Morphing Categories: When normativity is being contested
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Why can the idea of gay marriage disturb some so deeply? Many people assume that opposition to gay marriage, is just another one of the symptoms of homophobia, but I think the reasons are more profound. With the issue of gay marriage, normativity is being contested rather than assumed. I suggest that if we look at this controversy as a sign of a deeper struggle regarding norms, then we might find our way into a more compassionate appreciation of what is at stake for all parties. I think that the reader who is willing to explore this analytical framework will be rewarded if they apply it to other cultural controversies.

The concept of gay marriage is a relatively recent tremor in a series of shocks delivered to western foundational premises. Let me name a few such jolts. A number of years ago the academic community announced the end of grand-narratives. Previously these accounts had joined us together as a community of shared meanings and values. For example, religion had offered storylines that "made sense" of our hardships and promised rewards for righteous conduct. However, the pro-choice versus pro-life abortion conflict is an example of how religion's traditional normative claims about the sanctity of life are being contested[1]. In a similar manner, the Enlightenment narrative purported to have ended irrationality and heralded the triumph of Reason. One needs to look no further than the wars of the twentieth century to realize that the triumph of Reason was illusory. Marxism was another grand narrative that claimed that salvation could be had in the material world; no need for an after-life. That account began to unravel with the news of Stalin's atrocities. Similarly, in our present time, ideological arguments are increasingly viewed as limited in their capacity to address our most pressing issues. This certainly is the case in America where competing ideologies have produced a panicking but paralyzed giant. In American culture, it seems that meanings have become the cause of, rather than the solution to, our problems. Competing meanings seem to point to immanent cultural disorder.

This begs the question, what effect do these conflicting accounts have on our individual psyches? To answer that question we need to appreciate

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[1] Questions of normativity relate to what ought to be. Normative judgements are judgements of right and wrong.

how meanings influence our experience. When someone states: "You see what you expect to see!" or, "You hear what you want to hear!", they are claiming that our meanings, influence or condition our perceptions. This applies equally to meanings we've authored as to those we've received. Received 'wisdom' refers to meanings that we've downloaded from our culture. We shape or distort our perception of the world to fit these culturally derived meanings. When this is the case, for example, when a Republican looks at a Democrat, they do so through a filter of their preconceptions— their downloaded meanings. Rather than seeing a complex human being that is in flux, they see a simplified caricature. The same holds true, if to a lesser degree, when a progressive looks at a conservative.

Like that 'Republican', many of us conflate the real with a symbol that is its stand-in. By way of contrast, I don't make that mistake with a menu. I don't try to eat the menu because I know that it is a symbolic representation of the food dishes that are available. In that instance I haven't conflated the symbolic with the real. However, in the example of the political opponents cited earlier, they do experience their map *as* the territory. When that conflation is stated explicitly—as I just did—the absurdity is blatant: a map is a symbol for, and not equivalent to, the territory. However, dangerous possibilities arise when conflation is *implicit*. For example, the 'Republican' mentioned above is viewing the other through an ideological filter of which they are unaware.

We can understand the *unconscious* nature of conflation if we take a moment to recall how moods act as filters that condition our experience. When in a mood, one cannot see the world without looking *through* that mood. A child does not know this. As a result, when a parent responds to their frustrated child with a comment like "honey, you're just tired" the child's frustration can quickly turn to rage. They reject their mother's interpretation that the problem is *in* them when they experience the problem as *out* there.

The ideologue feels the same way when someone challenges his or her meanings. We can understand some of the heat generated by ideological dispute if we grasp that the participants hold that they are not defending their beliefs or theories but rather their grasp of reality. Like Noah, ideologues believe that they can grasp what others can't see.

For both ideologues and fundamentalists disputes are not a matter of opinion or lifestyle—something that might be tolerated if not accepted. Rather these prisoners-of-meaning experience their adversaries as reality deniers. One doesn't compromise with someone in denial. To make such a

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deal would be the initial move down a slippery slope. The refusal to do so protects one's existential integrity. No wonder the disputes are so fierce.

Is there anything to be done about this state of affairs? Perhaps a way forward can be detected if we move deeper into this matter of conflation: what happens when we cover reality with an ideological fabric. Unaware of what we've done, we assume that our experience is independent of our meanings. We conclude that our experience *confirms* our meanings— "Obama is trying to destroy America, *I see the evidence of a society in decline everywhere I look*." Such an individual assumes that one person—in this case, the president—can be the *cause*, rather than a *sign*, of a cultural shift. Given that assumption, it is not difficult for him or her to gather "independent" evidence to support their position. To escape this unconscious solipsism one has to make a fundamental shift. One has to consider that meanings condition or even construct one's experience. We have to own up to the fact that we are looking at our opponent through an ideological filter—reducing him or her to a one-dimensional idea.

