

Reviews

The functions of monogamous marriage

by Marvin Kohl

Bertrand Russell and John Cowper Powys. *Is Modern Marriage a Failure? A Debate*. With an Introduction by Margaret Moran. Edition limited to 200 copies for sale. North Walsham, Norfolk, England: Warren House Press, 1983. Pp. xviii, 38. £9.75.

MONOGAMOUS MARRIAGE IS complicated because it involves very diverse functions: preventing vicious sexual competition, bearing and rearing children, establishing relationships of intimacy and devotion, and sharing other mutual goals. Long-term marriage is further complicated in that it involves seasons, each being part of a developmental process, yet each having values and needs of its own. A theory of marriage is inadequate to the extent it neglects these vital aspects or is content to present half-truths. A scientific account of marriage aims, of course, at the simplest account which will systematize the whole body of available knowledge. But this does not mean that of any two hypotheses, the simpler is the true one. Theories with simpler initial premisses may turn out to be incorrect.

Reprinted from the rare 1930 edition, the Russell-Powys debate, involving two contrasting theories, attempts to answer the question whether or not modern marriage is a failure by applying standards for successful marriage. It also involves much rhetoric and humour, as, perhaps, entertaining theatre should. I shall not dwell on the latter except to say that, as far as logic and wit are concerned, Russell is at his dazzling best. Nor do I wish to spend much time discussing its propagandist value. Perhaps, like *Marriage and Morals*,¹ Russell viewed the debate primarily

¹ "I am anxious," Russell to Stanley Unwin wrote in an illuminating note about his next book, "to write a book which will sell well and not involve too much research. *Marriage and Morals* and *The Conquest of Happiness* both fulfilled these two conditions. The latter I am not very proud of, but as a propagandist I am not at all sorry to have written the former. Nevertheless I should prefer to write something more analogous to *The Scientific*

as a means of gaining public support for the reform of existing marriage and divorce laws. But, whatever his intentions were, little is gained and much lost by rhetorical flare which distracts from and thus, in effect, suppresses the truth. He himself writes: "No good cause is served by the suppression of truth; and those among us who show fear of truth are doing a greater disservice to the national cause than can be done by fearlessly proclaiming even the most damaging facts."²

Russell opens the discussion by posing three tests for a successful marriage. The first is that marriage should minister to the happiness of the husband and wife. Although Russell believes marriage to be a failure in this regard, he does not deny that there are some life-long happy marriages. Nor does he deny that most are pleasurable in their early stages. He just thinks that happy marriages, in general, are short-lived and rather rare. He advances two arguments in support of this contention. The first is based upon an application of the principle of marginal utility. Just as one would tire if forced to eat bacon and eggs for breakfast forever, one tires and often begins to hate being married to the same person, especially as the years pass. The argument is that human beings typically tire of pleasurable things if there is too much repetition. Marriage involves too much repetition. Hence humans typically tire of marriage. The second argument has more complex grounds. It appears to rest upon Russell's belief that love is indefinitely extensible and that compossible expansive emotions have the greatest positive utility. For Russell the heart of the matter is that monogamous marriage emphasizes restrictive rather than expansive passions. Because of exaggerated rules of fidelity, monogamous marriage necessarily involves the painful restriction of expansive passions and individual freedom. All human activity involving such a restriction contributes to boredom and unhappiness. Hence monogamy contributes to boredom and unhappiness.

He does not, however, believe that spousal happiness is the essential purpose of marriage. The essence of marriage lies elsewhere. Procreation is its essence. Marriage, writes Russell, is clearly "an institution concerned primarily and first of all, or should be so concerned with the bearing of children. That is its primary purpose" (p. 8).³ In this regard,

Outlook" (22 Feb. 1932, RA). Quoted from Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 448.

² Bertrand Russell, *Justice in War Time*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: Open Court, 1917), p. xvii.

³ Elsewhere Russell writes: "Where there are no children the essence of marriage is absent" ("My Own View of Marriage", *The Outlook*, 148 [7 March 1928]: 376); "The main purpose of marriage is to replenish the human population of the globe. ... children are the purpose of marriage, and to hold people to a childless marriage is a cruel cheat" (*Marriage*

it is "a preposterous failure. There are not nearly so many children born as would need to be born in order to keep the most civilized nations at the same level of numbers" (pp. 18-19). Marriage is unsatisfactory because, in almost all civilized countries, the birth rate continues to decline and the most intelligent sections of most Western populations fail to reproduce their numbers.

The third test is that marriage should minister to the proper rearing of children. The argument here is razor-like. Too many modern marriages are unhappy. Unhappy marriages are bad for the rearing of children. Therefore, too many are bad for the rearing of children.

To sum up: The success or failure of marriage in any given epoch and environment may be judged by three tests, namely, the happiness of the husband and wife, rate of procreation, and the proper rearing of children. Russell argues that in regard to all three, marriage at the present day is a failure.

