



Is Orientation the Issue?

JAMES H. BURTNES

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

IT IS A VERY LARGE, COMPLICATED, DIFFICULT QUESTION. IT DOES, HOWEVER, HAVE to be asked if any helpful conversation is to take place. It is possible to fight without asking this question. It is not possible to converse without asking this question.

I.

The title of this issue of *Word & World* is "Sexual Orientation." The question this article seeks to address is whether, in fact, sexual orientation is the issue. Of course, there are many who believe it is precisely the issue. Many are betting their lives on their ability to convince others that it is the issue. There are others who believe it is not the issue at all, that insisting that it is the issue is a massive obstruction to helpful conversation.

One way of framing this question is to ask whether orientation is *the* issue, or whether it is *an* issue, or whether it is a non-issue. If it is an issue, what kind of an issue is it, and what bearing in such a case does it have on related issues? The fact is that people disagree not only about issues. They disagree about what issues are worth disagreeing about.

It ought to be obvious to any observer of the political process. Almost everyone wants candidates to "speak to the issues." But people disagree not only about what candidates should say when they do speak to the issues. They disagree about what issues are worth speaking to. Almost everyone is against "single-issue politics," unless the one issue they consider to be most important is being neglected or

JAMES BURTNES is professor of systematic theology and ethics at Luther Seminary and author of Shaping the Future: The Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Fortress, 1985; now available from Sigler Press).

treated in a way contrary to their own convictions. Whether something is considered to be an issue in a political campaign is a highly contentious question.

The same thing is true in moral disputes. There is a long tradition in ethics which insists on a clean distinction between moral and non-moral judgments. An illustration, according to this tradition, would be that "he led a good life" is a moral judgment and that "he had a good life" is a non-moral judgment. When one gets beyond generic sentences such as this, however, people who reflect on moral issues in this tradition disagree widely on whether a given item is or is not a "moral issue." It makes a great deal of difference whether something is judged to be a moral issue in this case because moral issues are handled with a different set of categories and methods than are those things judged to be non-moral issues.

Not all ethicists, however, insist on a clean distinction between moral and non-moral issues. Another tradition insists that moral considerations may invade any judgment. The judgment that a person led a good life and the judgment that a person had a good life may well have something to do with one another. In this tradition, there are no issues that are strictly and completely "non-moral" issues. The question gets to be the degree of moral content. Ethicists who work with this set of assumptions often talk about the degree of moral gravity, or moral density. Obviously, here also there is disagreement, and it makes a great deal of difference what degree of moral gravity is assigned to a given issue.

Decisions about such differences are not easy to make. Serious conversations about reasons for declaring something a political or moral issue, or assigning to it a certain degree of importance, are not easy to have. Most people probably think that morals, understood as broad social patterns of behavior about which words such as "good and bad," "right and wrong" are commonly used, are finally more important than politics. The stakes are higher because the moral behavior of a society is closer to the bone marrow of a people than are its political decisions. Widespread changes in social behavior may be difficult to understand and even more difficult to channel, but few have any question about long-term consequences of shifts in the moral consciousness of a society.

One thing that should be said clearly in an issue of a theological journal dedicated to "sexual orientation" is that the question of whether orientation is the issue, or even an issue, is a very serious question on which people of equal compassion, competence, and commitment disagree.

II.

Great power is exercised in political and moral disputes by those who frame the question. In this case, those whose agenda it is to blur the distinction between being and behavior, between sexual attraction and sexual activity, have been remarkably successful in focusing attention in our time on "sexual orientation," and diverting attention away from sexual behavior.

Perhaps the most important question in relation to "sexual orientation" as an issue worth disagreeing about is whether the word "orientation" should mean what it seems to say, or whether it should mean "orientation and behavior." If

“sexual orientation” is a term that seeks to locate gender attraction and only that, then we are in one kind of conversation. If “sexual orientation” means gender attraction and also carries the assumption that this attraction will be carried out in sexual behavior, we are in quite a different kind of conversation. The problem is that clarity at this point, in the climate now created, is very difficult to achieve. The question of clarity is even very difficult to raise.

