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Sexuality, Authenticity, and Modernity

Leslie Green

1. Borrowed Truths

In his *Journals* for 26 December 1921, André Gide wrote:

The borrowed truths are the ones to which one clings most tenaciously, and all the more so since they remain foreign to our intimate self. It takes much more precaution to deliver one's own message, much more boldness and prudence, than to sign up with and add one's voice to an already existing party I believed that it is above all to oneself that it is important to remain faithful.¹

This celebration of fidelity to oneself gives voice to a central theme of modern consciousness: the search for authenticity. The idea that there is an 'intimate self' whose needs cannot be fulfilled by following 'borrowed truths' is a familiar modern notion and one that contrasts sharply with traditional outlooks. In many pre-modern societies value was believed to be less responsive to the individual: gods, natures, or history were the sort of things that inscribed value on states of affairs, and thus on our lives. Living well was not, therefore, a matter of being true to ourselves, but being true to our creators, natures, or traditions. Moral truths were precisely those things that were borrowed; that was what *made* them true.

That traditional world-view is not very popular now. Epistemological, moral, and political criticisms have done much to undermine it. Modern thinkers² ask how we can claim to know such truths. Our knowledge of the requirements of the gods, or of human nature, or even of tradition doesn't seem very secure; if that is what gives value to our lives then we seem to be doomed never to know what makes life worth living. The moral criticism is different. It asks how such external requirements could make our lives better. Lives have to be led from the 'inside', so the relevant sorts of reasons are those which are connected, at least indirectly, with the beliefs and desires we actually hold. And related to this is a political line of criticism. The reputed content of borrowed truths has been dominated by the powerful, and has excluded the marginal. Perhaps religions and what are sometimes called 'traditional'³ family values made some people's lives more meaningful; but they also ruined many others, and in fairly predictable ways. The publicly available and authoritatively endorsed standards of meaning in our culture have not served

1. André Gide, *Journals* ii 282; as cited in Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) at 39.

2. The ideas of 'modernity' and 'modern thought' are, of course, unavoidably controversial. For one influential account see Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982). And, although I cannot defend the claim here, it seems to me that the idea of 'post-modern' thought is simply a misnomer. In one version it is but a retreat to a pre-modern irrationalism, in another it is a highly sceptical version of modernism itself.

3. For evidence that, in the American context at least, memories of traditional family life are mostly mythical, see Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Viking Books, 1992).

everyone well. Indigenous peoples in North America have not been helped by the public conceptions of property that the majority share. Women have not been helped by the popular notions of justice. Sexual minorities have not been helped by the public notions of the family. It is in and around these margins of the polity that people have been readiest to grasp the promise of modernity—that a valuable and authentic life can somehow be constructed from within—not because they are narcissistic, but because public meanings have already failed them.

Modern thinkers tend therefore to be critical of borrowed truths, and insist that each individual (and, in some versions, each group) should pursue a path that is authentically his or her own. This is a mixed blessing. It is exhilarating to be freed from external constraints; but it is also dizzying. In Hannah Arendt's image, we find ourselves thinking 'without bannisters'. This tests our sense of balance, but it doesn't always make the ascent easier. So it is not surprising that in these *fin de siècle* days we find a recrudescence of the hopes and fears that came at the end of the last century.⁴ In moral and political theory this is increasingly expressed in a renewed hankering after bannisters. Just when it seemed that gods had died, communities had been atomized, and traditions exhausted, new signs of life are being detected. Whether they can contribute much to our understanding of the modern predicament depends on whether the epistemological, moral and political criticisms can be met.

In this paper, I want to consider the way some of these problems arise around the issue of sexuality. The so-called sexual revolution is a creature of modernity, as is the distinctive notion that there is an inner truth about sexuality.⁵ The example is important, not merely because it considers an issue that is too rarely discussed by mainstream philosophy, but because around sexuality the notions of authenticity, being true to oneself, defining one's life with or against traditional meanings, are all right at the surface.

Should we press on with the project of modernity, or go back to pre-modern traditions of argument? But going back would be to abandon the modern ideal of authenticity, of leading one's own life, and that may simply be too late for us. What we need instead, Charles Taylor argues in his Massey Lectures⁶, is to retrieve the ideal, to rescue it from its corrupt and corrupting forms. We need to see if we can respect the ideal while rejecting crude forms of relativism, subjectivism, and egoism—hallmarks of what Christopher Lasch called a narcissistic culture. While much of modern thought would endorse Gide's view that we should first strive to be true to ourselves rather than conform to some external standards, Taylor argues that true authenticity depends on leading a life of significance, and that standards of significance must always be external to the agent and grounded in 'horizons' of meaning. And this has profound consequences for the terms on which sexual minorities may demand respect and recognition.

4. For some astonishing parallels in the case of sexuality, see Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

5. For some roots of this, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (3 vols.) (New York: Vintage Books, 1978-86).

6. Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ont.: Anansi Press, 1991). Published in the U.S. as *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Page references to this work are included parenthetically in the text.

