

*Ethical Divisions between Social Liberals and Social Conservatives
Regarding Sexual Behavior*

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The raging public debate over same-sex marriages in Canada, and now Massachusetts, has highlighted the great divide between those who are socially liberal, and those who are socially conservative.

Generally speaking, the socially liberal are found on the center-left of the political spectrum, and include labor unions, women's and gay rights organizations, human rights tribunals, much of the popular media, a good proportion of the "intelligentsia," and, it may be argued, the judiciary.

Social conservatives tend to occupy the political right, and may be found in large numbers among those who adhere to organized religions, and many immigrant cultural groups.

The socially liberal appear to be in the ascendancy and have been remarkably successful in achieving many of their goals to "modernize" culture and society. Social conservatives decry such "progress," seeing instead a degradation of moral behavior and standards of social conduct.

A very thoughtful analysis of why this great divide exists is contained in an article entitled "Sexual Morality: The Cultures and Emotions of Conservatives and Liberals," published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* (Haidt and Hersh, 2001). Haidt and Hersh argue that, in the area of sexual conduct, social liberals operate within a moral framework which they call the "ethics of autonomy" (EOA).

Definition of "Ethic of Autonomy"

The ethics of autonomy hold that only acts that cause harm to self or others should be condemned. Acts which are consensual and are perceived not to cause harm should be tolerated or even affirmed. Under EOA, rationalization for approval of various non-traditional sexual behaviors is justified under the concept of the right of individuals to behave autonomously, acting according to their own conscience, rather than a obeying higher authority.

It can be argued that EOA is foundational to the arguments social liberals make for redefining what types of sexual behaviors and relationships are acceptable in today's society. Thus, when people say that there is nothing wrong with allowing homosexuals to marry, or that homosexuality should be taught as a normal variant in public-school sex education classes, or that adult-child sex is not really harmful and should be permitted, they are using the ethics of autonomy as the philosophical base for their position.

The EOA recently prevailed in the US when the Supreme Court struck down the anti-sodomy laws of Texas. In Canada, Pierre Trudeau's decision in 1968 to remove homosexual acts from the criminal code, because "the state has no business in the bedrooms of the nations," was also an EOA-based decision.

Definition of "Ethics and Community" and "Divinity"

Social conservatives operate on a much broader moral plain. Haidt and Hersh posit that social conservatives base their attitudes of what is morally acceptable on two additional sets of ethics: the ethics of community (EOC) and the ethics of divinity (EOD). The ethics of community are concerned with duty, perceived social roles, traditions, mutual respect, and what is appropriate for maintaining social order and family life. EOC is found in such organizations as Focus on the Family, REAL Women and the Canadian Alliance for Social Justice and Family Values. The latter organization is almost entirely made up of Chinese Canadians. Middle Eastern and South Asian cultural groups (religiously Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus) would also ascribe to EOC values.

People holding to EOC values are deeply concerned about the decay of family and societal values, and perceive that those who ascribe to EOA values are ranking hedonism—the pursuit of pleasure—as more important than maintaining the social fabric.

The ethics of divinity (EOD) are concerned with the sacred, with purity, and with living a life consistent with the requirements of God, generally as revealed in sacred scriptures. Those who ascribe to EOD believe in a universal moral order, ordained by God, and that to depart from it risks eternal separation from the divine in the life to come. All the world's great religions hold to these beliefs. Thus, in the area of sexual morality, EOD believers have behavioral standards much more restricted than those who hold to EOA beliefs. This is why when EOD people write publicly, they often tend to cite holy scripture as the justification for their concerns. The reaction from those in the EOA camp is often dismissive, because they generally do not subscribe to the concept of accountability to a divinely ordained universal moral code.

Heidt and Hersh found in their research, not surprisingly, that study participants from conservative church groups were much more likely to use EOD than EOA in their assessment of what types of sexual behaviors were accept-

able. Atheists and the non-religious tended to use EOA in their assessments, and consequently were more accepting of non-traditional sexual behaviors.

