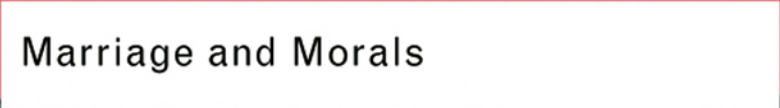






# Russell



Marriage and Morals



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Marriage and Morals



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# 1

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## INTRODUCTION

In characterising a society, whether ancient or modern, there are two elements, rather closely interconnected, which are of prime importance: one is the economic system, the other the family system. There are at the present day two influential schools of thought, one of which derives everything from an economic source, while the other derives everything from a family or sexual source, the former school that of Marx, the latter that of Freud. I do not myself adhere to either school, since the interconnection of economics and sex does not appear to me to show any clear primacy of the one over the other from the point of view of causal efficacy. For example: no doubt the industrial revolution has had and will have a profound influence upon sexual morals, but conversely the sexual virtue of the Puritans was psychologically necessary as a part cause of the industrial revolution. I am not prepared myself to assign primacy to either the economic or the sexual factor, nor in fact can they be separated with any clearness. Economics is concerned essentially with obtaining food, but food is seldom wanted among human



beings solely for the benefit of the individual who obtains it; it is wanted for the sake of the family, and as the family system changes, economic motives also change. It must be obvious that not only life insurance but most forms of private saving would nearly cease if children were taken away from their parents and brought up by the State as in Plato's Republic; that is to say, if the State were to adopt the role of the father, the State would, *ipso facto*, become the sole capitalist. Thoroughgoing Communists have often maintained the converse, that if the State is to be the sole capitalist, the family, as we have known it, cannot survive; and even if this is thought to go too far, it is impossible to deny an intimate connection between private property and the family, a connection which is reciprocal, so that we cannot say that one is cause and the other is effect.

The sexual morals of the community will be found to consist of several layers. There are first the positive institutions embodied in law; such, for example, as monogamy in some countries and polygamy in others. Next there is a layer where law does not intervene but public opinion is emphatic. And lastly there is a layer which is left to individual discretion, in practice if not in theory. There is no country in the world and there has been no age in the world's history where sexual ethics and sexual institutions have been determined by rational considerations, with the exception of Soviet Russia. I do not mean to imply that the institutions of Soviet Russia are in this respect perfect; I mean only that they are not the outcome of superstition and tradition, as are, at least in part, the institutions of all other countries in all ages. The problem of determining what sexual morality would be best from the point of view of general happiness and well-being is an extremely complicated one, and the answer will vary according to a number of circumstances. It will be different in an industrially advanced community from what it would be in a primitive agricultural régime. It will be different where medical science and hygiene are effective in producing a low death-rate

from what it would be where plagues and pestilences carry away a large proportion of the population before it becomes adult. Perhaps when we know more, we shall be able to say that the best sexual ethic will be different in one climate from what it would be in another, and different again with one kind of diet from what it would be with another.

The effects of a sexual ethic are of the most diverse kinds – personal, conjugal, familial, national and international. It may well happen that the effects are good in some of these respects, where they are bad in others. All must be considered before we can decide what on the balance we are to think of a given system. To begin with the purely personal: these are the effects considered by psychoanalysis. We have here to take account not only of the adult behaviour inculcated by a code, but also of the early education designed to produce obedience to the code, and in this region, as everyone knows, the effects of early taboos may be very curious and indirect. In this department of the subject we are at the level of personal well-being. The next stage of our problem arises when we consider the relations of men and women. It is clear that some sex relations have more value than others. Most people would agree that a sex relation is better when it has a large psychical element than when it is purely physical. Indeed, the view which has passed from the poets into the common consciousness of civilised men and women is that love increases in value in proportion as more of the personalities of the people concerned enters into the relation. The poets also have taught many people to value love in proportion to its intensity; this, however, is a more debatable matter. Most moderns would agree that love should be an equal relation, and that on this ground, if on no other, polygamy, for example, cannot be regarded as an ideal system. Throughout this department of the subject it is necessary to consider both marriage and extra-marital relations, since whatever system of marriage prevails, extra-marital relations will vary correspondingly.

We come next to the question of the family. There have existed in various times and places many different kinds of family groups, but the patriarchal family has a very large preponderance, and, moreover, the monogamic patriarchal family has prevailed more and more over the polygamic. The primary motive of sexual ethics as they have existed in Western civilisation since pre-Christian times has been to secure that degree of female virtue without which the patriarchal family becomes impossible, since paternity is uncertain. What has been added to this in the way of insistence on male virtue by Christianity had its psychological source in asceticism, although in quite recent times this motive has been reinforced by female jealousy, which became potent with the emancipation of women. This latter motive seems, however, to be temporary, since, if we may judge by appearances, women will tend to prefer a system allowing freedom to both sexes rather than one imposing upon men the restrictions which hitherto have been suffered only by women.

