

# Intrinsic Masking and Sexual Orientation\*

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## Abstract

In this paper, I argue that there are genuine cases of intrinsic masking – that sometimes an individual retains their disposition to engage in some behavior even when the manifestation of that disposition is interfered with by features intrinsic to the individual. My argument turns on real-world cases involving sexual orientation. In virtue of their sexual orientation, the individual is disposed to sexually engage with a certain (perhaps fuzzy) class of people. But because of their political, moral, or religious commitments, the individual never manifests the disposition. Armed with these cases, I argue that the most plausible interpretation is that sexual orientation can be intrinsically masked. Along the way, I clarify several topics, including the stimulus conditions relevant to sexual orientation and the ability to do otherwise.

**Keywords:** Social Metaphysics, Sexual Orientation, Dispositions, Masking

## Introduction

A glass vase remains fragile while covered in bubble wrap. A cat is still a stealthy predator when wearing a belled collar. And a witch is messy even if she owns a magical elf that washes every dirty dish and throws out every abandoned tissue.

In these three cases, something has a disposition even though something else interferes with the manifestation of that disposition. The disposition is in these circumstances *masked*. The glass vase's disposition to break is masked by the shock-absorbent packaging material. The cat's disposition to sneak up on prey is masked by the noisy bells. The witch's disposition to leave behind a trail of trash is masked by the stalwart house elf.

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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.

In these three cases, what interferes with the manifestation of the disposition is something extrinsic to the entity with the disposition. Can a disposition be masked by something *intrinsic* to the bearer of the disposition?

Yes. In this paper, I argue that masking is sometimes intrinsic. My argument turns on real-life cases about sexual orientation. In these cases, the individual has a disposition to engage in a range of sexual behavior but, for deeply held reasons, decides to not engage in that behavior. I argue that, in these cases, the individual has a behavioral disposition that is masked by features intrinsic to that individual.

There are at least three reasons to care about intrinsically masked sexual dispositions. First, some have used the alleged impossibility of intrinsic masks as a device to define the distinction between dispositional and categorical properties.<sup>1</sup> The fact that masking is sometimes intrinsic undermines this means of drawing the distinction. Second, reflecting on such cases helps to illuminate the correct stimulus conditions of sexual dispositions and, consequently, helps to illuminate the nature of sexual orientation. Finally, and somewhat speculatively, the fact that there are intrinsic masks advances one line of reasoning regarding moral responsibility. My cases of intrinsically masked sexual dispositions bear a structural similarity to Frankfurt-style cases involving intrinsic interference – for example, the case involving an addict who necessarily acts in a morally blameworthy way. If individuals retain their sexual orientation in intrinsic masking cases, by parity of reasoning the addict retains the ability to act otherwise. Arguably, then, such cases do not count as counterexamples to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities.

Here is a roadmap of what follows. In section one, I establish some background regarding the metaphysics of dispositions. Then, in section two, I motivate a theory of sexual orientation according to which sexual orientation is or is strongly tied to a cluster of dispositions regarding sexual behavior. In section three, I give two cases that strongly suggest that sexual orientation can be masked by features intrinsic to the individual. Finally, in section four, I sketch out some possible responses to my argument and show their deficiencies.

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<sup>1</sup>See Handfield (2008); Choi (2012).

# 1 Dispositions and Masks: A Primer

So what is a disposition? Very roughly speaking, something has a disposition just in case it manifests some specific behavior in the appropriate circumstances. For example, the Sorting Hat is disposed to sort because, when placed upon a Hogwarts student's head, the Hat declares to which House the student belongs. We might, then, offer the following analysis:

An object,  $x$ , is disposed to  $M$  when  $C \leftrightarrow$  If  $C$  were the case,  $x$  would  $M$ .

So, if the Sorting Hat were placed upon a student's head, it would declare to which House the student belonged.

This simple conditional analysis is intuitive. But philosophers have built a menagerie of counterexamples to it. Two members of the menagerie are especially relevant to my overall argument.

Observe the *mask*.<sup>2</sup> In a mask, something interferes with the manifestation of the disposition by disrupting the process that would have led to the manifesting behavior. Suppose Dumbledore decides to disrupt this year's sorting ceremony in the following way. Whenever the Hat is placed upon a student's head, Dumbledore will cast a spell that magically (but only temporarily) creates a barrier around the Hat through which no light or sound could escape. The Hat is still disposed to sort, and may attempt to sort, but is prevented from successfully doing so by Dumbledore's barrier. The Hat's disposition to sort is masked. Observe another member of the menagerie, the *reverse fink*.<sup>3</sup> In a reverse fink, something interferes with the manifestation of the disposition by *removing* the disposition when and only when the stimulus conditions are met. Suppose whenever the Hat is placed upon a student's head, Dumbledore instead will cast a spell that magically (but only temporarily) immobilizes the Hat, thereby preventing it from speaking, gesturing, or otherwise being able to promulgate to which House the student belongs. The Hat has been reverse finked by Dumbledore and has in the moment lost its disposition to sort.<sup>4</sup> Both the reverse fink and the

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<sup>2</sup>The mask is sometimes called an "antidote", as when an individual consumes a poison with its antidote. The reverse of a mask is a mimic, where the object counterfactually manifests the specified behavior but lacks the disposition toward that behavior. (Consider, for example, a concrete block that mimics fragility insofar as, were it dropped, a witch would turn the floor into diamond and lift it into the descending block.)

