

# To Gay, or Not To Gay?

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**Abstract:** This work examines the structure of discourses on homosexuality, taking the nature-versus-nurture question as a case study, in order to display the incoherency that results from taking such questions for granted. This paper critically explores the alleged neutrality and objectivity of discourses on sexuality, and within this exploration, a breakdown of the categories of sexuality, sex, gender, and nature occurs. What is shown is that the breakdown of these categories renders the nature-versus-nurture Question itself quite questionable.

Ever since sexuality became an object of discourse, the issue of homosexuality has spurred a plethora of inquiry and debate. One of the main questions of this inquiry into “the homosexual,” the Question perhaps, is the following: is homosexuality the result of nature (“they” are born that way) or nurture (external factors make “them” that way)? Both across and within various disciplines (i.e. medicine, biology, psychology, sociology, philosophy, etc.), serious debate has ensued over which answer adequately represents “the homosexual.” However, rather than attempt to answer this question in either direction, what this essay intends to do is problematize the Question as a whole, by showing the flaws of its fundamental suppositions. The legitimacy of this Question relies on the intelligibility of its terms (homosexuality and nature) and the categories to which these terms refer, and so it is these very categories that this paper shall challenge. Furthermore, there are certain implicit assumptions that this Question presupposes whose obviousness and accuracy shall also be contested here. As this Question is put into question, alternative inquiries that serve to further problematize this Question’s coherency



shall be suggested and discussed. The Question (nature or nurture?) is ultimately unintelligible because it relies on a network of erroneous assumptions about the “nature” of sex, gender, sexuality, and nature.

The possibility of posing this Question at all rests on the obvious assumption that there are homosexuals, and that there are some people to whom this term appropriately refers, and some people to whom it does not. In other words, this Question assumes that some people are, properly speaking, homosexual, and others are not, and that the distinction between the two is unambiguous. As Michel Foucault notes in his work *The History of Sexuality*, the assumption here is that “the homosexual” exists as a sort of species and, that there is a singular nature to homosexuality that encloses a distinct and unified category.<sup>1</sup> In *Sexing the Body*, Anne Fausto-Sterling similarly notes that sexual identity is perceived as a transparent and fundamental reality such that each person is obviously either gay or not gay, and that these distinctions allow for no ambiguity or admixture.<sup>2</sup> To say that homosexuality is a species with a fundamental reality is to say that homosexuality itself signifies a discrete and stable category, a completely unequivocal category, with clear-cut boundaries that determine who does and does not fall under its title. However, if it is the case (as this paper will argue) that the category of homosexuality is neither stable nor discrete nor unequivocal, then it is likewise the case that it is wholly unintelligible to claim that someone is or is not homosexual.

Judith Butler argues for this instability and fragility of the category “homosexual” in her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” Butler notes the impossibility of locating the common element among all homosexuals that determines them to be homosexual. For example, it is impossible to determine whether it is a particular type of practice, desire, or identity that universally distinguishes the gay from the not-gay.<sup>3</sup> Fausto-Sterling likewise notes this lack of commonality when she mentions the various models of homosexuality that are posited within scientific discourse, which variously identify the homosexual on the basis of things

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction – Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978): 43.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000): 9.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sara Salih (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004): 124.

such as, “sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, self-identification, hetero/homo lifestyle,” and others.<sup>4</sup> Sexuality, according to Butler, defies categorical representation insofar as every attempt to categorize or represent (homo)sexuality in a universal manner will inevitably face contradiction because sexuality always surpasses and exceeds any presentation or definition of it.<sup>5</sup> It is impossible to posit any totalizing, unifying, monolithic definition for homosexuality (or any sexuality) because to do so would be to eradicate the nuanced complexities of the sexuality one is claiming to “merely” define.

What this means is that, for the wide range of people who identify (or are identified) as homosexual, there is no single factor or trait that they all share which can be posited as that specific thing which makes them “a homosexual.” It may be objected that there are generalizations that can be accurately made, and this is not denied here, but the point is that any such generalization hides the fact that it is only a generalization, one that does not hold for the entirety of the people it is alleged to represent. The category “homosexual” is thus necessarily incoherent insofar as every attempt to disclose it is doomed from the start by the utter lack of commonality across the multifarious persons whom it alleges to describe. This being the case, it is unintelligible to inquire into the source of the category (nature or nurture) when the category itself (homosexuals or homosexuality) remains (necessarily) unintelligible and indefinable.

