Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case

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Abstract

This paper develops a view of human sexuality in the context of an understanding that human beings are, by virtue of their ontology itself (i.e., their essential being), agentic in a radical and comprehensive way. Human agency, as developed in this essay, manifests in its most fundamental expression as the constant "taking up" of ideas, meanings, feelings, and possibilities, and concomitantly, in the constant "giving of self over to" those same ideas, meanings, feeling, and possibilities to a non-negligible degree. Thus, "taking up," and "giving ourselves over" constitute both the substance of human agentic action, and also the origins, reasons, and justifications that are essential characteristics of any real agentic action. The paper applies this new understanding in the context of human sexuality. In contemporary social science explanations and theories of sexuality there is no form of explanation more common than that which invokes invisible abstractions presumed to exert real causal power over human actions, thoughts, feelings, and meanings. This paper offers an alternative understanding of human sexuality as inherently agentic, thus freeing it from the presumed causal efficacy of powerful, invisible abstractions and thereby preserving its humanity by insuring the possibility of always doing and of being otherwise.

***Keywords*:** moral agency, embodiment, sexuality, abstractionism, intentionality

Human sexuality, as a universal and widely studied phenomenon, seems to hold a special status among human phenomena, in that it is widely held to be basically biologically determined (LeVay et al., 2019). However, at the same time, it is also widely held to be one of the most important and meaningful of all activities in which human beings seem purposefully to engage — that is, it seems to be an importantly agentic matter (Albanesi, 2010). In short, paradoxically, a great many people defend the legitimacy of radical individual freedom of action in sexual matters while also considering sexuality to be fundamentally biologically based, or otherwise

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driven by abstract causal forces. Indeed, Wilkerson (2009) notes that the "standard view" in contemporary society and social science is that sexual orientation is "an enduring, fairly stable desire oriented toward a particular gender" that is "thought to be a constant and underlying feature of a person's make up," while sexual identity is "a self-consciously direct project that a person develops around this orientation" (p. 97). However, Wilkerson (2009) also notes that this distinction often disappears in many of our discussions about sexuality because "such talk often runs orientation and identity together" (p. 98).

The obvious contradiction between determinism and agentic origins speaks to both the importance attached to sexuality in our culture and to a persistent and enduring, possibly even self-deceived, confusion about its nature and meaning. And, insofar as the social sciences contribute significantly to the larger culture's understanding of human sexuality, the contradiction we note also attests to a fundamental incoherence in contemporary social science accounts of sexuality (see Eberstadt, 2019; Grant, 2015; Soh, 2020; Trueman, 2020). This paper will present an analysis of both abstract-nature and agentic approaches to understanding sexuality in the hope of shedding some new light on the phenomena, as well as bringing some clarity (by way of contrast) to the oft-muddled accounts present in contemporary psychological theory and practice relevant to sexual matters. We note at the outset that this task is complicated significantly because the language of sexuality — scholarly as well as common conversational language — is constantly shifting as people insist on certain definitions and usages to support their particular theories or political agendas, and, thereby, "capture the discourse" on sexuality for themselves (see Kuby, 2015). We will try to note these language problems along the way, and try not to let them derail the analysis.

Sexuality as Abstraction

Simply stated, the following analysis aims to establish that human sexuality is best understood as embodied agentic action. As such, human sexuality is neither reducible to underlying biological or natural causes, nor to the effects of powerful invisible abstractions — either of which would turn sexuality into a type of natural event rather than a meaningful human action. However, our claim here does not entail the somewhat common but conceptually flawed claim that sexuality, as genuinely human agentic action, is a matter of sexual behaviors, desires, orientations, or identities being freely chosen from among alternatives by an independent (free) rational will. This is to say, in order to support our claim that sexuality is agentic, human agency itself must be understood in a different (dare we say better) way, one that does not simply reflect a view of agency as "radical choice" (Taylor, 1985), or what is often termed "libertarian free will" (Clarke, 2003). Thus, a major purpose of this essay is to offer a new account of human agency, an account that can make sense of agentic human sexuality without succumbing to the temptations of either reductionism or radical free choice.

One major conclusion of our analysis is that the term "sexuality" does not really designate or refer to any "real" thing, category, or object. "Sexuality" is an abstraction, a general idea about context and meaning of all sorts of thoughts, observations, and experiences related to sex. And ideas — as thoughts, observations, and experiences — have their being only in the acts of thinking, observing, and experiencing. Such acts are real, but they produce ideas, and a generalized idea is an abstraction, not a category of real things. Thus, we contend, the term "sexuality" has, in fact, no real referent, no condition or entity, no "thing" to which the word directly or adequately corresponds. Rather, as we will show, "sexuality" is more fruitfully understood as a description of what people do, say, or think, and not as the name of something people possess, or something that is operating within people or upon people and causing them to do what they do, or to desire how and what they desire. This view stands in stark contrast to the prevailing consensus in the professional and academic areas of contemporary social science, as well as in the larger social and moral context of modern Western self-understanding (see Eberstadt, 2019; Lehmiller, 2018; Trueman, 2020).

Indeed, the current intellectual fashion is to offer explanation and understanding of virtually all human actions, including "sexual" activity, in

terms of the operations of powerful abstractions, invisible to the eye, and discernable by only those whose minds have been educated to "see" and understand the operations of such invisible forces, as well as to understand themselves and others in those terms (Toomela, 2008; Williams, 2018; Williams et al., 2021). For example, as Lehmiller (2018) asserts in a popular introductory text on the psychology of human sexuality, "As a starting point, it is useful to acknowledge that every single sexual act is the result of several powerful forces acting upon one or more persons" (p. 3). And, he continues, "Whether sex occurs at any given moment depends on which forces are strongest at the time" (p. 3). It is the appointed task of the educated and critically discerning social science researcher or practitioner to detect and identify these powerful (though subtle and abstract) causal forces — the operations of which the individual him- or herself is almost certainly unaware — in order to fully comprehend and explain the variety of human sexual desires, acts, and relationships that make up what we refer to as "sexuality."[1]

Perhaps the best known of all such abstractions applied to the understand-ing or explanation of sexuality are those drawn from the psychoanalytical theory of Sigmund Freud. Such abstractions include the "unconscious mind," "libido," "id, "ego," "superego," and, indeed, the whole notion of "sexual drives" (see, e.g., Freud, 1949, 1961, 1962). Without recounting the intellectual history in detail, we will simply note that this sort of explanatory tack — i.e., a reliance on abstractions to do the conceptual heavy lifting of explanation and understanding — is one inherited mostly from the European philosophy of the late 17th and early to mid-20th centuries. Its line of descent can be traced from the Enlightenment materialism and mechanism of figures such as Thomas Hobbes (Gantt and Williams, 2021) and Isaac Newton (Gantt and Williams, 2014), the Romanticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Trueman, 2020), the positivistic science of August Comte (Singer, 2005), and the "absolute idealism" of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, especially as manifest in more recent times in Marxism, Cultural Marxism, and Critical Theories of all stripes (Hayek, 1952). One of the most influential uses of abstractions to explain sexuality and sexual behavior originated in the "Third Force" psychology that developed in the middle decades of the 20th century, with its heavy reliance on concepts such as "needs," the "authentic self," and "orientations" (Gantt and Thayne, 2017). More contemporary treatments of human sexuality tend to draw at will from the full gamut of explanatory modes currently offered within the human sciences: positivism, structuralism, behaviorism, humanism, evolutionary approaches, neurophysiology, social psychological and post-modern social constructivist and critical theories (see, e.g., DeLamater and Plante, 2015; Naples, 2020) all of which rely heavily on the explanatory power of reified abstractions, and do so uncritically.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong, in principle, with using an abstract term like "sexuality" in common conversation. Effective communication in general would be very difficult without the use of such abstractions. One could use that word in any number of casual conversations, and everyone would know what was being talked about. However, "sexuality" becomes more than merely a conversational descriptive term when it is applied as the name of a metaphysical category of "things," or set of supposedly real things, or real types of persons, or forces that "push" and "pull" persons to do or feel certain things, whether from the inside, the outside, or some combination of the two. When used in such a way, "sexuality" begins to take on an existence of its own that is independent of conversational or descriptive narratives about agentic human actions, be-

