Sexual Orientation, Dispositional Interference, and Internal Psychological Conflict

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Abstract

Many philosophers think that it is better to understand sexual orientation as a dispositional concept. But, if so, 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, the analysis should distinguish between cases where the relevant conditions are not satisfied and cases where the relevant conditions are satisfied but the manifestation is interfered with. I then argue that an adequate analysis of our concept of sexual orientation should categorize cases of internal psychological conflict as cases of interference. This last claim is significant in part because it conflicts with a prominent position in the broader dispositions literature that denies the possibility of intrinsic 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. as only a matter of the sex/gender of the object).[1]

[1] For more on the sex/gender issue, see: Stein (1999): 31—34; Dembroff (2016): 5, 10—11, 19; Díaz-León (2022): 295—296; Stock (2019): 6—13. For more on the discrete/continuous issue, see: Stein (1999): 49—61; Dembroff (2016): 11, 22—23; Richardson (Forthcoming): 18—20. For more on the thick/thin issue, see LeVay (2017): 3—5; Dembroff (2016): 19—20; Díaz-León (2022): 305—306; Stock

I'd like to focus on another element. Among philosophers, 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 what are its relevant conditions and manifestations? Some answers to this question have been given. But I believe there is much more to be said.

In particular, I believe that any analysis of sexual orientation should accommodate the possibility of dispositional interference. For example, “Side B” Christians believe that God forbids gay relationships and thus choose to live a life of celibacy. Current analyses of sexual orientation may say that such cases fall outside the scope of the analysis in the sense that they fail to meet the relevant dispositional conditions. I think it is better to say that Side B Christians have a moral belief that interferes with the manifestation of their sexual dispositions. In fact, I think this sort of internal psychological conflict is an essential feature of our sexuality. To analyze it away would be to replace our concept of sexual orientation with something else. Or so I hope to convince you.

A quick note about terminology. Throughout the paper, I talk about “our” concept of sexual orientation. In that sense, I am offering a descriptive analysis of the concept rather than an ameliorative improvement. But I don’t intend to commit myself to any controversial claims about the nature of concepts in general or the concept of sexual orientation in particular. In fact, I think “our” concept of sexual orientation is contested and it may be better to talk about smaller, more cohesive, communities and the concepts of sexual orientation that are operative in those

(2019): 13—19. There are, of course, many issues related to sexual orientation that I have failed to mention.

communities. But for the sake of simplicity I will talk as if there is one shared concept of sexual orientation that all of us are trying to better understand. It's worth trying to understand this concept, even if it is not your concept.[2]

In addition, I will adopt a "standard" taxonomy whereby people are lesbian, gay, bi, straight, or asexual. There is much to be said in favor of other taxonomies. But the issues surrounding what taxonomy we should use make little difference to the issues I plan to discuss in this paper. Thus, my adoption of this "standard" taxonomy is merely for the sake of simplicity. The main claims I make 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 a concept primarily about what something is like here, now, or in actuality. Fairly uncontroversial examples of categorical concepts are the concept *having a mass of 82kg* and the concept *is to the west of*. More controversially, some categorical concepts are historical, like *having been to San Francisco*. A dispositional concept is a concept primarily about what the thing in question would be like or how it would behave in certain conditions that may or may not obtain in the future. An uncontroversial example of a dispositional concept is the concept *fragility*: a wine glass that is fragile is prone to shattering, even if it never in fact shatters. Most philosophers would agree that there is an important connection between the wine glass's fragility and the wine glass's current internal structure. And a fragile wine glass really is fragile here, now, in actuality. Nevertheless, the wine glass's fragility is in some sense a modal property that seems to imply more than what the wine glass is like here, now, in actuality.

[2] Cf. Richardson (Forthcoming): 18

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, such as a history of feeling sexual desire for men.[3] 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 advantages that made it appealing in the early history of research on sexual orientation. Most straightforwardly, 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.[4] Another advantage is that behaviorism offers an easier 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 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 (a point I will return to later in this paper).

