Sexual Authenticity

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I am interested in the ethics of everyday sexual agency: specifically, in moral questions about when, how, and why we identify ourselves as particular kinds of sexual agents. Given that sexual self-identifications involve a complex combination of individual and social processes, a framework which does justice to these processes would help make room for an analysis of the ethics of sexual self-identification. I introduce the concept of sexual authenticity as useful in these contexts, where such authenticity involves two main aspects: taking up sexual identifications as our ownmost and giving accounts of them to and with others.

RÉSUMÉ: Dans cet article, je m'intéresse à l'éthique de l'agentivité sexuelle courante. Il s'agit, plus particulièrement, des questions morales concernant quand, comment et pourquoi nous nous identifions à un type donné d'agent sexuel. Comme l'auto-identification met en jeux une combinaison complexe de processus individuels et sociaux, un cadre conceptuel qui rend justice à ces processus permettrait une analyse de l'éthique de l'auto-identification sexuelle. Je présente le concept de l'authenticité sexuelle comme étant utile dans les contextes où elle comporte deux aspects principaux : l'adoption d'une identité sexuelle qui nous est propre et l'explication que nous en donnons à et avec d'autres personnes.

Processes of sexual self-identification are practically complex and philosophically interesting. Considerations of such processes spur questions about ontology, epistemology, ethics, and politics: what is the nature of sexual identities? How do we come to know about the sexual identities of ourselves and others? Are some ways of self-identifying more responsible than others? How do sexual identifications become politically salient when they categorize us as members of dominant or non-dominant groups? How should ethicists assess

***Dialogue* 50 (2011), 77–93.**
© Canadian Philosophical Association/Association canadienne de philosophie 2011
doi:10.1017/S0012217311000126

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217311000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the rights of individuals to sexual self-identification? Moral questions about sexual identifications can overlap with ontological questions, as they do if we ask whether researchers have an obligation to consider the possibly adverse social effects of research into biological origins of homosexuality. Moral questions can overlap with epistemological ones, as they do if we ask whether it is possible for me to be deceived about my own sexual identity. And moral questions can overlap with political questions, as they do when we ask whether a relatively privileged individual who inhabits a non-normative sexual identity might have some obligation to advocate for the needs of less privileged, sexually oppressed others.

In this paper, I focus on one area of the ethics of everyday sexual agency: specifically, on moral questions about when, how, and why we identify ourselves as particular kinds of sexual agents (e.g., straight, queer, asexual, and so on). Given that sexual self-identifications involve a complex combination of individual and social processes, a moral framework which does justice to these processes would help make room for a sustained analysis of the ethics of sexual self-identification. I want to introduce a particular understanding of *sexual authenticity* as one way of analyzing the ethics of identification in sexual contexts. I draw on the work of Martin Heidegger, Judith Butler, and others in order to argue for the value of sexual authenticity, where such authenticity involves two main aspects: *ownmostness* and *account-giving*. I draw on examples from theory, literature, and film to clarify what being sexually authentic would mean in the context of real lives.

I begin in section 1 by outlining the moral significance of sexual self-identification. In section 2, I highlight some of the potential harms of using authenticity discourses in such contexts, and identify the main pitfalls to avoid. In section 3, I introduce an account of sexual authenticity which I claim does justice to the moral complexities of sexual self-identification. In section 4, I suggest possible implications of my view of sexual authenticity for broader questions of sexual justice in communities. Coming to sexually identify authentically is always done in the context of communities—it is a process which is thoroughly social, often a struggle, and always ongoing. The worries of those who caution against the use of authenticity in contexts of self-identification in general might remain so serious as to convince us to reject using authenticity in the context of sexual self-identification as I suggest. My aim here is to present what I take to be a promising account of authenticity, and to initiate a discussion in order to allow us to draw on the richness of authenticity discourses for sexual ethics in the future.

1. Sexual Self-Identification

I am working with a view of sexualities that takes for granted particular ontological, epistemological, and political understandings which, while shared by many sexuality theorists, are not uncontroversial. I take sexual selves to be persons for whom sexuality is a relevant component of identity, when "sexuality"

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217311000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is understood to admit of diverse forms and various degrees. I take sexualities to involve complex combinations of beliefs, desires, practices, habits, and identifications. The ways we sexually identify relate in various ways to our preferences and actions; identifying in a particular way (e.g., as "straight") can make us more likely to attend to or express some desires more than others, and more likely to practice certain kinds of sex, though we also clearly desire and practice sex in ways which do not align with what our identifications would suggest.

