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ASEXUALITY

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Introduction

Asexuality has been almost entirely ignored in the philosophical literature on sex and love. For instance, at the time we write, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which is arguably the premier comprehensive reference work in philosophy, mentions “asexuality” only when discussing fungi in the “Species” entry; there is no mention of “asexuality” in the entry on “Sex and Sexuality” (Halwani 2020) or in any of the entries related to gender. Another example is the most recent edition of *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, a popular reader on the philosophy of sex; in this collection, “asexuality” is discussed in the main body of only one essay, and then only briefly (Hall 2017: 250).¹ So far as we know, the only philosophical work devoted specifically to asexuality is a single essay by Luke Brunning and Natasha McKeever (2020).²

One might object that asexuality has not received philosophical attention because it is not philosophically or politically significant.³ We would strongly disagree. Asexuality is politically significant for several reasons. First, an estimated 1%–6% of the population is asexual⁴ and this population is oppressed in various ways, as we discuss in the third section of this chapter, “Asexuality and Oppression.” Second, there is a recent surge of political activism and awareness around asexuality, as we discuss throughout this essay. As for asexuality’s philosophical significance, we take this essay to conclusively demonstrate this. A clearer understanding of asexuality should make us reconsider our understanding of important philosophical concepts like “sexual orientation” (as we discuss in the second section, “Asexuality as a Unique Sexual Orientation”) and our understanding of the workings of oppression for groups that lack clearly established public mechanisms to signal their identity. For these reasons, the omissions in the relevant areas of philosophy are indeed noteworthy.

In this essay, we aim to provide an overview of the political and philosophical issues pertaining to asexuality. The first section, “What Is Asexuality?,” offers an account of asexuality. The second section, “Asexuality as a Unique Sexual Orientation,” argues that asexuality should be understood as a unique sexual orientation. The third section, “Asexuality and Oppression,” discusses the various forms of oppression facing asexual persons today. The fourth section, “The Goods of Asexuality,” articulates some goods that asexuality brings to human lives, and we do this with an eye toward conceiving of asexuality as something other than a mere deficit.

Before beginning, we would like to situate ourselves by highlighting aspects of our social identities that may influence what we say here. Szustak is a cis-gendered neurodivergent white woman who is herself asexual. Eaton is a cis-gendered non-visibly disabled white woman who is not asexual but who aims to support asexual people. Further, our discussion is limited to asexuality in the US context, although we invite our readers to make connections with other contexts.

What Is Asexuality?

Following what we take to be the current convention, we will refer to an asexual person as (an) “Ace” (used as a noun or an adjective) and to the broader group of asexual persons as “Aces.”⁵ Aces can be of any ability, age, class, gender or gender identity, ethnicity, or race, which is to say that Aces are a very diverse group.⁶ What unites Aces as Aces is their sustained lack, or near lack, of sexual attraction to others. It is the absence of sexual attraction and not any particular sort of behavior, that is central to asexuality. Aces may choose to engage in sexual activity (both partnered and non-partnered), but this is very rarely motivated by sexual attraction. However, this rough formulation needs refining because, as we shall see, asexuality is a complex orientation that lies on a spectrum and that admits of a wide variety of incarnations. There are many different ways to be Ace, and so what we offer below should be thought of as a characterization rather than a list of necessary and sufficient conditions.

With the aim of capturing some of asexuality’s complexity, we offer the following points and distinctions. First, in this essay we will follow *sympathetic* discussions of asexuality which tend to define it in terms of lack of sexual attraction rather than as a lack of sexual activity or of sexual desire.⁷ Some Aces may engage in sexual activity with others, even on a regular basis, for a variety of reasons; for example, to please their romantic partners, to conceive offspring, or to make money or other material benefits. In addition, some Aces may not be “out,” even to themselves, and so may engage in sexual activity with others because it seems normal or even proper. What would make such a person Ace would be that their sexual activity with others would not be motivated by sexual attraction.

Sexual attraction has been framed as a perspective on another person, a perspective that paints them as inviting some form of sexual engagement.⁸ Sexual attraction, in these contexts, is thought of as an exclusively other-directed disposition, whereas *sexual desire* is taken to be “an urge for sexual stimulation” that need not be directed at other persons (Bogaert 2015: 364).⁹ This distinction between sexual attraction and sexual desire allows for the acknowledgment of the fact that some Aces may desire sexual stimulation of the non-partnered masturbatory sort, yet feel absolutely no sexual attraction to other people. In such cases, non-partnered masturbation should be understood not as a substitute for sex with other persons but as an end in itself.

Second, Aces distinguish between various kinds of other-directed attractions that are typically run together in discussions of sexuality. An important example introduced by the Ace community is what is sometimes called the “Split Attraction Model,” which decouples romantic attraction from sexual attraction.¹⁰ Just as some sexual people feel a strong sexual attraction to others yet feel no romantic attraction to anyone, so some Aces lack sexual attraction to others yet want and participate in strong intimate loving relationships with others.¹¹ For instance, one study reports that roughly one-third of Aces are in long-term romantic relationships (Bogaert 2004; see also Hinderliter 2009). Some Aces, however, are also aromantic (sometimes called “aro”); that is, they do not experience romantic attraction to anyone. Aces who do engage in romantic relationships may identify as hetero-, homo-, bi-, or pan-romantic—although, as we suggest at the end of the second section, “Asexuality as a Unique Sexual Orientation,” it may be a good idea to modify these in light of Robin Dembroff’s recent account of sexual orientation. Distinct from both romantic attraction and sexual attraction is aesthetic attraction. This is the experience of finding someone beautiful (or handsome, pretty, gorgeous, striking, elegant, graceful, and so on) without this being sexually or romantically motivating. As Angela Chen notes, “breaking the link between aesthetic and romantic and sexual attraction makes it possible to understand each type on its own terms instead of mistaking one for the other” (Chen 2020a: 28).