[3] 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 (cf. Bailey *et al.* 2016; Bogaert and Skorska 2020; Breedlove 2017; LeVay 2017). 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.

[4] Cf. Prior (1985): Chapter 7; Armstrong *et al*. (1996): Chapter 3; McKitrick (2003).

Despite these advantages, and despite its early popularity, behaviorism should be rejected. To start, it seems to supply judgments that wildly conflict with many people's intuitive judgments. According to behaviorism, a celibate Catholic priest cannot be straight. Intuitively, though, such a person can be straight even if he has never been in a relationship with a woman. Similarly, cases 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 would have had the same sexual orientation even if he had never met Jane or any other human woman.[5]

Here is one more argument against categorical analyses. Each person is an amalgamation of traits: Liz is smart, competitive, nice, and loud, whereas Tim is smart but non-competitive, curmudgeonly, and quiet. These traits indicate how they would behave in certain situations. In other words, our concept of a personality trait is dispositional. Of course, our

[5] Throughout this paper, I appeal to examples from many different social contexts. Someone could object on the grounds that the concept of sexual orientation is socially constructed and it does not make sense to "project" such a concept onto individuals from social contexts that lack it. As I argued in Finocchiaro (2021), though, such projection is clearly conceptually coherent so long as we distinguish it from a similar type of projection that is clearly incoherent.

concept of sexual orientation is in some ways unlike our concept of a personality trait. Yet they seem to play functionally similar roles. 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 philosophers argue that our concept of a trait is not merely dispositional. They would say that for Liz to be nice requires that at some time in the past Liz demonstrated her niceness. Thus, our concept of a trait might be about *tendencies*, where a tendency is a dispositional property that has been previously manifested.[6] Or perhaps the concept of a trait is about some other type of dispositional property, such as an ability, power, or propensity.

What about the concept of sexual orientation? My personal intuitive judgment is that it is not about tendencies – as I said, I don't think Tarzan lacked a sexual orientation before developing feelings for Jane.[7] But then the analogy between the concept of sexual orientation and the concept of a personality trait isn't as strong as it initially seemed to be.

To be clear, I don't think any of these arguments are decisive. And they might be less effective against other types of categorical analyses. Whitlow and Laskowski (2022), for instance, defend a categorical analysis based on phenomenal experiences of sexual arousal rather than (non-phenomenological) desire. Nevertheless, I think these arguments are enough to motivate serious consideration of dispositional analyses. Furthermore, I think these considerations apply regardless of whether the concept of sexual orientation is about "mere" dispositions, tendencies, or some other type of dispositional property. I am happy to grant that there may be important differences between them. But, insofar as the concept of sexual

[6] See Alvarez (2017); Dinges and Zakkou (2020).
[7] Cf. Stein (1999): 48, where Stein introduces a relevant example but just narrowly misses its connection to the disposition/tendency distinction.

orientation is about some type of dispositional property, there will be a question regarding the conditions specifically relevant to its manifestation. To that question I now turn.

2 - Ideal Conditions v Ordinary Conditions

In the broader dispositions literature, philosophers 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.[8]

Sexual orientation is a conventional dispositional concept.[9] So, even if we try really hard, we might never find an analysis of it that would make it 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 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:

[8] Cf. Lewis (1997): 151—154

[9] 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).

> *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 before. We say that the celibate Catholic priest is straight because he would be with a woman if he were sexually free. Only later in his life did Tarzan find himself among a variety of appealing sexual partners. 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 revealing of their sexual orientation than what they do or do not do in more tolerant ones.

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). 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.[10] 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

[10] While Dembroff does not say that the empirical evidence on this question is decisive, 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 not necessary for Dembroff's argument to work, though, since the ideal conditions analysis still conflicts with our intuitive judgment of the case I mention.

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 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*. Ordinary conditions, according to Dembroff, are the conditions “under which ascriptions of sexual orientation typically take place” (Dembroff 2016: 16). Ordinary conditions need not be ordinary in the sense that they frequently or commonly occur. Rather, ordinary conditions are ordinary insofar as they fall within the concept’s operative scope. This operative scope can, in theory, change over time. As it stands now, though, we

regularly ascribe sexual orientation to individuals even when they lack Stein's ideal sexual freedom.

So what counts as ordinary is, ultimately, an empirical question about how the concept is used. Still, it would be useful to try to articulate it in some detail.[11] To that end, Dembroff give us the following list of conditions:

> (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 (Dembroff 2016: 17).

For Dembroff, these are the sorts of conditions we typically 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 the 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. Dembroff does not claim that (I)—(III) is a list of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. But for the sake of philosophical examination let's assume that it is. Call this analysis the Robin Dembroff ordinary conditions analysis, or *Ordinary-RD* for short.

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

[11] Cf. Whitlow and Laskowski (2022: 589—590), who are more pessimistic about doing this informatively.

manifestation. For them, sexual orientation is about how people are disposed to behave under ordinary conditions.

Esa Díaz-León argues against this combined analysis (Díaz-León 2022: 299—301). She offers two cases where behavior-based Ordinary-RD's judgments about those cases seem 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. I want to consider this argument in detail because, while I think it fails, explaining why it fails will reveal a critical oversight in current analyses.

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. 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. 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.

Can behavior-based Ordinary-RD be modified in a way that makes its judgments consistent with our intuitive judgments? Díaz-León argues that it cannot. 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.[12]

On the basis of this argument, Díaz-León rejects the behavioral element of Dembroff's analysis.[13] 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 2022: 301—305). 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

[12] 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.

[13] To be clear, there are other arguments worth considering, in particular arguments that focus on the role of interpretation (see Díaz-León (2017): 243—246; Andler (2022): 114). Here, I focus on the Alicia/Cary argument as a way of demonstrating the theoretical significance of dispositional interference. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helping me to clarify this dialectic.

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. Cary is psychologically aroused by the sense of adventure rather than the men who are part of that adventure.

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. Counterfactually speaking, then, Felicia would not form desires for women. Felicia does not think that there is anything immoral or inappropriate about sexual desires toward women in general, though. She would have acted similarly if her long-term monogamous partner had been a woman. Intuitively, Felicia is bisexual. Yet the line of reasoning that Díaz-León applies to Alicia's case would say that Felicia is not bisexual. So, according to that line of reasoning, Díaz-León's analysis would also conflict with our intuitive judgments.

Someone could respond by saying that such a radical commitment leads to a genuine change in sexual orientation – i.e. Felicia no longer has the disposition to desire women and therefore she is no longer bi. But that seems like a double standard to me. Díaz-León's original argument assumes that Alicia's monogamous commitment doesn't lead to a genuine change in her sexual orientation. Why not? Alicia is already an unusual partner; many (probably most) people are such that a monogamous commitment wouldn't block them in every nearby possible world from having sex with anyone besides their partner.[14] Better to treat Alicia and Felicia the same unless we have a strong reason to treat them differently.

[14] I don't quite trust the scientific study of this issue, but it's worth mentioning that there is evidence that many people (16%—24%) actually cheat (e.g. Luo and Yu 2022; Labrecque and Whisman 2017).

Someone could maintain that there is a strong reason to treat them differently: the cases are different insofar as (i) it is plausible to think that Alicia's monogamous commitment blocks her in every nearby possible world from having sex with anyone besides her partner, but (ii) it is not plausible to think that Felicia's monogamous commitment blocks her in every nearby possible world from having sexual desires for anyone besides her partner. In other words, monogamy can block a disposition for sexual behavior from manifesting but it cannot block a disposition for sexual desires from manifesting. I find this response unconvincing. I am happy to concede that many (probably most) people are such that if they were in Felicia's situation then there would be at least one nearby possible world where they formed a sexual desire for someone other than their partner. But surely some people are capable of maintaining the commitment.[15]

Can we accommodate Alicia and Felicia by modifying the analysis of ordinary conditions? If we add a new condition that explicitly rules out situations where the person is in a monogamous relationship, then we can avoid giving 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. But what about Phyllis, a straight woman who is turned off by the idea of being with a Trump voter – and yet everyone around her voted for Trump? And what about Phillip, a gay man who cannot tolerate being with a man who is still in the closet – and yet

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Presumably the percentage of people who would cheat in at least one nearby possible world is much larger.

