of course, things are not that simple. Other philosophers (e.g. Ashwell (2010)) have argued that there can be intrinsic interference. For example, a berry might be poisonous – and therefore is disposed to kill when ingested – even though it has an indigestible skin that prevents it from killing those who ingest it. The berry is still poisonous, but its skin masks the manifestation. Similarly, a chameleon might be green but shy. Any time someone sees it, the chameleon blushes and turns red. The chameleon is dispositionally green (i.e. is disposed to appear green to someone who sees it) but something intrinsic to the chameleon (its shyness) makes it lose the disposition when it would have otherwise manifested. The chameleon's shyness is an intrinsic reverse fink. If intrinsic interference is possible, then discerning whether or not an object's dispositions have been changed is not as simple as discerning whether or not the object's intrinsic nature has been changed.

I have no argument to offer here for the possibility of intrinsic masks, nor do I have an argument to offer here against the possibility. I raise these issues because I think being aware of them allows us to develop more sophisticated analyses of the dispositional element of our concept of sexual orientation. The arguments discussed earlier assume that the manifestation must “match” the ascribed disposition. For instance, Díaz-León argues that the fact that Alicia does not manifest bisexual behavior indicates that either (a) Alicia is not bisexual, (b) the conditions of manifestation have not been met, or (c) behavior is not the relevant manifestation. Of these three options, Díaz-

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<sup>14</sup>Perhaps this claim needs to be qualified: if two things are perfect duplicates *and subject to the same laws of nature*, then they must have the same dispositions.

León finds (c) to be the most plausible. But this is a false trilemma. There is a fourth option: something interfered with the manifestation of Alicia's bisexuality; Alicia's monogamy masked her attraction to women. This fourth option does not strike me as a strange thing to say. In fact, it strikes me as the intuitive thing to say. Insofar as sexual orientation is dispositional, its manifestation is regularly interfered with.

## 5 Ordinary Conditions v Dispositional Interference

We have to be careful. Once we accept that it is better to understand sexual orientation as something that can be interfered with, we may be tempted to characterize everything as interference. Yet we should respect the difference between a case of interference and a case where the relevant conditions are not met. To me, Alicia's case seems like a case of interference. Yet Tarzan's case does not; it seems to me that his situation (before he met Jane) is one where the relevant conditions are not met.

Is it possible to systematically distinguish between these two types of cases? I hope so! At first pass, we can ask ourselves the following question: "Is this case one that we would consider ordinary in the context of ascribing sexual orientation?" If it is not, then the failure to manifest the disposition is best attributed to the fact that the manifesting conditions were not met. But, if it is, then the failure to manifest the disposition is best attributed to the fact that something interfered with the manifestation. Tarzan's case is not what I would consider ordinary. But Alicia's case is. Being in a monogamous relationship is a perfectly ordinary situation.

Can we improve upon this first pass? Yes. While I can't offer a fully systematic analysis, I can narrow in on some details that such an analysis should accommodate. To draw out these details, I will consider some different types of cases. For the sake of simplicity, I will focus to dispositions to some sort of overt behavior. (We can always come back to discuss what, if anything, changes when we think about it in terms of dispositions to psychological states.) In these cases, the person's behavior should not inform what we think about their sexual orientation.

Let's first consider cases that involve extrinsic factors. There are a myriad of situations where someone's behavior does not seem reflective of their sexual orientation and the principle reason for the behavior is something entirely extrinsic to them. Many of the cases we've already considered

are good examples of this type of situation. One cluster of cases has to do with the availability of partners. Another has to do with sexual activity that is physically forced.

As I mentioned before, for any case we can construct some analysis whereby the disposition would have manifested if it weren't for some interference. Yet such an analysis seems implausible to me in the case of entirely extrinsic factors. These sorts of cases are not ordinary, in the relevant sense, and they are not relevant to our ascriptions of sexual orientation. Ordinary-RD's conditions (II) and (III) rightly capture this fact.

Let's now consider cases that are at least partially intrinsic to the person in question. One cluster of cases involve persistent physiological factors. Some physical impairments restrict what a person is able to do or remove their ability entirely. Relatedly, people who are depressed often experience severely reduced sex drives which lead to reduced sexual activity. Yet not all physiological factors decrease behavior that appears sexual. Many teenage boys in the midst of puberty have spontaneous erections in situations that do not seem reflective of their underlying sexual orientation.

These cases are harder for me to categorize. But it seems to me that they are also not ordinary. Ordinary-RD's condition (III) seems to capture the subset of cases that decrease behavior. But it does not seem to capture those that increase behavior. For example, though it is controversial, there is some evidence that dementia sometimes causes hypersexuality.<sup>15</sup> There is certainly room for debate here, but it seems to me that dementia and depression should be treated the same: if one should be seen as falling outside of ordinary conditions, then so should the other.

Interestingly, though, it seems better to say that cases with short-term physiological factors are ordinary and in such cases the factor interferes with the manifestation of the relevant disposition.<sup>16</sup> Someone with a moderate headache who doesn't want to have sex may be very attracted to the other person and may be otherwise willing and able to; it's just that in this moment the headache masks their ability to have sex. More controversially, when some people consume drugs or alcohol they may be willing to engage in behavior they otherwise would not be. In some of those cases, the new behavior might indicate a genuine expression of their sexuality that was before that moment masked through inhibitions. In other cases, the drugs or alcohol might create a sort of mimicking adventurousness similar to Cary's. I suggest, then, that such situations should not be

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<sup>15</sup>See Tsai et al. (1999); Alagiakrishnan et al. (2005).

<sup>16</sup>Michael Fara picks up on a similar difference for other dispositions. See his discussion of entrenched vs. transient finkishness (Fara (2005): 76–78) and temporary vs. permanent masks (Fara (2008): 857–858).

seen as falling outside of ordinary conditions unless, of course, they are severe enough to eliminate the possibility of consent.

Sometimes, extrinsic factors influence our behavior without directly controlling it. Coercion removes our ability to freely and authentically choose what we do. Yet a coerced action is still the result of a choice made by the person being coerced. Similarly, in many cases of prostitution the person's circumstance forces them to choose to sexually engage with people they otherwise wouldn't. These conditions are not ordinary. Yet not all extrinsic influence is coercive. Some sex workers are privileged in that they are able to freely choose with whom they sexually engage. Some such sex workers may use that freedom to choose only those they already would have engaged with. But others may have incentives – non-coercive incentives – for broadening the range of people they engage with. For example, some pornographic actors participate in same-sex scenes because it affords more, and potentially better-paying, opportunities for work. It seems intuitive to me to characterize at least some of these cases as ones where the person mimics a gay or bisexual sexuality. But I admit that the line between these cases and cases of coercion is hard to draw.

The cases I've so far discussed suggest a more general pattern: whenever the factor is long-standing, it is a matter of conditions, and whenever the factor is short-term, it is a matter of dispositional interference. Yet I think this general pattern fails to hold. Alicia's commitment to monogamy explains why she does not sexually engage with women. We could exclude cases of monogamy by saying that they fall outside of ordinary conditions. But, as I suggested above, it seems more intuitive to say that cases of monogamy are cases of dispositional interference. Most plausibly, Alicia's commitment to monogamy masks her disposition to sexually engage with women. If so, then we can say something similar about other action-guiding beliefs. In many real-life cases, people restrict their sexual behavior because of they believe that behavior to be immoral.

Within the gay Christian community, there is an on-going conversation regarding the role LGBTQ individuals play in God's plan. There are two prominent sides to this conversation. "Side A" Christians, generally speaking, affirm their sexual orientation and affirm the morality of acting accordingly. "Side B" Christians, in contrast, affirm their sexual orientation but believe that same-sex relations are morally impermissible and against God's will.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Both sides are importantly different from "Type X" Christians, who affirm neither the actions nor the identity. Type X Christians think that gay identity ought to be rejected; they often (used to) advocate for conversion therapy.

To illustrate the Side B perspective, consider the following from Ron Belgau. In reflecting on his disagreements with Justin Lee (founder of the Gay Christian Network), Belgau says:

In his senior oration, Justin called the realization that he was attracted to other guys the biggest challenge his Christian worldview has had to deal with. It has been the same for me, and I think that it was the shared experience of growing up Southern Baptist and grappling with our sexual attractions which gave us the foundation for the dialogue we have had over the years.

For me, trying to deal with my faith and my sexuality has been a long, turbulent process of being pulled in many different directions, and listening to many voices. For both of us, the process has involved challenging a lot of deeply-held beliefs. And in that process, our conclusions have diverged in several important ways. However, despite these differences, we are both dissatisfied with some of the important arguments put forward by both sides, and we share the conviction that different ways of framing the questions would lead to more fruitful examination of the issues involved.