<sup>3</sup>Following Manley and Wasserman (2008), I call this a reverse fink instead of a fink *simpliciter*. A fink is when the individual *gains* a disposition at the moment of manifestation – for example, a dead wire is finked when an electro-finking device causes the wire to become live the moment an electrical conductor is about to touch it.

<sup>4</sup>Thanks to Lindsey Brown, Rebecca Chan, Liz Jackson, Callie K. Phillips, and Alex Withorn for discussion on this and similar examples.

mask are counterexamples to the simple conditional analysis given above; in both scenarios the Hat is (prior to being used) disposed to sort when placed upon a student's head but would not sort if placed upon a student's head. The reverse fink falsifies the analysis by removing the disposition while the mask falsifies the analysis by interfering with the process that leads to the manifestation of the disposition.

We don't need to venture to the land of Pottermore to find reverse finks and masks. They're everywhere.<sup>5</sup> In fact, these phenomena seem to play an important role in explaining ordinary behavior. Consider what seems to follow from the three examples with which I started. It is because the bell masks the cat's stealthiness that she tries to take it off. The witch is still culpable for her messiness even if the elf never allows the messiness to take effect. We do not cross out the word 'fragile' on a box of glasswear after it has been carefully packed with bubble wrap. It is only through impressive metaphysical gymnastics that we could explain these facts without appealing to masks.

My overarching goal in this paper is to establish that there are genuine cases of intrinsic masking. There are two interacting obstacles to that goal. The first is the difficulty in distinguishing between reverse finks and masks. The second is the challenge to establish non-trivial stimulus conditions for some dispositions.

While the conceptual difference between a mask and a reverse fink is clear, it is at times difficult to determine to which a particular case belongs. Suppose Dumbledore mends the rip through which the Hat talks. Does Dumbledore remove the Hat's disposition to talk, 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. But this sorting difficulty threatens any attempt to establish that there are genuine cases of intrinsic masking. Say that a scenario has *negative counterfactual interference* if and only if in the nearest possible world (relative to that scenario) where the stimulus conditions are met the expected behavior is not manifested. One move available to someone who wants to deny intrinsic masks is the following. Whenever presented with an alleged example of intrinsic masking, the denier can (i) grant that it is a case of negative counterfactual interference, but (ii) claim that it is one where the individual would lose the

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<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., Fara (2005): 50. More precisely, if reverse finks and masks are genuine then they are everywhere. Some doubt whether there are any such phenomena. See, for example, Lewis (1997): 145, where he openly questions whether the right conditions obtain in alleged cases of masking.

disposition – that it is not a case of intrinsic masking but is instead a case of (potentially intrinsic) reverse finking.

Here is the second obstacle. Sometimes, we specify the stimulus conditions of a disposition when we ascribe that disposition to something. But often we do not. Distinguish between two sorts of dispositional ascriptions: *canonical* ascriptions and *ordinary* ascriptions. A canonical dispositional ascription explicitly references the circumstances in which the disposition manifests: something is water-soluble if it dissolves when placed in water and someone has arachnophobia if they feel fear in presence of spiders. In contrast, an ordinary ascription does not explicitly reference the relevant circumstances. I can assert that the glass vase is fragile or that the Sorting Hat sorts without thereby suggesting under what circumstances the glass would break or when the Hat would sort.<sup>6</sup> We typically have a general idea as to what the stimulus conditions associated with ordinary ascriptions are. But this general idea is not as exact as we would like in a philosophical context, and establishing more precise stimulus conditions is a challenge that invites dispute. The denier of intrinsic masks can therefore dispute a case by arguing that the scenario described is not one where the stimulus conditions are met.<sup>7</sup>

Putting these two obstacles together, when presented with an alleged example of intrinsic masking the denier has two possible moves. First, the denier could claim that the case is one where the individual loses the disposition in question. Second, the denier could claim that the case is one where the stimulus conditions are *not* present. As we'll see, both of these moves will be available in response to my cases of masked sexual orientation.

But before we discuss how the denier could respond to my cases, I need to give the cases.

## 2 Sexual Orientation

Actually, before I can give the cases, I need to say a bit more about what sexual orientation is. In this section I will argue that sexual orientation is a social property that is partially grounded in dispositions to engage in sexual behavior.

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<sup>6</sup>Note that a conventional ascription might reference the manifesting behavior, as with the Sorting Hat or as with an electable candidate.

<sup>7</sup>Even cases that involve canonical ascriptions are vulnerable to this strategy, albeit less so. One potential way to overcome this obstacle is to discuss only dispositions with fully specified stimulus conditions. But this strategy of getting more specific introduces larger problems than we started with. See Manley and Wasserman (2008), especially 66–71.

## 2.1 Some orienting distinctions

Sexual orientation is about sex. We thus ought to distinguish between sexual attraction and *romantic* attraction. Admittedly, sexual and romantic attraction often go together.<sup>8</sup> This is true both at the individual level (e.g. Blake’s sexual and romantic attraction to Ryan) and at the general level (e.g. Blake’s potential sexual and romantic attraction to men). There might even be a normative presumption that they *should* go together, that we ought to be with those toward whom we feel both sexual and romantic attraction. And of course there might be a feedback loop in effect, where sexual attraction plays a role in the development of romantic attraction, and *vice versa*.

