Is It a Choice? Sexual Orientation as Interpretation

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As with so many issues in gay and lesbian philosophy, Claudia Card may have said it best. Sexuality, she tells us, shows that "a more generous vocabulary is needed than is provided by the dichotomy of 'freely chosen' on the one hand and 'fated' or 'determined' on the other."[1] In this paper I will not claim that theorizing about sexual identity solves the philosophical dilemma of free will and determinism. I will argue, however, that gay and lesbian experience may show us a way to reject a rigid division between traits and aspects of the self (like sexuality) that seem determined and aspects of the self that seem freely chosen. To do this, however, it will be necessary to show that our enduring sexual desire, what we ordinarily think of as sexual orientation, is partly constituted by choice. Showing that our orientation originates partly in our own choices will of course change dramatically our understanding of sexual desire and sexual identity, as well as present a more ambiguous picture of the relationship between aspects of the self that appear determined and those that appear chosen.

The Standard View

I begin with what I call a standard view that distinguishes between sexual identity and sexual orientation. The latter is an enduring, fairly stable desire oriented toward a particular gender. Such a desire is enduring, rather than merely recurring, because orientation is thought to be a constant and underlying feature of a person's make up. The identity, meanwhile, is a self-consciously directed project that a person develops around this orientation. Many gays and lesbians report that they "always felt that way"—that is, that they always felt a sexual desire for people of their own gender, and hence that they always had a sexual *orientation*. They did not, however, have a gay and lesbian *identity* until they came out, accepted their sexual orientation and began to live accordingly. This distinction between identity and desire surfaces when people say things like, "He's gay, but he doesn't know it yet." This statement typically means that somebody has a particular sexual orientation, an enduring desire for sex with another man, but that he has not accepted this fact about himself, called himself "gay," self-consciously sought such sex, and understood himself as a person who does seek such sex. He has a sexual orientation but not yet the identity. The standard view thus holds that people can have recurring homosexual desires resulting from an enduring sexual orientation without acting upon these desires, or in some cases acting against them

JOURNAL of SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY, Vol. 40 No. 1, Spring 2009, 97–116.

and trying to be straight. This distinction sometimes disappears in everyday talk about people's sexuality, because such talk often runs orientation and identity together. (Ironically, I will show that this may be folk wisdom rather than popular confusion.)

The standard view also claims that we choose sexual identity but not sexual orientation. Specifically, it holds that an individual finds an enduring sexual desire for partners of a particular sex (male or female) within her or his experience, and in the case of minority sexual identity this desire produces a crisis which leads to the adoption of a sexual identity, such as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Typically, the desires are thought to be repressed, ignored, or refused until that final moment when the entire charade collapses and the person comes out. This means, of course, that choosing sexual identity is *motivated* rather than merely *arbitrary;* one chooses one's sexual identity based upon a seemingly intractable desire that must be accommodated by a changed identity. This desire is intractable precisely insofar as it seems given, determined and resistant to any choice that would eliminate it, and the identity emerges less as a capricious choice to try some new kind of sex and more as a capitulation to the facts of the matter. In existentialist talk, we could say that sexual orientation belongs to facticity and sexual identity is a project based on this facticity, and such language captures the underlying assumptions well. There are features of our existence, in particular traits of our personality or our psychological make up, which we do not get to choose. We must then make life choices based upon these traits, especially when something as socially and morally charged as sexuality puts us into conflict with existing mores.

Although I call this the "standard view," I do not think that it is always stated clearly in mainstream discussions, nor even in all theoretical discussions. Nonetheless, the standard view appears in many places: (1) biographical and fictional narratives (i.e., television shows like *Will and Grace*, novels like Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*) treat desires as given and derive comedy or drama from the process of accepting these desires; (2) the mainstream gay political movements insists that "we didn't choose to be this way," often as a counter to anti-gay rhetoric which describes us living out "perverse lifestyles" of our choosing; (3) sociological studies such as Steven Seidman's *Beyond the Closet* and Vera Whisman's *Queer by Choice* offer numerous coming out narratives, few of which actually satisfy Whisman's title and most of which show that people regard their queerness as *not* a choice;[2] (4) "Treatments" (such as the Exodus treatment program) for "curing" gay and lesbian desires typically fail. Even the subjects of success stories often admit that they still have some residual feelings and desires, and "relapses" are common;[3] and finally, (5) academic, theoretical, and scientific discussions often reflect the standard view. In the biological literature, a distinction between a fairly determined sexual orientation and identity has prevailed as a starting methodological assumption.[4] In gay and lesbian studies, the distinction between desire and identity has played an important role in debates, such as the social constructionism and essentialism

controversy, which turns on whether sexual identity and desire exist independently of social and historical circumstances.[5] In some ways, (1) and (2) are the most important forms of evidence, although also the least rigorous—this view about the place of choice in coming out is simply the mainstream gay and lesbian view. This does not, in the least, prove that it's true, although it shows us that many people's understanding of their experience reflects the story of choosing identity based on a given desire.

This view is also common for one last, more speculative reason. I think most of us take for granted a distinction between traits that seem established (like athleticism, musicality, intelligence, or personality traits like aggression, compulsion, distractibility, emotiveness and so on) and the choices that we make regarding how we will "handle" or use these given facts about our personality. We ask questions like, will my friend be controlled by his emotional, impulsive nature, or will he learn to control it? Or, will she make something of her intelligence and her philosophical ability? Such questions assume that the trait is given, and speculate about what a person will do with that trait, much as a person might dispose of a possession or a thing. Sexuality then fits perfectly within such a paradigm, especially given its apparently "biological" character.

