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Sexual Orientation as Interpretation? Sexual Desires, Concepts, and Choice

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Abstract: Are sexual orientations freely chosen? The idea that someone's sexual orientation is not a choice is very influential in the mainstream LGBT political movement. But do we have good reasons to believe it is not a choice? Going against the orthodoxy, William Wilkerson has recently argued that sexual orientation is partly constituted by our interpretations of our own sexual desires, and we choose these interpretations, so sexual orientation is partly constituted by choice. In this paper I aim to examine the question of whether our interpretations of our own sexual desires are constitutive of our sexual orientations. I will argue that whereas Wilkerson's argument for the claim that sexual orientations are in part constituted by our chosen interpretations of our sexual desires is not sound, there are good reasons for endorsing a weaker claim, namely, that there are different but equally apt descriptions of the same sexual desires, depending on which concepts we have.

Keywords: Sexual orientation; Sexual desire; Choice; Self-knowledge; Conceptual schemes.

1 Introduction

Are sexual orientations freely chosen? The idea that someone's sexual orientation is not a choice is very common in popular culture, and also very influential in the mainstream LGBT political movement.¹ But do we have good reasons to

¹ See Stein (2011) for a very nuanced discussion of the moral and political implications of this debate.

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believe it is not a choice? Wilkerson (2009, 2013) has recently argued that there are good reasons to believe that sexual orientation is partly constituted by choice. In this paper I would like to critically assess his main argument for this controversial claim, and I will argue that although the considerations he offers fall short of establishing the conclusion that sexual orientations are in part constituted by interpretation and hence choice, there is an alternative view about the connections between sexual desires and interpretation that is more plausible. In particular, I will argue that there could be different but equally apt descriptions of the same sexual desires, depending on which concepts of sexual desires we have. Therefore, there is a sense in which our descriptions of our sexual desires (but not the sexual desires themselves) depend on how we interpret them, that is to say, on which concepts of sexual orientation are more relevant or more salient to us.

2 Wilkerson's Master Argument

Wilkerson (2009) follows the standard distinction between *sexual orientation* and *sexual identity*. He characterizes sexual orientation as “an enduring, fairly stable desire oriented toward a particular gender” (Wilkerson 2009, p. 97), whereas sexual identity is “a self-consciously directed project that a person develops around this orientation” (Wilkerson 2009, p. 97). To simplify, we can characterize sexual identity as having certain beliefs about one's sexual orientation, and perhaps also identifying with a certain cultural community (in the sense of belonging to the community, or perhaps merely believing or desiring that one belongs to it), whereas sexual orientation does not require such beliefs or membership. I will assume, following Wilkerson, that sexual orientation is a matter of sexual desires oriented toward particular genders (and/or sexes), although I will remain neutral on whether the sexual desires constituting sexual orientation have to be enduring or not.²

Our topic here is sexual orientation itself, not sexual identity. Wilkerson's main argument for the claim that sexual orientations can be chosen goes as follows:

² See Stein (1999), Wilkerson (2013) and Díaz-León (forthcoming) for further elaboration and defence of the view that sexual orientation is a matter of sexual desires. For an alternative view in terms of dispositions to engage in sexual behavior, rather than desires, see Dembroff (2016). Wilkerson (2013) argues that sexual orientations (according to the ordinary conception) do not exist since many people do not have enduring, stable desires toward a particular gender. I am sympathetic to this worry, but it could be argued that a more minimal conception of sexual orientation that does not require that sexual desires are enduring and stable does not have to be empty, even if many people do not have enduring desires.

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. (Wilkerson 2009, p. 100)

In this paper I want to focus on premise (1).³ According to Wilkerson, the main idea behind this premise is that interpreting desires is not just a matter of forming a belief about a pre-existing desire; rather, interpreting a desire requires that we group together some inchoate and ambiguous desires, and by grouping them together we somehow develop them and transform their nature. Therefore, our desires constitutively depend on our interpretations of them.

Wilkerson offers two arguments for this central premise, namely, what he calls the “indirect” argument and the “direct” argument. I will critically examine them in turn in the following two sections. In Section 4 I will also introduce an alternative, weaker view about the relation between desires and interpretation, according to which our desires themselves are not constituted by our interpretations, but we can still claim that the descriptions of our sexual desires that are the most appropriate can vary from context to context, depending on which concepts of sexual desires and sexual orientation are the most relevant or salient in each context. In Section 5 I will defend my alternative view from a possible objection, and I will conclude that this weaker view is preferable to Wilkerson’s stronger view.