Within the monogamic family there are, however, many varieties. Marriages may be decided by the parties themselves or by their parents. In some countries the bride is purchased; in others, e.g. France, the bridegroom. Then there may be all kinds of differences as regards divorce, from the Catholic extreme, which permits no divorce, to the law of old China, which permitted a man to divorce his wife for being a chatterbox. Constancy or quasi-constancy in sex relations arises among animals, as well as among human beings, where, for the preservation of the species, the participation of the male is necessary for the rearing of the young. Birds, for example, have to sit upon their eggs continuously to keep them warm, and also have to spend a good many hours of the day getting food. To do both is, among many species, impossible for one bird, and therefore male co-operation is essential. The consequence is that most birds are models of virtue. Among human beings the co-operation of the father is a great biological advantage to the offspring, especially in unsettled

times and among turbulent populations, but with the growth of modern civilisation the role of the father is being increasingly taken over by the State, and there is reason to think that a father may cease before long to be biologically advantageous, at any rate in the wage-earning class. If this should occur, we must expect a complete breakdown of traditional morality, since there will no longer be any reason why a mother should wish the paternity of her child to be indubitable. Plato would have us go a step further, and put the State not only in place of the father but in that of the mother also. I am not myself sufficiently an admirer of the State, or sufficiently impressed with the delights of orphan asylums, to be enthusiastically in favour of this scheme. At the same time it is not impossible that economic forces may cause it to be to some extent adopted.

The law is concerned with sex in two different ways: on the one hand to enforce whatever sexual ethic is adopted by the community in question, and on the other hand to protect the ordinary rights of individuals in the sphere of sex. The latter have two main departments: on the one hand the protection of females and non-adults from assault and from harmful exploitation, on the other hand the prevention of venereal disease. Neither of these is commonly treated purely on its merits, and for this reason neither is so effectively dealt with as it might be. In regard to the former, hysterical campaigns about the White Slave Traffic lead to the passage of laws easily evaded by professional malefactors, while affording opportunities of blackmail against harmless people. In regard to the latter, the view that venereal disease is a just punishment for sin prevents the adoption of the measures which would be the most effective on purely medical grounds, while the general attitude that venereal disease is shameful causes it to be concealed, and therefore not promptly or adequately treated.

We come next to the question of population. This is in itself a vast problem which must be considered from many points of

view. There is the question of the health of mothers, the question of the health of children, the question of the psychological effects of large and small families respectively upon the character of children. These are what may be called the hygienic aspects of the problem. Then there are the economic aspects, both personal and public: the question of the wealth per head of a family or a community in relation to the size of the family or the birth-rate of the community. Closely connected with this is the bearing of the population question upon international politics and the possibility of world peace. And finally there is the eugenic question as to the improvement or deterioration of the stock through the different birth and death rates of the different sections of the community. No sexual ethic can be either justified or condemned on solid grounds until it has been examined from all the points of view above enumerated. Reformers and reactionaries alike are in the habit of considering one or at most two of the aspects of the problem. It is especially rare to find any combination of the private and the political points of view, and yet it is quite impossible to say that either of these is more important than the other, and we can have no assurance *a priori* that a system which is good from a private point of view would also be good from a political point of view, or vice versa. My own belief is that in most ages and in most places obscure psychological forces have led men to adopt systems involving quite unnecessary cruelty, and that this is still the case among the most civilised races at the present day. I believe also that the advances in medicine and hygiene have made changes in sexual ethics desirable both from a private and public point of view, while, as already suggested, the increasing role of the State in education is gradually rendering the father less important than he has been throughout historical times. We have, therefore, a twofold task in criticising the current ethics: on the one hand we have to eliminate the elements of superstition, which are often subconscious; on the other hand we have to take account of those entirely new

factors which make the wisdom of past ages the folly instead of the wisdom of the present.

In order to obtain a perspective upon the existing system, I shall first consider some systems which have existed in the past or exist at the present time among the less civilised portions of mankind. I shall then proceed to characterise the system now in vogue in Western civilisation, and finally to consider the respects in which this system should be amended and the grounds for hoping that such amendment will take place.

