An Overview of the Issue of Homophobia

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In these times, the issue of gay rights has come to be seen as more or less the civil rights struggle of the generation. The flip side of this zeitgeist of gay rights, though, would be homophobia. The purpose of the present sample essay provided by Ultius will be to delve into the issue of homophobia in greater depth. The discussion of the essay will proceed across four main parts. The first part will consist of an overview of recent history, in order to provide context for current discussions of homophobia. Then, the second part will consider motivations for homophobia. After this, the third part will consider the ways in which homophobia can be construed as a moral problem. The fourth and final part, however, will reflect on the fact that the word "homophobia" seems to be thrown around too easily in these times, and that this misuse suggests the need for a more critical examination of what it means to live within a free and pluralistic society.

To start with, then, contemporary discussions of homophobia within the United States cannot be understood outside of the context of the recent Supreme Court ruling that legalized gay marriage all across the nation (Liptak, 2015). Before this sweeping decisions, judgment over whether homosexuals could marry was de facto left to the individual states to decide for themselves. The Supreme Court, however, decided that refusing to permit gay couples to marry was a fundamental violation of the civil rights of homosexuals, insofar as the status of marriage conferred certain rights onto straight couples that gay couples would be barred from accessing insofar as they could not get married. On these grounds, gay couples are now allowed to marry in every state of the nation, and state-level laws prohibiting such marriages have now been overridden by the federal-level mandate of the Supreme Court decision.

Within this context, homophobia takes on the meaning of something like the following: an American begins to be seen as inherently homophobic if he is not in step with the spirit of the times regarding gay rights, as this has been reflected in the recent Supreme Court decision. As the Anti-Defamation League has indicated: "Homophobia is the hatred or fear of homosexuals—that is, lesbians and gay men—sometimes leading to acts of violence or expressions of hostility" (para. 1). What constitutes hostility per se, though, can vary depending on the level of acceptance that the homosexual population has gained within a given society as a whole. Within contemporary American society, then, where gay people have been granted the universal right to marry, any suggestion whatsoever that homosexuals are in any way wrong to be who they are, or that they should not be granted access to the institution of marriage, would by implication seem like a gesture of hostility against homosexuals—that is, it would seem like homophobia. With this context now set, it is worth considering some of the main motivations that people may have for acting in what could be called homophobic ways.

It was only rather recently that homosexuality stopped being classified as a mental illness. As Datta wrote in December 2014: "41 years ago this month, homosexuality ceased to be a mental illness. Amid growing opposition from gay activists, and dissent within its own ranks, the American Psychiatric Association was begrudgingly forced to expunge homosexuality from the DSM-II" (para. 1). In short, then, a lot has changed very fast: even a few decades ago, the concept of homophobia would have almost not even made sense. And this would have been for the simple reason that homosexuality itself was considered a mental illness, with the implication that there would have been nothing more natural than for a healthy person to feel a basic aversion to people "afflicted" with homosexuality.

Another explanation for the motivation toward homophobia, though, could perhaps be found as far back as the pioneering psychological theories of Freud; and with the rise of the gay rights movement, this explanation has perhaps taken on greater and greater currency. This explanation suggests that if a person behaves in a homophobic way, then this is probably because he is repressing his own homosexual instincts: he hates these instincts within himself, and thus, through the mechanism of psychological projection, begins to hate others who freely act on those instincts. This paradigm can be seen, for example, in one of the characters of the popular film *American Beauty.* At the beginning of the film, this character is seen to harbor violent hatred toward homosexuals; and by the end of the film, it becomes clear that this is because the character himself is in fact a homosexual. This is a reversal from the traditional diagnosis of homosexuality as a form of mental illness, insofar as it essentially suggests that homophobia itself is the real mental illness.

Finally, a third motivation for homophobic attitudes may have to do not so much with individual psychodynamic factors but rather simply with the nature of one's own worldview. The Bible (New Revised Standard Version), for example, makes it quite repeatedly and consistently clear that homosexuality is a perversion, and that marriage can be nothing but a union between a man and a woman. Insofar as one adheres to this or some similar worldview, one almost objectively must harbor at least some attitudes that would seem homophobic in this day and age. Such a person would not necessarily "hate" homosexuals or wish them any kind of ill fortune. However, the point would still unavoidably emerge that according to the worldview itself, homosexuality is either a psychological or metaphysical perversion, and that it would simply be better to be straight.