At the outset, I should say my claims will blur this line between traits and choices, particularly with respect to the distinction between orientation as a given trait of personality and identity as a chosen project of the individual. However, despite the popularity of the standard view on sexuality, I am not the first within the gay community to question this dividing line. Aside from the political right's claims that we choose this lifestyle, some distinguished dissenters on the side of gay liberation and feminism have claimed that choice is somehow involved in the constitution of the desire itself. For instance, Ed Stein, in *Mismeasure of Desire*, follows the work of developmental psychologist Daryl Bem and argues that continual, small choices are involved in the process of developing sexual orientation.[6]

The most important dissent has come from within the history of lesbian feminism. Involvement with the women's liberation movement in the United States led women to see male domination and oppression as both socially pervasive and deeply personal. Escape from this situation requires separation from the world of men, particularly in one's personal life, and so some women chose to live lesbian lives for reasons other than sexual desire. Marilyn Frye's essay, "Some Reflections on Separatism and Power" offers a powerful statement of these ideas, and Claudia Card offers a sophisticated discussion of the idea of lesbian choice and a compelling case study of Renée Vivien.[7] Vera Whisman records actual case histories of political lesbians, women who claim to have chosen, for a variety of reasons, both their desire and their identity.

Even apart from these political concerns, the coming out stories of women often involve more fluidity and choice than those of men and sometimes originate more in fellow feeling, attraction, or the sheer pleasure of the company of other women, and only later become a form of what Adrienne Rich called "genital

lesbianism."[8] Many of these claims about the multiple sources of lesbianism within women's experience, in turn, can be found in Simone de Beauvoir's early discussion of "The Lesbian" in *The Second Sex*, which argued that women's homosexuality lies ambiguously between being chosen and given, and originates from within the broader situation of being a woman under patriarchy.[9]

Against the Standard View

While it may be that coming out stories vary and sometimes show fluidity, it is the more typically masculine coming out story, focused on a seemingly given desire, that I wish to discuss. Ironically, the effect of my argument will be to show that these stories are in fact more similar to women's stories. In short, we should take the women's model as the norm for analyzing the men's coming out stories, and see choice involved in the constitution of desire and sexual orientation itself. Here is my argument:

(1) Sexual orientation as an enduring desire is partially constituted by interpretation within context.
(2) Interpretation requires choice.
(3) Hence, sexual orientation is partly constituted by choice.

The idea here is that adopting a sexual identity involves a process of acting on a persistent desire, but knowing one's persistent desire involves an act of interpretation that partially constitutes that desire. Insofar as we come to know our desire in order to develop an identity based upon it, we must make choices in the process of understanding this desire, thus constituting it in the process of choosing our identity. Most of the work involves proving (1). However, I will also have to say a few words about (2), for while I take it to be obvious, it may also appear to be begging the question.

What exactly, does (1) claim? Explaining this claim's meaning comprises much of my argument, and so I will discuss it more below, but here I will at least try to avoid an important misunderstanding. Interpreting desire is more than merely coming to have a new belief about a desire. Describing interpretation in this way already leads away from the point I want to make, for it separates belief from desire, giving each independence from the other, and it suggests that when I interpret, I am merely interpreting a single event or episode of some currently occurring and self-contained desire. Accordingly, interpreting desire would change only our *beliefs* about desire, while the desire would remain both the same and independent of its interpretation. Desire would be self-contained and isolated from the changes that different interpretations would make, and the content of the desire would appear as fixed in itself. With such an understanding of interpretation, my arguments in this article could not begin. While I do think it is obvious that we come to have new beliefs about ourselves when we come out, more is

going on than just the process of finding some new beliefs. I will show that interpreting my desire requires that we take an inchoate grouping of ambiguous desires, place them together into a complex, and consider them as a unified whole, and further that we compare this whole to available social and sexual roles in society, link those desires with other experiences like fantasies, pleasures, and so forth, and finally come to believe that it *means* something enduring and lasting about my self. Indeed, recognizing certain desires, feelings, fantasies, and so forth as both recurring and belonging to the same underlying feature of my personality requires an act of interpretation, because even my ability to *reidentify* them *as recurring* and as *belonging together* is partially determined by the framework within which I experience them. For this reason, the individual, recurring desires change, because they are grouped together into a new context, and my self-understanding changes as I conceive of myself as a particular kind of a person with a particular trait. This process thus involves more than reflection on a single desire or impulse, although it might involve trying to understand a single desire or impulse in relation to other experiences I have and have had in the past.

Interpretation tries to understand certain basic features of my self which explain the feelings, experiences, and desires I have. I am trying to understand who and what I am such that I should feel, desire, fantasize, and experience the world the way I do. Both my recurring experiences and my self-understanding change in such a process. Accordingly, such interpretation requires work on the part of a person, and it also requires, as I will argue, that my desires are not given as independent objects such that I simply come to have new beliefs about them, but rather they begin as something not fully formed, almost like an "open space" or ambiguity which will be resolved through my interpretation. Sexual desire does not fully become sexual desire, and especially does not become sexual orientation, until the subject has "worked it up" through interpretive choices. A person may feel sexual attraction or desire for another, may experience fantasies and emotional attachments, may enjoy being around people of the same sex, or even, as is the case with so-called political lesbianism, may resist various aspects of male-dominated society, but it takes work to know this. Even in the case of fairly strong and recurring sexual feelings for a person of the same sex, the fact that this desire is really a *sexual desire* for a person of the same sex, in the same way that other (straight) people may have sexual feelings, is not obvious and neither is the possibility that this feeling indicates a sexual orientation.

I can draw some parallels with Charles Taylor's discussions of self-interpretation.[10] When I articulate my most cherished and important values and evaluations, Taylor argues that my articulation partially constitutes these values. The very features I articulate and which are critical to both my decision making and my sense of self do not preexist my articulation of them as fully independent and self-contained objects. Rather, I "formulate what is initially inchoate, or confused, or badly formulated and because of this initial inchoate and indeterminate state, my articulation cannot but transform what I articulate by bringing it into language."[11] Taylor discusses this interpretive process with respect to values in a

very general sense, and I discuss instead the way in which certain features of my self, particularly desires, are transformed by this interpretive process. But his account and mine share two similarities: We both discuss deep features of the self as they may relate to more transient and occurent episodes, and more importantly, we both believe that the interpretation changes the thing interpreted because the thing interpreted does not have a fully determinate content prior to its articulation.[12]

I want to give two arguments for my claim that our sexuality requires interpretation, one direct and the other indirect. Both arguments impugn the idea that interpreting desire simply means coming to have new beliefs about it, as I stated above, since both arguments try to show how and why the content of desire must be indeterminate and require interpretation.