[1] One is reminded of Stanley Milgram's famous description of the nature of social psychological inquiry into human action, a description that can be justifiably applied to most contemporary social scientific research and theory. Milgram wrote: "The implicit model for experimental work is that of the person influenced by social forces while often believing in his or her own independence of them. It is thus a social psychology of the reactive individual, the recipient of forces and pressures emanating from outside oneself. The social world does not impinge on us as a set of discrete variables, but as a vibrant, continuous stream of events whose constituent parts can be dissected only through analysis, and whose effects can be most compellingly demonstrated through the logic of experiments. Indeed, the creative claim of social psychology lies in its capacity to reconstruct varied types of social experience in an experimental format, to clarify and make visible the operation of obscure social forces so that they may be explored in terms of the language of cause and effect" (Milgram, 1992, p. xix).

coming instead a label for types of actions, or, as the lines of analysis proceed, a name for a real cause of those actions. This sort of reification can be seen in the context of "sexuality," in references to such things and categories as "homo-sexuality," "hetero-sexuality," "bi-sexuality," or "pan-sexuality." In other words, such terms have ceased being mere descriptors of certain sexual acts a person engages in, and instead have become the explanation or reason why the person engages in those acts. Additionally, once this initial reification of sexuality has occurred, other abstractions are often and quickly drawn into the explanatory vocabulary to name more presumably real things and causes that are part of "sexuality," for example, "sexual needs," "sexual orientation," "sexual drives," "sexual identity," and so on. In conversations informed by contemporary thought in the social sciences, "sexuality" is almost always, and usually without reservation, transformed from being simply a useful abstraction for describing a broad category of human actions into a name for real things, either types of persons, or some invisible abstract things with causal efficacy in sexually relevant human actions.[2]

The crucial question about this sort of rhetorical and theoretical drift — wherein descriptions of actions are turned into real things, rather than remaining mere descriptions of actions (i.e., becoming nouns instead of adjectives) — is whether a category mistake has been made. In other words, by what new discovery or influx of knowledge do these reified descriptors ("sexuality," "orientation," etc.) show us that they are more than simply innocent descriptions of what persons do, but are in fact really the names of actual categories to which persons are to be assigned, or names of real, powerful, invisible causes of what people do relative to sex, and how and why they do it. In short, the question is, have we mistaken the abstract force for the human intentional act, and vice versa? Our answer, as you will see, is a resounding "yes!"

Of Agency and Abstraction

One of the salient effects of the reification of abstractions is the loss of genuine human agency from our understandings and explanations of our humanity and our actions. The absence of any compelling sense or understanding of agency in human affairs results in the loss of meaning, purpose, and the possibility of genuine proactive, self-initiated change (see Williams and Gantt, 2020, 2021). This, in turn, profoundly affects our understanding and explanation of sexual activity of all sorts (e.g., behavioral, cognitive, emotive, moral). With this in mind, then, this essay will focus first on how reifying abstractions obviates genuine human agency and how our current understanding of human agency is inadequate as an explanation of human agency as it is actually lived and experienced. We will explore some consequences of this inadequate thinking — both about agency and about sexuality — for our understanding of our humanity. We will move then to introduce an alternative understanding of human agency that overcomes the current problems and discuss the benefits of our alternative view of sexuality as agentic acts.

Our experience suggests that in the technical language of the social sciences and clinical practice, and even in the language of everyday life, reified abstractions have largely captured the imagination of a great many people, and, thus, the general discourse about human sexuality is suffused with reified abstractions. One result of this is that people actually do think of themselves — including when it comes to thinking about sex, sexual behavior, and gender — as being caused or determined (or at least heavily pressed upon) by any number of causes and forces that are outside their control, or certainly not readily subject to their agency (see Hess et al., 2014). These occult, abstract causes are given great deference in conversations, both professional and casual. It seems odd to have such confidence in, and give such deference to, the supposed importance and power of abstract things when the only evidence of their existence (i.e., that they have legitimate ontological status) — indeed the only form in which they can confidently be said to exist — is that they have

[2]For a fuller analysis of how this tendency toward reification in psychology reflects a "metaphysic of things," as well as a discussion of the philosophical issues and consequences involved, see Williams (1992).

been thought of. If we were to assign a real ontological status to them, it must surely only be that they exist as thoughts produced and expressed by human beings. And, very importantly, the only way they can continue to exist is by continuing to be thought. Even if one were to object to this conclusion by suggesting that things like "identities" or "orientations" can also be felt; that is, they can be experienced as "feelings," as subjective emotional states — feelings are always feelings about something, or toward something — otherwise they are merely bodily, diffuse, inarticulate, and of no effect above the level of general perturbance. Thus, the only way a feeling can have an effect on a person is for it to find expression, ultimately, as a thought, an idea.[3] As we will argue below, this very ontology (i.e., as idea) confirms that these supposed abstract causes, as thoughts and ideas, are in reality, themselves, meaningful agentic acts. This is the conclusion to which the following analysis takes us.

What this means is that we have come to think of ourselves largely as "having" an identity, including a sexual identity, instead of just being the person that our embodiment, our history, our kinship, and our experience belong to. Claiming to have an "identity" is redundant, and provides no new understanding or insight, it simply renames, as an abstract "thing," what is already the totality of our experience and agentic living. Such an abstract, reified "identity" seems from this reifying perspective to be in some way responsible for things about us which we must either accept, or which we must try (sometimes with some desperation) to control. Doing so, however, results in a highly unnatural split of our personhood such that we become both an "identity" and a "person" apart from that identity, someone who must either fulfill or oppose that identity for reasons about which the two parts might strongly disagree. This situation is as odd as it is difficult, and one that for an LDS Christian surely makes no sense. For what purpose would a loving Father and God create us and place us in a situation as part of an opportunity for moral development, but do so in a condition in which we have a fundamental split in our being such that war within ourselves is basically inevitable, and being true to our eternal nature is, by design, ambiguous and fraught with contradiction?[4] The reasonable response to this question would be, of course, that a truly loving God would not do such things. Indeed, we have some scriptural assurance on the matter. For example, we read in the Epistle of James: "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed" (James 1:13-14). If we take the liberty of defining "his own lust" as "his own agentic thoughts and ideas," the essence of our agentic analysis becomes clearer.

That a loving Heavenly Father does create or arrange such conflicts for us is, we suggest, a misconception rooted in the secular discourse about ourselves and about sexuality that we described above, and is not rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ or the plan of salvation. The more reasonable answer, we believe, is that as human beings we do not "have" any such thing as an "identity," certainly not one that stands apart from ourselves as we live, think, believe, and become, and, thus, our identity is largely of our own making, not hovering somewhere waiting to be discovered, realized, or obeyed. Rather, it is a description of what we do, think, and feel, rather than an occult and independent abstract causal force or entity somehow working within us or outside us from somewhere or other. We can find no scriptural reference to any "designer conflicts" or "designer weaknesses" crafted by our Father in Heaven that He might somehow have implanted in us (perhaps within an identity). In fact, there is scriptural evidence to the contrary. In Ether 12:27, for example, we find:

> And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for

[3] Though we will not develop the analysis here, this approach to understanding emphasizes the fact that human thoughts, feelings, and actions are radically holistic; every feeling is about something (accurately or not) and thus is intimately connected to a thought, and actions have thoughts and feelings already inherent in them.

[4] And lest one wants to simply claim that this odd situation merely arises because of naïve religiosity, we might ask of the non-believer what interest Nature could have in creating such a conflict of identities, why "evolutionary wisdom" would dictate such a struggle, or how and why "reproductive advantage" would accrue from it?

> all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.

It is important to note here that both uses of the term "weakness" in this passage are in the singular, which may indicate two things important to the point we are making here. First, it does not seem to be the case that the Lord handcrafts for each of us a set of weakness-es or temptations (plural), but rather that mortality — a state of weakness itself — provides an adequate opportunity for all moral agents to accomplish their purpose, and has been and will be overcome by Jesus Christ unto redemption. And second, as noted above, God is the source of redemption, not the source of the problem. Indeed, it is not clear exactly how God might actually become the source of a weakness in anyone's character. In order to do so, it would seem that God would have to first create an identity, or an orientation, a drive, or a particular "weakness" or set of "weaknesses" since these things seem to be made of ideas, such as experiences, memories, interests, habits, decisions, and emotive responses all of which are the products of our individual living and acting and reacting to the world we live in. How could God fashion something like an "identity," or an "orientation," and in what form could he "store" it, or where could he store it, while waiting for the right time to "give" it to someone or allow them to discover it? And because such things are very complex and context rich, "giving" such an abstraction would surely involve something more than whispering in an ear or triggering a thought in the mind. The whole process seems to be fraught with severe conceptual difficulties sufficient to suggest that it just cannot be the case. This position seems to make a loving Father and God simultaneously the designer of what might damn us, and the source of what might save us. Despite the fact that it might possess some mystical attraction that appeals to some with a taste for the absolutely numinous, the position fails as Latter-day Saint Christian doctrine.

Once again, scripture offers a clearer way of understanding how God "gives" us moral agency. As Alma the Younger taught:

> Wherefore, he gave commandments unto men, they having . . . [become] as gods, knowing good from evil, placing themselves in a state to act, or being placed in a state to act according to their wills and pleasures, whether to do evil or to do good. (Alma 12:31)

Carefully reading this passage teaches us that God "gives" us agency by simply telling us what is true or good and putting us in a state to act according to our wills. This notion is further reinforced in Latter-day scripture where we learn of another sense in which God "gives" us agency:

> Behold, I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself; and I gave unto him commandment, but . . . my commandments are spiritual; they are not natural nor temporal, neither carnal nor sensual. (Doctrine and Covenants 29:35)

In other words, one meaning of God's "giving" us something spiritually relevant is his "allowing" us to act agentically. So, on the one hand, it seems that He does not "give" us agency in the sense that we are missing some "thing" and He gives it to us — which makes sense since our agency consists of our being the kind of beings who constantly act and create, morally, conceptually, physically, and spiritually. But he does allow us to live agentically. By the same token, then, identities, orientations, propensities, attractions, tendencies, and lusts are not the sorts of things God "gives" us, as particular weaknesses to be overcome by the exertion of individual will. Indeed, such things do not seem to be the kind of things even God could give us. Rather, they are the sorts of things that we as agents readily do (i.e., create for ourselves, as God allows us to live out our lives agentically). And, in terms of our wrestle with identities, orientations, attractions, and such, it is our fundamental human agency that is both the way in and the way out — with God's help.

In summary, then, our larger (psychologically-informed) secular culture inclines us to think we are subject to powerful abstractions such as sexual drives, desires, attractions, identities, and orientations that have to be dealt with, controlled, ac-

cepted, or embraced and indulged, or even celebrated. This understanding is often so pervasive and unquestioned that it may not even occur to us that such things in fact do not exist — except as invented descriptions of what we, as individual human agents, actively think, feel, and do. The category mistake we mentioned above is that we put all of these sexual things in a category of "real things" exercising some power over us, when they are in truth just terms that describe how we are actively engaging as human agents in the world of which sexually relevant thoughts, actions, and feelings are a part. In a word, all these things are really descriptions of stuff we do; they are not things that do stuff to us. This is the fundamental claim of this essay.

Change and Fluidity

One objection to the entire line of analysis developed in the previous section might be that it is irrelevant because, according to a competing analysis, those just-named abstractions taken to be definitive of sexuality are not really firm categories because sexuality itself is "fluid." However, suggesting that sexuality is "fluid" opens some insightful possibilities viz-a-viz our main proposition that sexuality — when understood properly — might really be, in some important ways, agentic (Diamond, 2008). However, it must be kept in mind that fluidity in the context of sexuality can be conceived of in at least two ways. First, some might contend that sexuality is fluid in that people can move from one ontologically real category to another, essentially being one kind of sexual being, and then becoming another kind of sexual being (Hoffman-Fox, 2017). In terms of abstract sexual things, such as identities, orientations, drives, and so forth, this is a difficult proposition because there is no developed sense of how abstract laws, principles, concepts, structures, variables and such things can actually morph to become different abstractions. By their very nature, and in keeping with the role they play in social scientific explanations, abstractions are generally taken to be stable and unambiguous, and, thus, not subject to change or even extinction. This presumed stability and lack of ambiguity are what undergird the usefulness of abstractions as (presumed) scientific explanations. In the case of abstractions related to sexuality, such as identity, orientation, preference, attractions, and any number of others, research has not been able to provide stable, consensual, validated measures or definitions that can bring respect and scientific validity to the psychological study of human sexuality (see Sell, 1997, 2007; Wolff et al., 2017).

Second, this proposition of fluidity is difficult to defend if sexuality is held to be exclusively or entirely biologically based. The difficulty stems from the fact that there seem to be very few, if any, physical organisms that can be first one thing and then another. Even in the interesting case of insect metamorphosis where a butterfly emerges from a chrysalis as a butterfly after having emerged from the egg as a caterpillar, it is possible to trace a single organism through each of the various stages of development. At no point does the organism become a different organism. If insects had identities, the organism's identity would not change; if we had named the caterpillar "John," for example, then we could still be sure that the butterfly it became is still also John. Only the form John took has changed — which is what is implied in the term morph in "metamorphosis;" it is a changing of shape. There is, however, nothing in human life that even approaches metamorphosis, and when we consider that human beings are also possessed of consciousness, self-reflection, evaluative powers, memory, and historicity, it becomes obvious that our selfhood, our very ipseity,[5] is not ontologically fluid. Conscious self-awareness, coupled with meaningful historicity, makes it virtually impossible — barring some major physiological injury or other aberration — that we could ever meaningfully claim that who and what we ontologically are is fluid in any substantive ontological way.[6]

There is, however, a sense of "fluidity" that

[5]Essential selfhood or "self-ness," the quality of being what one is as distinct from anyone or anything else.

[6]If we could actually become someone or something else, our salvation history would be very difficult to define or understand. Whom did the Father send here to undergo a moral test? Who actually underwent that test? And, if one were to actually receive salvation, what would happen if one was to "morph" again? In such a world, what possible meaning could "repentance" even have? Thinking of human beings in such a way severely threatens the possibility of eternal relationships for the very same reasons.

coincides with a genuinely agentic understanding of our humanity. Indeed, it makes sense to claim that as agentic beings, what we do (including how we act, how we think, and how we feel and, importantly, why we do so) is in an important way fluid. This is, indeed, a basic thrust of the meaning of agentic sexuality. As we argued above, it is problematic to propose that a human being can really "be" one sort of being, one sort of person, materially and spiritually, and then really become another. Ipseity and its accoutrements are much too durable for this sort of morphing to be possible. But, nonetheless, migration among metaphorical or psychic categories — or ways of being — presents no such conceptual problems because psychic change and fluidity are hallmarks of human rational consciousness and imagination, and, as such, are hallmarks also of human agency. Migration between ontological categories, on the other hand, is unprecedented and, as some scholars have suggested, impossible to even conceptualize.[7]

Laying aside the question of how many scholars are actually careful in making the distinction between "sexuality" as a fairly straightforward descriptive term applied to a certain class of human activities and "sexuality" as a categorical term that designates some actual existent thing with ontological status of some sort, we are still faced with the question of exactly what it is that might be fluid and changing when we speak of "fluid sexuality." For reasons just discussed, it is difficult to defend a claim that "sexuality" is both metaphysically/ontologically real (i.e., an abstraction with causal efficacy) and profoundly fluid in some way. The alternative is to hold that persons and their intentional, meaningful, agentic acts are real, and that they therefore engage in "sexuality" volitionally in various ways with various persons for various reasons in various situations. This is the sort of fluidity that is reasonable.

