

Identity judgements, queer politics

Mark Norris Lance & Alessandra Tanesini

Political identities have received bad press for quite some time. Sexual identities constitute no exception to this trend. Nearly ten years ago Judith Butler expressed her ambivalent relation to identity categories by calling them ‘necessary errors’, whilst at the same time holding that ‘there remains a political imperative to use [them]’.¹ In more recent times, Alan Sinfield has suggested that we might be entering a period which he labels ‘post-gay’. This period is characterized by the realization that metropolitan post-Stonewall gay and, perhaps, lesbian identities ‘are historical phenomena and may now be hindering us more than they help us’.² Sinfield gives voice, then, to the hope that in this new period ‘it will not seem so necessary to define, and hence to limit, our sexualities’. For reasons not dissimilar to those advanced by Butler, however, Sinfield cannot bring himself to reject identities altogether. Instead, he enjoins us ‘to entertain more diverse and permeable identities’.³

This uneasiness or discomfort with identities is widespread among queer theorists.⁴ This common ambivalence has several sources. The reasons that motivate suspicion about sexual identities are well known. Among them, there is, of course, the tired, and by now tiresome, argument that identities presuppose essences. Perhaps more crucial is the assumption that sexual identities limit or constrain sexuality in ways that must be resisted. Sometimes this assumption is motivated by the desire to undermine the dichotomy between hetero- and homosexuality. At other times, it depends implicitly on a radical libertarian position that any constraint imposed on our sexual practices is oppressive, since it limits our freedom. Finally, a negative attitude toward identities is motivated by a discontentment with the shortcomings of identity politics as traditionally understood.

Nevertheless, theorists never advocate the end of all sexual identities as a proposal for the immediate

future. There is little doubt that many individuals take their sexual orientation to be a feature which plays an important role in their perception of who they are. They feel that in some sense they would not be the same person if their sexual orientation were to change. For this reason it seems deeply unrealistic to deny that sexuality is, in the current situation, one component of personal identity; hence the tendency to preserve, despite numerous reservations, talk of sexuality as an identity.

Awareness of the views shared by the vast majority of gay men and lesbians, activists included, must also be part of what motivates theorists to preserve the idea of sexual identities. Most gay people take their sexuality to be fairly fixed, something which is unlikely to change. They often also perceive it as something about which they had very little choice. More strikingly, in recent times many gay men and lesbians believe that they were born gay.⁵ A widespread belief that sexual identities can be explained biologically stands in direct opposition to the social constructionist view which is now the orthodoxy among scholars working in queer theory, history and politics.⁶

This formulation of the division between academics and the majority of gay people leads to an impasse. This stalemate, however, cannot be ignored if we care about politics, since it has given rise to incomprehension as well as several degrees of separation between theory and political practice. Given this background we intend in this article to reconsider the notions of personal and collective identities.

We do not want to begin, however, by asking a direct question about what sexual identities might be. Instead, we hold that questions about the importance of identity *claims* offer a better starting point. Thus, our question is: what is one committed to when one claims that one has a particular sexual identity?⁷ We do not assume that there is a reality – either biological

or socially constructed – which identity claims purport to describe. Instead, we argue that identity claims are not descriptive. Their correctness is not a matter of descriptive truth; it is not a matter of the presence of biological or social truth-makers. Identity judgements, we hold, are normative.⁸ They are political endorsements of particular sorts of psychological and sociological placings, whose appropriateness can be evaluated only within specific political contexts. We hope that the theoretical advantages of choosing this starting point will become clearer as our argument develops. Nevertheless, it might be useful to begin with a consideration which speaks in favour of this approach.

There is a common tendency, widespread among academics, to avoid the difficulties involved in genuinely political questions. Nowhere is this tendency more manifest than in recent discussions about identity politics among feminists and queer theorists. In these discussions political issues of commitment and strategy have been transformed into metaphysical questions about essences – or the lack thereof – and social constructs. Hence Cindy Patton's suspicion that 'deconstructionists may believe in the imputed essentialist identities much more than those in the political sphere who are purported to have them'.⁹

In this manner, theorists dream of an end to all disagreements. They hope to home in on the right theory about identity which will answer their problems once and for all. This theory will either explain what identities are or dissolve them. In either case, theoretical discoveries will be a substantial guide for political decisions. This approach, we argue, is misguided. Discussions about identities cannot ever be settled solely by looking at the biological, social or even cultural facts. They are genuine political discussions, and – as such – not based on any metaphysics, even a negative one. Disagreements which cannot be settled by means of non-normative considerations will, thus, always arise.

In this article we first explain and defend our account of identity judgements as normative claims, showing why it is a mistake to conceive of identities in biological terms. Some social constructionist accounts are, however, equally defective. Perhaps surprisingly, one consequence of our account is that the claim to be straight as a matter of identity is unlikely ever to be appropriate. Further, we argue that most current accounts of political identities are descriptive. Even performative accounts of identity categories, we contend, fall within this camp since they amount to descriptive interpretations of normative judgements.

Am I that name? The psychological significance of identity attributions

We all take ourselves to have several identities. One might, for example, be a mother or a father, a woman, a socialist, or a philosopher. These identities carry with them desires and inclinations. Philosophers, for instance, like abstract thinking, and fathers are inclined to play with their children. These desires and inclinations, however, do not in themselves constitute identities. One might like ice-cream without taking being an ice-cream lover to be a matter of identity. Identities play a far more prominent role in our psychology than mere likes and dislikes. Further, identities are often associated with social roles and mere inclinations do not have this sort of social significance.

We claimed that identity judgements are endorsements of psychological and social placings and also that identity judgements are normative. In order to make good our position, however, we need to turn first to questions concerning the psychological and social significances of taking oneself, and being taken by others, to be of a given identity. Our immediate concern is thus not with what identities themselves might *be*, but with the significance of identity attributions. Borrowing from Anthony Appiah's account of the psychological significance of identity claims,¹⁰ we label the three aspects of this account 'felt demand', 'call to coherence', and 'normative projection'.

Appiah claims that identities provide scripts by which to live. These scripts are not fully determined, but they offer reasons for and against some ways of acting. It is hard to see, for example, how one could take oneself to be a socialist as a matter of identity without being thereby committed to working towards ending specific forms of injustice. If one never engages in this kind of work, sees no reason to do so, and does not even perceive this as a problem, then one is simply not a socialist. In this way identities pose demands on us to which we are sensitive, provided that we take that identity to be part of who we are.

Related to the fact that identities pose demands on us is the fact that we feel the need to try to reconcile the scripts that accompany each of our different identities. Thus, identities issue a call to coherence. It might never be possible to achieve full coherence between our identities since they might always make demands on us that take us in different and, perhaps, incompatible directions. In these cases one will perceive some sort of rational tension which one might try to alleviate in a variety of ways. For example, there might be tensions between those commitments to our parents which follow from our identities as their sons and daughters,

and our commitments to our partners which stem from a different aspect of our identity. In this case, we will attempt to find strategies to make these two sets of commitments more compatible.

Sometimes, however, one might find two aspects of one's identity to be so irreconcilable that one will feel a demand to abandon one of them. One might, for example, come to the conclusion that being gay is incompatible with being a religious believer. In this case one holds that the commitments and demands that follow from being a religious believer conflict with those which follow from taking being gay as a matter of identity. If one believes that there is no justifying story which can bestow some discursive coherence on these two aspects of one's identity, one might stop taking oneself to be a religious believer.

These examples show that self-attributions of identities come with commitments. They also show that we expect – in the sense of call for – some discursive coherence between different aspects of our and others' identities. Hence, it is perfectly appropriate to be critical of somebody who does not even perceive a conflict between his gayness and his membership of, say, the Catholic Church.¹¹ As these examples show, then, identity attributions are subject to normative constraints.

Since identities carry commitments, they project normatively rather than merely causally into the future. Suppose being a mother is one of your identities. Of course you can predict that you will care for your children in the future. More importantly, however, your identity places future demands on you; it carries a commitment to care for your children in the future. Caring for your children in the future is not simply something you know you will do. It is also something you feel you ought to do.

Of course, things can change: people get divorced, change sexual orientation, give up philosophy. However, if they do so on a whim, and feel no need to provide themselves and others with reasons for the change, we will doubt the extent to which being married, having that sexual orientation, or being a philosopher were ever significant parts of their identity.

Identities also have a significance for one's place in society besides being, as we have already explained, of psychological significance. Thus, whether one is taken to be a woman, or a man, single or not, makes a difference to how others treat you as well as to how it is generally assumed you ought to be treated. Identities are a matter of social significance. There is a world of difference in the significance of knowingly serving pork to someone who dislikes it and to a

practising Muslim. Generally people could not carry out the commitments that are, for them, associated with their identities were they not facilitated by others. People need their identities to be recognized as matter of psychological and social significance. When social facilitation is not forthcoming, as in the cases of working mothers or gay parents, we are dealing with *prima facie* cases of oppression.

Two mistakes: biological and social descriptivism

What we have said so far should already be sufficient to show that biology is not even a candidate for an explanation of sexual identities. Accordingly, the debate over gay genes is a red herring. We believe that there is very little evidence for the belief that there are biological causes of homosexual sexual inclination. But, even if sexual inclination was biologically determined, this fact would not make sexual identities a matter of biology.

An analogy should help to make this explicit. Consider the case of a person who is revolted by strawberry ice-cream. Suppose that this revulsion is genetically determined. This fact does not make hating strawberry ice-cream a matter of identity for the person in question. More specifically, mere likes and dislikes, whether or not they are genetically determined, do not project normatively into the future. The person who hates strawberry ice-cream might be in a position to predict that her dislike will not change. However, it makes no sense to say that she is committed to disliking this kind of ice-cream in the future. Further, were her dislike to change we might be surprised, but would not think that she needs a justifying story for her change. Similarly, mere likes and dislikes do not issue calls to coherence. We would be surprised if the person who dislikes strawberry ice-cream so strongly loved fresh strawberries as well as ice-cream in other flavours. But, neither we nor the person in question would feel a need to alleviate any conceptual conflict.

This analogy shows that there can be behaviours which have a deep biological root and are, therefore, fairly fixed, but which are not a matter of identity. Further, there are identities, such as being a socialist, for which it seems absolutely ludicrous to suppose a biological aetiology. It is possible, however, that biological and social facts about the individual are a necessary condition for the correct attribution of some sorts of identities to that individual. Examples of such identities could be: being black, being American, or being a woman, as well as being queer. Even so, these

facts do not *constitute* that identity. To suppose that they do is a category mistake.

In the case of biological facts this is quite clear. Suppose that the claim to be gay is the assertion that certain biological facts are true of oneself. We have seen that attributions of identities to oneself give reasons for and against some forms of behaviour, issue calls to coherence with other aspects of one's identity, and project normatively into the future. But, attributions to oneself of a certain biological nature have no such consequences. On the basis of biology we can expect – in the causal sense of predict – a certain future behaviour to occur. On the basis of identity judgements we can expect – in the discursive sense of call for – a certain future behaviour to occur. To think of identities in biological terms involves confusing normative for causal constraints.

The irrelevance of biology to identity judgements might, incidentally, explain why many activists who believe that they were born gay or lesbians do not necessarily engage in the kind of identity politics one might expect to be associated with so-called essentialist accounts of identity. These activists make a distinction between what they think has caused them to have homosexual inclinations, and what being gay or queer as matter of identity means to them. The distinction might not always be clearly articulated, but it is sufficiently entrenched. No one looks to biology to find out how they ought to behave, whilst almost everybody holds that social and political commitments follow from attributing a given identity to oneself.

Even sophisticated accounts of identities as social constructions are not immune from the same category mistake of taking a descriptive claim for a normative one. More precisely, these accounts often employ a descriptive interpretation of normative judgements in their accounts of identity. They identify the normative nature of identity claims, which we have discussed in its psychological and social dimensions, with what is done in one's society. In other words, they reduce normativity to normality. It is, therefore, not surprising that identities have got such bad press. If we are right that current social constructionist accounts of identity ultimately take identities to be defined by what is normal in society, it becomes clearer why theorists have taken identities to be, as a matter of theoretical necessity, limiting in oppressive ways. But what, more precisely, is meant by a descriptive account of the normativity of identity, and what is the alternative proposal?

We have claimed that commitments and expectations follow from identity judgements. For example,

being judged to be a woman makes a difference as to how one is treated. Thus, it is not uncommon to hear from some quarters that women ought to get married, look after children, stay at home, and so on. This is a particularly conservative view of the commitments associated with being a woman. Similarly, it is not unusual to hear that gay men and lesbians should not have children. This too is a conservative view of the sort of scripts associated with gay and lesbian identities. Social institutions and practices also define, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, the commitments and responsibilities which are taken to flow from given identities.

Some crude social constructionist accounts identify being of an identity with the occupation of such a social role. These accounts take identity claims to be purely descriptive of one's position in society. According to these accounts, whatever norms might be associated with identities, they are not constitutive of the identities in question. Rather, the identities, seen as social positions, logically precede the norms associated with them.

More recent social constructionist accounts are less crude. They acknowledge that identities are normative in the sense that being of a certain identity is constituted by, not just constitutive of, norms. However, they understand 'norm' in a weak sense that makes it a function of what is taken to be proper in society. In other words, they take the norms constitutive of identities to have merely a *de facto* normative force. Normative, here, refers to the kind of behaviour that is licensed or sanctioned within the society. According to this view, to be of a certain identity is to be the kind of person for whom certain forms of behaviour, but not others, are taken to be proper.

This new form of social constructionism is not committed to the belief that identities pre-exist the norms of identity. On the contrary, the view entails that identities are constituted by the current social-normative significance attributed to identities. Nevertheless, this view continues to be committed to a form of descriptivism. It assumes that claiming that one is of an identity is tantamount to asserting that one is the sort of person who is subject to the demands and commitments which society (or the majority, or some future idealized version of the majority) associates with that identity. It is rather obvious that identities so understood will always function as stumbling blocks. The grammar of identity claims, according to this view, entails that when making such a claim one implicitly accepts what the majority says is proper for an individual of one's own kind.

