Wasserstrom, Steinbock, and Martin on Adultery

Richard Wasserstrom

- Let’s just define ‘adultery’ to refer to having sex with somebody other than one’s spouse (given that you are in a marriage).

- Wasserstrom considers an argument for the conclusion that adultery is wrong because it involves breaking promises:

  P1 Adultery involves breaking a promise (the promise to not have sex with another)
  
P2 Breaking a promise is wrong

  C1 Adultery is wrong

  - Of course, it is more wrong to break some promises than others. Wasserstrom thinks that breaking the promise to be monogamous might be especially bad because it is more likely to hurt one’s partner to a greater degree than breaking other promises. This might be because your partner has sacrificed much themselves to keep up their end of the promise, or because it indicates that you feel affection for somebody other than your partner.

- He also considers the following argument:

  P3 Adultery involves deception.
  
P4 Deception is wrong.

  C2 Adultery is wrong.

  - Here, the deceived party is either 1) the spouse, who is deceived about the existence of the affair, or 2) the paramour, who is deceived into believing that they are loved. They are deceived in this way because sexual activity carries with it the implication of love.

- (2) appears to presuppose both P5 and P6 below, which afford a new argument against adultery:

  P5 Sex is intimately bound up with love; to have sex is to express feelings of love.
  
P6 You should only love one person (at a time?)

  C3 You should only have sex with one person (at a time?)
• Wasserstrom notes that you could reject this argument's conclusion by rejecting either of the premises. If you reject P5, you divorce sex from love. If you reject P6, you divorce sex from exclusivity— you claim that you can love multiple people at once; that love is not a finite resource or a zero-sum game.

  – Against P6: don’t parents of multiple children claim that they can love all of their children equally, and that the love they feel for one of their children is not diminished by the love they feel for the others? Why should we expect erotic love to be any different?
  – Another example: can’t children love both of their parents equally, without the love they feel for one parent diminishing the love they feel for the other? And can’t there even be feelings of jealousy in this context. Especially in the case of divorced parents, can’t one parent be jealous of the love their children give to the other parent?

• Consider a couple in an open marriage. This couple has made no agreement to remain sexually monogamous; nor do they lie to one another about their sexual affairs. For this couple, both P1 and P3 are false. If we reject P6, then the arguments above don’t give us any reason to think that this couple has done anything wrong.

• A question left unsettled by Wasserstrom’s article: given that both open and closed marriages are morally acceptable, which is preferable?

  – Also left unsettled: is closed marriage morally acceptable? (At one point [not assigned], Wasserstrom compares sexual monogamy to a practice in which married couples are only permitted to eat with their spouse. This practice seems bad; is there a morally salient difference between this practice and the practice of only being permitted to have sex with one’s spouse?)

Bonnie Steinbock

• Open marriages are not immoral, but they fall short of the ideal form of marriage, which involves sexual exclusivity.

• We needn’t say that one form of marriage is impermissible in order to say that it is less ideal than another form of marriage.

  – Consider arranged marriages. Many people in the West want to say that, while arranged marriages are perfectly permissible, they are not as ideal as a marriage based on love.


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P_1 \text{ Sexual exclusivity is intrinsic to true love. To truly love somebody is to love them to the exclusion of others.}
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P_2 \text{ An ideal marriage is one which is characterized by true love.}
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C \text{ An ideal marriage is characterized by sexual exclusivity.}
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Mike Martin

• In order to make sense of the ethics of adultery, we must consider the ideals of marriage—specifically love.

• Martin claims that one ideal of marriage is a commitment to love.
  – A commitment to love is not just a commitment to have strong feelings for another person, but also a commitment to work to sustain and enrich the relationship.
  – The commitment to sexual exclusivity is a subsidiary commitment; couples commit themselves to sexual exclusivity in order to fulfill the primary commitment to love.
    * A commitment to sexual exclusivity helps to fulfill the primary commitment to love in two ways:
      1) it mitigates the danger which adultery poses to the relationship
      2) sexual exclusivity helps to establish the symbolism of “making love”—that sexual intimacy is an expression of a couple’s deep love for one another.
  – Thus, given traditional marital ideals, adultery is bad because it undermines a commitment to love.

• Trust is another ideal of marriage.
  – Trust provides a basis for ongoing intimacy by allowing couples to feel secure, despite the risks and vulnerabilities inherent in a relationship. It provides a necessary foundation for intimacy.
  – Therefore, given the traditional ideals of marriage, violating trust means undermining the foundation necessary for intimacy.
  – Therefore, given traditional marital ideals, adultery is bad because it undermines the trust that it necessary for the commitment to love.

• Nevertheless, Martin thinks that, under certain circumstances, these reasons against adultery can be undermined, in which case adultery becomes permissible.
  – If couples decide mutually to change their commitments, then adultery can be permissible.
    * A commitment to sexual exclusivity is only a subsidiary commitment, there to help achieve the primary commitment of love. If a couple decides that it is no longer necessary, then there is no reason to continue adhering to it.
  – If a couple falls out of love, then adultery may become permissible.
    * A marital commitment to love is not unconditional. It is rather conditional on various tacit conditions being met: that the spouse continue to love them in return and make efforts to keep the relationship afloat. If these conditions are not met, then spouses are no longer bound to honor their commitments. In such cases, adultery can serve as a transition to a new and better relationship.
– If one partner finds themselves in love with somebody else, then adultery may be permissible. (Martin is not sure.)

– It may be that, in sexually frustrated marriages in which one partner feels a lack of self-respect, the gains in self-respect from an affair might provide sufficient reason to have an affair. It may even enliven the marriage. (Martin is not sure.)