The indirect argument begins, naturally, by assuming the negation of what is to be shown. Assume that desire does not require interpretation in the way I describe. Then, if it is true that I know my desire, I must do so "directly"—that is, through a process that somehow transfers its meaning directly to my awareness. I am not sure, of course, what such a process would look like, but it would be one in which my desires and related feelings would be seen directly for what they are. In general, I only interpret something when its meaning is at least partially indeterminate or unclear. If I require no interpretation to know my desire, then it must be known to me as it is, and it will require no further work, construal, or contextualizing to be known. Desire would thus be self-intimating, in that it comes to me without my having to do any work to grasp it. I would even go so far as to claim that such a desire is self-evident, at least in the following sense: if it can be known without any interpretive work on my part, it is hard to see how I could even be mistaken about it. For in what way could I be mistaken about something that I know so directly and easily? Saying that desire *requires* interpretation means that its content cannot be read off the surface, that uncertainty enters the picture, and that something outside the particular desire will be necessary to "unlock" its meaning. This, after all, is a large part of what interpretation is: construal on the basis of a relation between a thing and its context. If there's no interpretation, there's no relevant context, and no construal.

Now if desire were known in a direct and non-interpretive way, it would be difficult to explain how somebody could be in denial about homosexual desires. Coming out is the process of accepting one's sexual orientation and revealing it to others, and it is often said that people are in denial before they come out, meaning that they know of their feelings of desire, but somehow refuse them. On the one hand, a person pretends that she does not have the feelings and experiences that she has. She refuses to see that these feelings *mean* that she is homosexual and perhaps even that they are really sexual feelings—she *denies* them. On the other hand, refusing these desires means acknowledging their presence at the same time, for refusal of this kind is also a form of recognition. Often, a person develops elaborate rationalizations or explanations for peculiar feelings and desires. Such rationalizations show awareness of these experiences, since they could not be

developed in their absence. However, these same rationalizations not only reject the experience, they develop precisely to evade it. Denying something is acknowledging it by refusing it. On the assumption of self-intimating desire, this kind of denial is unintelligible, for it implies a fully contradictory state of mind. If feelings and experiences are given with their meanings self-contained, and do not require context and interpretation to gain meaning, then why would a person not simply *see* that her feelings were homosexual, and that she should adopt a homosexual identity? Certainly, part of the answer lies in the fact that society still has strong sanctions against these forms of desire and identity, sanctions that give strong incentive to deny or rationalize away the "wrong" feelings and desires. But the important question here asks how self-deception can be possible at all on the model of a desire that requires no work to understand. If we assume that interpreting desire means simply coming to have beliefs about a fully formed and directly knowable desire, then deceiving myself about desire requires both that I have true beliefs about my desire and that I have false beliefs about it. I must have true beliefs, because deception requires knowledge of the truth (it's not simply being mistaken after all) and also that I have a false belief about my desire—a belief that my desire is something other than what it is. It was such phenomena that led Sartre to develop the concept of bad faith, and if that hoary notion seems worthy of rejection, this view of denial, and the theory of desire that leads to it, is equally worth questioning. If we drop the assumption that our desires are self-intimating and fully formed, and also drop the assumption that interpretation in these cases is merely having new beliefs about desire, then the self-deception can more easily be explained as a form of ignorance about one's own desires and feelings.[13]

Indeed, this indirect argument does not prove my thesis since it only generates a reasonable presumption that desire cannot be given as fully formed and self-intimating, without interpretation. Rather, some other view of desire might better be able to explain repressed feelings and the process of coming out. The indirect argument leads us to the direct one, which argues that no experience is self-intimating or self-evident and so desire cannot be self-intimating or self-evident.

In effect, we need an attack on the notion of the given, an argument that shows that things in our experience cannot be known as self-evident atoms of experience. Here I choose to follow twentieth century phenomenology (particularly Merleau-Ponty), although I will mention Sellars's classic argument as well.[14] The idea of self-intimating and self-evident experience requires that any particular experience, feeling, desire or sensation requires no relation to anything outside it, for then it could be neither self-intimating nor self-evident. This view of experience, in short, is an atomistic one, and it is this atomism that I attack and replace with the Gestaltist notion of an experience constructed of figures-against-backgrounds. Now this point about experience, and the attack on the given generally, is a large topic and I do not here provide what I consider fully sufficient arguments against it, simply because that is at least a paper unto itself.[15] But I do at least want to

sketch out the main line of an argument, so that I can then fit it into the question of desire and show its fruitfulness in solving the puzzle raised by the indirect argument. I also take it that the discussions of givenness will be familiar to philosophers at least, and my discussion fits into these in a fairly straightforward way.

So, take any purported "atom" of experience, even something as simple and old-fashioned as a red patch. This experience relies internally upon its spatial context and temporal horizons for its identity. The experience of the red patch requires differentiation from its spatial context to be a red patch, and further differentiation from preceding and following experiences to be that *particular* experience of *that* patch. The experience of the red patch is thus not properly the experience of only the red patch, but of the red patch against a background and within a horizon of time. Putting the point simply, experience has the structure of figure-against-ground; built into the identity conditions of any experience is an internal relation to a horizon, background, or other element that grants the unity to the focal element of the experience.

