Russell and Scruton on Conventional Sexual Morality

Summary

Russell

- Human nature consists of two competing drives: a drive towards jealousy and a drive towards “sexual variety”.

- Conventional sexual morality has sided with jealousy. However, Russell thinks that we should diminish the drive towards jealousy and amplify the drive toward polygamy.

  - Jealousy can be tempered and diminished by different social conventions.

    * E.g., If a man is ridiculed for having an unfaithful wife, he will be more jealous. If not, he will be less.

- Russell accepts a kind of Rule Utilitarianism. He claims that the correct moral norms are those which are most likely to promote human happiness were they to be universally accepted — taking into account that, just because the rules are accepted, this does not mean that they will be obeyed. We must consider “the effect which the rules will in fact have, not that which they would have if they were completely effective.” (end of §II)

- Modern life has made it almost impossible to have a society in which there is very little intercourse outside of marriage.

  - People today live in crowded urban communities and men are often away from their wives for long periods.

  - People today no longer believe that sex is ‘sinful.’

P1 The correct moral norms are those which are most likely to promote human happiness if they were accepted (though not necessarily obeyed).

P2 In the modern world, men and women are less likely to obey the traditional sexual moral norm of fidelity, and more likely to obey a sexual moral code which permits infidelity.

C The correct sexual moral norms permits infidelity.
Scruton

- Scruton accepts an Aristotelian Virtue Ethics. On this view, the fundamental object of moral appraisal is not the action, but rather the person. What makes an action right or wrong is not anything intrinsic to the action; rather, a right action is one which flows from a virtuous character. A virtuous character is one which is characterized by stable dispositions to act, believe, and desire in such a way as to promote human fulfillment or happiness (eudaimonia), which Aristotle took to be the telos of human life (the end at which human life aims). Vices are those dispositions which impair our ability to act, believe, and desire in such a way as to promote eudaimonia. Virtues are produced by good education — by instilling the right habits in the young, as well as giving them the correct desires.

- Scruton applies this ethical theory to the case of sexuality.
  - The telos of sexual activity is erotic love — the giving and receiving of love in an embodied interpersonal union — the wedding of the personal and the sexual.
    - We must be properly constituted in order to experience erotic love.
  - Sexual virtues are, therefore, those stable dispositions of character which make us able to experience erotic love. Sexual vices are those dispositions of character which make us less able to experience erotic love.
  - Jealous love is imperfect love. Our sexual virtues, therefore, should aim toward the elimination of jealousy. The virtue of fidelity achieves this.
    - [ Notice that both Russell and Scruton see jealousy as a bad thing, but for different reasons; and they also advocate different solutions to this problem. For Russell, the solution is eliminate the disposition to feel jealous; for Scruton, the solution is to eliminate the cause of jealousy. Is there a way to use Russell’s moral framework to argue for Scruton’s conclusion? Is there a way to use Scruton’s moral framework to argue for Russell’s conclusion? ]
  - Sexual impurity (perversion, lust, fantasy, masturbation, and pornography, e.g.) diverts sexual desire from its goal of interpersonal union.
    - Sexual impurity thus diminishes the capacity to experience erotic love; since it makes one less able to regard the sexual act as involving one’s self.
  - Children ought to be taught to value chastity so that they may impede the urge toward sexual activity until it can be properly directed toward its telos: erotic love. Debauched youths are no longer able to experience erotic love (witness Lolita).