Nevertheless, sexual and romantic attraction are conceptually distinct and do *not* always align. At the individual level, there might be all sorts of reasons for why Alex is sexually but not romantically attracted to Kristen. At the general level, many people have some level of “mismatch” between their sexual and romantic attractions. Consider, for example, someone who tends to be sexually attracted to both men and women but tends to be romantically attracted to only women.<sup>9</sup> Or consider someone who does not experience sexual attraction but does still experience romantic attraction.<sup>10</sup>

There is an on-going dispute as to whether sexual attraction is best understood as attraction on the basis of *gender* or on the basis of *sex* – or some combination of the two.<sup>11</sup> In what follows, I will carelessly slide between the two approaches. I do this for three reasons. First, I’m genuinely unsure as to what the right answer is. Second, I don’t have the space in this paper to say anything particularly useful about this dispute.<sup>12</sup> Third, the cases I will discuss involve individuals who hold radically different background theories regarding the relationship between sex and gender.

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<sup>8</sup>They are also often conflated. The Planned Parenthood website says, “Sexual orientation is who you’re attracted to and who you feel drawn to romantically, emotionally, and sexually.” The American Psychological Association website says, “Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes.”

<sup>9</sup>A popular label some choose to use is “bisexual and heteroromantic”.

<sup>10</sup>*BoJack Horseman*’s Todd Chavez is one prominent (albeit fictional) example.

<sup>11</sup>For a thorough discussion of this and related issues, see Dembroff (2016).

<sup>12</sup>One reason to think that sexual orientation is gender-based is that sexual attraction can be based on the superficial physical features of an individual. But such attraction seems independent of the sex of the person toward whom attraction is felt – there is sexual attraction even when the sex of the individual is unknown. (But maybe there are analogous instances of this happening with regard to gender!) A second reason to think that sexual orientation is gender-based is that sexual orientation is socially constructed and what society has constructed is a category that targets an individual’s gender, not their sex.

That being said, I do want to distinguish between sexual orientation and sexual *druthers*. Roughly speaking, an individual's sexual druthers are especially strong sources of attraction based on attributes that are not rooted in sex or gender. For example, someone might be especially attracted to redheads. Druthers need not be restricted to physical attributes: someone might also be especially attracted to funny guys, or to ambitious women. By labeling these sources of attraction as sexual druthers I do not mean to imply that they are by definition less important sources of sexual attraction. But sexual druthers are distractingly irrelevant to the matter at hand. Whatever we mean by sexual orientation is not supposed to be shaped by an individual's druthers. Let's set them aside.

One final distinction concerns the number of individuals referenced in an attribution of sexual orientation. Consider the term 'lesbian'. As ordinarily used, someone might describe herself as a lesbian just in case (i) she is (primarily) attracted to women and (ii) she is a woman. So, as ordinarily used, the term 'lesbian' references both the gender of the people toward whom the individual feels sexual attraction *as well as* the gender of the individual herself. Most of our ordinary terminology regarding sexual orientation follows this model.<sup>13</sup> Someone is straight just in case either (i) they are (primarily) attracted to women, and (ii) they are a man, *or* (i') they are (primarily) attracted to men, and (ii') they are a woman. And so on.

Some have argued that this is a mistake, and that a better taxonomy of sexual orientations would reference only the gender of those toward whom the individual feels attracted.<sup>14</sup> I'm quite sympathetic to this line of reasoning. That being said, I will use the "standard" LGBTQ taxonomy, a taxonomy that (in most cases) references both person's genders. I will do this because the cases I will discuss involve individuals who employ this taxonomy.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the underlying metaphysical difference between a single-reference taxonomy and a double-reference taxonomy won't matter for determining whether or not these are cases of intrinsic masking.

I will end these preliminaries not with another distinction but with a clarificatory and somewhat conciliatory point. It is an open question whether and to what extent sexual orientation is

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<sup>13</sup>Although, interestingly, of the standard LGBTQ terminology, 'lesbian' alone requires a *specific* gender combination. On the flip side, 'bisexual' does not seem to reference the gender of the individual experiencing the attraction – or at least if it does it does so superfluously.

<sup>14</sup>One argument is that the single-reference taxonomy combats the presumption of cisheterosexuality and reduces the impact of charges of sexual "deviancy". See Dembroff (2016): 19–20. Another argument that I'm particularly fond of is based on a metaphysical bias toward conceptual simplicity.

<sup>15</sup>In fact in both cases this taxonomy plays an ineliminable motivational role for their actions.

socially constructed.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, I do not have space to fully address this question. Is this a problem? Maybe, but it's not easy to specify how. One potential complication concerns the reality of sexual taxonomies. Consider a constructivist approach to sexual orientation according to which the categories we use fail to pick anything out.<sup>17</sup> On this approach, identifying someone as straight or gay is like identifying them as a witch or a wizard. If this form of constructivism is correct, then the cases I discuss below would seem to be irrelevant to the intrinsic masking question because they would be presupposing a sexual orientation that does not exist. Consider, instead, an essentialist position that holds that (i) sexual orientation is naturally determined but (ii) the categories that would best match nature deviate substantially from the LGBTQ taxonomy. So too on this approach my cases would seem to be irrelevant. I would be like someone who was trying to derive substantive conclusions from the "fact" that the world is built from Fire, Air, Water, and Earth.