Since the figure is *internally* related to its ground, the character and identity of the figure are conditioned by the ground. The "same" red will appear different against different colored backgrounds or in different ambient light conditions. Recall, by the way, that Sellars used just such an example as a part of his argument that seeing colors requires knowledge of the normative conditions under which colors are seen. To use a different and more vivid example from the philosophy of mind literature: consider the taste of something you once disliked but now like. Did the taste change for you, and then you learned to like it, or did learning to like it change the taste? On the figure–ground view of experience, this is really an unanswerable question, since there was never a "pure" taste experience to begin with, but always an experience of a taste within a context of likes and dislikes, past histories of tasting, associations with other tastes and so on. Experiences are not self-intimating, but relationally determined by context.

While this discussion has been very quick, we can see immediately how it applies to the case at hand. Before coming out, somebody experiences socially unacceptable desires, feelings, fantasies, and other episodes, often alongside other feelings and episodes that can be construed as socially acceptable (i.e., heterosexual) ones. A person may feel that whatever heterosexual feelings he experiences are correct and proper; this person may work to amplify and hold those, even as he works to suppress, ignore, and rationalize other feelings. But note: now the feelings that are "rationalized" are not fully given, meaningful experiences, but rather an ambiguous mess of uncertain and frightening feelings, mixed in with the other desires, social messages, homophobic worries, and so forth. The person does not actually suppress fully given and meaningful experiences, rather a person does not know how to construe the feelings he or she has. There are not, as coming out stories lead us to think at times, simply one set of recurring desires, homosexual ones, occurring in a vacuum, but a whole battery of feelings, desires, attractions, social stereotypes, fears and hopes, and the sexual feelings are not self-contained

atoms, rather they take on meaning from this context. In this way, there are a variety of factors that go into constituting sexuality beyond mere desire, and which may not have been chosen. We do not choose the cultural world we find ourselves in, but undoubtedly it plays an important part in our sexual self-understanding. Similarly, other nonsexual aspects of personality may encourage particular interpretations over others, such as an inclination toward risk taking, a love of rebelling against social norms, and so forth, although even these deep features of a person can change in response to new aspects of a person's identity. In the situation under consideration, various sexual feelings lack determinate meaning or structure; they are constituents of a frightening, ambiguous situation awaiting some kind of resolution. Am I gay? Am I straight? Do I just have strong feelings for my same-sex friends? Am I just not very sexual with girls? Should I put one set of feelings and desires together, actually face the fact of their recurrence, and see them as belonging with other experiences? Or should I group them differently, separate them, find other deep explanations for my experiences? To what extent do the roles available in society fit with my own understanding of my experiences? Since feelings gain meaning from context, inability to decide which context to use renders their content uncertain, and the situation as a whole anxious. Rationalization really is just a name for an attempted explanation of this mess, and denial now makes sense: the person does not repress fully given feelings, but cannot find a pattern for the feelings that will make sense, possibly out of fear, or possibly out of simple ignorance of what to do. The possibility of placing feelings in different contexts and grouping them together differently suggests multiple possibilities for a person's sexual self. Placing these experiences together under a single label and thinking of them as a single aspect changes their context and hence changes them. Even seeing certain desires, feelings or fantasies as recurring instances of the same thing requires some interpretive framework against which they are recognized. Grouping the desires together changes the experience of these desires for me and allows me to see a possible aspect of my self.

More specifically, series of seemingly disconnected desires change insofar as they become accepted rather than rationalized, and insofar as they are seen to recur and to originate from the same part of my self. I could be said, in a sense, to know differently what these desires are, and this is because in their new context they are different from what they were before: I see them as the same and as related to other experiences (fantasies and so forth), and I see this relation because I see all of this as stemming from a deep feature of my personality. Consequently, my self-understanding has now also changed, precisely insofar as I see myself possessing a sexual orientation of a particular kind. This new aspect of my self allows me to reinterpret experiences and feelings in my past and also to project different futures and different goals for myself; it provides the ground of a sexual identity. Both the occurring and recurring desires and my self-understanding change, and they change in relation to each other.

Epistemic non-givenness, the fact that I must interpret feelings to know their meaning, implies that any experience will not carry self-evident content. From

this, however, it follows neither that the content has no character at all and that we can just make up what we are, nor (obviously) that the content is given. In other words, we do not need to assume that content must be determinate to be content. Further, indeterminate content will change as its construal changes. This was part of Taylor's reason for thinking that certain features of our self-interpretation are constituted in self-interpretation. In fact, we are all familiar with indeterminate content. Every time we read great literature or watch great cinema, we are presented with a work which requires interpretation, which definitely has some meaning that guides our interpretation, but which nonetheless does not govern entirely what we make of it. Indeed, great works are often taken to be so just because they suggest a plenitude. The case of mental content does not really differ: we also often are not sure of the contents or meanings of our feelings, but think that we can make some reasonable and guided interpretations, subject to later revision, about how we feel. Such indeterminate content, then, would precisely be content requiring interpretation; content that *suggests* without *governing* its subsequent meaning; and this is what I mean by saying that it is ambiguous or open-ended. Interpretative processes will make content more determinate, in part through decisions we make for contextualizing it, but such processes will never determinate it fully.

Indeed, a literary example may make this more clear, especially one that depicts this very process. E. M. Forster's *Howards End* portrays, among other things, a somewhat unlikely romance and marriage between the idealistic Margaret Schlegel and the hard-headed imperialist, Mr. Wilcox. Trying to explain her response to the marriage proposal to her even more idealistic sister Helen, Margaret describes exactly the process I have in mind.

