Agentic Sexuality: On Rescuing Humanity from the Tyranny of the Invisible

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This paper refutes the common, non-agentic view that human sexuality and sexual activity is caused by any number of powerful constructs or forces acting upon them. The paper also briefly refutes traditional "free choice" theories of sexual and other human activities. Furthermore, the paper develops an alternative, essentially hermeneutic-phenomenological view of human sexuality, one which holds that human beings are, by virtue of their very ontology (i.e., their most essential being or nature), agentic in a fundamental and comprehensive way. Human agency, as it is defined and developed in this essay, is conceived as the constant "taking up" and "giving ourselves over to" various meanings, feelings, and possibilities as they are present and available to us in our own active being-in-the-world. The paper applies this understanding of agency to the question of human "sexuality" and sexual activity, articulating an alternative view in which human sexuality is seen as inherently agentic and, thus, free from the causal power of material of other hypothetical abstractions and constructs. Our account seeks thereby to preserve the intrinsic meaningfulness of human sexual desire and action. Finally, the paper briefly addresses some of the ways in which this view of sexuality as agentic could impact research and clinical practice.

Keywords: agency, human sexuality, abstraction, sexual agency, embodiment

Contemporary social science explanations and theories of sexuality—as well as the contemporary cultural narratives of human sexuality—uniformly invoke as explanations invisible abstractions (constructs) presumed to exert some type of real directing causal influence over human sexual actions, thoughts, feelings, and meanings (see, e.g., Dess, Marecek, & Bell, 2018; Golanty & Edlin, 2012; Richards & Barker, 2015; Rokach & Patel, 2021). This paper refutes the common, non-agentic view in psychology and in the social narrative that the "sexuality" and sexual activity of human beings are caused by—i.e., are in effect the product of—any number of powerful constructs or forces acting upon them (e.g., Lehmiller, 2018). The paper also briefly refutes radical free choice theories, as applied in certain psychological theories, to sexual and other human activities. Further, the paper develops an alternative, perhaps best described as a phenomenological, view of human sexuality in the context of an understanding that human beings are, by virtue of their very ontology (i.e., their most essential being or nature), agentic in a fundamental and comprehensive way.

Human agency, as it is defined and developed in this essay (see also Williams, Gantt, & Fischer, 2021), is best conceived as the constant "taking up" (i.e., considering, including, or integrating into the active stream of one's emotive/cognitive/conative life) of ideas, meanings, feelings, and possibilities, as all these essential phenomena are made available to us by the possibilities afforded to us by our own active being-in-the-world. In addition to "taking up," human agency unfolds in our constant "giving ourselves over to" (i.e., entertaining, considering, judging, conceiving of, or accepting) various ideas, meanings, feeling, and possibilities, as well as in declining, refraining, or refusing to give ourselves over to such things—for any or all of a very large, undetermined number of reasons (which reasons themselves are likewise agentic acts of "taking up" and giving ourselves over to).

What this means is that by our intrinsic agentive being in the world, we will constantly, in one way or another, "put in play" or "remove from play" in our lived world any number of meaningful elements in the very act of being the kind of beings we are. Thus, "taking up" and "giving ourselves over" constitute both the substance of human agentic action, and also the origins, reasons, and justifications that

are essential parts of any genuinely meaningful agentic action. An important part of this conception of human being in the world is that in human lived experience reasons are themselves agentic actions of exactly the same sort as any actions for which they are or become the reasons. Thus, human agency is wholistic constant, and nonlinear (see Table 1—Glossary for an account of how "agency" is to be understood in this theoretical formulation).

Table 1

Glossary of Key Terms

Key Term	Definition utilized in the present paper
Agency/Human Agency	Agency as defined and developed in this theoretical approach (see Williams, Gantt, and Fischer, 2021) is not understood as just a capacity or a particular operation of the mind or consciousness, as we might, for example, think of "logic," or "memory," or "perception." Rather "agency" refers to the totality of on-going, constant, mental/emotional/conative activity that characterizes living or being-in-the-world itself for a human being. Agency is agentic, creative, and expressive, rather than pro-forma and determined or caused or produced within individuals by something other than the individuals' acting for themselves. This is to say that agency is agentic owing to the fundamental metaphysical and ontological makeup of human beings *as agentic*, not because of any special power or particularity arising from some "attribute" of persons," such as "consciousness" itself and is not produced, or called into being by environments and situations, such as in social cognitive models of agency.
Abstraction	Abstraction, as referred to in this paper has three meanings. First, the common and mostly theoretically innocent use of abstraction, is fundamental to any language. It consists of using words to name or specify things in the world. A name is never the actual thing named, but it has an actual thing as its referent. The second use of abstraction is to specify categories of things—things that share a set of qualities characteristic of the category. Categorization, like naming, results in an economy of expression. The issue most relevant for this paper pertains to a third way abstractions are used. It is that abstractions are often used to name some idea or hypothesized "entity" that is then spoken of as if were the name of some entity or force possessing the power or ability to *produce*, or *cause* events, including, feelings, actions and knowledge in the minds and lives of agentic persons. For example, the word "desire" is an abstraction used, appropriately perhaps, to summarize and classify a number of things that Smith is *doing*—i.e., thinking, feeling, considering, wanting, planning, etc. However, the abstraction "desire," can only really refer to and describe the whole of the intricate network of things Smith is actually *doing* at any one time, or across time, as an intelligent, sentient, rational agent. Indeed, there would seem to be no mechanism nor medium for any causal power or efficacy for any abstraction like a "desire" to *cause* or *produce* Smith's actions either mental of behavioral—since "desire" itself is a term used for economy to describe and tentatively classify or name Smith's actions and since names neither produce nor cause. Other examples of this issue include "memory" vs. acts of remembering, "love" vs behaving kindly and caringly toward someone, "intelligence" vs performing certain tasks (aka, doing some stuff) well.

Intentionality	Following the phenomenological philosophical tradition, pioneered by Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl, "intentionality" in this paper is used to mean that mental states, such as thoughts, beliefs, hopes, desires, and consciousness itself are always directed toward some object or state of affairs as the individual human being organizes and makes meaning of the experienced world. See https://iep.utm.edu/intentio/. In this intellectual tradition, consciousness itself—as its primary manifestation—"discovers" and "reveals" the experiential world meaningfully. This usage contrasts with naturalistic, physicalistic psychological theories which posit that sensations—patterns of stimulation at the level of sensory organs and brain cells are by some as yet unspecified process—turned into *perceptions*, i.e., meaningful things and events recognizable as representations of the reality of the lived world.
Agentic Action	This essay employs a conception of agency (see Williams, Gantt, & Fischer, 2021) alternative to models grounded in what is commonly referred to as "libertarian free will," free choice, or as "radical free choice." Genuine human agency is more organic and more fluid than can easily be captured in models that invoking deliberated choosing, and the imposition of the will or a similar assertion of power over self or circumstance. While there are distinct "choice points" in the flow of life, such points are not the best exemplars of agency, and are relatively rare within the constant flow of agentic living. Rather, agentic action is much closer to "yielding to" or "taking on" as in entertaining or trying out a possibility, a possible understanding or account of something that one might provide as a reason for a particular behavioral path, as opposed to some other path that might also have been taken. Human agency is active; we are continually considering, acting, reserving, committing as well as re-considering, doing differently, changing our minds as well as our reasons.
Agentic	Of, by, or reflecting holistic human agency, rather than caused by forces outside (or inside) the agent him- or herself. This contrasts, for example, with Stanley Milgram's use of the word as in "agentic state" to mean acting as an agent under the authority of another person.
Affordance	The use, purpose, or possibilities a thing, a situation, an idea, or action could have or make possible as that thing is disclosed in the lived world of an agentic person.
Embodiment	The integrated state of being in the world as an agentic person such that the traditional dichotomy between mind and body is experientially overcome or recast. The term refers to the ubiquitous experience that mental life is always grounded in the material realities of the body (as the body is part of the larger material world) including its unique affordances, limitations, and meanings. At the same time experiences of the material world including the physical body are always grounded in the psychic life of an intelligent agent including all of its unique affordances, limitations, and meanings.

The paper applies this new understanding of agency to the context of human "sexuality" and sexual activity, offering an alternative understanding of human sexuality as inherently agentic, thus freeing it from the hypothetical power of invisible abstractions (in their guise as constructs and causes) and thereby preserving for us the possibility of always doing otherwise and of being otherwise. Such an agentive account likewise preserves "sexuality" as inherently meaningful in the

same way and for that same reason that any agentic human actions are always meaningful by virtue of their arising always from and within the actions of meaning-making human beings. Such inherent meaningfulness contrasts with more artificial *assigned meaningfulness* that is the only kind of meaningfulness available in a non-agentic causal world. Ways in which this view of sexuality as agentic could impact research and clinical practice will also be briefly addressed.

Agentic Sexuality: Protects Humanity from the Tyranny of the Invisible

As noted above, human sexuality is widely held to be in important ways basically biologically driven/determined (LeVay et al., 2019), both in the academic discourse of the social sciences and in the larger culture. However, at the same time, it is also widely experienced as one of the most important and meaningful activities in which human beings purposefully engage—that is, it seems to be an importantly agentic phenomenon (Albanesi, 2010). As Christine Emba (2022) summarizes this dual nature of sex as we understand it, using a phrase from Oxford philosopher Amia Srinivasan, "Sex is not a sandwich . . ." (Emba, 2022, p. 7). In short, and paradoxically, a great many people defend the legitimacy of radical individual freedom of action in sexual matters while also considering sexuality to be fundamentally biologically based, or otherwise driven by abstract causal forces. Indeed, Wilkerson (2009) notes that the "standard view" in contemporary society and social science is that sexual orientation (as an example) is "an enduring, fairly stable *desire* oriented toward a particular *gender*" that is "thought to be a constant and underlying feature of a person's make up," while sexual *identity* is "a self-consciously direct project that a person develops around this *orientation*" (p. 97).[1] However, Wilkerson (2009) also notes that this distinction often disappears in many of our discussions about sexuality because "such talk often runs orientation and identity together" (p. 98).

