

On Covering: Queerness

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ACADEMIC ABSTRACT

The literature on the ethics of presenting as queer has been largely confined to a commonly acknowledged phenomenon called "passing," or fully concealing one's membership to a marginalized group. Often employed as a survival strategy, many are sympathetic to the idea that one should be able to pass if need be. With that said, many philosophers argue that it is inextricably tied to oppression in the sense that acts of passing are acts complicit with one's own oppression. Because of the usually drastic alteration to one's appearance or behavior passing encompasses, along with its connection to oppression, a larger problem has gone unnoticed: covering. Covering differs from passing as one's membership to a marginalized community is now background knowledge in any social interaction where one may cover. Covering, then, depicts the intentional editing of one's behavior to modify the way in which their marginalized status is communicated to an audience. It is because one has announced their status as a community member that this concept often surfaces without controversy.

This, at first, is intuitive. Why should someone be able to permissibly hide the entirety of their identity if partial concealment is impermissible? In the end, the very reason that covering is often excluded from the ethical discourse – that one has already announced their status as a marginalized community member – is actually a reason for my claim, that covering is wrong but passing is not, rather than one against it. I begin my argument with a negative claim: there is no duty not to cover. After explaining why this is the case, I argue for my second, positive claim: there is a duty to refrain from covering. If successful, my argument should show that a duty not to pass, or to be out, is too demanding. This will offer a better starting point for a relocation of some duty, which I argue should be on covering. If it is placed on covering, then demandingness concerns are circumvented and the goal of a duty to be out is more concrete.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

My thesis focuses on moral obligations that one may have as a member of the queer community. In other words, I am focused on how general moral duties intersect with queer individuals. An example of this could be the thought that queer people have an obligation to inform others of their queerness, or that queer people should tell others that they are queer.

In my thesis, I focus on two behaviors: passing and covering. For queer people, passing would be denying their queerness in an attempt to have others view them as heterosexual and cisgender. Covering, on the other hand, does not deny one's queerness; covering downplays one's queerness. Put another way, those passing deny their queerness while those covering announce it, but attempt to minimize it. It has been commonplace to believe that queer people have a moral obligation to come out of the closet. The argument is this: queer people have a duty not to pass. The reason this argument has been pushed forward is because it is believed that the oppression queer people face would significantly deteriorate if more queer people would simply acknowledge their queerness. My thesis argues against this for two reasons. The first is that I believe that a duty to come out of the closet places a significant and unfair burden on queer people. The second is that I believe queer people do have moral obligations but that they primarily surface once they come out of the closet, but not before that point.

My research predominately focused on why queerness was accepted. In other words, what made it the case that people who originally disagreed with the concept of queerness changed their minds? Most thoughts pointed to the idea that logical arguments about queerness were not changing minds but rather emotional appeals, such as knowing someone who is queer. From here, I began to think that any moral obligations related to queerness came after one announced their queerness. Prior to announcing one's queerness, a closeted queer person is not contributing to societal views of queerness in the same way as an out queer person. This gives us a good starting point to discuss these complex moral obligations without presenting a significant burden to a group that is already oppressed.

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## 1. Introduction

When Lance Bass came out as gay, he offered the following message:

I want people to take away from this that being gay is a norm... that the stereotypes are out the window... I've met so many people like me that it's really encouraged me. I call them SAGs – the straight-acting gays. We're just normal, typical guys. I love to watch football and drink beer.<sup>1</sup>

We are not able to definitively know Bass' intent in making this statement, but it is reminiscent of a behavior called 'covering': while Bass acknowledges his homosexuality, he highlights hobbies of his that are coded as 'straight' to appear more palatable to a heteronormative audience.<sup>2</sup> By defining gay men that partake in stereotypically straight activities as 'normal' and 'typical,' Bass seems to implicitly support the claim that gay men who partake in other activities are not 'normal' or 'typical'. This example is extreme, and it may be complicated by other factors, such as his fame. That said, it highlights general features of covering that surface in more common, or 'everyday,' examples; the common examples are the ones I focus on here.

Covering may be contrasted with a more widely-known phenomenon called 'passing', which involves a complete concealment of one's membership in a marginalized community.<sup>3</sup> Before coming out, Bass was passing as straight. While the coverer is acknowledging his identity, but trying to make it more palatable to heteronormative audiences, the passer is denying that he has this identity at all.

Thus far, passing has dominated discussions about the ethics of presenting as queer. Currently, much of the debate has centered around the question of whether it is permissible to pass,

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<sup>1</sup> Laudadio, Marisa. "Lance Bass 'I'm Gay'." *PEOPLE.com*, 7 Aug. 2006, <https://people.com/archive/cover-story-lance-bass-im-gay-vol-66-no-6/>.