One would think that it would be very easy, that being and behavior would be an obvious and elementary distinction. Who one is and what one does surely have something to do with one another. In almost any area of life that one can imagine, however, the distinction can be made and understood. If serious conversation about sexual matters is desired, should it not be obvious that all parties in the conversation could agree to begin, at least, with a clean distinction between being and behavior, between who one is and what one does? If we stay with sexual matters, for instance, few would reject the clear distinction between a man being sexually attracted to women other than his wife and the carrying out of that attraction by having intercourse with these other women to whom he is sexually attracted. Regardless of what we think of such activity, we do agree to make this clear distinction. “Orientation” and “behavior” are two different things.

We do it in many areas of life. Almost everyone knows that when a person says “I am an alcoholic,” absolutely nothing has yet been indicated about whether that person is currently drinking or has, for that matter, ever been a drinker. The statement is about who the person is, not what the person does. The clear distinction between desire for alcohol and the consumption of alcohol is recognized to be of very great importance. Alcoholics Anonymous and related recovery programs would go out of existence overnight if the distinction between being and behavior, between who one is and what one does, were abolished.

But this is precisely what has happened in the current moral and political struggles about sexual behavior. The conversation goes nowhere because the homosexual movement¹ specifically refuses any serious conversation about the importance of the distinction between being and behavior, between who one is and what one does.

The distinction is clear and important when speaking about heterosexual people. If a person says “I am a heterosexual,” the sentence says absolutely nothing about that person’s sexual behavior. Our society has worked out a number of euphemisms which are used to indicate that the person is in fact engaged in mutual genital activity of some sort. People may say such a person is “sexually active.” In some circles “having a relationship” is a statement about sexual behavior. Or the word “intimacy” may be used. (These euphemisms are extremely unfortunate expressions, but that is another matter.) The word “heterosexual” means only sexual attraction to the opposite gender. It specifically excludes any

¹I use the word “movement” to include organizations with offices, letterheads, and mechanisms for fund solicitation. It includes action plans, lobbying, networking, coalition building, putting on public events, etc.

assumptions about behavior. The opposite is true when speaking about homosexual people. Here "sexual orientation" is used specifically to include the legitimacy of sexual activity.

The deliberate blurring of the distinction between being and behavior, between who one is and what one does, first pressed onto the public consciousness by the homosexual movement, has now penetrated the entire discussion. The word "sexuality" is clearly a word about being, about who one is. It has, however, now been used so much to include both being and behavior, both one's sexual being and the assumed genital expression of that being, that serious conversation which seeks to work with the distinction is very difficult.

The ramifications in the political realm should be immediately obvious. We have laws prohibiting discrimination against people because of gender or race. These laws state that a person ought not to be discriminated against because of who that person is. In many jurisdictions now, "sexual orientation" is added to the list. If that means who a person is, the law is at least arguable. The trick done with mirrors, however, is the inclusion of behavior in the word "orientation" without actually saying it. Without knowing it, people are voting on anti-discrimination laws now for the first time regarding not at all who people are, but regarding what people do. Anyone who thinks this is an unimportant matter for the future of our society should think again.

Vast numbers of people on opposite sides of the dispute have unfortunately bought into this terminological blur. In Christian churches, for example, there is supposedly a dispute about "ordaining homosexuals." In fact, there is no such dispute. There is a dispute about ordaining practicing homosexuals. Those who believe it should not be done also believe that heterosexuals practicing intercourse with someone to whom they are not publicly married should also not be ordained. The issue is not sexual attraction. The issue is sexual behavior. To frame the question in terms of "ordaining homosexuals" is every bit as unhelpful as it would be to expect people to enter into serious conversation about "ordaining heterosexuals." The question of whether to ordain someone has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with sexual orientation. It has a very great deal to do with sexual behavior, no matter what a person's orientation may be.

Ordination serves simply as an instance for reflection. Since Protestants have no theological justification for any double standard for sexual behavior of clergy and lay persons (it happens to be one of the major issues of the reformation), it should be clear that the distinction between being and behavior made by people in most Christian churches regarding their pastors should also apply to conversation about lay people. The conversation is, of course, about the human race and how we shall conduct ourselves as we look to the future.