The obvious contradiction between determinism and free choice speaks to both the importance attached to sexuality in our culture and to a persistent and enduring, possibly even self-deceived, confusion about its nature and meaning. And, insofar as the social sciences contribute significantly to the larger culture's understanding of human sexuality, the contradiction we note also attests to a fundamental incoherence in contemporary social science accounts of sexuality (see, Eberstadt, 2019; Grant, 2015; Soh, 2020; Trueman, 2020). This paper will present an analysis of both abstract and agentic approaches to understanding sexuality in the hope of shedding some new light on the phenomenon, as well as bringing some clarity (by way of contrast) to the frequently muddled accounts present in contemporary psychological theory and practice relevant to sexual matters. We note at the outset that this task is complicated significantly because the language of sexuality—scholarly as well as common conversational language—is constantly shifting as people insist on certain definitions and usages to support particular theories or political agendas and, thereby, "capture the discourse" on sexuality for themselves (see Kuby, 2015). We will attempt to note these language problems along the way and to keep them from derailing the analysis.

[1] Italics are added in this quotation to identify and illustrate the use of abstractions that grants to them explanatory, and often, causal power. This use of abstractions to explain and account for human phenomena will be dealt with in various places in this paper.

Simply stated, the following analysis aims to establish that human sexuality is really best understood as embodied agentic action. As such, human sexually is neither reducible to underlying biological or natural causes and forces, nor to the effects of powerful invisible abstractions—either of which would turn sexuality into a type of *natural event* rather than a meaningful *human action*. However, our claim here does not entail the somewhat common but conceptually flawed claim that sexuality as genuinely human agentic action is a matter of sexual behaviors, desires, orientations, or identities being freely chosen from among alternatives by an independent (free) rational will in the traditional libertarian way of thinking about human agency and free choice. To support our claim that sexuality is agentic, we offer a new account of human agency that does not simply reflect a view of agency as "radical choice" (Taylor, 1985), or what is often termed "libertarian free will" (Clarke, 2003).[2] This new account of human agency makes sense of human sexuality without succumbing to the temptations of either biological reduction or radical free choice.

Sexuality as Abstraction vs. Sexuality as Embodied Human Action

One major conclusion of our analysis is that the term "sexuality" as generally used in academic psychological theory and pop psychology does not actually designate any "real" object or category of things. "Sexuality" is an abstraction, a general idea about all sorts of thoughts, observations, and experiences related to sex in any of many manifestations. And ideas—as thoughts, observations, and experiences—have their being only in the human acts of thinking, observing, and experiencing. Such acts are real, but they produce ideas and other acts—behavioral, emotive, or cognitive. And we must understand that a generalized idea is an abstraction, not a category of real things (see Table 1—Glossary for an account of how "abstraction" is to be understood in this theoretical formulation). Thus, we contend, the term "sexuality" has, in fact, no real referent, no condition or entity, no "thing" to which it directly or adequately corresponds. Rather, as we will show, "sexuality" is more fruitfully understood as a *description* of what people do, say, feel, or think, and not as the name of something people possess, or something that is operating within people or upon people and causing them to do what they do, or to desire how and what they desire. This view stands in stark contrast to the prevailing consensus in the professional and academic areas of contemporary social science, as well as in the larger social and moral context of modern Western self-understanding (see Eberstadt, 2019; Lehmiller, 2018; Slife, 2004; Trueman, 2020).

Indeed, current explanations and understandings of virtually all human actions, including "sexual" activity, posits the operations of powerful abstractions, invisible to the eye, and discernable by only those whose minds have been educated to "see" and understand the operations of such invisible forces, as well as to understand what they themselves and others do and feel in terms of such abstractions (Toomela, 2008; Williams, 2018; Williams et al., 2021). For example, as Lehmiller (2018) asserts in a popular introductory text on the psychology of human sexuality, "As a starting point, it is useful to acknowledge that every single sexual act is the result of

[2] This discussion is necessarily simplified for non-specialist readers. A fuller account and argument contrasting agentic human action and radical free will is found in Williams, Gantt, and Fischer (2021). Arguably, some psychological theories positing causation as an interaction of nature/biology and nurture/environment might be called "compatibilist."

several powerful forces acting upon one or more persons" (p. 3). Continuing, he further states: "Whether sex occurs at any given moment depends on which forces are strongest at the time" (p. 3). It is thus the appointed task of the educated and critically discerning social science researcher or practitioner to detect and identify these powerful (though subtle and abstract) causal forces—the operations of which the individual him- or herself is almost certainly unaware—in order to fully comprehend and explain the variety of human sexual desires, acts, and relationships that make up what we refer to as "sexuality."[3]

Perhaps the best known of all such abstractions applied to the understanding of sexuality are those drawn from the psychoanalytical theory of Sigmund Freud. Such abstractions include the "unconscious mind," *libido*, *id*, *ego*, *superego*, and, indeed, the whole notion of "sexual drives" (see, e.g., Freud, 1949, 1961, 1962). While granting that for Freud himself, and other members of the Psychoanalytical movement, these constructs were not meant to be, and in the minds of the theorists themselves were not abstractions, we nonetheless claim that in every respect they function as, and thus are best understood in contemporary social science as abstractions—i.e., as descriptions of what people do and how some therapists think and understand the meaningful world in which their clients live and function. Without recounting the intellectual history in detail, we will simply note that this explanatory tack—i.e., a reliance on abstractions to do the conceptual heavy lifting of explanation and understanding—is one inherited mostly from the European philosophy of the late 17th and early to mid-20th centuries. Its line of descent can be traced from the Enlightenment materialism and mechanism of figures such as Thomas Hobbes (Gantt & Williams, 2021) and Isaac Newton (Gantt & Williams, 2014), the Romanticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Trueman, 2020), the positivistic science of August Comte (Singer, 2005), and the "absolute idealism" of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, especially as manifest in more recent times in Marxism, Cultural Marxism, and Critical Theories of all stripes (Hayek, 1952; see also, Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). One of the most influential uses of abstractions to explain sexuality and sexual behavior originated in the "Third Force" psychology that developed in the middle decades of the 20th century, with its heavy reliance on concepts such as "needs," the "authentic self," and "orientations" (Gantt & Thayne, 2017). More contemporary treatments of human sexuality tend to draw at will from the full gamut of explanatory modes currently offered within the human sciences: positivism, structuralism, behaviorism, humanism, evolutionary approaches, neurophysiology, social psychological and post-modern social constructivist and critical theories (see, e.g., DeLamater & Plante, 2015; Naples, 2020), all of which rely heavily on the explanatory power of reified abstractions and do so with limited, if any, careful critical reflection.

[3] Note Stanley Milgram's apt description of social psychological inquiry into human action: "The implicit model for experimental work is that of the person influenced by *social forces while often believing in his or her own independence of them*. It is thus a social psychology of the reactive individual, *the recipient of forces and pressures emanating from outside oneself*. The social world does not impinge on us as a set of discrete variables, but as a vibrant, continuous stream of events whose constituent parts can be dissected only through analysis, and whose effects can be most compellingly demonstrated through the logic of experiments. Indeed, the creative claim of social psychology lies in its capacity to reconstruct varied types of social experience in an experimental format, to clarify and make visible the operation of *obscure social forces* so that they may be explored in terms of the language of cause and effect" (1992, p. xix; emphasis added).

To be clear, there is nothing wrong, in principle, with using an abstract term like "sexuality" in common conversation. Effective communication in general would be very difficult without the use of such abstractions. One could use that word in any number of casual conversations, and everyone would know what was being talked about. However, "sexuality" becomes more than merely a conversational descriptive term when it is applied as the name of a metaphysical category of "things," or set of supposedly real things, or real types of persons, or forces that "push" and "pull" persons to do or to feel certain things, whether from the inside, the outside, or some combination of the two. When used this way, "sexuality" begins to take on an existence of its own that is radically different from conversational or descriptive narratives *about* agentic human actions, becoming instead a label for *types* of actions, or, as the lines of analysis proceed, a name for a real *cause* of, or category of such actions. This sort of reification can be seen in the context of "sexuality," in references to such things and categories as "homo-sexuality," "hetero-sexuality," "bi-sexuality," "non-binary sexuality" "a-sexuality," or "pan-sexuality." In other words, such terms have ceased being mere descriptors of certain sexual actions (behavioral, mental, or emotional) a person engages in behaviorally, mentally, or emotionally, and instead have become the explanation or *reason why* the person engages in those acts. Additionally, once this initial reification of sexuality has occurred, other abstractions are often quickly drawn into the explanatory vocabulary to name other presumably real things and causes that are part of "sexuality," for example, "sexual needs," "sexual orientation," "sexual drives," "sexual identity," and so on.[4] In conversations informed by contemporary thought in the social sciences, "sexuality" is almost always, and usually without reservation, transformed from being simply a useful abstraction for describing a broad category of human *actions* into a name for real *things*, either types of persons, or some invisible abstract things with real influence or even causal efficacy in human sexual actions.[5]

The crucial question about this rhetorical and theoretical drift—wherein descriptions of actions (e.g., desiring) are turned into real things (e.g., desires), rather than remaining mere descriptions of actions (i.e., becoming nouns instead of adjectives)—is whether a category mistake has been made. In other words, by what new discovery or influx of knowledge, or by the imposition of what powerful force do these reified descriptors ("sexuality," "orientation," "desire," etc.) become more than simply innocent descriptions of what persons *do* and become the names of actual categories to which persons are to be *assigned,* or categories of real, powerful, invisible causes of what people do relative to sex, and how and why they do it? In short, the question is: have we mistakenly understood what is essentially meaningful agentic human action to be reified powerful causal abstractions? Our answer, as we clarify below, is a resounding "yes!"

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[4] An example of how this invocation of causes an abstractions is expressed in the current cultural narrative, see https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/sexual-orientation/sexual-orientation/what-causes-sexual-orientation.

[5] For a fuller analysis of how this tendency toward reification in psychology reflects a "metaphysic of things," as well as a discussion of the philosophical issues and consequences involved, see Williams (1990).