2. The Significance of Difference

The first step, on Taylor's view, is to see how authenticity is bound up with a certain notion of 'significance', of doing and being something that counts. And significance is a public matter; there are no private meanings. So Taylor rejects certain subjectivist, relativist-inclined, theories: 'as though people could determine what is significant, either by decision, or perhaps unwittingly and unwillingly by just feeling that way' (36). This, he thinks, is a delusion. 'Your feeling a certain way can never be sufficient grounds for respecting your position, because your feeling can't *determine* what is significant' (37). Significance has to do with meaning, and meaning, for lots of well-rehearsed reasons, is a public and not a private matter.

Some philosophers have expressed scepticism about the whole idea that there is anything that *determines* significance; they think meanings are underdetermined by things. Perhaps that is not relevant, for the sense of 'significance' in play is not a purely semantic one, but is related to the idea of 'meaning' as worth that we invoke in phrases like 'the meaning of life'. In any case, we do not need to pursue that here. It will be enough to explore the ways in which Taylor thinks the case for a significant and authentic life may, and may not, be made out.

Taylor objects to a certain, he thinks self-defeating, line of argument about sexual orientation:

there is a certain discourse of justification of non-standard sexual orientations. People want to argue that heterosexual monogamy is not the only way to achieve sexual fulfilment, that those who are inclined to homosexual relations, for instance, shouldn't feel themselves embarked on a lesser, less worthy path. (37)

But, continues Taylor, at least 'in some forms this discourse slides towards an affirmation of choice itself. All options are equally worthy, because they are freely chosen, and it is choice that confers worth' (37). But this form of subjectivism or 'soft relativism' as he also calls it, ends up being self-defeating.

But then the choice of sexual orientation loses any special significance. It is on a level with any other preferences, like that for taller or shorter sexual partners, or blonds or brunettes. No one would dream of making discriminating judgements about these preferences, but that's because they are all without importance. They really do just depend on how you feel. Once sexual orientation comes to be assimilated to these, which is what happens when one makes *choice* the crucial justifying reason, the original goal, which was to assert the *equal value* of this orientation, is subtly frustrated. Difference so asserted becomes *insignificant*. (38)

And that's what happens to those moderns whose world view 'implicitly denies the existence of a pre-existing horizon of significance...' (38). This denial sets in motion the degeneration of the ideal of authenticity. The notion of being true to oneself becomes shallow, trivial, meaningless. And if difference becomes in this way insignificant, it can hardly demand the kind of respect that minorities claim on its behalf. A politics of identity, as it is sometimes called, would be empty. To seek justice for those identified by such difference would be to celebrate nothing

more substantial than minority tastes; it would be to grant 'special rights' as the proponents of anti-gay referenda in Oregon, Colorado, and Idaho warned. To seek recognition of such difference would surely be wrong-headed.⁷ But then sexual minorities find themselves in a polemically difficult position. A modern, choice-based view of authenticity fails, and the 'pre-existing horizons of significance' have provided inadequate space for them. Looking inward is self-defeating, but looking outward is oppressive. They have nowhere to turn.

That is why Taylor's is an important argument. His attempt to refute a choice-based conception of authenticity, and his demand that people articulate identities against pre-existing horizons of significance on the pain of incoherence is alarming for the way it represents one familiar defense of the way gay people lead their lives, for the way it seeks to undermine it, and for the alternative it offers. If a modern understanding of authenticity in our sexual lives is not merely unattractive or dizzying, but *self-defeating*, then it just cannot be maintained. No sense of the heroic or tragic is going to sustain us in that. But Taylor's argument is not valid, and its misprision of the issues around sexuality raises more general doubts about his program for retrieval.

3. Sexual Orientations and Life Choices

Arguing about 'authenticity', 'modernity' and 'recognition' as abstract, unsituated terms is rarely fruitful, so let us begin by considering closely Taylor's discussion of a more concrete problem, what he calls the 'justification of non-standard sexual orientations.' This is a difficult notion. I am not just pointing to the import of the presumptions that there is such a thing as a 'standard' orientation (guess which one), or that 'non-standard' orientations need to be justified. Those are unfriendly thoughts. My deeper worry, however, rests with the whole idea of justifying sexual orientations *at all*, and with the relationship between that idea and questions about how to achieve sexual fulfilment or to lead a worthwhile life.

Are sexual orientations *candidates* for 'justification'? If I were asked to justify my sexual orientation, my reaction would be not merely indignation at the presumption of someone who felt entitled to ask such things of me. It would be bafflement. Could I justify my blood-group? My family environment? My place of birth? What sort of considerations would I be expected to adduce? I might express contentment or anxiety about any of those things, and I might give reasons for those attitudes. So it is with sexual orientation. I might discuss the social consequences of having one orientation or another, or speculate on whether or not it pleases the gods. I might decide how to go about living given my orientation. But none of this amounts to anything that can be called a *justification* of my orientation.