There has been a growing tendency among those in the EOA camp to accuse those in the EOC/EOD camp of "homophobia" if they dare to speak or write publicly about their concerns. Indeed several Christians have been successfully prosecuted by gay activists in the courts and human rights tribunals for publicly expressing their opposition to homosexual behavior.

Moral disapproval for certain sexual behaviors based on EOC/EOD positions ought not to be defined as an irrational or phobic reaction, however. Yet that is the sledgehammer those in the EOA camp have been employing with considerable success in the past decade. Currently, there is general acceptance of the term homophobia, and general agreement that it is a negative influence in public life. To this end, there is a concerted effort by gay and lesbian lobby groups, and supported by teachers' unions, to implement anti-homophobia and anti-heterosexism programming in Canadian public schools. Regrettably, there has been very little attempt to accommodate the concerns of the EOC/EOD side, resulting in divisive and expensive court battles, most notably the Trinity Western University and Surrey Book cases. Those who hold EOC/EOD positions are not prepared to compromise their religious beliefs or cultural values to accept as normative, sexual behaviors condemned by tradition or holy writ.

Negative Toward Behavior, But Positive Toward Persons

It is necessary for those in the EOA camp to understand that EOC/EOD believers may be homo-negative towards certain sexual behaviors, but homo-positive in affirming the inherent worth of homosexual persons. This position is affirmed by all responsible religiously based social conservative organizations, but seen as unacceptable by leaders of the EOA camp. The EOA camp argues that sexual orientation and the accompanying behaviors are inextricably linked, and that to condemn the behavior is the same as condemning the person.

The EOA position that sexual orientation is inherent and unchangeable is simply not supported by social science research. Indeed, even the psychiatrist most responsible for the removal of homosexuality from manual of mental disorders (the *DSM*) in 1973, Dr. Robert Spitzer, has published research affirming that orientation change therapy has been shown to be beneficial and effective for his particular study group ("Can Some Gay Men and Lesbians Change Their Sexual Orientation? 200 Participants Reporting a Change from Homosexual to Heterosexual Orientation," *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, October 2003, 403-417). The majority of his group were motivated by desires to marry, to maintain their marriage, or to live a life con-

sistent with their religious beliefs.

To that end, most major religious groups in North America have established therapeutic resources for those in their faith communities who are distressed over unwanted same-sex attractions, and who are motivated to re-orient towards heterosexuality. For Jews there is JONAH, Mormons have Evergreen, Catholics call theirs Courage, and Protestants have Exodus.

These organizations (including NARTH) exist because those with unwanted same-sex attractions have asked for help for dealing with their distressing symptoms. The treatment category used in the *DSM IV* is 302.9(3) "persistent and marked distress over one's orientation." Ironically, it is a denial of the concept of autonomy for those in the EOA camp to try to prevent these people from gaining access to these types of services. Gay and lesbian lobby groups have vigorously (but unsuccessfully) lobbied the American Psychological Association to declare orientation change therapy unethical. The personal stories of those who have undergone re-orientation therapy successfully are posted at www.peoplecanchange.com.

Liberal Values Must Not Be Forced on Traditionist Families

Mandatory indoctrination of all public school children with EOA ideology in the area of sexual behavior, is profoundly disrespectful and manifestly unethical, as it violates the rights of EOC/EOD parents to transmit their values to their children. The United Nations has repeatedly affirmed that this is an inalienable right of parents. Educational authorities have delegated roles in the education of children, and do not have the right to impose an EOA value system without parental consent. Furthermore, such efforts violate the specific requirements of the BC Teachers Federation code of ethics to respect the sensibilities of their students, and to refrain from using their roles for ideological gain.

We live in a pluralistic society where a broad spectrum of values are cherished. It is the duty of public educators to acknowledge all three ethical positions. Denigrating those who adhere to ethics of community or ethics of divinity is no way to achieve social harmony, or even improve social conditions for sexual minorities.

Let us agree on what we can agree on: affirmation of the inherent worth of everyone; non-violence; eradication of harassment, bullying and name-calling; and promoting understanding of each other's profoundly held values. Against this ethic, there can be no argument. ■

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