Third, it is important to distinguish the lack of sexual attraction, which is an internal psychological disposition, from various kinds of conduct and behavior. As noted above, Aces may

engage in sexual conduct with other persons for a variety of reasons. Conversely, sexual people (sometimes referred to as allosexuals or allos) may refrain from all sexual activity and yet not be in the least asexual; for example, in the cases of abstinence, celibacy, and chastity (see McArthur, this volume). Abstinence is the practice of refraining from indulging sexual attraction, and in particular from engaging in sexual activity with other people and perhaps also with oneself alone, while celibacy is a commitment to lifelong abstinence. Chastity is abstinence prior to marriage. The concept of abstinence ordinarily assumes that the subject feels sexual attraction in the first place and that it is precisely this attraction that they refrain from indulging. Asexuality, as we have said, is first and foremost the lack, or near lack, of sexual attraction and does not hinge on the absence of sexual activity with others.

Fourth, it is generally important to Aces that asexuality be excluded from the sorts of purported medical disorders outlined in the DSM-V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). To be clear, this does not necessarily support legitimacy of the other purported medical disorders outlined in the DSM-V; rather, it is simply to insist that asexuality ought not to be included. This is because asexuality has been wrongly medicalized and this medicalization is part of the oppression that Aces experience, as we discuss in the third section, “Asexuality and Oppression.” Aces are not intrinsically distressed by their lack of sexual attraction. We say “intrinsically” to make the point that while many Aces may be distressed about being asexual, the sources of this distress are the various forms of stigmatization, discrimination, and lack of social acceptance that Aces experience, not the state of asexuality itself. It can be distressing to be asexual because society makes it so. In the absence of societal pressures and discriminations, there is nothing inherently distressing about being asexual.

Fifth, while we initially described asexuality as a total lack of sexual attraction, the matter is in fact murkier and more complex. It is more precise to say that asexuality lies on several intersecting spectra. Some Aces, for instance, do not *usually* experience sexual attraction, but can experience this sometimes (sometimes called “Graysexual” or “Gray-A”). Some Aces can *sometimes* desire and enjoy sex with other people, but only under highly specific circumstances such as when there is a strong emotional bond (sometimes referred to as “Demisexual”). Some Aces are completely repulsed by sexual activity, while others are merely indifferent. Some Aces engage in sexual activity because their partners desire it, but what makes them Ace in such cases is that sexual attraction is not among their motives.

One might object with the following dilemma: either Graysexuality, Demisexuality, and other closely related orientations cannot be included under the umbrella of “asexuality” because members of these groups do sometimes experience some degree of sexual attraction, or asexuality ought not to be characterized as a lack of sexual attraction for this same reason. But this objection misses the point that we have emphasized from the beginning, namely that ours is a sympathetic characterization that aims to reflect how the Ace community understands themselves, and the Ace community definitively understands asexuality to lie on a spectrum and accepts low-sexual-attraction orientations under their umbrella.¹²

Exploring these distinctions and spectra is essential for understanding asexuality, but these distinctions and spectra are also useful for thinking critically about the building blocks of other sexual orientations. This is yet another reason why asexuality should be included in the philosophy of sex and sexuality.

Asexuality as a Unique Sexual Orientation

If asexuality is the absence of sexual attraction, then in what sense can asexuality be considered a sexual orientation as opposed to a mere lack of sexual orientation? Further, why does this matter? What practical difference does it make whether we consider asexuality to be a bona fide sexual

orientation? We contend that exploring these questions reveals much about asexuality and also encourages critical reflection on our understanding of “sexual orientation.”

It is perhaps obvious that much depends on how one defines “sexual orientation” in the first place, and this is a matter of considerable dispute. While it is not the aim of this essay to resolve the issue, we do think that taking asexuality as a starting point when thinking about how to conceive of and understand “sexual orientation,” rather than addressing asexuality as an afterthought, yields some important new considerations. It may be that centering asexuality forces us to rethink what we mean by “sexual orientation” altogether.

For this reason, our starting point when thinking about “sexual orientation” is that of Aces and their allies, and Aces and their allies very strongly tend to consider asexuality to be a bona fide sexual orientation rather than the absence of one. Even a cursory glance at the website for the Asexuality and Visibility Education Network (AVEN), which is arguably the most influential online asexuality community, or the asexuality literature makes this clear. The reasons for this are deeply practical. Considering asexuality to be a sexual orientation, rather than a lack of one, provides for legal protections such as antidiscrimination laws, allows for inclusion in sexual minority societies and in pride events, serves as a basis for networking and identity-based communities such as AVEN, and provides a basis for self-understanding, all of which are important for fighting stigma and discrimination.¹³ We discuss these things in the third section, “Asexuality and Oppression.”

Following Sally Haslanger, we ask: What conception of “sexual orientation” can serve these purposes while simultaneously serving the needs of other minoritized groups (Haslanger 2000)? A good starting point is Robin Dembroff’s “bidimensional dispositionalism” account of sexual orientation which aims to recognize and accommodate persons who are queer, trans, or outside of gender or sex binaries (Dembroff 2016). Dembroff’s account is also the only one we know of to explicitly acknowledge and aim to include asexuality. While we appreciate Dembroff’s overarching aim, we do have our doubts about whether their definition of sexual orientation can in fact include asexuality. To see this, let us briefly review the definition and compare it to ordinary understandings of “sexual orientation.”

While there are different ways of trying to capture our ordinary conception of “sexual orientation,” they all have the following features in common (Dembroff 2016; Halwani 2020, sec. 1.4):

- a They assume that there are, at most, three basic orientations (heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual);¹⁴
- b They are ambiguous between sex and gender (e.g., If a woman is attracted to a man’s gender but not his sex, is she still heterosexual?);
- c They assume sex and gender binaries;
- d They make reference to the sex/gender of the subject of the orientation;
- e They do not distinguish between romantic and sexual attraction.