[15] Consider the long (and complicated) history of chastity in Christian thought. At first glance, chastity requires refraining from sexual behavior. But it is often extended to sexual desires. In Matthew 5 27—28, Jesus says "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." The Rule of Saint Augustine conveys a similar attitude and recommends some strategies for cultivating an ability to avoid spontaneous sexual desires from forming (Chapter IV). More recently, it was revealed that former US Vice President Mike Pence adheres to the so-called Billy Graham Rule, according to which a man should avoid meeting or eating alone with a woman other than his wife. I don't mean to suggest that these approaches to chastity are unproblematic. Far from it. But they indicate how people in the real world strive toward a version of monogamy similar to Felicia's.

every man around him is stuck in the closet? We could add conditions that explicitly rule out these situations as well, and thereby avoid the counter-intuitive conclusion that Phyllis and Philip are asexual. But there are three reasons to be dissatisfied with this strategy. First, it seems *ad hoc*: there seems to be little reason to exclude these very specific situations other than the fact that the analysis seems to misjudge them. Second, it seems endless: as soon as we add 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. Third, each condition we add will reduce the informativeness of our analysis. We ordinarily treat facts about an individual's sexual orientation as informative, as saying something that suggests a lot more about what they might do or feel. But if our analysis of sexual orientation only looks at a highly specific range of circumstances, then facts about an individual's sexual orientation say very little. Suppose our analysis only looks at situations where someone is not in a monogamous relationship. Then what about people who only have sexual desires in the context of a monogamous relationship? Even if we accept the counterintuitive result that they are asexual, it seems that their asexuality says very little about what they might do or feel in the context of a monogamous relationship.[16] These three reasons do not decisively show that we should abandon the more-conditions strategy. But they should encourage us to try something else.[17]

Here's a suggestion. In all of these cases, the person is in a fairly ordinary situation. Yet something *interfered* with the manifestation of the relevant disposition and therefore what the person did or felt diverged from what their sexual orientation, taken by itself, suggests they would do or feel. Such interference does not automatically entail a change in the underlying

[16] Cf. Manley and Wasserman's Achilles' heels argument against the strategy of getting specific (2008: 67—68). Even if the strategy of getting specific successfully identified a disposition, it would be uninformative in my sense; it would thus not be a suitable disposition for our concept of sexual orientation.

[17] See Richardson (Forthcoming): 21—22 for an alternative strategy based on the idea that both behaviors and desires can be part of the nature of sexual orientation.

dispositions. In other words, a person can have a certain disposition even if the desires or behavior that they manifest under the relevant conditions does not match that disposition.

In fact, I think this is the right thing to say about Alicia: despite the fact that she does not sexually engage with women in nearby possible worlds, she remains disposed to do so; it is her monogamous commitment that interferes with her otherwise bisexual tendencies. Thus her case is not a counterexample to behavior-based Ordinary-RD, and thus Díaz-León's argument fails. But it will take me some time to substantiate that conclusion. In the remainder of the paper, I will further explain the idea of dispositional interference. I will then develop some constraints on how to understand dispositional interference when analyzing the concept of sexual orientation.

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.[18] 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

[18] This terminology is from Johnston (1992). A mask is sometimes called an "antidote", as when a person consumes a poison with its antidote.

struck. When he is near a styrofoam cup, the cup will mimic fragility by being torn to pieces.[19] 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.[20] 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 are 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 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.