> "Remember, I've known and liked him steadily for nearly three years."
>
> "But loved him?" [asked Helen].
>
> Margaret peered into her past. It is pleasant to analyze feelings while they are still only feelings, and unembodied in the social fabric. With her arm around Helen, and her eyes shifting over the view, as if this county or that could reveal the secret of her own heart, she meditated honestly, and said: "No."
>
> "But you will?"
>
> "Yes," said Margaret, "of that I'm pretty sure. Indeed, I began the moment he spoke to me."[16]

Here Margaret must decide if she loves Mr. Wilcox sufficiently both to spend her life with him and to accept the transformation such a change would bring. Whether or not she loves him in this profound way might seem like something she should simply know; she should either believe that she desires him sufficiently or not. But it was Forster's great acuity to portray the very process of forming these feelings and desires, and to show how much Margaret's own agency, and the context of her life, affected this formation. There are

at first only feelings "unembodied in the social fabric," that is, not yet thought in the cultural categories of love and marriage, and not yet spoken and shared among people. These feelings are not yet love, and indeed it is unclear what elements and episodes of Margaret's inner life she might be reflecting upon in making her decision. Interestingly, Forster has Margaret depend upon her context, the environment around her and the closeness of her sister, as well as an interpretation of her past in light of a possible future with Mr. Wilcox, in order to decide that her feelings *will be* love, as she had already begun to form these feelings at the moment of the proposal. I will love him, Margaret seems to be telling her sister, precisely because I am in the process of committing my feelings to this very task. This commitment begins to fulfill itself precisely as she puts together her feelings into those of love; hence, the curious tense of her statements: I am certain that I *will* love, because I have *already begun* to love, and I have already begun to love because I will love.

This example differs from the question of sexuality in some respects, to be sure, but it shares with my discussion the idea that foregrounded parts of experience have contents that emerge in relation to their context. If I am uncertain how to interpret my experiences, their content remains unclear. But unifying my experiences into a whole, placing them under labels with culturally secured meanings like "wife," "love," or "gay," adopting and projecting a role for myself, reinterpreting the past—all of these actions change the context and thus the meaning of the experiences themselves, just as tastes change relative to our likes and dislikes, and just as Margaret's decision to love changes her feelings into love. Coming out really is not the revealing of the desire, but the interpretation and creation of these experiences in light of available social categories. After coming out, we may feel that the experiences all make sense—my feelings are the feelings of a gay person, those heterosexual feelings weren't even real, and these other feelings are. The interpretation makes previously inchoate desires into a recurring desire, and the recurring desire it explains by means of an enduring sexuality, changing both the desires and my sense of who and what I am. The "click" of recognition emerges as a result of fitting the experiences together under a single identity rubric that allows it all to make sense. This unfolding of experience is the result of an act of interpretation and reflection on the part of the person. Since the context includes a variety of sexual roles (gay, straight, etc.) against which a person interprets desire, desire and identity are chosen together in a continual project, and possible future identities can motivate the choice of a specific kind of desire as much as the desire motivates the adoption of a possible identity.

Thus, if these considerations are correct, and the experience requires interpretation to be the desire that it is, then I have already come close to proving my thesis, since this discussion of (1), the thesis that desire requires interpretation, already begins to show that (2)—interpretation requires choice. I should now try to explain more carefully what this second premise means.

Obviously, different forms of interpretation may involve different levels of choice. The literary scholar, trying to develop an interpretation of Forster's entire *oeuvre*, may make a quite deliberate choice between possible ways of reading his novels. Such a choice would involve considerations of style, theme, the context of past literary criticism, Forster's unique cultural and historical milieu, and might require tremendous work to develop and justify. I would not deny that some people's coming out stories might be equally labored and thoughtful, but I do not think that they have to be so. Moreover, there is another sense in which interpretation involves choice, one both more "minimal" and also more universal. The Forster scholar opts for one interpretation from among many, and this is essential for it to be an interpretation. If the meaning of the thing were simply given and fixed, there would be no need for interpretation. All interpretation involves the narrowing of options or selection among options for the one that seems most suited. Similarly, if we deny the given and say that all seeing is *seeing as*, the "as" here implies always also a "not as something else." If, using Sellars's old example, I see the tie as green, that implies that I'm not seeing it as blue, and further that both possibilities were options depending on the ambient light conditions.[17] Presented with ambiguous possibilities, the person must choose which possibilities to actualize, since they will not resolve themselves.[18] In the case of coming out, one must choose what role (gay or straight) one will play, and in so doing one must interpret the meaning of those jumbled, ambiguous desires. But, just like deciding to like a taste means that the taste changes, so deciding that one is gay or lesbian means that the very desire itself changes; it becomes the enduring desire of a gay person, it is placed into a new context, and as the recognition of a pattern changes disconnected elements into elements-of-a-pattern, so the desires themselves change in the act of coming out and interpreting one's experience. But since interpretation involves making choices about how to construe desire, the desire itself is changed by the interpretation. One chooses one's sexual identity in the same process as one chooses one's sexual orientation.

While this minimal sense of choice is important because it shows that the subject is involved in making her or his experiences to some degree, it does not settle the kind and level of agency involved in this choice. There are options we decide between, but how much of the self is involved in this opting? Certainly, we might decide between many options with little or no deliberative process. Upon being told that I have mistaken a blue tie for a green one, I might then see that shade of color as blue from that moment on, and it seems that I did not really *engage* the choice in the same way that I might engage with literary texts or indeed with my sexuality. There had to be options and an "open situation" in order for me to see the tie as blue rather than green, but little of my person and energy was spent on it. In the case of sexuality, clearly more of the self—its time, its energy, its creativity—is involved in choosing a rubric for understanding desire and for taking on the project of a sexual identity. How much will depend in part upon the person—Whisman describes cases in which people

literally choose their sexuality in a fully self-conscious, deliberative process, but these cases are more rare than ones in which a person simply muddles through confusion to attain clarity.[19]

Taylor's discussion of agency is again helpful here. He describes three levels of choice and agency: (1) the level of mere preference between equal options that does not engage our deeply held values (chocolate or vanilla ice cream tonight?); (2) a self-evaluation of options based upon our deepest held values and which involves making decisions based on aspects we consider to be part of our self-identity (who deserves help first, my good friend or my family members?); and (3) a kind of "radical" evaluation, in which we try to examine the very standards that govern our other choices and determine our self (why would I even consider family or friends more important, what meta-value can I use to answer this question?).[20] Certainly, the choice of sexual orientation and identity involves something around the second and third level; it involves higher-order reflections on aspects of my self; it may require abandoning certain moral claims and values; and it likely involves a change in one's understanding of both one's future and past.