These restrictions mean that ordinary conceptions of sexual orientation cannot classify, or even recognize, the sexualities of the following: people who are, or who are attracted to those who are, genderqueer or gender fluid or nonbinary; people whose sexual identities or attractions fasten on to kinds of sexual activity rather than to person-types (Bornstein 1995); people whose sexual identities or attractions gravitate toward non-human animals (Wilkerson 2017: 199); and, of course, Aces.

Dembroff’s bidimensional dispositionalism aims to include these groups. It holds that: “sexual orientation is based upon a person’s sexual behavioral dispositions under the ordinary manifesting conditions for these dispositions (i.e., the conditions corresponding to applications of the term ‘sexual orientation’ and related terms), and having a particular sexual orientation is based upon what sex[es] and gender[s] of persons one is (or is not) disposed to sexually engage with under these

conditions.” (Dembroff 2016: 3). On this account, categories of sexual orientation do not reference a person’s own gender or sex, but only the sex[es] and gender[s] of the persons they are or are not disposed to sexually engage with. So, for example, a person whom we would normally consider to be a gay man (i.e., having a homosexual orientation) and one whom we would normally consider to be a straight woman (i.e., having a heterosexual orientation) would, on Dembroff’s account, actually have the same or at least a similar sexual orientation, namely, being disposed to sexually engage with men.

Dembroff’s definition is rich and touches on a host of issues that we do not have room to discuss here.¹⁵ What we’d like to focus on is whether this definition can properly countenance and include asexuality. As we noted earlier, it is clear that Dembroff intends their definition to include asexuality. In a footnote to the definition just cited, Dembroff writes: “Acknowledging that some people wholly lack dispositions to sexually engage with other persons on the basis of sex- or gender-attractions will include asexuality with regard to sex and gender among the class of sexual orientations” (Dembroff 2016: 10). While we very much appreciate the attempt at inclusion, we have two worries about the definition.

First, we worry that asexuality appears in this definition as a mere afterthought that must be shoehorned into a definition that was not built to properly accommodate asexuality. The concern is not merely that asexuality appears only in footnotes. Rather, the concern is that Dembroff’s definition construes the most basic options among sexual orientations as differences in the kinds of persons with whom one is disposed to sexually engage, implicitly leaving it open for people who opt out altogether. In this way, the definition centers on allosexuality and does not explicitly anticipate asexuality as a sexual orientation. We think that this is a shortcoming of a definition that means to be inclusive of minoritized and stigmatized sexualities.

To see what we mean, consider the following example. You’re inviting guests to dinner and you ask them, “What kind of meat do you eat?” Even if you are in fact totally open to their being vegetarian or vegan, this way of putting the question risks making them feel unanticipated, and perhaps worse, unwelcome, unrecognized, and awkward. Now imagine that vegetarians and vegans were part of a socially unrecognized (and so chronically unanticipated) and wrongfully stigmatized group, as Aces are. It becomes clear why it would be so important to first ask if your guests are vegan, vegetarian, meat-eater, and if the latter, Kosher or Halal. Failing to ask the more general question—if your guests have any dietary restrictions, preferences, or needs—risks not only making your guests feel unanticipated and unwelcome (which, we are imagining, is the regular state of their lives) but it also puts them in a position of having to “out” themselves, which could submit them to other risks, and of having to explain themselves yet again. Hence our first proposal is that Dembroff’s definition be amended so that having a particular sexual orientation would be *first* a question of whether a person is disposed to sexually engage with others and second, if so, with which sex(es) and gender(s).¹⁶

Our second concern is about the centrality of “dispositions to engage sexually,” which Dembroff discusses at length (Dembroff 2016: 12ff.). As we noted in the first section of this essay, Aces tend strongly to understand “asexuality” as the lack of sexual attraction (which is understood to be always other-directed), leaving open the possibility that Aces could be disposed to willingly engage in sexual activity with others for a variety of reasons pertaining to their life choices and projects. Consider, for example, an Ace who makes a living through some form of sex work, or a person who is Ace and who is romantically involved with an allo with whom they have sex on a regular basis. In both cases, the person would be “disposed” to engage sexually with others and yet would still count as Ace because the sexual activity would not be motivated by sexual attraction. Now let us consider the inverse of this: some people are not “disposed” to engage in sexual activity because they are celibate or practice abstinence, and yet these people do not count as or identify as Ace because they nevertheless experience sexual attraction (to others). It is worth

noting that some of these considerations also apply to other sexual orientations. Consider, for instance, a cis woman who is a sex worker with exclusively cis male clients but who is attracted to trans women. If she has no opportunity to date any trans women because, imagine, she works a lot and the rest of the time has to fulfill familial care work, we could say that she is “disposed” to engage in sex with cis-men but it would seem wrong to describe this as her sexual orientation since she, by hypothesis, is attracted to trans women.

With these two points in mind, we propose recasting Dembroff’s definition to a multidimensional model that begins by taking the Ace/allo distinction as the most basic. In addition, this model would construe the Ace/allo distinction as being on a spectrum to make room for Graysexuals and Demisexuals (discussed in the first section above, “What Is Asexuality?”). The model then would carve up the allos in just the way that Dembroff suggests, but Dembroff’s model should also inflect how we think about some Aces. For instance, taking Dembroff’s model into consideration should shift how we think about the romantic orientations of those Aces who experience romantic attraction and engage in romantic relationships. Following Dembroff, romantic Aces, Graysexuals, and demisexual orientations would be distinguished according to what sexes and genders a person is romantically attracted to or very occasionally sexually attracted to, and would not make reference to the subject’s own sex or gender.

