Love's Constancy

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"Marital faithfulness" refers to faithful love for a spouse or lover to whom one is committed, rather than the narrower idea of sexual fidelity. The distinction is clearly marked in traditional wedding vows. A commitment to love faithfully is central: "to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part . . . and thereto I plight [pledge] thee my troth [faithfulness]."[1] Sexual fidelity is promised in a subordinate clause, symbolizing its supportive role in promoting love's constancy: "and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her/him."[2] . . .

Is marital faithfulness a virtue, that is, something morally desirable and admirable? Presumably virtues are intrinsically good. Marital constancy, however, is desirable in some cases but undesirable in others, depending on how well a marriage promotes the good of spouses and others (especially children). Faithfulness seems more a matter of self-interest, luck, and simple compatibility, rather than morality. Perhaps commitments to love should be understood in terms of intentions but not obligations. That would also free us to approach divorce without being preoccupied with betrayal and blame-mongering. In short, should not the entire topic of marriage be demoralized? Not if we value the goods made possible in long-term marriages. Here I will make six comments by way of clarifying faithfulness as a virtue.

First, we can acknowledge that when a marriage is disastrous and hopeless, constancy can be bad rather than virtuous in that it prolongs a bad thing. But it does not follow that faithfulness is not a virtue. Virtues are context-dependent. Michael Slote pointed out that "many virtues only count as such when they are attended by certain other virtues."[3] For example, conscientiousness is a virtue, or at least a highly admirable virtue, only when it involves attention to duties that promote human good, as opposed for example to the conscientiousness of a Nazi. Similarly, Eva Braun's faithfulness in loving Hitler is not a virtue, nor is constancy in love for a wife-beating, child-abusing, sadistic husband. In general, faithfulness is desirable and admirable only in so far as there is something good about the love. That good centers on caring, mutual support, kindness, and joy—which is morally desirable in itself and which contributes to the fulfillment of persons.

Second, taking moral commitments seriously does carry with it the possibility of betrayal of one's spouse, of oneself, and of one's ideals of love. At the same time, not meeting an ideal does not automatically imply moral failure and blameworthiness, given causes beyond our control. Marital betrayal is usually the result of not trying, or not trying hard enough. But all the effort in the world cannot by itself achieve marital success without luck.

Some loves are lucky; others are unfortunate, even tragic, due to circumstances that spouses can only partially influence.[4] Luck, as well as good judgment, plays a role in finding a promising partner whom one finds attractive physically, intellectually, morally, socially, and in terms of shared interests and values. Then, if a permanent relationship is to emerge, partners must be able to trust each other's commitments. During their shared history, the basis of love must remain sufficiently constant to overcome inevitable difficulties, such as money problems, major illness, temporary separations, and changing interests. Later, the relationship must survive the ravages of old age, and at any time the threat of death to one of the partners. In addition, there is luck in having the gifts of temperament conducive to monogamy, gifts that are in part genetic and in part the product of our up-

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bringing.[5] All these factors call for great reserve in judging people who are unable to meet their marital commitments.

Third, it is true that talk about faithfulness and betrayal should be set aside in some contexts. The therapist's office is one such context. In order to help couples or individuals deal with marital or divorce difficulties, counselors do well to keep matters focused on problem-solving skills, not blame-mongering and credit-grabbing. So do couples themselves, as they try to improve their relationship (rather than engage in exercises in self-righteousness). And observers who know little about the obstacles confronting a marriage should be wary of passing judgment. This does not, however, negate the appropriateness of moral language in other contexts, such as marriage ceremonies which publicly express solemn acts of acquiring responsibilities.

Fourth, acknowledging the role of luck does not remove the vital contribution of effort, responsibility, and moral virtue in shaping good relationships. Unless we are fatalists, who view human life as determined in ways that remove moral responsibility, we must recognize that faithfulness plays an important role. Precisely what role, in a given case, can be difficult to answer.