Perhaps a full defense of my claim about intrinsic masking would require me to definitively resolve the issue of social construction. But I think I can dodge the issue without much harm. While it is dialectically useful to frame my paper in terms of sexual orientations, the real work is done by the underlying behavioral dispositions. I will argue that in my two cases the individuals have certain behavioral dispositions and that those dispositions ground the fact that the individual has a certain sexual orientation. For those who dispute my interpretation on these cases, I recommend that they focus on the identified dispositions.

So if it turns out that sexual orientation is *not* grounded in these behavioral dispositions, then my argument for intrinsic masks might still work. That being said, I would consider this to be a non-devastating but still significant loss. Once sexual orientation is decoupled from behavioral dispositions, we should be less confident as to what behavioral dispositions an individual has. This is because our confidence is derived from the fact that we know we have relatively reliable access to our sexual orientation.

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<sup>16</sup>For illustration, see Stein (1992).

<sup>17</sup>This is what Stein (1992): 341–342 calls the "empty-category" version of social constructivism. It is analogous to Appiah (1985)'s eliminativism about race.

## 2.2 Sexual orientation is grounded in behavioral dispositions

There are, very broadly speaking, three camps of views regarding the nature of sexual orientation. According to *behavioralism*, an individual's sexual orientation is grounded in their sexual behavior (past or present).<sup>18</sup> According to *desire theory*, an individual's sexual orientation is grounded in their desires or similar psychological states. Finally, according to *dispositionalism*, an individual's sexual orientation is grounded in their dispositions to engage in sexual behavior.<sup>19</sup>

While behavioralism and desire theory are not without merit, I ultimately think that they should be rejected. Here, I'll sketch out a few arguments against the two views. I do not think that these arguments decisively rule in favor of dispositionalism. (Dispositionalism has its own challenges, after all.) I do, however, think that they establish a weaker claim, namely that sexual orientation is at least *partially* grounded in behavioral dispositions. This weaker claim is compatible with a hybrid view according to which sexual orientation is grounded in behavioral dispositions as well as desires.

Behavioralism has some significant advantages. One straightforward advantage is that behavioralism is more theoretically neutral. There are all manner of disputes regarding the nature of dispositions, including but not limited to: are dispositions nothing over and above their categorical bases? do dispositions figure into the laws of nature? are dispositions sometimes intrinsic, or are they always at least partially extrinsically determined? Dispositionalism about sexual orientation becomes mired in these sticky issues.<sup>20</sup> Behavioralism, in contrast, is more theoretically neutral because it is uncontroversial that individuals exhibit behavior and that sometimes that behavior is sexual in nature. Another advantage is that behavioralism provides a relatively solid epistemological foundation. According to behavioralism, sexual orientation is grounded in something directly observable. It thereby offers a more empirically trackable account, one that could be readily incorporated into the sciences. In contrast, dispositionalism's epistemological offerings are tenuous; it is far from clear how to rigorously test for an individual's behavioral dispositions.

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<sup>18</sup>My use of grounding isn't intended to depend on any specific theory of grounding. That being said, it might be useful to think of sexual orientation in terms of fact-based partial grounding. Thus, each camp offers a way to complete the following: 'The fact that  $x$  . . . grounds the fact that  $x$  has sexual orientation  $S$ .' where the right-side fact regarding sexual orientation is a *social fact* regarding a *social property*. For more about grounding, see Fine (2012); Epstein (2015).

<sup>19</sup>For an example of behavioralism, see Kinsey (1948, 1953); for an example of desire theory, see LeVay (2017): Chapter 1; for an example of dispositionalism, see Stein (1999).

<sup>20</sup>So, too, does the only plausible version of the desire theory.

These advantages notwithstanding, behavioralism has at least one fatal flaw: it cannot account for common scenarios in which an individual abstains from sexual behavior. Imagine a man who has eagerly gone on several dates with women, but has decided to save himself for marriage. Before he settles down, however, he decides to join the priesthood. His decision leads, of course, to a vow of celibacy. On the assumption that he keeps his vows, he will live his whole life without ever having had sex. According to behavioralism, the priest is asexual. But that is absurd. It is better to say that the priest is straight but never acts on his sexual attractions. Thus, behavioralism ought to be rejected.

Behavioralism also suggests implausible verdicts regarding scenarios in which the individual engages in sexual behavior that ought not be considered relevant to their sexual orientations. Consider, first, scenarios that involve physical force or coercion – e.g. rape, blackmail, and survival sex. In such a case, an individual is sexually active. But their behavior in these scenarios does not determine their sexual orientation.