The second explicit assumption within the Question regards the issue of “nature” in its relation to sexuality. To say that someone is born a homosexual or to say that it is possible to be homosexual by nature, assumes a certain neutrality to the category of “natural” as something that transcends the realm of human intervention, when in fact it is only through human discourse and intervention that the category of “nature” takes on significance. In order to challenge the Question’s intelligibility, the more pressing inquiry regarding sexuality is the following: How is the category of “nature” discursively constituted? This new question can highlight the fundamental flaw in taking the nature of “nature” for granted.

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<sup>4</sup> Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 131.



Scientific discourse claims to be purely neutral observation, but no theory is ever neutral because the nature that a scientific (medical, biological, psychological, etc.) theory claims to be merely observing and reporting on is constituted at the very moment that one observes and reports on it. It is not the case that scientists, in addressing inquiries such as the nature-versus-nurture Question, simply observe a preexisting truth about sexuality. Rather, “with the very act of measuring, scientists can change the social reality they set out to quantify,” and thus create the very truths about sexuality which they allege to merely describe.<sup>6</sup> It is one of the miraculous characteristics of science that it tends to find whatever it looks for, and this is because the nature that it looks for is constituted by social and political discourses as well as the epistemological conditions in which scientific research takes place.

As Thomas Kuhn explains in his famous work *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, scientific research always proceeds under a particular paradigm (i.e. biology, physics, chemistry, genetics, etc.), and this paradigm dictates what types of phenomena the world “naturally” contains and thus what types of results an experiment should yield (for example, if you are working under chemistry’s paradigm, your world is comprised of chemical elements and compounds, and your research should yield information that deals with chemical issues). This being the case, Kuhn asserts that no practice, “thus restricted to reporting a world fully known in advance can produce mere neutral and objective reports” on its subject matter.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, how a scientist interprets and reports their data is influenced by a number of factors, the data itself being only one factor among many. As one is trained to become a scientist, one is taught to see the world according to a particular scientific paradigm, and so different scientists will see the same “natural” phenomena in different ways, depending on how their education has taught them to see (and interpret) the world.<sup>8</sup> In addition to training under a paradigm, scientists are also influenced by their social and political beliefs and experiences such that “[w]hat a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his

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<sup>6</sup> Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962): 126.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see.”<sup>9</sup> It is for this reason that if a scientist truly believes that homosexuality is natural, then that scientist will almost certainly be able to produce “objective” evidence to support this claim, and a scientist arguing for the opposite will be able to find equally “objective” evidence to support their own claim.<sup>10</sup> Questioning the neutrality of the category of nature thus illustrates the fact that social and political transformations produce correlative transitions in scientific accounts of nature insofar as these scientific accounts are influenced by the scientists’ social, political, and scientific world-views.<sup>11</sup> The category of nature must be questioned in order to demonstrate the fact that it is an instable category, and that the science that claims to “merely” report on this category is actually producing that very category in the move that reports it.<sup>12</sup>

It is not, however, only these explicit suppositions in the Question which call for examination; there are also hidden assumptions at work here that need to be addressed. Insofar as the category of homosexuality is posited, the binary categorization of sex/gender is simultaneously posited. When the claim is made that person ‘Q’ is gay, two things are assumed about ‘Q’: first, that ‘Q’ is gender/sex A (and not B), and second, that ‘Q’ is attracted to persons who are also sex/gender A (and not B).<sup>13</sup> The question that is begged here is the following: how would the discourse on homosexuality be affected if sex/gender were not limited to only two possible options? The significance of this particular question for elucidating the incoherency of the Question is that it leads to the recognition that sex/gender are not limited to only two expressions. The troublesome claim implied in the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>10</sup> These comments are not meant to imply any sort of grand scientific conspiracy; two scientists looking at the same set of data can draw equally scientific and valid, yet contradictory conclusions about “nature” because scientists are influenced by both their “pure” observations and, more importantly, by the assumptions and expectations about nature that each scientist brings to the table when their research begins.

<sup>11</sup> Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that nothing “naturally” occurs or that there are no “natural” phenomena; the point is that what “nature” refers to is not necessarily these occurrences or phenomena.