Asexuality and Oppression

Aces are an oppressed group. In this section, we identify four key aspects of the oppression that Aces face. We take our understanding of “oppression” from Iris Marion Young who famously argued that oppression is structural and systemic “rather than the result of a few people’s choices or policies.” “Oppression,” on Young’s influential view, refers to “the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms -- in short, the normal processes of everyday life” (Young 2011: 5 ff.).¹⁷

In this section, we highlight some significant aspects of the oppression of Aces, dividing it into the following categories which have also been influenced by Young.

Violence

Aces face serious danger because of their sexual orientation. Aces are subject to online threats of rape and murder, are told that they should kill themselves, and frequently receive hateful, derogatory, and discriminatory messages. This danger extends to the real world where Aces experience sexual violence, assault, and so-called “corrective” rape. A 2018 asexual community census found that 79.5% of approximately 15,000 respondents reported having experienced sexual violence, including rape, (other) nonconsensual sex, sexual coercion, and sexual assault (Weis et al. 2020: 27–28). Although this survey was not randomized and so does not purport to offer a representative sample of the Ace population in general, it is the largest data collection on Ace experiences and gives evidence of real violence. In this survey, almost 12,000 Aces acknowledge that they have been sexually assaulted or sexually coerced.¹⁸ They should be believed.

But how, one might object, do we know that the Aces who reported in this survey were assaulted or coerced *because* they are Ace? After all, as we discuss in the sub-section “Cultural Imperialism” below, invisibility is one facet of Ace oppression, meaning that there are no public tell-tale signs of being Ace. At first glance, this might seem to make it unlikely that the attacks reported by Aces would be due to their being Ace as opposed to being a member of some other publicly identifiable oppressed group.¹⁹

We offer the following responses to this objection. First, as we say below, due to the lack of a robust and thriving community, asexuality does not have the rich array of socially sanctioned public markers that some other sexual orientations have. However, Aces can and do declare their asexuality to people they trust, and this trust can be tragically exploited and abused. Second, taking intersectionality seriously means that often one cannot prize apart the various dimensions of a person's identity to figure out which is "the" target of violence or other kinds of oppression. Many, perhaps most, Aces are also people of color or women or trans or disabled or fat (all conjunctive "or" s), and as with all kinds of intersectional violence, one may not be able to tell with scientific exactitude which aspects of one's identity figure most into an attacker's motives. That said, and this brings us to our third and final point, some Aces report that their attackers have told them that the attack is specifically in response to asexuality; this is especially true in cases of "corrective rape."²⁰ Again, they should be believed.

Cultural Imperialism

Young's concept of cultural imperialism offers a helpful way to understand one important mechanism of the social oppression of Aces. Young writes, "To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as Other" (Young 2011: 59).

Aces and asexuality are invisible in a variety of significant domains: invisible in the dominant culture, invisible in LGBTQ+ communities, and also often Aces are invisible to each other. Furthermore, some Aces are invisible even to themselves in the sense that they are unaware of what asexuality is and so unable to identify in this way. While in practice these modes of invisibility are often interconnected, below we disentangle them for conceptual clarity. Also, to be clear, by "invisible" we do not mean that asexuality is *in principle* hidden and unshareable but, rather, that asexuality does not have what Linda Martín Alcoff calls a "visible manifestation" (Alcoff 2006). Nor does it have a publicly shared, socially sanctioned, and recognizable expression. Of course, as noted above, Aces can and do express their asexuality through verbal declaration, and Aces are working to develop strong communities with publicly identifiable markers, but at the time that we write there is still a lot of Ace-invisibility that must be overcome.

First, Aces and asexuality are invisible in the dominant culture. Representation of asexuality in media and popular culture is virtually nonexistent. GLAAD, an American media monitoring association founded by LGBT media people, publishes an annual report on diversity and representation in television. In the 2018–2019 report, there were only two asexual characters listed: Todd Chavez from *BoJack Horseman*, and Raphael Santiago from *Shadowhunters*, and in the 2019–2020 report only Todd Chavez remained on the list. This leaves us with zero asexual characters on television at the time of this writing.²¹ Wikipedia's entry for fictional asexual characters lists only forty-three characters from books, television, film, comics, podcasts, and video games at the time of this writing.²²

Second, Aces are invisible in LGBTQ+ communities. While the visibility of asexuality is greater within the LGBTQ+ community, Aces are widely rejected and/or misunderstood by other LGBTQ+ persons. They are often accused of repressing their sexuality, perhaps from internalized homophobia, or claiming asexuality as a way of "staying in the closet" or passing as straight. Pride parades often include little to no asexual representation.²³ There is an Ace flag corresponding to the various pride flags of LGBTQ+ identities, but how many of our readers can identify it?²⁴

Finally, Aces are often invisible to each other or even unaware of the existence of asexuality or of Ace identities. There are no well-established communities for Aces—such as Ace neighborhoods, bars, or community centers—and so no physical structures or social gathering places

for Aces to gather, share, and bond. Additionally, there are no conventionally accepted ways of signaling asexuality and so not even stereotypical ways that Aces talk, act, or dress.²⁵ This contributes to Ace invisibility in the dominant culture and in LGBTQ+ communities, but importantly also Ace invisibility to other Aces. Because they have never encountered it as an option in the dominant culture or even in LGBTQ+ spaces, many Aces are unable to recognize and name their orientation as such, thus rendering them in a sense invisible to themselves. Just as some gay and trans persons spend much of their lives unable to recognize that they are gay or trans, so too some Aces are not able to recognize that they are Ace. All of this can lead to depression and isolation as well as various forms of hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2009: chap. 7).

Insofar as Aces and asexuality do receive representation in the dominant culture, they are stigmatized, dehumanized, pathologized, or ridiculed. For instance, in a 2012 episode of the popular show *House M.D.*, the titular doctor encounters a female–male married couple who identify as asexual. Despite his colleague Dr. Wilson defending asexuality as a valid orientation, House declares that “[Sex] is a fundamental drive of our species, sex is healthy. Lots of people don’t have sex...The only people who don’t want it are either sick, dead, or lying.”²⁶ By the end of the episode, the husband has been diagnosed with a tumor that suppressed his sexual drive, and the wife is revealed to have been lying for the sake of her relationship, thereby validating House’s proclamation. This is the kind of representation that Aces and asexuality receive if they are represented at all.