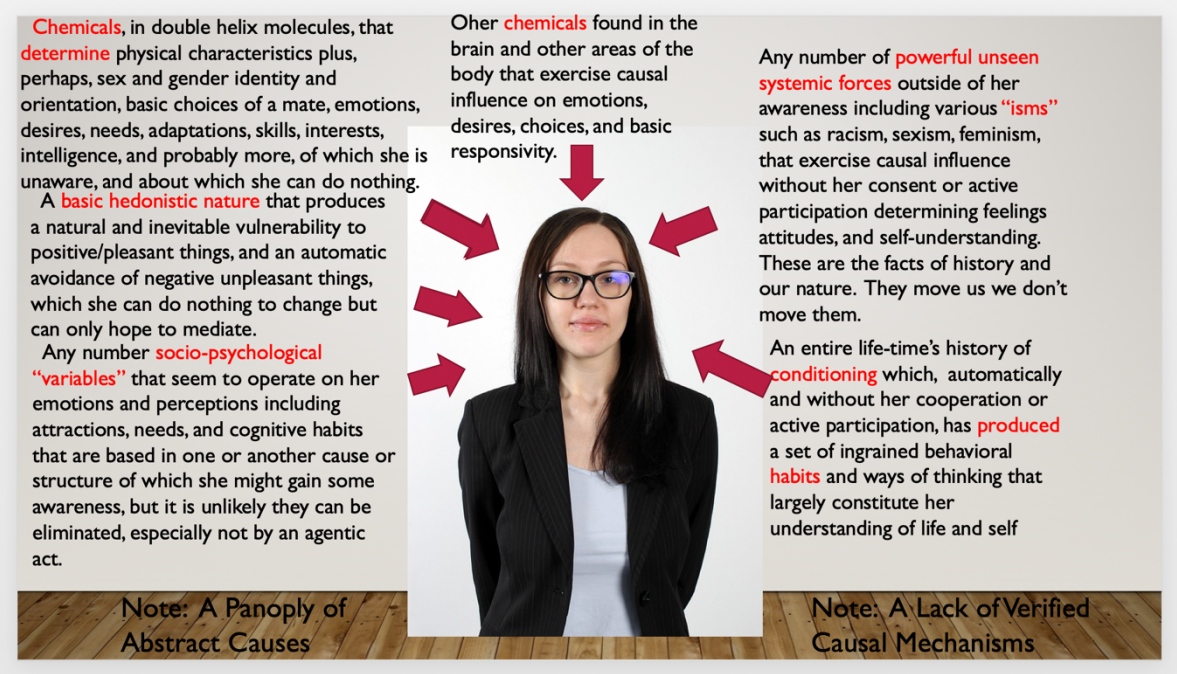
Reified Abstractions and the Loss of Agency

One of the salient effects of the reification of abstractions described above is the loss of genuine human agency from our understandings and explanations of our humanity and our actions. The absence of any compelling sense or understanding of agency in human affairs results in the loss of meaning, purpose, and the possibility of genuine proactive, self-initiated change (see Williams & Gantt, 2020, 2021). This, in turn, profoundly affects our understanding and explanation of sexual activity of all sorts (e.g., behavioral, cognitive, emotive, moral). With this in mind, then, this essay will focus next on how reifying abstractions obviates genuine human agency and how our current understanding of human agency is inadequate as an explanation of human agency as it is actually lived and experienced. We will explore some consequences of this inadequate thinking about both agency and sexuality for our understanding of our humanity. We will introduce an alternative understanding of human agency (Williams, Gantt, & Fischer, 2021) that overcomes the current problems, and discuss the benefits of our alternative view of sexuality as agentic acts.

In both the technical language of the social sciences and clinical practice, and even in the language of everyday life, reified abstractions have largely captured the imagination of our culture, and, thus, the general discourse about human sexuality is suffused with reified abstractions. One result of this is that people actually do think of themselves—including when it comes to thinking about sex, sexual behavior, and gender—as being caused or determined[6] (or at least heavily pressed upon) by any number of causes and forces that are outside their control, or certainly not readily subject to their agency (Hess et al., 2014; see also Figure 1 (next page) for a graphic representation of this state of affairs in contemporary social science).

[6] We recognize here that causality and determinism, in their technical and philosophical definitions, are not the same thing. We will let them "run together" at this point in the paper for the benefit of a non-technical readership and to make a more general point than the philosophical analysis of causality and determination would provide. Space will not permit a fleshed-out treatment. The interested reader is referred to Williams (1992) and Williams, Gantt, and Fisher (2021) for a more technical treatment of some of the issues related to causality and determinism in the context of human agency.

Figure 1—A Representation of General Causal Explanatory Schemes in Contemporary Psychology and the Challenge Faced by Agentic Theories of Human Beings in the World



These occult, abstract causes are given great deference in conversations, both professional and casual. It seems odd to have such confidence in and afford such deference to the supposed importance and power of abstract things when the only evidence of their existence (i.e., that they have legitimate ontological status and efficacy), indeed the only form in which they can confidently be said to exist, is that *they have been conceived of*—and talked about, and taught, and written of, etc. If we were to assign a real ontological status to them, the status must surely be only that they exist as thoughts (or conceptions) produced and expressed by human beings. And, very importantly, the only way they can continue to exist is by continuing to be thus conceived of. Even if one were to object to this conclusion by suggesting that things like "identities" or "orientations" can also be *felt*—that is, they can be experienced as "feelings," or subjective emotional states—feelings are always feelings *about* something, or toward something—otherwise they are merely bodily, diffuse, inarticulate, and of no effect above the level of general perturbance. Thus, the only way a feeling can have an effect on a person is for it to find expression, ultimately, as a thought or idea "about something" and "for the sake of something."[7] As we will argue below, the ontology of idea and feeling confirms that these supposed abstract causes are themselves meaningful agentic acts and not the causes of such acts. This analysis of feelings as products of agentic acts is related to the work of C. Terry Warner (1986,

[7] Though we will not develop the analysis here, this approach to understanding emphasizes the fact that human thoughts, feelings, and actions are holistic; every feeling is about something (accurately or not) and thus is intimately connected to a thought, and actions have thoughts and feelings already inherent in them (see Williams & Gantt, 2021).

2013). The notion that meaningful telic actions begin with agentic "affective assessments" of world self and possibilities was carefully developed by Joseph Rychlak (1994). The following analysis will support the conclusion just outlined.

We have come to think of ourselves largely as "having" an identity, including a sexual identity, instead of just being the person to which our embodiment, our history, our kinship, and our experience belong. Claiming to have an "identity" is redundant and provides no new understanding or insight; it simply renames, as an abstract "thing," what is already the totality of our experience and agentic living. Such an abstract, reified "identity" seems, from a common reifying perspective, to be in some way responsible for things about us which we must either accept, or which we must try (sometimes with some desperation) to control, reverse, or disown. And this contrived situation provides the setting for a possible war of sorts between artificially conceived aspects of ourselves. This idea of self as subject to, or source of, or product of reified abstractions, however, results in a highly unnatural split of our personhood such that we become both an "identity" and a "person" apart from that identity, someone who must either fulfill or oppose that identity for reasons about which the two contrived avatars of ourselves might strongly disagree.

In summary, then, our larger psychologically influenced secular culture as well as similarly influenced religious cultures, incline us to think we are subject to powerful abstractions such as sexual drives, desires, attractions, identities, and orientations that have to be dealt with, controlled, eliminated, accepted, or embraced and indulged, or even celebrated. This understanding is often so pervasive and unquestioned that it may not even occur to us that such things (i.e., the supposed powerful abstractions) in fact do not exist—except as invented descriptions of what we, as individual human agents, actively think, feel, and do at any one time for any of a very large number of available reasons. The category mistake we mentioned above is that we put all of these sexual things in a category of "real things" exercising some power over us, when they are in truth just terms that describe how we are actively engaging as human agents in the world in which sexually relevant thoughts, actions, and feelings are a part. In short, all these things are really descriptions of stuff we do; they are not things that do stuff to us. This is the fundamental claim of this essay.

Abstractions in the Context of Change and Fluidity

One objection to the entire line of analysis developed in the previous section might be that it is irrelevant because, according to a competing analysis, those just-named abstractions taken to be definitive of sexuality are not really firm categories because sexuality itself is "fluid" (Diamond, 2008). However, suggesting that sexuality is "fluid" opens some insightful possibilities *viz a viz* our main proposition that sexuality—when understood properly—might really be, in some important ways, agentic action. However, it must be kept in mind that fluidity in the context of sexuality can be conceived of in at least two ways. First, some might contend that sexuality is fluid in that people can move from one ontologically real category to another, essentially being one kind of sexual being, and then becoming another kind of sexual being (Hoffman-Fox, 2017). This would essentially mean that the fundamental cause, or "trigger" for any change must be something built into the very nature of the sexual construct itself (i.e., identity, orientation, etc.). In terms of abstract sexual

things, such as identities, orientations, drives, and so forth, this is a difficult proposition because there is no developed sense of how abstract laws, principles, concepts, structures, variables, and such things can actually morph to become different abstractions. By their very nature, and in keeping with the role they play in social scientific explanations, abstractions are generally taken to be stable and unambiguous, and, thus, not subject to change or even extinction. This presumed stability and lack of ambiguity are what undergird the usefulness of abstractions as (presumed) scientific explanations. In the case of abstractions related to sexuality, such as identity, orientation, preference, attractions, and any number of others, research has not been able to provide stable, consensual, validated measures or definitions that can bring respect and scientific validity to the psychological study of human sexuality (see Sell, 1997, 2007; Wolff et al., 2017), and thus provide a reasoned scientific account of change and fluidity.

Second, this proposition of fluidity is difficult to defend if sexuality is held to be exclusively or entirely biologically based. The difficulty stems from the fact that there seem to be very few, if any, physical organisms that can be first one thing and then another. Even in the interesting case of insect metamorphosis where what was once a caterpillar emerges from a chrysalis as a butterfly, it is possible to trace a single organism through each of the various stages of development. At no point does the organism become a different organism. If insects had identities, the organism's identity would not change through the metamorphosis. If we had named the caterpillar "John," for example, then we could still be sure that the butterfly it became is still also John. Only the *form* John took has changed—which is what is implied in the term *morph* in "metamorphosis;" it is a *changing of shape*. There is, however, nothing in human life that even approaches metamorphosis, and when we consider that human beings are also possessed of consciousness, self-reflection, evaluative powers, memory, and historicity, it becomes obvious that our selfhood, our very *ipseity*,[8] is not ontologically fluid. Conscious self-awareness, coupled with meaningful historicity, makes it virtually impossible—barring some major physiological injury or other aberration—that we could ever meaningfully claim that who and what we ontologically *are* is fluid in any substantive ontological way. Superficial changes of form, however, are quite common, and are almost always easily attributable to agentic actions by the persons themselves.