I follow a view of sexualities as dynamic rather than static aspects of our lives.[1] That is, I work from an understanding of our sexual beliefs about ourselves, desires, practices, habits, and identifications not as fixed or permanently established, but as having the potential to change at any point in our lives. Jacquelyn Zita characterizes her own sympathetic approach as challenging the following historical assumptions:

> That heterosexuality and homosexuality are two mutually exclusive and autonomous orientations, that sex selection is necessarily a *primary* or *first order* criterion for sexual kinds of desire, that sexual orientation is immutable or nonfungible, that sexual orientation identity formation is a linear process with a fixed outcome, that monosexual identity constructions are based on a purity of content, and that bisexual identities have no monosexual dimensions. (Zita 1998, 135)

Further, I work from an understanding of the beliefs we have about ourselves as sexual, of our desires, practices, habits, and identifications as being socially situated.[2] I am working with a non-essentialist reading of sexual selfhood, and this informs my own interest in the moral dimensions of sexual self-identification. We enact sexual agency on these dimensions always within a social system that validates some kinds of sexual agency more than others, making it easiest and safest to desire, act, and identify in certain ways, and to do so as permanently as possible. Identifying myself as a certain kind of sexual agent sometimes facilitates my entrance into corresponding social groups; these groups can be affirming and can protect marginalized sexual individuals from some kinds of harm, but they can also suffer from their own troublingly reified systems of membership (e.g., bisexuals not being accepted in some gay contexts) and power structures (e.g., certain queers being more powerful spokespeople than others because of various kinds of privilege).

Sexual self-identification is a complex part of sexual agency: through identifying ourselves, we position ourselves publically, making ourselves available to particular others, and we create possibilities for our own sexual actions and expressions, among other things. But these processes are not always straightforward, and are in every case complicated by the socio-sexual contexts in which we are located. Nalo Hopkinson describes her process of identification as follows:

> I tend to act first through a trepidation that gongs so loudly I have a hard time hearing whether it's masking any desire. I figure out the desire part in the moment or later, if at

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> all. Form following function. Identity following action. Or something like that, only messier. If the popular narrative of knowing one's sexuality before experiencing it is the only way to be, I don't have an orientation. I have a dis-orientation. (Hopkinson 2007, 22)

We sometimes come to sexually self-identify only through first attempting to act through experiences of serious uncertainty. Such processes are further complicated by socially structured fears about some identifications more than others. In Jeannette Winterson's *Gut Symmetries*, the protagonist, Alice, describes part of the difficulty of sexual identification:

> When Stella kissed me I remember thinking, 'This is not allowed.' I was glad of the fog and the dark because I knew that if anyone saw us, the totality of our lives; history, complexity, nationality, intelligence, age, achievement, status, would be shrunk up to the assumptions of our kiss. Whoever saw us would say, 'There's a couple of . . . ,' and this kiss, tentative, ambivalent, would become a lock and key. I had seen it happen to others. I did not want it to happen to me. At the same time I realised the absurdity of pinning anything onto a kiss. At the same time I realised that I would like to do much more kissing if it were not so complicated. So complicated. My first serious emotion was for a married man. My first experience of authentic desire was with a married woman. You see, I did want to kiss her. That was what surprised me most of all. (Winterson 1997, 120)

Alice highlights complexity on a number of levels here: sexual attraction can surprise us, our tendencies of desire can change over time, or after meeting particular others, even in the face of social harm. Yet we can worry about being sexually identified by others in ways which mischaracterize, spur stigma, or create expectations we may not meet. In one sense, sexual desire and action is just desire and action and Alice's desire for Stella need not require her to shift her self-identification (e.g., as heterosexual) among others. Yet the desire to kiss Stella "much more" is curious and compelling, and can be motivating in ways distinct from feelings of attachment or romantic love for (in Alice's case, male) others. It is not clear what would be meant by "authentic" desire in Alice's case, though some experiences of desire do compel sexual self-identifications that make us feel more like ourselves.

Given the complexity of processes of sexual self-identification, moral questions about such processes are both important and difficult to answer. If we accept the view of sexualities as dynamic rather than static, how should sexual agents identify? How should we think about the still-influential dichotomy of being "in" or "out" of the closet? How should we think about responsibilities to help others navigate processes of self-identification? How might we think of responsibilities to self-identify (or to identify others by virtue of what we know of their practices), particularly in cases of non-normative identifications where, for example, more visible individuals openly identifying as queer could shift popular opinion of queerness for the better?[3]