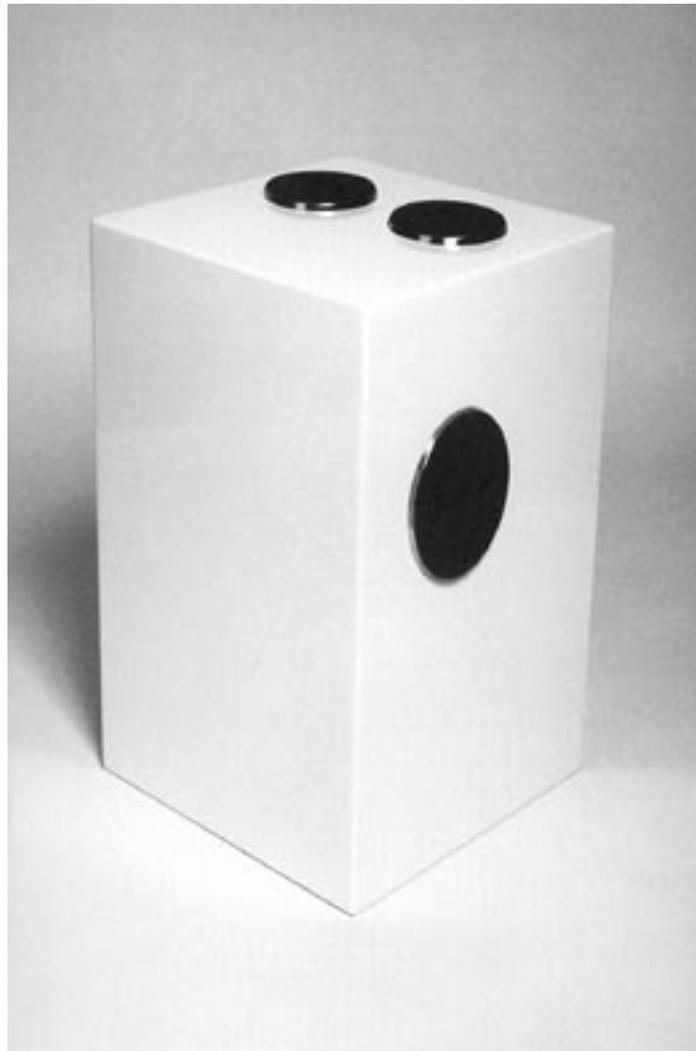
Given the current popularity of performative accounts of identities, our charge is bound to sound paradoxical, to say the least. It seems rather obvious that performatives are not descriptive (that is, constative). Yet, despite appearances to the contrary, we believe that these constructionist accounts ultimately rely on descriptive interpretations of normative judgements. In this regard, it is useful to consider Butler's accounts of gender identity, since she was the first to provide a sustained account of the performativity of identity.

In *Gender Trouble* Butler claims that the critical task of feminism is to identify and participate in 'those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them'.¹² What are being repeated in the practices of repetition are norms.¹³ But these norms are nothing other than what is taken to be proper, what has *de facto* normative force. Norms are tantamount to prescriptions of what is normal. They are merely the result of compulsory regulatory regimes. For this reason, Butler takes the repetitions that constitute identities to be imitations of the currently accepted norms of heterosexuality. However, since we are always bound to fall short, since we never fully embody what is proper in accordance with these norms, we are compelled to repeat our attempt to comply with them.

Butler argues that identity claims do not describe a pre-existing hidden nature. Thus, she abandons crude forms of descriptivism. She does, however, adopt a descriptivist account of identity judgements. This fact is obscured by her decision to call her view a performative account of identities.

There are at least three related problems with this view. First, it misreads what people do when they claim a currently despised identity for themselves. According to these sophisticated social constructionist accounts, self-attributions of identity amount to asserting that one occupies the psychological and social placings that are currently associated with that identity. For example, in the case of queer identity, to claim that one is queer would amount to asserting that one occupies a position about which it is appropriate to feel ashamed, and guilty. But, we contend, when people claim 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it!', they are not implicitly accepting what society takes to be proper for queers.

Second, the view makes it hard to explain why people take on despised identities. Usually, one will



need to resort to accounts that show that individuals were forced into the mould of the despised identity. In this case, however, it becomes a mystery why people valorize their despised identities, since these identities would be purely the result of oppressive forces. Further, given the psychological centrality of identity attributions, these constructionist accounts will interpret individuals who take themselves to belong to an oppressed identity to be always clinging to, and valorising, what is a direct result of their oppression.¹⁴ Thus, these individuals will, of necessity, contribute to the continuation of their oppression. That we can achieve a political conclusion of such generality from a claim about the grammar of identity claims should make us extremely suspicious of these constructionist views.