<sup>13</sup> What this “attraction” means is intentionally left unclear, because as has been noted, the criteria for such a determination is lacking, so “attraction” here could mean any number of things (i.e. ‘Q’ is attracted to a certain type of anatomy, a certain orifice, a certain gender performance, a certain social identity, a certain fantasy, a certain sexual practice, etc.).



Question is the following: that there are, “naturally” speaking, only two possible genders/sexes (for without this claim, how can the notion of same-sex-attraction—homosexuality—be intelligible at all?).

In order to further problematize the Question, it is important to note that the appeal to nature employed as evidence for the naturalness of the binary sexual division (i.e. that “in nature” there is a clear and consistent binary distinction between men and women) does not hold up to scrutiny. The claim that there are truly, or naturally, only two sexes/genders is justified with reference to bodies. The logic runs: Bodies fit neatly into two boxes, so sex and gender must correspond one to each box. However, as Fausto-Sterling notes in her analysis of the intersexual (a person born with characteristics—physical, biological, hormonal, etc.—of both male and female physiology), bodies do not fit neatly into two boxes, and “nature” clearly suggests more than two possible sexes/genders.<sup>14</sup> The body of the intersexual displays the inconsistency of claiming that binary sex/gender divisions are “natural” because it shows a “natural” defiance to such claims. However, the binary divisions are still able to appear natural because all evidence of intersexuality is erased from view through surgical, hormonal, and behavioral “correction,” usually beginning immediately after birth.<sup>15</sup> It is only through this intervention and erasure that the male/female binary is able to appear natural. As Catharine MacKinnon notes in her work *Feminism Unmodified*, “Sex, in nature, is not a bipolarity; it is a continuum. In society it is made into a bipolarity,” through the intervention of mechanisms that correct and thus erase the anomaly that is the intersexual.<sup>16</sup> Some other means by which this bipolarity is naturalized shall be discussed below, but for now, suffice it to say that the appeal to “nature” here is flawed, for the naturally occurring phenomena (i.e. intersexuals) contradict the claim of a dichotomous sexual division. What is meant by “nature” is not these natural phenomena, but rather, a particular discursive production that is maintained by social, political, medical, and scientific discourses, practices, and interventions.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987): 44.

Because of the way that the issue of the intersexual is intimately linked to the issue of homosexuality, recognizing the intersexual as a challenge to binary sex/gender divisions exhibits another reason why the Question is unintelligible. Since human sexuality is conceived of in terms of bodies, and bodies are thought to always correspond to one of two sexes, then a body that doesn't fit either box A or box B will frustrate conceptions about sexuality at a fundamental level. As Fausto-Sterling points out, "If intersexuality [blurs] the distinction between male and female, then it [follows] that it [blurs] the line dividing hetero- from homosexual."<sup>17</sup> In other words, if the intersexual is neither an A nor a B, then neither the As nor the Bs are the same (or the opposite) sex as the intersexual, and so it is impossible for the intersexual to be homosexual (or heterosexual). Additionally, since the sex of the intersexual is unclear, it is impossible to determine its "naturally" corresponding gender. Thus, the intersexual displays the incoherency of the binary categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. In the same instance, the intersexual also reveals the unintelligibility of the nature-vs-nurture Question, insofar as it challenges both its explicit and implicit presuppositions (the stability of the category of homosexuality along with the naturalness of the category of "nature," and the incoherency of binary divisions of sex/gender).

The intersexual thus opens up the possibility of further problematizing the Question by investigating sexuality along new paths of inquiry that highlight the inconsistencies of sexual discourse discussed above. One such question was already mentioned: how would the discourse on sexuality be affected if there were more than two options for the sex/gender of a person? With the inability to universally determine all bodies unequivocally as either male or female demonstrated, another question calls to be posited: in order for an intersexual to be either hetero- or homosexual, what must the sex/gender of their partner be? This question is itself wholly unintelligible, because the determination of one's sexuality as homo- or hetero- utterly depends on sex/gender binaries, and without such binaries, the coherency of these categories disintegrates. To reiterate, this is to say that, since the current conceptions of homo- and hetero-sexuality depend on binary divisions of gender (hetero means the two partners have opposite sexes/genders, and homo means they have the same sex/gender), the intersexual, who is properly speaking

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<sup>17</sup> Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 72.



neither male nor female, cannot be accurately described as either homo- or heterosexual. Since neither of the binary categories (male or female) is either the same as, or opposite from, the sex/gender of the intersexual, it is logically impossible for the intersexual to be, or not to be.