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## MATRILINEAL SOCIETIES

Marriage customs have always been a blend of three factors, which may be loosely called instinctive, economic, and religious respectively. I do not mean that these can be sharply distinguished, any more than they can in other spheres. The fact that shops are closed on Sundays has a religious origin, but is now an economic fact, and so it is with many laws and customs in relation to sex. A useful custom which has a religious origin will often survive on account of its utility after the religious basis has been undermined. The distinction between what is religious and what is instinctive is also a difficult one to make. Religions which have any very strong hold over men's actions have generally some instinctive basis. They are distinguished, however, by the importance of tradition, and by the fact that, among the various kinds of actions which are instinctively possible, they give a preference to certain kinds; for example, love and jealousy are both instinctive emotions, but religion has decreed that jealousy is a virtuous emotion to which the community ought to lend support, while love is at best excusable.

The instinctive element in sex relations is much less than is usually supposed. It is not my purpose in this book to go into anthropology except in so far as may be necessary to illustrate present-day problems, but there is one respect in which that science is very necessary for our purposes, and that is, to show how many practices, which we should have thought contrary to instinct, can continue for long periods without causing any great or obvious conflict with instinct. It has, for example, been a common practice not only with savages but with some comparatively civilised races, for virgins to be officially (and sometimes publicly) deflowered by priests. In Christian countries men have held that defloration should be the prerogative of the bridegroom, and most Christians, at any rate until recent times, would have regarded their repugnance to the custom of religious defloration as an instinctive one. The practice of lending one's wife to a guest as an act of hospitality is also one which to the modern European seems instinctively repugnant, and yet it has been very widespread. Polyandry is another custom which an unlearned white man would suppose contrary to human nature. Infanticide might seem still more so; yet the facts show that it is resorted to with great readiness wherever it seems economically advantageous. The fact is that, where human beings are concerned, instinct is extraordinarily vague and easily turned aside from its natural course. This is the case equally among savages and among civilised communities. The word 'instinct', in fact, is hardly the proper one to apply to anything so far from rigid as human behaviour in sexual matters. The only act in this whole realm which can be called instinctive in the strict psychological sense is the act of sucking in infancy. I do not know how it may be with savages, but civilised people have to learn to perform the sexual act. It is not uncommon for doctors to be asked by married couples of some years' standing for advice as to how to get children, and to find on examination that the couples have not known how to perform intercourse. The sexual act is not,



therefore, in the strictest sense, instinctive, although of course there is a natural trend towards it and a desire not easily to be satisfied without it. Indeed, where human beings are concerned we do not have the precise behaviour-patterns which are to be found among other animals, an instinct in that sense is replaced by something rather different. What we have with human beings is first of all a dissatisfaction leading to activities of a more or less random and imperfect sort, but arriving gradually, more or less by accident, at an activity which gives satisfaction and which is therefore repeated. What is instinctive is thus not so much the finished activity as the impulse to learn it, and often the activity which would give satisfaction is by no means definitely pre-determined, though, as a rule, the biologically most advantageous activity will give the most complete satisfaction, provided it is learnt before contrary habits have been acquired.

Seeing that all civilised modern societies are based upon the patriarchal family, and that the whole conception of female virtue has been built up in order to make the patriarchal family possible, it is important to inquire what natural impulses have gone to produce the sentiment of paternity. This question is by no means so easy as unreflective persons might suppose. The feeling of a mother towards her child is one which it is not at all difficult to understand, since there is a close physical tie, at any rate up to the moment of weaning. But the relation of father to child is indirect, hypothetical and inferential: it is bound up with beliefs as to the virtue of the wife, and belongs accordingly to a region too intellectual to be regarded as properly instinctive. Or at least it would so seem if one supposed that the sentiment of paternity must be directed essentially towards a man's own children. This, however, is by no means necessarily the case. The Melanesians do not know that people have fathers, yet among them fathers are at least as fond of their children as they are where they know them to be their children. A flood of light has been thrown upon the psychology of paternity by Malinowski's

books on the Trobriand Islanders. Three books especially – *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, *The Father in Primitive Psychology*, and *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-West Melanesia* – are quite indispensable to any understanding of the complex sentiment which we call that of paternity. There are, in fact, two entirely distinct reasons which may lead a man to be interested in a child: he may be interested in the child because he believes it to be his child, or again he may be interested in it because he knows it to be his wife's child. The second of these motives alone operates where the part of the father in generation is not known.

The fact that among the Trobriand Islanders people are not known to have fathers has been established by Malinowski beyond question. He found, for example, that when a man has been away on a voyage for a year or more and finds on his return that his wife has a new-born child, he is delighted, and quite unable to understand the hints of Europeans suggesting doubts as to his wife's virtue. What is perhaps still more convincing, he found that a man who possessed a superior breed of pigs would castrate all the males, and be unable to understand that this involved a deterioration of the breed. It is thought that spirits bring children and insert them into their mothers. It is recognised that virgins cannot conceive, but this is supposed to be because the hymen presents a physical barrier to the activities of the spirits. Unmarried men and girls live a life of complete free love, but, for some unknown reason, unmarried girls very seldom conceive. Oddly enough, it is considered disgraceful when they do so, in spite of the fact that, according to native philosophy, nothing they have done is responsible for their becoming pregnant. Sooner or later a girl grows tired of variety and marries. She goes to live in her husband's village, but she and her children are still reckoned as belonging to the village from which she has come. Her husband is not regarded as having any blood relationship to the children, and descent is traced solely through the female line. The kind of authority over children which is

elsewhere exercised by fathers is, among the Trobriand Islanders, vested in the maternal uncle. Here, however, a very curious complication comes in. The brother-and-sister taboo is exceedingly severe, so that after they are grown up brother and sister can never talk together on any subject connected, however remotely, with sex. Consequently, although the maternal uncle has authority over the children, he sees little of them except when they are away from their mother and from home. This admirable system secures for the children a measure of affection without discipline which is unknown elsewhere. Their father plays with them and is nice to them but has not the right to order them about, whereas their maternal uncle, who has the right to order them about, has not the right to be on the spot.

Strangely enough, in spite of the belief that there is no blood tie between the child and its mother's husband, it is supposed that children resemble their mothers' husbands rather than their mothers or their brothers and sisters. Indeed, it is very bad manners to suggest a resemblance between a brother and sister, or between a child and its mother, and even the most obvious resemblances are fiercely denied. Malinowski is of opinion that the affection of fathers for their children is stimulated by this belief in a resemblance to the father rather than to the mother. He found the relation of father and son a more harmonious and affectionate one than it often is among civilised people, and, as might have been expected, he found no trace of the Oedipus complex.

Malinowski found it quite impossible, in spite of his best argumentative efforts, to persuade his friends on the islands that there is such a thing as paternity. They regarded this as a silly story invented by the missionaries. Christianity is a patriarchal religion, and cannot be made emotionally or intellectually intelligible to people who do not recognise fatherhood. Instead of 'God the Father' it would be necessary to speak of 'God the Maternal Uncle', but this does not give quite the right shade of meaning, since fatherhood implies both power and love,

whereas in Melanesia the maternal uncle has the power and the father has the love. The idea that men are God's children is one which cannot be conveyed to the Trobriand Islanders since they do not think that anybody is the child of any male. Consequently, missionaries are compelled to tackle first the facts of physiology before they can go on to preach their religion. One gathers from Malinowski that they have no success in this initial task, and have, therefore, been quite unable to proceed to the teaching of the Gospel.

Malinowski maintains, and in this I think he must be right, that if a man remains with his wife during pregnancy and child-birth he has an instinctive tendency to be fond of the child when it is born, and this is the basis of the paternal sentiment. 'Human paternity', he says, 'which appears at first as almost completely lacking in biological foundation, can be shown to be deeply rooted in natural endowment and organic need.' He thinks, however, that if a man is absent from his wife during pregnancy he will not instinctively feel affection for the child at first, although, if custom and tribal ethics lead him to associate with the mother and child, affection will develop as it would have done if he had been with the mother throughout. In all the important human relations, socially desirable acts, towards which there is an instinct not strong enough to be always compelling, are enforced by social ethics, and so it is among these savages. Custom enjoins that the mother's husband shall care for the children and protect them while they are young, and this custom is not difficult to enforce, since it is, as a rule, in line with instinct.

The instinct to which Malinowski appeals to explain the attitude of a father towards his children among the Melanesians is, I think, somewhat more general than it appears in his pages. There is, I think, in either a man or a woman a tendency to feel affection for any child whom he or she has to tend. Even if nothing but custom and convention, or wages, have in the first instance caused an adult to have the care of a child, the mere fact

of having that care will, in the majority of cases, cause affection to grow up. No doubt this feeling is reinforced where the child is the child of a woman who is loved. It is, therefore, intelligible that these savages show considerable devotion to their wives' children, and it may be taken as certain that this is a large element in the affection which civilised men give to their children. Malinowski maintains – and it is difficult to see how his opinion can be controverted – that all mankind must have passed through the stage in which the Trobriand Islanders are now, since there must have been a period when paternity was nowhere recognised. Animal families, where they include a father, must have a like basis, since they cannot have any other. It is only among human beings, after the fact of fatherhood has become known, that the sentiment of paternity can assume the form with which we are familiar.