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Part of what is needed is a sustained analysis of how sexual identifications are both relational and uniquely our own, and how this makes them particular kinds of moral actions. How we are able to identify, how we see ourselves as identifiers, and how we think about future possibilities for identification are relational questions; yet, at least on many views, we as individuals are in some sense the only ones who can decisively identify ourselves. Unlike some aspects of identity which shape and constrain action and possibilities for default group involvement on the basis of bodily characteristics or location before identification (e.g., race, sex, nationality), sexual identification starts at the individual level of desire, decision, action, and expression, and can then establish group memberships. To be sure, we sexually identify within the social constraints of certain identifications seeming most viable, subject to the contestation and punishment of others, and with consequences for those around us. It is still sometimes the case that we cannot identify as we want to and survive. But even given the deeply wrongheaded mechanisms that make heterosexuality the default identification in theory and practice, others do not sexually identify us *for* us. I want to suggest that authenticity, as I construe it here, can be a useful concept for considering the complex ethics of sexual self-identification.

2. The Harms of Authenticity Discourses

Feminist philosophers have been rightly hesitant about maintaining authenticity discourses in discussions of self-identification in large part because of the presumptions such discourses so often introduce—perhaps most problematically, assumptions about identities as static and fixed,[4] and ongoing suspicions about untrustworthiness and deceit being connected to inauthenticity. The concept of authenticity has not been applied to discussions of sexual self-identification in a sustained way, but the same problems could apply in this context of identification as in others.[5] If conceptions of authenticity are to be useful in discussions of sexual identity and selfhood, they need to be conceptions which emphasize the ongoing development of sexual identities and the complex patterns of individual and relational agency involved in developing them.

Zita highlights one context within which authenticity discourse is troublingly applied to questions of sexual identification: through the understanding of certain sexual identities (e.g., bisexuality) as being too indecisive to be authentic. As she explains, "Because a bisexual identity formation seems less linear, more open-ended, and in some ways less fixed than heterosexual or homosexual identity, bisexuality is often perceived as an inauthentic or untrustworthy state of being" (Zita 1998, 119). In these cases, bisexuality is equated with indeterminacy of orientation, which is then equated with untrustworthiness, and then with inauthenticity—bisexuality is seen as a fraudulent mischaracterization of the orientation of someone who is *really* either heterosexual or homosexual. The potential use of such authenticity discourses to harm all who are seen as having indeterminate or open-ended sexual identities is clearly troubling.

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Two tropes of authenticity could function harmfully in practical contexts of sexual self-identification: (1) understandings of authentic selves as those who have become the persons they truly are, always were, and always will be; and (2) understandings of authentic selves as those who behave in ways "true-to-themselves," in whatever disclosive forms that might take, however capriciously, superficially, briefly, and with however little consideration or consistency. We might think of the first sense of authenticity as "rigid" and the second, "flimsy."

In the case Zita raises, a call to rigid authenticity is aimed at bisexual identification in ways which preclude its ever being considered an authentic sexuality; bisexual identities are too indeterminate to be (rigidly) authentic. We can imagine another case in which a lesbian who hesitates to come out to her conservative-minded co-workers is criticized for being inauthentic: she is not being authentically "true to herself," which would require practicing her sexuality in fully public ways. In this second case, a call to flimsy authenticity would be aimed at hesitant lesbian identification in ways which preclude its ever being considered authentic; (flimsily) authentic sexualities must be lived openly, regardless of what dangers or harms specific selves might incur. In the first case, a requirement of rigid authenticity prevents open-ended sexual identifications from being authentic; in the second, a requirement of flimsy authenticity would prevent some sexual identifications shaped and complicated by social constraints from being authentic. Neither conception of authenticity would account for the need for authentic selves to seriously face and negotiate the dynamic, open-ended, and often severely constricting aspects of self-identification in the social world. Both cases show how misguided calls to sexual authenticity could harm sexual selves.

3. Reintroducing Authenticity

3.1. Ownmostness

I want to suggest that Martin Heidegger's account of authenticity, articulated in *Being and Time*, can be a helpful starting point for re-theorizing one aspect of sexual authenticity—namely, the sense in which being sexually authentic requires taking up our sexual identifications as our *ownmost*.[6] Heidegger's account of authenticity can be briefly sketched as follows: authenticity signifies a way in which Dasein (i.e., the being or person for whom Being is an issue) responds to its potentiality for Being within the world by means of understanding and acting on its ownmost possibilities therein. In his discussion of authenticity, Heidegger focuses on Dasein's response to the possibilities it alone has for acting and responding to the world. Dasein's predominantly inauthentic state is due to the dominance of what Heidegger deems Dasein's unreflective participation within the context of other beings (*das Man*), such that both Dasein's actions and its character blend in, rather than appearing as uniquely those of an individual. The movement towards authenticity requires

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that Dasein gain an understanding of itself as singularized. Unlike the unquestioned acceptance of its position among other beings, authentic Dasein's self and possibilities for enacting selfhood appear to it as questionable (Heidegger 2001, 29). In becoming authentic, Dasein realizes that its socially introduced and fostered opportunities for agency and identity (including sexual agency and identity) ultimately call for action on the part of it alone.