If one prefers a reifying explanation reliant upon the invocation of abstractions, then "sexuality" really is a "thing" with causal power and causal efficacy (although one's preference does not make it so). Such a view keeps sexuality safely confined to the natural world (including both powerful invisible abstractions and physical matter) where moral quality or value cannot really be attached to it (except in a purely pragmatic sense) — since "natural" phenomena "just are," and thus are morally inert. As Trueman (2020) observes:

> Sexual activity [in this naturalistic sense] is not, in and of itself, moral or immoral. It is just an activity. To the modern post-Freud, post-Nietzsche mind, those who argue that sex acts have intrinsic moral content are merely expressing irrational aesthetic preferences rooted in cultural conditioning of simple prejudice. Sex becomes morally significant only as it is an expression of the self or of personal identity, and so any moral discussion of sex acts or their consequences must be set against that background (pp. 348–349).[8]

In contrast, if sexuality is understood agentically — that is, as what we do, as moral agents, together with others — then sexuality, including imagining, feeling, desiring, and many other ways of being in which people "take up" and "give themselves over to" various real possibilities, is inherently morally relevant and meaningful — chiefly because people are relevant and meaningful (Williams et al., 2021). Meaningfulness, as a key defining attribute of humanity, and our spiritual heritage, is both the content of and context for the fluidity of sexuality, as it is for all human acting. This understanding of sexuality locates it meaningfully within the realm of our humanity to which morality can be legitimately attached — as it can be to all agentic acts (Williams and Gantt, 2021).

[7] See, for example, Nagel (1974) "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" for a compelling analysis of the incoherence of the thesis that human beings might actually achieve change in their metaphysical nature or their fundamental identity, or even authentically imagine such a change.

[8] Trueman (2020) provides further clarification of this point in an accompanying footnote where he points out that "in this framework rape is wrong because it does not include the mutual consent of the parties involved and, therefore, represents the denial of the identity of the victim. The physical act itself, considered from a purely physical perspective, has no moral content, good or bad" (Trueman, 2020, p. 349).

The traditionally presumed advantage of metaphysical reification in understanding and explaining sexuality is that it keeps human sexuality safely within the amoral universe of naturally caused activities, and, thereby, preserves not only the positivist intellectual project of establishing an objective, value-neutral account of behavior, but also any number of compatible structuralist intellectual projects (Howell, 2013). The agentic explanation, on the other hand, brings sexuality (as fundamentally agentic activity) into the realm of "intentionality" as understood in the older, more formal phenomenological sense of that term articulated by such thinkers as Brentano (1995) and Husserl (1982). Intentionality, in this sense, refers to the fact all meaningful human consciousness, and therefore all human action, is intrinsically bound up with a telos, something toward which it tends or aims. Indeed, "the word 'intentionality' derives from the Latin verb intend, meaning to aim or point at, or to extend or stretch" (Carman, 2020, p. 33). Thus, intentionality allows for "moral" significance (in the broadest sense of that term). Genuinely human acts (including sexual acts), as intentional acts, are thus, a matter of what agents do with reason and purpose, in the context of, and for the sake of, a meaningful lifeworld of social relationships and moral possibilities. In contrast, the scientistic, positivist approach to explanation preferred by most in contemporary social science, an approach that posits the existence and causal power of hypothesized abstractions, is one that ultimately strips all human acts and desires, sexual or otherwise, of any intrinsic meaning or moral substance — except insofar as the individual musters up some personal significance and manages to attach it for themselves to maintain some semblance of moral weight in a world of their own making, a world necessarily untethered to any outside, anchoring truth (see Gantt and Williams, 2016, williams2015introduction, williams2018hayek).

Embodiment as a Rescue from Abstractions

The phenomenon of embodiment has a rich history within the phenomenological and hermeneutical philosophical traditions, owing substantially to the influential work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1989, 2004). Succinctly stated, Merleau-Ponty's work contributes a thoughtful and nuanced understanding of the nature and role of the body in the purposive, meaning-making activities of human beings as they live their individual lives. Indeed, as philosopher Charles Taylor noted: "If one had to sum up Merleau-Ponty's philosophical legacy in a phrase, one might say that he more than any other taught us what it means to understand ourselves as embodied agents" (Taylor, 1989, p. 1). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's core thesis, Taylor (1989) states, is that "the human subject is an agent, engaged in activity, and engaged in a world. He is an embodied subject" (p. 1). As Merleau-Ponty (1989) demonstrates in his most famous philosophical work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, the body is the basic medium through which we are in the world. The body, he shows, constitutes a fundamental "existential condition" and "intersubjective ground" for all human experience, action, thought, emotion, and relationship (rather than a bundle of forces, pushes, and pulls). As one of Merleau-Ponty's foremost commentators, Gary Madison (1981) succinctly explains:

> I am a subject only by means of the many unbreakable bonds which tie my consciousness and my body together; I am an embodied subject only by being in a direct mutual relation with the world; and I am in the world only through my co-existence with others who, themselves, are also so many beings in the world. Inversely, the other exists for me only because I am directly linked to the world by a body which is inseparable from my existence. (p. 22)

In other words, as embodied beings, we are always already situated beings, simultaneously enmeshed in social, physical, temporal, and spatial fields of various relationships and meanings. However, just as human action is recognized as always occurring in the context of an inescapable and ever-present biological reality, embodiment is also not in any meaningful way separable from the social, moral, cultural, and historical contexts in which all our acts are inherently embedded. The "lived-body" is a fundamental dimension of our

existence as the sorts of (human) beings we are, the presuppositional horizon within which we live and act. Embodiment is, in this way, the grounding feature of the world of agents and, thus, the most salient context within which agents exercise their creative freedom to be and to do. This view stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing, but philosophically naive perspectives currently on offer from any of a large number of biological-reductive perspectives (see, e.g., Garson, 2015; Plaisance and Reydon, 2012; Plomin, 2019; Rowland, 2020).

A perspective grounded in embodiment suggests that the body is more than a mechanical object, governed by natural forces, defined by abstract conditions or casual tendencies, and driven by reflexive responses. In contrast to the traditional view of the body as mechanical, viewing human agency through the lens of embodiment allows us to see the "lived-body" (i.e., the whole, embodied being) as both site and source of our intentional engagement with, and engagement by, the world in all of our projects: a necessary ground for purposive, meaningful action and relationship.[9] While it is in and through the body that we are able to be intimately familiar with and engage the world and others — and are capable of desiring and acting at all — this does not mean that it is because of the body that we have a world in the first place, nor is it the case that the body is the sole origin or organ of our desires, our actions, or identities. As Merleau-Ponty (2004) notes, "Except in certain contexts, we experience living human bodies, our own and those of other people, not as bits of machinery, but as the expression of a human person and his or her mode of being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 194). Indeed, according to this view, sexuality is not best thought of as some sort of abstract causal force or condition, a category of something that we possess or to which we belong, but rather an active, purposive, meaningfully unfolding mode of our being in the world with others. In other words, the body is best understood as a mode of being, not the material source of being. As such, it should be thought of as affordance — that is, an enabling context rather than as a cause.

In this way, Merleau-Ponty (and others) provides a thoughtful and sophisticated alternative to the reductive and emergent explanatory strategies advanced over the last century or so, all of which attribute direct causal roles to the material body in the production and understanding of meaningful human phenomena, including sexuality (see, e.g., Heinämaa, 2014; Moya and Larrain, 2016; Tolman et al., 2014). Understanding human beings as embodied agents, thus, provides a way of taking both the body and agency seriously — as certainly we must do if we hope to understand human sexuality — while avoiding the pitfalls of naïve and incoherent attempts to get meaning out of meat. It also serves as a deterrent to making all sorts of facile category mistakes of various sorts — such as the common notion that sexual attraction and feelings of love are really just the result of oxytocin and dopamine activity in the limbic system (Schneiderman et al., 2012).

We want next to briefly explicate the value and role of the concept of embodiment (and of embodiment itself) to the question of sexuality and human agency, as well as intrinsically related issues such as sexual identity, sexual orientation, sexual desire, and sexual intimacy, by considering the various challenges entailed in uncritical thinking about such things. Consider the following points specifically.

