

The Power in Rescuing Agency: A Response to Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs' Agentic Sexuality

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Abstract

In challenging the prevailing logic that one's sexuality, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and the myriad of other related abstractions determine our experience of sexual embodiment, Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs' article, "Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case" offers us a profound gift. Uncovering the reality that our own agency is the source of sexual behaviors, understandings, and meanings, expands awareness of our capacity as well as our responsibility. Most importantly, rescuing a true understanding of the agentic nature of sexuality breaks apart the false choice offered our LGBT brothers and sisters, opening a meaningful world of unending possibility through the infinite power of Christ. Examples of that hope are provided through personal accounts of such individuals.

Keywords: agency, sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual identity, agentic sexuality

I am honored to respond to the incisive and insightful piece by Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs, "Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case." As Williams et al. (this issue) explain, "Sexuality" has widely come to be understood as something we possess, that operates on us and causes us to do what we do and desire what we desire. As a force that acts upon us, we must either accept it or try (sometimes desperately) to control it, unnaturally creating a split in our personhood, "as we become both an 'identity' and a 'person' apart from that identity."

Yet, "sexuality" as merely a descriptor of thoughts, perceptions, and experiences related to sex cannot exist as an entity that acts in and of itself. Thoughts, perceptions, and experiences only

exist through the "acts of thinking, observing and experiencing." Thus, sexuality is something we do (not something done to us) in the process of being human, a reality in which we are continually acting — "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. . ."

In challenging the prevailing logic that one's sexuality, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and the myriad of other related abstractions determine our experience of sexual embodiment, Williams et al. (this issue) have offered us a profound gift.

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They have expanded our awareness of our own agency, a gift that means everything. As Gantt recently quoted in this journal, “no being can possess sensibility, rationality, and a capacity for happiness without it” (Warner, 1992, p. 26). Indeed, genuinely helpful, meaningful psychological therapeutic efforts depend on the truth that human beings are fundamentally moral agents, with the capacity to “act for themselves and not be acted upon,” to determine their way of being in the world. If it were not so, therapeutic efforts would have little meaning. Sexual behaviors and understandings and meanings would already be predetermined by abstract causal forces, making it impossible to engage differently, even if one might hope or desire or believe differently. Seeing sexuality as agentic means the genuine possibility of hope, purpose, capacity, and change.

That is a profound gift, but not an easy one. In uncovering the reality of agency as the source of our sexual behaviors, understandings, and meanings, Williams et al. (this issue) have expanded awareness of our capacity, as well as our responsibility. Rather than being caused, destined and determined by forces outside our control, it is we as individuals who are actively creating how we relate to and experience the reality of our sexual embodiment. This means turning upside down the narratives currently offered to our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and doing that in the face of powerful messages that would want to deny the possibility of anything else.

Doug Mainwaring, a gay man whose story went viral some years ago described the Hobson’s choice presented to same-sex attracted men and women, especially young people: “Either jump out of the closet, join the celebration, make being gay or lesbian the dominant characteristic of your life and the sole foundation of your identity—or remain ‘closeted,’ deny yourself, choose a false identity, become depressed, and risk suicide” (Mainwaring, 2013). His words paralleled closely the description of this false choice by faithful, gay, Latter-day Saint, Bennett Borden in a recent interview: “I can act on my feelings, be in a gay relationship, feel like I’ve got some connection, and be out of the church. Or I can keep my covenants, stay in the church, and die a horrible, lonely death” (Francom, 2021, 45:00).

Their poignant description of this trapped choice captures the deep concern of many faithful among us. As one of my valiant Latter-day Saint students recently described about her wrestle with the seeming irreconcilability of the real needs of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and what was asked of them in living a life faithful to the doctrines of the Restored Gospel: “Does our doctrine really mean people who identify as LGBT don’t ever get to experience a fullness of love and meaning in this life? Does it really mean that they must sit through meeting after meeting hearing about the joys of family life while feeling like they can never have one of their own? What do we actually expect them to do with their lives? What are the options for them?” Surely the only reasonable response could be “that a truly loving God would not do such things.”

Agentic sexuality breaks apart the false choice given our LGBT brothers and sisters, opening up a genuinely meaningful world of possibility, unique to each person, their own narrative infinitely expanded through the call, possibility, support, power, and open arms extended by Jesus Christ Himself.

This does not mean that answers immediately become easy. In fact, agentic sexuality does not mean we have unending choices. As Williams et al. (this issue) explain, our bodies constrain us “in important ways” even as they provide “the necessary context” for us to engage as moral agents “in a world of which sexually relevant thoughts, actions, and feelings are a part.” The biological reality of our bodies means “relentless demands on us” that “limit the boundless expression of our will.” That reality should invite our greatest compassion, our most sincere efforts to listen, understand, and support. But as Williams et al. (this issue) make clear, we can feel assured that not at any point is agency removed, only the “possibilities and consequences of its expression.” Whatever our biological realities, we are always acting — engaged in a “constant and endless procession of ‘taking on’ and ‘giving ourselves over to’ meaningful possibilities as we construe and construct our lives within the possibility-rich (or sometimes, perhaps, possibility-poor) world of our lives.”