People can offer justifications only in certain circumstances: when the state of affairs in question is a product of, or at least responsive to, human action and

7. It is important to note that Taylor is himself sympathetic so some forms of a politics of recognition. See C. Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* with commentary by A. Gutmann, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

decision. That is no doubt why Taylor also talks about justifying one's 'choice of sexual orientation' (38). Now this makes more sense, provided that orientations are the kinds of things that are chosen. The etiology of sexual orientation is a matter of great dispute. But there is no evidence to show that orientations are chosen.⁸ Nature is not chosen; nurture is not chosen; and although freely chosen actions can sometimes reinforce or repress one's orientation, none of that amounts to anything one could properly call 'choosing a sexual orientation'. Those who talk about 'choice' in the context of sexuality do not deny this at all; they merely focus on those aspects of our sexuality that are partly within the realm of individual control, for example, one's behaviour, social role, and, to a lesser extent, sense of identity. Sexual orientation is anterior to and deeper than all of that. Celibate gay priests are still gay; straight-acting gay men are still gay; and straight-identified men whose predominant erotic interest is in men are still gay. Sexual orientation is a matter of things like one's sexual arousal cues and fantasies, one's primary sources of sexual pleasure and, above all, one's capacity for erotic love. These form the unchosen background to one's erotic life. They are objects neither of choice nor of justification.

What is chosen, let us therefore say, is one's life-path. That is, after all, strongly suggested when Taylor puts the question whether 'heterosexual monogamy' is the 'only way to achieve sexual fulfilment' and (perhaps consequently) whether 'those who are inclined to homosexual relations ... shouldn't feel themselves embarked on a lesser, less worthy path.' Now, there is no plausible case to be made that heterosexual monogamy is the only way to sexual fulfilment (though there has been endless literary and scientific speculation about whether it is *compatible* with sexual fulfilment for anyone). On a charitable reading, then, the issue must be this: what is it, for a person of a given sexual orientation, that makes his or her choices of behaviour, social role, and personal identity worthy ones? And what makes them authentically his or her own?

Admittedly, Taylor's contrast between 'heterosexual monogamy' and 'homosexual relations' is obscure. It is not clear whether the latter term is a embarrassed euphemism for 'gay sex' or rather a general notion embracing different lifestyles within which a homosexual orientation may find its expression: for instance, homosexual monogamy, homosexual non-monogamy, or heterosexual non-monogamy—as opposed to heterosexual monogamy or celibacy. (It is hard to avoid the impression that the sloppiness of formulation has a rhetorical function, namely, to associate heterosexuality with monogamy and homosexuality with promiscuity.) So just what is the path that some judge less worthy? In homophobic societies like our own, it is surely *any* of the lives in which gay people act on or even acknowledge their inclinations. Thus, the question is what choices should people of a given orientation make about their lives, and what conditions are necessary in order for

8. An entry into the literature might begin with Alan P. Bell, Martin S. Weinberg, and Sue Kiefer Hammersmith, *Sexual Preference: Its Development in Men and Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); Michael Ruse, *Homosexuality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981); and John C. Gonsiorek & James D. Weinrich, eds, *Homosexuality: Research Implications for Public Policy* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991).

those choices to merit respect, at least to the extent that in our public life we would recognize them as no less worthy than others, and that in our private lives we would acknowledge them as being authentic.

When comparing such fundamental and wide-ranging life-choices, how would we know whether one path is less worthy than another? That is a hard question. But Taylor has made the interlocutor's case unfairly difficult. For the interlocutor is trying to argue only that, for example, gay people's giving expression to their desires is *not* a less worthy path than something called 'heterosexual monogamy'. Polemically, that is an important denial, one that is popularly debated. For gay people are often told that their life-paths *are* less worthy than those of others, because, for example, they are unnatural, immoral, or imprudent, dooming them to promiscuity, narcissism, unhappiness, etc. And one's life-path is something that one can reasonably be called on to justify, at least to the extent that it is within one's control. People are called on to justify their paths in a variety of circumstances: when we think they are harmful to others, when we think they betray the potential of the agent leading them, when we think they outrage community values, and so on.

In response, perhaps, to such requests, Taylor imagines his interlocutor trying to defend himself. His path is not less worthy, he says, because it is freely chosen and is thus authentically his own. Now, Taylor sees this, in at least some of its versions, as 'sliding towards' the claim that 'All options are equally worthy, because they are freely chosen, and it is choice that confers worth' (37). We are not given much more of the details of the argument; Taylor's encounter with it is a hit-and-run affair—we have to infer the nature of the collision from the apparent remains. Whatever is said is supposed both to deny any 'pre-existing horizon of significance' and to emphasize the role of choice. So exactly what argument is being imputed here? How does the reference to choice end up being self-defeating?