Third, these accounts practically rule out the possibility of using identity attributions for progressive ends. If claiming that one is of an identity is a description of what society takes to be proper for individuals of that identity, then identity claims always function as implicit reassertions of the status quo.

In order to overcome these problems, we suggest that one take seriously the normative nature of identity

judgements. Thus, we subscribe to a radical normativity thesis about identity claims. In our view to claim an identity for oneself is to endorse a cluster of attitudes, behaviours and judgements on the part of oneself and of society, and to undertake a commitment to defend their appropriateness. In our opinion, therefore, identity judgements *are* moral and political evaluations. They do not describe the evaluations currently associated with the identity, as in the social constructionist interpretation; rather, they consist in an endorsement of a range of psychological and sociological placings, and of their consequences. The placings, attitudes and behaviours one endorses by claiming oneself to be of a given identity, however, could be somewhat at variance with those currently associated with that identity. (However, they cannot be totally at variance with current evaluations, because in such a case it would be nonsensical to hold that one is claiming that same identity, rather than a different one, for oneself.)

To summarize, in our view, to say that one is of a given identity is to say that one *ought* to take that identity to be part of one's script for one's life, that one ought to allow an associated script to demand coherence with one's other scripts, that one ought to take this identity to project normatively into the future, and that others ought to assign social priority to facilitating one's living according to the resulting narrative unity of the various scripts. To say who one is, then, is not to describe one's hidden nature because it is not to describe at all. At the same time, it is therefore neither empty nor a mere description of how one is currently treated, for it is an endorsement.

'Straight' is not an identity

So far we have discussed the grammar of identity judgements, and suggested that they are political endorsements. But, we have not made fully clear what identities themselves might be. In our view, identities are a matter of the correctness of identity judgements. Thus, if one *claims* to be of an identity, and one's claim is correct, then one *is* of that identity. Since identity claims are normative – they are political endorsements – their correctness conditions are not a matter of corresponding to something in the world, some biological or even socio-cultural facts. Rather, identity judgements are correct whenever genuine political and moral goods are endorsed by making those claims.¹⁵

A consequence of our view is that it is impossible to have a totally bad political identity. One can, of course, make claims to such an identity. For example, one can make racist beliefs normative for oneself. One

can hold that society should facilitate one's attempt to prevent miscegenation and so forth. However, these identity claims are never correct since what they endorse are not political and moral goods. By claiming such a racist identity for oneself one is claiming that society ought to give one a special status, accord one privileges and make it easier for one to act on one's racist beliefs. However, since the racist is not entitled to such status, and privileges, their claim to these entitlements is incorrect. In other words, the racist claim to identity is wrong, because by making it the racist claims entitlements, which would be constitutive of an identity, that he does not have. (This case shows why another sort of performative analysis – one which would equate having an identity with asserting that one has it – won't do. Since normative obligations on the part of others follow from an identity ascription, neither thinking nor saying that one has an identity makes it so.)

With reference to the specific case of sexual identities, we think that it is highly likely that, whilst it is sometimes appropriate to claim being gay or queer as a matter of identity, it is never appropriate to claim a heterosexual identity. Although it is foolish to make general claims at this level of abstraction, we are confident that, at least in the context of contemporary British and American cultures, being straight is not a genuine identity. Thus, we reach the surprising conclusion that there is an asymmetry in the case of sexual identities, since gay and queer identities exist, but heterosexual identities do not.

We shall deal with some of the obvious objections to this conclusion in what follows after having provided some reasons in its favour. It must be stressed that these are exclusively political and moral reasons. We have entered at this juncture the fray of political discussions and disagreements. It is perfectly possible for somebody to agree with what we have said about the grammar of identity judgements, and about identities as a matter of normative status, and violently disagree with the purely political evaluations that follow. They are offered here because we recommend them, but also because these discussions allow us to clarify a few features of identity judgements as we understand them.

We have claimed that to accord to sexuality the status of an identity is to endorse the taking up of a particular script as normative for one's thought and behaviour, and to demand society's facilitation of one's living a life which coherently conjoins this script with one's other identities. But exactly which script is in question here? Three senses could be given to this

normative issue, senses we label ‘conservative’, ‘ideal’ and ‘tactical’.

A conservative identity endorsement is an endorsement of a range of psychological attitudes and social roles of the sort currently associated with that identity by currently dominant social practices. It is not thereby a mere description of these attitudes and roles, but rather a political act which attempts to preserve the status quo. All identity judgements are script-endorsements, and if the script in question is precisely the dominant one, then the act of so judging is a way of throwing one’s social weight and epistemic authority behind current practice.

In the case of sexual identity, this would mean an endorsement of stereotypical psychological identities by either gay or straight people, and an endorsement of the oppressive social order of heterosexist practice. We have little to say about this potential endorsement as it is quite clearly inappropriate. No one who opposes homophobia could endorse taking up either social position definitive of that oppressive relationship.