There is, therefore, another sense of "fluidity" that coincides with a genuinely agentic understanding of our humanity. Indeed, it makes sense to claim that as agentic beings, what we *do* (including how we act, how we think, how we feel, and, importantly, *why* we do so) is in an important way fluid (Williams, Gantt, & Fischer, 2021). This is, indeed, a basic thrust of the meaning of agentic sexuality. As we argued above, it is problematic to propose that a human being can really "be" one sort of being, one sort of person, materially and spiritually, and then really become another. Ipseity and its accoutrements are much too durable for this sort of morphing to be possible. But, nonetheless, migration among *metaphorical* or *psychic* categories—or *ways of being*—presents no such conceptual problems because psychic and metaphorical (i.e., meaningful) change and fluidity are hallmarks of human rational consciousness and imagination, and, as such, are hallmarks

[8] Essential selfhood or "self-ness," the quality of being who/what one is as distinct from anyone or anything else.

also of human agency. Migration between *ontological* categories, on the other hand, is unprecedented and, as some scholars have suggested, impossible to even conceptualize.[9]

Laying aside the question of how many scholars are actually careful in making the distinction between "sexuality" as a fairly straightforward descriptive term applied to a certain class of human *activities* and "sexuality" as a categorical term that designates some actual existent *thing* or *category* with ontological status of some sort and metaphysically real defining properties, we are still faced with the question of exactly what it is that might be fluid and changing when we speak of "fluid sexuality." For reasons just discussed, it is difficult to defend a claim that "sexuality" is both metaphysically/ontologically real (i.e., an abstraction with causal efficacy) *and* profoundly fluid in some way. The alternative to this difficulty is to hold that persons and their intentional, meaningful, agentic acts (including thoughts, feelings, and actions) are real, and that people therefore engage in "sexuality" volitionally in various ways with various persons for various reasons in various situations. This is the sort of fluidity that is reasonable.

Embodiment as a Rescue from Abstractions

The phenomenon of *embodiment* has a rich history within the phenomenological and hermeneutical philosophical traditions, owing substantially to the influential work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1989; 2004). Succinctly stated, Merleau-Ponty's work contributes a thoughtful and nuanced understanding of the nature and role of the body in the purposive, meaning-making activities of human beings as they live their lives. Indeed, as philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) noted: "If one had to sum up Merleau-Ponty's philosophical legacy in a phrase, one might say that he more than any other taught us what it means to understand ourselves as embodied agents" (p. 1). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's core thesis, Taylor (1989, p. 1) states, is that "the human subject is an agent, engaged in activity, and engaged in a world. He is an embodied subject." As Merleau-Ponty demonstrates in his most famous philosophical work, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1989), the body is the basic medium through which we are in the world. The body, he shows, constitutes a fundamental "existential condition" and "intersubjective ground" for all human experience, action, thought, emotion, and relationship. This way of understanding the body is in sharp contrast with the notion of the body as home to, and origin of, a bundle of forces, pushes, and pulls. As one of Merleau-Ponty's foremost commentators, Gary Madison (1981) explains:

> I am a subject only by means of the many unbreakable bonds which tie my consciousness and my body together; I am an embodied subject only by being in a direct mutual relation with the world; and I am in the world only through my co-existence with others who, themselves, are also so many beings in the world. Inversely, the other exists for me only because I am directly linked to the world by a body which is inseparable from my existence. (p. 22)

In other words, as embodied beings, we are always already situated beings, simultaneously enmeshed in social, physical,

[9] See Nagel (1974) for a compelling analysis of the incoherence of the thesis that human beings might change in their metaphysical nature or fundamental identity, or even authentically imagine such a change.

temporal, and spatial fields of various relationships and meanings. No one comes into the world as an unembodied being. However, just as human action is recognized as always occurring in the context of an inescapable and ever-present biological reality, embodiment is also not in any meaningful way separable from the social, moral, cultural, and historical contexts in which all our acts are inherently embedded. The "lived-body" is a fundamental, essential, and inseparable dimension of our existence as the sorts of (human) beings we are, and the presuppositional horizon within which we live and act. Embodiment is, in this way, the grounding feature of the world of agents and, thus, the most salient context within which agents exercise their creative freedom to be and to do. This view stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing, but philosophically naïve perspectives currently on offer from any of a large number of biological-reductive perspectives (see, e.g., Garson, 2015; Plaisance & Reydon, 2012; Plomin, 2019; Rowland, 2020) wherein the body is either the source of blind, generic motivational pushes and pulls or the physical substrate from which intelligence and moral sensibility magically emerge from meat and chemical.

A perspective grounded in embodiment, on the other hand, suggests that the body is more than a mechanical object governed by natural forces, defined by abstract conditions or casual tendencies, and driven by reflexive responses. In contrast to the traditional view of the body as mechanical, viewing human agency through the lens of embodiment allows us to see the "lived-body" (i.e., the whole, embodied being) as both site and source of our intentional engagement with, and engagement by, the world in all of our projects: a necessary ground for purposive, meaningful action and relationship.[10] While it is *in and through* the body that we are able to be intimately familiar with and engage the world and others, and are capable of desiring and acting at all, this does not mean that it is *because of* the body that we have a world in the first place, nor is it the case that the body is the sole origin or organ of our desires, our actions, or our identities. As Matthews (2004) notes, "Except in certain contexts, we experience living human bodies, our own and those of other people, not as bits of machinery, but as *the expression of a human person and his or her mode of being in the world"* (p. 194, emphasis added). Indeed, according to this view, sexuality is not best thought of as an abstract causal force or condition, a category of some "thing" that we possess or to which we belong, but rather it is best thought of as an active, purposive, meaningfully unfolding mode of our being in the world with others. In other words, the body is best understood as a *mode* of being, not the material source of being. As such, it should be thought of as an affordance—that is, an enabling context, rather than as what we commonly refer to as a "cause."

In this way, Merleau-Ponty (as do others) provides a thoughtful and sophisticated alternative to the reductive and emergent explanatory strategies advanced over the last century or so, all of which attribute direct causal roles to the material

[10] This understanding of embodiment should not be taken as a suggestion that bodies are composed of some sort of magical "smart meat," such that the physical body just *has* all the intelligence of a person. Such a position leads to all the conceptual problems encountered by invoking magical abstractions and attributing to them causal power on the one hand, or relying on some sort of magical powers inherent in some, but not all, physical matter on the other hand, all without explanation as to how such might be the case (i.e., how does meat "get" or "produce" meaning and mattering)—positions we have just refuted. Rather, embodiment simply holds that even if there is an intelligent soul or mind that continues after the death of the body, to understand human beings as we encounter them, we must adopt a holistic view that every intelligent agent we meet lives in and through a physical body.

body in the production and understanding of meaningful human phenomena, including sexuality (see, e.g., Heinämaa, 2014; Moya & Larrain, 2016; Tolman et al., 2014). Understanding human beings as embodied agents provides a way of taking both the body and agency seriously—as certainly we must do if we hope to understand human sexuality—while avoiding the pitfalls of naïve and incoherent attempts to get meaning out of meat. It also serves as a deterrent to making all sorts of facile category mistakes—such as the common notion that sexual attraction and feelings of love *are really just* the result of oxytocin and dopamine activity in the limbic system (Schneiderman et al., 2012).

Embodiment and Sexuality

We want next to briefly explicate the value and role of the concept of embodiment (and of embodiment itself) to the question of sexuality and human agency, as well as intrinsically related issues such as sexual identity, sexual orientation, sexual desire, and sexual intimacy, by considering the various challenges entailed in uncritical thinking about such things. Consider the following points specifically:

1. It is embodiment that provides the first and most immediate (literally "un-mediated")[11] experience of otherness. And, as such, it constitutes an irrefutable validation of ipseity—i.e., of one's individual existence distinct from any others (e.g., we do not share protoplasm or pain receptors with other people). Embodiment stands in contrast to the other things about us that we *can* create by an act of our own minds or the exercise of rational capacity, and, because such are just our own ideas, we can to a great extent readily share them with others.
2. Like everything else in the stubborn material world, embodiment resists us in important ways. Embodiment puts boundaries around our creative will and the pride that comes with absolute mastery of anything in the world. It is due to the givenness of embodiment that we are not, alas, as the Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola (1956) suggests in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, the "makers and molders of our Selves," able to fashion ourselves into any form we please, the center of heaven and earth, the measure of all things (see pp. 7–8). Even though we are agentic beings capable of acting on and in the world in which we find ourselves, the brute facticity of embodiment entails that we are also constrained—often in quite profound and far-reaching ways—in what we can do (e.g., some things are too high, too heavy, or too far away, and some things such as others' embodiment can never be ours).
3. As embodied agents we live in a world that constrains our agency in important ways, a world that makes its own constant demands on us and provides affordances for action, and simultaneously limits the exercise and expression of our will (e.g., we simply must eat, rest, and depend on things outside us, and we cannot do everything that we can think). However, in this, it is not agency that is constrained, but rather

[11] That is to say, embodiment is not produced by or dependent upon conscious deliberating thought or reflection.

the possibilities for, and the consequences of, its expression.

4. Embodiment is a source of individuation and alienation because of the otherness inherent in it. After all, we always just know that the headache we are experiencing is *our headache* and not someone else's headache. But we also very clearly know that our headache does not extend to nor exhaust the whole of our being. For just this reason, it is common to say, "I *have* a headache;" that is, part of us *has* the headache and knows *of* it in a way different from just the brute physical experience.

5. However, the body is also a source of intimacy, as embodiment allows us to find others who, in the most basic sense of being to which we have access, are like us and can be with us and we with them. Sympathy, for example, is not just a mental phenomenon. Indeed, sympathy is not solely or even primarily a matter of cognitively imagining ourselves in another's place, but rather something that can be expressed through touch, through a look or a tone, by lifting up the "hands which hang down" (Heb. 12:12), and so forth. Embodiment marks us off as different from one another in deep and impermeable ways even as it opens up for us a shared world of possibilities, meanings, and experiences.

6. The otherness of embodied persons is different from the otherness of material things. The concreteness afforded us in embodiment is a surer foundation for finding, engaging, and knowing others than any sort of imaginative, creative, or empathic thought could ever afford us. In fact, as the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1969) argues, it is the encounter with concrete otherness that calls us into being as ourselves, as who we are as the particular beings we are. In short, he argues that we would have no reason or occasion to be "us" if it were not for our intimate awareness of "the other" and the moral obligation which concrete otherness affords us. Embodiment makes this otherness of the other real and salient, calling us out in a way that mere ideas never can. It is, thus, perhaps no surprise that Levinas describes the encounter with the other, the encounter that instantiates the self as a self, as the experience of "the face-to-face" (1985, see especially, pp. 83–92).