The only meanings that the dominant society allows to asexual persons are those of the deviant, and this is the sort of attitude that affects how Aces are seen and treated by allosexuals, both hetero and LGBTQ+ (The T in LGBTQ+ is excluded in this context as trans refers to gender identity, not sexual orientation). A 2012 study by MacInnis and Hodson found evidence that heterosexuals view Aces less favorably than other sexual minorities, considering them less trustworthy and less human (MacInnis and Hodson 2012). Aces are also frequently rejected by the LGBTQ+ community.²⁷ One reason for this is that sexuality is widely celebrated within LGBTQ+ communities as a central component of identity and as a resistant response to the stigma against LGBTQ+ people as sexually deviant or depraved. “For many sexually variant people, defense of queer eroticism is an act of defiance against a homonormative culture that at worst wishes queer people out of existence and at best wants them out of sight,” Erica Chu writes (Chu 2020: 22). Because Aces are not participating in queer eroticism, they are presumed in many LGBTQ+ spaces as being closeted or trying to pass as straight. The assumption that Aces seek and have “straight privilege,” that is, that they pass as heterosexual, contributes to their rejection by the LGBTQ+ community by generating two false beliefs: one, that Aces are rejecting queer eroticism and therefore do not support the LGBTQ+ struggle, and two, that Aces do not experience structural oppression or discrimination like other LGBTQ+ persons. This perception paired with asexuality being ignored or made invisible in heteronormative society creates a double bind for Aces.

Asexuality, the Law, and State-Sanctioned Marriage

At first blush, it might seem that the American legal system does not in any way favor allosexuals or discriminate against Aces.²⁸ However, in her groundbreaking article “Compulsory Sexuality,” Elizabeth F. Emens argues that US Law is an implicitly sexual law.²⁹ Emens argues that using asexuality as “a diagnostic tool or heuristic” reveals “unarticulated assumptions embedded in our law and culture” (Emens 2014: 347–348), which we briefly describe below.

To begin with, laws that provide exceptions to shield sexuality (e.g., contract law) thereby treat sexuality as special. This reinforces the perceived specialness of sex in our culture and contributes to the perception that Aces are excluded from something of importance (Emens 2014: 356).

Next, an examination of sexual harassment laws also reveals hidden assumptions about sexuality within the law. Arguments in sexual harassment cases are frequently based on the idea of

“unwelcomeness”; that is, whether the words and actions of the accused would be unwelcome on the standard of a “reasonable person.” However, this standard is implicitly that of a “reasonable *allosexual* person” in that it assumes that every person welcomes at least some degree of sexual attention. As Emens puts it, “Existing legal debates are framed by assuming sexual expression and interaction are a social and individual good,” treating sexuality as a universal given (Emens 2014: 359).

Third, it is important to consider legal status concerns through an Ace lens. For instance, some Aces are lobbying for inclusion in federal antidiscrimination laws. In the United States, the Equality Act, an amendment to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, is aimed at explicitly providing protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.³⁰ The Civil Rights Act and the Equality Act provide protections against discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, education, federally funded programs, credit, and jury service. However, according to the Equality Act, “[t]he term ‘sexual orientation’ means homosexuality, heterosexuality, or bisexuality,” thus failing to provide protections for asexuality and other missing orientations (Cicilline 2019). The only current US law that protects asexuality is New York State’s Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act (SONDA).

Fourth, marriage laws are of concern to Aces. While no US state requires consummation for legal marriage status, some states still have laws that allow nonconsummation as grounds for voiding a marriage, leaving Aces vulnerable (Emens 2014: 350–351).

Aces also have good reason to question the current form of state recognition of marriage. As is well-known, the state provides financial, health, and immigration and other legal advantages to the married. In so doing, the state explicitly and publicly puts a positive value on the relationships that fit the particular structure it recognizes. Those relationships are, among other things, implicitly sexual and romantic. As a cultural institution with a long history, marriage is deeply linked with sexual union—just think of the cultural value still placed on women’s virginity, symbolized by the still-common white wedding dress—and with romantic union (see, for instance, Jenkins 2017: Ch. 6). We speculate that it is this cultural and symbolic link to sexuality that discourages Aces from marrying—twice as many allosexuals marry as Aces (Bogaert 2004)—thereby depriving them of the state-conferred advantages mentioned above. (We do not have data on aromantics but speculate that they tend to feel similarly excluded from the cultural institution of marriage.) For these reasons, we think that Aces have good reason to join the feminists, queer activists, polyamorists, and others who push for radical reform of the state-sponsored institution or, even more radically, for abolishing state recognitions altogether.³¹

Medicalization

As mentioned in the first section “What Is Asexuality?,” asexuality should not be thought of as a medical disorder to be cured, despite its common misattribution to other supposed disorders such as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) and Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorders (FSIAD) (as we make clear below, we do not mean to imply that HSDD and FSIAD are in fact legitimate medical disorders, nor to imply that the notion of “medical disorder” is itself clear or unproblematic). It is only recently that asexuality has been acknowledged at all by the medical community, yet it is still largely medicalized; that is, treated without warrant as an individual health problem rather than as a disadvantage that is the result of the individual’s environment.³² Compulsory sexuality plays a key role in this medicalization in that the absence of sexuality is thought of as a mental health issue that impoverishes a life if untreated. Both medicine and the broader society tend to assume that a “normal” human (see Dankel, this volume) experiences sexual desire and attraction, and therefore that an individual who does not is disordered and in need of treatment. The medicalization of asexuality mirrors the medical model of disability and also

the medicalization of intersex, where these “conditions” are seen as pathologies of individuals that must be ameliorated even when they present no genuine health risks.³³

