

What Agentic Sexuality Is and What It Is Not

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Abstract

A brief rejoinder to the critical responses of Nelson, Erickson, and Sabey to our paper, "Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case."

We wish to sincerely thank the scholars who have taken the time to respond to our paper, "Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case" (this issue). The responses are thoughtful and help to focus attention on issues where our paper can be clearer. We appreciate the opportunity to respond to those issues and thereby refine and clarify the central ideas that we have presented. We are pleased to respond briefly to each reviewer.

Nelson, in "Illuminating the Untenable Nature of the 'Born That Way' Argument" (this issue), provides an important example of how the analysis developed in our paper can be applied to a substantive contemporary issue relevant to both research in psychology and related disciplines and the larger culture. The application is rendered clear by Professor Nelson's careful analysis of the empirical literature on the topic and his weaving of that analysis into his evaluation of the theoretical case that our paper makes for the centrality of agency in any comprehensive understanding of human behavior in general, and of human sexuality in particular. Our earnest hope is that our paper might motivate other works of the sort that Nelson offers here, and that such works might result in

a new and more fruitful understanding of human sexuality, particularly in light of the truth available within the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We believe that the pairing of careful empirical work with intensive and exacting philosophical critique and analysis can be of immense benefit to contemporary psychological understandings of the nature of human sexuality and moral agency. We take it to be axiomatic that good, careful, and thoughtful theory can enhance the understanding of the meaning and import provided by empirical data. At the same time good, careful, thoughtful empirical study can reveal important things and help in evaluating theories. Ultimately, then, good theories simultaneously affect and benefit from carefully produced reliable empirical data. This symbiotic effect is beautifully exemplified in Nelson's review of our work.

We are similarly grateful for Erickson's (this issue) careful reading and insightful response to our paper; which, given the unconventional and non-traditional understanding of agency our paper offers, we realize is no small task. Erickson takes an important step in bringing the issue of agentic sexuality into the realm of lived experience and directs attention to the all-important "applied"

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realm where theoretical explication meets the understanding and behavior of real persons. Erickson takes up this most important set of questions by drawing on an article by Douglas Mainwaring, as well as some material produced by the North Star organization. In this short response, we will take the opportunity that Erickson's response offers to provide additional clarification of the important issues she raises.

As Erickson takes up particular examples of how agency and sexuality can be understood, such as those found in the narrative provided by Mainwaring, it is clear how difficult it can be to break from all the categories of thought and analysis that have developed from the dominant rationalist libertarian explications of free will and how such traditional categories shape and guide our contemporary cultural and professional understanding of the nature of human sexuality. For example, Erickson correctly notes that our paper does speak of the biological reality of our bodies and of the relentless demands the body places on us. Unfortunately, however, the nature of biological reality and its effects (i.e., "demands") is easily misunderstood. Indeed, a key argument of our paper is that this has largely been the case in modern culture and psychology—and it has been so to the ultimate detriment of our understanding of our own agency, not to mention our own sexuality.

In almost all areas of human endeavor, the "relentless demands" of our biological embodiment are quite clear and straightforward. For example, imagine Smith works as a carpenter; that is, being a carpenter is what Smith does in and with much of his life. Every day, Smith must confront the "relentless demands of embodiment," as it is repeatedly made clear that there are limits to how fast he can work, and how much he can carry at one time, and thus to the number of trips it takes to load and unload needed materials. He is continuously confronted by limitations of various sorts, such as the size and weight of certain tools, how such brute realities constrain how he will operate those tools, and what contrivances he will need in order to use them most effectively. He is also confronted by advantages and affordances because his more-than-six-foot frame allows him to reach some things and do some jobs others cannot. His physical stature also allows him to excuse himself

from certain other jobs in small and tight spaces, tasks that he will gladly assign to others because they are things he is simply not capable of doing. However, at no time does it enter Smith's mind that any part of his physical make-up – including his DNA—could in any way make him or induce him to be a carpenter, or cause him to enjoy being a carpenter, or need being a carpenter for the establishment of his identity or even personal satisfaction. Indeed, how could the physical material of Smith's body know or care about, or do any of these sorts of things?

The case of physical reality and the "relentless" (because not subject to willful change) demands of the body (or, embodiment) in terms of sexuality is in some sense similar to the case of Smith's carpentry. In another sense, the bodily impact and import *viz a viz* sexuality is much simpler. The acute givenness—"relentless demands"—of the body in sexual matters are really quite simple and straightforward, and limited to some obvious realities. Every cell of the human body—except for blood cells—has the markers of biological sex. The biological/bodily demands on sexuality are the chromosomally indexed bodily sex, sexual apparatus, and secondary sex characteristics, along with biological correlates such as muscle mass, center of gravity, and other biological dimorphisms in various body parts. But, just as we likely would not assume that Smith's love and expression of carpentry or his identity as a carpenter could be deeply rooted in or caused by his biology, we ought to seriously ask ourselves on what basis we could suppose that the human, agentic expressions or experiences of "sexuality" are matters that biological substances could determine or influence, much less produce.