However, the thought that we construct, rather than receive, our experience, can be terrifying because it implies that we are trapped in the labyrinth of our own belief system. Any news from reality is just folded into the interpretive framework—leading directly to the conservative's bogeyman of cultural relativism and nihilism. We seem to be caught between two equally disastrous alternatives: either we ignorantly conflate reality with our beliefs (often the case with conservatives) or we conclude that there is no reality beyond our beliefs (often the case with liberals). This conclusion, might enable us to understand the ideological standoffs a little better… but, is understanding enough?

We might begin to find our way out of this cul de sac if we think of concepts as similar to categories. Categories help us *organize our meanings*. For example, the category of "flower" includes roses, daisies, tulips, daffodils, etc. And the category "rose" includes many types from Alba to Wichurana. These category systems help us organize our knowledge efficiently. It organizes our concepts, *not reality*—a rose doesn't know it's a 'rose', or a 'flower' or a 'plant'. Categories exist in one's mind but not in the world. There they form a kind of scaffolding of understanding. We stand on that platform of organized meanings and we count on its support. When categories change then our conceptual structure becomes unstable.

We can come to understand the existential significance of categories by looking at the original category. The primordial category is the one that makes the distinction between "me" and "not me". As the child learns to

make that distinction, he or she begins to separate, psychologically, from one's mother and develops a separate identity: "That which I can control is 'me' and that which eludes my control is 'not me'."

We can get a sense of the importance of this proto-category if we look at those occasions when it breaks down. This breakdown occurs most frequently during a dispute between intimate partners. In order to be intimate both parties had relaxed or dissolved the boundary between "me and the other". After all, when one joins with one's "soul mate" there is no need for a boundary, right? Or so we think during the initial stages of the relationship. However, when conflict eventually arises between these "star crossed lovers", primitive fear and rage are detonated. Extreme emotions result as one or the other realizes "you're not who I thought you were." But that is too mild. It is more like, "somebody is crazy here and *I'm not sure* whether it's you or me." That is, the proto-category is breaking down. As a result, one isn't certain from where the trouble is coming—am I causing this or is it my partner? This uncertainty threatens a total catastrophe for one's way of making sense. One feels an intense urgency to address the situation but the path to action is blocked by conceptual ambiguity and emotional ambivalence. This is why conflict between intimates can be so devastating. Such conflict is experienced as an attack on one's sanity, on one's basic frame of reference and its predisposition for action. To put it another way: one's normative categories are being challenged.

As our culture moves from the modern era into postmodernity, we find that our "naturalized" categories are morphing. The fiction that they are natural is being undermined. Homosexuality, for example, was once considered unnatural and therefore abnormal[2]. This is very disturbing if one believes those categories are eternally fixed. For example, when marriage was understood as "till death do us part", then separation and divorce was conceived of as shameful. Now, however, divorce is no longer considered abnormal. The normative function of the category of marriage has changed. And further change is in the offing. This current challenge to normativity seems to be what is provoking the reaction to the notion of gay marriage. What is being resisted is the reconfiguring of categories that once were thought to be written in stone. Categories instruct us as to what is to be considered normal and natural: "I'm married, so I'm not a pervert. I'm a good person, right?!" When the category gets contested, then one's notion of

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[2] Some of the synonyms for abnormal include bizarre, deviant, odd, and queer.

normal is challenged. Categories are historically contingent; not eternally fixed. They express what that particular era considers to be ideal.

We can get some perspective on morphing categories by reflecting on the modernity project. According to Zygmunt Bauman[3], a Polish sociologist, the modernity project's aim was to rid the world of ambivalence and ambiguity. Ambivalence is defined as conflicting impulses. "I want to go to the party; I want to stay home"; "I love you and I hate you"; "Some of what Republicans say makes senses—I can't believe I just said that!" Ambiguity occurs when more than one interpretation is available for the same event. "It could be read this way; or it could be viewed that way…each is equally plausible". Ambivalence and ambiguity can be very disturbing because there is no clear way forward. Neither our feelings nor the situation give definite direction. When our culture was in its late modernity era we attempted to banish these difficult states through the establishment of clear and distinct categories—or, as they say in the academy—binaries. Binaries are mutually exclusive categories, no overlap, no shades of grey: black/white; on/off, 0/1, left/right, man/woman; hetero-/homo-; good/evil; literal/metaphorical truth. No confusion…no subtlety, no nuance, no intermediate positions.

When gay marriage begins to surface as a possibility, those neat, distinct categories are disrupted…and the foundation of one's meanings—one's assumptions—begin to shake. The scaffolding is wobbling. And the ferocity emerges.

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[3] Bauman, Zygmunt. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity.