

Kyle Keen

Definitions

In her article on knowledge and desire *Eros and Emergence*, Catherine Pickstock offers an interpretation of Plato's *Meno*, which has come to be called the "aporia of learning," that is chiefly important to any discussion about epistemology. "How can one seek to find out about that of which one is ignorant? How does one recognize a truth when one finds it, if previously one had been ignorant of this truth?"ⁱ This is the quandary of knowing: not, "what do we know," but rather, "How do we know what we know?"ⁱⁱ The task of epistemology is to answer this question and over the years theories of knowledge have risen and fallen in popularity and prestige. Pickstock continues her discussion of the *aporia* by relating Socrates' answer to those very questions. "As everyone knows, Socrates' solution to both sides of the *aporia* is to argue that before birth, our souls possessed perfect understanding, and that the process of human learning in time is less a matter of new discovery than of remembering."ⁱⁱⁱ This is an example of one of the first epistemologies to be widely followed, today called rationalism: the idea that all knowledge is *a priori*.

However, moving from epistemology to queer theory is often thought to be a rather large jump in thought, especially considering the relationship between the queer and the certain. This is because, at least within the terms of academia, the queer functions as an "erasing of boundaries."ⁱⁱⁱ Though it is important to note that this is not the only way the queer is described, in fact the word queer is commonly used in three distinct variations. Firstly, the queer might be used as an identity. "One common use of the word "queer" is as an umbrella term that refers collectively to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning, and other individuals who identify with non-normative and/or gender identities."^{iv} Secondly, queer might be seen as a revolutionary form of reclamation.^v Finally, in terms of erasing boundaries, the queer is made theoretical in the third configuration. "In other words, queer theory challenges and disrupts the traditional notions that sexuality and gender are imply questions of scientific fact or that such concepts can be reduce to fixed binary categories such as 'homosexual' vs. 'heterosexual' or 'female' vs. 'male.' ... 'queer' refers to the erasing or deconstruction of boundaries with respect to these categories of sexuality and gender."^{vi} This paper will be primarily focused on the third formulation of the queer, but not merely as erasing boundaries but rather the epistemological value that uncertainty, rather than certainty, can have in the formulation of Christian belief.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the value of a queer epistemology versus what I argue are "heteronormative" categories of the biological/natural. To show this I will provide two cases which are heavily influenced by issues of heteronormative vs. queer conceptions of the body. In the first case, I will explore the recent statements of one of the stars of the television show *Duck Dynasty* Phil Robertson. Here I will focus primarily on his conception of sin and natural formulations of sexual desire in relation to his "Christian" faith. In the second case, I engage with the work of the Pop icon Lady Gaga. Here I argue that Gaga queers the natural/biological categories by shifting the importance away from the identity (what I identify as natural for others and myself) to infinity (the infinite possibility of form).

Case One: Phil Robertson on Sin and Sexuality

I admit that while I was perturbed at the blatantly homophobic comments that Phil Robertson uttered in an interview with GQ magazine, but I cannot say that I was surprised. I will admit, though, that what was most taxing to my patience that the perfect opportunity to talk about something meaningful, such as the nature of sexuality in Christianity, was immediately overlooked in favor of reducing the controversy to an issue of freedom of speech. In my mind, freedom of speech is what we talk about when we don't want to talk about the elephant in the room: that being not if he is free to say it but if he ought to say it or if what he says has any value as a truthful claim. While this is an essentially ethical claim, we might have care to be clear on where an ethical claim comes from. In other words, what epistemological framework allows Phil Robertson to posit homosexuality as a sinful "lifestyle" versus his own "natural" category of heterosex. Based upon the article, it is clear that Robertson derives his ethical claims from two primary categories which might be loosely considered epistemological. Firstly, the nature of sin is an active choice to commit the sinful act. Secondly, that the natural state of sexual desire is biologically determined via anatomical differences between bodies.