Consider an analogy. Women sometimes defend the right to choose an abortion on the ground that a free choice, here, is extremely important. But no one—certainly not pro-choice women—takes that argument to mean that whatever is chosen is right. That defense would not assist them, for to appeal to a general propriety of doing whatever one likes will embrace also the contradictory likings of those who oppose abortion. Their argument, however, is clearly intended to exclude those people's choices, and to secure for women a measure of self-determination *even against* the contrary choices of others. Choice therefore figures in a more complex way. It is, in fact, a compressed but comprehensible reference to the ideal of self-determination.

For analogous reasons, that is how we must construe the argument about sexual authenticity. Note that my claim is not simply that Taylor has been unsympathetic to a choice-based view; rather I say that he has not identified the issue correctly. The modern view is that free choice is important because it allows people to be self-determining, to attend to the needs of what Gide called the 'intimate self'. Choice is celebrated by gay people because it permits them to be true to themselves rather than attempt to conform to borrowed truths. This neither presupposes, entails, nor even 'slides towards' the scarcely intelligible idea that all choices are equally worthy. Indeed, it endorses only authenticity-respecting choices as worthy. It

condemns, not lack of sexual fulfilment, but dishonesty, self-deception, and the cowardice of clinging to borrowed truths.

It is true that, on this view, sexual orientation is itself simply a matter of having certain feelings and authenticity a matter of living in harmony with those feelings.⁹ That too provokes an objection from Taylor: 'as though people could determine what is significant, either by decision, or perhaps unwittingly and unwillingly by just feeling that way' (36). But there is a world of difference between 'decision' and 'feeling'. Decisions are made for reasons, and one possible reason for making a decision is that it accords with one's feelings. So the correct reading of the choice-based view of sexual authenticity is this: 'My path is my own. I have chosen it freely, and I am content with it because and to the extent that it accords with my own inclinations. By choosing this path, I am being true to myself.' That argument, compressed and incomplete though it is, is at least intelligible. Choice is celebrated, not for its own sake, but for its capacity to attend to the needs of the intimate self. Respect for people's choices thus expresses respect for the lives they have made.

Something like this must be the right way to understand the issue, because Taylor wants to argue that a choice-based defense of sexual authenticity is *self-defeating*. Now, 'self-defeating' does not mean 'unintelligible'; it means that the argument undermines its own point. And that is the case he brings: he says that respect for sexual minorities can't be grounded in choice because to do so would fail in its aim, namely, to show that there is some special significance to these choices. Why exactly is this self-defeating? Because now 'the choice of sexual orientation loses any special significance'; it's no different than a preference for blonds over brunettes. And with respect to these, 'No one would dream of making discriminating judgements ... but that's because they are all without importance. They really do just depend on how you feel' (38). So, by playing up the valorizing power of free choice, sexual orientation gets assimilated to the insignificant and 'the original goal, which was to assert the *equal value* of this orientation, is subtly frustrated.'

This argument is very subtle indeed. For somehow it manages not merely to establish the thesis, but also to change it in the process. The interlocutor started out defending himself against heterosexists, trying to show that his path in life is authentically his own and in that way is *not less worthy* than theirs; but he is now charged with having failed to prove it *of equal value*. This may just be laxity in exposition, but it is significant laxity. There is good reason to think that neither this argument nor any other is going to establish that gay and straight life-paths are of equal value.

Let me explain. To show that two items are of equal value, one must be able to compare them on a common scale. That is often hard to do, particularly with respect to complex things such as life-paths. Life-paths are combinations of elements that define personal and social relations in quite different ways. Consider,

9. I am not, of course, claiming that the only way to live in harmony with one's feelings is to act on them. There may, for instance, be some celibate gay priests who have made authentic life-choices. They would be cloistered, so to speak, without being closeted. And the same would apply to some cross-orientation relationships: see, e.g., Catherine Whitney, *Uncanny Lives: Gay Men and Straight Women* (New York: New American Library, 1990).

for example, gay and straight notions of kinship.¹⁰ Many straight people acknowledge a sharp distinction between family and friends. The core of the straight family is biological, and to it is joined those legally bound by marriage. Friends, however committed and lasting, are thus not family. Gay people (at least in urban North America) do not live this distinction. Biological families often reject their gay children, so mere genetic commonality is not sufficient for kinship. Gay people are refused legally recognized relationships, so those are not necessary. Instead, gay people have what are sometimes called 'families of choice': committed networks of people bound by shared experiences and acknowledging important mutual obligations of support. Now, in seeking to compare and evaluate *just this one aspect* of two life-paths—the sort of family structures one has—one engages an impossible task. How can one say whether life in a gay family or life in a straight family is better? How could one prove them of equal value? Just this one incommensurability suggests that our interlocutor won't be able to show that overall gay and straight life-paths are of equal value. How much less likely still is it that there could be any intelligent overall comparison of gay and straight *lives*, differing not only in kinship structures, but in also in attitudes to sexuality, in the sense of personal identity, and, of course, in social and civil status?