<sup>2</sup> Yoshino, Kenji. *Covering the Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*. Random House, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Silvermint, Daniel. "Passing as Privileged." *Ergo, an Open Access Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 20191108, 2018, doi:10.3998/ergo.12405314.0005.001.

or whether queer people have an obligation to come out of the closet. The thought that one has a duty to come out has been endorsed, to various extents, by Cooley, Mohr, and Silvermint, among others.<sup>4</sup> The idea that we have a duty to come out initially seems intuitive – surely, if queer people have any duties related to how they present themselves, then they must have a duty to acknowledge their queerness. Nevertheless, while I am sympathetic to the claim that queer people may have duties regarding representation, I reject the conclusion that they have a duty to come out.

In this paper, I argue for the following two claims:

**Claim One:** There is no duty to come out.

**Claim Two:** There is a duty not to cover.

These claims, taken together, suggest the following line of argument: there is no duty to come out, but if one chooses to come out, then one has a duty not to cover. At first, these claims seem to be in tension with one another. This is because, if true, they result in the following conclusion: one may permissibly conceal 100% of their queer identity but one may not permissibly conceal 90%, or some part, of it. Nevertheless, a proper understanding of our moral obligations of beneficence and non-maleficence will illustrate why these two claims are both true and mutually compatible.

My paper will proceed as follows. Section 1 consists of two parts. In Section 1.1, I argue for the following conditional: if there is a duty to come out, then it must be a duty of beneficence. In Section 1.2, I show that a duty to come out necessarily cannot be a duty of beneficence. Therefore, there is no duty to come out. Section 2 proceeds in three parts. In Section 2.1, I highlight

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<sup>4</sup> See more: Cooley, Dennis, et al. “Complication Reason(s) and a Praxis for Coming Out” *Passing/Out: Sexual Identity Veiled and Revealed*, edited by Kelby Harrison and Dennis Cooley, 1st ed., Routledge, 2012, pp. 43–74. See also: Chekola, Mark, and Nancy Arden McHugh. “The Ontological Foundations of Passing.” *Passing/Out: Sexual Identity Veiled and Revealed*, edited by Dennis Cooley and Kelby Harrison, 1st ed., Routledge, 2012, pp. 1–12.; Mohr, Richard. 1988. *Gays/Justice: A Study of Ethics, Society, and Law*. New York: Columbia University Pre.; Silvermint, Daniel. “Passing as Privileged.” *Ergo, an Open Access Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 20191108, 2018, doi:10.3998/ergo.12405314.0005.001. These authors do not all completely agree, but they do all make the argument that there is something morally impermissible about staying closeted.

an asymmetrical feature between the concepts of passing and covering. In Section 2.2, I argue that this asymmetry makes it the case that covering harms the queer community, whereas passing merely fails to provide a benefit. Thus, I argue that a duty not to cover is a duty of non-maleficence. As such, we may be obligated to adhere to a duty not to cover because of our general duties not to harm. In Section 3, I consider three potential objections.

Before I move on to Section 1, however, I want to clarify one aspect of my paper. As of now, my argument is specific to LGB people – lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. While the concepts of covering and passing are prevalent among other marginalized groups, each group navigates their oppression differently. As such, the way these concepts are employed will reflect these differences. Because of this, it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the ways in which covering may or may not apply to other groups. That said, I hope to expand the scope of this project in future work.

Lastly, for sake of clarity, I would also like to give definitions of the concepts ‘passing’ and ‘covering’ as well as examples of each.

*Passing:* Actions that ensure a member of an oppressed group is not identified as a member.<sup>5</sup>

- *Passing as Straight:* Jamie is not out to her family and friends, so to reference her girlfriend, she changes all terminology that would expose her sexuality to reinforce the concept that she is straight. For instance, referring to her girlfriend as her ‘boyfriend’ or using masculine pronouns. Jamie is passing as straight.

*Covering:* Actions that tone down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream.<sup>6</sup>

- *Covering Womanhood:* Emily knows that her work environment is misogynistic and only hired her to meet a quota. Emily does not completely conceal her womanhood because of this, but she does choose to dress in a more masculine manner. Emily is covering her womanhood.

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<sup>5</sup> Silvermint (2018), page 2.

<sup>6</sup> Yoshino (2007), page 837.

## 2. Against a Duty to Come Out

In this section, I argue for my first claim: there is no duty to come out. My argument proceeds in two steps. In Section 1.1, I argue that if there is a duty to come out, then it is a duty of beneficence (or one that requires an agent *to* act).<sup>7</sup> In Section 1.2, I show that a duty to come out is not a duty of beneficence, so there is no duty come out of the closet.

### *Section 2.1: Coming Out as Beneficence*

There are two general conceptions of duties that I focus on in this paper: duties of beneficence and duties of non-maleficence.<sup>8</sup> Here, I will focus on the former. For Q to have a duty of beneficence to P, it must be the case that (1) P be in danger of a significant injury or loss, and (2) Q does not subject herself to significant costs or burdens in the process.<sup>9</sup> To see a classic example of a duty of beneficence, consider Peter Singer's drowning child example.<sup>10</sup> In this example, there are two agents: the drowning child, let's call them P; some nearby adult, let's call them Q. Given the age difference, we assume Q is able to swim. This is important because it allows for the second criterion to be met. If Q can swim, then Q will likely not suffer the same fate as P. This case also meets the first criterion because P's life being lost is a generally considered a

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<sup>7</sup> These duties are often referred to as, more broadly, positive duties. I use them synonymously for sake of clarity throughout this paper, but they are not truly synonymous. Positive duties refer to a broad range of duties that require one to act. Duties of beneficence are a subset of these, which require someone to act for another's benefit.

<sup>8</sup> While this is not an exhaustive list, most of our commonly-accepted duties fall into one of these two categories. See more on other *prima facie* duties: Ross, W. D. (1930). *The Right and the Good. Some Problems in Ethics*. Clarendon Press.

<sup>9</sup> These criteria do not come without controversy. I am not arguing we should use them. I merely recognize they significantly inform our philosophical discussion on moral obligations. As such, I position my argument within this system. To explore these criteria more, see here: Hooker, Brad (2009). The demandingness objection. In T. Chappell (ed.), *The Problem of Moral Demandingness*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 148-162; Lichtenberg, Judith. "Negative Duties, Positive Duties, and the 'New Harms.'" *Ethics*, vol. 120, no. 3, 2010, pp. 557-578., doi:10.1086/652294.; Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1972, pp. 229-243. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2265052](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265052).

<sup>10</sup> Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1972, pp. 229-243. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2265052](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265052).

significant loss. Because both criteria are satisfied, it is generally accepted that Q, the adult, bears a duty of beneficence to P, the drowning child.<sup>11</sup>

As stated earlier, many philosophers argue that we may justify a duty to come out on similar grounds as a duty to save the drowning child. The thought is that the queer community faces significant danger for being queer: wrongful termination from their employment, ostracization, family disownment, and even physical violence and murder.<sup>12</sup> Studies have shown that dangers decrease as acceptance increases.<sup>13</sup> From this, the question becomes one of how acceptance is usually generated. Many studies have shown a positive correlation between a non-queer person's interactions with queer people and a non-queer person's acceptance of queer people. In other words, if someone interacts with someone that they know to be queer, then they are more likely to accept queer people. Again, this is not always the case; many people will not accept queer people even if they know many queer people. Despite that, the positive correlation between familiarity and acceptance is significant enough that many take it to be a causal factor instead.

These studies have been a driving motivation for a duty to come out on the basis that not coming out harms the queer community. If we assume that more queer people coming out means more acceptance for the queer community, then it makes sense to believe that coming out benefits

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<sup>11</sup> Again, this is not an uncontroversial statement. That said, it is generally agreed upon, and the disagreement is beyond the scope of this paper. See more on why there are no duties of beneficence:

<sup>12</sup> Wrongful termination examples: "Bostock v. Clayton County." *Oyez*, [www.oyez.org/cases/2019/17-1618](http://www.oyez.org/cases/2019/17-1618). Accessed 8 Dec. 2019. Carter, Bill. "ABC Is Canceling 'Ellen'." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 25 Apr. 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/25/arts/abc-is-canceling-ellen.html>.; Examples of physical violence and murder: Mckinley, James C. "Elliot Morales Convicted of Hate Crime Murder in West Village Shooting." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Mar. 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/10/nyregion/elliott-morales-convicted-of-hate-crime-murder-in-west-village-shooting.html>.; Sheerin, Jude. "Matthew Shepard: The Murder That Changed America." *BBC News*, BBC, 26 Oct. 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45968606>.

<sup>13</sup> "In Gay Marriage Debate, Both Supporters and Opponents See Legal Recognition as 'Inevitable'." *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, 18 Oct. 2018, <https://www.people-press.org/2013/06/06/in-gay-marriage-debate-both-supporters-and-opponents-see-legal-recognition-as-inevitable/>. Morales, Lymari. "Knowing Someone Gay/Lesbian Affects Views of Gay Issues." *Gallup.com*, Gallup, 12 Nov. 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/118931/knowning-someone-gay-lesbian-affects-views-gay-issues.aspx>.

the queer community. As such, it might be thought that closeted queer people have a duty of beneficence to the queer community. In this section, I have argued that, if there is a duty to come out, then it should be categorized as one of beneficence. In the next section, I argue that because a duty to come out is necessarily a duty of beneficence, there cannot be a duty to come out.

### *Section 2.2: There is No Duty to Come Out*

In the previous section, I discussed what defines a duty of beneficence. Then, I explained why coming out should be understood as a duty of beneficence. In this section, I will argue that a duty to come out cannot meet the criteria of a duty of beneficence. Therefore, a duty to come out cannot be a duty of beneficence. Because of this, there is no duty to come out of the closet.

Let's recall the criteria for a duty of beneficence: (1) that some agent, P, be in danger of a significant danger; and (2) that some agent, Q, not be subject to a significant costs or burdens. We can conceive of the queer community and the closeted individual as follows: (1) the queer community is in danger of a significant harm, let's call them P; (2) the queer individual, let's call them Q, is aware that their act of coming out of the closet is likely (if not necessary) to increase acceptance of queer people. So, it initially seems that a situation like this meets the criteria for a duty of beneficence.

This is mistaken. Recall that, in the drowning child example, it was true that Q did not significantly risk anything in saving P. But this is not the case with a closeted queer person. Imagine how this might look in a hypothetical example of someone coming out:

*Coming Out:* The queer community faces significant danger. Jack is a closeted queer person. If Jack comes out, then the queer community's dangers will decrease. If Jack does not come out, then they will remain stagnant.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that it is usually extremely unlikely that one queer person coming out will change *societal* impressions of queerness. That said, duties of beneficence incorporate collaborative actions. In light of this, Jack's individual action need not induce societal changes; it must merely contribute to them.

The first sentence of *Coming Out* shows that Criterion 1 is met. So, assume Jack comes out. In doing so, Jack has just told the world something about himself. Specifically, he has told the world that he is gay. By sharing this information, Jack is now a potential victim of the very dangers he was attempting to mitigate. By coming out, Jack may have decreased such dangers to the queer community, but he could not plausibly have done so in a way that allows him to completely avoid these dangers. Because of this, *Coming Out* falls prey to a significant problem: Jack cannot meet both of the criteria for a duty of beneficence at the same time.

One might object that not *every* queer person is put in danger by coming out. This may be true, but it will not save a duty to come out. Imagine *Coming Out* again – this time, without the significant harms Jack is presented with in the original example. By imagining this, we must also imagine what conditions make it the case that Jack would definitely not be harmed upon coming out. For Jack to know that this would be the case, it would have to be because Jack was aware that the queer community was also not in danger of these harms. So, if we stipulate that Jack has nothing to fear, then we must also stipulate that the queer community has nothing to fear. But once this is the case, we run into the same problem as the original example does – the only difference is which criterion is not met. So, meeting one of the criteria for a duty of beneficence seems to usually mean that the other will not be met.

There is still reason to be skeptical about my claim. The reason for this is because it is not difficult to imagine some hypothetical person (call them Person H) who does not meet the criteria I have set out here. In other words, Person H is a closeted queer person who will not be subject to some significant harm upon coming out, but *will* bring about some significant benefit. In a case like this, it seems that there is room to dispute my claim.

The difficulty with cases like these is that they are easy to imagine, but they are difficult to find. Much of the difficulty associated with coming out, and the time directly after, relates to the individual who is coming out and how they process it. The process of coming out is often (or only) made difficult by external stimuli, such as the reactions from friends and family, or posts seen on social media. Each individual has a different and complex set of external stimuli in their life, the intricacies of which are known only to that individual. This makes it difficult to know that the hypothetical individual who does have a duty to come out, at least according to the criteria I have set out here, tracks onto an actual person, such that we would know that some actual person does have a duty to come out. So, my claim does need some qualification to make room Person H, and others like them, but I question the likelihood of being able to know whether some actual person will be in the position that Person H is located.

In this section, I have made two arguments. The first is a conditional: if there is a duty to come out, then it is a duty of beneficence. My second argument negates the consequent: it is not a duty of beneficence. This is because coming out leads to a queer person putting herself in the very dangers she was trying to prevent for others. Since both criteria could not be met at the same time, coming out cannot be thought of as a duty of beneficence, barring cases like Person H. From this, the negation of the consequent of my first argument leads to the negation of the antecedent. So, there is no duty to come out.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Again, Person H may have a duty to come out. I do not question that. I question whether an actual person would (or currently does) not meet the criteria, such that they would have a duty to come out.