For myself, I finally came back to the view that the Bible forbids gay relationships, in part because though I could see the reasons to doubt the traditional position, I couldn't see any solid evidence to support the idea that God blesses gay marriages. And the more I sought to find in the Scriptures principles which could be used to support gay marriage, the more I realized that the basic principles in the Scripture for guiding sexual expression would rule out gay relationships (Belgau (2003)).

Belgau does not believe that *being gay* is immoral. But he does believe that *manifesting* the associated dispositions – for instance, by marrying and having sex with a man – would be. Thus, Belgau chooses to live a life free of sex:

It is love that inspires me to be celibate: the love of God which gives me the desire to obey His commandments, and the love for my friends in which I strive to express the spirit and truth of God's intent for human love (Ibid.).

Intuitively, gay Christians don't cease to be gay when they decide to live a life of celibacy. We could, theoretically, describe their situation as one that falls outside of ordinary conditions. But that's implausible. Even though Side B Christians believe that sexual expression within gay relationships is immoral, their belief might on occasion fail to prevent that expression. It would be *ad hoc* to claim that ordinary conditions are satisfied only when the belief is efficacious.

The people in these cases are internally conflicted. Speaking loosely, one part of them wants to do one thing and another part of them wants to refrain. For people with well-ordered psychologies, one part is satisfied more consistently and intentionally. Yet even in those cases it seems to me



that the person retains their disposition to act contrarily.<sup>18</sup> A gay Christian remains disposed to sexually engage with other men no matter how strongly he believes it to be immoral.

Alicia is similarly internally conflicted. Her bisexuality disposes her to sexually engage with both men and women. Her monogamy disposes her to sexually engage with only her partner. Given Alicia's psychology, her disposition toward monogamy win out. But the fact that she is conflicted in this way does not mean that Alicia loses her bisexual dispositions. Cary is also internally conflicted. His straightness disposes him to refrain from sexually engaging with men. His adventurousness disposes him to sexually engage with both men and women in certain situations. Given Cary's psychology, in those situations his disposition toward adventurousness wins out. But that does not mean that Cary acquires a bisexual disposition.

Let's return, once more, to personality traits. Suppose that Tim comes to believe that his curmudgeonliness is hindering his ability to make new friends. He may choose to act in a way that mitigates its effects. In the beginning of his reformation, he may choose to stay silent when he otherwise would have made a sarcastic remark. Here, his belief that he needs to suppress his curmudgeonliness masks its manifestation. Over time, Tim's efforts might lead to a genuine change of personality whereby he is no longer disposed to act curmudgeonly. After his reformation, Tim is no longer in conflict; he is no longer curmudgeonly.

That is not how we should understand sexual orientation. Even if sexual orientation is in some sense constructed, it is remarkably impervious to change. The failure of conversion therapy is evidence to this fact.<sup>19</sup> Thus, any belief that pushes against the manifestation of sexual orientation is almost certainly contributing to internal conflict. This conflict is more analogous to the conflict between Liz's niceness and her competitiveness. These personality traits need not always be in conflict. But even when some sort of psychological harmony is achieved, it is misleading to suggest that either trait disappears. It would also be misleading to modify the conditions relevant to the manifestation of either trait. Liz's niceness is inherently in tension with her competitiveness, just as a Side B Christian's sexuality is in tension with his belief in the immorality of its manifestation. These tensions are best articulated by saying that the one dispositionally interferes with the

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. Fara (2005, 2008); Ashwell (2017). As I see it, sexual orientation follows Fara's analysis for physiological factors yet does not for psychological factors. The latter follow Ashwell's analysis, whereby one person's desires are in constant conflict.

<sup>19</sup>See, for instance, the American Psychiatric Association's position statement: APA Commission on Psychotherapy by Psychiatrists and Others (2000).

manifestation of the other.

## Conclusion

It is better to understand sexual orientation as a dispositional concept. According to this concept, sexual dispositions (whether those are dispositions to behave or dispositions to desire) are manifested in ordinary conditions. We should not expect to discover necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for what counts as ordinary. Yet we should also be careful to separate cases that fail to meet ordinary conditions from cases that involve dispositional interference.

I did not offer a fully systematic analysis that can plausibly interpret every possible case. But the cases I discussed suggests the following. Ordinary conditions cover extrinsic factors as well as persistent (intrinsic) physiological factors. But they do not cover short-term physiological factors, nor do they cover psychological factors. In those cases, uncharacteristic sexual behavior is the result of dispositional interference. Non-coercive internal conflicts are especially deserving of further examination, since our intuitions about them seem to conflict with standard analysis of dispositions.

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