III.

People who work in the discipline of ethics find themselves struggling with what is often called “the is/ought question.”² It has something to do with the question of whether there is a clear disjunction between non-moral and moral issues, and also with whether and how one ought to distinguish between being and behavior. But “the is/ought question” is its own question with its own history and disputes and contributions to moral deliberation.

The variations on this theme are many. They range from large questions about whether and, if so, how the creation is put together in some kind of moral way³ to minute “metaethical” questions about how phrases and sentences function in moral discourse.⁴ No conversation can be considered to be morally serious which does not somehow or another deal with how conversation partners understand and work with “the is/ought question.”

The institution of morality, no matter how it is defined, exists only if there is some distinction between what one perceives to be the case and what one thinks ought to be the case. If only the “is” exists, if all there is to consider is that which is actually taking place, the institution of morality evaporates. Obviously, important disagreements exist about how to define the “is” and how to define the “ought,” about how these two are related if at all, even about subtle grammatical and rhetorical distinctions between indicatives and imperatives. But nobody who does ethics thinks there is no difference between “is” and “ought,” and few would reject the conviction that the distinction must be maintained, however the connections are articulated.

“Sexual orientation” has to do with what “is.” Of course, what “is” in this case is not entirely clear. We do know a great deal. We know that the sexual drive is a very strong one, not only in human beings but in all sexually reproducing creatures. We know that among human beings sexual appetites are enormously varied. We know that there is a great deal of evidence to support the contention that sexual attraction in the human species is almost never monogamous, that sexual attraction is both polygamous and polyandrous. We know that a large percentage of the population could find sexual pleasure achieving orgasm in the company of either or both sexes or, for that matter, by masturbating in isolation. We all know a great deal about “sexuality.” The question of why differences in the specific sexual orientation of individuals exists is part of the broader question of other diversities in the human family. Disputes about nature and nurture will go on for a very long time, even after the human genome project is completed and all the DNA is “mapped.” It is all very interesting, and the investigation of such things

²For a more technical and ample discussion, see my article, “Doing What Comes Naturally: Christian Ethics and the Is/Ought Question,” *dialog* 25 (Summer 1986) 186-192.

³For two major but very different accounts of this matter, see James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, vols. 1 and 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981, 1984) and Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

⁴See, for example, R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952).

should and will continue. But is any of this the issue in current disputes about sexual behavior? Does any of it even come close to solving the “ought” question?

This is a small effort to say that Christian churches are filled with people who believe that orientation is not the issue, that behavior is. These people have their own passions and drives about which they know a great deal. They are not untutored. They are not naive about sexual matters. They are perfectly capable of talking about these things. They do not appreciate being patronized. They are stunned when they find themselves ridiculed in the media by people they have elected to offices of leadership in their churches.

Most of them have struggled considerably to channel their drives and desires and to express their gift of sexuality in what they consider to be appropriate, moral, and Christian ways. Many are married, but many are not. Some have never been married. Some are divorced. Some have experienced the death of a spouse. Some choose not to be married, for varieties of reasons. Married or not, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, polysexual, whatever, these are people who believe that as human beings and as Christians they want at least to be in serious conversation and not merely the object of massive political attacks and manipulations. They have been called “homophobics” and “heterosexists,” they hope, for the last time. They expect from people who say they want to talk at least the willingness to talk. And that means also to listen, even to those with whom they have massive disagreements. They still believe that a conversation is a conversation, not a political campaign or a power play.

Is “sexual orientation” the issue? A great many Christian people think it is not the issue at all. Behavior is the issue, no matter what one’s orientation is or how that orientation came to be. Most of these people think they have very good reasons for believing that mutual genital activity belongs within and only within publicly declared marriage between one man and one woman, and that the current drive to establish “committed relationships” as an institutionalized context for such activity is deleterious to the long term prospects for a just and sustainable future.

This is a plea. Will the people who have succeeded in focusing the conversation on “sexual orientation” please listen to those who disagree? The stakes are very high. If it is conversation that is desired, is it possible that this conversation can at least be serious?