3 The Indirect Argument: How Can We Know About Our Own Sexual Orientations?

The indirect argument starts by assuming the negation of Wilkerson’s conclusion, namely, that sexual desires are *not* constituted by interpretation, and then it argues that some absurd or problematic consequence would follow, so that we have some indirect reasons for thinking that sexual desire does require interpretation. In particular, Wilkerson argues that if sexual desires were not (at least partially) constituted by interpretation, then it would be difficult to understand how we come to know our sexual desires in the way we do, and more in particular, how we can be wrong or deceived about our own sexual desires. Therefore, the view that sexual desires are partially constituted by interpretation provides a good explanation of how we come to know our sexual desires.

³ See Ayala (2017) for an interesting critique of premise (2).

More in particular, Wilkerson argues that if knowing my desires requires no interpretation of the desires, then desires must be *self-intimating* (i.e. they can be known automatically, without having to do any work), and also *self-evident* (i.e. we cannot be mistaken about them). But, Wilkerson argues, desires are neither self-intimating nor self-evident. Then, we can conclude that knowing my desires requires interpretation.

The conclusion of the indirect argument might seem to be an *epistemic* rather than a *metaphysical* claim, that is, it seems to be a claim about how we can come to *know* about our desires, rather than about the nature of our desires. But as Wilkerson explains, he is drawing a genuinely metaphysical conclusion from epistemic premises. That is, he wants to argue that sexual orientations are very likely to be constituted by our interpretations of them (a metaphysical claim), given the way we come to know them, that is, given that their nature is not transparent to us and we can therefore be wrong about them (an epistemic claim).

Wilkerson does acknowledge the fact that the indirect argument only gives (at most) inductive, fallible evidence for the metaphysical claim. In his view, there are other independent, more direct arguments for the metaphysical claim. I will first examine the indirect argument in the remainder of this section, and then I will focus on the direct argument for the metaphysical conclusion in Section 4.

As we have seen, Wilkerson's strategy is as follows: in order to reach the conclusion that our desires are constituted by interpretation, he argues that if interpretation was not required, then our desires would be self-evident, but desires cannot be self-evident because we can be wrong about them, so interpretation must be constitutive of our desires. The claim about the possibility of error is especially clear when it comes to sexual desires, because many people report that they have been mistaken or self-deceived about their own sexual desires. And it seems clear that if we can be self-deceived or mistaken about our own sexual desires, then sexual desires are not self-evident. So far so good. But Wilkerson adds the following, more controversial claim: if knowing our desires did not require that they are constituted by interpretation, then they would somehow be given to us in experience, and if so, Wilkerson wonders, "why would a person not simply see that her feelings were homosexual, and that she should adopt a homosexual identity?" (Wilkerson 2009, p. 103). That is to say, if our desires are not constituted by interpretation, then we would be able to discover the nature and meaning of our sexual desires in a direct, straightforward manner, but this does not seem to capture the way many people come to know their sexual orientation. Therefore, he argues, this gives us some evidence for the claim that coming to know our sexual desire requires that they are constituted (in part) by interpretation, or in other words, sexual desires are not fully formed until they are interpreted.

In response: I agree that sexual desires, and other desires, do not have to be self-evident. But this does not entail that they are constituted by interpretation. In particular, I want to argue that there is an alternative account of how we come to know our sexual desires that can do justice to the claim that we can be wrong about them, without being committed to the stronger claim that those desires are partially constituted by interpretation. More in particular, I think it is possible to deny that desires are self-evident, but accept that they are self-intimating (as opposed to Wilkerson, who claims that if desires are not self-evident, then they cannot be self-intimating either). For a desire (or a mental state in general) could be self-intimating in the sense that it does not take much work to grasp it, that is, someone can know that she has that mental state just in virtue of undergoing it, but at the same time such mental state might fail to be self-evident if for example we come to know about it by means of some reliable (and sort of direct and effortless) mechanism that typically produces true beliefs about it, but could occasionally produce false beliefs. In this way, we can have mental states that are self-intimating but not self-evident, since our knowledge of them is automatic and effortless, but not infallible.