Further complicating matters is the fact that some 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.[21] Any time someone is about to see it, the chameleon notices, blushes, and turns bright red. The chameleon is dispositionally green (i.e. is disposed to appear green to someone who sees it) but something intrinsic to the

[19] This example comes from Lewis (1997), who got it from Daniel Nolan.
[20] Finks and reverse finks were first discussed (in these terms, anyway) in Martin (1994).
[21] This example comes from Johnston (1992): 231.

chameleon (its shy but intuitive psychology) makes it lose the disposition when it would have otherwise manifested. The chameleon's psychology seems to act as a reverse fink, a kind of dispositional interference.

Despite (or because of) these complications, the possibility of intrinsic interference allows us to develop more sophisticated analyses of the dispositional element of our concept of sexual orientation. The arguments about sexual orientation that I discussed in the previous sections all implicitly assume that the manifestation must match the ascribed disposition. For instance, Díaz-León argues that the fact that Alicia does not manifest bisexual behavior across nearby possible worlds indicates that either (a) Alicia is not bisexual, (b) the conditions for manifestation have not been met, or (c) behavior is not the relevant manifestation. Of these three options, Díaz-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. In this case, 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

The intuitive judgments I've reported cohere well with the idea that sexual orientation can sometimes be interfered with. We should be careful, though. Once we accept this idea, we may be tempted to characterize every problem case as a case of interference. Yet we should respect the difference between a case of interference and a case where the relevant conditions are simply 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) fails to meet the conditions under which we typically make ascriptions of sexual orientation.

Is there an analysis of our concept of sexual orientation that provides a fully satisfying explanation for why these cases seem to be different? If there is, I haven't found it! But I have found some constraints that I think any such analysis must satisfy.[22]

First constraint: short-term physiological factors generally lead to dispositional interference. 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 interferes with their desire to have sex. So short-term physiological factors may have a masking effect. They may also have a mimicking effect. When some people consume drugs or alcohol, they may be willing to engage in behavior they otherwise would not be. (Ignore those cases that remove the possibility of consent; those cases fail to meet ordinary conditions.) We should be careful, though. In some cases, the drugs or alcohol might create a sort of mimicking adventurousness similar to Cary's. In other cases, though, the new behavior might indicate a genuine expression of their sexuality that was, before that moment, masked through inhibitions.

Second constraint: persistent physiological factors produce cases where ordinary conditions are not met. Some physical impairments restrict what a person is able to do or remove their ability entirely. People who are depressed often experience severely reduced sex drives which lead to reduced sexual activity. Yet not all physiological factors decrease behavior that might be read as sexual. Though it is controversial, there is some evidence that dementia sometimes causes hypersexuality.[23] 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 failing to meet ordinary conditions, then so should the other.

[22] For the sake of expediency, in this section I will talk loosely about both behavioral and psychological dispositions. We can always come back to discuss what, if anything, changes when we think about it more carefully.
[23] See Ttsai *et al*. (1999); Alagiakrishnan *et al.* (2005).

If you are inclined to accept these two constraints, you might be inclined to accept the more general claim that long-standing factors are a matter of dispositional conditions and short-term factors are a matter of dispositional interference. In fact, this is a prominent position in the broader dispositions literature. According to Michael Fara, when he drinks caffeine the electrochemical activity of his brain changes in such a way that masks his normal ability to fall asleep when tired. But someone's long-term addiction does not merely mask their ability to resist taking the drug; the addiction has removed the ability entirely (Fara 2008: 857—858).

Yet I think this general claim should be rejected. I think it should be rejected because it fails to cohere with other claims about sexual orientation that are, in my opinion, both more plausible and more important.

Here's one such claim: action-guiding beliefs can dispositionally interfere with sexual orientation. Recall that Alicia's commitment to monogamy explains why she does not sexually engage with women. We could exclude cases of monogamy by saying that having a monogamous commitment fails to meet ordinary conditions. But I think that would be a pretty radical break with our ordinary concept of sexual orientation; the concept's scope would be much more limited given how prevalent monogamous relationships are. As I suggested before, 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.