Sexual authenticity requires that we experience our sexual possibilities as our ownmost in this sense of understanding them to be those that we gain in social contexts, but that call for us to act on them ourselves.[7] Ownmostness is a moral concept here: it intersects with aspects of taking responsibility for self, the autonomy of self-constitution, and the morally significant project of creating an identity for oneself. The ownmostness of sexual authenticity allows for a consolidation of sexual agency: although the possibilities for sexual identification are to some degree contingent on the norms of my community, and although I only come to know about them through others, I must take responsibility for my actions in response to them. Sexual authenticity thus prevents us from taking our sexual identifications as parts of our lives decided wholly by the social world—it is especially important that such false understandings be avoided in a social world that is still predominantly heterosexist and otherwise sexually oppressive.

The character of Alyssa (Joey Lauren Adams) in Kevin Smith's 1997 film *Chasing Amy* provides one example of how individuals might take up sexual identifications as their ownmost. Holden (Ben Affleck) meets and is attracted to Alyssa before he finds out that she identifies as lesbian. On a stormy drive home from dinner, Holden confronts Alyssa with his feelings for her and the confession turns into an argument—Holden maintains that even though Alyssa consistently self-identifies as a lesbian, "People change" and that every relationship will involve a period of adjustment. Alyssa angrily points out how a relationship between them would change nothing for Holden while throwing her whole world into upheaval, and repeatedly emphasizes her self-identification, yelling, "I'm gay! That's who I am!" Themes of self-definition and ownership run through the rest of the film: eventually, Alyssa finds herself attracted to Holden and the two end up in a relationship. Alyssa repeatedly explains that she got to her current sexual identity "*on her own terms*," and insists at the end of the film that she must leave Holden alone to do the same.

What it means to reach a sexual identification on one's own terms is complicated, but I take it some degree of self-definition is required. As the passage from Hopkinson indicated earlier, it might involve some struggle to identify on the basis of experience over time. Alyssa takes her possibilities for sexual identification to be questionable and ones that she alone must negotiate. She pursues a relationship with Holden even when doing so angers her lesbian friends, and she acknowledges the complexity of her sexual identity at the end of the relationship with Holden, not simply reverting to a vision of herself as having pursued him despite her *true* lesbianism.

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The "ownmostness" requirement of becoming sexually authentic also introduces the question of the affect of authenticity—what might becoming sexually authentic feel like? On Heidegger's view, anxiety is involved in processes of becoming authentic insofar as the process of facing singularity and acting according to our ownmost possibilities can be overwhelming and isolating. I want to propose that becoming sexually authentic is likewise not a process free from affective struggle. Sexual authenticity can more often involve felt disintegration and weakness than integration and strength.[8] Given that allowing ourselves to be sexually identified by the dominant sexual perspectives of our communities could be experienced not only as resignation but alternatively as relaxation or relief, taking responsibility for sexual self-identification can mean taking on effort and giving up ease. Although sexual authenticity need not involve perpetually embodying discomfort or anxiety, it is important that we not associate sexual authenticity only with a feeling of being at home because sexually self-identifying in ways which take up our sexual identifications as our ownmost can feel deeply risky and uncomfortable.

3.2. Giving an Account

In addition to taking up sexual identifications as our *ownmost*, sexual authenticity requires *giving accounts* of them to and with others. The accounts we give of ourselves—and what makes it possible for us to give such accounts—are important components of how we identify, partly because the accounts we give are often our best ways of evaluating our sexual identities, and partly because our accounts tangibly re-ground us in the communities that make identification possible in the first place.

Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* provides a useful framework within which to theorize this aspect of sexual authenticity. Butler emphasizes how our identities and agency are made possible only against a social backdrop (e.g., a community's framework of expectations and obligations), clarifying the character of our identity and agency as deeply informed by our social situations. As she explains, "There is no self that is prior to the convergence or who maintains 'integrity' prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field. There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very 'taking up' is enabled by the tool lying there" (Butler 1999, 185). Our social frameworks make some sexual actions and identities seem more available or acceptable than others; it is within such frameworks that we necessarily shape our identities as sexual selves. When we give accounts of our sexualities to others, we come to better understand the contingent characters of our situations and our possibilities for action within them.[9]

Account-giving is a moral phenomenon: it highlights senses in which our processes of self-identification rely on, have impacts on, and implicate other selves, and emphasizes the senses in which self-identifications are meaningful in practice only when at least some others respect them and respond to us accordingly. It is unlikely that we can ever provide complete accounts of our

