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Sexual Orientation, Sex, and Gender

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Nearly all, if not all, people have *sexual orientations*,^[1] commonly understood to refer to one's sexual attraction to members of their same or opposite sex.^[2] What we can call the "Orthodox Account"^[3] is that there are three sexual orientations: gay, straight, and bi.

These categories, however, might not exhaust all the possible sexual orientations: e.g., there are men attracted to transwomen who have not had genital surgery; people attracted to gender-ambiguous people; women attracted to transmen; and more.^[4]

This essay focuses on how examples like these illustrate the interplay between sex and gender, and how this interplay raises doubts about the Orthodox Account of sexual orientation.^[5]

1. Sex and Gender

Sex and gender are metaphysical and moral minefields, especially gender. Roughly, *sex* refers to the biological differences between men and women (including primary and secondary sex characteristics), and *gender* refers to the psychological, emotional, or social roles that are typically based on the sex differences.

While gender encompasses various aspects of someone's identity, crucial for our purposes is *gender presentation*, because sexual attraction is usually based on appearance, and gender presentation is an important part of someone's appearance.^[6]

Gender presentation is important also because on its basis one forms beliefs about the sex of the person to whom one is attracted: e.g., John, who is gay, meets Robert, whom he finds attractive. This is both because of Robert's physical appearance and Robert's gender presentation as a man, on which John forms

the belief that Robert is biologically male (a cisman).^[7]

Beliefs about the sex of the person to whom one is attracted usually play an important role in sexual attraction. This is because sexual attraction typically (though not only) takes primary and secondary sex characteristics as its basis and, often, its target or object.^[8] The difference between basis and object is best seen in the context of love:^[9] Juana loves Roberta because Roberta makes Juana happy. The basis or reason for Juana's love—*why* she loves—is that Roberta makes her happy. But the object of her love—*what* she loves—is Roberta herself.

So John is attracted to Robert *because*, in part, he believes that Robert is male, and Robert's sexual parts are (some of) the *objects* of John's attraction.

2. Sexual Orientation, Sex, and Gender

Suppose, however, that Robert is a transman who has had only top (no genital) surgery. What happens when John finds out? Well, his belief that Robert's sex matches his gender comes to the fore and is falsified. As a result, he might lose his sexual attraction to Robert. But he might not.

This raises the question: is sexual orientation based on sex, gender, or both? To answer, let's consider the contrasts between the views of Robin Dembroff and Kathleen Stock.

Dembroff has recently argued for a conception of sexual orientation that they call "Bidimensional Dispositionalism."^[10] The "bi" in the name refers to the two dimensions of sex and gender.^[11]

On this view, one is sexually oriented to others on the basis of a particular combination of sex and gender. To Dembroff, this is necessary given that people are frequently sexually attracted to individuals with particular primary and secondary sex characteristics, *and* that there is a growing number of people who are attracted to transgender individuals.^[12]

On this view, one can be attracted to only cisgender women, to only post-op transwomen, to both, and so on. What is crucial is that because sexual attraction "tracks both gender- and sex- attraction," it "tracks various combinations of these attractions," including being attracted only on the basis of sex (regardless of gender presentation) or gender (regardless of sex).^[13]

By contrast, Stock considers sexual orientation to cause attraction to people of a particular sex.^[14] She argues that gender presentation or expression is not usually on its own an object of attraction, because attraction to gender presentation is “inevitably inflected with prior understandings of the Sex that the person is and what is stereotypical for that Sex.”^[15] Even if John is attracted to Cliff, a highly effeminate man, male effeminacy is different from female effeminacy, such that John’s attraction is underpinned by his beliefs about Cliff’s sex.

Stock concludes that gender as the object of sexual desire, regardless of beliefs about sex, is not widespread, so there is no reason to believe that the Orthodox Account is wrong.^[16]

3. Further Clarifications

One issue between Bidimensional Dispositionalism and the Orthodox Account is the extent to which each reflects the reality of sexual orientations—for example, how many people do have sexual orientations to, say, genderqueer persons compared to those with the “orthodox” sexual orientations? I set this issue aside because it is (partly) an empirical question and one in need of much data.^[17]

Another issue is which view is more politically useful or accommodates current political and social goals.^[18] I also set this question aside because political goals can vary and clash.^[19]

Instead, I end by returning to the distinction between the *object* and the *basis* of sexual attraction. If John sexually desires Robert, then Robert himself, alive and embodied, is the object of John’s sexual attraction.^[20] Parts of Robert (e.g., genitalia, thighs) are also objects of sexual attraction.^[21] Is Robert’s gender presentation an object of attraction? It’s unclear that it is, though clearly it is a common basis for someone’s attraction to another.

The general point is that if sexual orientation is a concept that revolves around the object, rather than the basis, of sexual attraction, and if it turns out that gender (or sex) is usually the basis rather than the object of attraction, this might help settle some of the questions about the connections between sexual orientation, on the one hand, and sex and gender, on the other.