When thinking of race, one would similarly not be likely to endorse the current scripts and social positionings of racist society. One might, however, be prepared to make what we call an ‘ideal’ identity judgement. To do this is to envision a future non-racist society, and to endorse an amended version of racial categories – presumably some sort of ethnic identity – which would be appropriate and defensible in that context. In the case of sexuality, however, we do not see any progressive role for ideal endorsements either. In other words, we do not believe that in a society free of heterosexist bias, it would make much sense to elevate one’s sexual inclinations to the status of an identity. We see no reason why in such a society it would be morally and politically good to turn one’s current *inclination* to find partners of a particular gender into a *commitment* not to change that inclination. In such a society people might still have fairly settled sexual inclinations towards people of one gender rather than another, and they might be able to predict that this will continue to be the case. But there seems to be no good reason to make this a matter of normative concern.

Contrast the elevation of one’s inclinations to stay with a particular partner. Here there is a clear reason why, even in the absence of oppression, one would take this to be a matter of identity. The elevation of the inclinational to the normative that is constitutive of identity here serves a positive force in shaping the nature of the relationship. Families can only be what they are because they are taken on with normative

significance. But we see no corresponding reason to take one’s inclination, should one’s current partner die, to be attracted to future partners of a given gender as a matter of normative concern in a non-homophobic world. And if no positive good is served, then there can be no grounds for demanding that society facilitates the identity.

The third and most interesting sort of identity judgement, and the one in which an asymmetry emerges, is what we refer to as a tactical identity endorsement. In this case, we claim that there are politically progressive gay identity claims and no progressive straight identity claims in the contexts of British and American societies. We have said that to claim oneself to be gay is to make one’s sexual inclination a matter of normative concern. To do so involves adopting a certain conception of oneself which gives reasons for and against attitudes and behaviours. One will feel the need to make the rest of one’s life rationally cohere as much as possible with this aspect of one’s psychology, and one will take this conception to project normatively in the future. In other words, one will endorse a commitment to preserve one’s current set of desires and inclinations and, importantly, demand social facilitation of this stance toward one’s life.

In the case of tactical identity endorsements, what is being endorsed is not the script which is currently associated with gay identity. Rather, this embracing of gay identity will involve substantial revisions of this script. There is no need to assume that everybody who makes a tactical endorsement of a gay identity will thereby endorse precisely the same revisions of the attitudes and self-conceptions which society takes to be proper for gay people. Just as in the case of an assertion of marital identity or of oneself as a socialist, there is scope for variance on this issue; and there is scope for ethical and political discussion.

Similar considerations apply on the social front. One can endorse society’s taking oneself to be gay, and endorse that there are statuses, obligations, expectations and privileges carried by that attribution, without embracing the current set of such normative expectations as just, or good. Further, there is a politically progressive point to such endorsements. They are acts of solidarity whereby one affirms a commitment to being treated as others are being treated.

Such political acts belong to an old tradition of endorsing a social positioning for oneself with an eye to subverting the significance of that social position. For example, to be queer in the old usage was first to be excluded from what is ‘proper’, and then to be reviled for it. To call oneself queer in the new usage

is to endorse that exclusion and to turn the evaluation on its head, to embrace difference as a challenge to what is regarded as proper.¹⁶

Not one of my words

There are no symmetrical political considerations that would indicate that genuine ethical and political goods are endorsed by means of straight tactical identity judgements. Let us begin with the psychological. It is hard to see anything of value in a tactical embracing of straight identity. One of us is not gay, and he is married to a member of the opposite gender. Suppose, for purposes of argument, that he were able to predict that he would only be attracted to women should he lose his current partner. What would be gained by taking this projection into the normative realm? Why would one want to make this into a normative concern at all? In the case of gay identity, the point was to commit oneself to a project and to embrace one's place in the division of political labour. There is no corresponding point in the straight case.

The primary social markers of a positioning as straight are the trappings of privilege. One is considered by dominant society to be more trustworthy with children, more valuable as an employee, even more likely to be rational and unbiased when discussing gay politics. Obviously none of this privilege is deserved. Thus it would be wrong to endorse the social granting of it. This is not to say that one can avoid being granted it. One's inclinations, if known, will be enough for heterosexist society to grant one privilege, but to take one's heterosexuality on as a matter of identity is to endorse this granting of privilege and to make it central in one's life. Denying 'straightness', is a disavowal of such privilege. Such a refusal, though it won't prevent others from recognizing privilege, at least calls into question the universal assumption that such would be welcome.