It is embodiment that provides the first and most immediate (literally "un-mediated")[10] experience of otherness. And, as such, it constitutes an irrefutable validation of ipseity — i.e., of one's individual existence distinct from any others (e.g., we do not share protoplasm or pain receptors with other people). Embodiment stands in contrast to all the other things about us that we can create by

[9]This understanding of embodiment should not be taken as a suggestion that bodies are composed of some sort of magical "smart meat," such that the physical body just has all the intelligence of a person. Such a position leads to all the conceptual problems encountered by invoking magical abstractions and attributing to them causal power — a position we have just refuted. Rather, embodiment simply holds that even if there is an intelligent soul or mind that continues after the death of the body, to understand human beings we must adopt a holistic view that every intelligent agent we meet lives in and through a physical body. This point calls to mind an important point of LDS doctrine shared by most Christians: "And the spirit and the body are the soul of man" (D&C 88:15).

[10]That is to say, embodiment is not produced by or dependent upon conscious deliberating thought or reflection.

an act of our own minds or the exercise of rational capacity, and, because they are just our own ideas, we can readily share them with others.

Like everything else in the stubborn material world, embodiment resists. Embodiment puts boundaries around our creative will and the pride that comes with absolute mastery of anything in the world. It is due to the givenness of embodiment that we are not, alas, as the Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola (1956) suggests in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, the makers and molders of our Selves, able to fashion ourselves into any form we please, the center of heaven and earth, the measure of all things (della Mirandola, 1956, see pp. 7–8). Even though we are agentic beings capable of acting on and in the world in which we find ourselves, the brute facticity of embodiment entails that we are also constrained — often in quite profound and far-reaching ways — in what we can do (e.g., some things are too high, too heavy, or too far away). As embodied agents we live in a world that constrains our agency in important ways, a world that makes relentless demands on us and limits the boundless exercise and expression of our will (e.g., we simply must eat, rest, and depend on things outside us). However, in so doing it is not agency that is constrained, but rather the possibilities and consequences of its expression.

Embodiment is a source of alienation because of the otherness inherent in it. After all, we always just know that the headache we are experiencing is our headache and not someone else's headache. However, it is also a source of intimacy as embodiment allows us to find others, who, at the most basic sense of being to which we have access, are like us and can be with us and we with them. We do not just think sympathy. Indeed, sympathy is not solely or even primarily a matter of cognitively imagining ourselves in another's place, but rather something that can be expressed through touch, though a look, a tone, by lifting up the "hands which hang down" (Heb. 12:12), and so forth. Embodiment marks us off as different from one another in deep and impermeable ways even as it opens up for us a shared world of possibilities and meanings. The otherness of embodied persons is different from the otherness of material things. The concreteness afforded us in embodiment is a surer foundation for finding, engaging, and knowing others than any sort of imaginative empathic thought could ever afford us. In fact, as the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1969) argues, it is the encounter with concrete otherness that calls us into being as ourselves, as who we are as the particular beings we are. In short, he argues that we would have no reason or occasion to be "us" if it were not for our intimate awareness of "them" and the moral obligation which concrete otherness affords us. Embodiment makes this otherness of the other real and salient, and calls us out in a way ideas never could. It is, thus, perhaps no surprise that Levinas describes the encounter with the other, the encounter that instantiates the self as a self, as the experience of "the face-to-face" (Levinas, 1985, see especially, pp. 83–92).

It is the embodied other, and the context of both the limitations and possibilities that embodiment brings, that provide the occasion for the possibility of morality and meaning. Embodiment makes salient the consequences of our actions not only in our own lives, but in the lives of others. Without others and the constraints incumbent in an embodied world there would be no salient context for caring and sharing. Neither material things nor abstract ideas can really cooperate with us in joint meaningful projects. Even using a tool from the natural world is not really a joint or shared endeavor — the world from which the tool comes does not care about any project. Real caring and sharing involves joint projects, engaging both mind and body with an embodied other. It is the embodied presence that makes a loved one all the more dear, and the bodily absence that makes the loss of a loved one all the more poignant.

Embodiment is particularly important in experiencing and understanding sexuality not only because sexuality generally involves the body and bodily affordances, but, more importantly, because sex is instantiated in the physical body. For males, in addition to primary and secondary sex characteristics, every cell in the body (except blood cells) is also male. For females, in addition to primary and secondary sex characteristics, every cell in the body (except for blood cells) is female. This biological fact seems to be immutable. In discussions of sexual fluidity, then, biological sex is not one of the factors that is mu-

table. A significant part of the muddle in both academic and lay discussions of human sexuality arises from making fine, mostly rhetorical, distinctions between "sex" and "gender," and the introduction into discussions of various terms referring to various "things" with very different ontological provenances (see Kuby, 2015, especially pp. 108–120). This serves to keep the conversations fluid and allows for any number of claims that might make conversational or grammatical sense, but which are logically and/or ontologically incoherent (see Trueman, 2020). One might state, for example, that "gender" is fluid, and in so doing cite differences in gender roles and gender identities, and then also propose that sex is a part of gender, so that sex is similarly fluid — in spite of what the biological facts "on the ground," so to speak, happen to be. In these types of discussions, careful definitions, conceptual consistency, and ontological clarity are usually not points of principle emphasis.

One important aspect of embodiment, then, is that the body witnesses, even at the cellular level, to the immutability of biological sex (and, therefore, biological gender).[11] Embodiment and sexual dimorphism also brings us face to face with sexual complementarity and gives tangible form to the natural connection of sexuality to fecundity and to the concrete otherness of others, including others not yet present (Levinas, 1985). Even granting that biological processes of development and maturation do occasionally not work out perfectly, a person's sexual or, one could say, "gendered" embodiment, at the level of the body itself and not merely its outward appearance, is what it is, and is so in its concrete givenness. To the extent that embodiment undergirds identity, then, one's sexual identity is likewise given. In other words, this is to say that, at the material level, our identity is immutable as well. For LDS Christians, and most other Christians, this truth can be stated even more directly, as it has been in *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*:

> All human beings — male and female — are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.

As this statement declares, there is more to the modern concept of "identity" than just what the body provides (i.e., sex/gender). Contemporary Western culture is quite taken with the notion that we can make out of ourselves whatever we will (i.e., whatever we desire). The brute facts of the material world and its resistance to us, however, impose strong pragmatic limitations on this self-creativity. Nonetheless, we do have significant power and significant leeway to create our non-biological selves. At the heart of this self-creation — the construction of an identity — is the human will and its capacity to imagine and to create and re-create. Though we can certainly construe the circumstances of our embodiment in a variety of ways, and apply to it a variety of meanings, our embodiment is not itself fully complicit in such creativity, it does not inexorably bend to the dictates of our will, but rather constrains and resists the inventiveness of our imagination. Thus, it makes more sense to talk about something like sexual identity, along with preferences and orientations, as being mutable (i.e., subject to creative construction through agentic action). Indeed, we have argued that such things likely are mutable — able to be constituted and re-constituted, done, undone, and redone — precisely because they have their being, their essence, only in agentic acts, even in the context, or perhaps especially in the context, of embodiment with all the possibilities and affordances that embodiment presents to us along with its inherent givenness. Thus, we can hope that mutability might bring about harmony with the given, rather than conflict with the immutable. It is in this context — i.e., while biological sex (or gender) is fixed and immutable, sexual identities, and such things, are constructions which only agentic human beings can create — that we turn attention to the case for genuinely agentic sexuality.

[11] This will hold as true of human beings, regardless of what future exercises in gene splicing or other technological tinkering might produce.