7. It is the embodied other, and the context of both the limitations and possibilities that embodiment brings, that provides the occasion for the possibility of morality and meaning. Embodiment makes the consequences of our actions not just in our minds or our own lives, but in the lives of real embodied others prominent. Without others and the constraints incumbent in an embodied world there would be no salient context for caring and sharing. Neither material things nor abstract ideas can really cooperate with us in joint meaningful projects. Even using a tool from the natural world is not really a joint or shared endeavor—the tool and the world from which it comes do neither care about, nor have any real stake or interest in any of our projects. Neither material things nor abstract ideas can really cooperate with us. Caring about things, or even about

> the passing from vogue to passé of an idea or abstract principle, implies only the shallowest kind of sharing. Real caring and sharing involves joint projects, engaging both mind and body with an embodied other. It is the embodied presence that makes a loved one all the more dear, and the bodily absence that makes the loss of a loved one all the more poignant.

The foregoing seven points show that embodiment is particularly important in experiencing and understanding sexuality not only because sexuality generally involves the body and bodily affordances, but, more importantly, because sex is instantiated in the physical body and is the means of procreating new embodied beings: i.e., it is the source of embodiment itself. For males, in addition to primary and secondary sex characteristics, every cell in the body is also male (with the exception of non-nucleated cells—chiefly blood cells). For females, in addition to primary and secondary sex characteristics, every cell in the body (except blood cells) is female. This biological fact is, by all accounts, immutable. In discussions of sexual fluidity, then, biological sex is not one of the factors that is mutable, notwithstanding the scaffolding, interventions and accoutrements we might deploy in attempting to make it so. A significant part of the muddle in both academic and lay discussions of human sexuality arises from making fine, mostly rhetorical, distinctions between "sex" and "gender," and the introduction into discussions of various (often concocted) terms referring to various "things"—not infrequently abstractions of precisely the sort discussed above—with very different ontological provenances (see Kuby, 2015, especially pp. 108–120). This serves to keep the conversations *fluid* and allows for any number of claims that might make conversational or grammatical sense, but which are logically and/or ontologically incoherent (see Trueman, 2020). One might state, for example, that "gender" is fluid, and in so doing cite differences in gender roles and gender identities, and then also propose that sex is a part of gender, so that sex is similarly fluid—in spite of what the biological facts "on the ground," so to speak, happen to be. In these types of discussions, careful definitions, conceptual consistency, and ontological clarity are usually not points of principal emphasis, since the energy that generates such discussion is often political or largely emotive.

One important aspect of embodiment, then, is that the body witnesses, even at the cellular level, to the immutability of biological sex (and, therefore, biological gender).[12] Embodiment and sexual dimorphism also brings us face to face with sexual complementarity and gives tangible form to the natural connection of sexuality to fecundity and to the concrete otherness of others, including others not yet present (Levinas, 1985). Even granting that biological processes of development and maturation do occasionally not work out perfectly, a person's sexual or, one could say, "gendered" embodiment, at the level of the cells of the body itself, and not merely its outward appearance, is what it is and is so in its concrete givenness. To the extent that embodiment undergirds identity, then, one's sexual identity is likewise given. In other words, at the material level, our identity is immutable as well.

There is, however, more to the modern concept of "identity" than just what the body provides (i.e., sex/gender). Contemporary

[12] This will hold as true of human beings, regardless of what future exercises in gene splicing or other technological tinkering might produce. Y chromosomes can only be either present or absent.

Western culture is quite taken with the notion that we can make of ourselves whatever we will (i.e., whatever we desire). The brute facts of the material world and its resistance to us, however, impose strong pragmatic limitations on this self-creativity. Nonetheless, we do have significant power and significant leeway to create and modify our non-biological selves. At the heart of this self-creation—the construction of an *identity*—is the human agent and the agent's capacity to imagine and to create and re-create. Though we can certainly construe the circumstances of our embodiment in a variety of ways, and apply to it a variety of meanings, our embodiment is not itself fully malleable or complicit in such creativity—it does not inexorably bend to the dictates of our will, but rather constrains and resists the inventiveness of our imagination. Thus, it makes more sense to talk about something like sexual *identity*, along with *preferences* and *orientations*, as being mutable (i.e., subject to creative construction through agentic action). Indeed, we have argued that such things likely are mutable—able to be constituted and re-constituted, done, undone, and redone—precisely because they have their being, their essence, only in the acts of genuine human agents—even in the context, or perhaps especially in the context, of embodiment with all the possibilities and affordances that embodiment presents to us along with its inherent givenness. Thus, one could hope that mutability might bring about harmony with the immutable, rather than conflict with the immutable. It is in this context—i.e., of biological sex (or gender) as fixed and immutable, and sexual identities, desires, orientations, and such things, as constructions which only agentic human beings can create and maintain—that we turn attention to the case for genuinely agentic sexuality. We first introduce agency as understood in this essay and then introduce agentic sexuality.

Agency and Agentic Sexuality

There is no aspect of our essential humanity that is more fluid (i.e., mutable) than our agentic acting/living. The fluidity does not attach to whether or not we *are* agents (agency is the metaphysical core of our being and we cannot be otherwise), but rather "fluidity," whatever that may mean, attaches to how agency is deployed, and what it might produce. Agentic action is, in its essence, "fluid" and open-ended. To be human is to be an agent, and to be an agent is to be creative, to be intimately enmeshed in a world of genuine possibility, purpose, and meaning. Agency is the essence and foundation of our mutability, our being able to change and do otherwise at any time. The lived world for us exists primarily as possibility and constraint, permeated throughout by meaning and moral significance. Agentic beings are fluid and mutable, though not infinitely so, particularly in light of our embodiment and the material world that resists us, and the fact that we live in a world populated by other agents. Obviously, we simply cannot bring material things into existence by thinking them or speaking them into existence. We cannot conjure. At the same time, we cannot by any act of will become someone else (e.g., Smith cannot ever become Jones). Nonetheless, Smith is never stuck just as he or she is. In the language of today's world, he or she can always become "Smith 2.0." However, the fact that we are ontologically agentic beings is *not* itself mutable or subject to change, for all the reasons discussed above about metaphysical realities. However, fluidity of action and mutability in the face of possibility, and in the flow of human events, is endemic to all human agents and definitive of agency itself.

None of this is to say, however, that human agency, properly understood, ends up in a chaos of random reasons and impulses

that would obviate any predictability or understanding of us and our behavior, as has long been feared by many proponents of the largely positivistic social sciences. On the contrary, the lifeworld in which human agency unfolds is not chaotic.[13] Chaos (i.e., random, unconstrained change) precludes reasons and thereby destroys meaningful agency. Rather, it is the case that sense can always be made of people's agentic actions and their lifeworld (even if the "sense" it makes is hard to make "sense" of). However, if sense is to be made of a person's agentic world, it must be made from the perspective of the particular agent him- or herself, rather than from some "extraspective theoretical (or abstracted) perspective" (Rychlak, 1988), which in the contemporary social science disciplines is generally based on assumptions developed and applied generically, and usually emphasizing constructs, abstractions, forces, or meat and chemical. In the agentic realm, agentic life is a constant and purposeful doing, undoing, and redoing—in the sense of always being open-ended. In short, one might say that for human beings, "it's agency, all the time, and all the way down."[14] The reality of agentic action unfolds within the very hermeneutic circularity—or spiral trajectory—of life (Slife & Christensen, 2013). And agentic human life, as we have argued, always takes place *within* a world of embodied reality—although, it must be noted, this does *not* mean that agentic life arises (causally) *from* the world of embodied reality. In both the realm of embodied reality and the realm of agentic action, it is true that what is done is done—in the sense that it has some reality in the life-world inhabited by embodied agents—but in the meaning-laden realm of human agency, whatever is done—and its meaning—can also always be undone (or redone) for any or all of a potentially very large number of reasons and in a large number of ways. This is to say, simply that agentic action is meaningful because it comes from meaning-making acts of meaning-making beings. And so, while the *consequences* of agentic acts are not always easily undone, the *meaning,* and thus the "substance" of an agentic act, is always subject to recension, revision, and reconstrual—all of which are, themselves agentic acts. And construals and reasons can also always *be taken up* anew (*or put down again*), taken on, or modified as we *give ourselves over to* (or *hold ourselves back from*) them, either fully or by degrees (see Table 1 – Glossary for an explanation of terms used here that are descriptive of "modes of agentic acting").

This ubiquitous un-doing and re-doing are most important and most obvious in the realm of meaning, purpose, reason, mattering, and related human actions—that is, the realm where our humanity is manifested. The physical, embodied realm provides setting, substance and affordances for agentic human actions. It is the realm in which we always encounter stubborn consequences that do not conform to, nor accommodate, our every meaningful act or aspiration. Some things, in terms of their state of being in the embodied world cannot be un-done. A victim cannot be un-abused,

[13] Any chaos in the unfolding of agency would be of the sort that afflicts humankind generally whenever there might be illness, developmental difficulties, impairments, or other things that would introduce their seeming "chaos" into human life, even in a completely determined world.

[14] This expression refers to the famous story about the defense of the thesis that the world does not just "stand" in space, but rather rests on the back of a giant tortoise. The answer to the question as to what, in turn, the tortoise rests on is "Nothing, its tortoises, all the way down." In other words, agency is a fundamental way of being and not caused by or dependent on other things. It is originative and irreducible (see Gantt, Williams, & Reynolds, 2014).

or un-murdered. A child cannot be un-conceived. A promise or covenant once broken cannot be un-broken. The world of embodiment thus provides the unique and un-yielding setting within which agents can exercise their agency in the co-existing realms of meaning, and human agentic thinking, feeling, and action. It is the realm of embodiment that lends a sense of urgency, poignancy, and consequential salience to human thought and action that would not be available in any other way. However, in the realm of being where human agency reigns and gives meaning, mattering, and purpose to life and world and actions, there are equally important realities and opportunities. In this realm where questions of what things "are" are formulated, refined, and finally articulated, agency reigns, and it is here where things really can be done, but also un-done, and re-done, created and re-created, and in this realm where they finally become "this" rather than "that" and ultimately what they "are."[15]

Human agency, we contend, is best understood as a constant and endless procession of our "taking on" and "giving ourselves over to" meaningful possibilities as we construe and construct our lives and ourselves within the possibility-rich (or sometimes, perhaps, possibility-poor) world in which we find ourselves—constantly living and acting with others and among things (Williams, Gantt, & Fischer, 2021). It is for this reason that our agentic action in the realm of sexual matters is, as in all other realms of human action, contextual and fully participatory, involving others (both real and imagined). It is in this light that agentic action in the realm of sexual matters is inescapably moral (i.e., it *matters* to people, and so it has real effects on other agents). One's sexual actions, like all other agentic actions, not only contributes to the morally relevant meaning and trajectory of one's own life, but also provides the "raw material" for other meaning-making agents to possibly take up as they construe and construct their own agentic moral meanings and moral lives.

