

Gay Man or Transwoman: A Metaethical Discourse on Gender and Sexuality

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Abstract It can be surmised that the Philippines in the 21st-century is headed towards the direction of accepting those who do not classify themselves in one of the gender binaries and those who do not believe that heteronormativity is the natural sexual orientation. The goal of this study is to inquire whether this is the case as there are some people who tend to display their natural contempt for the members of LGBTQIA+ community as in the case of Manny Pacquiao apologizing for the remarks that he had made about homosexual acts sans the willingness to reflect and change their biases for the sake of religion. I would like to show how the principles of meta-ethics, which is a branch of ethics that deals with the nature of ethical assertions, can be applied to the discourses on gender and sexuality and their implications to education by doing thematic analysis.

Keywords: *bakla, education, gay man, metaethics, transgender woman*

Introduction

It is quite interesting to take note how the Philippines has changed gradually its view of *bakla*. Looking back, one can say that our country has gone a long way. From the stereotypes and sweeping statements that they are up to no good, their image starts to be portrayed on a more positive light. Thanks to the continuous efforts of people, organizations, some forms of media and the like, they are able to prove that there is something more to them than meets the eye. Just like any other person who is deemed “normal” by society, they are also capable of achieving greater heights. One cannot just give out certain remarks about them that inadvertently delimit their possibilities and choices in life. Gone are the days when their social presence is equated merely with being hair stylists, make-up artists or beauty pageant veterans. In other words, labeling no longer works for them because they can be seen and felt practically everywhere.

To reinforce such a claim, there is even this survey that shows the Philippines being the most gay-friendly country in Asia and number 2 in the whole Asia-Pacific region next to Australia (Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Project, 2013). Indeed, we, Filipinos nowadays are exhibiting more tolerance¹ towards gay people than our counterpart, let us say 20 or 30 years ago. However, is it really the case that the Philippines have been increasingly kind towards gay people? This is an important question to ask in mapping out their true situation living in the Philippines. In her article entitled, “Is the Philippines really Asia’s most gay-friendly country?” Magda Mis elaborates on this.

¹ Devout Filipino Catholics are known to be too traditional but, as the figures, show they can be tolerant as well. In this context, tolerance means having the capacity to exhibit acceptance and respect.

What I found even more interesting was that although some 80 percent of Filipinos were Catholic, they seemed to be exceptionally tolerant² towards gay people - despite Pew's conclusion from the same survey that acceptance of homosexuality diminishes in places where religion has a central place in people's lives (Mis, 2014).

The Filipino society insists that gay people should be accepted and considered. In spite of our country's conservative Catholic upbringing, there seems to be a soft-spot in most of us when it comes to our relationships with them. It goes to show that we have evolved and become more respectful towards them even though some of their ways of living are beyond acceptable from the Filipino Catholic church's perspective. This attitude can be anchored on the belief that gay people are human beings also that are equipped with intrinsic value. On the basis of this, they are no different from the heterosexual and gender-conforming individuals. We were expected to be less accepting to them when religion comes into play but it is the same religion through which we try to debunk the myths that are associated with gay people.

There is an apparent contradiction when it comes to the situation of Filipino gay people. On one hand, they are thought to be part of society so respect should be accorded them. But on the other hand, majority of us believe that they are immoral. This means our acceptance of them is one thing and the question of them being moral or immoral is another thing. Mis (2014) contends that the belief that "society should accept homosexuality" is practiced in theory only and in reality, it remains to be inexistent (Mis, 2014). It can be

² In this paper, there is no strict distinction made between "tolerance" and "acceptance." However, some would say that they are not the same. Acceptance is more encompassing since it does not focus on an individual's supposed indifferent attitude to the members of the LGBTQIA+ but embracing the entirety of their personhood which is grounded on compassion, respect, and understanding.

seen here that when it comes to moral beliefs, Filipinos seem to be hostile toward gay people. The majority of Filipinos are Roman Catholics so it is not surprising that this kind of attitude emerges as soon as moral beliefs come into play. Since I find her concern noteworthy, this will serve as my starting point on how I am going to proceed with this paper and probe into the way gay men are represented in the Philippines through the framework of ethics. When it comes to issues that involve gender and homosexuality, it is easy for anyone to prescribe the good or right actions that any gay man should do but it is imperative to look into the nature of morality and moral judgments.

