

Considerations on Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs' Arguments for Agentic Sexuality

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Abstract

Sex and sexuality are increasingly dominating social discourse. The prevailing orientation of this discourse affirms facets of sexuality (e.g., orientation, identity) as real and inherent features of individuals. In other words, individuals could not choose otherwise. Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs challenge this position and assert that sexuality is fundamentally agentic. I discuss their arguments, pointing out what I view as strengths and a potential shortcoming of their position.

Keywords: sexuality, agency

Issues regarding sexuality, sexual behavior, and their consequences have come to dominate the social and political landscape of our day. For example, disputes over limits on abortion and the durability of *Rowe vs Wade* have been in the news. Additionally, cases of business owners declining to provide goods and services for events they deem morally objectionable on grounds of issues related to sexuality have become more prominent. Finally, the limitations of religious institutions' ability to discriminate based on issues of sex and sexuality continues to be challenged. Sex and sexuality seem to be finding their way into ever more facets of our lives, even into areas where they may have once seemed irrelevant. For people of faith, who have strongly held beliefs about sex and sexuality, there is a growing urgency to understand these issues in a way that is coherent, defensible, and consistent with religious doctrines and principles. Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs take on this project in their piece "Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case" (this issue).

Williams et al. address causal theories of sexuality in contemporary psychology (i.e., what is the source of what we call sexuality?)(this issue). The two major thrusts of their critique are to demonstrate the inadequacy of accepted theories and to demonstrate that these theories do not allow humans to be responsible for their sexuality or sexual behavior. They then propose an agentic explanation of sexuality that makes humans responsible for their sexuality and sexual behavior. The authors suggest that many popular articulations of the source of sexuality are either contradictory or incoherent. For example, if sexuality is a merely biological phenomenon, then it is essential and immutable, and humans cannot be accountable for controlling it or changing it. However, contemporary psychologists and psychological theories are committed to the fluidity of all aspects of sexuality. Both positions cannot be true, but rather than develop a coherent account of human sexuality, modern psychology (wittingly or not) seems to have largely defaulted to an *al la carte* approach, choosing theories that, under the spe-

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cific circumstances, best suit an agenda of human blamelessness. In order to assert human responsibility for sexuality, Williams et al. propose a model that makes sexual identities, thoughts, feelings, desires, and orientations agentic (this issue). The theory is based on rejecting explanations of sexuality that rely on reified abstractions (e.g., sexual identity, sexual orientation). In the field of applied behavior analysis, we call these reified abstractions hypothetical constructs that become explanatory fictions (Cooper et al., 2020). The problem is, using hypothetical constructs as causal explanations leads to a circular argument. For example, if we observe Billy kissing a girl, we might ask why he is kissing a girl, to which someone might respond because he is heterosexual (explanatory fiction). We might then ask how we know that he is heterosexual (hypothetical construct), to which someone might respond, because he kisses a girl.

In the place of these reified abstractions, Williams et al. propose the ontological reality of human embodiment. They suggest that sexuality only makes sense when considered in terms of what embodied humans do, in other words, when it addresses human behavior (a concretization or instantiation) rather than human identity, orientation, or attraction (abstractions). This theory gives rise to agency or the “taking up” and “giving oneself over to” thoughts, feelings, ideas, circumstances, and more. In consequence, humans become fully responsible for their sexual behavior.

Although Williams et al. present a well-reasoned case for sexuality being fully agentic (i.e., the “taking on” and “giving over to” all aspects of sexuality), as LDS Christians, they face a sticky problem; that of reconciling their position on agentic sexuality with the Church. The Church officially and explicitly asserts that individuals may experience attractions that are not of their own making (i.e., not agentic). Elder Ballard stated, “Let us be clear: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believes that the experience of same-sex attraction is a complex reality for many people.” He goes on to say, “Even though individuals *do not choose* to have such at-

tractions, they do choose how to respond to them (Ballard, 2015, emphasis added). To be fair, Elder Ballard was not trying to present a cohesive theory of sexuality, nor did he identify the source of sexual attraction, but his statements are presented on the Church website under the topic of same-sex attraction, suggesting that they represent the Church’s current official position. The Church leaves open the possibility that individuals may experience “forces that ‘push’ and ‘pull’[them] to. . . feel certain things,” for which they are not responsible because (i.e., they did not choose those feelings). And these forces may incline individuals toward certain sexual thoughts, feelings, desires, attractions, and behavior. As described by Elder Ballard, these forces do not seem to rise to the level of a “sexual identity”, but they do suggest that not every aspect of a person’s sexual experience is strictly agentic.

I commend Williams and his colleagues for taking on a difficult and potentially costly topic in an era where careful reasoning is often subjugated to social expedience and dissenting voices are expunged from public discourse. Heaven knows that the growing confusion around sex, sexuality, and sexual behavior is causing untold damage to individuals and societies. Consequently, there is a growing need to provide cohesive, lucid, and compelling explanations of sexuality and agency. I look forward to reading the authors future works on these topics.

References

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