In other words, it is equally questionable just how the physical material of the body, or even a particular bit of physical material in the body, can produce any non-physical things such as "attractions," "feelings," "identities," or "preferences"—whether for carpentry or for sexuality. At the present time we are not familiar with any research on this possibility that is not—at its core—simply correlational; that is, when people are behaving in some sexually relevant way, their bodies and brains are not inert, bodies are (always) doing something. However, no causal arrows emerge

from such analyses, despite the fact that they are often (illegitimately) inferred. In a similar vein, as we might think to ask Smith whether he has ever felt that deep inside him there was a musician trying to “get out” and find expression. We suspect his answer might be something like, “I don’t know. Maybe. I’ve thought about it. I used to hang around with friends who played instruments. I know I could do that if I wanted to. It would be a change in life. It would come at a cost. Would I really want that more than this? That’s for me to choose, right?”

This answer from Smith—that we have constructed—illustrates the kind of being-in-the-world that is the domain of persons possessed of the sort of agency for which our paper argues. As we have argued, agency consists in doing, taking up, giving oneself over, taking on, and putting off, for countless, and often unarticulated reasons, which reasons are also, in turn, the fruit of genuine agentic acting. We note here that in our brief explanation, there has been no mention of, indeed no need for, any abstract entity like an “identity,” an abstraction so often invoked and which indeed seems to dominate current thinking about sexuality, but which ultimately obviates the very existence and power of real human agency.

Now, none of the foregoing should be taken to suggest that the emotions, the “feelings” of persons as they are actively “taking up” or “taking on” various possibilities, various “what-if’s” and “if-only’s,” that active agentic meaning-making persons experience in daily life, are not “real.” The question is, rather, in what way they are “real.” Certainly, they are real enough in the sense that something is being experienced; the person experiencing such feelings is neither lying about them nor just “making things up.” However, and this is the crux of any truly agentic account, while such (sexual) feelings and desires are really taking place, it most certainly does not follow that such feelings are necessarily what they present themselves to be, either in substance or in origin, even while the agent doing the “feeling” is really experiencing them.¹ On the contrary, the agent is not

simply “feeling,” but in many subtle and continuous ways “creating,” or, in other words, “living.” Of course, we are most often unaware of the creative, constructive activities involved in thinking, doing, or feeling at the heart of our actions. This is because in nearly all aspects and situations of life, we simply do not take the time to stop, introspect, and make explicit to ourselves in some formal or theoretical way what, why, and how exactly we are doing and feeling what we are doing and feeling. Indeed, doing so often seems unnecessary, and would in fact tend to make all acting profoundly slow, artificial, and clumsy—not to mention people mostly lack any language suitable to such a subtle and boundless identification and specification task. This is to say that this agentic productive process is largely unnoticed because it exists—not on display as in a museum, or in a form that might be readily captured by an X-Ray or fMRI image—but only in and through the actual agentic act of doing and feeling.

Asking us to give abstracted, analytical descriptions of what it is like to feel sexually attracted is rather like asking a fish what it is like to breathe by means of gills instead of lungs. Being sexually attracted is just what we do in many ways that are constantly coming and going, shifting and growing, or frightening and demanding—as we actively live our lives moment to moment, in and through the flow of daily engagement with the world and others. There really is no “time-out” in agentic life—just ever-shifting meaningful contexts co-constituted by us and all the others who happen to be relevant to us in our ongoing-lives, for whatever combination of shifting, ebbing, and flowing reasons. So, the conclusion here is that sexual feelings are real enough (all life is real enough), but this is not to say that they are what they proclaim themselves to be or what we, ourselves, or others take them to be, at any one moment in the flow of any agent’s lived world. Even less can we claim such feelings to really be what extraspective analysts, scholars, or professionals might claim them to be.

Finally, Sabey’s (this issue) thoughtful re-

¹The possibility of self-deception in the agentic “doing” of particular feelings that is raised here is a psychologically and philosophically pressing question, but one which unfortunately exceeds the scope of this short response paper and will require more attentive treatment at another time. The interested reader, however, may benefit from consulting discussions of the issue of self-deception, agency, and emotion explored in Williams and Gantt (2012), Williams (2005), and Warner (1986b,a).