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sexual lives, given their dynamism and our position always in the midst of them. The accounts we give will therefore always be partial, incomplete, and at least somewhat opaque to us. As Butler confirms, any account of oneself "does not have as its goal the establishment of a definitive narrative but constitutes a linguistic and social occasion for self-transformation" (Butler 2005, 130). The accounts we give are themselves actions; accounting for various aspects of my sexual selfhood to others is one way in which I understand and enact it as my own. In developing authentic selfhood, we strive to account for our actions and identifications in a social context where all others are doing likewise, while each must be accountable.[10] Likewise in developing authentic *sexual* selfhood, we strive to account for our sexual actions and identifications when all other sexual selves are doing likewise against particular backdrops of sexual norms.

Accounts of sexual identification might include descriptions of the important confusions, questions, changes, developments, realizations, decisions, pleasures, and confirmations of our sexual lives so far. We give accounts of our sexual identifications to others, but also to ourselves. We might account for ourselves to others verbally or descriptively, through providing narratives about our sexual identifications – interpreting them, explaining how we came to them, how we worry about them, or how we anticipate experiencing them in the future. In doing so, we position ourselves as part of an ongoing narrative that establishes how we came to embody the sexual identifications we do.

Steven Soderbergh's 1989 film *sex, lies, and videotape* depicts a relationship between conservative Ann (Andie MacDowell) and intriguing Graham (James Spader), a college friend of her husband. Ann lives within what appears to be a stable marriage and suburban schedule, though we are immediately introduced to her struggle to shape her marriage's boundaries given her own sexual reluctance, and we soon learn that her husband and sister are engaging sexually behind Ann's back. Graham confides in Ann that while he's not had sex with other people in many years, he has developed a project that involves recording videotapes of individual women describing their sexual histories in confidence. Graham's sexual life appears limited to recording and reviewing these tapes. The film depicts Ann's efforts to reconsider her sexual agency in a troubled and dishonest marriage, and Graham's own sexual isolation. Graham ultimately videotapes Ann, who becomes a good example of someone struggling to give to another an account of her sexual identification. At the film's denouement Ann turns the camera on Graham, forcing him to account for himself, holding him accountable for his dependence on others (the women in the films), and pressing him to note the ways in which his sexual interactions, contrary to what he thinks, have involved and been shaped by more than himself alone. Ann and Graham provide an example of how giving an account can be something we do mutually, in conversation with others—we can give accounts of ourselves both to and with others, sometimes through asking others to give accounts of their sexual identifications as we give accounts of our own.

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We give accounts of ourselves to *ourselves* through processes of asking and answering questions about our sexual identifications, trying out narratives, and imagining how well different accounts could fit with who we are. We see attempts to account in this way in the passage where Alice questions herself after finding herself attracted to Stella, and imagines how such desire might fit into an account of her sexual identification—her first emotional attraction being for a man, her first authentic desire being for a woman. Even in accounting for ourselves to ourselves, we rely on the social structures that have established us as relational beings and made us aware of how our identifications can affect others. To echo the point about authenticity's affect in the context of ownmostness, we can notice how another affective characteristic of coming to authentically self-identify can be feelings of alignment and clarity: when the accounts we give of our sexual identifications are heard and responded to by others, we can come to feel more at home in ourselves, and become better able to access the kinds of relationships we are most excited to pursue.

It might seem that, in sexual contexts, the primary way we account for ourselves is by making non-normative aspects of our sexual selves explicit: by coming out of the closet, establishing queer autobiographies, or confessing to sexual behaviours historically seen as deviant.[11] These accounts might be first to come to mind because of both the common association of account-giving as something we do when we are guilty and the ongoing association of non-normative sexualities with wrongdoing. Sexual authenticity does not require account-giving only when we enact sexualities other than those expected in dominant frameworks. On the contrary, I am suggesting that viewing our sexual practices and identities as aspects of selves of which we should *all* give accounts helpfully refocuses attention on the complexities of sexual self-development and might challenge hierarchies of sexual possibilities (e.g., where heteronormative behaviour is highest/most powerful) in concrete ways: our sexual selfhoods are at all times questionable, they could at any time be otherwise, no sexual identity is default, all need to be accounted for.

Requiring that agents give accounts of themselves inevitably means involving power structures in developments of authentic sexual selfhood: in situations of unevenly distributed power, this view of accountability might seem to create more ways to harm already less-powerful individuals. To whom must I give account? On what grounds is this decided? Although it is true that power dynamics remain a serious concern in sexual contexts (not just when we give accounts of ourselves, but also when we engage in sex with others at all), my contention is that our social contexts are crucial parts of what makes our sexual identities possible. Liberatory sexual politics must envision new ways of making interpersonal accountability more viable and less dangerous, rather than eclipsing it with an ideal of self-made-sexual-selves.