This gives rise to an interesting question: how is it possible to be wrong about our sexual desires sometimes, if we can apprehend them in such a direct manner? In my view, we should distinguish between our knowledge of *occurring* mental states (that is, conscious mental states that appear in the stream of consciousness), which can be known by means of introspection, so they are self-intimating (but not self-evident), and our knowledge of *dispositional* or *standing* mental states, which are not always manifested, and only occasionally enter into the stream of consciousness, and therefore we cannot always introspect them. It seems clear that dispositional mental states are not self-intimating, since it does take some work to come to know them, but in my view there are alternative ways of explaining how we come to know about dispositional mental states, without having to endorse Wilkerson's claim that they are partly constituted by our interpretations. In particular, we could appeal to a general "inference to the best explanation" mechanism, which may involve a combination of introspective knowledge, knowledge of our own behaviour, and other forms of inductive knowledge. In this way, coming to know dispositional mental states would require some work and therefore those mental states would not be self-intimating, as opposed to occurring, episodic conscious mental states that can be apprehended much more directly and straightforwardly by means of introspection, and are therefore self-intimating.

This account seems plausible enough, but if we accept it then we do not have good reasons to accept Wilkerson's account of coming to know our desires by means of interpretations that somehow determine their nature. That is, if we accept the view according to which we come to know occurring mental states in

a self-intimating but not self-evident way, and we come to know dispositional mental states in a way that is neither self-evident nor self-intimating, then we do not have any good reasons to deny the claim that coming to know our desires is a matter of forming beliefs about states whose nature is determined prior to forming those beliefs, that is, without the need for interpretation, *contra* Wilkerson's indirect argument.

To sum up my line of reasoning in this section: my main point here is just that the indirect argument does not suffice to motivate Wilkerson's claim that sexual desires are constituted by interpretation. In particular, the claim that sexual desires are not self-evident does not suffice to establish the claim that our ways of coming to know our desires requires that they are constituted by interpretation, since there are other accounts of self-knowledge that are also compatible with the possibility of error, without having to endorse the need of interpretative work. Moreover, we can agree with Wilkerson that dispositional mental states such as desires are probably not self-intimating (because some work is needed in order to grasp them), but again this does not necessarily entail that our sexual desires are constituted by interpretation.

4 The Direct Argument: The Constitution of Desires

Wilkerson agrees that the indirect argument gives at most some fallible evidence for the claim that sexual desire is partially constituted by interpretation. But he argues that this initial evidence, plus some independent arguments having to do with the open nature of experiences and desires, are sufficient to motivate his metaphysical claim, namely, that the way we conceptualize and classify our desires and experiences changes and partially determines those experiences.

He says that the direct argument "argues that no experience is self-intimating or self-evident and so desire cannot be self-intimating or self-evident" (Wilkerson 2009, p. 103). First of all, I would like to point out that *experience* and *desire* are in principle different kinds of mental states, so what applies to experiences might not apply to desires and vice versa. Experiences are supposed to be occurring, phenomenally conscious mental states that appear in the stream of consciousness, whereas desires are supposed to be propositional attitudes, arguably of a dispositional character, which are not necessarily manifested in the form of either behavior or phenomenally conscious mental states. We can therefore distinguish between standing, dispositional desires that are not always manifested, and their manifestations in the form of episodic feelings or experiences that enter into the

stream of consciousness. That is to say, (standing) sexual desires can give rise to episodic feelings or experiences of attraction or arousal, which are indeed conscious. But still, the former are different from the latter. I agree that dispositional mental states are neither self-evident nor self-intimating, since it takes work to grasp them and we could be mistaken about them, but I am sympathetic to the view that conscious mental states are self-intimating, even if we can sometimes be mistaken about them, when the direct and reliable but fallible mechanisms that produce beliefs about our phenomenal states fail for some reason. Therefore, we need an alternative way of formulating Wilkerson's metaphysical conclusion, so that it is related to the view that sexual desires themselves (rather than experiences) are constituted by interpretations.