In many real-life cases, people restrict their sexual behavior because they believe that behavior to be immoral. Here's a detailed case in point. 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.[24]

To better represent the Side B perspective, I will quote an actual Side B Christian, 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.).*

[24] 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.

Such commitments seem to form a core part of Belgau's identity.

If we were to follow Fara's lead about the limits of intrinsic interference, we would be forced to find some other way to draw the distinction between Ron Belgau and Justin Lee. But there's no appealing way to do it. Intuitively, gay Christians don't cease to be gay when they commit to a life of celibacy. We could, theoretically, categorize Belgau's situation as one where ordinary conditions are not met. But that's implausible. There is nothing particularly extraordinary about Belgau's situation. Many people have moral beliefs that influence their sexual behavior. Think about Phyllis and Phillip, who are willing and able to have sex but whose moral standards exclude everyone around them. Think about conservative Christians like Mike Pence and political lesbians like Sheila Jeffreys. In most respects they couldn't be more different. But they have this in common with each other and with so many other people.[25]

I am inclined to think that the sense in which sexual orientation is a dispositional concept may differ from the sense in which some philosophers think fragility is a dispositional concept. In this latter sense, a disposition is an "all things considered" feature of the bearer of the disposition such that it doesn't make much sense to say that a glass is fragile but also has an intrinsic structure that prevents the glass from breaking when struck. In contrast, it makes plenty of sense to say that Ron Belgau is gay but also has a belief system that prevents him from having sex with men. This potential for internal conflict seems to me to be an essential feature of sexual orientation as a dispositional concept. To analyze it away would be to replace the concept of sexual orientation with something else.

Thus, I think an analysis of sexual orientation should categorize cases of internal psychological conflict as cases of dispositional interference. Call this the Internal Psychological Conflict constraint, or IPC. A moral belief preventing sex is a paradigm instance of IPC in action.

[25] For most of us, our moral beliefs are to varying degrees influenced by the social systems we are a part of. I am open to the possibility that for some people this influence is so great that their situation is a case where ordinary conditions are not met. But our concept of sexual orientation seems to preclude the possibility that this influence causes all of us to be so excluded.

But it should apply more broadly. Someone may have prudential reasons to refrain from sexually engaging with men or women or both. Someone may have moral reasons for sexually engaging with someone they otherwise wouldn't.[26] Or they may have conflicts rooted in less intellectualized states: adventurousness, anxiety, disgust, benevolence, and so on.[27]

Besides the apparent fact that internal psychological conflict is widespread, another reason to adopt IPC is that it helps to show how an analysis of sexual orientation can account for coerced sexual behavior. Very few people would be willing to ascribe sexual orientation on the basis of what happens under such conditions. Yet non-coercive incentives and disincentives are everywhere. If cases involving them were for that reason cases where ordinary conditions were not met, then ascriptions of sexual orientation would be much less common than they actually are.[28] So an adequate analysis of sexual orientation needs to find a way to accommodate the latter while still excluding the former.

Here's how IPC helps. Although a coerced action is in some sense the result of a choice made by the person being coerced, the coercion removes their ability to freely and authentically choose what they do.[29] As Frankfurt would put it, "A coercive threat arouses in its victim a desire – i.e., to avoid the penalty – so powerful that it will move him to perform the required action regardless of whether he wants to perform it or considers that it would be reasonable for him to do so" (Frankfurt 1998: 41). There is no internal psychological conflict because the coercion

[26] Such arguments are not uncommon in feminist literature. See, for instance, Trebilcot (2009). More recent arguments include D'Alessandro (2023) and Liu (2015), though they consider lookism more generally.
[27] See Ashwell (2017), whose general approach to conflicts of desires coheres well with what I am saying about dispositional interference in the specific domain of sexual orientation.
[28] I am sympathetic to the claim that ascriptions of sexual orientation *should* be much less common than they actually are. (In fact, I argue in an unpublished paper that we should abandon the concept of sexual orientation altogether.) But that normative claim is distinct from the descriptive claim under consideration.
[29] In contrast to Robert Nozick (Nozick 1969) and others, I am not invoking a sort of coercion that requires a specific coercer, let alone a specific threat. Rather, the sort of coercion I am invoking is one that limits the freedom of the coerced. In some cases, this sort of coercion may be systemic. I have in mind ideas like the idea that patriarchal structures preclude (or at least complicate) the possibility of consensual heterosexual sex. This sort of systemic coercion is importantly different from the systemic influence on moral beliefs that I mention later.