Fortunately, one does not need to show that in order to establish that gays are not embarked on a less worthy path. For A is no less worthy than B if *either* A is better than B, A is of equal value to B, or if *A is valuable though incommensurably different from B*. So now we need to know only whether having chosen a life-path can ever valorize it, irrespective of any comparison between it and someone else's life-path. Modern believers in authenticity think that it can, precisely when it matches the needs of the intimate self: so the relevant comparison is not between gay and straight lives, but, for instance, between the kinds of lives open to a particular person—and even here incommensurabilities will be rife. Respect for difference requires, not some net, overall comparison of lives, but just the confidence that each type of life-path is in itself valuable.

4. Options, Issues, and Feelings

So it comes down to this: is choosing to live in harmony with one's deepest inclinations about love something that can valorize that choice and make it a worthy life-path? Perhaps one might reply that if a decision to follow one path rather than another just comes down to inclination, then the matter in question is unimportant. A Kantian, for example, would deny that the shifting, empirical, province of inclination could ever become the kingdom of unshakeable, categorical, moral value. But here, we are primarily concerned with authenticity and non-moral worth, and Taylor's argument is in any case independent of such Kantian premises. His point is simply that, on a choice-emphasizing view, sexual orientation comes off the high-tension wires of significance and is put back down on the ground along with other

10. See Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

preferences in sexual partners such as height or hair-colour, etc. Sexuality becomes a matter of trivial difference, and certainly not the locus of urgent, respect-worthy claims. Sexuality in itself is just meaningless.

If that follows, why does it matter?¹¹ After all, the *interlocutor* does not want sexuality up on the high-tension wire of cosmic significance. He will be content if his object-choice is regarded as no worse than other people's object-choices: they prefer blondes; he prefers blonds.¹² Something has thus gone wrong with this attempt at *reductio*. Remember where we begin: with gay people being challenged to defend their lives, a challenge that notoriously comes in the context of widespread hatred and discrimination. When they say that their life-paths are no less worthy because they authentically accord with their inclinations, Taylor replies that that merely puts it on a par with choice of hair-colour. *But that is an advance*. Gender of object-choice is *not* now treated on a par with hair-colour; it is treated much worse. No one asks those who prefer blondes to justify their life-paths; no one fires them for loving blondes; no jurisdiction refuses to recognize their relationships with blondes, etc. And if social and institutionalized blondphobia did emerge, why would it be a self-defeating argument to point out that those who prefer blonds are merely choosing in accord with their inclinations?

On Taylor's argument it would be self-defeating because it would not attribute the right sort of significance to the choice. Mere inclination undercuts the possibility of the 'discriminating judgements' that we want to make about sexual orientations—such judgements have no place when we are discussing something that really does have no importance beyond 'how you feel'. There is truth in this. Some choices do seem relatively trivial to us: what to have for lunch, which shoe to put on first, etc. Others seem important: how to vote, how to find love, what work to do. Our moral sentiments are most often engaged over the second kind. Because they are both equally choices, there must be something beyond choice itself that accounts for the significance of the second set. As I argued above, however, all this is conceded by the interlocutor: choice commands respect, because it allows for authentic lives, it gives people the power to be themselves.

Moreover, it is important to take a critical attitude towards the whole idea of making 'discriminating judgements'. Modernity has undercut some of these judgements as illusory and baseless. The modern believes that the world is not as chock-full of significance as his opponent thinks. Can it be denied that this is sometimes an advance? People used to ask, 'Does the size and power of the eagle mean that it is the king of birds?' No one asks that now. But some people do still ask, 'Does the rise of AIDS mean that the gods will punish those who break their rules?' Moderns just think those questions are silly (though perhaps dangerous): eagles

11. Skinner remarks of Taylor's philosophy in general that 'what Taylor fears above all is loss of meaning, a fear he appears to experience almost as a phobia.' Q. Skinner, "Who are 'We'? Ambiguities of the Modern Self" (1991) 34 *Inquiry* 133 at 142.

12. The hair colour example is an interesting one. If a man in our society were gender-indifferent but blond(e)-exclusive in his object choice, he would be classified as a bisexual man who only has sex with blond(e)s. We have no name for blond(e)-sexuals, but not because that sexual orientation does not exist. We do not name it because we do not care about it; our cultural anxieties about sexuality focus on gender almost to the exclusion of anything else.

and viruses don't mean *anything*. Likewise, they do not ask, 'What is the meaning of the gender of one's object-choice?' These things don't have any significance at all, and much illusion and misery rests on the false supposition that they do. As Gayle Rubin has wisely remarked, in our society 'sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance'.¹³

But perhaps a different, more political, point is at also stake here. For the debate around sexuality has not just been about personal worth and public recognition, but also—even in the most liberal of countries—about liberty, equality, and justice. While some forward-thinking intellectuals are already limning the post-modern, post-liberal society, gay people throughout much of the "liberal" world still suffer feudal conditions. Liberalism has not yet arrived for people who stand to be imprisoned for offending ancient taboos, who are denied the power to marry, and who are untouchables in a caste system of heterosexual privilege. If sexuality really is meaningless, if it is rooted in nothing grander than fitting lives to inclinations, then why should there be such an *issue* around it? We protect, in our social and legal practices, political views and associations, not because it doesn't matter what people choose, or because opinions are ineffectual or unimportant, but because it does matter and they are important. Is sexuality is nothing more than inclination and choice, then perhaps it does not deserve to be in the same category as freedom of expression, association, etc. It is more like the choice between flavours of ice-cream. Perhaps "gay rights" is just the slogan of a special-interest, life-style group who have no better claim to our attention than do coffee-drinkers or pet-owners.