According to John Cowper Powys, monogamous marriage not only successfully meets all these tests but passes some with flying colours. He admits that there are some difficulties. Unhappy marriages are bad for the rearing of children. But he quickly adds that even imperfect marriages are better than divorce or similar alternatives. Unlike Russell he does not hold marriage to be an "all or nothing" affair, to be either a success or a failure. The suggestion here is that it is better, more accurate, to talk about the degrees of success or the degrees of failure of a marriage. Although Powys is concerned about proper population growth, he does not regard it as problematic. The civilized portions of the population do not only come from their like. Given the vigour and vitality of the foreign-born proletariat, the procreation of children as an element in American marriage has not been destroyed. He does, however, regard Russell's encouragement of sexual infidelity as being deeply problematic. For the emotional disturbance in a passing love affair is acute and the feeling of abandonment extreme. "[I]f you are going to mitigate marriage by love affairs on the side," he writes, "the result will be the destruction of the very essence of marriage ..." (p. 34).

But the heart of Powys's argument lies elsewhere. It is that marriage, with all its imperfections, is the best garden for the nourishment and growth of multiple human excellences. Unfortunately Powys's style is such that he mixes implausible with more plausible points. "I contend," he writes,

and *Morals* [New York: Liveright, 1929], pp. 240, 235); "Children are the one purpose of marriage, and no one should be tied to a union which fails in this respect" ("A Liberal View of Divorce", *The Debunker*, 12, no. 2 [July 1930]: 35).

that the magic, the glamour, above all the mystery of sex in a very definite way remains five years, ten years, fifteen years. They have this gift; Providence has given it to them; five, ten fifteen years, twenty years after marriage they are conscious of the piquant, the provocative, the mysterious difference spiritually, mentally, aesthetically, morally and above all nervously, between the man and the woman. This, I contend, is the great, the grand purpose of marriage, whose end both at first and now is to intensify our interest in life and to offer an escape from life. Marriage above everything else intensifies, (Mr. Russell is wrong) intensifies the interest in life. (Pp. 18-19)

Thus he begins by claiming that sexual interest between monogamous partners does not rapidly diminish and then slides into the claim—the more important point—that above everything else marriage intensifies our interest in life. For the grand purpose of marriage is to provide a consecrated haven, one that allows us to rest, refuel, and return to the pursuit of other kinds of happiness with greater vitality.

A second reason why satisfaction grows with age is that marriage nurtures a lifetime of intimacy and devotion. Although couples may perpetually quarrel, this tension establishes powerful and enduring relationships. More often than not, quarrels and other forms of tensions contribute to the greatest experience possible to human beings—the experience of devotion and enduring intimacy. Whereas Russell argues that in order to achieve satisfaction and fullness in life one has to go outside the marriage—human beings, he contends, get more of the good life, more fulfilment in adventures that involve going out in meeting new people and falling in love with new people—Powys argues that the greater fulfilment lies in a relationship of devotion and intimacy. He contends that "there is more fulfilment of life and a deeper knowledge, not ideal, not necessarily poetical, but real, a deeper knowledge of reality of life to be derived from the psychological, intellectual and esthetic difference between two people when held together by custom than in the other way" (p. 33). In short, marriage, especially a quality monogamous one, is an exaltation of multiple excellences. Quite apart from having children, the coming together of a man and a woman is the most fulfilling of the nobler, subtler, more imaginative and (Russell notwithstanding) more rational nature of human beings than any other great institution of modern times (p. 35).

It is not possible in the short compass of a review to do full justice to the arguments of the debate or to the devilishly difficult problem of determining what constitutes a successful marriage. What follows is merely an outline of what I believe to be the more salient points.

(1). Every general theory of marriage expresses some truth and rep-

resses others. Even in our own day we are unable to formulate a unified explanation of all or almost all the findings concerning marriage, and indeed it may be unrealistic to think that there could be such an explanation. This can be stated strongly. We can, for example, say (as Russell does in 1968) that there seem to be insuperable objections to every general theory of marriage.⁴ Or we can be content to suggest that general theories of marriage, including Russell's and Powys's, since they contain partial descriptions, are too simple to fully and accurately account for all relevant facts. At its bare roots, Russell is offering a "procreation-social expansion" theory. For him, marriage must successfully minister to the propagation of the race and allow for full, or the fullest possible, self-realization of the husband, wife, and children. He appears to concentrate on that passage in marriages (probably the second) which is typically marked by a decline of romantic love and an increasing awareness of limited personal freedom and social constriction. But if this particular passage is as transitional or problematic as it seems to be, then Russell may well be describing marriage as though it existed only at one of its most painful stages. Powys, on the other hand, is defending a "relationship-social integration" theory. At bottom he views marriage as an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, of bringing people close together, by providing a haven of devotion. In the pinch, he shifts to and prefers to describe not only the latter passages but only the best of those passages. He neglects typical problems of social isolation and spousal estrangement. Unlike Russell, his target is ideal marriage. This means that they are often talking past each other. More important, the distinctions between minimally successful, reasonably successful, and ideal marriages are being fudged.