circumvents any ordinary process of deliberation. So coerced sexual behavior is rightly understood as producing cases where ordinary conditions are not met. In contrast, incentives and disincentives are a part of the process, within which they may come into conflict with sexual dispositions. Consequently, in at least some cases incentives will lead a person to behave in a way that mimics the way someone with a different sexual orientation would behave. For example, some (but certainly not all) straight pornographic actors non-coercively participate in same-sex scenes because it affords more, and potentially better-paying, opportunities for work. Other incentives may have a masking effect, and disincentives may have analogous masking and mimicking effects; it depends on the specific behavior being incentivized or disincentivized.[30]

6 – Taking Stock

In the previous section, I offered three constraints for how an analysis of sexual orientation should account for potential dispositional interference. In this section, I will discuss the implications of those constraints.

In Section 3, I claimed that Díaz-León's original argument against behavior-based Ordinary-RD fails because it fails to account for potential dispositional interference. An updated version of the argument could acknowledge that theoretical possibility but deny that it applies to Alicia's case – in other words, Díaz-León could insist that Alicia is not disposed to sexually engage with women.

But I think it would be better to say that Alicia's monogamous commitment is an instance of internal psychological conflict. There does not seem to be any relevant difference between

[30] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for comments that helped me see the connection between IPC and coercion. That being said, I admit that the line between coercing and incentivizing is hard to draw in the real world. Consequently, the line between a case not meeting ordinary conditions and a case containing dispositional interference will also be hard to draw. But that's okay. An analysis of sexual orientation need not also be an analysis of coercion. It is enough to say that the line should be drawn wherever the right analysis of coercion says that that line should be drawn.

Alicia's case and other instances of IPC. So, given that we should already be committed to IPC, it is better to treat them similarly. The same line of reasoning applies to Cary. 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.

So I think even an updated version of Díaz-León's argument against behavior-based Ordinary-RD fails. But I have not given a positive argument for behavior-based Ordinary-RD nor have I given a negative argument against Díaz-León's desire-based analysis. Both analyses can satisfy IPC. Someone could argue that a desire-based analysis coheres better with IPC because it pairs moral beliefs with sexual desires, thus keeping the conflict "in the head". But such an argument relies on a misreading of the analysis. According to Díaz-León, sexual orientation is about dispositions to desire. When internal psychological conflict occurs, it interferes with the manifestation of the disposition. In other words, there is no desire. Dispositions to desire are no more "in the head" than dispositions to behave, and thus a desire-based analysis does not better cohere with IPC. As far as I can tell, this implication holds generally: IPC applies to every dispositional analysis of sexual orientation regardless of whether it is behavior-based or desire-based. And any argument for or against any dispositional analysis must take IPC into consideration.

IPC also has implications for how we understand the causal construction of sexual orientation. Everyone should agree that individual sexual behavior is causally influenced by society. There is no other plausible way to explain how much it varies over time and across societies. But that does not mean society causally influences sexual dispositions. Which moral beliefs an individual has is often causally influenced by the society they grew up in. I have argued that moral beliefs lead to dispositional interference; they do not, typically, change the

underlying dispositions relevant to sexual orientation. Thus, sexual orientation is not in this way causally constructed.[31]

An individual's sexual orientation might change for other reasons. As before, though, we need to be careful. Many physiological or environmental factors make it seem as if an individual's sexual orientation has changed. But I have argued that it is often better to say that there is dispositional interference and the underlying dispositions remain unchanged. I remain open to the idea that those underlying dispositions do sometimes change. A baby, for example, does not have a sexual orientation, though it may have a "first potentiality" to develop into someone that does have a sexual orientation. But I hesitate to speculate about when someone's sexual orientation can change. I also doubt that it is something we have meaningful control over. Even setting aside the normative problems with "conversion therapy", experts agree that it is ineffective (APA 2000, AACAP 2018, Cramer *et al*. 2008, Higbee *et al.*2022).