Agentic Sexuality

There is no aspect of our essential humanity that is more fluid (i.e., mutable) than our agency. The fluidity does not attach to whether or not we are agents, but rather to how agency is deployed, and what it might produce. Agentic action is, in its essence, fluid and open-ended. To be human is to be an agent, and to be an agent is to be creative, to be intimately enmeshed in a world of possibility, purpose, and meaning. Agency is the essence of our mutability, our being able to change and do otherwise at any time. The lived world for us exists primarily as possibility and constraint, permeated by meaning and moral significance. Agentic beings are fluid and mutable, though not infinitely so, especially in light of our embodiment and the material world that resists us. Furthermore, we simply cannot bring material things into existence by thinking them or speaking them into existence. We cannot conjure. However, the fact that we are, ontologically, agentic beings is not itself mutable or subject to change, for all the reasons discussed above about metaphysical realities. However, fluidity of action and mutability in the face of possibility, and in the flow of human events, is endemic to all human agents and definitive of agency itself.

None of this is to say, however, that human agency, properly understood, ends up in a chaos of random reasons and impulses that would obviate any predictability or understanding of us and our behavior, as has long been feared in the social sciences. On the contrary, the lifeworld in which human agency unfolds is not chaotic.[12] Chaos (i.e., random, unconstrained change) precludes reasons and thereby destroys meaningful agency. Rather, it is the case that sense can be made of people's agentic actions and their lifeworld. However, if sense is to be made of a person's agentic world, it must be made from the perspective of the particular agent him- or herself, rather than from some "extraspective theoretical (or abstracted) perspective" (Rychlak, 1988), which in the contemporary social science disciplines is generally based on assumptions developed and applied generically, and emphasizing constructs, abstractions, forces, or meat and chemical. In the former, agentic view, agentic life is a constant and purposeful doing, undoing and redoing — in the sense of always being open-ended. In short, one might say that for human beings, "it's agency, all the time, and all the way down."[13] The reality of agentic action unfolds within the very hermeneutic circularity — or spiral trajectory — of life (Slife and Christensen, 2013). In other words, human agency innately entails that what is done is done, but can always be undone (or redone) for any or all of a potentially very large number of reasons. And those reasons can also always be taken up anew (or put down again), taken on, or modified as we give ourselves over to (or hold ourselves back from) them, either fully or by degrees.

Human agency is, we contend, best understood as a constant and endless procession of persons' "taking on" and "giving themselves over to" meaningful possibilities as we construe and construct our lives and ourselves within the possibility-rich (or sometimes, perhaps, possibility-poor) world in which we find ourselves — constantly living and acting with others and among things. It is for this reason that our agentic action in the realm of sexual matters is, as in all other realms of human action, contextual and fully participatory, involving others (both real and imagined). And, moreover, it is in this light that agentic action in the realm of sexual matters is inescapably moral, always tethered to the givenness of life while simultaneously being telic and oriented to the rich possibilities that givenness always affords a rational moral agent. Sexuality as agentic meaning-making is inherently fluid, as fluid as any other kind of meaningful human action, consisting of "taking up" ideas, meanings, and possibilities, and "giving oneself over to" those meanings and possibilities — or, at other times, leaving certain meanings and possibilities behind — in a constant flow of living, deciding,

[12] Any chaos in the unfolding of agency would be of the sort that afflicts humankind generally whenever there is illness, developmental difficulties, impairments, or other things that would produce their chaos even in a completely determined world.

[13] This expression refers to the famous story about the defense of the thesis that the world does not just stand in space, but rather rests on the back of a giant tortoise. The answer to the question as to what the tortoise rests on is "Nothing, its tortoises, all the way down." In other words, agency is a fundamental way of being and not caused by or dependent on other things. It is originative and irreducible (see Gantt et al., 2014).

acting, re-acting, doing, undoing, and doing over. What is apparent in any lived-world, however, is that abstract metaphysical realities (in contrast to human meaning and purpose) are not so fluid or mutable. For example, agency and possibility are inherent in a proposition (and in the lived reality it represents) such as "Smith is a golfer," or "Smith is an English speaker." Such statements can only be understood as something that a person (i.e., Smith) — understood as an agent — is doing. Smith is a golfer because she golfs or is golf-ing. She is not necessarily bound to be a golfer indefinitely, nor is she metaphysically or necessarily a golfer. If she gives up golfing, then she ceases to be a golf-er. The world of human sexual understanding and activity, as opposed to the world of the metaphysically given, is inherently an agentic world of meaning and possibility, in which we actively and creatively immerse ourselves.

What all of this means is that things such as sexual orientation, preference, attraction, and identity are actually descriptions of what a person is doing, not statements of metaphysical "types" or abstractions, or categorical identification of what a person just is. In other words, all of these aspects of our sexuality, since they are things we are doing, are things that can be undone, taken up anew, or put down. As agentic acts, they are the sort of things (i.e., possibilities) to which we can give ourselves over, or reserve ourselves from, as we take up some other possibilities — including the possibilities of desire itself. This is not to say, however, that such agentic becoming otherwise is easy, as habits of thinking and acting are notoriously stubborn. It is to say, however, that there are no metaphysical or lawful constraints on change, and no powerful causal abstractions exercising invisible, compulsive force and constraint on us. That aspect of our sexual nature which genuinely is metaphysically given, and thus not agentic or mutable (i.e., gendered embodiment), provides the givenness, and a range of affordances and opportunities consistent with that reality, within which agentic sexuality can be meaningfully expressed or fought against.

Agency as More than "Free Choice"

Most opposition to the idea that sexuality is radically agentic, as we have proposed here, will likely be rooted in an understanding of human agency that has prevailed for centuries. This is the construal of agency as traditional libertarian free will or "radical choice" (Taylor, 1985). In this construal, agency is manifested most clearly and fundamentally in the capacity for making autonomous or free choices; that is, choices made based on the unfettered will of the agent and the agent's capacity to resist external (or, even, internal) influence (see Williams, 1992, williams2005agency, williams2017freedom). It is important to note here that the belief in invisible, magically powerful abstractions is one of the sources of "influence" that are traditionally held to impact individual "free" choices (or attempts at choosing freely). If, as we have argued above, the powerful abstractions developed in the discourse of our culture really do not exist, or have any real causal power, in themselves, then their influence can lie only in our giving them credence, and allowing them to become the grounds for our "free" choices. But, we argue, a choice made by an agent who gives credence to something that is not true, or is not "the case" is in fact not really free in the way freedom is usually understood. For example, if Smith, as an adult, chose always to sleep on the couch in his home because he believed (sincerely) that there was a monster under the full-sized bed in his apartment, and the monster was too large to fit under the couch, therefore the couch was a safer place to sleep, would we be inclined to grant that Smith's choice is really a free choice — even though he made the choice of his own free will? Would we not, in such a case, be more inclined to consider that Smith is not really exercising his agency because he is living in a false world, bestowing power, in the form of influence, on a false narrative (i.e., on an entity that does not in fact exist except in Smith's own narrative), and therefore has no real causal power except insofar as Smith's narrative grants such power in the very act of his choosing?

Similarly, cultural narratives can obviate freedom and negate human agency on at least two levels. First by creating powerful narratives about ourselves and our world in which invisible, powerful abstractions exist and control many aspects of our lives, including the choices we make based on reasons that reflect our belief in the reality of those

forces, and, thus, our own impotence in the face of such forces' working in our lives. The second level on which our freedom can be negated has to do with whether the various reasons for which we might make our free choices actually reflect truth; that is, the world as it really is, including the truth of our own being-in-the-world.

The common view of agency as described above — as exercising one's freedom to choose in a situation despite influences to the contrary — does not constitute human agency as we really live it out in almost all the situations in which we find ourselves in the course of daily life. The common view tends to emphasize particular specifiable "choice points" and the exercise of agency in a particular situation by weighing alternatives and deliberating on possible choices, while resisting some influences and opting in the direction of other possible influences. The problem is that in actually living our lives we almost never do anything like this. A moment's reflection should be enough to convince us that there really are very few instances in any given day where we really go through the sort of detached, deliberative process of making a free choice that the common view assumes. For the most part, as we go about living, we are just too busy doing what we want to do and what needs to be done. As Taylor (1989) notes:

> [T]he subject is in this world (= field of meanings) as an agent. He acts, he does things. The meanings which things have for him of course reflect this: that delicious bit of pastry attracts him, tempts him to eat it; this edgy social situation is calling for his intervention (either "physically" to stop the fight, or "socially" to say something soothing, change the subject), and so on. The fact that we act, that certain events are our doing, is another primitive, along with the fact that things have meaning for us. This is to say that the distinction within what "happens," in a topic-neutral sense of the term, between what I do and what comes about, is an irreducible one. (pp. 2–3)

Of course, we might assume that true agency is brought out only on special occasions, but this line of thinking misses the ubiquity and the essence of our genuine agency. Our real human agency is not something we employ just on special, sometimes momentous occasions of careful, calculative deliberation. Rather, human agency is the substance of our being-in-the-world. It is the very "stuff" of which human life is composed. And, as such, our agency cannot be disentangled from our very living and acting as the sort of beings we are.