Thus, in examining individual cases, whether ourselves or others, we confront ambiguities that make it difficult to tell whether inconstancy is the result of temperament, luck, or irresponsibility of the sort that leads us to talk of betrayal and unfaithfulness. Consider Bertrand Russell, who reports that seven years into his marriage he suddenly fell out of love with his wife. "I went out bicycling one afternoon, and suddenly, as I was riding along a country road, I realized that I no longer loved Alys. I had had no idea until this moment that my love for her was even lessening."[6]

What does Russell mean by "love"? He goes on to record that he was no longer sexually attracted to Alys and that also he had become preoccupied with her character faults. In his autobiography, however, he admits the unfairness and self-righteousness in his criticisms of Alys, and in a passage omitted from the final draft of the book he explained the breakup by appeal to his temperament: "I now believe that it is not in my nature to remain physically fond of any woman for more than seven or eight years. As I view it now, this was the basis of the matter, and the rest was humbug."[7] We need not accept Russell's explanation as authoritative, any more than Russell had to accept his own earlier interpretation of events. Some might interpret the bicycle experience as a symptom of the "seven-year itch" which other couples deal with through marriage counseling or by taking a long vacation together. Possibly Russell was not only self-righteous but . . . guilty of bad faith in reducing his love to sexual desire and related feelings.[8] He prides himself on his honesty in promptly telling Alys that his love was gone, but perhaps full honesty would lead to a quite different conversation with Alys in which together they explored his troubled feelings with an eye to preserving an ideal-guided relationship.

As another possibility, perhaps Russell had undergone a fundamental change in his ideals since making his wedding vows. Perhaps he was rebelling against the Victorian ideals he had been raised with. Not temperament, but a new ideal of love was the reason he could so quickly conclude that his sexual relationship with Alys was over. In any case, some individuals do change their ideals, rejecting marital faithfulness after having earlier made lifelong commitments in good faith. Anais Nin, for example, arrived at this view of faithfulness after entering a fairly traditional marriage: "I really believe that if I were not a writer, not a creator, not an experimenter, I might have been a very faithful wife. I think highly of faithfulness. But my temperament belongs to the writer, not to the woman."[9] A year later, in the midst of her tumultuous affair with Henry Miller, her attitude changed again; "The ideal of faithfulness is a joke" and the essential value in love is "sincerity with one's self."[10]

Fifth, appreciating marital faithfulness as a virtue does not mean making it the supreme value. Marital obligations are not absolute in the sense of always overriding all other considerations. Consider Paul Gauguin, who after a decade into his marriage, and after fathering five children, quit his job as a successful stockbroker to become a full-time artist. For most of the remainder of his life he did not earn enough money to support his family.

It is difficult to avoid saying that he was unfaithful. It is also difficult to avoid admiring what he did—in one respect—if we value the art he produced and realize that it could not have been produced except at the expense of his family.[11] We, perhaps like him, may regret that the world did not make possible a happier accommodation of art and family, but we may also view aesthetic values and the moral value of self-fulfillment as providing some reasons for his conduct.

Sixth, we tend to think of faithfulness in terms of staying the same in the midst of changing circumstances, especially changes in our spouse. Shakespeare gave the classical expression of this idea: "love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds . . ./it is an ever-fixed mark/That looks on tempests and is never shaken."[12]

Dorothy Day recounts how her common-law marriage with Forster Batterham ended because he could not adjust to her decision to have their child and herself baptized in the Catholic Church. Prior to her decision, the marriage had been joyous, and deeply rooted in a shared devotion to social justice—a devotion which Day sustained throughout her subsequent leadership in the Catholic Worker Movement. Yet Batterham was also adamantly anti-religious: "he was averse to any ceremony before officials of either Church or state. He was an anarchist and an atheist, and he did not intend to be a liar or a hypocrite. He was a creature of utter sincerity, and however illogical and bad-tempered about it all, I loved him."[13] In order for Batterham to remain faithful, his love would have had to adjust so as to accept, or at least tolerate, Day's new religious outlook.

The best marriages, like the best persons, are often seriously flawed. Faithfulness is a virtue when it supports good though imperfect relationships. The same is true of tolerance and humility. Nietzsche was no booster of marriages, but what he said of strong characters applies to strong marriages: "'Giving style' to one's character [and marriage]—a great and rare art! It is exercised by those who see all the strengths and weaknesses of their own natures [and marriage] and then comprehend them in an artistic plan until everything appears as art and reason and even weakness delights the eye . . . Here the ugly which could not be removed is hidden; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime."[14]

Children and the Ethics of Divorce

Laurence D. Houlgate