Within contemporary American society, homophobia has generally been framed as a serious moral problem, akin to racism. Just as a racist discriminates against groups of people just because of the color of their skin, the homophobe would be a person who discriminates against groups of people just because of the nature of their sexual orientation. Insofar as this analogy holds, the conclusion that naturally follows is that homophobia is just as unacceptable within a free and liberal society as is racism, and that a person cannot excuse homophobia on ideological grounds any more than he can excuse racism on ideological grounds. That is, in today's world, one would not think that (say) a Nazi had any sort of real right to his racist ideas; rather, the common consensus is that those ideas are delusional and that they cannot be allowed to have any kind of real effects within the public sphere. Homophobia—here almost defined as having any sort of skepticism or misgivings whatsoever regarding the nature of homosexuals—is increasingly also being seen today as based on such delusions that cannot be allowed to have real effects within the public sphere.

At the pragmatic and policy levels, in any case, it is clear enough that it is not acceptable to deny any given person civil rights for any reason whatsoever, and that includes on the basis of his sexual orientation. Within the contemporary United States, any person—whatever his race, whatever his gender, and whatever his sexual orientation—must be granted the same equitable access to all civil rights as any other person. For homosexuals, this probably means that even if one does not choose to call their unions marriages per se, there would need to exist at least some sort of parallel structure of civil union that allows gay couples to gain access to the same civil rights that straight couples can access through the institution of marriage. At this level, and insofar as it is opposed to this basic extension of universal civil rights to gay people, homophobia is a serious moral problem that must be relentlessly contested by anyone who cares about living in a free and pluralistic society.

These days, however, it would seem that almost anything could be construed as at least potentially homophobic—and this is due to the sense of entitlement that would seem to have crept into many aspects of contemporary American civil life. Lukianoff and Haidt have written about this problem in their virtuosic article entitled "The Coddling of the American Mind": they have coined the concept of vindictive protectiveness in order to refer to the phenomenon by which people begin to think that they have a positive right to not be offended, or even a positive right to be liked by others. In principle, such vindictive protection is essentially hostile to freedom of speech and belief, even as it acts in the name of those very values. This problem has several things in common with what has come to be known as the problem of political correctness, and the main issue consists of people experiencing a basic confusion regarding rights and responsibilities within a free society.

A little more should be said about this matter. In essence, there is a fundamental difference between the right to be respected on the one hand, and the demand to be liked on the other; there is a fundamental difference between the right to physical safety and the demand to not be offended. Returning to the issue of homophobia now, the main issue here would be that the word "homophobia" itself would seem to have expanded to the point that it is now considered homophobic simply to dislike the stereotypical flamboyance of gay culture or to feel somewhat skeptical about what gay people may say about themselves. In other words, it is no longer considered adequate to simply respect the civil rights of gay people within the public sphere; the demand against homophobia now is that everyone almost has a moral responsibility to positively like homosexuals and to acquiesce fully to their own, often muddled and extravagant concepts of themselves.

In a certain sense, it can be suggested that this latter demand is quite simply un-American. On the one hand, it is certainly unacceptable to hate or condemn anyone for being who they are: within the public sphere, all people are entitled to equal civil rights; and if one is coming from a religious angle, then it is clear enough that homophobia—defined as actual hatred of homosexuals—has no place within a mature faith (Roen, 2016). On the other hand, however, it must be acknowledged that concepts of homosexuality are culturally relative; that there is no clearly defined consensus regarding why a homosexual is who he is; and that from the perspective of certain quite legitimate worldviews, homosexuality almost necessarily has to be viewed with a sort of vague skepticism, even as hostility is never acceptable. In this context, the suggestion can be made that perhaps the term "homophobia" should be reserved for the active and hateful persecution of homosexuals within the public sphere, and that people should be allowed to have their own sentiments and opinions within the private sphere without thereby being assigned this label.

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a discussion of the issue of homophobia. The essay began with a historical overview, proceeded to consider motivations for homophobia, turned to a consideration of homophobia as a moral problem, and finally reflected on the extent to which the attack on "homophobia" itself is a moral problem. A key conclusion that has been drawn here is that there is a fundamental difference between the right to be respected and the demand to be liked, and that homophobia proper should be used to refer to affronts against the former and not the latter.

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