response raises several important questions that provide us an opportunity to clarify some additional aspects of what we mean in depicting human sexuality as agentic acting. The first issue is raised in the first paragraph of Sabey's response, where he discusses the importance of sexuality in such contexts as those where "limitations of religious institutions' ability to discriminate based on issues of sex and sexuality continues to be challenged." The issue of discrimination raised here most certainly is not the simple and inevitable truism that people, as well as organizations such as churches, can and do "tell the difference" between things or types of things (i.e., discriminate them from other things). Life, without discrimination of this sort, would be dangerous indeed. Obviously, rather, what Sabey is referring to is mistreatment or unfairness toward people because of something they are—categorically or even metaphysically—through no action of their own. The analysis of sexuality presented in our paper, however, argues that sexuality is not an attribute of persons – categorically or metaphysically—but, rather, sexuality is agentic action undertaken by moral agents in ways and for reasons that may be quite opaque in the course of daily involvement in the world to the actors themselves or to observers of the action. Thus, it would be unreasonable for a church to discriminate—i.e., deal with people differently—"based on issues of sex and sexuality" were these indeed non-agentic things that simply befall people because of factors and forces in the face of which persons are either ignorant or helpless. That is, differential treatment would be problematic were sexuality just something that happens to persons. However, on the other hand, it would be entirely reasonable to deal with people differently based on what they, as moral agents, do by virtue of their intrinsic agency. Indeed, it might be argued that the purpose of religion is to caution against some courses of action and ways of going through life, courses of action that agents might take up, or give themselves over to, which lead to outcomes not to be desired, as well as recommending other courses of action that lead to where believers want to go (or, qua believers, where they should want to go). While this is "discrimination" in the broad descriptive sense, it is hardly discrimination in the negative, persecutorial sense,

even though such "discrimination" might be taken to be or pervasively claimed to be persecutorial, even by other believers, in our current cultural discourse. Indeed, it would seem that a central defining function of any faith tradition is to lay out for all believers the beatific vision of what any adherent should want to do and want to be—otherwise, there would be no purpose for a faith tradition beyond providing the hedonic affirmations that any secular psychotherapy might also offer.

Sabey catches the essence of our analysis of sexuality when he points out that the theories of contemporary psychology "do not allow humans to be responsible for their sexuality or sexual behavior." This is indeed a fundamental part of our argument. However, we will here seize on the opportunity to remind the reader of how deep the analysis goes by noting that the wording of the above quote from Sabey's paper regarding people's "being responsible for . . . their sexuality or sexual behavior" seems to make a distinction between "sexuality" and "sexual behavior," a distinction our argument calls into question. Ultimately, although for rhetorical convenience we can use both "sexuality" and "sexual behavior" in their descriptive senses, analytically, the perspective we offer in our paper argues against reifying any abstraction (e.g., sexuality) and thus emphasizes that sexuality and (agentic) sexual behavior are always the same thing.

Sabey is clear and insightful in his description of how the mainstream discipline has handled human sexuality noting that, failing to develop a coherent account of human sexuality, "modern psychology (wittingly or not) seems to have largely defaulted to an *à la carte* approach, choosing theories that, under the specific circumstances, best suit an agenda of human blamelessness." Indeed, this problem is chief among those our paper seeks to address.

Sabey further expresses a very substantive issue, one about which we care deeply. This is the question of whether the analysis of sexuality we offer is in some way at odds with how prophets, apostles, and other leaders in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have spoken about sexual experiences and attractions. We appreciate this thoughtful critique as it gives us opportunity to respond to such concerns directly. Sabey

writes: “The Church officially and explicitly asserts that individuals may experience attractions that are not of their own making (i.e., not agentic).” It is important to note here that, at least in the official writings of the Church of which we are aware, the parenthetical comment “(not agentic)” is not part of the text. We would hope our paper makes clear that we disagree not only with any naturalistic or psychic view of determinism that eliminates the possibility of human agency in its account of human behavior, but also disagree with the understanding of human agency cast in the language of classical rational libertarian free choice. To say that people experience attractions not of their own making seems to agree with one of the fundamental assumptions of our paper. Of course, we do not purposely and deliberately “make” our own experiences. As we argue in our paper, agents are most often “blind” to the source and origin of most of what they do—even agentially do – unless significant critical self-reflection is undertaken in or after the doing of it. The traditional libertarian view of agency, what is often called the “radical choice” approach to human freedom (see, e.g., Taylor, 1985), argues that the hallmark of agency is the making of deliberated “free” choices from among sets of (presumably equally viable) alternatives. However, such is almost never actually the case in actual human action and choosing. Rather, agency, as our paper seeks to understand it, consists in a much more pervasive, dynamic, holistic, and intricate engagement in and with the world and with others. Indeed, our agency is so much a part of us that we seldom stop to deliberate about it at all. Thus, we agree with Elder Ballard, whom Sabey cites, in that we do not believe that sexually relevant feelings or experiences of any sort generally arise from, or result from, deliberated choices from amongst equally attractive and possible alternatives in the way that our post-Enlightenment, rational cultures might have supposed that all agentic acts must emerge. We simply cannot and do not conjure experiences—at least, not genuine experiences. For example, it is impossible to “be angry,” or “be attracted,” on demand or for no grounding reason. Rather, agency is so much woven into the fabric, both warp and woof, of life itself that we, for the most part, lose all sense of

deliberate choosing and indeed do not “have” genuine experiences of our own deliberate making – except as we sometimes distance ourselves from the flow of life for some limited analytical purposes, or perhaps, to test the maxim, “fake it ‘til you make it.”