One should not confuse this political act of refusal with a failure to acknowledge the unwarranted privilege that generally accrues to individuals who are taken to be heterosexuals. It is not uncommon to hear individuals complain that gay activists are too vocal about their sexuality. These individuals might even assert that they do not think of themselves as heterosexuals, but merely as fathers or professional men. These claims amount to denying that matters of sexuality currently have a social-normative significance. As such these assertions are false. They are also politically pernicious because they make invisible the privileges granted to those who are taken to be straight. The explicit refusal to endorse heterosexuality as a matter of identity has the

opposite political effect. It is an acknowledgement of these privileges as undeserved.

Yet, one might remain unconvinced, and argue that there are politically progressive tactical endorsements of heterosexual sexual identity. For example, one might cite the use of the slogan 'straight but not narrow' as an example of such an endorsement. We think this is a mistake. There is, of course, a political point in making the claim that one opposes heterosexist bias. One hopes that many non-gay people would perform such political acts of solidarity against homophobia. But it is hard to see why such acts should take the form of identity claims. One might suggest that what is at stake is the elaboration of new scripts which one might endorse as a heterosexual without endorsing homophobia. But, why, we ask, if one is attempting to refuse undeserved privilege, and the narrowness of current heterosexual scripts, try to do so by hanging on to the view that one's sexual inclinations should be elevated to a matter of normative status with accompanying entitlements and facilitations? We do not see any plausible answer to this question that does not rely, at least covertly, on the structures of authority and the privileges which are undeservedly bestowed upon people whom society takes to be straight, and who do nothing to disassociate themselves from that attribution. (Compare an eighteenth-century person claiming that it is a matter of identity that they are noble, but insisting that this doesn't really imply any sort of privilege. We find it hard to make sense of this act. Of course one could say, for example, 'these are my parents; this is my culture'. But one should simply go on to deny that one is noble, to deny the legitimacy of the very category as having to do with nothing but privilege.)

One must distinguish this point about tactical identity endorsements from questions of pure, brutal, short-term political effectiveness. It might be the case that straight but not narrow people could achieve results by claiming this identity for themselves. Virtually any act might, in some circumstance, be politically useful, but our contention is that their success will be partly predicated on the fact that straight people are often taken more seriously than queers by straight society even on matters of queer politics. In these cases strategic success is obtained by implicit reliance on homophobic expectations. Hence, we are sceptical about claims that such endorsements are politically progressive.

One might object, on another front, that these considerations ignore gender disparities in matters of sexuality. The psychological scripts and social roles

currently associated with womanhood by dominant male society still prescribe sexual passivity as the appropriate behaviour for women. In the light of this, tactical revisionary endorsements of heterosexual identity might have a role to play in feminist politics. This conclusion is, however, premature, for it is politically important to call into question the current social norms governing women's sexual behaviour; it is hard to see what is gained by taking this project to be part of a revision of *heterosexual* identity. We see the point of embracing an active and independent sexuality for women as an important part of feminist politics, but such political acts of endorsement do not require that one makes the gender of one's sexual partners a matter of normative concern. Feminism does not require that we elevate the heterosexual dimension of some women's sexual inclination to the status of an identity.¹⁷

What about the more abstract objections to our position? First, it must appear odd to argue, as we have done, that heterosexual sexual identities do not exist. Such a conclusion seems intrinsically implausible. Second, our argument also seems to employ a notion of identity that does not correspond to the ordinary usage.

It is easier to address the first of these two objections by means of an analogy. Consider the case of claims to property, and more specifically to ownership of land. In several countries colonialists have appropriated for themselves, by means of genocide and pillage, the land which natives inhabited. It is not unusual nowadays for natives to reclaim entitlement to their land. These claims are, at least partly, based on the judgement that those individuals who now take themselves to own the land in question do not, and never did, own it. They do not own it because, due to the morally impermissible ways in which they have claimed it, they never really gained the sort of entitlement which is constitutive of genuine ownership.

Our claim about heterosexuality is the same. We do not deny that people have heterosexual inclinations and take themselves to have a heterosexual identity. Similarly, we do not deny that society attributes such an identity to many individuals. Politically bad identities can be attributed, undertaken and facilitated, but one cannot be entitled to them. So, given the meaning of identity judgements, one can't really be of that identity.

None of this implies that homophobia is not real. Since people take themselves to be straight, and society also takes them to have this sexual identity, privileges are granted to people with heterosexual

inclinations. The claim that heterosexual identity does not exist does not prevent one from recognizing the very damaging ways in which incorrect identity claims operate.¹⁸

Our account of identity judgements as normative claims could also be accused of failing to fit ordinary usage. Thus, one might want to assert that there are descriptive uses of identity vocabulary. For example, one might point out that we have often used in this paper the expression 'straight people', although we have denied that being straight is ever a matter of identity. There is, however, no contradiction in our ways of writing. The expression 'straight people' stands as shorthand for 'people who take themselves and are taken by others to be straight', or for 'people with heterosexual inclinations'. We have never denied that there are such identity attributions. Also, one might point out that there are uses of the word 'heterosexual' in scientific contexts. We contend that in these cases, either the word is used merely to refer to a sexual inclination, or that we have a normative use of the word which is mistakenly taken as descriptive. What we would have in this case is a politically conservative naturalization of identities.