Which is why as Williams et al. (this issue) acknowledge, truth is so critical. Genuine agency

requires access to truth, knowledge of things “as they really are,” so we may “take up” and “give ourselves over to” things that are true. It is the truth that sets us free, taking us out of old ways of seeing and being into ways of relating we might never have thought possible.

Ty Mansfield poignantly captures this reality in describing his own journey of expanded hope, possibility, and meaning. As a single adult, wrestling with the meaning of his own biological reality, Truth opened to him a whole new way of relating to his “sexuality,” enabling him to “give himself over,” to a new way of seeing and being, one full of possibility (Mansfield and Mansfield, 2012).

I was struggling at the time with some confusion around some deep emotional connections I was feeling with another guy. It hurt that I couldn't have what a piece of me really wanted. I needed some comfort and, since it happened to be General Conference time, I wrote down some of my most heartfelt questions and went into the first session of conference fasting. As soon as the opening prayer was shared, I felt this spiritual feeling completely envelop me; I hardly remember anything that was said during the session, but the feeling I had was unlike anything I've ever felt. For nearly the whole two hours, all the hurt, the pain, the confusion, the frustration... was completely gone. In its place was a feeling of Divine Love I had only ever experienced something similar to once before. And yet this was also different. As a part of this experience, there was a feeling of what I understood as pure Celestial love and desire to be with a daughter of God in the most holy and connected and uniting of ways—a way that made even “heterosexual” love and romance—as commonly portrayed or expressed today—seem cheap/primal and “false” in comparison. And with the feeling came the voice: “Just stay

with me. If you do, this is the feeling you will feel someday. And it will be eternal.” The only way I can describe it is as a “vision” of feeling. Along with the brief and very clear spiritual communication. Then, the “vision” ended.

Ty continues,

I believe strongly that I would not be where I am today—I would not be happily married with five beautiful children who bring so much joy to my life—if I hadn't been granted some small glimpse into Divine Love that has left me feeling like “heterosexuality”—particularly as it's most often portrayed in popular media today—is something relatively shallow and not what I ultimately should be pursuing. I want and pray for and pursue and continually seek to develop a capacity for Love that I believe is much more transcendent. These experiences are mine alone, and I own that. Others may feel or believe or have felt guided differently, and that's totally fine, but that instruction and other instruction since then has been foundational to my own personal faith and life journey. It has helped me to unpack what I see as a lot of bad ideas and assumptions about sexuality and love and identity in our culture.

Charlie Bird describes his own experience with the Divine, and the transformative influence of Truth made possible because of the agentic reality of sexuality. Exhausted from years of hiding in fear and shame about his same-sex attraction, he desperately pleaded (again) for help. In that moment he heard these words:

“I love you. I created you.” He continues, “They were simple words, but they transformed me. I realized that God didn't hate me. He wasn't ashamed of who I was. He hadn't messed up when He made me... The insight was the green light I needed

to ask deeper questions. . . As I meditated and prayed, I received deeply personal answers concerning the nature of my orientation and its role in my personal spiritual progression. . . God was the architect of my soul. As I came to a better understanding of my relationship with Him, I began to see my peculiarity from an entirely new perspective. . . I finally understood: Christ's Atonement wasn't there to alter my orientation; it was there to heal my heart. Jesus suffered and subjected Himself to my pain so He could lift me from the heavy burdens of shame, hatred and confusion I carried." (Bird, 2020, p. 15).

Real life stories are powerful windows into the truthfulness of the principles Williams et al. (this issue) present. And there are so many more. They are stories of hope made possible because awareness of one's agency around sexuality was expanded by truth, changing how these individuals were able to "be" and relate to their own biological realities. Such change would not be possible were it not for truth that our sexuality is indeed agentic.

Williams et al. (this issue) have not laid out answers to the host of questions that must surely follow such a powerful divergence from the deterministic cultural narratives and taken-for-granted assumptions we swim in. But they have offered us a foundation for going forward in the pursuit of genuine help and hope.

Surely, expanding awareness of our agency around sexuality means asking more questions — questions about the assumptions that underlie the thoughts, perceptions, behaviors, and experiences we tie to sexual feelings, and why those are the assumptions. Expanding awareness of agentic sexuality is also the increasingly important work of sexual mindfulness, "to cultivate space to evaluate and make a choice in the matter, rather than take it as an obvious given" by bringing awareness to how we are choosing to identify with our experiences (physically, emotionally and mentally) and

"expanding options in how we relate to what we are experiencing" (Hess et al., 2020).

The purpose of this effort is to expose the truth that we are agents, we do have choice — perhaps not in terms of immediate sexual feelings — but as Jacob Hess wisely explains, "in the story we adopt about what those feelings mean" (Hess, 2021). In that is hope, possibility, capacity to live according to our deepest beliefs and most sacred commitments, and in that, the possibility of genuine joy. We come to know that God really can be the architect of our souls. Through expanding our awareness of our own agency, and our ability to access His Atoning power, we find that He is able to work more in and through us than we might ever have thought possible, and infinitely more than the narratives offered to us by others.

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