By interrogating the difficulties in determining the sexuality of an intersexual, the aim is to display the inability to definitively determine the sexuality of any person, not just the intersexual person who blatantly defies the traditional sex/gender dichotomy. As Judith Butler explains, there is similarly no “proper” sex/gender for the “normal” bodies, and the appearance of a natural or proper sex/gender is only the effect of imitative practices; sexes/genders are performed according to given socio-political norms, and these performances produce the appearance of natural expressions.<sup>18</sup> As Butler puts it:

...gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth.<sup>19</sup>

Thus the presumed naturalness of binary divisions of sex/gender is an illusion that results from the repetition of behaviors that fit the binary model. We have already seen how the notion of bodily sexual difference as natural is maintained through intervention, and what Butler is pointing out here is that the correlative presumed natural division of gender is also reinforced by the expression, or performance, of this sex through gendered behavior, which in turn reinforces the belief in the natural division of the sexes. The behaviors typically associated with masculinity and femininity—alleged to correspond, naturally, to male and female bodies respectively—are learned behaviors, and as these behaviors are repeated again and again, they come to appear natural. However, the fact that these behaviors have to be learned and then continually repeated for an individual to clearly present as either male or female indicates that they are unnatural, for if these behaviors were natural, why would they have to be taught? Hence the question of

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<sup>18</sup> Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 130.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.



“which partner must one choose to be either hetero- or homo-?” could, and should, be asked of all persons, and should illustrate the same incoherency for every-body that this question demonstrated with respect to the intersexual. If there are no “proper” (i.e. natural) A’s or B’s with respect to sexed bodies or gendered behaviors, then the A and B distinction is unintelligible, and if this distinction is unintelligible, then the determinations of sexuality that rest on these distinctions (i.e. Q is gay if Q is an A and so is Q’s partner) are likewise unintelligible.

By putting the Question into question we have thus demonstrated a variety of ways in which it is problematic, insofar as it depends on discrete, stable, consistent categories of sexuality, sex, gender, and nature that are nowhere to be found. Acknowledging this point directs one to yet another inquiry that challenges the Question: how is heterosexuality naturalized and thus normalized? It is clear from the above analysis that heterosexuality cannot be merely natural, insofar as “naturalness” does not appropriately refer to any categories of sex, gender, or sexuality, for “nature” is a highly suspect term. For heterosexuality to be “natural,” nature would have to strictly provide two, and only two, opposite sexes (which it doesn’t), who are naturally predisposed to behave in ways that correspond to the conventional notion of heterosexual behaviors (which they aren’t). The problem thus remains: if heterosexuality is not “natural,” then the manner in which it maintains its status as the norm ought to be interrogated.

Foucault touches on this issue in his historical analysis of discourses on sexuality. As sex became an object of study within various discourses (i.e. medical, psychiatric, scientific, etc.), these discourses produced various techniques and apparatuses for determining the “truth” of sex and sexuality (i.e. the confession), and this followed the same order as the scientific production of “nature:” these discourses produced the very “truths” they claimed to uncover.<sup>20</sup> These “true” discourses on sex/sexuality produced the “truth” of sex by placing it, “under the rule of the normal and the pathological,” wherein heterosexuality was deemed the norm and homosexuality was exhaustively pathologized.<sup>21</sup> To question heterosexuality’s

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 56.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.



status as norm directs one to the recognition that all ideas about sexuality have a history, and analyzing the history of heterosexuality's normative role highlights the instability of the categories of both homo- and heterosexuality.

Judith Butler explains that heterosexuality can only claim its status as the norm with reference to the abnormality of homosexuality. These two terms imply each other. Heterosexuality is only able to assert its status as the normal, the natural, and the original, in relation to that which it claims is the abnormal, the unnatural, and the derivative. Butler explains that, "The origin requires its derivations in order to affirm itself as an origin, for origins only make sense to the extent that they are differentiated from that which they produce as derivative."<sup>22</sup> In order for heterosexuality to claim normality, there must already exist an alternative sexuality from which heterosexuality can differentiate itself. As such, if one of the terms is unintelligible, the other one is likewise bound up in the same unintelligibility because the two terms, homo- and hetero-, gain their signification from each other, such that if the meaning of one of them is unclear then the meaning of the other must be equally unclear. To put it simply, heterosexuality is defined as not-homosexuality, and so if heterosexuality is asserted to be normal, then homosexuality must be defined as not-normal.