### 3. In Favor of a Duty not to Cover

Thus far, I have shown that a duty to come out should be conceived of as a duty of beneficence. Because of the similarities between passing and covering, it makes sense to believe moral considerations pertaining to passing would similarly apply to covering. But as I will argue, this belief falsely assumes that passing and covering are relevantly analogous. While they appear quite similar, there is at least one significant distinction between them: passers are not recognized as queer, but coverers *necessarily* are recognized as queer. A logical consequence of this asymmetry is that, whether desired or not, coverers contribute to the representation of the queer community in a way that passers are not able to. In light of this, it seems that coverers are in a unique position to harm the queer community that passers cannot be in *unless* they are no longer passing.

A quick clarification is needed here about the sort of covering that I am targeting. As Silvermint notes, “whether an individual is passing or covering depends in part on the person that’s observing her.”<sup>16</sup> The example given is as follows: “to an employer who knows you’re a lesbian, refraining from holding your girlfriend’s hand at an office party is an act of covering. But to an amorous coworker who stubbornly persists in the assumption that you’re straight... refraining from holding hands is instead an act of passing as straight.”<sup>17</sup> The example could work the other way as well, in which one attempts to pass, but due to observer knowledge, covering is conveyed. It also could be the case that an individual does not attempt to do either, but the observer interprets the actions as ones of passing or covering.

The distinction here is between *active* and *passive* acts. So, for the purposes of this section, active covering is covering that the individual intends to do, regardless of what the audience knows

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<sup>16</sup> Silvermint (2018), page 11.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

or believes. Passive covering is, then, dependent on audience knowledge. I am concerned only with active covering. Including passive covering means that the queer individual would be responsible for when others thought that they were covering. I believe that this would be too great of a burden, but think that active covering is easily within the frame of my argument.<sup>18</sup>

With this in mind, here is how my argument advances: In Section 2.1, I establish this asymmetrical feature of passing and covering and explain the importance of it. In Section 2.2, I show that an implication of this feature is that covering presents an active harm to the queer community, rather than a failure to provide a benefit. In Section 2.3, I conclude that there is a duty not to cover. Following this discussion, I consider the three most pressing objections to my view.

### *Section 3.1: Asymmetrical Representation*

In this section, I highlight an asymmetry between passing and covering that pertains to representation of the queer community. To understand why this asymmetry is important, though, I turn back to the motivating force for a duty to come out. As philosophers argue, and studies show, there seems to be a positive correlation between increased familiarity with queer people and increased acceptance of queer people. From this, the message is clear: the queer community stands to be benefitted if more queer people come out, so closeted queer people have a duty to come out. The desire for increased acceptance is an understandable and obvious one, but closeted queer people do not *decrease* acceptance of queerness. They simply fail to increase it.

Because it is thought that societal acceptance of queerness originates in perceptions of queerness, passers are not in a position to alter such acceptance because they do not contribute to perceptions of queerness. The same cannot be said for coverers. By definition, coverers are known by others to be part of the queer community. So, coverers are always in a position to alter the way

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<sup>18</sup> For sake of clarity, I continue referring to ‘active covering’ simply as ‘covering’.

society perceives queerness, and thus, the acceptance that is coupled with it. The reason that coverers have a potential to make an impact on how the queer community is perceived by non-members can be explained by appeal to a view that is endorsed by standpoint epistemology: the Situated Knowledge Thesis.

*Situated Knowledge Thesis:* For certain propositions  $p$ , whether an epistemic agent is in a position to know that  $p$  depends on some non-epistemic social facts about that agent.<sup>19</sup>

It is often thought that group membership is one of these non-epistemic facts. If this is the case, then the distinction between passing and covering becomes more salient. Passers are thought to be non-queer; coverers are known to be queer. So, passers are never thought to have situated knowledge in virtue of group membership to the queer community. Conversely, coverers are thought to have such knowledge.

This situated knowledge often confers a sense of representational authority. In other words, being in a member of some group is thought to be sufficient to have knowledge about the group that non-members generally are presumed to lack. As such, members of groups are thought to have a sense of authority when speaking of topics pertaining to that group. It should be clear that being perceived as having this authority does not mean that one truly has this situated knowledge. In other words, the Situated Knowledge Thesis need not be true for group members to be taken by others to be authorities on matters related to their group. Rather, the Situated Knowledge Thesis must only be believed to be true for group members to have this authority. So, coverers do not actually need to know anything about the queer community to be perceived as an authority on queer topics.

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<sup>19</sup> Toole, Briana (forthcoming). From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression. *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*.

In this section, I have established an asymmetrical feature between passing and covering that stems from the representation of the queer community. Passers are inherently excluded from such representation because they are not seen as queer. Coverers are necessarily seen as queer, so they necessarily contribute to queer representation. In the next section, I argue that this representative position is coupled with moral obligations that cannot be considered for passing because passers are not representatives.

### *Section 3.2: Covering as a Harm*

In the previous section, I discussed an asymmetry between passing and covering. Specifically, I showed that this asymmetry grants coverers a perceived authority over queer-related topics that is not granted to passers. In this section, I explain what falls out of this asymmetry. In particular, coverers being seen as queer representatives means that what they say about the queer community is taken more seriously than it would be if it were said by a non-member. Because of this, coverers are in a unique position to harm the queer community that both passers and non-queer people are unable to occupy.

First, I would like to emphasize the strength of situated knowledge, or rather, the perception of it. Generally, we take one's membership in a group to be considerably weighty when discussing topics related to that group. What I mean by this is that it is usually assumed that if one is a member of the group, then they will know more about the group than non-members.

Take the following example:

*All-Female Dormitory:* A prospective student, Student P, is touring School Y and comes across two current students. Student 1 is a resident of an all-female dorm, and Student 2 is not. Student P asks Students 1 and 2 about the living conditions of the all-female dormitories on School Y's campus. Student 1, the resident of an all-female dorm, says the conditions are poor while Student 2 claims that the conditions are good.

We can imagine that Student P likely weights Student 1's (the resident) answer significantly higher than that of Student 2's. We can imagine that, even if Student 2 spent more time in the all-female dormitory, Student P would still weigh Student 1's answer higher than Student 2's. Assuming that this is the case, if someone were to ask P why she weighted 1's answer over 2's, it is easy to imagine that P would respond with something along the lines of "But she *lives* there!".<sup>20</sup> This shows that there is a natural attraction to situated knowledge. This is likely because Student P believes that, if she were in Student 1's position, that she would have access to the same knowledge and come to the same conclusion.

The features in *All-Female Dormitory* are not unique to this example of situated knowledge. These are general features about situated knowledge. In general, situated knowledge is appealed to quite frequently and is thought to be considerably weighty in terms of justifying one's beliefs. Again, a member of a group does not actually have to have this knowledge in order to be perceived by non-members as having it. They just have to be perceived to be in a position to have it.

Let's now refer back to Lance Bass. Bass is a known member of the queer community. As such, he is presumably in a position to know information about the queer community that non-members might have difficulty in getting. It is worth noting that there is no specific information about the queer community that I am interested in determining whether Bass knows or not. This is because Bass does not actually need this information. He just needs to be in a position such that non-members would be justified in believing him about topics related to the queer community as a whole. Because Bass is openly gay, he is in such a position.

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<sup>20</sup> A plethora of examples like this can be thought of to illustrate the same point. Seeking out a Canadian to talk about your potential move to Canada, a philosophy major about your philosophical questions, etc.

In light of this, let's refer back to his comment. Explicitly, Bass refers to his behavior as 'straight-acting,' which he supports through examples of watching football and drinking beer. He contrasts this behavior with adjectives like 'normal' and 'typical,' which suggests that anything coded as queer is abnormal or atypical. This also implies that a gay person may only be 'normal' so long as they enjoy heteronormative activities and not queer ones. Similar to Student 1 confirming a negative stereotype about all-female dormitories, Bass has confirmed a stereotype about the queer community: that we *are* abnormal. Again, Bass need not be correct. He must only be believed to be correct by non-members of the queer community. Because he is a member of the community he is speaking of, he is thought to have a certain amount of authority on the queer community. This authority makes it so that Bass is not merely repeating a common stereotype; he is confirming it as a member of a group that would be in the ideal epistemic position to either confirm or deny it.

While explicit in Bass' behavior, a rejection of queerness is a general feature of covering. Turning down queer-coded music, dressing 'straight,' controlling mannerisms... these are all examples of covering.<sup>21</sup> Like Bass, these acts of covering do not merely repeat stereotypes. Because they come from members of the group, they offer a unique perspective: "I have seen the inner workings of the queer community, and the negative societal perceptions were correct – queerness is bad."

In this section, I have argued that the representational authority granted to coverers makes it such that covering can harm the community in a way that non-queer people and passers cannot.

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<sup>21</sup> As Sreedhar and MacLaclan show, these may also be forms of 'passing.' The distinction lies in spectator knowledge. If the spectator is entirely unaware of someone's sexuality, then a queer femme covering to a spectator may appear as passing. Because of this, one's intent often comes apart from one's impact. See more: Cooley, Dennis, et al. "Complication Reason(s) and a Praxis for Coming Out" *Passing/Out: Sexual Identity Veiled and Revealed*, edited by Kelby Harrison and Dennis Cooley, 1st ed., Routledge, 2012, pp. 43–74.

Because coverers are recognized as members of the queer community, they are granted a certain amount of authority when referencing the queer community. Covering does not merely reinforce negative stereotypes about the queer community. It confirms that they were true the whole time. So, covering harms the queer community in a way that passing does not. In the next section, I show that this allows for the conclusion that there is a duty not to cover as a duty of non-maleficence.

### *Section 3.3: A Duty of Non-Maleficence*

In the previous section, I identified a morally relevant asymmetry between passing and covering. Because of this, our moral obligations regarding passing and covering may differ. In Section 1, I showed that passing does not harm the community, so a duty to come out would be a duty of beneficence. One might think this means that a duty not to cover is also a duty of beneficence. But covering, unlike passing, does not merely fail to provide a benefit – it actively harms the queer community. As such, it should be conceived of as a duty of non-maleficence. In this section, I briefly elaborate on these duties and show that a duty not to cover comes from broader duties of non-maleficence.

Most of our duties are duties of non-maleficence: “Don’t kill people, don’t rape them, don’t attack them, don’t rob them” (Lichtenberg, 558).<sup>22</sup> From these, there are two common features. The first is that they are all framed as inactions: do *not* commit some act. A duty to come out is already quite different: it compels one *to* act. The second is that these duties are framed as refraining from harms. As shown in Section 1, passing does not commit a harm – it merely fails to provide a benefit. That said, covering meets both of these general features. Claim 2 compels one *not* to cover, so the first general feature of a duty of non-maleficence is present. Further, Section

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<sup>22</sup> These sorts of duties are generally uncontroversial as well. Specifically, Lichtenberg discusses the growing haziness between our positive and negative duties and argues that they are not as separable as they once were. This seems true, but this is not to say that they cannot be separated – just that it is difficult.

2.2 shows that covering itself harms the community. As such, a duty not to cover adopts the same shape as these other general duties. So, queer people have a duty not to cover.

#### 4. Possible Objections

I will now consider the three most pressing objections to my view. The first objection seems to stem from an implication of my view: if queer people harm the community when covering their queerness, then one might argue that queer men who authentically act straight harm the community in the same way. The second objection is that a duty to refrain from covering may be too demanding: if covering queerness is impermissible on my view, then it seems plausible that one must *always* refrain from covering queerness. The third is a concern about universality: if a duty not to cover cannot apply to every group, then it might be argued that it is not a duty at all because duties are often thought to apply universally.

##### *Section 4.1: Implications for Straight-Acting Gays*

Thus far, I have argued that suppressing one's queerness is morally wrong. One has a moral obligation *not* to suppress their queerness. This is because covering conveys a strong, negative message from a presumed epistemic authority about the queer community: specifically, it conveys the message that queerness is bad. Now, let's refer back to Lance Bass. He called himself, and other gay men like him, SAGs – straight-acting gay men. Generally, the only 'queer' thing about SAGs would be their sexual identity. This gives rise to an objection: if queer men who cover harm the queer community, then it seems SAGs must harm the queer community in a very similar way. This seems to imply that SAGs have a duty to feign queerness. So, we should reject a duty not to cover.

It might be true that SAGs inadvertently harm the queer community by acting authentically. That said, this does not pose a problem to my view. As referenced earlier, the primary goal of the queer community is increased acceptance. The idea underpinning this goal is increased acceptance for a diverse community, meaning that not everyone will present as queer. So, SAGs have a choice

here: feign queerness or act authentically. By feigning queerness, SAGs forfeit their authenticity. By acting authentically, SAGs stand to harm the queer community because it appears as covering. So, both choices for SAGs seem to be harmful. This difficult decision represents a well-known concept in minority groups called a “double-bind,” which was adopted by Marilyn Frye in reference to minority groups (Frye, 2).<sup>23</sup>

In light of this, we should not reject a duty not to cover. The double-bind that SAGs (and queer femmes) are faced with upon coming out is a problem with society, not the duty. As MacLachlan and Sreedhar explain, the issue is that there seems to “exist a criteria for queerness,” which some queer people might “still fail to meet” despite “sincerely express[ing] queer desires” (MacLachlan and Sreedhar, 56). When the goal is increased acceptance, those accepted should be accepted as their authentic selves. So, if SAGs are accepted but are feigning queerness, then the representation of queerness now lacks a group of individuals that were directly contributing to the diverse community. As such, this is not a difficulty for my view because SAGs are not covering in the first place. Instead, our society should abandon its expectation that queerness must fit in some specific box and make room for SAGs.

#### *Section 4.2: The Demandingness Objection*

If we have a duty not to cover, then it presumably follows that covering is always impermissible. As was said above, if covering produces some harm to the queer community, then it seems that one must *always* refrain from covering to ensure that such a harm is not produced. So, one might think that a duty not to cover is overly onerous. Therefore, one might believe there is no duty not to cover.

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<sup>23</sup> For more on double-binds in general: Bateson, G., Jackson, D. D., Haley, J., & Weakland, J. H. (1956). Toward a theory of schizophrenia. *Behavioural Science*, 1(4), 251–264. Bettcher, Talia Mae (2007). Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion. *Hypatia* 22 (3):43-65.

Let's imagine how this objection works in an example. We can imagine a queer person, let's call her Laura, who really enjoys talking about being a lesbian, to the point that she prefers talking about being a lesbian rather than not talking about being a lesbian. As such, one might believe that Laura must always reference her sexuality. If Laura cannot cover due to the harmful consequences, then it seems to follow that Laura should never be able to cover. But this seems to undermine the role that context, or relevance, plays in these examples.

There are some contexts in which sexuality is not relevant whatsoever. For instance, at a work meeting, Laura's queerness is likely not considered relevant information. That said, this is not because Laura is queer – this standard equally applies to her heterosexual coworkers. So, the general idea here is that one's sexual orientation is often not pertinent to the company's functioning (or, at least, should not be). As such, a duty not to cover would not extend so far to require us to reveal facts about our sexual identities in situations where they are not relevant.

#### *Section 4.3: Concerns of Universality*

The third objection primarily stems from the coming out process in the queer community. Because queer people come out, passing and covering are separate phenomena. Many philosophers have described each as a sort of survival strategy for how a marginalized individual may navigate an oppressive society safely. If they are truly survival strategies, then one may think their availability should not be restricted by some moral duty. I think this objection is especially important when discussing other social groups. While LGB people typically have the option to pass or cover, many other minority groups are not offered this same choice. Instead, they are offered a rather limited one: cover or don't cover.

If these strategies are employed for survival needs, then it seems that a duty to refrain from covering would impose significant burdens on those who cannot pass, but only cover. In other

words, covering is sometimes the only way to stay safe. For instance, disabled people often are unable to choose between whether or not they will present as disabled, but rather *how* they will present as disabled. With this in mind, I am not entirely convinced that this consideration rules out a duty to refrain from covering. Even if covering is the only strategy available, it does not follow that it is morally permissible strategy. If harming another person is the only strategy available for one to stay safe, for instance, it does not follow that it is permissible to harm them. That said, this alone does not mean a duty not to cover would not *apply*. In light of these new circumstances, this may be true, but it is also true that such a duty may also be outweighed by competing moral considerations.

I do think that this gives reason to believe more care is needed when discussing this duty in relation to other communities as it is a very real possibility that such a duty may not exist given these perspectives. I hope that this paper is able to contribute to widening the scope of moral questions like these, and I hope to incorporate these concerns in future projects within this discussion.

## 5. Conclusion

My general argument has been as follows: there is no duty to come out of the closet, but if one does come out of the closet, then there is a duty not to cover. I argued for the former half of this claim – that there is no duty to come out of the closet –in two steps. First, I established that, if there is a duty to come out, then it must be a duty of beneficence. From here, I showed how coming out necessarily fails to meet the criteria for a duty of beneficence. So, a duty to come out is not a duty of beneficence, and thus not a duty.

While one might believe that my argument against a duty to come out rules out a duty not to cover, in Section 2, I argued that we can appeal to an asymmetry between passing and covering to block this conclusion. When someone passes, they do not represent the queer community. Upon coming out, they not only represent the queer community, but they are also in a position to access information that is only available to those who are out. In light of this position, others are justified in believing out queer people on issues related to queerness. Because of this sense of authority, a queer person refraining from presenting as stereotypically queer *because* they don't want to be seen as stereotypically queer reinforces a negative connotation of queerness, specifically in relation to that activity. While reinforcement is bad enough, this thought coming from a queer person is more than a reinforcement. Due to the elevated status of the authority, the negativity related to queerness is exacerbated when voiced by a queer person. In light of this, the queer community is harmed by acts of covering. So, there is a duty not to cover that assumes the form of a duty of non-maleficence.

Following my argument, I responded to three potential objections: an implication of my view, the demandingness objection, and one concerning universality. All are interesting, but the universality objection has made me question broader questions within this topic. In the future, I

hope to further investigate covering, the ways in which it surfaces and is employed in minority communities, and potential obligations individuals may have related to the concept.

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