I have claimed that sexual authenticity involves ownmostness and account-giving—processes that are morally weighty, as they involve crucial dimensions of moral agency including autonomy, self-constitution, and relationality.

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My account of sexual authenticity might seem to introduce a tension between the requirement that we take up sexual identifications as our ownmost while becoming able to identify authentically only by giving an account of ourselves to others—that is, a tension between sexual self-identification as an individual versus social project. This conceptual dualness starts to respond to the complexity of sexual agency, which is at all points socially situated but which at the same time is practiced, experienced, and interpreted at the individual level. Further assessment of sexual agency by relational autonomists might help to detail an account of how sexual agents can, in thoroughly relational circumstances, still have autonomy.[12] The important point for me is that the dual vision of authenticity explicitly aims to respond to the ways in which our sexual self-identifications both belong to us individually and come to seem possible (or required) through our relations with other sexual agents—the components of both ownmostness and account-giving are required.[13]

The concept of sexual authenticity provided here is not meant to be the chief or only ethical framework for considering sexual agency. Much has been written about harm in sexual contexts, and sexual harm must be understood to constrain sexual activity: it cannot be seen as morally promising to sexually self-identify as a pedophile, no matter what the possibilities would be for taking it on as my ownmost identification, or for giving an account of such an identification to others. Sexual authenticity as a concept does not alone bear the burden of distinguishing sexual goodness from badness. I would hope that sexual authenticity could be part of a picture of sexual ethics which, along with nuanced analyses of sexual harms, could be further supported by accounts of sexual flourishing, sexual virtues, and sexual responsibility.

Being sexually authentic does not require that I be queer, or that I experience major changes in my patterns of sexual desire, as in cases of changes of gender-attraction.[14] Being sexually authentic does not require that I explicitly conceive of, reflect on, or describe myself as having dynamic desires (e.g., such that I am able to describe a worked out ontology of sexual desire, or such that even if I am attracted only to women I readily discuss the possibility of becoming attracted to men). We might be more likely to have such understanding when it has been difficult for us to establish sexual legitimacy in our communities, perhaps because we have had to struggle toward queer sexualities, because we have failed to perform gender roles as expected, or just because we desire multiple kinds of others, differently at different times. Restrictive social contexts can compel us to reflect on what keeps us from fitting into them. While such explicit understanding or reflection will not always accompany sexual authenticity, the corresponding underlying affective and physical awareness/flexibility may. These underlying senses might be best evidenced by the kinds of reactions we have when aspects of sexual selfhood change—being sexually authentic might make us better at anticipating such changes in ourselves and others, less threatened by them, more able to pursue and sustain sexual relationships without taking the agents or desires within them for

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granted, and better able to establish environments that will facilitate dynamic sexuality. Even without the explicit or reflective understanding that can accompany sexual authenticity, it may be seen in the emotions and actions surrounding processes of sexual identification. Saba Mahmood emphasizes the need to recognize actions, identifications, and embodiments which resist dominance and oppression without taking the form of forceful subversion of dominant norms (see Mahmood 2005, esp. chapter 5). Her analysis is helpful for showing why we need not take up, for example, violent forms of queer politics in order to resist heteronormativity and the reification of other harmful sexual norms. Sometimes moral agency in contexts of sexual self-identification requires recalibrating our positions with respect to sexual norms in subtle ways.

4. Sexual Authenticity and Social Change

Developing sexual authenticity is good for us as individuals. Sexually self-identifying in ways which are our ownmost and giving accounts of them to others better positions us to flourish as sexual selves than do less authentic sexual identities. Having said this, I want to suggest further that developing sexual authenticity as individuals is not only good for us, it is also good for our broader communities: sexual authenticity can help to challenge and change the socio-sexual frameworks that continue to make it difficult and dangerous for many to openly live out non-normative sexualities. Evaluating Heidegger's understanding of authenticity in light of contexts of oppression, Dorothy Leland suggests the need for a view which "link[s] authenticity to struggles over social meanings and see it as taking shape as part of a political practice" (Leland 2001, 124). Developing sexual authenticity can be politically productive in one way by changing the way we think of the ethics of sexual environments. Increased attentiveness to our own dynamic sexualities and to the social contexts which make them more or less liveable helps us re-envision and reshape the oppressive aspects of those situations. We see this to some extent in the example of Alyssa in *Chasing Amy*: her attention to her changing and sexual identification helps her better attend to the way queer identifications can be policed by queers as well as by non-queers. Cultivating sexual authenticity can be expedient in another way insofar as it changes the way we think of the ethics of sexual agency. Coming to better understand our own sexual agency and the roles others play in making sexualities available helps us better understand ourselves as responsible for creating social contexts that allow sexual agents to flourish.