Now, as I said, I worry that claiming that interpretation involves choice appears to beg the question. It is easy, after all, to get choice in the conclusion of the argument if you put it into one of the premises. But of course, there's no way you will get choice in the conclusion *unless* it appears in some (non-equivocating) form in the premises. The idea, therefore, is to stress the necessity of interpretation in coming to know and even experience one's own desire, and then to claim that choice is necessary for interpretation. The real worry about begging the question arises when we ask whether or not certain interpretations might not also be determined or unfree; "forced" interpretations, as it were. But here I can only respond that such a worry begins to squeeze choice out of the picture altogether. Of course, if everything is determined, nothing will be free at all, but I take it that we do make choices, that we are in some sense free, and that interpretation is meaningful precisely insofar as it can be done in different ways, which are nonetheless guided by the source material being interpreted. That is, I do not intend here to present an argument that we are free in some meaningful sense, but to argue, on the assumption that there is some meaningful notion of freedom, that freedom is involved in interpretation. After all, if interpretation is forced, then it loses its meaning as interpretation, and there is simply no room for choice, not even the choice between desire and identity which the standard view accepts.[21]

There may be other ways, however, in which the interpretive choices made around sexuality may seem "forced" without the idea of interpretation losing its implied freedom. Certain aspects of our situation are largely beyond our individual control, and certain parts of our self are so deeply engrained that changing them would seem to require an almost impossible effort. The external factors here include things like the social roles available in society, the cultural concepts available for understanding one's self and one's desires, sanctions of deprivation

or even violence for expressing oneself in particular ways, rewards for acting and being acceptable. Such features of situation channel and guide, but do not ultimately curtail, possible self-understandings; the history of resistance to sexual and gender oppressions, as well as the transformation of sex roles and sexuality, all attest that these are only relative, and not absolute limits. Internal limits on our freedom arise from particularly stubborn traits and features of personality that simply make it hard to choose certain interpretations. Extreme religious guilt, deeply engrained from an early age, or a profound cultural attachment to the idea of heterosexuality and reproduction, or the psychological damage of early sexual abuse can all prevent or block certain options of sexual living. In such cases, I would say not that interpretation becomes unfree, but rather that the individual's self and history have made it nearly impossible to see certain options as live, and hence as ways of being that could be adopted. Breaking the continual association of sex with violence may be nearly impossible; some seem capable of overcoming and seeing sex differently, many cannot. Such examples do not show that interpretation lacks choice, but that the options one can see as live when making a self-interpretation can be severely narrowed. Choice is always partially in response to ways of being that have already been set up within ourselves, so that we have not so much forced choice, as choice that must cut across the dense grain of the self that we have been made into by circumstances.

Finally, I should acknowledge that I have argued from the epistemology of the situation to its metaphysics, although in a peculiar and fitting way. Knowing our sexual orientation involves choices that literally have a hand in making our sexual orientation. I would not argue that all cases of knowing so clearly involve the making of the thing known, but in this particular case, there is no escaping the fact. And at any rate, such an analysis of aspects of ourselves is not so unusual, except that it deals with sexuality, which is often thought of as a biological and hence the determined aspect of ourselves *par excellence*. As I mentioned, there are many traits which we take to be given, that yield, on further analysis, to the claim that they are also chosen. Consider the way in which some other traits of ourselves may begin with entirely accidental choices about which we make very little fuss. Subsequent choices then gradually "snowball" into a full-blown character trait that we eventually affirm. How many of us became philosophers through exactly such a process? For whatever reason, many of us may have chosen a college course in philosophy, only to find it interesting enough to take another, and then another, until we began to think like philosophers, and then go onto careers as philosophers, by this point thinking of ourselves as having "philosophical minds" when really, we made these minds as much as we discovered them.

I conclude that choice is involved in the constitution of desire, and also involved in the constitution of identity, and that these two processes occur together. Choice does not lie *between* desire and identity, but *alongside* desire and identity, or is interwoven with, or partly constitutive of, both. If the possibility for being gay exists in a person's social settings, this possible identity

(which we might think of as a social role) will present possibilities for patterning and interpreting experiences, and thus alter the very desires which might lead us to look into our selves in the first place. It is a continual process of integrating experiences and projects together. Note that I am not claiming that we simply choose our desires, any more than I am claiming that they are simply biologically determined. I am instead claiming that interpretive choices are bound up with the very constitution of a desire based upon a context of feelings and sensations. My goal is to convince you to see neither desire nor choice as independent factors, and even not to think of desire and choice as additive, as if we can take the two factors as separate prior to the process of understanding oneself. Instead, I want to claim that the two are completely intermixed in a continuous process.

To further defend my view, and also to explain and clarify it, I would like to consider some objections.

(1) Why can't we just say that desire is given, but our interpretation of it involves choice? Hence, what we make of desire will be chosen, but the desire itself will not be. A version of this objection has been made to my view whenever I have presented it. Objectors often take it that there must be some "kernel" or core of content in the desires in order to even require interpretation, and this kernel would remain the same. This view is encouraged, as I've said, whenever we try to understand 'interpreting x' only as 'coming to have new beliefs about x.' In response, I would repeat my claim that I do not deny content, only determinant and unchanging content, and I also would again repeat my argument about the impossibility of atomistic and self-contained experiences. But I will also add two further points: (i) The objection claims that desires are given and then subject to interpretation. But if the objection holds that desire is subject to interpretation, then it must also admit that its meaning cannot be fully given, otherwise it would not be open to interpretation. Consider what in the given desire would be subject to interpretation: Is there something unclear, ambiguous in it, which the act of interpretation resolves through recontextualization? Then the desire's meaning cannot be given, and something in it requires the work of the person to understand. If its meaning really is given, fully, on the other hand, how could it change with context or even be construed in different ways? The objection is actually asking us to consider an impossibility: the interpretation of something that cannot be interpreted. To philosophers under the influence of the "Myth of the Given," this objection seems coherent because such philosophers typically assume that there is a layer of experience that provides bedrock for the formation of the rest of our knowledge, and my view denies exactly this, in just the way that holists and phenomenologists have been denying this for years. Hence, if desire can be interpreted, it implies that the meaning of the desire will be at least partly constituted by that interpretation. (ii) Since, again, the objection admits that desire is open to interpretation, we have to ask how the desire could be known, under *any* description, apart from such interpretation? This leads both to a skeptical point, that desire cannot be known entirely by itself or in its own terms, because we

always know it *as* something, and further back to my first point, that a desire that can be interpreted will inevitably be known under one description or another, and hence its meaning will be partly constituted by interpretation.