Sexuality, as agentic meaning-making acts, is inherently fluid, as fluid as any other kind of meaningful human action, consisting of "taking up" ideas, meanings, and possibilities, and "giving oneself over to" those meanings and possibilities—or, at other times, leaving certain meanings and possibilities behind—in a constant flow of living, deciding, acting, re-acting, doing, undoing, and doing over. For example, agency and possibility are inherent in a proposition (and in the lived reality it represents) such as "Smith is a golfer," or "Smith is an English speaker." Such statements can only be understood as something that a person (i.e., Smith)—understood as an agent—is *doing*. Smith is a golfer because she golfs or is golf-ing. She is not necessarily bound to be a golfer indefinitely, nor is she metaphysically or necessarily a golfer. If she gives up golfing, then she ceases to be a golf-er.[16] The world of human sexual understanding and activity,

[15] We note that the reality of a world where agency reigns things can be both done and undone, and meanings and mattering are finally refined is the hope of every Christian, as well as other people of transcendent faith.

[16] It must be granted that Smith's "be-ing" depends upon her actually golfing. However, what really counts as "golfing" is also an agentic decision. Perhaps Smith hasn't played in years, but still thinks of herself as a golfer, or Jones played only once, but enjoyed it so he considers himself as a golfer. Perhaps Brown has never played but she is drawn to the game (as a possibility) and to the golf-centered life; she owns the equipment, attends events, and feels comfortable in the golf-world. In the realm of genuine human agency, identities of any sort are agentic actions and, like other human agentic activities, can always be un-done or re-done because they exist only in the doing.

as opposed to the world of the materially or metaphysically given, is inherently an agentic world of meaning and possibility, in which we actively and creatively immerse ourselves.[17] Our contention is that an analysis similar to the one above regarding golf can be aptly applied to sexuality also. As Lisa Diamond (2016) reports:

> . . . sexual orientation is not a static and categorical trait. Rather, same-sex attraction shows substantial fluidity in both men and women . . . in high rates of nonexclusive . . . patterns of attraction among men and women. . . . it can be observed in the high numbers of men and women who flexibly engage in patterns of sexual behavior that do not concord with their self-described identity or attractions. (p. 254)

What this means is that things such as sexual orientation, preference, attraction, and identity are actually descriptions of what a person is *doing* (i.e., we orient ourselves, we prefer things, we feel interest toward, and we identify/think of ourselves), not statements of metaphysical "types" or abstractions, or categorical identifications of what a person *just is*. In other words, all of these aspects of our sexuality, since they are things we are doing, are things that can be undone, taken up anew, or put down. As agentic acts, they are to which we can give ourselves over, or reserve ourselves from, as we take up some other possibilities—including the possibilities of desire (or desir-*ing*) itself. This is not to say, however, that such agentic "becoming otherwise" is easy. In fact, many times, habits of thinking and acting are notoriously stubborn. It is to say, however, that there are no *metaphysical* or *lawful* constraints on agentic change, i.e., on changing what agents *qua* agents are doing, and no *powerful causal abstractions* exercising invisible, compulsive force and constraint on us. That aspect of our sexual nature which genuinely is metaphysically given, and thus not agentic or mutable (i.e., biologically gendered embodiment), merely provides the givenness, and affordances and opportunities consistent with that bodily reality, within which agentic sexuality can be meaningfully expressed.

Agency as Lived Experience

This construal of agency is often known as libertarian free will or "radical choice" (Taylor, 1985). In this construal, agency is manifested most clearly and fundamentally in the capacity for making autonomous or free choices—i.e., choices by the "free" will of the agent and the agent's capacity to objectively weigh options and choose while resisting the influence of other attractive options (see Williams, 1992, 2005, 2017). In this model of agency, invisible but powerful abstractions are important sources of "influence" that can impact individual "free" choices. If, as we have argued above, the powerful abstractions developed in our lives and in culture really do not exist that could give them real causal power, then their influence can lie only in our giving them credence and allowing them, by an act of agency, to become the grounds for our "free" choices. While the understanding of agency as agentic action can offer protection from any supposed powerful abstractions. There is one important potential problem that may arise in agentic activity that bears mentioning here.

We suggest that a choice made by an agent who gives credence to something that is not true, or is not "the case," is in fact not really free in the way freedom is usually

[17] It is important to keep in mind here that biological sex/gender is one of those metaphysical givens rather than an agentic act—as witnessed in every nucleated cell of the material body.

understood. For example, if Smith, as an adult, chose always to sleep on the couch in his home because he sincerely believed that there was a monster under the full-sized bed in his apartment, and the monster was too large to fit under the couch, so, therefore, the couch was a safer place to sleep, would we be inclined to grant that Smith's choice is really a *free* choice—even though he made the choice as a fully functioning agent? Would we not, in such a case, be more inclined to consider that there is something very "unfree" about Smith's life—that Smith is not really exercising his agency because he is living in a false world? It seems in this case that Smith is bestowing power, in the form of influence, on a false narrative—on an entity that does not in fact exist except in Smith's own life-world. Therefore, the monster narrative has no real causal power except insofar as Smith's understanding grants such power in the very act of his "taking up" and "giving himself over" to his own narrative and "taking up" the world as a fearsome place and himself as a potential victim. So, we find Smith in the peculiar position of exercising his agency to then surrender his agency to a false world that does not really exist.

Similarly, cultural narratives can obviate freedom and negate human agency on at least two levels. First our freedom is negated when we adopt a narrative about ourselves and the world that precludes the possibility that we really are agents. For example, Jones does not believe in monsters that live under beds, but does believe in something called a "drive," or a "desire" that compels him and drives his decisions regarding sexuality. That is, creating powerful narratives about ourselves and our world in which invisible, powerful abstractions exist and control many aspects of our lives, including the choices we make, obviates the very agency that creates the narrative in the first place. In the way just described, and as in the case of Smith above, ironically, warrant for belief in agency is effectively destroyed by an apparent act of agency. The second level on which our freedom can be negated has to do with whether the various reasons for which the ideas and meanings we might "take up," or "give ourselves over to" actually reflect truth; that is, whether they reflect and confirm the world as it really is, including the truth of our own being-in-the-world.

The common view of agency as described above—as exercising one's freedom to freely choose something in a particular situation, based on deliberation that is free from various influences that might move us to choose otherwise—does not constitute human agency as we really live it out in almost all the situations in which we find ourselves in the course of daily life. Nor does it describe agentic sexuality. The common libertarian view tends to emphasize particular specifiable "choice points" and the exercise of agency in a particular situation as involving the weighing of alternatives and deliberating on possible choices, while resisting some influences and opting in the direction of other possible influences. The problem is that in actually living our lives we almost never make choices in such a cognitive deliberative manner. A moment's reflection should be enough to convince us that there really are very few instances in any given day where we really go through the sort of detached, deliberative process of making a free choice that the common view assumes. For the most part, as we go about living, we are just too busy doing what we want to do and what needs to be done. In fact, we ordinarily make our choices by *engaging the world* and all its affordances, not *distancing ourselves* from the world and its affordances, as we go through the decision process. As Taylor (1989) notes:

> [T]he subject is in this world (= field of meanings) as an agent. He acts, he does things. The meanings which things have for him of course reflect this: that delicious bit of pastry attracts him, tempts him to eat it; this edgy social situation is calling for his intervention (either "physically" to stop the fight, or "socially" to say something soothing, change the subject), and so on. The fact that we act, that certain events are our doing, is another fundamental feature of human being, along with the fact that things have meaning for us. This is to say that the distinction within what "happens," in a topic-neutral sense of the term, between what I do and what comes about, is an irreducible one. (pp. 2–3)

Of course, we might assume that true agency is brought out only on special occasions, such as when we are faced with particularly hard or ambiguous decisions; but this line of thinking misses the ubiquity and the essence of our genuine agency as meaningful acting. Our real human agency is not something we employ just on special, sometimes momentous, occasions of careful, calculative deliberation. Rather, human agency is the substance of our being-in-the-world. It is already in play as we recognize that there are important matters to be dealt with, and as we recognize and formulate the content and focus of our lives. Agency is the very "stuff" of which human living is composed. And, as such, our agency cannot be disentangled from our very living and acting as the unique sort of beings we are. Our agency and our living in the world cannot be disentangled because they are not two things, but always one. In precisely the same way, the reasons that we always have as the basis for our agentic actions are agentically created and employed (i.e., "chosen") by means of exactly the same agentive activities by which the decision at hand itself is made. That is, agentic actions are always both the source and the result of agentic acting in an on-going cycle of agentic activity. Some might criticize this part of our conception of agency by pointing out that this constant and continuing cycle of agentic reasons and actions is an infinite regression, and thus illogical. We suggest, in response that an "infinite regression" is problematic because the sequence or cycle for some logical or metaphysical reason is *supposed to* end. In the case of human agentic acting, the cycle of reasoning that we have described here taking up and giving ourselves over to ideas, things, reasons, values, desires, etc. is not *supposed to* end—because this cycle is human life itself. We suggest that this mode of agentic being in the world is more aptly described as a hermeneutical circle than an infinite regression.