The development of sexual authenticity may compel us to prevent any sexual patterns and identities from becoming more normative than others. That is, developing sexual authenticity through developing ownmostness and account-giving in sexual self-identification can involve developing strategies for norm-interrogation and subversive identification. The way we understand our social contexts will change as we develop sexual authenticity, particularly

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if we face restrictions we had not noticed before. Given that the development of sexual authenticity often involves the development of personal and interpersonal stakes in more supportive sexual environments, becoming more sexually authentic will often also mean that we become more politically concerned about our social environments.

Developing sexual authenticity will also highlight our position as sexual agents who, like those who support us and make the enactment of our desire possible, have capacities and responsibilities to support the sexual lives of others. We can see this shift in *sex, lies, and videotape*: in developing more sexual authenticity, Ann and Graham come to see themselves as able to mutually support and challenge each other's sexual identification and actions. As Butler explains, "The self at issue is clearly 'formed' within a set of social conventions that raise the question whether a good life can be conducted within a bad one, and whether we might, in recrafting ourselves with and for another, participate in the remaking of social conditions" (Butler 2005, 134-5). On Heidegger's account, too, the development of authenticity involves coming to understand our ethical positions with respect to others and our responsibilities to care for them.[15] Sexual authenticity can be morally motivating insofar as it helps us recognize both the importance of creating the most supportive sociosexual circumstances possible and the promise of our own capacities for doing so. Becoming sexually authentic means developing new understandings of social circumstances, so that we can act more supportively and responsibly as and toward agents within them.

5. Conclusions

I have claimed that in developing authentic sexual selfhood, we develop possibilities for sexual self-identifications which are crucially our own, and ones about which we can give accounts, against a backdrop of socially shaped (sometimes helpful, sometimes deeply harmful) sexual norms. Such authenticity follows the pattern of neither more rigid forms (e.g., being sexually authentic means being the sexual self I am, always was, and always will be) nor flimsy forms (e.g., being sexually authentic means just being somehow "true to my sexual self," whatever and however unquestioned that may be). Representations of how sexual authenticity should look or feel are more readily found in partial, flawed forms than in complete ones. Although *Chasing Amy* does well to highlight how we can experience sexualities as our ownmost, in the case of Alyssa, sexual identity is at times made to seem like a free-floating, socially unsituated choice—even her major shift in orientation is described as something she comes to independently, on her own terms, as though unimpacted by her community. *Sex, lies and videotape* attends to the role account-giving plays in allowing for sexual authenticity, while nonetheless making it seem as though such accounting is meant to impact only one monogamous couple at a time, straightforwardly easing anxiety, and leaving the surrounding power/class dynamics, sexism, heterosexism, and racism intact. It can be hard to find

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217311000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

models of sexual authenticity, given that authenticity is not something we ever secure in full, always something we only work toward.

I have claimed that developing sexual authenticity should be seen as an important moral aspect of sexual agency. Perhaps what is most useful about such a form of authenticity is its unwavering emphasis on ongoing open-endedness in the development of selves—developing authentic selfhood, sexual or otherwise, is consistently characterized as a process of becoming. This is especially useful given the tendencies of some discussions of sexual selfhood to eclipse *becoming* with *being*, focusing on the sexual selves we were and are, rather than on those we still may be. As Butler encourages us, "We must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chances of becoming human" (Butler 2005, 136). Processes of developing sexual authenticities involve just this: analyses like the one I have offered may allow us to further theorize the connections between becoming authentic and becoming better sexual selves.[16]

Notes

1 Ahmed stresses the need to focus on sexual orientations as at all points dynamic: see Ahmed 2006, 79.

2 Richard Mohr criticizes views which he thinks over-emphasize the social aspects of sexual identification in Gay Ideas, see especially chapter 7.

3 For a nuanced analysis of moral questions surrounding practices of outing, see Alice MacLachlan, "Closet Doors and Stage Lights: On the Goods of Out."

4 See Zita 1998, 56 and 138, for helpful discussions of problems with such discourses.

5 Simone de Beauvoir accounts for authenticity's connection to sexuality in one way (see West 2005, 164 and de Beauvoir 1989, 406-9), and Diana Tietjens Meyers also argues for the use of authenticity discourses in discussing the development of agency and identity (see Meyers 2004, 22, 39), although it seems to me these accounts would read authenticity very differently than I have here. Ada Jaarsma's recent analysis of Kierkegaard and queerness gives a nuanced approach through another philosophical framework.