Wilkerson also says that "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" (Wilkerson 2009, p. 103). This claim is about self-intimating experiences and self-intimating desires: we can understand the latter as the conscious manifestations of (dispositional) desires, which can indeed be self-intimating. Wilkerson's point seems to be that if a mental state is self-intimating, then it is going to be a non-relational or *intrinsic* mental state (that is, a mental state that requires no relation to anything outside of it in order to be instantiated), or conversely, if it is *relational* (that is, it requires a relation to something outside of it in order to be instantiated), then it cannot be self-intimating. However, this inference seems too quick: in my view we could provide a plausible account of the nature of experiences and desires according to which they can be both self-intimating and relational mental states. That is to say, accepting that they are self-intimating does not entail that they are not relational, as Wilkerson suggests. For instance, a functionalist account of the nature of experience can hold that experiences are self-intimating, to the extent that functionalism can explain our knowledge of experiences in terms of direct and reliable but fallible mechanisms (such as introspection), but functional states are clearly relational, so being self-intimating does not entail being non-relational.

Therefore, the crucial idea of Wilkerson's account cannot be just that sexual desires are relational, or that they are neither self-evident nor self-intimating, since many other views about the nature of desires can also accept those claims. What is distinctive about his account is the idea that sexual desires are not fully formed prior to our interpretations about them, and more in particular, that sexual desires are partially constituted by our interpretations of them. So, what arguments could be offered in support of this view, given that the plausible claim that sexual desires are relational and neither self-evident nor self-intimating is not sufficient to establish it?

First, Wilkerson appeals to a “Gestaltist” account of the nature of experience, as opposed to an atomistic one. As he recognizes, this is part of a larger, controversial discussion. What I want to emphasize here is that we can accept some of his claims about the nature of feelings and experiences (such as being relational, and not self-evident) without having to accept that they are always indeterminate and open to interpretation.

In order to provide additional support for his view, Wilkerson also appeals to familiar narratives about the experience of coming out, such as the following:

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? [...] 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? (Wilkerson 2009, p. 105)

In my view, these remarks seem to vividly capture the phenomenology of coming to know one’s sexual orientation, especially in cases of non-normative sexual orientations (or at least they do so in my own case), but they do not yet establish the metaphysical claim that Wilkerson wants to defend, namely, that our desires are not merely “given” and are not fully developed until we choose to group them in one way rather than another (out of several possibilities that are open to us), and only then do they become fully determinate.

My main worry, in a nutshell, is that his account about the nature of feelings and desires seems too strong: it is not clear why we should accept that our acts of classifying and labeling our desires and experiences will change and transform their nature in the way Wilkerson describes. Of course, he is right that there are many different and mutually incompatible ways of classifying a certain system of experiences and desires, and there might be no unique classification that is clearly superior to the rest.⁴ But this is a claim about the availability of different *conceptual schemes* or systems of classification to conceptualize or classify the same phenomena, and this plausible claim does not entail the stronger, more

⁴ They are incompatible in the sense that they provide different answers to questions such as “how many mental states are there?”, or “is this mental state more similar to this one or that one?”. But it could be argued that these different descriptions are compatible in the sense that they could all be true at the same time, since they involve different concepts and therefore yield different propositions that are compatible with each other. That is, there is no single proposition that one conceptual system endorses and the other denies. Since they employ different concepts, they do not have contradictory propositions.

controversial claim that the very *nature* of those desires is not yet determinate prior to our acts of classifying and labeling them. For instance, he says:

[R]ecognizing 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. (Wilkerson 2009, p. 101)

In response to this: I agree that when it comes to recurring instances of an experience, there are different ways of grouping and classifying them, since any token experience instantiates more than one type of phenomenal state. For instance, a token of a blue experience will instantiate the type 'blue experience' but also 'dark blue experience,' 'color experience,' 'visual experience,' 'experience I have in the evening,' and so on. Therefore, there are many different ways of grouping together and classifying the many tokens of experiences that appear in my stream of consciousness: we might choose to focus on the more fine-grained types such as 'dark blue' vs. 'light blue experience', so that when we have recurring experiences of seeing something light blue, we will group them together (that is, we will conceptualize them as falling under that same concept), but when we have an experience of something dark blue, this will not be grouped together with the light blue experiences, but will rather fall under a different concept. Or alternatively, we might be interested in grouping all blue experiences together, under the more coarse-grained concept 'blue experience,' or even 'color experience.' Hence, the way we classify our experiences depends on the different concepts that we might choose. But this does not entail that those experiences were not fully formed prior to our conceptualizing them in this or that way, since those experiences already had those properties (both being a blue experience and a light blue experience, say), prior to my application of these phenomenal concepts. So, I agree that there is a sense in which in order to recognize my experiences, I need to apply concepts to them, and there is an element of interpretation and choice in this process. But this does not entail Wilkerson's stronger claim to the effect that the nature of the experience is determined through the process of choosing and applying a concept rather than another.