The first claim is actually the second of his two controversial statements regarding homosexuality, though it does contain other sexual "deviancies" as well. When asked what he considered to be sinful, Roberts responds with the usual list. "Start with homosexual behavior and just morph out from there. Bestiality, sleeping around with this woman and that woman and that woman and those men," he says. Then he paraphrases Corinthians: "Don't be deceived. Neither the adulterers, the idolaters, the male prostitutes, the homosexual offenders, the greedy, the drunkards, the slanderers, the swindlers—they won't inherit the kingdom of God. Don't deceive yourself. It's not right."^{vii} What should be immediately noted about this claim about the nature of sin is twofold. Firstly, no direct definition of sin is given to legitimize these claims. Secondly, each act assumes a sort of agency of choice to "commit" a transgression. In the first case, this is important because without an active definition we, the receivers of his version of scriptural interpretation, have no standard by which to judge the truth of his claims. That is to say, without a definition of sin to go on, we are left only with an opinion that need not be weighed with an actual argumentative strength. In the second case, the assumption of agency creates a necessary calculus of desire. That is to say, when one assumes that agency might be actively related to sexual desire, then it posits the necessity of constantly calculating whether or not to engage in that desire. Thus, in the case of homosexuality, whenever I come into contact with a male I actively choose to be attracted to him whereas Robertson actively chooses to not be attracted to him. Or if I might use the example of bestiality, when one comes into contact with an animal one chooses not to be attracted to that animal.

This leads into the second claim, that sexual desire is naturally predisposed to heterosexuality. This claim has a slightly more nuanced view insofar as the argument is generally speaking the fetishization of the natural or biological categories of embodiment. "It seems like, to me, a vagina—as a man—would be more desirable than a man's anus. That's just me. I'm just thinking: There's more there! She's got more to offer. I mean, come on, dudes! You know what I'm saying? But hey, sin: It's not logical, my man. It's just not logical."^{viii} The logic is extremely simple here: the biological difference between males and females, specifically of the genitalia, is such that the act of

intercourse is only natural when they engage in intercourse together because the vagina has more to offer than the anus, procreative powers assumedly. What is striking about this argument though, is not that his argument is so extremely different from many gay and lesbian activists but rather that it is the same argument prioritized differently. In the case of the “homosexuality is a choice” camp, biology is used to denote the naturalness of heterosexual, that is to say, the importance of biology is located in a specific kind of intercourse. However, the opposite camp also has an importance on biology, but the prioritization is on the individual. That is to say, that the individual’s biological makeup itself is predisposed to homosexuality and thus gays and lesbians are “born this way.” The terms themselves do not shift, only the what aspect of biology is prioritized. In this way, the common arguments seem to leave us at an impasse. On the one hand, we have the logic of natural intercourse, and on the other, the logic of natural identity. The problem, which is thus exposed, is not an argument that can be won, but rather an equal fetish for, an unconditional and spiritual desire to fall within, the category of natural.

Case two: Born this Way the Queer Anthem

Or alternatively: Not Actually Born this Way but it’s a Catchy Title

How then do we respond to the heteronormative obsession with the natural? I find that often where prose falls short poetry arises to pick up loose ends. Thus I turn to Lady Gaga not only for her nature as a queering force but also for the poetry of her lyrics. There is a reason that she begins her song *Born this Way* with a soliloquy describing her “manifesto.” “This is the manifesto of Mother Monster... A birth of magnificent and magical proportions took place, but the birth was not finite, it was infinite. As the wombs numbered and the mitosis of the future began, it was perceived that this infamous moment in life is not temporal, it is eternal. And thus began the beginning of a new race, a race within the race of humanity, a race which bears no prejudice.”^{ix} This mythos which precedes the lyrics functions as a *methodos*, in Greek path, along which the lyrics become more than they are at face value. The word born this way do indeed seem indicative of the same heteronormative formulations that are found in Robertson’s theological categories, however, as I have noted Gaga is not using a traditional definition of birth to supplement her statement. Thus when Gaga says:

No matter gay, straight or bi
Lesbian, Transgender life
I’m on the right track baby
I was born to survive
No matter black white or beige
Chola or orient made
I’m on the right track baby
I was born to be brave^x

It is immediately clear that identity is taking a back seat to the purposes of birth. Neither race nor sexuality nor gender seem to be intrinsically problematic for Gaga not because they are unimportant to her schema, they obviously are, but rather because an infinite birth, such as she describes the new race, in never complete one’s identity becomes incidental to the construction of a community which can sustain that lack of identity. This is

perhaps most poignant in the line, “Whether life’s disabilities/Left you outcast, bullied, or teased/Rejoice and love yourself today/Because baby you were Born this Way.”^{xi} Disability is obviously just as important to Gaga as race, gender and sexuality; this is what is most immediately queer about her formulation of the monstrous as an epistemological category.

Gaga’s theology is the theology of the monster. In a short analysis Gaga wrote at the age of seventeen regarding nakedness and deformity, she notes, “The perceptions of the nude and the deformed both manifest out of a concept of the social body, and the ideological contrast and visible conflict that is created in their presence. In *Of A Monstrous Child*, Montaigne asks us to consider the way we look at the body, and at each other.”^{xii} The monstrous is a category for Gaga which deconstructs and forces the social to confront the humanity of a morphology which is inherently outside of a normative naturalness. What remains is a sort of trembling and disgust which, for Gaga, is the ultimate unethical result of heteronormative formulations of epistemology. This is where the bravery comes in as an importance of being infinitely born. It is the bravery to join this group of deformed and naked persons outside the normative bounds of reality. “It is possible that in our naked form, in our deformed, that we are not only exposing our vulnerability, our skin, our scars, our flaws, and our genitals. But we also are exposing our secrets.”^{xiii} And that monstrosity/deformity for Gaga is, as birth, not a completed project which is one thing, but rather it embodies the ever changing commitment to resist the temptation to safely fit within a normative dimension of the natural in favor of the bravery necessary to revel in the queer deformity of the monstrous. But this is not the queer theory of recent years beset by the *angst* and *nihil* of the postmodern, but rather a theological rejoicing of the queer which is embodied in Gaga’s paraphrase of Montaigne. “What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work the infinity of forms that he has comprised in it; and it is for us to believe that this figure that astonishes us is related and linked to some other figure of the same kind unknown to man.”^{xiv} Is this not the image of Christianity we ought to aspire to? The witnessing of the suffering of those who are deformed in all sorts of ways by social ideas of naturalness and more to join those who are deformed not by their morphology but by the disabling effects of the fetishization of the natural. Is this not the force that inspired Pope Francis bless and embrace Vinicio Riva, a sufferer of severe disfigurement due to neurofibromatosis?^{xv} This infinity of form which Gaga explains through Montaigne is a sort of absolute queering of epistemology: in the face of my uncertainty I must embody an ethnicity of queer knowing. In other words, I know that my knowing is short of God’s knowing, so I must endeavor to embody the knowledge of the immensity of forms in my own resistance to take on an identity.

ⁱ Catherine Pickstock, *Eros and Emergence*, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 99

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radial Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, (New York: Seabury Books, 2011) 3

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.* 5

^{vi} *Ibid.* 6

^{vii} Drew Magary, *What the Duck?*, *GQ Magazine*, January 2014, 2,
<http://www.gq.com/entertainment/television/201401/duck-dynasty-phil-robertson>

^{viii} *Ibid.* 1

^{ix} Lady Gaga, *Born this Way*, Interscope Records, 2011

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Jordan Carter, The Theory Monster, The College Hill Independent, February 4, 2010,
http://students.brown.edu/College_Hill_Independent/?p=2481

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Yasmine Hafiz, Pope Francis Blesses Man With Disfigured Face Displaying Healing Power Of Love, Huffington Post, November 2013

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