This alternative view of agency developed in this essay can be most readily understood by attending to the experience of agency as actually lived. If we focus on the countless agentic actions we perform in a given day — everything from choosing whether to get up or push the snooze button on the alarm, picking up a glass to drink and putting it down again in the spot we put it rather than somewhere else, making a purchase or foregoing it, phoning or texting a friend or putting it off, doing any one of perhaps hundreds of things we could purposely do in a given day — it becomes clear that we almost never actually stop, lay out competing alternatives, deliberate over them systematically, and then free ourselves from all influence we don't want to influence us, and then exert our own will in order to decide the matter. The common libertarian model of agency is artificial at best, and incoherent at worst. We should note here also that the model of agency as just "free choice" cannot be saved by claiming that the real deliberation and deciding is all done unconsciously, as some models assert (see, e.g., Akram, 2013; Shepherd and Mylopoulos, 2021), and that is the reason we are not aware of doing it. From a conceptual point of view, taking this position and relying on the existence of unconscious minds and/or subconscious processes creates more conceptual and moral problems than it could ever solve, and much worse conceptual problems than the ones we have laid out in our argument about agency in this paper (e.g., the homunculus problem that results in our having two minds to explain instead of just one, etc.).

To understand how we really experience and exercise our agency, we have to focus not on deliberations and choice-making, but on the hundreds or even thousands of things (e.g., ideas, feelings, desires, beliefs, aspirations, worries, traditions, relationships, purposes, and the context of

embodiment) that form the meaningful world of which we are always a part and in which we are always engaged. We are constantly accepting, rejecting, "taking up" the world, or a thought or feeling, accepting or "giving ourselves over" to an idea, a project, an interpretation, a priority, a mistake, a bit of slothfulness, giving ourselves over to our good judgments, or picking up and taking on an excuse for accepting what we really should not, and doing something else instead (Williams and Gantt, 2021). It really is quite unreasonable to believe that there are countless invisible, powerful, abstract causal influences, variables, or biological processes within us and around us, all operating beneath every physical, mental, emotional, and moral experience we have every day, and that these things are somehow connected to each of us as we move through time and the richness of our physical, mental, emotional, and moral lives. The truth is that there are no such unfathomable invisible, magical, abstract determining forces at work. Rather, quite simply, it is we (i.e., holistic, embodied, moral agents) who are at work. This manner of living constitutes the unique manner of being-in-the-world as only agentic beings can be. This is how the rationality that defines and characterizes human beings, and not other living creatures, unfolds in the life — the daily mode of living — of an agent. The crucial part of all this, however, is that agents, no matter how they happen to be in the world now, no matter how they are construing things, how they are "taking up" the world, or what they "giving themselves over" to, can at any instant, for any of perhaps thousands of reasons and invitations, do otherwise . . . or not.

Within this understanding of agency, we can see that agency arises not from the fact that we can supposedly make deliberated decisions free from determining influence, subject only to our "will," but rather that no matter what we as agents are doing, what decisions we are making in any given situation, it really is possible to do or be otherwise. And, even if it is not convenient or easy, it is always nonetheless possible to do something otherwise. Further, we should also note, the power to "do otherwise" comes not from standing apart from one's life and world in order to deliberate about it, but rather it comes as we engage more fully and more seriously in the life we are living, considering things more broadly (or narrowly), adopting new perspectives, questioning ourselves, resurrecting or reconstructing memories, yielding to the Spirit, listening to our conscience, forgiving loved ones, losing ourselves in work . . . and the list goes on. Whatever meaning is "taken up" can be kept or put down, at any time, for a large and fluid number of reasons, any of which might be sufficient to be seized upon and thus to comprise a reason for action — or not. For genuine agents, therefore, whatever is started can be stopped, whatever has been done can be undone, or redone or modified in a potentially very large number of ways and for a potentially very large number of reasons. Agency then, we must be clear, is not some special capacity we have (like choosing from amongst hypothetical alternatives free from any influences we do not want). Agency as described here is the defining character of our very being, our being-in-the-world. It is not one trait or capacity among many. Rather, it is the very essence of our being as the kinds of beings we are. Agency is what we are — but it manifests itself always as what we do, and re-do, and un-do, and so on.

We should acknowledge here that what we describe as the essential modus operandi of human agents (i.e., "taking up or putting off" and "giving oneself over or taking back") can be described loosely or generically as choosing, as making choices. Although the choosing described here is certainly not the deliberative, influence-selective choosing prescribed in traditional libertarian accounts of free will, "taking up" and "giving ourselves over to" might be thought of as a sort of "micro-choosing;" in that, such "choices" are not carefully deliberated nor made in any kind of "time out" from living, and are not necessarily consistent, logical, or decisive. These incidents of "micro-choosing" are generally not clearly available in detail to the agents themselves, because of the hundreds of other things that press on our attention, and the many other things that call our attention and also require choosing at any given time. Thus, these "micro choices" are not lived-out as conscious deliberative choices. They are not the products of detached, neutral self-reflection and assessment. Rather, they are most often only vaguely coherent and can be made ex-

plicit only by some other agentic act of the same sort of which they themselves are a part.[14] But most of the time in the course of a day, most of our agentic "taking up" and "giving over" are not elevated to any level of importance or awareness. However, they can be elevated, focused on, elaborated, and made meaningful — when, for a potentially large number of reasons (perhaps hundreds of reasons not fully articulated) they become important. A passage of scripture from the Book of Mormon offers an example of how agency can be understood as non-deliberative micro-choice that ultimately takes on importance as it comes to the forefront in a choice of great magnitude.

> Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil. (2 Nephi 2:27)

Certainly, the decision between "liberty and eternal life" or "captivity and death" is unlikely to be one that can be or will be made at one magnificent, deliberative choice point. Surely, how one has lived one's life will have agentically set the stage powerfully for any such decision as this. A more likely understanding of the choosing described here is based on the fact that a person's "choosing" eternal life is really constituted by hundreds, if not thousands of "choosings" throughout one's life, the "taking up or putting down," and "giving ourselves over or taking oneself back" that constitutes the rich, meaningful, moral life of agentic sons or daughters of God.

And Ye Shall Know the Truth, and the Truth Shall Make You Free

It needs to be understood, however, that if what we have just described here — i.e., agency as the innate capacity for taking-up or giving ourselves over to meanings for reasons that are always a part of our fluid, mutable being-in-the-world — were all there were to our human agency and to sexuality, neither would be much of a blessing. Indeed, if agency were just that, and only that (i.e., just taking up the world and giving ourselves over to it without regard for just what it is we are taking up and what we are giving ourselves over to), it could hardly serve as the foundation for a moral life or the grounds for moral development. Just always being fluid and mutable, always able to do otherwise, would be at least as likely to lead to moral and epistemological relativism, immorality, and even chaos, as it would lead to something good, such as perfection of the soul. It would be just as likely to lead to sexual confusion and promiscuity as to sexual morality and sacred communion. Just doing otherwise may not lead to true freedom, but may lead us down any number of conceptual, relational, and moral dead ends. What is required for genuine agency, an agency worth having, is access to and a genuine capacity for Truth. There must be a source of truth — that is, knowledge of things as they really are (e.g., D&C 93:24). When truth is available, always being able to "take up" and "give ourselves over to" things that are true, that "really are" is a great blessing and means of safety, progress, opportunity, and openness — the essence of freedom. Absent truth, and the capacity to grasp it and receive it, agency serves no useful purpose,[15] and provides no meaningful freedom. When truth is available, agency can lead to what is usually referred to as "the good and flourishing life" (Thompson et al., 2020). Without truth, agency is meaningless. Without agency, truth is meaningless. After all, what good is truth if we cannot actually live it on purpose? Once again, modern scripture casts some light on the issue:

> Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own

[14] In his 1999 book *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory, and Ethics of Sexual Orientation*, philosopher and legal theorist Edward Stein, himself a gay man, draws on the work of developmental psychologist Daryl Bem, arguing that continual, small, seldom noted choices are fundamental to the process of developing a sexual orientation. Although the argument we present here differs from that of both Stein and Bem, we do share common ground on this point (see also Spinelli, 2013, 2014; Stein, 1999; Wilkerson, 2009).