Mete-ethics and the Nature of Human Freedom

For this particular paper, I will look into the existential concept of absolute human freedom and see how it can be able to shed some light on the most common claims people make about the members of the LGBTQIA+ community and the things that are often associated with them. In the event that a person starts calling another person names that intend to degrade them in any possible way, the reality of that person's freedom to choose anything they want to be may be disregarded. They are being delimited into something they are not. For example, there is a tendency for someone who claims to be a devout Christian to give their negative remarks about any member of the LGBTQIA+ community in light of the perceived immoral activities that are more often than not associated with them. They are being called derogatory names like "fags," "homos" and the like and seemingly, these fail to see the entirety of a person that goes beyond their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Jean-Paul Sartre in his book, *Being and Nothingness* introduces the concept, "bad faith" wherein a person lies to themselves about something they have complete knowledge of.

Frequently this is identified with falsehood. We say indifferently of a person that he shows signs of bad faith or that he lies to himself. We shall willingly grant that bad faith is a lie to oneself on the condition that we distinguish the lie to oneself from lying in general...The essence of the lie implies in fact that the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding (Sartre, 1956).

When one speaks of bad faith there is an element knowledge that is involved in it unlike a simple case of lying. It can be inferred here that those who reduce the members of the LGBTQIA+ to mere sexual objects, laughing stock or somebody that causes them too many unpleasant feelings are in the constant state of bad faith. There is a possibility that these people know that their prejudices are showing but due to several reasons they remained in that state.

One factor seems clear about all the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms that we can see and embedded forms that members of the dominant group are not taught to see... Likewise we are taught to think that sexism and heterosexism is carried on only through intentional, individual acts of discrimination, meanness or cruelty rather in invisible systems conferring unsought dominance on certain groups (McIntosh, 1988).

The oppression that is exhibited by certain groups of people is deeply rooted on systems that are considered acceptable by society in spite of the attempts to teach that such an act is carried out by individuals (McIntosh, 1988). This can be applied to the case of the members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The profound belief that one group is superior to another and the denial that there is nothing wrong in it

contribute to the endless cycle of people oppressing others on the basis of the factors that the oppressed group has no control over. Due to factors like personal contempt, they fail to acknowledge that to the point of convincing themselves that they are way better than any of the members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

I believe the goal of using the existential concept of absolute human freedom to show how principles of meta-ethics can be applied to discourses on gender and sexuality takes place through analyzing the moral assertions that are made about them since the task of meta-ethics is to look into the moral values in the context of words and sentences and what they possibly say about the utterers of such assertions.

Methodology

For me to be facilitated, I used 2 principles of meta-ethics in showing how they can be applied to discourses on sexuality and gender namely: moral realism and emotivism. I searched for some articles that were written in the past 7 years that speak about the lived experiences of Filipinos that are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. I believe these articles reflect very well what people have to go through when they decide to disregard societal expectations as a result of living their truth. I used Rappler articles as I noticed that they are contextualized in the Philippines and they mirror the challenges that they have to face living in a country that still adheres to conservatist views about gender and sexuality.

Thematic analysis was used in the paper to determine the themes that these articles have in common. The articles that I have chosen are the following: “When two boys hold hands (2013),” “The LGBT as moral panic (2015),” “Manny Pacquiao, religion and bigotry (2016),” “The day we woke up and smelled our haters (2016),” and “Sodom, Gomorrah, and

the fate of gender equality (2019).” As a result of this process, I was able to draw out 2 common themes and these are the threat the LGBTQIA+ community poses to the societal norm and the perceived immorality that they commit the moment they came out as a gay person.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the paper has led me to a lot of themes that are noteworthy when it comes to understanding the plight of the members of the LGBTQIA+ community but there are two recurring themes which stand out that can be extracted in the analysis of these articles namely: the idea that the emergence of the LGBTQIA+ can be seen as a factor that can disrupt the ‘natural’ order of things and the common claims against them that they are immoral, shameful, sinful or plain evil. In this part of the paper, I show how metaethical discourses can be applied in the context of the two recurring themes from my readings of selected Rappler articles.