Likewise, there are different ways of conceptualizing our sexual desires and experiences of sexual attraction. All these mental states instantiate many mental properties, and we could focus on the more fine-grained or the more coarse-grained properties. For instance, if I am experiencing sexual attraction towards some women, I could focus on what these mental states have in common with

other mental states that I also have, such as romantic feelings towards my close friends. Or I could focus on some other features of such sexual desires that they do not share with those feelings towards my close friends. Using different concepts to pick out these different features will likely have an impact in the significance that these mental states have for me, and how I self-identify. In my view this claim can capture the intuitions behind Wilkerson's remarks about the phenomenology of coming out, without establishing the stronger view that our desires and experiences are not fully determined until we interpret them.

Wilkerson also argues that applying one concept to our experiences rather than another can change the way the experience feels. For instance, he says:

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 experiences of these desires for me and allows me to see a possible aspect of my self. (Wilkerson 2009, p. 105)

This seems intuitively true, but in my view this is not sufficient to justify his metaphysical conclusion. Let me elaborate: it seems clear that our concepts can make a *causal* contribution to the phenomenology of our experiences. As many philosophers and cognitive scientists have pointed out, applying concepts to the objects of our perceptual experiences can change the overall phenomenal qualities of our perceptual experiences of those objects (e.g. Pylyshyn 1994; Tye 1995; Carruthers 2000; Carruthers and Veillet 2011). For instance, the perceptual experience of an expert bird-watcher is much richer and full of detail than the perceptual experience of a beginner. As Peter Carruthers and Benedicte Veillet put it:

[C]oncept acquisition can transform the phenomenology of one's experience. [...] When one first takes up birdwatching, for example, one's experience of the birds one observes will be comparatively impoverished. One might only see collections of little grey birds on a beach, for instance. But having learned to distinguish knots from plovers from redshanks, one *sees* them as such. [...] having acquired the relevant concepts, the differences between the birds jump out at one phenomenologically. (Carruthers and Veillet 2011, p. 39)

Likewise, it could be argued that when we conceptualize our experiences and (the conscious manifestations of) our sexual desires in one way rather than another, that makes a difference to the phenomenology of our global experience. This seems correct, but in my view this does not entail that our concepts make a *constitutive* contribution to the phenomenal qualities of our experiences. As Carruthers and Veillet argue, the data here are compatible with the view that our conceptualizations make a *causal* (rather than constitutive) contribution to the qualities of

our experience. For instance, they argue that entertaining and applying certain concepts such as the concept of “redshank” rather than the concept of “little grey bird” will change our patterns of attention, and this will in turn change the nature of our perceptual experiences. They say: “These forms of attention can either be overt, in the form of increased numbers of saccades to the relevant features, or covert, devoting extra processing to information deriving from the relevant portions of the visual field” (Carruthers and Veillet 2011, p. 39).

In my view, we could extend this line of argument to the case of *introspection*, in addition to the case of perception. In particular, it could be argued that when I introspect my experiences of sexual arousal and affection for people of the same gender, my applying one concept (say, “sexual attraction”) rather than another (say, “romantic feelings”) changes the global experience of my introspection of my feelings. For example, we can imagine the case of a woman who has sexual feelings and romantic feelings for women, but she is still unsure about how she should describe those feelings. She has several choices: she could focus for instance on a property that her feelings for the women she is attracted to, and her feelings for her close male friends, have in common, namely, feelings and desires of affection, intimacy and closeness. If she chooses to conceptualize her feelings for women in virtue of these concepts, then this will probably have an impact on the global phenomenology of her experiences, and the significance they have for her. On the other hand, she might choose to focus on the properties that her feelings for a close female friend she’s falling in love with do not share with her feelings for her male friends, namely, elements of sexual attraction and romantic love. Should we then say that our conceptualizations of our mental states determine the nature of those mental states?