[15] Except as a continual "open door" through which Christ might one day be able to reach us.

> power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down; And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice. (Moses 4:3-4; emphasis added)

Agency is destroyed, or nullified, when truth is not available. The Christian truth of sexuality includes its being bound to covenant relationships. Further, it is intimately and inextricably connected to fecundity and the creating and rearing of families (or, at least, to being open and willing to give oneself to the possibility of doing so). In most Christian traditions, marriage is an ordinance or sacrament that believers enter into willingly, and as moral agents. Sexuality is thus located within the sacred and the agentic in Judeo-Christian traditions (see Campbell, 2003; Lawler, 1996).

It has been common in the literature on human sexuality, both within scholarly discourse and within the lay culture, to contend that "sexuality" is not agentic. Often, this line of argument is based on the observation that sexuality is not agentic because it is phenomenologically (i.e., according to our lived-experience) not the case that people make the kind of special, deliberated decisions about most sexual matters employing the sort of detached, reflective process that libertarian models of free will require as the defining feature of libertarian forms of agency (see Bailey et al., 2016). In other words, many people resist the notion that sexuality is agentic because it just seems to be the case that no one actually deliberates, weighs options, resists unwanted influences, and then rationally, calculatingly, decides on their sexual identity, orientation, gender identity, sexual desires, and so on. Obviously, this is not how such things play themselves out. However, it is also true that this sort of deliberative choosing from amongst options is not how we make most any other important (non-sexual) decisions about ourselves either. This way of deciding and choosing is, indeed, not the natural or ordinary form human agency takes.

In the end, the idea that conscious, deliberative choosing does not apply to sexual matters bears little relevance for our understanding of either sexuality or agency because that kind of choice-making really is artificial and yields understanding of very little even in other (non-sexual) aspects of our lives. Therefore, affirming that one's sexuality is not the product of the calculative or deliberative making of free choices does not entail the conclusion that sexuality must therefore not be agentic in any important way. On the contrary, as our analysis of agency makes clear, when agency is properly understood in terms of our fundamental ontology as irrepressibly meaning-making moral agents, it becomes clear that matters of sexuality, just as all other aspects of our being-in-the-world, can and should be understood as what we are doing, not what we are caused to be or do by any material or abstract forces. Consequently, and in principle, all such doings can be undone, redone, or done differently. This is, of course, not to say that all of the consequences of our agentic acts can be entirely undone, but only that the acts themselves surely did not have to happen as they did and the consequences of our agentic actions can, in many meaningful respects, be altered going forward. Thus, genuine human agency offers an understanding of ourselves in terms of what we do and what we are, and what we really are is not to be understood as any aspect of our material composition or as the convergence of hypothesized abstractions or physical causal forces. Rather, from the perspective we offer here, it is possible to understand ourselves, our identity, and our "sexuality" in terms of what we agentically do, and, thus, at any time, what we meaningfully do really is what and who we really are. Understanding sexuality as agentic, as something we do, preserves meaning, moral purpose, and, most important of all, the genuine possibility of being and doing otherwise.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis, we are brought to the conclusion that human sexuality is an agentic phenomenon in all of its manifestations above the level of the gender that is intrinsic to our eternal nature and identity. Sexuality manifests itself in one's "taking on" and "giving oneself over to" the meanings entailed in sexuality, sexual desires, and sexual possibility, as we

encounter and engage them in the human relationships and purposive activities of our daily lives. In the light of this understanding, then, sexuality is neither something pushed upon us nor pulled out of us. It is no different from, and no more central to, our lives than any other meaningful phenomena we might take on and give ourselves over to. Although, owing to any number of factors based on our shared cultural meanings, and to much of the folklore we take on and give ourselves over to, it well may seem at times that we are pushed or pulled in matters of sexuality. Indeed, sexuality is often presented in ways that may entangle us in any number of problematic theories, ideas, practices, and folkloric tales unless we are critically vigilant and careful about how we think and talk about it.

In sexuality, as in all meaningful engagements in our lives, it takes some effort to maintain a clear view of who and what we are, or what we wish to be. This is the essence of our agency as embodied moral beings. As far as we know, it takes no effort for an oak tree, for example, to be an oak tree, or for a stone to be a stone. Such things simply are as they are.[16] And, for this very reason, there is no intrinsic meaning in being an oak tree or being a stone, nor does it seem to be the case that life means anything to them. This, however, is never the case with human agents because it takes effort to be, to do, and to mean (or intend) and to engage in the constant taking up and giving ourselves over to which is the essence of an agentic and meaningful life. The material world provides us with embodiment, and embodiment provides necessary context for and constraint on both the creative and stabilizing powers of agentic beings. Agentic living requires that we make peace with the givenness of embodiment, just as we must make peace with the passage of time, and the particular and individual characteristics, and even the limitations, of embodiment and the facticity of the world. Embodiment provides as much in the form of affordances as it may in the form of constraints. Importantly, human agents can maximize those affordances.

The view of sexuality we have developed here, as innately and fundamentally agentic, has implications for a wide variety of human activities, including diagnoses and therapies, relationships, and morality. It also has implications for our aspirations, our spirituality, and (perhaps most importantly) our understanding of what it means to be a human being as an eternal moral agent. Agency both reflects and constitutes our very nature as the sort of beings we are. It must be remembered that agency as understood here is as eternal as the soul itself, and testifies to the eternal possibility of doing and being otherwise.

None of our analysis of agentic sexuality should be taken to mean, however, that changes in sexual behavior, identity, orientation, or other manifestations, are easy. Such things are not easy. Indeed, it is often the work of a lifetime to create such things so it is not easy to undo them and create something else. To suggest that it is easy falls into the trap of assuming that agency is essentially libertarian free will, and that change of any sort is simply a matter of exercising one's will in a moment of radical choice. Thus, it is imperative to remember that agency as we have defined it and developed it here does not consist in the making of "free choices." Generally, we cannot simply change sexually relevant phenomena, especially those with long, deeply embedded and personally meaningful histories, by making a single decision to do so. In fact, such attempts might very likely produce frustration — as they would in most cases with other aspects of life. In the end, the most important aspect of this analysis, and the positive news it conveys, is that even if substantive changes in sexually relevant (or any other) actions and meanings in our lives do not come by single grand decisions, that does not rule out the possibility that changes can, in fact, come. How can such changes come? By doing differently in "taking up the world" or "putting it off," and "giving ourselves over to" or "holding oneself back" in regard to any number of relevant alternative ideas, feelings, actions, and possibilities. There is almost never any grand single exercise of effort through which we are able transform for ourselves experientially significant things about ourselves. Rather, it is usually the case that there are dozens, or hundreds, or perhaps even thousands of small

[16]Some might argue that there are any number of chemical things going on in physical objects such as trees and stones. However, trees and stones are not the originative source of such natural processes.

agentic acts through which doing becomes being. The account we offer here is, we believe, a fundamentally hopeful (and hope-filled) account of agency and sexuality. Ultimately, for LDS Christians, it is the offer of atonement extended by Jesus Christ Himself that provides the call, the possibility, the support, the power, and the welcome, in an agentic process of dealing with sexual issues — indeed, with all issues faced by moral agents in a meaningful world of possibilities and purposes. After all, only moral agents need a Savior.

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