Moral Panic in the Context of Gender Equality

Cornelio (2016), in his article, “The LGBT as moral panic,” analyzes why many Filipinos were infuriated when same-sex marriage has been legalized all throughout the United States when in fact, we are far away from them. Moreover, people started to point out several passages from the bible that speak about this issue (Cornelio, 2016). From a sociological point of view, Cornelio cited moral panic as the answer to the questions raised in his article. This is the set of fears or anxiety that can arise as a result of threatening to disrupt the social order of things. In “Sodom, Gomorrah, and the fate of gender equality (2019),” Cornelio pointed out a similar scenario when it comes to resisting gender equality anchoring on the belief that to be “a queer is not only strange, it is evil (2019).”

Moral Realism, which is an ethical theory, can be applied in this context if moral panic were to be evaluated. This is the belief that ethical assertions exist independently of the person's mind and there are objective moral properties that we are supposed to follow if we would like to live a morally upright life (Mañebog et al, 2013). In the case of the situation of the members of the LGBTQIA+ community, they are often seen as the bad guys since they refuse to conform to standards that are imposed on them by their religion and the society that they are a part of.

People who turn to the Bible to defend their religiosity in the face of issues pertaining to gender and sexuality have this tendency to speak about their interpretations of Jesus' teachings as the absolute truths.

Homosexual orientation is, the Church teaches, "objectively disordered" and homosexual acts are "intrinsically disordered." The former teaching means that homosexual orientation, though not sinful, "is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder." The latter teaching affirms the tradition that "has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered'. They are contrary to the natural law and close the sexual act to gift of life (Salzman and Lawler, 2020).

When people start to mistake their beliefs for truths, this becomes problematic on the part of the members of the LGBTQIA+ community since they see someone who does not conform to the teachings of the church as disordered, sinful, disgusting, evil, etc. This is anchored on the belief that the sexual act itself should take place between two people of the opposite sexes since the end goal of such is to procreate and this is how the natural order works. Faith believers may

construe this to be the absolute truths that anyone who does not follow this may be seen as immoral. Following Moral Realism's line of thought, this can be interpreted by other people as a truth that is to be understood from an objective perspective since their stance is construed as not just a mere expression of one's personal take but a universal truth set by one's moral standards. This is quite evident also when students in Philippine secondary schools would exhibit their negative perspectives towards the members of the LGBTQIA+ community due to the lack of knowledge about issues surrounding them ("Just Let Us Be," n.d.).

The Supposed Immorality of the Members of the LGBTQIA+ Community

Based on the attempts to look into the possible nature of human acts in the context of male and female homosexuality, it can be seen here that the nature of moral judgments should also be discussed since there are competing claims with regard to their nature in searching for the objective truth of such a moral judgment. In a way, those who adhere to the belief that homosexuality is indeed immoral might say that the proposition is true.

It must be noted that only propositions are the ones that can be verified to be either true or false and it does not make sense to do the same to sentences that are not propositions (Mañebog et al, 2013). The proposition, "Homosexuality is immoral" is neither true nor false because it is not a real proposition. An emotivist can interpret this as "Do not commit homosexuality." She can also interpret the same proposition as "Boo for homosexuality." Both interpretations do not express real propositions since the former can be understood as an imperative sentence and the latter, exclamatory sentence. Both of these sentences do not contain truth-claims.

Shakira Sison, in her article, “When two boys hold hands (2013),” states that people instinctually think of anal sex when they see two boys who are in a romantic relationship. They ask themselves who’s the top and who’s the bottom to the point of reducing their worth to mere sexual objects. If a proposition that goes like, “Two boys in a romantic relationship is immoral” is understood in the context of anal sex, this very proposition is not verifiable since it can be seen as a reflection of what the utterer feels about this issue.