I want to answer this question negatively. Drawing from Carruthers and Veillet, it could be argued that these interactions between conceptualization and global phenomenology can be explained in terms of a causal rather than constitutive contribution of those concepts to the phenomenology of the experience. That is to say, choosing to apply one concept rather than the other (even when both concepts in principle could be applied correctly since the experiences fall under both) changes the nature of our *introspective* mental state, in the sense that those concepts make a causal contribution to the nature of my global experience (i.e. the introspection of my first-order experiences). That is to say, applying one concept rather than another can cause a certain change in my introspective experience of my sexual feelings, but this does not entail that applying those concepts causes a change in my sexual feelings themselves. This is so because applying a certain concept rather than another to my first-order experiences could change whether I pay more attention to certain aspects of my experiences rather than others, and this will in turn change what it is like for me to *introspect*

those experiences. But crucially, this does not entail the stronger thesis that my first-order experiences of arousal and affection are themselves constituted by my second-order interpretations of those experiences.

Finally, Wilkerson has offered an additional, related argument for the metaphysical conclusion: he first claims that our experiences and desires are not intrinsic but rather relational mental states, that is, their nature depends on the context, and in particular on other mental states that the subject is having, and he then argues that since mental states are relational, this means that the nature of one given mental state depends on the nature of other mental states, in the sense that the nature of one mental state is not fully determined until it is interpreted. For instance, he argues, someone's sexual desire, say, a desire for someone of the same sex, is not fully given independently of other experiences she might be having, such as feelings of fear and shame, or feelings of pride and recognition. Wilkerson's claim is that the desires will be experienced very differently, depending on the context, and therefore the desires themselves will be different, depending on what other mental states the subject is having.

In response, it is not clear to me that the best way of understanding what is going on in this case is in terms of the strong metaphysical claim that Wilkerson defends. In particular, it is not clear that these considerations really show that sexual desires *constitutively depend* on other mental states such as beliefs and experiences, in the sense that those sexual desires are constituted by those beliefs. The following claim seems clearly true: if we change the surrounding beliefs and experiences, our experiences of sexual attraction will probably change too. But as we saw above, we can understand these cases in terms of a causal rather than a constitutive contribution. In particular, we could understand his example in terms of mere *causal dependence*. For example, we can imagine a case of a subject who has internalized homophobic attitudes in her environment, and because of this, she has feelings of fear and shame regarding her feelings of sexual attraction and romantic love for women. It seems plausible to assume that these feelings of fear and shame might causally affect which sexual feelings and desires she is having. We could also imagine that this subject leaves her homophobic worries aside, and comes to have feelings of pride with respect to her feelings of attraction for women. It seems likely that these feelings of pride might causally affect her feelings of sexual attraction themselves, that is, they could become more intense or more frequent. This is a case in which other mental states such as beliefs and experiences might causally affect the first-order sexual desires that constitute sexual orientation themselves, but this is a causal rather than constitutive contribution so this falls short of justifying Wilkerson's conclusion.

As we saw above, there is another way in which other mental states might causally affect my global experience of *introspecting* my sexual desires, namely,

by causally affecting what I pay attention to, or what aspects of my sexual desires I focus on (rather than causally affecting those sexual desires themselves). This is also a causal rather than constitutive contribution, as we explained. An example of this pattern is the following: there could be a subject who has negative beliefs about same-sex desire, so that this prevents her from applying the concept “same-sex sexual desire” to their own sexual desires (which she does have), and this will in turn change the global phenomenology of her experiences. But, to repeat, this does not entail that those sexual feelings and desires are *constituted* in part by our acts of conceptualizing and classifying them, even if these can be causally efficacious in several ways.

5 Concepts of Sexual Orientations and Conceptual Choice

In this section I want to further develop an alternative view about the relation between sexual desires and our conceptualizations of them, which has been hinted at in the previous sections, and in addition I want to consider an objection by Wilkerson to a similar view that he has recently discussed and rejected.

He characterizes his opponent’s view as follows:

But surely [...] if some people have desires that lead them to adopt one rather than another sexual understanding and identity, then these desires have a meaning that could exist independently of social circumstances, and interpretation merely amounts to recognizing the truth of one’s desires and experiences. (Wilkerson 2013, p. 209).