6 Heidegger's authenticity account is in some important senses problematic. It can seem to focus too exclusively on individualistic practices. It can fail to sufficiently take into account senses in which it is only through being social that we can become authentic. It can be claimed that Heidegger sets up authenticity as a state which is only accomplished by setting ourselves over against our communities. These and other criticisms have been raised, and they need to be taken seriously. A number of helpful articles on feminist accounts of problematic aspects of Heidegger's thought are collected in *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger* (Nancy J. Holland and Patricia Huntington, eds.).

7 I take my account of sexual authenticity to be drawing on Heidegger's analysis — we come to face ourselves and our sexual possibilities as uniquely our own, relying

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217311000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

heavily on our communities to make such possibilities available — while also diverging from it. Heidegger would not have theorized authenticity in relation to a particular aspect of our identities (e.g., sexuality), and many Heidegger scholars would resist the claim that authenticity should be read as normatively as I read it.

8 I am not providing an account of sexual integrity where integrity might mean some constellation of integrated identity, standing for something, virtue, or felt strength.

9 It is for this reason that Ahmed examines theory from the Heideggerian tradition at length in order to consider (in a Husserlian vein) how heterosexuality can come to function as a normative, practice-shaping background (Ahmed 2006, 87).

10 Although Butler is at times suspicious of authenticity discourses, the descriptions of agency and selfhood she provides seem compatible with the concept of authenticity I aim to reintroduce here.

11 The AQ more info? Labonté and Schimel's *First Person Queer* anthology or Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy* would be good examples of these kinds of accounts. I am not criticizing the kind of support that coming out stories can provide, nor am I denying the resonance they have. I would, however, echo Biddy Martin's warnings about the sense of "truth-telling" that is too often associated with such accounts, as though there is a static sexuality that we are either "out" about or not (Martin 1993, 278), not to mention the unspoken conception of outing as something that need only happen once. Also, we should be cautious about unequivocally embracing the genre of coming out stories: phenomena of "coming out" rely on a normative structure that sustains a need to be "in the closet" about whatever identity aspect is in question, where closets offer protection against an otherwise dangerous environment. It is therefore not clear that in the best social circumstance we should want coming out stories to be as important as they currently are.

12 I take my project of establishing a relational view of authenticity to run parallel to feminist work in establishing concepts of relational autonomy. For an example of such views, see Mackenzie and Stoljar's Relational Autonomy.

13 It is difficult to do justice to complex processes of self-identification through any existentialist framework. It should be noted that Heidegger's view of authenticity is not the only view, and given the problems feminists and others have shown it to have, a choice to draw on it here is contentious. It's not clear that the benefits of Heidegger's account justify making use of it despite its problems. Another approach to authenticity from the existentialist tradition—Sartre's—might seem more intuitive in its emphasis on our positions as those faced with choosing our roles. Insofar as Sartre understands authenticity to impact how we understand ourselves as those who create the world and its values, he emphasizes less the anxiety involved in Dasein's facing its death and the contingencies of its inheritance, and more the process of self-discovery that accompanies discovering that the lack of a god entails radical freedom—freedom to determine our positions and power as agents in the world. It might seem that, to the extent that we are sexually authentic, we become so by being self-determining sexual agents—we will live out whatever sexualities we want, as we see fit. My interest in starting from a Heideggerian rather than a Sartrean view (which emphasizes authenticity's relation to choice) stems from an

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217311000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

appreciation of Heidegger's articulation of how authenticity can relate more to what we inherit than to what we choose. It seems to me that understanding my view of sexual authenticity to be straightforwardly existentialist would misleadingly connect it to more freedom- and choice-based existentialist readings, such as Sartre's.

14 The fact that sexual authenticity is not aligned with any particular sexual identifications is part of what distinguishes my questions from those of Joyce Treblicot in "Taking Responsibility for Sexuality" (Treblicot 1994, 97-109).

15 See Heidegger's discussion of "leaping ahead of the other" (1962, 122) for an understanding of the contexts where responsibilities for care can be enacted.

16 For feedback and guidance I thank Alice MacLachlan, Helga Varden, Laurie Shrage, Sandra Bartky, Tom Digby, Samantha Brennan, Jason Holt, Alexis Shotwell, Ada Jaarsma, Sue Campbell, Susan Sherwin, Greg Scherkoske, Michael Doan, and groups who responded to earlier drafts of the paper at meetings of the Society for the Philosophy of Sex and Love and the Canadian Philosophical Association.

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