Some forms of behavioralism might be able to handle cases of explicit coercion. They might, for example, take the grounds for sexual orientation to be facts about the *consensual* sexual behavior of the individual. But there are scenarios involving consensual sex that also seem irrelevant. Consider, for example, the prevalence of same-sex relations in prison. Very often these relations are non-consensual means of asserting dominance or negotiating for protection. Sometimes, though, prisoners engage in consensual sex. Sometimes this is because the individuals involved are already disposed toward same-sex relations. Sometimes, though, this is because the individuals want to have sex but lack an opportunity to have sex with those who are of their preferred sex or gender. On most (if not all) forms of behavioralism, no man can be straight if his only sexual encounters are with other men in prison. Some such men would have had sex with women and only women if they had not been incarcerated. Behavioralism would then count these same men as straight. But this seems to be the wrong verdict. An individual's sexual orientation should not radically shift with biographical contingencies like incarceration.

So much for behavioralism. Why not think that sexual orientation is grounded in desire? After all, desires are also empirically trackable. Desires can be reported by those that experience or have experienced them, and, arguably, desires can also be measured in ways that behavioral dispositions

cannot.<sup>21</sup>

Note, first, that a plausible desire account must consider more than just the sexual desires an individual actually has. Otherwise, the account would be flawed in a way that is similar to the way that behavioralism is flawed. To see why, imagine that Andy lives alone on an island overgrown with rich plant-based sources of food and plenty of water to drink. Andy never forms a desire to have sex with someone. But, intuitively, this could be true even if Andy is not asexual. Similarly, imagine that Xanthippe is born and raised in a female-only society. In this society there are a number of women over the years that Xanthippe wants to have sex with. The fact that they never in fact desire a man should not exclude the possibility that they are bisexual. Xanthippe might have formed sexual desires for men had men been around. Thus, what matters is not which desires an individual actually has, but what desires an individual is disposed to have.

Any desire account, dispositional or not, will also face a significant challenge regarding the *reasons* for desire. A desire account shouldn't base an individual's sexual orientation solely on facts about the sex or gender of the individuals with whom they want to have sex.<sup>22</sup> This is because there are all sorts of reasons to want to have sex with someone and many of them are irrelevant in determining an individual's sexual orientation. Suppose Allison offers (in a non-coercive manner) a large sum of money to have sex with her and Jamie takes her up on the offer. Jamie wants to have sex with Allison *in order to earn the money*; Jamie's desire has nothing to do with the fact that Allison is a woman. Plausibly, then, Jamie's desire to have sex with Allison does not bear on their sexual orientation.

A desire account might try to accommodate such cases by saying that the desires that ground sexual orientation are desires that are formed on the basis of the individual's sex or gender. But this is psychologically unrealistic. For many (if not most) people, sex and gender are not the reasons for their sexual desires. At best, sex and gender are *associated* with the reasons for sexual desire. But specifying this association in a way that properly distinguishes between the desires had for relevant reasons and desires had for irrelevant reasons is no mean feat. Furthermore, at this point it seems like whatever epistemic advantage the desire account had over dispositionalism has been

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<sup>21</sup>See LeVay (2017) for a discussion of some scientific attempts to measure sexual desires through sexual arousal, including measurements of pupil dilation and genital arousal.

<sup>22</sup>Or, on a dispositional desire account, on the sex or gender of the individuals they are disposed to want to have sex with.

lost. Perhaps we can more accurately report whom we sexually desire than whom we are disposed to have sex with. But I doubt that we can more accurately report the desires that we are disposed to have for the “right” reasons. Those sorts of facts are no more epistemically accessible than facts about our behavioral dispositions.

Dispositionalism does not face these challenging issues regarding the reasons for desire. Furthermore, there is something intuitively missing in an account that totally disregards an individual’s sexual behavior. Imagine someone who regularly experiences weak sexual desires for both men and women but, no matter the circumstances, never engages in sexual behavior with either. Intuitively, it seems more accurate to characterize this individual as asexual than as bisexual. I suggest that this intuition supports the claim that sexual behavior is – in some capacity – a necessary component of sexual orientation.

In offering these challenges, I do not mean to demonstrate that behavioralism and desire theory are, in every form, indefensible. In fact, the central claim of this paper can be seen as yet another piece in the argumentative mosaic. If I’m right, then dispositionalism about sexual orientation entails that there are intrinsic masks. Those who firmly deny the possibility of intrinsic masks therefore ought to reject dispositionalism. There is nothing wrong with this strategy *per se*. Although I think the case for dispositionalism is much stronger than the case against intrinsic masks, I am happy to merely establish a connection between the two.

### **3 Intrinsically Masked Sexual Orientation**

In this section, I will present two cases where an individual refrains from sex on the basis of a deeply held belief. These cases, I argue, represent scenarios where the manifestation of a disposition is masked by a feature intrinsic to the bearer of the disposition. Thus, intrinsic masks are possible. I will then respond to some potential objections, objections that call into question the claim that these are genuine cases of intrinsic masking.

#### **3.1 Two Cases of Moral Masking**

The first case involves a Christian man and his moral beliefs about same-sex relations. 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>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

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 Gods intent for human love.<sup>25</sup>

So here’s the first case. Imagine two men, Dan and Tan. Dan and Tan are practically physical duplicates and are both gay Christians. Both of them have seriously reflected on how best to

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<sup>23</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.

<sup>24</sup>Belgau (2003)

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

reconcile their faith and their sexuality. Here's the stipulated difference. On the basis of this serious reflection Dan believes that the Bible forbids gay relationships and Tan does not. Consequently, while both have similar careers and social lives in the city of Chicago, Tan is married and Dan lives celibately.