This alternative view of agency developed in this essay can be most readily understood by attending to the experience of agency as actually lived (see Williams, Gantt, & Fischer, 2021). If we focus on the countless agentic actions we perform in a given day—everything from choosing whether to get up or push the snooze button on the alarm, picking up a glass to drink and putting it down again in the spot we put it rather than somewhere else, making a purchase or foregoing it, phoning or texting a friend or putting it off, doing any one of perhaps hundreds of things we could purposely/meaningfully do in a given day—it becomes clear that we almost never actually stop, lay out competing alternatives, deliberate over them systematically, free ourselves from all influence we don't want to influence us, and then exert our own will in order to decide the matter. The common libertarian model of agency is artificial at best, and incoherent at worst. We should

note here also that the model of agency as just "free choice" cannot be saved by claiming that the real deliberation and deciding is all done unconsciously, as some models assert (see, e.g., Akram, 2013; Shepherd & Mylopoulos, 2021), and that is the reason we are not aware of doing it. From a conceptual point of view, taking this position and relying on the existence of unconscious minds and/or subconscious processes creates more conceptual and moral problems than it could ever solve, and much worse conceptual problems than the ones we have laid out in our argument about agency in this paper (e.g., the *homunculus problem* that results in our having two minds to explain instead of just one, whether such an unconscious mind is agentic even if people are not, and just how that might be, etc.).

To understand how we really experience and exercise our agency, we have to focus not on deliberations and traditional choice-making, but on the hundreds or even thousands of things (e.g., thinking, feeling, desiring, believing, aspiring, worrying, yielding to habitual acts and concerns, traditions, caring, mattering, resisting, and relating to others, all the while dealing with the context of embodiment) that form the meaningful world of which we are always a part and in which we are always engaged. We are constantly accepting, rejecting, "taking up" the world, or a thought or feeling, accepting or "giving ourselves over" to an idea, a project, an interpretation, a priority, a mistake, a bit of slothfulness, a feeling, or giving ourselves over to our good judgments, or picking up and taking on an excuse for accepting what we really should not accept, and doing something else instead (Williams & Gantt, 2021). Joseph Rychlak (1994) referred to our acting in this way as "telosponsivity," that is, always affirming or rejecting meaning, as an end or purpose (i.e., a *telos*) for all that we do, and in all our actions. It really seems quite unreasonable to believe that there are countless invisible, powerful, abstract causal influences, variables, or biological processes within us and around us, all operating beneath every physical, mental, emotional, and moral experience we have every day, and that these things are somehow causally connected to each of us and to each other as we move through time and the richness of our physical, mental, emotional, and moral lives. The truth is, we assert, that there are no such unfathomable invisible, magical, abstract determining forces at work. Rather, quite simply, it is *we* (i.e., wholistic, embodied, moral agents) who are at work. This manner of living constitutes the unique manner of being-in-the-world as only agentic beings can be. This is how the rationality that defines and characterizes human beings, and not other living creatures, unfolds in the life—the daily mode of living—of an agent. The crucial part of all this, however, is that agents, no matter how they happen to be in the world now, no matter how they are construing things, how they are "taking up" the world, or what they are "giving themselves over" to, can at any instant, for any of perhaps thousands of reasons and invitations, *do otherwise* . . . or not.

Within this understanding of agency, we can see that agency arises not from the fact that we can supposedly make deliberated decisions free from determining influence, subject only to our "will," but rather that no matter what we as agents are doing, what decisions we are making in any given situation, it really is possible to do or be otherwise. And, even if it is not convenient or easy, it is always nonetheless possible to do *something* otherwise. Further, we should note, the power to "do otherwise" comes not from standing apart from one's life and world in order to deliberate about it, but rather it comes as we engage more fully and

more seriously in the life we are living, considering things more broadly (or narrowly), adopting new perspectives, questioning ourselves, resurrecting or reconstructing memories, yielding to promptings, listening to our conscience, forgiving loved ones, losing ourselves in work . . . and the list goes on and on. Whatever meaning is "taken up" can be kept or put down, at any time, for a large and fluid number of reasons, any of which might be sufficient to be seized upon and thus to comprise a reason for action—or not. That is, no such available alternatives *need to be* seized upon because there are no laws, principles, or other abstractions hovering over our world or in our minds, causing us to seize upon any one or all of them. There are always many factors in play, not causally, but rather, meaningfully, in play.

For genuine agents, therefore, whatever is started can be stopped, whatever has been done can be undone, redone, or modified in a potentially very large number of ways and for a potentially very large number of reasons. Agency then, we must be clear, is not some special capacity we have (like choosing from amongst hypothetical alternatives free from any influences we do not want). Agency as described here is the defining character of our very being, our being-in-the-world. It is not one trait or capacity among many. Rather, it is the very essence of our being as the kind of beings we are. Agency is what we are much more fundamentally than can be captured by any notion of a mere "identity." Agency manifests itself always as what we do, and re-do, and un-do. We might say, therefore, "we are what we do, and we do what we are."

We should acknowledge here that what we describe as the essential *modus operandi* of human agents (i.e., "taking up or putting off" and "giving oneself over or taking back") can, in an "every day" sense, be described loosely or generically as *choosing*, as making choices. Although the choosing described here is certainly not the deliberative, influence-selective choosing prescribed in traditional libertarian accounts of free will, "taking up" and "giving oneself over to" might be thought of as a sort of "micro-choosing;" in that such "choices" are not carefully deliberated nor made in any kind of "time out" from living, and are not necessarily consistent, logical, or decisive. These incidents of "micro-choosing" are generally not clearly available in detail to the agents themselves, because of the hundreds of other things that press on our attention, and the many other things that call our attention and also require micro choosing at any given time. Thus, these "micro choices" are not lived out as conscious deliberative choices. They are not the products of detached, neutral self-reflection and assessment. Rather, they are most often only vaguely coherent and can be made explicit only by some other agentic act of the same sort of which they themselves are a part, perhaps including some self-reflective focused awareness, and even some narrative that forms a sort of life story or inventory. But most of the time, in the course of a day, little of our agentic "taking up" and "giving over" are likely to be elevated to any level of importance or explicit self-awareness. However, any of it can be elevated, focused on, elaborated, and made meaningful when, for a potentially large number of reasons (perhaps hundreds of reasons not fully articulated), they *become* important—as lived experience changes and flows and as we keep making meaning, "taking up," and "giving ourselves over." It is in this process of reflection, meaning generation, and self-narration that some often large decisions or choices can be articulated. For example, Smith decided or "chose" to become a college professor after deciding to focus on schoolwork which she

was good at rather than athletics where she was quite average, and after committing to the life of the mind because she always was wondering about things, wanting to raise a family in a smaller town with good schools, and learning of the job security that academic tenure brings. None of this process was self-reflective for very long, none of it was particularly careful, none of it involved the suspension of influence of other things—they were always a part of the whole of Smith's world. And, importantly, all of it could always have "gone another way" or been reversed, but, in the end, it was, in fact Smith's free "choice."

Agency as a Truth of Human Being

It has been common in the literature on human sexuality, both within scholarly discourse and within the lay culture, to contend that "sexuality" is not agentic. Often, this line of argument is based on the observation that sexuality is not agentic because it is phenomenologically (i.e., according to our lived experience) not the case that people make the kind of special, deliberated decisions about most sexual matters by employing the sort of detached, reflective process that libertarian models of free will require as the defining feature of libertarian forms of agency (see Bailey et al., 2016). In other words, many people resist the notion that sexuality is agentic because it just seems to be the case that virtually no one actually deliberates, weighs options, resists unwanted influences, and then rationally, calculatingly, decides on their sexual identity, orientation, gender identity, sexual desires, and so on. [18] Obviously, it is true that this is not how such things generally play themselves out. However, it is also true that this sort of deliberative choosing from amongst options is not how we make most any other important non-sexual decisions about ourselves either. This way of deciding and choosing is, indeed, not the natural or ordinary form human agency takes.

The fact that conscious, deliberative choosing does not apply to many sexual matters has limited relevance for our understanding of either sexuality or agency because that kind of choice-making is artificial and yields understanding of very little even in other aspects of our lives. Therefore, affirming that one's sexuality is not the product of the calculative or deliberative making of free choices does *not* justify the conclusion that sexuality must therefore not be agentic in any important way. On the contrary, as our analysis of agency makes clear, when agency is properly understood in terms of our fundamental ontology as irrepressibly meaning-making moral agents, it becomes clear that matters of sexuality, just as all other aspects of our being-in-the-world, can and should be understood as what we are doing, not what we are caused to be or do by any material or abstract force. Consequently, and in principle, all such agentic doings can be undone, redone, or done differently. This is, of course, not to say that all of the consequences of our agentic acts can be entirely undone, but only that the acts themselves surely did not have to happen as they did, and the consequences of our agentic actions can, in many meaningful respects, be altered going forward. Thus, genuine human agency offers an understanding of ourselves in terms of what

[18] In his 1999 book *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory, and Ethics of Sexual Orientation*, philosopher and legal theorist Edward Stein, himself a gay man, draws on the work of developmental psychologist Daryl Bem. arguing that continual, small, seldom noted choices are fundamental to the process of developing a sexual orientation. Although the argument we present here differs from that of both Stein and Bem, we do share common ground on this point (see also, Wilkerson, 2009; Spinelli, 2013, 2014).

we *do* rather than in terms of what we *are* because of our material makeup, or as the convergence of hypothesized causal abstractions or physical causal forces.[19] Rather, from the perspective we offer here, it is possible to understand ourselves, our identity, and our "sexuality" in terms of what we do, and, thus, at any point in time, what we do really is what and who we are—but not what we inevitably must have become, nor what we must continue to be. Understanding sexuality as agentic, as something we do, preserves meaning, and moral purpose in our sexual lives, and, perhaps most important of all, it offers the genuine possibility of always being and doing otherwise.

Implications for SOCE and Other Current Therapeutic Issues

The ideas developed in this paper cover a range of phenomena and have implications for a number of aspects of human sexuality—as observed and understood from a psychological perspective. Space will allow us to touch briefly on only a few. Fuller development will require another forum. We will focus this brief section on the document *APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Sexual Minority Persons*, task force report dated February, 2021. Space will permit only a few quick observations.

