

Racism and homophobia

Recently a long-time reader and commenter raised an issue that should be of interest and concern to people on both sides of the LGBT divide:

“Zac and so many others want their point of view to be seen as a legitimate point of view. Even if we disagree with it we are at least supposed to acknowledge that it has some veneer of legitimacy to it. The problem is racists say the exact same thing!”

Racism has played a significant role in framing and scaffolding LGBT issues. Interracial marriage was often used as a purported analogue for same-sex marriage. Racial and gender equality have been offered as precedents for expanding the rights of self-identified sexual minorities. In keeping with progressive narratives, LGBT issues are presented as merely the next step in an ever-increasing expansion of human rights to previously marginalised and mistreated groups.

The implication is that people who are not on board with the LGBT worldview will go the same way as racist (and sexist) bigots, whose views were once sheltered by more mainstream debate over racial and sexual difference, but now hold no legitimacy outside their own backwaters.

Take, for example, Abraham Lincoln’s [arguments](#) against slavery from 1854:

“If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B. – why may not B. snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave A?”

You say A. is white, and B. is black. It is color, then; the lighter, having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own.

You do not mean color exactly?—You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and, therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own.

But, say you, it is a question of interest; and, if you can make it your interest, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you."

Here we see Lincoln abstracting away from the specious arguments of his pro-slavery opponents, to undermine any vestige of moral principle behind the enslavement of the African-American population.

If I have a right to enslave you on whatever basis, then by the same rules it must follow that someone else has the right to enslave me.

To determine whether racism and homophobia are truly analogous, we need to approach the question with the same analytical rigour. Unfortunately this is both arduous and time-consuming. We need to begin by defining racism, understanding why it is invalid or untrue, then define homophobia, and finally determine whether the things that make racism invalid or untrue apply to homophobia as well.

What is racism?

Racism is not a single thing. The term is used loosely and encompasses a number of different albeit related phenomena. When we use words loosely their meaning becomes unclear and reasoning is made more difficult. Sometimes we need to assert a strict definition, but this in turn runs the risk of defining the problem away by using a definition that is too narrow or too strict.

Racism can refer to animosity and prejudice directed at others on the grounds of race, but it is also used in reference to institutions and policies that unintentionally deliver negative outcomes for people of different races.

What we typically object to in all instances of racism is the idea that race is a meaningful characteristic for any moral/ethical purpose – whether it be institutional outcomes, socio-economic status, personal interaction, or outright aggressive or vicious behaviors.

The anti-racist ideal is simply that race is not a relevant factor in nearly every aspect of life.

Why is racism invalid?

To understand why racism is invalid, we simply need to observe that

race does not justify the differences in treatment, behavior, or outcome that have historically been attributed to it.

Race originally meant “a people of common descent”, and in the past it seems that many distinct factors were conflated with race. At present we regard race as biological, and we have separated out other factors like culture, custom, and spurious notions of collective temperament or racial character.

We now recognize that trying to assess the intelligence of another race was a project built on unexamined assumptions about the nature of intelligence and the homogeneity of peoples.

To put it simply, most if not all of the significant factors attributed to race are not part of race at all. Therefore, to discriminate on racial grounds is a highly fraught if not totally discredited practice.

What is homophobia?

The definitions of homophobia are problematic because they range in scope from extremely broad to very narrow, and remain highly contested.

The origins of the term derive from *phobos* which is used to designate an irrational fear. Taken literally, a homophobic person would have an irrational fear of homosexuality or homosexual people quite apart from their rational beliefs.

But if we take it as common usage suggests, homophobia can be construed narrowly as animosity and prejudice toward homosexuality or homosexual people.

More broadly, many people believe that a hidden or clandestine animosity or prejudice is the underlying motive of people who oppose or dissent from various aspects of the LGB agenda.

In my case it means that although I state I am skeptical of how the concepts of sexual orientation and sexual identity are constructed, and I am therefore skeptical of derivative phenomena like same-sex marriage, some people will nonetheless argue that I am secretly motivated by animosity and prejudice toward homosexuality – that I am in fact homophobic.