If sexual orientation is at least partially grounded in dispositions to seek out and engage in sex, then the fact that both Dan and Tan are gay men means that they have a cluster of behavioral dispositions to have sex with men. Tan manifests these dispositions and Dan does not. The best explanation for why Dan does not is that he believes that it is wrong to have sex with men. Dan's belief *masks* Dan's disposition to have sex with men. Because this belief is an intrinsic feature of Dan, his sexual disposition is intrinsically masked. So intrinsic masks are possible.

Some might be dissatisfied with my diagnosis of this case. But before I address their reasons to be dissatisfied, let me present the second case.

Political lesbianism is a view that, in association with second-wave feminism, gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>26</sup> Speaking roughly, one primary commitment of political lesbianism is that women ought to refrain from having sexual relations with men. This obligation stems from the fact that such relations are oppressive. As the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group put it:

...Men are the enemy. Heterosexual women are collaborators with the enemy. All the good work that our heterosexual feminist sisters do for women is undermined by the counter-revolutionary activity they engage in with men. Being a heterosexual feminist is like being in the resistance in Nazi-occupied Europe where in the daytime you blow up a bridge, in the evening you rush to repair it. Take Women's Aid for example: women who live with men cannot tell battered women that survival without men is possible since they are not doing it themselves. Every woman who lives with or fucks a man helps to maintain the oppression of her sisters and hinders our struggle.<sup>27</sup>

Not everyone who ascribed to political lesbianism had sexual relationships with other women (though to be sure some did). Some women chose to live celibately. Either way, someone who is a political lesbian is committed to the belief that they must in service of political liberation

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<sup>26</sup>Political lesbianism is most strongly associated with the feminist separatism movement prominent during the 1960s, but it is not exclusive to that movement. In a 1992 issue of Ms. Magazine, feminist Rebecca Walker said: "So I write this as a plea to all women, especially the women of my generation: Let [Supreme Court Justice Clarence] Thomas' confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman's experience [i.e. Anita Hill's allegations] move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives."

<sup>27</sup>Press and Group (1981)

abstain from sex with men.

Here's the second case. Imagine two near-duplicate women, Helen and Ellen. Both are dedicated feminists who believe in the importance of living your politics. As a result, both left long-term relationships with men and moved to a separatist community in New York City. They both infrequently interact with men, typically in connection to their jobs. The stipulated difference between Helen and Ellen is that Ellen believes that having sex with men undermines women's liberation and Helen does not. Consequently, Ellen has not had any sexual encounters since she joined the community whereas Helen on occasion has sex with the men she meets.

If sexual orientation is at least partially grounded in dispositions to seek out and engage in sex, then the fact that both Helen and Ellen were in long-term relationships with men suggests that they have a cluster of behavioral dispositions to have sex with men.<sup>28</sup> Helen manifests these dispositions and Ellen does not. The best explanation for why Ellen does not is that she believes that it is wrong to have sex with men. Ellen's belief *masks* Ellen's disposition to have sex with men. Because this belief is an intrinsic feature of Ellen, her sexual disposition is intrinsically masked. So intrinsic masks are possible.

### 3.2 Disputing the cases

Now I will address some of the ways that someone might deny that these cases involve intrinsic masks.

I'll start with a technical objection. I presented two cases where it seems like what masks the behavior is a belief. But why think it's the belief that does the masking? According to Dan, what grounds the fact that having sex with men is wrong is God's will; according to Ellen what grounds the fact that having sex with men is wrong is the patriarchy. These are (alleged) realities external to the bearer of the disposition. Plausibly, both Dan and Ellen would have sex with men if God's will were different and the patriarchy were dismantled. If that's right, then it seems like their sexual orientations are masked, but externally so.

In response, I claim that God's will and the patriarchy are superficial masks at best. The mere fact that some thing can partially explain why a disposition fails to manifest doesn't entail that that

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<sup>28</sup>This is one circumstance where it would be controversial to definitively declare that Ellen is not a "true" lesbian. More on this later.

thing is a *true* mask. If the dispute regarding intrinsic masking is interesting at all there must be some sense in which we can distinguish between more or less explanatorily proximate interferers. It is true that if the patriarchy were dismantled then Ellen would feel free to have sex with men. But it is just as true that if Ellen came to believe that the patriarchy were dismantled then she would have sex with men. In fact, the better explanation for why Ellen would have sex if the patriarchy were dismantled would be that Ellen's belief about the oppressiveness of heterosexual sex would change. If Ellen were to mistakenly come to believe that the patriarchy had been dismantled, she would have sex with men. So it is the belief that is the true mask, not the external reality that the belief is about. *Mutatis mutandis* for Dan and his belief in the immorality of same-sex relations.