Mental Health

Mental health is negatively impacted by the things just discussed; that is, by violence and the threat of violence, lack of cultural representation and persistent negative stereotyping, legal discrimination and exclusion from the state-sanctioned institution of marriage, isolation and lack of community, and medical pathologization. It should not surprise us, then, that 41.8% of the asexual community census respondents describe themselves as mentally ill, compared to the general population at only 20.6% in 2019 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2020: 44). In total, 62.5% of asexual community census respondents reported suicide ideation in their lifetime; of those, a third made serious plans to kill themselves, and half of those attempted suicide. In total, 37% of respondents had considered suicide in the previous twelve months. By contrast, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) reported in 2020 that 4.3% of adults in the United States had thoughts about suicide and 0.6% had attempted suicide in 2018. These data strongly suggest that Aces in the United States are at much greater risk of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts than the general population (Weis et al. 2020: 73).

Furthermore, in a 2020 study by the Trevor Project of 40,000 LGBTQ+ youth ages thirteen to twenty-four, 10% of respondents identified as Ace. The Ace respondents had higher rates of anxiety and depression (75% and 61%, respectively) compared to all other respondents combined (68% and 55%, respectively) (The Trevor Project 2020). Finally, statistics show that 46% of trans Aces have attempted suicide, the highest of any sexual orientation, despite trans Aces making up only 4% of the trans population (Haas et al. 2014).³⁴

The Goods of Asexuality

Asexuality is usually framed negatively, sometimes even by advocates, as either the lack of something that the dominant society considers to be good or as outright deviance. Against this, we propose a truly positive view of asexuality. Does asexuality offer genuine goods to individual Aces, to Aces as a group, or to society at large?

One thing we would like to note upfront is that people who talk about the goods of asexuality sometimes fall into the traps of ableism or sex negativity. They fall into ableism by comparing sex, sexual desire, or sexuality to some kind of disease or impairment where the implication is that it is bad to have a disease or be impaired. They fall into sex negativity in a similar way by comparing sex, sexual desire, sexual passion, or any of the bodily aspects of sexuality to “madness” or some other kind of irrationality, thereby reinforcing a disparaging trope that has held sway since Plato.³⁵ Our hope is to capture the goods of asexuality while navigating the Scylla of ableism and the Charybdis of sex negativity and at the same time openly acknowledging that allosexuality offers its own goods and benefits. The problem is that our society recognizes only the latter while refusing to recognize the goods and benefits of asexuality. It is our view that one way of being is not superior to the other and that both ought to be presented to everyone as viable and potentially rewarding life paths.

Deaf Gain and Asexuality

We can begin to identify the advantages of asexuality by turning to Deaf Gain as a theoretical framework. The notion of Deaf Gain reframes deafness and hardness of hearing, moving away from the “normalcy” model where deafness is framed simply as hearing *loss*, to a diversity model

that construes deafness as a gain. The normalcy frame follows the medical model of disability, discussed in above in the section “Asexuality and Oppression,” with its normative standard of “normal” and “healthy” against which some persons are measured and found wanting. In the case of deafness and hardness of hearing, the ideal standard of normalcy is a complete auditory ability, thereby construing hearing loss as a defect that must be fixed or at least compensated for. As explained by Bauman and Murray, “Medical professionals have the goal of eradication of disability, and with deafness within the frame of normalcy, the eradication of deafness is seen as self-evident” (Bauman and Murray 2009: 2). Without suggesting that deafness and asexuality are in all ways similar, we do think that attitudes toward deafness and asexuality in society and medicine are similar in relevant respects and that Aces and their allies can learn from the notion of Deaf Gain.

By construing non-hearing as Deaf Gain, deafness and its culture become positives, creating “a greater understanding of what it means to be human” (Bauman and Murray 2009: 5). Bauman and Murray outline three kinds of contributions that deafness and Deaf Culture make: cognitive diversity, cultural diversity, and creative diversity. We suggest that these also apply *mutatis mutandis* to asexuality. For instance, just as sign language has changed our understanding of language and mental processes connected with language acquisition and use, so the recognition and study of asexuality can improve aspects of our understanding of human sexuality. Or, just as architects and designers construct physical spaces that cater to deaf and hard of hearing people in ways that generate a variety of aesthetically interesting features (often referred to as “Deaf Space”³⁶), so we conjecture that a host of exciting new aesthetic possibilities would arise out of cultural production from an Ace perspective. Consider, for instance, Emens’ point about compulsory sexuality (discussed above in the sub-section “Asexuality, the Law, and State-Sanctioned Marriage”) in the context of culture, broadly construed. Nowadays sexuality dominates popular music, film and television, advertising, some genres of so-called “high art,” fashion, and even sports, turning “even non-sexual activities (such as dining or shopping for a car) into a confusingly sexually charged experience” (Scherrer and Pfeffer 2017: 1). This saturation by sexuality is not only detrimental to many people, but it can also be aesthetically dull in the sense that sexualization often relies on hackneyed and predictable tropes that leave little to the imagination. Cultural production through an Ace lens would seek to find new modes of expression that appeal without relying on sexuality.

Finally, both Deaf Gain and asexuality encourage those who are not members of these groups to construct richer, more expansive, and more inclusive understandings of what constitutes a good and fulfilling human life.

Personal Gains

Asexuality and Ace lifestyles offer freedoms from the considerable demands and risks of allosexual lifestyles (here in the plural to recognize the diversity of asexual and allosexual lifestyles). These demands and risks, which are well known, include resources (time, psychic energy, and money) spent attracting and maintaining sexual partners, unplanned pregnancies, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), and the heteronormative expectations of parenthood.