4. Conclusion

Both gender and sex are crucial for understanding sexual orientation. But how and in what ways are questions in need of answers. The answers will be

difficult to attain given the need for more empirical data, for clearer conceptual work, and the charged politics of it all.

Notes

[1] Asexual people, who have no sexual attraction to anyone, might not have sexual orientations, although this is not the case if asexuality is also a sexual orientation. See Bogaert (2015).

[2] The language of “same” and “opposite sex” is part of a popular view of sexual orientation, so it should not be taken to imply the non-existence of intersex people.

[3] The name is from Stock (2019, 295). Stock includes other elements in the orthodox view, including that it refers to the sex of the person with the orientation: a lesbian is a *woman* who is attracted to women. Depending on future empirical and philosophical findings, the Orthodox Account might need to change its language from “same and opposite sex” to something like “same and other sexes.”

[4] Transwomen with no genital surgery are people who were born male, have developed female breasts through treatment, but who have not altered their male genitalia. Transmen are people who were born female but who transitioned, medically or not, to become men. A gender-ambiguous person is someone who adopts an identity that has no clear gender (so they could be bigender or all-gender).

[5] Other ways to question the Orthodox Account’s view on the number of sexual orientations are by asking whether there are orientations for age, for non-human animals, and for dead human beings, for example, since it is not obvious that sex or gender must be the only bases of sexual orientation and that some people might be attracted to things regardless of their sex and gender.

Questions about the number of sexual orientations are also motivated by pushing against the distinction between *sexual orientation* and *sexual preferences*: the former takes a type of sex or gender as its object (women), and the latter takes specific aspects of that type as its object (blonde or skinny women). The Orthodox Account would consider a man’s attraction to young boys (or older women) a *preference*, but one can deny this and think of it as a *sexual orientation*, though one that takes age-sex as its object. See Wilkerson (2013) for discussion of what makes a sexual attraction an orientation as opposed to a preference.

[6] See Giles (2015, 6-25) for why sexual attraction is based on appearance. By “appearance” I mean primarily physical appearance, but physical appearance is also tied to mannerisms (gesticulation, way of talking), which themselves can enhance (or detract from, depending on the case) the attraction. Mannerisms are also part of gender presentation and are, in this respect, diverse. For example, Robert can gender present not only as a man, but also as effeminate or masculine; or he can gender present as a man by wearing male sports attire or a suit.

[7] A cisman (or a ciswoman) is someone whose gender matches their sex. Note that John need not use the word “cisman” (indeed, outside academic circles, the use of “cis” is not very common). One is not usually aware of this belief formation, which can occur quickly. But when there is a perceived mismatch between one’s sex and one’s gender the belief formation might become conscious.

[8] Giles (2008, ch. 4).

[9] See Soble (1990, 4 and *passim*).

[10] Dembroff (2016). A couple of other philosophers, especially Wilkerson (2013), have raised doubts similar to Dembroff’s about the Orthodox Account.

[11] One crucial aspect of Bidimensional Dispositionalism is that it does not include a reference to the sex or gender of the person with the orientation, an inclusion that is found in the Orthodox Account. For example, a man and a woman attracted to other men would have the same sexual orientation on Bidimensional Dispositionalism (but different ones on the Orthodox Account).

[12] Dembroff (2016).

[13] Dembroff (2016, 17; 38).

[14] Stock defends another part of the Orthodox Account, which is its reference to the sex of the person with the sexual orientation (2019, 295). It is important that a gay man is a *man* who is attracted to other men.

[15] Stock (2019, 304).

[16] Stock (2019, 306).

[17] “Partly” because conceptual issues are also present: how are we to conceptualize what a genderqueer person is, not to mention other new genders that have recently arrived on the social scene? The empirical studies are also paltry. See

Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski (2012) and Morandini, Blaszczyński, and Dar-Nimrod (2017).

[18] Both Dembroff and Stock provide political reasons for adopting their respective views of sexual orientations. Dembroff (2016, 7-10), for example, argues that their view undermines the assumption of cisheterosexuality (the view that non-cis and non-hetero orientations are deviant), while Stock (2019, 307-312) argues that the Orthodox Account is important for addressing various areas (e.g., reproductive medicine, the criminalization of same-sex behavior) that affect, respectively, heterosexual women and lesbians.

[19] I am also somewhat skeptical of analyzing and defining concepts based on social and political goals—what is sometimes called “ameliorative reasoning” (see Haslanger [2012, Pt. III, esp. chs. 13 & 14])—given that such goals can clash and be the product of (potentially fashionable) trends in thinking.

[20] Unless John is a necrophile, a dead Robert would not normally be an object of sexual attraction to him.

[21] Whether non-physical parts, such as someone’s intelligence and accent, can be objects of sexual attraction is more debatable, though they clearly enhance or detract from the attraction to physical parts. See Giles (2015, 13-14) and Nagel (1969).

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