So the beliefs are the true masks. But here's another technical objection. Plausibly, beliefs have external content.<sup>29</sup> Two individuals could be molecule-for-molecule duplicates and yet have different beliefs. It thus seems like beliefs are not wholly internal. If that's right, then any time a belief is responsible for the masking of a disposition, we do not have an example of purely intrinsic masking.<sup>30</sup>

Even if beliefs have external content, beliefs aren't external in a way that threatens their status as intrinsic maskers. To see why, consider the following example. Recall the cat whose ability to stalk prey is masked by a noisy bell. Suppose that bell is made from Chinese tin. Now imagine a duplicate of that cat who wears a qualitatively identical bell made from Peruvian tin. Each bell has an externally determined property based on its source of material – even if they were molecule-for-molecule duplicates they would not share all of their properties. But it seems clear that this external determination does not impact the fact that the masking ability of the bell is intrinsic to the bell – it seems inappropriate to say that the cat's ability to stalk prey is masked, even partially, by China! So some externally determined properties do not impact the nature of masking. Thus, some properties do not threaten a thing's status as an intrinsic mask. I claim that among these non-threatening properties are the properties related to the external determination of the content of belief.

Here's one final technical objection. For sexual dispositions to be intrinsically masked, the masking agent must be intrinsic to the genuine bearer of the disposition. Consider an object, VB,

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<sup>29</sup>At a minimum, this includes cases like H<sub>2</sub>O and XYZ. See Putnam (1975).

<sup>30</sup>Thanks to Callie K. Phillips for raising this issue.

that is composed by a glass vase and some bubble wrap that is wrapped around the glass vase. If VB were dropped, it would not shatter. But it would be misleading to characterize this as a case of intrinsic masking. The genuinely fragile object is the glass vase; VB is at best derivatively fragile in virtue of having a part that is fragile. It is therefore more accurate to characterize this as a case where one of VB's parts (the bubble wrap) externally masks the manifestation of a disposition born by one of its other part (the glass vase). Something analogous might be true for people. Here's a sketch of one way the story might go. Suppose that a person is a sort of composite of sub-personal systems. Sexual appetite, like hunger, is governed by some sub-set of these sub-personal systems. But sexual appetite is constrained by other sub-personal systems, like those that govern beliefs. We shouldn't say that someone's belief that the food is spoiled masks their disposition to eat the food. So, too, we shouldn't say that someone's belief that sex of the relevant variety is immoral masks their disposition to have sex of the relevant variety.

Obviously, this objection rests on controversial conceptions of desires, beliefs, and agency.<sup>31</sup> But even setting aside that larger issue, the objection fails to target the specifics of sexual orientation. Both Dan and Helen are unlike VB. This is because they are the primary bearers of their sexual orientations and the associated sexual dispositions, not any of their parts. (I also think that Dan and Helen are the primary bearers of the beliefs that mask the manifestation of sexual behavior, but that is a more controversial claim that I do not need to defend here.) So, given that a belief is intrinsic to the individual who bears the belief, the objection fails to show that these are not genuine cases of intrinsic masking.<sup>32</sup>

Here's an objection more specific to the cases at hand: Dan and Ellen's situations do not involve intrinsic masking because each undergoes a change in sexual orientation. There are two ways this objection might be run.

First, suppose that Dan and Ellen's sexual orientations are not masked, but are rather reverse finked. Accordingly, they retain their sexual orientation for most of their lives. But whenever they are in a position to pursue someone, their newfound belief removes the disposition to have sex. If this explanation is the right one, then neither case would involve intrinsic masking.

The main problem with this objection is that it requires sexual orientation to be the sort of

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<sup>31</sup>See, *inter alia*, Stalnaker (1984); Schroeder (2004); Ashwell (2014).

<sup>32</sup>Thanks to Kris McDaniel and others for pushing this point.

feature that can be quickly gained or lost. Presumably, someone like Dan would occasionally be in sexually charged circumstances. If this explanation is to work, then, it must say that every time Dan finds himself in such a circumstance he changes his sexual orientation. But this is implausible. If sexual orientation can change it is the sort of change that happens at most a few times over the course of someone's life. It does not rapidly vacillate in coordination with who is in the room at any given hour of the day.

Suppose instead that Dan and Ellen's sexual orientations "permanently" change some time after acquiring the new belief. This explanation can be motivated by comparing it to an analogous explanation regarding non-sexual behavioral dispositions. Imagine someone who is irritable – call them Devon. Devon is irritable in virtue of the fact that they have a cluster of behavioral dispositions, including the disposition to lash out at others without justified provocation. But suppose that Devon comes to realize that their irritability is negatively impacting their ability to form deeply connective relationships. As a result, Devon decides to cultivate a more peaceful mentality. After substantial personal growth, Devon no longer lashes out, nor behaves in any characteristically irritable way. There are two possible explanations for what has happened to Devon: either Devon is no longer irritable or Devon's irritability is masked. The first explanation seems much more accurate; Devon seems to have lost the disposition to lash out without provocation. Thus, sometimes an individual can change their behavioral dispositions.

I'm sympathetic to the idea that an individual's sexual orientation and underlying sexual dispositions can change. But I do not think that this happens in my two cases. I think this is clearly correct in the Christian case. Dan is still gay even after he acquires a belief that motivates him to refrain from same-sex relations. This is because men in circumstances similar to Dan's can and do wholeheartedly affirm their identities as gay men. To say that Dan has changed his sexual orientation is to say that Dan is surprisingly mistaken about his sexual orientation.

Yes, individuals can be mistaken about their sexual orientation. But it's implausible to think that such a mistake is systematically made by men in Dan's situation. Such men have thought deeply about their sexuality, often at a significant psychological cost. While every individual in this situation is different, plausibly many men in this situation think that their lives would be substantially easier were they straight or asexual. These are not the sorts of circumstances that lend themselves to mistaken self-identification. So we should be doubtful that they are systematically

making such a mistake.