(2). It seems to me that, aside from intellectual playfulness or the advantages obfuscation has for purposes of propaganda, it makes little sense to talk about happy marriages, when the term "happy" can signify almost any level of satisfaction from simple pleasure to permanent bliss. Elsewhere I suggest that, for Russell, happiness is almost always attainable because, misfortune aside, individuals can almost always live happier lives.⁵ If I understand Russell correctly, given his meliorism and his theory of happiness, the goal is not to be happy in the sense of achieving or attempting to achieve a permanent state of satisfaction, but to be happier (to achieve more life-satisfaction). The goal is not to have prosper-

pered but to be prospering. This is true of marriage as well. What we seem to be after are better, not perfect, marriages. Of course, any rational being would welcome perfection. But, aside from Platonists and theistic mystics, who expects perfect marriages? Ordinary conventional marriages are rational to the extent that they, in balance, produce more satisfaction, or excellence, or more highly valued goods. We might even talk about happier or the happiest of rational marriages. But to use the word "happy" at one time to denote simple pleasure, at another to signify reasonable life-satisfaction, and at other times full or ideal satisfaction, is indeed worrisome.

(3). Suppose we admit the following: first, that the good life is inspired by love and guided by knowledge and that each is indefinitely extensible; second, that "all expansive passions are better than restrictive ones" (p. 14); third, that love is one of the most, if not the most, important expansive passion; and finally, that we should "regard any system as bad which interferes unnecessarily with its [love's] free development."⁶ In other words, granting Russell's underlying assumptions, does it follow that the present emphasis upon fidelity in marriage must be rejected? Perhaps not. Russell writes as if we can have it all. He seems to believe that social reform can always proceed without paying the piper. But more often than not individuals or a society trades off one good for another. Love, for example, is indefinitely extensible but only as an emotion. Acts of love, the things caring people do for each other, are not. A person who loves many objects cannot actively love each as much as he can a few. Except for saints and lunatics, he who gives himself up to all there is to love, loves none of them very deeply.

To state this another way: Increased freedom may relieve boredom, but its price (perhaps a necessary one) is a proportionate decline in the relationship of devotion. If this is true, then is it better to taste, in a limited way, many different loves, or to taste less and discover what consecration and life-long affection are like?

(4). Excessive freedom often results in the tyranny of open-market sex. Of course, Russell does not advocate unlimited sexual freedom, only more sexual freedom. But, as our own times indicate, this seems to be sufficient to nurture open-market sex and threaten, perhaps seriously damage, a vital function of monogamous marriage. For one of its functions is to provide protection for the weak and powerless against the strong and more sexually appealing members of society. The chief losers in Russell's sexual revolution are younger men and older women. The

⁴ *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 2 (Boston: Atlantic-Little Brown, 1968), p. 228.

⁵ "Bertrand Russell and the Attainability of Happiness", *International Studies in Philosophy*, 16, no. 3 (1984).

⁶ *Marriage and Morals*, p. 118.

chief beneficiaries are older, married men with wealth, power, or sexual appeal. It is simply easier for the wealthy and powerful to live a successful pansexual life than it is for the less advantaged.⁷ Having said this I hope it is clear that I regard the opposite position—Powys's talk about an irrevocable fidelity instinct—to be erroneous. But it is not a mistake, I believe, to argue that a rational function of monogamy is to prevent vicious sexual competition, to protect the weak and powerless from the strong and more sexually appealing members of society; and that monogamous marriage is, in large part designed to prevent a breakdown of society into a Hobbesian war of every man against every other man.

(5). Marriage has no essence. It is a rich institution with multiple functions that we are only beginning to sufficiently understand. Having children may be a purpose of marriage, but it is not *the* purpose. Nor does it seem right to say that where there are no children the essence of marriage is absent.

Contra Russell the social reformer, the purpose of marriage is not the having of children. Nor is it companionship, though for most this is the bottom line. When viewed from the perspective of the man and the woman, a good marriage involves a *sharing of that which is reciprocally wanted to be shared*. This can be the having of children, working together, protecting family against life's many infirmities, or any other harmonious and deeply shared value. What seems to be minimally necessary, almost all-important, is the having of some shared aim and thereby a sense of not being alone, of having both a sense of belonging and of a common cause. Whether this remains an imperfect solidarity or grows into mutual devotion, it is a rare and most beautiful thing.

*Department of Philosophy
State University of New York
College at Fredonia*

⁷ I am not suggesting that Russell had an easy or non-problematic sex life. I am only suggesting that men like him, when so inclined, have an unfair advantage in the market. For a brief but fascinating description of Russell's own problems, see Clark, pp. 436-64.