Many Aces consider their freedom from these demands to be a significant advantage of asexuality. Angela Chen, author and member of the Ace community, writes about how being Ace afforded certain advantages growing up: “Being ace spared me from sexual distraction, from slut-shaming internal or external, from bad hookups or any hookups at all, from casual relationships that ended in ghosting or confusion” (Chen 2020b: 14). In pursuing relationships (romantic or platonic), Aces are not influenced by the heat of sexual attraction and can take a more deliberate and cool perspective on things like the suitability of a (potential) partner. Aces also benefit from the lack of distraction by sexual attraction and desire, as well as from the time saved by not

pursuing or engaging in sex. Aces can more easily choose to focus their energies on their schooling, careers, or other personal goals.

To be clear, we are not saying that it is better to be Ace than allo. We are simply acknowledging that every person faces decisions and trade-offs in their life paths, some of which are influenced in particular ways by their gender identity and sexual orientation. Our point is that while some decisions are made easier (or more difficult) in relation to sexual orientations, none of these decisions should carry any normative value, assuming a liberal conception of morality, so long as no one is being harmed. The benefits available to Aces due to their orientation should be equally as positively valued as those available to allos.

Conclusion: What Does Asexuality Teach Us?

We began this chapter by noting that the philosophical literature on sex and sexuality has overlooked asexuality, to which we encountered the objection: “Perhaps asexuality has been overlooked because it is not philosophically or politically important?” We believe that this essay has answered this objection. Asexuality is politically important because, simply put, asexual persons exist and they experience various forms of oppression on the basis of their sexual orientation.

For those of us who work on social justice issues from within philosophy, the political and the philosophical do not pull apart so neatly. For both political and more purely philosophical reasons, we philosophers should aim to be as inclusive as possible in our understanding of an area of study. We have seen what failures in this regard amount to in, for example, feminism’s longstanding neglect of women of color and trans women.³⁷ The philosophy of sex and sexuality should no longer ignore asexuality.

Asexuality also makes a more purely philosophical contribution to our understandings of sex and sexuality, and a better understanding of how asexuality fits into current theoretical frameworks of sexuality and queer studies can help us to identify gaps in these frameworks. For instance, as noted from the beginning of this chapter, asexuality requires us to distinguish between sexual attraction, romantic attraction, and aesthetic attraction. While we don’t pretend to have precisely defined these terms or specified these differences—this would be a paper in itself—we have shown that asexuality presses us to do so. And while these distinctions are, so far as we know, uniquely important to understanding the various forms of asexuality (including aromanticism), they may also be useful as we develop our understanding of other sexual orientations and also in identifying heretofore overlooked orientations. Another of asexuality’s philosophical contributions is that it throws compulsory sexuality into high relief. What does a “normal” human life look like? What about a *good* human life? How might compulsory sexuality reshape our current best models of oppression and how might it change our understanding of liberation, and in particular sexual liberation? We hope that this essay and the few other philosophical treatments of asexuality will bring more philosophical attention to this important topic.

Notes

- 1 Dembroff does mention asexuality in several footnotes of their essay in this reader.
- 2 The authors have recently learned that Matthew Andler has two forthcoming papers that aim to include asexuality in his account of sexual orientation.
- 3 We owe this objection to Clare Chambers.
- 4 See Przybylo (2019: 13). A 2018 study estimates that 1.7% of the U.S. population is asexual (Rothblum et al. 2020). If this strikes you as insignificant, remember that, according to the latest Gallup poll, only 5.6% of the U.S. population identifies as any kind of LGBT identity (Jones 2021).
- 5 This is now a widely accepted definition of “asexuality.” See, for example, the Asexuality and Visibility Education Network (AVEN) (<https://www.asexuality.org/en/>), which is arguably the most influential online asexuality online community. See also the Trevor Project (<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>).