Ellen's case is more contentious. This is because some think that Ellen's commitment comes with a genuine change in sexual orientation, including some women that have in fact done what Ellen did. That is, when Ellen comes to believe that heterosexual sex is oppressive and decides to reject it, she genuinely becomes a lesbian. If they are right, then Ellen has lost any sexual orientation that might be masked, and therefore her case is not one that involves intrinsic masking.

Is an individual's sexual orientation determined solely by facts related to sexuality, or is it partially determined by socio-political commitments? This is a question that can be resolved only after we have a full account of sexual orientation. Regardless, it seems to me that Ellen is unlike Devon. I do not deny that Ellen has undergone a profound change. But I am doubtful that it is the sort of change that significantly impacts the biological features that figure into the grounds of her sexual orientation. In other words, Ellen's socio-political commitments have not removed her underlying sexual dispositions. Therefore, Ellen retains but fails to manifest the disposition to have sex with men.

I'll address one final objection. Suppose that both Dan and Ellen retain their sexual dispositions. Nevertheless, their circumstances may not demonstrate the possibility of intrinsic masks because the required stimulus conditions for these dispositions are not met.

According to dispositionalism, sexual orientation is grounded in certain behavioral dispositions. Which dispositions are these? Recall that a central motivation for dispositionalism is its ability to handle circumstances where an individual engages in sexual activity that, intuitively, ought not to inform that individual's sexual orientation – for example, an incarcerated man who over the course of a decade in prison has sex with another incarcerated man exactly once. The dispositions that determine sexual orientation must be ones that are *not* manifested in these circumstances.

To determine whether Dan and Ellen are in similar situations, we need to more explicitly discuss the stimulus conditions for the sexual dispositions that ground their sexual orientation. There are at least two distinct dispositionalist approaches available. Following Edward Stein, we might think that the dispositions that matter are those that are manifested under *ideal circumstances*, where “there are no forces to prevent or discourage a person from acting on his or her [sexual] desires, that is, when there is sexual freedom and a variety of appealing sexual partners available” (Stein (1999): 45). Clearly, incarceration is a force that curtails sexual freedom. Thus, Stein's account

correctly explains why the man's one-off encounter is irrelevant. Alternatively, we might follow Robin Dembroff in thinking that the dispositions that matter are those that are manifested under *ordinary conditions*. Such ordinary conditions would correspond to our everyday operative concept of sexual orientation. For example, we tend to make ascriptions only when we think that the individual is willing and able to sexually engage with others and has a reasonable diversity of potential sexual partners.<sup>33</sup> Thus we do not think that a priest or an island loner are asexual.

Arguably, on the ideal conditions approach the relevant stimulus conditions are not met in either Dan or Ellen's case. Consequently, on that approach I have failed to establish the possibility of intrinsic masks. But I think that dispositionalists ought to adopt the ordinary conditions approach. This is because the ideal conditions approach involves conditions that have been met extremely rarely, if ever. (When was the last time you found yourself sexually free and with a variety of appealing and available sexual partners?) Presumably, though, the relevant conditions are regularly met. Our evidence regarding people's sexual orientations is not exhausted by speculations about what would happen. Our evidence also includes actual observations of what people actually do.

So what ordinary condition might the denier of intrinsic masks offer? The most plausible candidate condition in my opinion is the condition that the individual lacks any moral inhibitions regarding the sexual activity under consideration.<sup>34</sup> Dan and Ellen both fail to meet this condition. Dan's moral inhibition is rooted in his belief that same-sex relations are contrary to God's will. Ellen's moral inhibition is rooted in her belief that heterosexual sex is oppressive. Thus, the stimulus conditions are not met and these cases do not involve intrinsic masking.

I think that it is a mistake to include this condition regarding moral inhibition. This is because we often make judgments on people's sexual orientation on the basis of behavior that is laden with moral concern. Straightforward cases of coercion are, of course, rightly excluded. But there are many real-life circumstances where the individuals involved are to varying degrees unsure about the act under consideration. Consider teenagers who decide to have sex for the first time knowing that their parents would disapprove of the act. Some teenagers would plausibly be conflicted about their decision. Yet it would be unusual to conclude that the relevant behavioral disposition has not manifested. Similarly, it's not rare for adults in complex power relations to find themselves in bed

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<sup>33</sup>Dembroff (2016), especially 16.

<sup>34</sup>Thanks to Robin Dembroff for raising this point.

together. To be sure, in some such cases the dynamics are severe enough to distort their value as evidence toward someone's sexual orientation. But there is a sizable gray area where the individuals involved might have legitimate moral concern. In some cases they might nevertheless consensually choose to have sex; in others they might not. This gray area would be wrongly excluded by the moral inhibition condition. It seems – to me anyway – that this is precisely the area to which Dan and Ellen's cases belong.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for the possibility of intrinsic masks on the basis of realistic scenarios involving sexual orientation. Sometimes, individuals refrain from sexual behavior because they believe it is immoral. While these cases can be interpreted in ways that do not entail intrinsic masking, I have pointed out the ways in which they lead to implausible results. Thus, the best explanation is that sexual orientation can be intrinsically masked.

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