(2) What about the evidence of people's coming out stories and those who can't change their feelings, no matter how many "recovery programs" they attend? Many people report, after they come out, that they always had these feelings, and that they felt that they had little or no choice about having them, even if they wanted to change them. However, these facts do not prove that sexual orientation is given as a persistent, core desire separated from interpretive choices. These facts at most establish that similar feelings remain present in that person's experience. I do not claim that there are no such feelings, but that these feelings, however strong they are, exist only in relation to specific contexts, and that they can be used to form a variety of possible sexualities and identities. A person who says that she always felt "that way" had various feelings that clearly form a pattern once she has come out, but this does not mean that she has the *same* feelings now that she had prior to coming out, because seeing the feelings in light of this new interpretation changes the feelings. The continuity of memory and the similarity of the feelings do not indicate that these feelings remain the same. Given what I have said, they cannot indicate this. The stability of these feelings comes from the repeated occurrence of a variety of feelings that have been grouped into a stable orientation in part by an interpretation.

(3) Certainly, if you look closely at what I have said, it begins to sound contradictory: "Sexuality on this view appears to be simultaneously determined *and* chosen. How can it possibly be both, since they are exclusive options?" The problem, of course, is that we like to think that our motivations for our choices preexist our choices; the motivations or feelings upon which we base our life projects are determined, not chosen; and we choose on the basis of these determined feelings. Denying this commonsense view leads to a grave difficulty: either an infinite regress or a view of human freedom in which choice is absurd.

Suppose we choose both the motivating feelings and the identity project based upon these feelings in an interpretive process. These further choices in favor of feelings must also have further motives to avoid being merely arbitrary. Are these second level motives also the result of interpretive choices? If they are, then we see the beginning of an infinite regress of choice and motives. I choose my identity based on feelings that I choose, these choices in favor of feelings are motivated by further feelings, which I also again choose, and on we go. Or, if we deny this regress, we seem to face a Sartrean view in which I must choose both my project and the very values and motives which would explain this choice and motivate me to make it. Sartre has arguments for this view, of course, but they are hard to accept in light of the conclusion they generate, which renders the choice we make "absurd" or arbitrary. My choice for a particular project, be it a career, a sexual identity, or a relationship, must be explained by certain values and feelings in order to make sense within the context of my life; if instead I must choose those very values and feelings in

the same act as choosing the project, there can be no explanation for my project other than the absurd fact of my choice. Surely, to return to the case at hand, sexuality is stronger than a merely arbitrary choice, and surely people do not have to cross the expanse of an infinite regress in order to come out.

We like to think that we can separate the motivations and given features of our personality from the choices we make regarding them. Some of the stuff within my experience is "determined" and some of it results from the choices I make. Sexuality, in the standard view, fits perfectly well with this model. Sexual orientation or desire is the given, determined stuff, the rest comes from my choices with respect to this. But as we have seen, this picture of the relationship between choice, desire and identity does not stand scrutiny, and indeed it makes less sense the more one looks at it, and the more one looks at actual cases of sexual identity formation. Hence, it does indeed appear that we need a "more generous vocabulary" than the terms "free" or "determined" offer us.

I would like to suggest, however, that we begin to look for this new vocabulary in a slightly different place than we might expect. Rather than hunting about for a way to speak of things being "sort of determined" and "kind of free," we need to interrogate the starting assumptions that lead us to find cases like sexuality puzzling. In this case, it bothers us to think that sexuality is both determined and chosen if we take our desires to be given, fully meaningful and complete in themselves, rather than to be ambiguous situations requiring resolution. And, more generally, we may begin to question the distinction between seemingly given features of a person and those that are chosen. If regarding our feelings in this situated, ambiguous way seems problematic, it also helps if we recognize that even in our everyday dealings, feelings and desires are rarely very clear or straightforward, their relation to other experiences is often open to interpretation, what we make of them is never a certain matter. I may be upset with someone and only realize why much, much later, and then perhaps even realize I wasn't upset with them: I was *attracted* to them! If we recognize, from the start, the extent to which feelings and desires are actually ambiguous situations requiring interpretation, then it seems to make sense to think that they are not separate from the acts of interpreting them.

This allows us to explain interesting cases of choice like the choice of sexuality and sexual identity without facing the regress or absurdity problems. Rather than assume that either my experiences must be given and determined in order for me to make choices, or my choices face absurdity or regress, we avoid the entire disjunction. The GLBT experience of coming out and living as a member of a sexual minority teaches us to think of our agency as continually interwoven with the very process of coming to have meaningful experiences which inspire further decisions for living. If there is a given in our experience, if something reaches us as determined or as facticity, it does so only as an *open situation* (to borrow another existentialist phrase), as something suggesting possibility but requiring our resolution. The situation will appear open against the

wider background of all that stands fast for me within experience, but no doubt coming out causes readjustment of much of that as well. It is this *relatively* established context, acquired in the past and held into the present, that appears given and determined, even as it contributes to the meaning of my present situation and will be transformed by my transformation into a gay man. It is not a matter of what is determined or free, but rather what is established and stable, what is open and ambiguous, and what future changes my future actions will make to this entire structure of experience. However uncomfortable it may make those seeking a rigid and clean distinction between the determined and the free, or however uncomfortable this language may sound, the very rigidity of the free/determined distinction leaves us unable to explain experience which we (gays and lesbians) have lived. This is the continual process of making and remaking our lives, of making things in our lives "make sense" by literally changing them in acts of interpretation that project forward new ways of living and being.