Or taking a different tack, they will argue that my skepticism lends

moral support or a vestige of legitimacy to people who genuinely are motivated by animosity and prejudice, and so regardless of my actual motives like genuinely wishing to know the truth, my writing is homophobic by association.

Are racism and homophobia analogous?

Which two of these three are most similar: a wood fire, a rusting piece of iron, and the sun?

If you've studied physics and chemistry you'll know that contrary to appearances the burning of wood and the rusting of iron are both instances of the same kind of chemical reaction, whereas the sun is an instance of nuclear fusion.

But if you want to dry your clothes you'll have better luck with the sun or a fire than with a load of rusty metal.

In the same way, even if racism and homophobia are not truly the same kind of thing, they are similar enough for the purposes of social change and activism.

And the reason why this "good enough" works, is that going any deeper into the matter turns quickly to the very questions that are in dispute.

Sexual orientation and sexual identity are two contestable ways of framing and conceptualizing the fact of same-sex desire and related behaviors.

Depending on one's broader ethical and philosophical outlook – some informed by religious tradition, but others not – the question of how to respond to our desires can receive very different answers.

These ethical and philosophical differences are not shallow. Nor are they merely rationalisations of prejudice.

Are race and sexual desire analogous?

Unfortunately on this very point the differences between worldview appear irreconcilable.

Race has been successfully isolated to a set of morally irrelevant and biologically trivial characteristics.

They are biologically trivial in the sense that skin color, facial

features, and head size and shape do not impact on either intelligence or character; they are morally irrelevant in the sense that they do not of themselves inform desires, actions, or any qualities proposed as morally relevant by any independent ethical theories.

Sexual desire may be biologically grounded, yet because it is a desire oriented to voluntary action it immediately falls within the domain of ethics.

Different ethical theories may reach diverging conclusions on the moral significance and place of sexual desire generally. They may also diverge on specific subsets of sexual desire, including homosexual desire.

In short, ethics is an attempt to guide our response to the desires we find in ourselves, primarily by framing those desires in a broader context of virtue, fulfillment, justice, duty, and so on.

Even though sexual desire is biologically grounded to an unknown degree, it is still a form of desire and therefore subject to ethical framing. The characteristics of race have no such framing, and now discredited racial theories persisted only for so long as they could conflate morally relevant characteristics with racial ones.

Race and sexual desire are therefore not analogous.

Homosexuality is ethically framed

Yet obviously people disagree that race and sexual desire are disanalogous.

The contemporary mainstream view, informed by the LGBT movement, interprets sexual desire as an ethically significant component of human nature. It quarantines sexual desire from the normal ethical domain of desires in general, framing it in terms of distinct sexual orientations that invoke different ethical rules.

Prior to this distinction an ethical theory might view homosexual desire as it would any other desire: test it against the existing rules and norms of that ethical theory and conclude whether it furthers or undermines “the good” as defined by that theory.

But this new distinction reframes homosexual desire as prima facie evidence of a difference that – whether grounded in biology or psychology – means we should test it against different rules.

In effect, from the contemporary point of view our past ethical theories were committing a category error in treating “homosexuals” as if they were “heterosexuals” with divergent sexual desires.

Reprogramming ethics

So what’s the big deal? Shouldn’t our ethics change with the times? Isn’t that the whole point of progress?

Admittedly these kinds of changes are problematic for ethicists in a different way from ordinary people. There’s a delightful quip that “philosophers are people who worry that what works in practice might not work in theory”, but anyone with a sense of history greater than their own memories should take care before claiming that something novel is working “in practice”.

Still, it is in theory that the ethicist takes issue with the idea of a category error, or new rules, or alterations to an existing ethical framework.

An ethical theory developed on the basis of observation and logic should only be altered and adapted on the same basis, and that means convincing ethicists that the new framing of sexual desire in terms of orientation and identity is valid.

Here the most obvious problem, and the reason many ethicists reject or are skeptical of the contemporary notions of sexual identity and orientation, is the simple question: why this desire alone? If it is true for A, why not for B?

This is how the argument appears if we abstract it for the skeptical ethicists’ benefit:

The pre-existing ethical rules governing sexual behavior dictate that we should not act on sexual desire for members of the same sex. But these rules were written from the perspective of a heterosexual majority. By definition, experiencing homosexual desire means one is not a member of the heterosexual majority. Therefore those rules do not apply.

But why is this argument limited to homosexuality? If we want to change the rules, we need to be consistent. Hence the following argument:

We used to think that the rules governing sexual desire applied to everyone. But then we discovered that we had incorrectly applied rules for the heterosexual majority to a homosexual minority, to their detriment. But there may be other minorities we are also incorrectly applying majority rules to. Since the defining feature of the homosexual minority is homosexual desire, it follows that other forms of desire that were previously considered aberrant from the majority perspective may in fact be evidence of further minorities.

If we follow this argument through to its logical conclusion, it provides a compelling case for a diversification of moral sexual norms. In fact, the implications reach beyond sexual ethics:

We used to think that the rules governing sexual desire applied to everyone, but then we discovered that people with diverging sexual desires actually belonged to minority groups with different ethical rules and norms. But why are these minorities limited to sexual desire? It is plausible that other divergent desires are in fact indicative of new minorities who have been oppressed by majoritarian ethical norms.

None of this train of thought is problematic for supporters of the LGBT movement. Really it's only a problem for people with essentialist ethical perspectives who take their ethics seriously. For such people the introduction of a minority ethical exemption entirely undermines the integrity of their ethical theory. Its implications extend beyond sexual orientation to encompass potentially every aspect of their ethical system.

The contemporary framing of sexual desire in terms of sexual orientation and identity is incongruous with the essentialist approach to ethics and philosophy more generally, and results in something more reminiscent of a contemporary utilitarianism.

Racism and homophobia revisited

From the ethical perspective detailed above, the inclusion of sexual orientation and sexual identity as ethically significant constructs appears totally arbitrary. From the contemporary mainstream view, the

refusal to accept these constructs at face value appears irrational and suspicious, hence the attribution of malicious motives and bigotry.

Dispassionate thinkers should be able to see both sides and understand the nature of the disagreement. But most of us are not dispassionate thinkers, and the public debate is littered with activists on both sides. Non-activists, like pacifists in the middle of a war-zone, are liable to take fire regardless of their motives and intentions.

Disavowals of homophobia will not satisfy activists who lack the capacity or the will to understand the real points of contention. But if those of us who disagree with the LGBT movement are to remain dispassionate thinkers, then we can't blame them for this failing either.

Nonetheless it is up to us to make clear for our own sake and for the sake of others, that we reject bigotry, animosity, and hatred directed towards people who identify as homosexual. There is no basis for violent, aggressive, or derogatory treatment of people on the grounds of sexual identity. This may seem self-evident for those of us who dispassionately disagree with aspects of the contemporary view of human sexuality, but we must restate it nonetheless.

The views of people like the [Californian pastor](#) who told his congregation that Christians "shouldn't be mourning the death of 50 sodomites" are profoundly vicious and show no cognizance of our common humanity or the universal reality of human suffering, evil, and mortality.

Ultimately we are responsible for our own selves, and in this spirit we should admonish and examine our own hearts regardless of the political and social turmoil around us. Religious or not, we all fall short of the [ideal](#) expressed by the saints:

"Blessed is he who loves and does not therefore desire to be loved; blessed is he who fears and does not therefore desire to be feared; blessed is he who serves and does not therefore desire to be served; blessed is he who behaves well toward others and does not desire that others behave well toward him; and because these are great things, the foolish do not rise to them."

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Zac Alstin is associate editor of MercatorNet. [This article](#) was republished with permission.

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