From the moment we’ve shown the first sign of non-conformity, we’ve been told our lives are sinful, shameful, and that it would be best if we just changed our most fundamental selves... We’ve sat through numerous homilies and religious teachings that say people like us deserve death and eternal damnation. We’ve learned not to flinch when our own relatives laughed at our friends and acquaintances, and sometimes even at us (Sison, 2016).

To equate homosexual acts with anything that is evil and shameful can present a strong feeling from a believer of this idea. When an utterer says anything negative about the members of the LGBTQIA+ in general, it reflects the preconceived opinions or prejudices that they have against them. Since this can be understood in the context of feelings, these cannot be considered as a legitimate proposition because any statement that they make can be seen as a reflection of their own individual preconceived opinions and hence can be likened to sentences like “I abhor gay people” or “Gay people will burn in hell.” They are not supposed to be verified to being either true or false since they cannot be considered as real propositions and hence, it does not make sense to ask whether these are true or false.

A Deeper Look into Filipinos' Perspective on LGBTQIA+ Issues

Since the Philippines is known for being a predominantly Christian country, we are taught to follow God's teachings which can be read in the Sacred Scriptures. Let us take for instance, Manny Pacquiao's comment on same-sex marriage.

He claimed that those humans who engage in sexual activities are worse than animals because the latter know these distinctions and will not do it with another being of the same sex (Tabuena, 2016). Aside from the fact that he had committed a mistake by stating that homosexual activities do not take place in the animal world, he was criticized for showing his bigoted belief. To appease the public, he had issued a public apology but reiterated that he was still against it (Tabuena, 2016).

His disapproval of same-sex marriage reflects a Bible-oriented stance. Our identity as a Christian nation contributes to the understanding that a moral action is something that God approves. In other words, morality is something that most of us equate with religious beliefs. It is implied in Pacquiao's perspective how our nation changes as regards to its treatment of gay men but it does not go too far by extending it to the things that they do.

The source of this attitude can be accounted for the influences of the Spanish which we all know, were the ones who introduced Christianity to our country. In J. Neil Garcia's article, "Male Homosexuality in the Philippines: A Short History" he stated that prior to their arrival, the precolonial society would accept gender-crossing since this was one of the cultural features of the early societies (Garcia, 2004). However, the Spanish did not take this well because these people were highly-esteemed in their respective communities. These people would assume the roles of the

babaylan or *catalonan* who perform various religious and civil functions (Garcia, 2004). It follows then that it was natural for any precolonial Filipino community to encounter gender-crossers Garcia noted that women who were mostly priestesses had full autonomy since they could “divorce their husbands, choose their children’s names, own property and accumulate wealth (Garcia, 2004).” Since the gender-crossers were considered as somewhat women, they had shared the same privilege with the regular women.

To the Spanish, however, these people would pose a huge threat to them so over the course of time the experiences of women, including the gender-crossers, would worsen. They would subject the gender-crossers to humiliation and suffering which was inflicted by Spanish machismo (2004). Since they had been most influential for the past 300 years, this treatment was and continues to be accepted as the prototype of what one’s attitude should be the moment she encounters gay men and women. If it is taken in the present-day context, the concept “homosexuality” is used interchangeably with “transgenderism” as what was pointed by Garcia (2004). Even though they are different both of them entail the same social effect and i.e. stigmatization (Garcia, 2004).

While working on this paper, I realized that Magda Mis was right about the claim on the Philippines being Asia’s most gay-friendly country. The Philippines still has a long way to go to live up to this title (Mis, 2014). This is so because as I see it, we tend to be selective on those whom we are going to accept. This brings to mind one of the conversation scenes in *My Husband’s Lover* between Zsa Zsa Soriano and her father. There was a point where her father asks her to change her ways (go back to her old self) in exchange of being welcomed and accepted in the family (Lana, 2013). Of course if we talk about acceptance, it is tantamount to saying that everything about the person, including her flaws, is accepted and loved.

So it follows that there should be no conditions when we decide to accept someone.

The way gay men are represented in media counters the claim that the Philippines is gay-friendly. The fact that there have been some aspects in any gay man's life that are kept hidden and not portrayed goes to show that we are still far from being friendly in the strictest sense.

To reinforce my reference about how the social presence of gay men (and even transgender women for that matter) is divided into two groups, I would like to use the case of Mimi Juarez, a transgender woman who acts in independent films. She won the best actor trophy in Cinemalaya 2013 for her film, *Quick Change*. Inarguably, she performed well in the film but why give her the best actor award? Should it be more appropriate if the best actress award is given to her instead? This act so perfectly reflects a typical Filipino perspective that classifies any transgender woman as a gay man who is on the proud and loud group.

But our beliefs are born of the social imagination. Perhaps, precisely because many of us have yet to warm up to the idea that womanhood is not predicated solely on genitalia, we will continue to define others and ourselves using a limited and limiting vocabulary. We had words once for transgender – asog, bayougin, bayok etc – but they seem to have all but disappeared along with the esteem we held for transgenders who were often also babaylan or catalonan or priestesses, during Spanish rule. It seems the process of colonization licked our language clean of diversity. Giving the best actor award to Mimi Juarez keeps this colonized language alive which has no words for and thus invisibilizes transgenders, lumping them together with all other deviations (such as

bisexuals) under the name of bakla. Mimi is still a man (Becky in Manila, 2013).

The reason why no distinction is made between a gay man and a transgender woman, as presented in this blog post, is because the Filipino language has a relatively limited vocabulary. We used to have local terms to refer to transgender people but the blog post cites the process of colonization that blurs such a distinction. This claim is reinforced by the fact that Juarez was given the best actor award. Although she does not mind at all, there can be a form of oppression that starts to build up in the guise of not properly acknowledging who she really is. The *bakla*, as how our culture understands the concept, has to do with the misalliance between a person's biological make-up and what they are feeling within their core (Baytan, 2021 p. 213). This misalliance can be accounted for their relegation into an inferior state since the *bakla* is twice "unreal" (Baytan, 2021 p. 213). The very gendered concepts that we have situate the *bakla* in an uncertain category. The *bakla* is neither perceived as man enough nor a genuine woman since no matter their insistence that they have a mind of a woman, this does not really count (Baytan, 2021 p. 213). They are physically male so they are not considered a woman in that regard (Baytan, 2021 p.213).

In identifying the borders of *bakla* and gay, Martin Manalansan in *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (2006) refused to use the term "transgender" to refer to *bakla* since most of his respondents would not cross-dress and exhibit effeminacy but "they drew on the *bakla* as a social category and as a pool of meanings in analyzing everyday events in terms of the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality (2006:56)." This shows that the *bakla* is a wide-encompassing term that touches on the consolidated traits of "effeminacy, transvestitism, and homosexuality and can mean one or all of these in different contexts (2006:57)." Although the *bakla* may share similarities with transgenderism since

in both cases, the person who identifies as either of the two may experience gender dysphoria by saying that they possess the “female heart (2006:57),” the *bakla* can also refer to the masculine *baklas* or the *baklas* who do not “cross-dress or exhibit effeminate mannerisms.”

The Implications to Education

Upon knowing how male sexuality and even transgenderism can fall under the jurisdiction of metaethics, an important issue may be given much attention to, and that is its implications to education. In a country such as the Philippines, it is necessary for any one of us to have access to education because we believe that this can be our gateway to success. However, not a lot of people can take advantage of the opportunity to finish a degree when factors like lack of money, occurrence of natural disasters and discrimination come into existence.

It is a common belief that schools should create safe spaces for everyone to learn. More than anywhere else, it is considered as a training ground for those who would like to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills that they need to acquire to thrive in society. But for other people, it is not just an institution where one can develop their intellectual aptitude. It is also like a second home to them because they build strong and profound relations with their teachers and classmates. This is an ideal situation for anyone who wishes to go to school. Although that is the case, there are still a lot of people who experience bullying in every form among the members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Schools should be safe places for everyone. But in the Philippines, students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) too often find that their schooling experience is marred by bullying, discrimination, lack of access to LGBT-related information, and in some cases, physical or sexual assault. These abuses can

cause deep and lasting harm and curtail students' right to education, protected under Philippine and international law (Thoreson, n.d.).

The experiences of the students from LQGBTQIA+ community are perfect examples of how an institution that they must feel secure being in may be the same institution where bullying, harassment and discrimination can thrive. Although the Department of Education (DepEd) has attempted to solve this compelling problem through enforcing a Child Protection Policy on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (Thoreson, n.d.), something is still lacking.

This report is based on interviews and group discussions conducted in 10 cities on the major Philippine islands of Luzon and the Visayas with 76 secondary school students or recent graduates who identified as LGBT or questioning, 22 students or recent graduates who did not identify as LGBT or questioning, and 46 parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, service providers, and experts on education. It examines three broad areas in which LGBT students encounter problems—bullying and harassment, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, and a lack of information and resources—and recommends steps that lawmakers, DepEd, and school administrators should take to uphold LGBT students' right to a safe and affirming educational environment (Thoreson, n.d.).

The report shows that the Philippines, no matter how we claim that we are gay-friendly, is a country that cannot fully accept the differences of others. It reinforces the belief that no definite amount of initiatives to put an end to this deep-seated problem can suffice. In spite of this, I believe that

something can still be done in order to solve the issues that contribute to this seemingly endless problem.

Since the Philippines is predominantly Catholic and we, as Filipinos, form the bases of our ethical standards on religion, it is just but proper for us to examine the very nature of the moral statements that we make on certain issues pertaining to divorce, abortion and respect for the members of the LGBTQIA+ community. We can apply the principle of Moral Realism in evaluating the moral judgments that we make about them. The moment that we try to make not so positive statements pertaining to what they do, how they behave or how they interact with other people, our biases are coming into play. Let us say for instance that in the statement, “Transgender people will rot in hell,” there is, certainly, no objective fact that can support this claim. The statement itself reflects a preconceived opinion that the utterer has on these people and their activities. Moreover, it is emotionally charged so it is quite evident that more than anything else, this statement also shows only the feelings that go with it and not the truth that it supposedly possesses.

When a person is evaluated based on moral standards using certain criteria that they have no control of (e.g. being frowned upon for being different and for not conforming to societal expectations), then that becomes unfair on the part of that person who is being judged. A person should not be blamed based on their gender identity or sexual orientation because this is something that they did not decide on. It just happened for some reasons so it is nobody’s decision to grow up developing a physical attraction to people of the same sex or to feel that they are trapped in a wrong body. In the event that a gay or transgender person has to be evaluated on their behavior, this should be done on the basis of what they have done or have failed to do but not on their gender identity or sexual attraction. If people develop the idea that their emotions are in no way relevant to moral standards then

probably they will start to loosen up and be welcoming to people of different backgrounds and cultures. Less people will feel discriminated in school hence a safe space for learning can be created for them.

Conclusion

This paper discusses first the nature of the goodness or badness of a human act in the context of homosexuality. Before coming up with prescriptions as regards to the things that any gay man should and should not do, it is imperative to ask what really makes an action good or evil.

After discussing the nature of the goodness of human acts, the paper shifted its attention to the nature of moral judgments. There are conflicting claims as regards to truth and falsity of a certain moral judgment which is also done in the context of male homosexuality. I used a proposition and analyzed it following the flow of thoughts of moral realism and emotivism. It is just appropriate to start with the nature of moral judgments since this will help us trace their foundations and nature which is needed once other branches of ethics are studied.

In this paper, I have highlighted a couple of points that show that gender issues like male homosexuality can be studied from the perspective of meta-ethics. I do not go so far to evaluate which among the meta-ethical theories is the most viable perspective to take since I deem it necessary to study first the nature of the goodness or badness of any human action and its implication to education. However, I think a study about this can be done in the future.



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