But this political version of the argument also fails, for it relies on a mistaken premise about the way the significance of options is relevant to the permissibility regulating choice among them and attaching social disadvantage to them. It would be intolerable if society were given boundless freedom to interfere in the trivia of life. Of course it is wrong of a government to prohibit the expression of communist views in part because people's views are important to them as individuals and our political life is important to us as a community. And of course the choice whether to tie my left shoe-lace before the right is unimportant. But a government that punished those who tie their left lace first, or allowed them to be subject to private discrimination and abuse, would nonetheless be invading personal liberty. And the reason is not simply that a government that regulates shoe-laces is likely to regulate more significant things, too. It is that pointless interference with personal liberty is wrong and that liberty includes the freedom to choose in line with our inclinations, at least where doing so harms no one.

To appeal to the argument that choosing one's own path is more noble or courageous, as Gide calls it, is indeed to look beyond the individual will, to appeal to standards of nobility or courage. Taylor's position is that such standards get no grip unless one's choice is grounded in something more than feeling:

[U]nless some options are more significant than others, the very idea of self-choice falls into triviality and hence incoherence. Self-choice as an ideal makes sense only

13. As cited in, Shane Phalen, *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) at 123.

because some *issues* are more significant than others. (39)

But the difficulty with that suggestion is that the second formulation is correct, the first is not, and the pair pivots on an equivocation between 'options' and 'issues'. *Options* are the items up for choice, the things for which one opts. *Issues*, on the other hand, are the kinds of concerns into which the options fall. So, homosexual monogamy is one option a gay man might choose when considering the issue of his life-path.

In the dispute about sexual authenticity, are we talking about options or issues? Plainly, it is options: people are expected to produce arguments to show that the options they have chosen are no less worthy. The issues are not chosen. So there are two different questions: What makes an issue significant? What makes an option valuable? One option does not need to be more significant than another for it to be more valuable (meaning is in an odd index of value). What Taylor evidently has in mind is that the *issue* must be a significant one: one can't take much pride in a self-made life if the only issue one grapples with is what to have for lunch. But the reason that is so is not that a tuna sandwich is no more meaningful than a hamburger, nor that this is the province of brute tastes. It is because the issue—what should I have for lunch?—is trivial; it (normally) engages no important human concerns. In contrast, sexuality matters, not because our sexual orientations involve more than feelings, but because we are embodied creatures, sexual animals with a capacity and need for erotic love. That has nothing to do with the putative significance of the options we may have. To see this, compare our views about interracial marriage. We don't need to prove that there is some special significance to a homoracial as opposed to heteroracial marriage choice in order to think that such choices merit respect and recognition. We need only show that marriage is important. Having established that, we would not go further and ask someone who had decided to pursue a life including a heteroracial marriage to account for the special significance or value of heteroraciality on pain of being silenced or oppressed. Likewise, we do not need to prove there is some special significance to homosexual as opposed to heterosexual partner choice in order to establish the centrality of our sexualities and the importance of authentic choices in expressing them.

Distinguishing in this way between life issues and options is crucial to a clear view of what is at stake. The more significant an issue, the more demanding we are in our normative attitudes towards it. In particular, in public life we tend to be more concerned about the ways in which we respond to the choices people make about important issues than about trivial ones. But even here, there is no tight correlation between the significance of an issue and (say) the permissibility of regulating choice of options with respect to it. As I argued above, it would be quite wrong for a society to regulate the trivial matters of life. It would be wrong to regulate shoe-lace tying pointlessly. Suppose, however, that tying one's left lace first made one more susceptible to chronic back-pain. We might then be more willing to endorse paternalistic regulation here, precisely because shoe-lace-tying is not part of any important form of life; the paternalism would not be an indignity. In contrast, there are other choices we would wish to protect even against paternalistic

interference, because the issues in which they are embedded are so important. We would not prohibit inter-racial marriages even if those marriages made the partners more likely targets of abuse. Human sexuality, like choice of marriage partners, is indisputably part of forms of life that are important to people, and it is that rather than the character of the options that engages our attention.

There is thus an unhappy similarity between Taylor's confusion of options and issues and the mistake made by the US Supreme Court in *Bowers v. Hardwick*. The majority upheld Georgia's criminal prohibitions on gay sexuality on the ground that there is no 'fundamental right to engage in homosexual sodomy.' The majority agreed that, quite apart from the long pedigree of legal homophobia, there is no mention of the option of homosexuality in the Constitution, and no good reason to expect one. But as Blackmun J. properly observed in his dissenting judgment, all that is irrelevant: "The case is no more about a "fundamental right to engage in homosexual sodomy", as the court purports to declare, than *Stanley v. Georgia* was about a fundamental right to watch obscene movies, or *Katz v. United States* was about a fundamental right to place interstate bets from a telephone booth. Rather, this case is about "the most comprehensive of rights and the right of most civilized men", namely, "the right to be let alone". *Olmstead v. United States*."¹⁴ As a constitutional matter, Michael Hardwick did not have to establish that the option he had chosen in his intimate life was important—indeed, from the law's point of view the option itself is insignificant. He had merely to establish that the issue of sexual intimacy deserved protection.¹⁵ Likewise, to root authenticity in choice one does not have to prove that the options people choose are meaningful, but that they are exercising their powers in important areas.

If we concede, as I have argued, that a homosexual or heterosexual life path is in itself meaningless, and if sexual orientation really is just a matter of feelings, then what is to become of the 'discriminating judgements'—judgements of value and worth—that some people want to make about sexuality? Some of these judgements we must retain: because authenticity is not the only value in life, we will also need an aesthetics and ethics of sexuality. Many other judgements, however, we should not seek to ground but to abolish. Some 'discriminating judgements' are made by those who plan to discriminate against those whose judgements ignore what they hold to be the external horizons of significance. To show that sexual orientation is an area in which it is appropriate to act according to inclination, according to how one 'just feels', is in this context sufficient to establish that a life path significantly influenced by that consideration is one that is no less worthy. Moreover, it is no less worthy in *precisely* the way that a search for tall or dark partners is no less worthy than a search for short or fair ones. And to someone who had the audacity to demand that one justify such a path one might plausibly reply: 'I've chosen it because it accords with my inclinations, so it's no less worthy than

14. 478 U.S. 186 (1986).

15. And, of course, that his choices did not offend other constitutional values; but that was not at issue here. The fact that our sexual choices must respect the rights of others does not show that choice is irrelevant to their value for us. It shows that authenticity, being true to oneself, is not the only thing at stake in sexuality.

yours which accords with your inclinations. It allows me to be myself, to pursue my own good in my own way, to be authentic.'

We should therefore take Gayle Rubin's advice and purge sexuality of its surplus significance; we should not make the discriminating judgements that many insist on. Is it better to be gay or straight? The question is to be refused, not answered. Is it better for gay people to follow gay or straight life-paths? Is it better to respect or degrade sexual minorities? These questions can be discussed. If we came to see sexualities in precisely the way Taylor derides, as matters of brute taste and devoid of deeper significance, would we not be better and more humane people? After all, if there were widespread discrimination, violence, and hatred of those who prefer blondes, it should be a matter of grave concern, even though preferring blondes is, as Taylor says, just a matter of taste. Indeed, we might even think it worse precisely *because* people were getting worked up over, and causing so much human misery over, nothing at all. So to show that the discrimination, violence and hatred that gay people suffer matters, and is wrong, one does *not* need the premise that choice of life-path is *significant* in some cosmic sense.

5. Values and Horizons

At the core of Taylor's doctrine there lies an important and correct thesis: we can appraise choices as better or worse only when they are made on grounds, which grounds must reach beyond choice itself. But no one said that the gay interlocutor in this argument has no grounds. The grounds are obvious: such choices accord with his inclinations. Is it good to serve one's deepest inclinations, or should one instead repress them? And when people are innocently pursuing such inclinations, how should a society respond? Things can be said about this. Instead, Taylor writes:

Asserting the value of a homosexual orientation has to be done differently, more empirically, one might say, taking into account the actual nature of homo- and heterosexual experience and life. It can't just be assumed a priori, on the grounds that anything we choose is all right. (38)

There are two misguided ideas here. First, we have again the notion that sexual orientations have values and must be defended. Second, the role of choice is again misidentified. No one says that 'anything we choose is all right', for that would commit the interlocutor to endorsing a life of vindictive homophobia provided it is freely chosen. Indeed, the argument Taylor recounts and seeks to refute is inconsistent with the assumption that anything chosen is all right. The person whose deep preference is for blondes chooses *badly* when he chooses a brunette. In Gide's terms, it is *wrong* to follow 'borrowed truths' instead of the needs of the intimate self. Maybe that is an unattractive view—maybe it is too self-centred, or maybe, as some sceptics think, there is no self to centre it. But whatever else it is, it is not self-defeating. What Taylor needs to show is that choosing with our inclinations is not enough to valorize *anything*, but that is hard to endorse. Sexualities are about the capacity for the bodily expression of love, and for that reason sex is precisely

the empire of inclination, emotion, and brute feelings. Perhaps nowhere else is it so risky to betray the intimate self in favour of borrowed truths.

I have already expressed my scepticism about the intelligibility of such gross comparisons as are suggested by Taylor's words 'the actual nature of homo- and heterosexual experience and life.' Often, these merely cover the distorted and biased judgements that circulate in a homophobic society. First, the idea that there is something called 'homosexual life' that we might evaluate on empirical grounds is but crude stereotyping. Second, such commonalities as exist among the diverse life experiences of gay people depend in part on how others treat them. Consider, for example, the epidemic of suicide amongst gay teenagers.¹⁶ That is, I suppose, part of the 'actual nature of homosexual experience and life'. But it establishes nothing about the value of a homosexual orientation, although it is tragically eloquent about the effects of the ridicule and hatred that gay youth suffer at the hands of heterosexual people, especially their parents and peers. What is astonishing in our homophobic societies is thus not that 'the actual nature of homo- and heterosexual experience and life' may differ; it is that in spite of these 'differences' many gay people still choose to live in harmony with their inclinations.

Thus, Taylor's argument in its most general form comes down to this:

- (1) nothing can be valorized just by the sheer fact that it is freely chosen
- (2) so if an option has value for the agent it must be in virtue of something about that option other than the fact that it is freely chosen
- (3) one feature of options is their relation to external horizons of significance, so
- (4) if an option has value for the agent it must be in virtue of its relation to an external horizon of significance.

The argument fails because (3) specifies a merely sufficient condition for value, while (4) infers a conclusion about its necessary conditions. There are lots of other features of options apart from their standing in relation to external horizons of significance, for example, the extent to which they accord with an agent's deepest inclinations. The central theoretical error thus lies in supposing that if the source of value must be external to the choice, it must also be external to the agent.

Perhaps if there are external horizons of significance they can valorize choices for at least some people. But modernity has done a lot to cloud these horizons. This is an important point; modernist criticism of such horizons is not purely metaphysical or epistemological. It may be true that a naturalistic world-view cannot make room for them and that a naturalistic science cannot get knowledge of them. That is part of our history. But there is another, more significant, part. Criticism of the external horizons has also been political. Marginalized groups have not found much stake in such standards and have found it difficult to control their definition. Certainly that is true of the examples Taylor offers:

Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs

16. For discussion of some of the literature, see John C. Gonsiorek, "The Empirical Basis for the Demise of the Illness Model of Homosexuality" in *Homosexuality: Research Implications for Public Policy*, supra note 8 at 133-34.

of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. (40-41)

The supposed demands of history, nature, society, the state, or God haven't been kind to gay people—or for that matter to women, or to the poor, or to people of colour. I'm not saying that this is inevitable; no doubt the possibilities of reconstruction vary from horizon to horizon. But it won't do simply to say that the appropriate relation to the horizons of meaning is not just deference but 'dialogue'. If that only means that we all begin building with the tools we have to hand, it is true but empty. If it means to capture something stronger for our existing traditions of argument, then it is to be rejected. There are horizons of meaning that sexual minorities should simply refuse, dialogues they should simply leave. As Taylor rightly says, meanings are not individual creations; they are public. But there is more, for in some cases they are not merely *socially* constructed; they are *authoritatively* constructed in ways that regulate and limit possible change. It seems to me quite pointless for gay Roman Catholics to keep hoping that the Pope will read John Boswell's books and be persuaded.¹⁷

Admittedly, Taylor's horizon-list is not a closed one. Maybe there is something else 'of this order' that would skyrocket sexual orientation into the realms of non-triviality. Maybe not. But most gay people would be happy to be allowed to choose according to their inclinations, to identify as it feels comfortable, in the knowledge that in doing so their life-path is no less worthy, and that they have staked out an authentic identity.

How, finally, do we gauge the promise of modernity? There is, Taylor says, not just *misere* but also *grandeur* and that latter can be captured if only we give proper deference to—or at least dialogue with—the preexisting horizons of significance. Those marginalized will, I hope, be forgiven if they feel that they have heard all this before. A theory that emphasises the need to articulate one's identity against standards set externally by nature, or tradition, or gods; one that thinks it appropriate and intelligible that people should justify their sexual orientations; one that discounts the role of inclination in value—these ideas all sound too familiar. Surely to proceed in this way is to give insufficient weight to the moral and political criticisms of the world view in which they once made sense.

A priori arguments in the realm of value are, as Taylor rightly suspects, not too profitable. It is more complicated than that. Value and choice are related in a complex way. But on any credible theory, choosing according to one's inclinations sometimes does serve value, for instance, by allowing one to stake out a life that is authentically one's own. And to remind others that the ground of one's choice is simply that it serves one's inclinations is politically potent, especially when they think the choices are poised miles overhead on high-tension wires. It helps to remind

17. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); and John Boswell, *Same-sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994).

them that there is no cosmic significance here, and that we are all of us just standing with both feet on the ground. Standing here, or, if that proves uncomfortable, over there. That unromantic idea captures one real achievement of modernity: the understanding that even in a disenchanted world it still is possible to lead a life that is both authentic and worthy of respect.