In response, he argues that his opponent’s notion of interpretation as merely describing and classifying our own sexual desires seems to require the presence of some basic, “raw” desires that are fully determined prior to our interpretations of them, which is counter-intuitive according to Wilkerson. His main objection against this view goes as follows:

At issue here is the larger philosophical question of the degree to which our experiences constrain the interpretations we make of them and the knowledge we gain from them. Three views are possible: our experiences totally constrain (determine, even) the interpretations we make of them. I find this view implausible for two reasons. First, it makes little sense to speak of determined interpretations since the interpretation of something implies the possibility that it could have been interpreted in another way, and second because our interpretations of feelings can and do change. Equally implausible is the second view that we can interpret any experience in any way. In between, there is the third view that experiences can suggest and constrain, without determining, our interpretations of them. (Wilkerson 2013, p. 209)

In response: I agree that the second view, according to which we can interpret our desires in any ways whatsoever, is very implausible. For surely we can imagine descriptions of our desires and other mental states that are clearly false. Regarding the first view, which claims that our desires and experiences completely constraint and determine the descriptions of them that are apt, I agree that this is also implausible, but this is not an accurate characterization of my view, as I will explain. And regarding the third view, I agree that the most plausible view lies somewhere between the first and the second view, but I disagree with Wilkerson concerning the details of this middle position. I will elaborate these points in what follows, and this discussion will also lead me to introduce a more developed version of my own alternative view about the interaction between interpretation and desire.

Regarding the first view that Wilkerson mentions in the quote above, I agree that our desires do not fully determine a uniquely correct interpretation of them. As I have explained, there can be several interpretations of the same mental state, all of which are equally correct, and it is up to us to choose one or another, depending on whether it is more useful to employ more inclusive or less inclusive concepts, and so on. So the mental states themselves do not determine a unique interpretation, independently of our aims and purposes. But this is compatible with the view that those mental states have all those properties that we pick out with the different concepts independently of our aims and purposes. That is, we can reject the first view without endorsing Wilkerson's stronger claim to the effect that those mental states do not fully have those properties until we interpret them. The two reasons he gives against the first view do not suffice to motivate this stronger metaphysical conclusion. First, the fact that our interpretations of our feelings sometimes change does not entail that those feelings are not fully formed independently of our interpretations. The interpretations could change because for instance we shift the focus of attention without a change in the instantiated properties; or we might go from an incorrect interpretation to a correct interpretation, given additional information or improved recognitional abilities. Moreover, the claim that it is possible that a certain feeling could have been interpreted in another way is clearly true, but this does not entail that feelings are indeterminate prior to interpretation. As I argued above, our phenomenal tokens instantiate many phenomenal types at the same time, and therefore there is a sense in which there are several interpretations of them that are possible, since we can conceptualize them in different ways (that is, in terms of these different phenomenal types). In this way, we always have several options when it comes to interpreting our mental states (and this also explains why we can change our interpretations). For instance, we might choose between a coarse-grained concept and a more fine-grained concept. Still, all of this is compatible with the claim that experiences

are fully formed prior to interpretation, and to conceptualize them in one way rather than another does not change all the phenomenal types they instantiate. Likewise, our desires can be conceptualized in different ways, but this is a claim about the possibility of classifying the very same phenomena by means of different conceptual schemes that make salient different patterns of similarity. Therefore, I agree with the central claim that Wilkerson tries to refute (unsuccessfully), to wit: in order to make sense of the way we conceptualize and interpret our feelings and desires, we need to postulate a layer of “raw” feelings that are fully determined prior to interpretation. This does not mean that our raw feelings fully constrain the way we conceptualize them: we can still choose to apply more or less fine-grained concepts, or we can choose among different conceptual schemes that emphasize different patterns of similarity.

What about Wilkerson’s third and preferred option? In my view, there is a plausible way of reading that option that is exactly the view I have been suggesting here, namely the following: Our sexual desires and feelings can be conceptualized in different ways, that is, according to different concepts and classification systems, and the experiences and desires themselves do not fully determine which concept or classification system we must use at a certain occasion (since there are several conceptual schemes that are equally apt), although the nature of those experiences and feelings does put some constraints on the descriptions of them that are apt, since those descriptions that ascribe properties that the mental states do have will be correct, whereas those descriptions that ascribe properties that the mental states do not have will be incorrect. However, this view does not entail that the nature of those desires and feelings is not fully determined prior to our interpretation.

This alternative view also allows room for choice, but in a different way from Wilkerson’s proposal. Our desires themselves are not constituted by choice, but our choices regarding which aspects of our experiences and desires we pay attention to and which descriptions we focus on will likely affect our global phenomenological state and the significance that those mental states have in our life. This element of choice gives rise to an interesting question: what kinds of reasons might we have for choosing some descriptions over others? So far I have been emphasizing contingent reasons that might make us pay more attention to some aspects other than others, such as internalized homophobic beliefs, or feelings of fear or pride. I would also like to consider a more “normative” version of this issue, that is to say, not just in terms of the question of which beliefs and experiences actually affect which descriptions we use, but rather in terms of the question of which descriptions we *ought* to use. There is a new sub-discipline in philosophy, known as *conceptual ethics* or *conceptual engineering*, which focuses on normative considerations regarding which concepts and terms

we ought to use in order to think and talk.⁵ These questions do not have to do only with choices of words, but also with choices of conceptual or classificatory systems, that is, questions about how we should classify a certain subject matter, or which patterns of similarity we should make salient. This is precisely the kind of normative question that I am invoking here. When it comes to choosing a description of our experiences and feelings, there can be many factors that are relevant with regards to the question of which concepts we should use, such as the following: psychological factors having to do with which descriptions might be beneficial or harmful for us, contextual reasons having to do with whether the community we are part of is more or less homophobic or more or less accepting, and more general moral and political factors having to do with which descriptions might be more suitable in order to fight discrimination and achieve social justice.

6 Sexual Orientation and Concepts of Gender

There is one final worry I would like to address before concluding my discussion of the connection between desire and interpretation. It could be said that the sexual feelings and desires that determine someone's sexual orientation necessarily involve certain *concepts*, since the sexual feelings and desires that are relevant for determining someone's sexual orientation are feelings of desire and attraction for people of a certain sex or gender *because* they are of that sex or gender.⁶ In this way, it could be argued that someone's sexual orientation depends on which concepts are available to that person, since the sexual desires that determine her sexual orientation are those that require certain concepts of gender. That is, if a person is not able to conceptualize her sexual desires as attraction to men and/or women, *qua* men and/or women, then her sexual desires are not really sexual desires for men and/or women *qua* men and/or women, and therefore they cannot determine her sexual orientation.

Does this provide a good argument for the view that someone's sexual desires are in part constituted by their interpretative choices? In my view it does not. I agree that the sexual desires that determine someone's sexual orientation are those that somehow involve concepts or representations of the people one is

⁵ See Burgess and Plunkett (2013a,b) for a very clear introduction to the main issues in conceptual ethics.

⁶ See Vernallis (2013), Dembroff (2016) and Díaz-León (forthcoming) for further discussion of this characterization of sexual orientation.

attracted to, in virtue of their sex or gender, so one has to be able to represent them as being men or women (or some other sex or gender, if we reject the binary conception of sex and/or gender). But once someone possesses these concepts of sex/gender, and has sexual desires that are appropriately connected to those concepts, this is sufficient for the content of those desires to amount to sexual attraction for men and/or women, *qua* men and/or women. It is true that one can have these desires only when one *possesses* those concepts, but this does not entail that one can have those desires only when one *interprets* those very desires as being a desire-for-men or desire-for-women. That is to say, according to the account of sexual orientation that we are assuming here, what determines someone's sexual orientation is a matter of her sexual desires for men and/or women, where the subject needs to conceptualize humans in terms of their sex and/or gender. But this does not require the subject to interpret her sexual desires themselves as sexual desire for men and/or women. Perhaps if the subject possesses the concepts of sex and/or gender, as required in order to have a sexual orientation, then the subject will automatically classify (most) humans in terms of their sex and/or gender, but this does not entail that subjects will automatically classify their own *sexual desires* as desires for men and/or women. In other words, someone's sexual desires can be fully determined independently of the subject's awareness of them, as I have argued. Therefore, the need for concepts of sex and/or gender does not establish Wilkerson's metaphysical conclusion about the nature of sexual desires.

I agree that this conceptual requirement is an interesting claim, and perhaps this will have substantial consequences, such as the possible conclusion that people in different communities with different or no concepts for sex and/or gender would have very different kinds of sexual orientation. But this claim does not suffice to motivate the stronger claim that sexual desires are partially constituted by our interpretations of them.

7 Conclusion

To conclude: Wilkerson has provided a very interesting argument for the claim that sexual desires are in part constituted by our choices regarding how to group together and classify our desires. However, even if he has presented a compelling description of the *phenomenology* of coming to know that one is attracted to people of the same sex or gender, in my view he has not provided a successful argument for the stronger claim that our sexual desires are constituted in part by our (freely chosen) acts of classifying and labeling them. Indeed, his description of the phenomenology of coming out is also compatible with a more plausible

view about the relation between our fully formed sexual desires and the different concepts we can use to classify them.

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