While sexuality is a particularly vivid example of these claims about experience and choice, what it means for all of us is just this: this view of experience and choice will work to make sense of all our choices of self—falling in or out of love, deciding our careers, picking our hobbies, coming to our moral commitments and beliefs, choosing our spirituality. I cannot here justify such a broad claim, although I think the way is clear to see how we could rework the example of sexuality into these other ones, and I think it suggests a fruitful direction for future inquiry.

Notes

[1] Claudia Card, *Lesbian Choices* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 42.

[2] Vera Whisman, *Queer by Choice: Lesbian, Gay Men, and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Routlege, 1996); Steven Seidman, *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[3] A survey of some of the literature demonstrating these points about "treatments" and "cures" can be found in Ed Stein, *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory and Ethics of Sexual Orientation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 260.

[4] Scientific researchers (such as Simon LeVay, Dean Hamer, Brian Mustanski, and Michael Bailey) do not seek to directly explain particular behaviors. Rather, they seek the sexual orientation which produces these behaviors. Indeed, Mustanski claims that investigating behavior alone is unadvisable: see Brian Mustanski, Meredith Chivers and J. Michael Bailey, "A Critical Review of Recent Biological Research on Human Sexual Orientation," *Annual Review of Sex Research* 12 (2002): 89–140. This paradigm of seeking traits and not behaviors appears in all their work. Dean Hamer does not look for the gene which produces homosexual behavior, but the gene which produces homosexual orientation and he has an elaborate interview process and seemingly strict criteria for distinguishing the real homosexuals from those who only appear homosexual. (This procedure is detailed in Dean Hamer and Peter Copeland, *The Science of Desire* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 52–73.) Bailey states that he investigates *psychological* rather than *behavioral* sexual orientation because the latter is both stable and measurable in cases where a person has no sexual activity. (See J. Michael Bailey and others, "A Family History of Male Sexual Orientation Using Three Independent Samples," *Journal of Personality*

and Social Psychology 78 (2000): 524–36.) LeVay and Byne, looking at brain anatomy, do not differ in this respect; since they worked with deceased AIDS patients, they could not even look at what their subjects' specific behaviors were, they could only infer that these people were "gay" in some respect having to do with an abiding orientation. (See Simon LeVay, "A Difference in Hypothalamic Structure Between Heterosexual and Homosexual Men," *Science* 253 [1991]: 1034–37, and William Byne and others, "The Interstitial Nuclei of the Human Anterior Hypothalamus: An Investigation of Variation with Sex, Sexual Orientation, and HIV Status," *Hormones and Behavior* 40 [2001]: 86–92.) Putting the point simply, this scientific research tries to look past surface patterns of behavior to the deep cause of these patterns in sexual orientation.

[5] Raja Halwani points out, for instance, that much of the so-called constructionism and essentialism debate has been marred by a confusion over whether identity or orientation is constructed or essential. See Raja Halwani, "Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics of Sexual Identity: Recasting the Essentialism and Social Constructionism Debate," in *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, ed. Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Hames-García, Satya P. Mohanty and Paula M. L. Moya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2005): 209–27.

[6] See Stein, *Mismeasure*, 258–75, and Daryl J. Bem, "Exotic Becomes Erotic: A Developmental Theory of Sexual Orientation," *Psychological Review* 103 (1996): 320–35.

[7] See Card, *Lesbian Choices*, 50–53; and Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983), 95–109.

[8] Anthony D'Augelli and Charlotte Patterson, *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity Over the Lifespan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5 (1980): 631–60.

[9] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952).

[10] Charles Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–44.

[11] Taylor, "Human Agency," 36.

[12] For this reason, Richard Moran's response to Taylor seems quite wide of the mark. He wrongly describes Taylor's ideal of self-interpretation as the process of coming to have new beliefs about desires, and uses this idiom as an argument that the thing interpreted must in fact have independent reality. Richard Moran, "Making Up Your Mind: Self-Interpretation and Self-Constitution," *Ratio (New Series)* 1 (1988): 135–51.

[13] I am grateful to Andrew Cling for much helpful clarification of these points.

[14] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Humanities Press, 1942); and Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *Science, Perception and Reality* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Press, 1963): 127–96.

[15] See William Wilkerson, *Ambiguity and Sexuality: A Theory of Sexual Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 31–48, for a fuller discussion.

[16] E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (New York: Vintage Books, 1921), 173.

[17] I have in mind here particularly the third section of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" where Sellars discusses the logic of "looks." Certainly his concern was as much or more with justification, rather than mere interpretation, but without the ambiguity in the experience of color, his claims about justification wouldn't take hold.

[18] Or, more properly, the possibilities will resolve themselves, but merely in the way that one resolves to take the last stop of the bus if one doesn't make any earlier choices about what stop one wants. One allows one's facticity to determine one's choice, which itself is a choice, as existentialists point out.

[19] Whisman, *Queer by Choice.*

[20] Taylor, "Human Agency." I am condensing a three-part distinction around which Taylor structures his entire essay.

[21] In this respect, we could say that my argument in this article is conditional. On the assumptions that (1) given, self-intimating experiences can be dispensed with; and (2) there is some meaningful

notion of choice or freedom, then sexual orientation is not fully determined. As for (1), I provide some arguments and also suggest that further arguments are available in the tradition (both analytic and continental). As for (2), I take it that both the standard view and the view I am putting forward hold on to the idea that choice is meaningful and real; the only question is where to "locate" it, and I am arguing that we need to put it much "sooner" than the choice of identity. So I am willing to conclude that we have good reason for affirming (1) and that we should accept (2) and proceed with the argument.