I will end by addressing a potential issue with the epistemology of sexual orientation. In the broader dispositions literature, Sungho Choi has raised an interesting argument against the possibility of intrinsic interference (Choi 2017). The argument turns on the idea that intrinsic interference would lead to widespread skepticism about dispositional ascriptions. We ordinarily believe that a bowl of rice isn't poisonous. But we can't rule out the possibility that rice is like Ashwell's berry: poisonous and yet also intrinsically masking its own poisonousness. Similar lines of reasoning extend to the corrodibility of metals, the combustibility of diamonds, and a myriad of other cases. Thus, if intrinsic interference is possible, we aren't justified in believing even the most basic of dispositional ascriptions. But of course such a skeptical conclusion should be rejected; and so the possibility of intrinsic interference should also be rejected.

An analogous argument could be constructed against IPC. We ordinarily believe that so-and-so is gay. But we can't rule out the possibility that they are in fact bisexual and have some

[31] It might be causally constructed in other ways, though. See, for instance, the conceptual act theory of sexual orientation as developed by Saray Ayala-López (2017: 250—257).

sort of internal conflict that interferes with the manifestation of their actual sexual orientation. Thus, we aren't justified in believing even the most basic ascriptions of sexual orientation. If we want to avoid this skeptical conclusion, we should reject IPC. Perhaps, instead, we should say that every case of internal psychological conflict is a case where ordinary conditions are not met. Alternatively, if I am right that intrinsic dispositional interference is an essential feature of the concept of sexual orientation, then the concept of sexual orientation is irreparably flawed and should therefore be abandoned.

I'm not sure what to say about Choi's original argument. But I think the analogous argument for sexual orientation fails. If we accept Choi's skeptical consequence, then we must say that our ascriptions of dispositions like fragility and poisonousness depend on scientific investigations into the internal structures of physical objects and we don't know whether rice is poisonous until we pull out our microscopes and perform some chemical analyses. We don't need to say that our ascriptions of sexual orientation depend on analogous scientific investigations into the internal structures of our bodies. We can know the difference between a "true" bisexual and someone who mimics bisexual dispositions because we can know the internal psychology that guides their behavior. In Cary's case, we know that it is his adventurousness, not his sexual orientation, that disposes him to have sex with men.

Maybe scientific investigations can provide knowledge of a person's internal psychology. But in the real world our knowledge often depends on the introspective access that an individual has to their own psychology. The fact that an individual has privileged access to their own psychology is one reason to defer to their self-identity: they are better positioned to understand any internal psychological conflicts they may have and are thus better able to discern whether there would be any dispositional interference. There's no guarantee that the individual shares that information with others, though. Many Side B Christians, for instance, may choose to hide their internal conflict and identify as straight. Given this epistemic hurdle, many people are not in a position to make judgments about what someone else's sexual orientation is.

Some people may not be in a position to make judgments about their own sexual orientation, either. They may lack the conceptual resources to understand themselves. And some people may repress their sexuality so deeply that they are not even aware of that repression. In such cases, we really aren't justified in ascribing to them a sexual orientation. But these cases should not motivate us to reject the possibility of intrinsic interference. Knowing yourself is hard, but it is not impossible.

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 for diagnosing every possible case. But the cases I discussed suggest that ordinary conditions sometimes permit dispositional interference. Most importantly, dispositional interference is sometimes the result of internal psychological conflict. Far from being a *reductio*, such dispositional interference highlights the privileged access an individual has to their own sexual orientation and therefore demonstrates the epistemic importance of self-identity.

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