To pursue the issue further, the kind of “choosing” that constitutes agentic action, in the flow of a real life always already underway, must be something akin to the constant “choosing” of, for example, the point of articulation, the position of the tongue, engagement or non-engagement of the vocal cords, and the expulsion of air from different places in our vocal system every time we speak. Speaking is inherently agentic—unless one is under the influence of chemical substances or otherwise impaired—but it is not deliberately or radically freely “chosen” in the way that libertarian accounts of human action typically describe human agency. Indeed, if a speaker were to stop to make these actions of articulation matters of deliberation, he or she would almost certainly experience grave difficulty in speaking with any fluency at all. Thus, we hold that we are in agreement with Elder Ballard and even hope that our view of agency might help people understand what we believe he is teaching. Things like attractions, even while they are agentic, are much more dynamic and subtle than can ever be understood by any conception of libertarian rational choice.

Sabey further quotes Elder Ballard, who 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.” Here again we agree with Elder Ballard. We hold that people “do not choose to have . . . attractions,” firstly because, as Sabey correctly argues in his commentary, “attractions” as abstractions are empty concepts, and not at all the sorts of things a person could actually “have” in the common sense of that word. As abstractions, attractions are not real “things” that one can choose. In our view, an “attraction” is a description of how one is currently agentially “being-in-the-world.” That is, attractions are not things that “call” us or “drive us,” but, rather, in any moment, they are always already what we are doing. To be sure, we can do more – which would be doing the “attraction” more broadly and overtly, but, even

then, only by “acting attractedly,” acting as we, without really deliberating or consciously choosing to do so, suppose an attracted person would act. Nonetheless, since our attractions, our sexual “desirings,” are accoutrements of what else we as agents are doing, then we as agents must keep doing certain things or the attractions will cease to be—that is, they will, as we might say, “go away” (as all actions do when we cease doing them—this is why, for example, repentance works). In the end, this is all to say that agents can, at all times, in hundreds of ways, and for hundreds of reasons, do and be otherwise. Perhaps not easily in every case, or even most cases, but nonetheless the possibility still persists, and it does so only by virtue of our fundamental nature as moral agents. We are so confident that doing otherwise is always possible because to be the kind of beings we are is to be doing something—so doing otherwise is always a sort of “sideways” move, not a “starting from scratch.”

The position we wish to articulate and defend in our paper is one in which this ongoing, dynamic, enmeshed agentic doing constitutes the very substance of agentic life and a particular type of choosing.² In 2 Nephi 2:27, we read of “choosing” in a way that looks very much like what we are proposing in our conceptualization of human agency:

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.

Certainly, a choice of the sort described in this passage of scripture (i.e., a choice of eternal life) is not the sort of thing one does one day on a whim or for some calculated reason arrived at through the detached deliberation of any cost/benefit ratios. The sort of “choosing” depicted here is simply too comprehensive and too grand for that sort of thing. Such a choice (eternal life or captivity and death) can be nothing short of the creative result of an entire life of agentic taking up and giving of ourselves over to various meaningful, lived

possibilities and relationships. We believe Elder Ballard is absolutely correct in his analysis, and more importantly we would hope that he would judge us to be in agreement with him.

We believe the Church has wisely left further analysis of the “pushes and pulls” that sometimes seem to be a part of our lives, including sexually relevant actions, for church members to work through, thereby avoiding what would surely be taken to be theological pronouncements of the metaphysics of sin and worthiness. Surely, the Church has no desire to offend or discourage—with some philosophical or metaphysical pronouncement—any member who might actually be helped at any moment for any number of reasons, by any number of invitations by the loving grace of Jesus and helping words and helping hands. The Church, we believe, would not want any sort of theological or philosophical perspective to get in anyone’s way or to interfere with the genuine agency which offers the continual promise of a possible “otherwise.” Nonetheless, we hardly believe that something the Church “leaves open” can rise to the level of a refutation, much less a contradiction, of the view of agency we have sought to articulate. The only way the Church’s statements referenced by Sabey could constitute a refutation of our view of agency would be if one were to reify abstractions (like “attractions”) and endow them with real causal power, while accepting libertarian rational free choice as the true definition of human moral agency. However, to do that would be to adopt a position that Sabey himself seemed to appropriately refute earlier in his comments, and one that our paper was also intended to refute.

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²Not, we must be clear, the kind of objective, isolated, abstracted, deliberative choosing of the classical libertarian model of agency that has been so prominent in our traditions.

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