1. These guidelines for psychological practice are clearly influenced by the post-modern Critical Theory approaches descending from 19th and 20th century chiefly European philosophy following Neo-Hegelian and Neo-Marxist traditions, and, more recently, the work of the Frankfurt School (Institute for Social Research, Goethe University). Critical Theories, in whatever area of culture, art, or social science, are aimed at liberation broadly conceived (see Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/). Critical Theories have come to prominence in most intellectual fields, not least of which we count psychology, over the last 20 years—since the turn of the present century. Issues regarding sexual identity and orientation seem to have been more or less settled, at least to the satisfaction of many or most mainstream scholars and organizations. In keeping with the rise to prominence of various Critical Theories, theoretical approaches—and, increasingly, clinical practices as well—regarding sexuality have focused on sexuality from a broader socio-political perspective. Issues or concerns about individual sexual behaviors, though still recognized, have been, to a considerable extent, folded into issues of sexual group identity, and intersectionality. This "structuralist," or "post-structuralist" approach has resulted in the generation of more abstractions which have then been invoked as explanations, if not actual contributing causes, of sexual feelings, behaviors, and difficulties. For a prime example of this, we need

[19] In fact, in cases where there is a clear association between some physical condition in the nervous, or other bodily system, it is generally the case that the effect of the physical condition is not to produce or cause a meaningful purposive action. Rather, the clearest cases of physical causation of behavior are when there is a behavioral detriment or an inability to perform, or a decrease in effectiveness of some sort. Such phenomena do not constitute evidence of causality of meaningful purposive behavior. It is quite the opposite.

to look no further than to the construct of "intersectionality" itself. This sociopolitical perspective on sexuality clearly imposes more abstractions, for example, more "categories" of sexual orientation and identity which clearly are taken to have considerable influence on the sexual lives and psychological health and functioning of clients and on the practices of clinicians. For some, this socio-political casting of the problems of sexuality might be seen as liberating and empowering. However, for others, it must surely seem more burdensome, bringing into play many more forces and abstractions capable of producing (in theory at least) many more complications and issues to be dealt with by ordinary people who have experienced sexuality in an intensely personal sense, and might have wrestled with personal and moral issues related to sexuality, but must now, it seems, come to grips with an entire array of socio-political sexual issues that they had never previously imagined. In terms of the principal topic of this paper, these individuals must deal with a host of abstractions which, they must understand, have been exercising real influence on them without their participation or even their knowledge, and which owing to the huge scope of these abstract social forces, they can do nothing about. What is lost in all this is, of course, human agency.

2. Central to the "Critical Theory" movement that underlies much of the work and the theorizing about sexuality in our contemporary professional culture is the axiom that sexual issues (psychological issues, cultural issues, interpersonal issues, and even moral issues) are mostly clear and accurately understood in terms of their origins in the broad cultural/economic systems that have emerged through the last century or so and are now finally recognized. The treatment of such issues will therefore ultimately include revelation of their socio-political origins. This is, as noted above, an inherently and irredeemably non-agentic, if not anti-agentic position. If all problems are, in fact, systemic and endemic to culture and history, then solutions to such problems must also be—and can only be—systemic and cultural. This seems as likely (or more likely) to produce impotence, paralysis, and despair as it is to produce hope, optimism, and healing. In the current intellectual climate, the structural, systemic epistemological stance derived from Critical Theories will guide treatment and, also importantly, it will inevitably guide the self-understanding of clients seeking help with sexual matters—especially sexual matters related to sexual minority status but certainly other (or, perhaps, all) sexual matters as well. Further, dealing with sexual issues, according to the *APA Guidelines*, ultimately entails social activism of a prescribed sort. Guideline 5 reads: "Psychologists recognize the influence of institutional discrimination that exists for sexual minority persons, and the need to promote social change." It is a legitimate question as to whether such an approach can be reasonably, effectively, or ethically imposed on a population who very well may not experience their world or their problems in these particular

systemic, post-modern terms. A discipline that has purposely, for decades, assiduously avoided recommending that clinicians impose value systems or their own personal theories and understandings on their clients, now seems very intent on doing just that (see, e.g., Slife & Yanchar, 2019; Slife, Ghelfi, & Slife, 2019).

3. The guidelines also make it clear that sexual issues related to anything that might bestow sexual minority status on a person are best dealt with in terms that are consistent with how other minority groups (based on constructs and intersectionalities other than sexual ones) might be dealt with. Guideline 5 reads: "Psychologists recognize the influence of institutional discrimination that exists for sexual minority persons, and the need to promote social change." Guideline 6 reads: "Psychologists understand the influence that distal minority stressors have on sexual minority persons and the need to promote social change." The effect of this might well turn what were once individual "sexual issues or problems" into collective social problems. One senses the problems and concerns of individual moral agents slipping away from among the central concerns of the discipline and from society as a whole. Sex as a social issue reflects a change in the human meaning it once had and which it may still have for many if not most clients and potential clients.

4. Critical Theories, which are prominent in the *APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Sexual Minority Person*s are, as noted above, historically and essentially non-agentic accounts of human nature and human behavior. This is the case, owing in large measure to the strong influence of Neo-Marxism in the grounding assumptions of those Critical Theory based movements. In one of the best-known quotations from Marx, we find his stance, and the current stance of Cultural Theories, on the issue of the origins of human consciousness—and thus the origins of human agency: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but . . . their social existence . . . determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1904). If social existence determines consciousness, since consciousness is essential for the existence of agency, and a consciousness determined by conditions outside the agent him- or herself cannot possibly be a genuinely agentic consciousness, then in any such system agency is impossible. Only a sort of benign but impotent illusion of agency, likely entailing some sort of "ersatz" free choice, would be possible. Under such an intellectual regime, sexuality is not agentic at all except for any self-control one's culture might, by whatever systemic means, instill in one's psyche.

5. On a more optimistic note, genuine human agency in sexual matters makes it necessarily the case that all efforts at SOCE (Sexual Orientation Change Efforts), to take one example, should be recast. Any "change efforts," relating to sexual matters are really no different than "change efforts" in any other sphere of life for a genuine human agent. Such efforts can now proceed based on the desires of

> agents to regulate and conduct their own lives in a particular way. From the agentic perspective proposed here, "reparative" therapies are not really "reparative," since there is nothing to repair because there are no causal entities in people that might break and need repair. All therapies are therapies designed to help individuals find out how to live a "good and flourishing life" of their own making. Any truly agentic person is living in a constant and rich milieu of change—change of thoughts, memories, feelings, desires, hopes, meanings, actions, and evaluations. Therapies related to any sexual matters would therefore not be different in kind from any therapy about anything a client might want to instantiate into, or eliminate from, his or her life, and only distinguished—as any therapy would be distinguished—by its focused subject matter.

Conclusion

We conclude that human sexuality in all its manifestations is an agentic phenomenon. It comes from a "taking on" and a "giving oneself over to" the meanings and possibilities entailed in the sexual aspects of our lived experience, including what we experience and have come to refer to as sexuality, as we encounter and engage them and participate in our cultural narratives about sex. In the light of this understanding, then, sexuality is neither something pushed upon us nor pulled out of us. It is no different from, and no more central to our lives, than any other meaningful phenomena we might take on and give ourselves over to. Although it may seem that we are pushed or pulled in matters of sexuality, such seems to be the case only because of any number of shared cultural narratives that we take on and give ourselves over to, and because sexuality often engages the body in ways only relevant to sex. There is, after all, much in our cultural story about sex that has its origin in any number of problematic theories and hypotheses, commonly experienced physiological structures and processes, ideas born of individual experiences, and stereotypical tales about sex.

In sexuality, as in all meaningful engagements in our lives, it takes effort, i.e., activity, to maintain who and what we think we are, or what we wish to be. This is the essence of our agency as embodied moral beings. As far as we know, it takes no effort for an oak tree, for example, to *be* an oak tree, or for a stone to *be* a stone. Such things simply are as they are.[20] And, for this very reason, there is no intrinsic *meaning* or morality attached to being an oak tree or being a stone, nor does it seem to be the case that their existence means anything to them. This, however, is never the case with human agents because, for agents, it takes effort to be and to do, and the constant *taking up* and *giving ourselves over to* is the essence of an agentic and meaningful life. The material world provides us with embodiment and affordances, and embodiment and affordance provide the necessary context for, and constraint upon, both the creative and the stabilizing powers of agentic beings.

[20] Some might argue that there are any number of chemical things going on in physical objects such as trees and stones, so why do we suppose the same sorts of physical processes are not going on inside human beings as well. Indeed, there are many physical and chemical processes going on within human beings, and their effects are in the physical/chemical sphere. However, human beings seem also to have (and be told that they indeed do have) a phenomenal sphere that is not in the same metaphysical category as physical and chemical things—containing, rather, such as desires and moral sensibility. Physical objects have no sphere of activity other than the physical/chemical, nor do they seem to be concerned about such things.

Agentic living requires that we make peace with the givenness of embodiment, just as we must make peace with the passage of time, and the particular and individual characteristics, and even limitations, of embodiment and the facticity of the world. Embodiment provides as much in the form of affordances as it may in the form of constraints, and we believe, substantially more. Importantly, human agents can maximize those affordances. The view of sexuality we have developed here, as innately and fundamentally agentic, has implications for a wide variety of human activities, including diagnoses and therapies, relationships, and morality. It also has implications for our aspirations, our spirituality, and (perhaps most importantly) our understanding of what it means to be a human being as a gendered sexual being and a moral agent. Agency both reflects and consists in our very nature as the sort of beings we are. It must be remembered that agency as understood here is coexistent with the soul itself, and, as such, testifies to the ever-present possibility of doing and being otherwise.

None of our analysis of agentic sexuality should be taken to mean that changes in sexual behavior, identity, orientation, or other manifestations are easy. It is not easy. Indeed, sexuality as manifest in our agentic humanity as what we *do* is the work of a lifetime; thus, it is not easy to *undo* and *do* something else. To suggest that it is easy falls into the trap of assuming that agency is essentially libertarian free will, and that change of any sort is simply a matter of exercising one's will in a moment of radical choice. Thus, it is imperative to remember that agency as we have defined it and developed it here does *not* consist in the making of such "free choices." Generally, we cannot simply and immediately change sexually relevant phenomena, especially those with long, deeply embedded and personally meaningful histories, by making a single decision to do so. In fact, such attempts might very well produce frustration—as they would in most cases with other (nonsexual) aspects of life. In the end, the most important aspect of this analysis, and the positive news it conveys, is that even if substantive changes in sexually relevant (or any other) actions and meanings in our lives do not come by single grand decisions, that does not rule out the possibility that such changes do, in fact, come. How can such changes come? By doing differently in "taking up the world" or "putting it off," and "giving oneself over to" or "holding oneself back" in regard to any number of alternative ideas, feelings, actions, and possibilities. There is almost never any grand single exercise of effort through which we are able transform ourselves experientially regarding significant things about ourselves. Rather, it is usually the case that there are dozens, or hundreds, or perhaps even thousands of small agentic acts—thoughts, feelings, and actions—through which such doing becomes being. The account we offer here is, we believe, a fundamentally hopeful (and hope-filled) account of agency and sexuality.

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