Finally, we would like to consider briefly the charge that identity politics of the sort we have been defending always belongs to a kind of minoritarian politics. Related to this charge is the claim that identity politics in matters of sexuality reinforces, rather than undermines, the dichotomy between hetero- and homosexuality. We find these charges to be premature, and based on descriptivist readings of what identities might be. Whilst we agree that in an ideal society there would be no place for being gay as a matter of identity, there is no reason to conclude that in the current situation it is always counterproductive to claim being gay or being queer as a matter of identity. Similarly, there is no reason to assume that the political import of identity judgements is limited to making a demand for rights to be bestowed on a minority group. Rather, it is plausible that, by claiming to be gay as a matter of identity, and thereby endorsing for oneself a cluster of attitudes, behaviours, responsibilities and facilitations, one might be able to influence society's expectations about matters of sexuality in ways that are progressive for all members of the community.

In conclusion, one might ask what a non-queer person is to say to the question whether they are straight or gay, if they accept our position. We suggest that one follow the example of Oscar Wilde. When he was asked to state whether a certain passage in one of his books was blasphemous, Wilde, apparently,

answered that ‘blasphemy’ was not one of his words. By extension, we recommend that those of us who are not gay, when asked whether we are straight, should insist that ‘straight’ is not one of our words.

Notes

1. Judith Butler, ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination’, in Linda Nicholson, ed., *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, Routledge, New York and London, 1997, p. 303.
2. Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After*, Serpent’s Tail, London, 1998, p. 5.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 199.
4. See, for example, Ed Cohen, ‘Who are “We”? Gay Identity as Political (E)motion (A Theoretical Ruminantion)’, in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, Routledge, New York and London, 1991, pp. 71–92; and Lisa Duggan, ‘Queering the State’, *Social Text* 39, Summer 1994, pp. 1–14.
5. See Vera Whisman, *Queer by Choice*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996. Alan Sinfield remarks on this fact in his ‘Virtually Undetectable: The Andrew Sullivan Phenomenon’, *Radical Philosophy* 97, Sept/Oct 1999, p. 4.
6. Some of the most influential papers in the currently extinguished debate between biologism and social constructionism are collected in Edward Stein, ed., *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy*, Routledge, New York and London, 1992. Outside the context of queer theory, biological accounts of sexual orientation have been supported by Simon LeVay in his *Queer Science: The Use and Abuse of Research into Homosexuality*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1996.
7. Here we follow Robert Brandom in refusing to take the question of meaning to be a matter of identifying which bits of reality a linguistic expression refers to, together with an account of their relation. For a systematic account of this semantic view of language, see his *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1994.
8. For a sustained account of the nature of meaning claims as well as of normative commitments of the sort discussed in this article, see, Mark Norris Lance and John O’Leary-Hawthorne, *The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.
9. Cindy Patton, ‘Tremble, Hetero Swine!’, in Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1993, p. 166.
10. See K. Anthony Appiah, ‘Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction’, in Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1994, pp. 149–63.
11. This is not to say that self-attributions of these two identities must be absolutely irreconcilable. But there is a rational tension between them, which individuals would need to do something about.
12. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York and London, 1990, p. 147.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
14. In recent times Butler, and others, have explicitly en-

dorsed this consequence of their position. See, for example, Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1997. We find it astonishing that these writers do not think it a problem that they make *a priori* universal claims about matters which would seem to require case-by-case consideration.

15. Thus, the three criteria offered above – ‘felt demand’, ‘call to coherence’, and ‘normative projection’ – explain what it is to *take* oneself to be of an identity. One might fulfil them and yet not be of the given identity. This is no surprise since it is always possible to take oneself to be of an identity and be mistaken. On this matter, as on any other, we are not infallible.
16. Some readers might be troubled by our almost interchangeable usage of ‘gay’ and ‘queer’. We do believe that these terms are employed in tactical identity endorsements which tend to differ from each other. It would, however, be a mistake to read queer as simply advocating an end for all identities.
17. There are deep and important connections between heterosexism and sexism. Further, there are also important differences in the socio-normative significances of identity claims made by men or women. These issues must be explored in detail in each particular political context. These considerations do not entail that women, unlike men, should make their heterosexual inclinations a matter of identity.
18. Similarly Appiah’s claim that there are no races does not prevent him from acknowledging the reality of racism. See K. Anthony Appiah, ‘Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections’, in K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutman, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1996, pp. 30–105.

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