Furthermore, this dependence that heterosexuality has on homosexuality in order to define itself (as normal, or as anything whatsoever) can be demonstrated historically. The term homosexuality was introduced in Germany in 1869 to describe an alleged mental disorder, and it wasn't until 1880 that the correlative "normal" condition of heterosexuality was named and defined as the "natural" counterpart to homosexuality.<sup>23, 24</sup> Hence, given that the incoherency of the category of homosexuality has been established, and given heterosexuality's dependency on homosexuality for its own intelligibility, examining the normative status of heterosexuality demonstrates the incoherency of the hetero-norm.

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<sup>22</sup> Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 128.

<sup>23</sup> This example is meant to illustrate not that homo- is the original and hetero- the derivative, but rather, that it is unintelligible to claim that either one is original or natural; they are both imitations of an ideal, natural, original that does not exist, insofar as all performances of gender/sex/sexuality are imitative.

<sup>24</sup> Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 14.

It is clear, then, that the Question is riddled with incoherencies regarding the stability of categories such as nature, sexuality (both hetero- and homosexuality), and sex/gender, as well as the interrelations among these indiscrete categories. However, there is another fundamental assumption implied in the Question that has been hinted at, but not directly interrogated: that sexuality is subject to truth-values, that is, that true and false claims can be made about it. The Question under scrutiny was not even a possible question until the nineteenth century when the *scientia sexualis* emerged as a technique for producing the truth of sex by producing true discourses on sex, and “sexuality” was named as the embodiment of this truth.<sup>25</sup> This transformation of sex into discourse, into an object of analysis, was not a neutral or objective scientific move: it was influenced by a political and economic imperative to know sex, motivated by the motto, “Sex, the explanation for everything.”<sup>26</sup> The precariousness of this move results from the fact that this truth of sex, much like the truth of nature, is not a cause but an effect that is determined by political, social, and scientific intervention. The discourses on sex/sexuality created the truths they claimed to describe, because within this discursive deployment of sexuality, “Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered,” and regulated.<sup>27</sup> The assumption that sexuality is subject to truth-values is thus highly problematic, because it is an assumption influenced not by neutral observation, but by political motivation.<sup>28</sup>

The nature-versus-nurture Question is hence unintelligible on all accounts, not only because it relies on faulty assumptions about the coherency of categories of sex, gender, sexuality, and nature, but also because it depends on the erroneous belief that truth and falsity are categories that are appropriate to sexuality (i.e. that there are truly homosexual people, that it can truly be said to be by nature or nurture, that nature is the true and all else is false, pathological, and abnormal, a

<sup>25</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 68.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> There is no room in this paper to discuss this issue at any great depth here, but for more information on this issue, see Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. In short, the problem with alleging “true” discourses on sexuality is the problem of making universal claims about sexuality, since, as was discussed, such universal claims are always exceeded and surpassed by the group they allege to universally describe (and the notion of truth at work in such discourses is a notion of truth as something universal).



defect, etc.). In relation to this unintelligibility of the Question, a variety of other questions were posed to both highlight and substantiate the facets of this unintelligibility, such as interrogating the category of nature itself, questioning the relation between sex, gender and sexuality, and investigating the normality heterosexuality is proposed to have. A more in depth examination might also pose such questions as: “how do social and political discourses effect the naturalization of scientific discourses?” or, “what are the dangers implicit in answering the nature-versus-nurture Question in either direction?” or even, “what is at stake (politically, economically, socially, etc.) in questioning heterosexuality’s status as norm?” Now that the unintelligibility of the nature-versus-nurture question has been exhibited with respect to its categorical assumptions, further inquiry into the history of these terms and their various manifestations (both historical and contemporary) ought be pursued. For now, though, one must settle for the conclusion that without stable, discrete, coherent categories of sex, gender, sexuality, and nature, it is wholly unintelligible to ask questions that take these categories for granted and that imply the possibility of making true or false claims with respect to these constructed, contingent, inconsistent, and incoherent classifications. ❖