- 6 See, for instance, the Asexual Community Survey (Weis, R. and Members of the Asexual Community Survey Team 2020).
- 7 This usage need not take a stand on a particular theory of desire and is open to action-based theories of desire, pleasure-based theories, good-based theories, and so on.
- 8 Brunning and McKeever offer a detailed explanation of what sexual attraction is: “to be sexually attracted to someone is to experience them as ‘inviting’ certain forms of sexual engagement. To be clear, the notion of invitation is metaphorical. We need not be literally asked to engage with someone sexually to be sexually attracted to them, just as a pool does not ask us to go swimming. Instead, sexual attraction invites certain kinds of sexual action, whether specific sexual acts, or forms of sexual attention, imagination, and fantasy” (Brunnering and McKeever 2020: 499).
- 9 There are, of course, exceptions to this way of thinking. Brotto and Yule, for instance, allow that “individuals can experience sexual attractions that are not directed toward others” (Brotto and Yule 2017: 619). Whether there is a marked distinction between sexual attraction and sexual desire, and what that distinction might amount to, is one issue that needs more philosophical attention.
- 10 See, for instance, [https://lgbtqia.wikia.org/wiki/Split_Attraction_Model_\(SAM\)](https://lgbtqia.wikia.org/wiki/Split_Attraction_Model_(SAM)).
- 11 Defining “romantic attraction” is beyond the scope of this essay. At this point we simply note that many Aces want and participate in what they understand to be *romantic* relationships that are distinct from friendship but also are non-sexual.
- 12 For a discussion of inclusion of people in certain groups for reasons to do with respecting community self-definition and attempts at solidarity, see (Anderl forthcoming).
- 13 As Bogaert states: “Similar to other sexual minorities, asexual people stand in contrast to a heterosexual majority. As such, sexuality is the key characteristic in what makes them different from the majority group, and hence sexuality may become a very relevant “personal construct” for some asexual people, even if they have never engaged in sex (Bogaert 2012). In addition, asexual people may face similar discrimination challenges to other sexual minorities.” (Bogaert 2015: 368).
- 14 The Equality Act (H.R.5) introduced in Congress to encode antidiscrimination protections for women and LGBTQIA+ individuals amends Title XI to define sexual orientation as “homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality” (Cicilline 2019: sec. SEC.9.MISCELLANEOUS.).
- 15 One interesting question was raised in conversation by Lori Watson: It seems that on Dembroff’s definition, the orientation that we call “lesbian” would fall in the same group with the orientation belonging to the group we currently call “straight men” and this is something that most lesbians – and perhaps also straight men – would find infelicitous.
- 16 To be fair, Dembroff explicitly notes at the outset that while they mean to amend our ordinary concept of “sexual orientation,” they mean this as an improvement of “our everyday concepts” (Dembroff 2016: 2). Perhaps Dembroff would reject our suggestions -- that we take the Ace/allo distinction as the most basic -- as too distant from our ordinary concepts of “sexual orientation.” This may be, but it may also be that our ordinary understanding of “sexual orientation” is so broken that there is no saving it.
- 17 For a related but somewhat different account of the oppression of Aces, see (Brunnering and McKeever 2020). Their focus on erasure and denigration complements the account given here.
- 18 The questions about sexual violence and corresponding analysis used in the census survey were modeled upon the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) conducted in the United States, and results were mapped based on the interpretations of sexual violence used by the United States’ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) analysis of NISVS data. Between the time of writing and publication, the 2019 Ace Community Census report was published. See Weis et al. (2021).
- 19 We owe this objection to Clare Chambers.
- 20 Corrective rape is “the rape of any member of a group that does not conform to gender or sexual orientation norms where the motive of the perpetrator is to ‘correct’ the individual,” (Doan-Minh 2019: 167). While all instances of corrective rape, including anti-asexual rape, are hate crimes, the invisibility of asexuality means that a case of anti-asexual rape is unlikely to be understood or prosecuted as a hate crime. For more on corrective rape, see Kliegman (2018), Mosbergen (2017), Decker (2015), and Scarlett (2020).
- 21 <https://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv19>.
- 22 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fictional_asexual_characters Note that this list is a historical record keeping track of all Ace characters created in mainstream fictional media, not just currently show-cased ones like the GLAAD report. In the context of all of the existing characters in popular culture across time, 43 is an inordinately miniscule number.
- 23 Of the thousands of marchers in the NYC Pride Parade in 2019, about 80 marchers represented asexuality and aromanticism. The 2019 Chicago Pride Parade had no asexual representation among floats/marchers.

- 24 The asexuality flag is four horizontal stripes, in order from top to bottom: black, gray, white, and purple. See <https://www.asexualityarchive.com/the-asexuality-flag/> for a description of the color symbolism and a history of the flag's development.
- 25 Some Aces have adopted wearing a black ring on their right middle finger, but this is not a universally known or adopted symbol even within the Ace community. Some Aces will wear apparel in the colors of, or with representations of, the Ace pride flag, but this still requires that other parties can recognize the flag and that the Ace is wearing that apparel at the right time.
- 26 Lingenfelter, K. (Writer), & Yaitanes, G. (Director), (Jan 23, 2012). Better Half. [Television series episode] In D. Shore (Creator), *House M.D.* Los Angeles, CA: FOX.; example drawn from (Marks 2017).
- 27 See Scarlett (2020), Stacey (2018).
- 28 As we note in the introduction, the points made here are limited to the U.S. legal system because the authors do not feel qualified to comment on anything beyond this. However, we invite our readers to draw connections to and contrasts with other legal systems when appropriate.
- 29 On the concept of "compusory sexuality" more generally, see Gupta (2015).
- 30 At the time of writing, the Equality Act has been passed by the US House of Representatives and has moved into the Senate for consideration.
- 31 This literature is rich and complex. See Brake (2021) for an overview. For an Ace-specific argument in favor of developing alternatives that are more inclusive of "non-traditional" partnerships including platonic partnerships, polyamory, and multi-parent child-rearing, see Emens (2014: 352), Chen (2020b), and Chu (2020: 40).
- 32 The 2013 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), or DSM-V, recognized asexuality as an exception to HSDD and FSIAD, and thus not a disorder. On the medical model of disability, see Wasserman et al. (2016: Section 2).
- 33 We owe this analogy between disability and asexuality to Eunjung Kim (2011). For a recent philosophical discussion of the medical model of disability, see Barnes (2019). On the medicalization of intersex persons, see Fausto-Sterling (2020).
- 34 This report shares the same limitations of sampling methodologies as the Ace community census and so cannot be considered generally representational of the U.S. transgender population, but should be taken seriously. More recent surveys have been conducted on suicide attempts among the U.S. trans population, but their reports do not provide enough data to complete a full comparative analysis (Herman et al. 2019).
- 35 See, for instance, the work of Anthony Bogaert, one of the most prominent and prolific champions of asexuality. Bogaert writes: "[I]f one views sex from a distance...it can be seen as comprising a host of symptom-like behaviors—obsessive thoughts, odd vocalizations, repetitive movements, and so on – reminiscent of a mental disorder" (Bogaert 2015b). The implications here are clear: from a certain point of view (which Bogaert identifies as the point of view of asexuality), sexuality can look like a mental impairment which – again, from this point of view which is not ours – is something to be avoided. Our hope and aim is to outline the benefits and advantages of asexuality and Ace culture without disparaging sex, sexuality, and allosexuality and without falling back on ableist and sex-negative tropes like Bogaert's.
- 36 See Bauman and Murray (2009: 6–8). See also the Deaf Space project led by Bauman at Gallaudet University. <https://www.gallaudet.edu/campus-design-and-planning/deafspace/>. For a recent related take on disability and the built world, see Hendren (2020).
- 37 To be clear, we are not in any way making an analogy between the oppression faced by transwomen or by women of color and that faced by Aces. We are simply pointing to recent cases of exclusion by a purportedly liberatory movement that should have known better.

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