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Why Marry At All? Motives and Obstacles for Lifelong Marital Commitment

In 1837-1838 Charles Darwin was seriously pondering the question whether or not to marry. Under the heading "THIS IS THE QUESTION" he hurriedly listed on a scrap of paper the pros and cons of marriage. In the left column, entitled "MARRY", he noted:

Children – (if it please God) – constant companion, (friend in old age) who will feel interested in one, object to be beloved and played with – better than a dog anyhow – Home, and someone to take care of house – Charms of music and female chit-chat. These things are good for one’s health. Forced to visit and receive relations but terrible loss of time.

My God, it is intolerable to think of spending one’s whole life, like a neuter bee, working, working and nothing after all. – No, no, won’t do. –

Imagine living all one’s day solitarily in smoky dirty London House. – Only picture to yourself a nice soft wife on a sofa with a good fire, and books and music perhaps – compare this vision with the dingy reality of Gt Marlboro’s St. [the place of his then bachelor’s residence, TK]

Marry – Marry – Marry Q.E.D.

In the right column, headed: "Not MARRY", Darwin had written:

No children, (no second life) no one to take care for one in old age. – What is the use of working without sympathy from near and dear friends – who are near and dear friends to the old except relatives.

Freedom to go where one liked – Choice of Society and little of it. Conversation of clever men at clubs. –

Not forced to visit relatives, and to bend in every trifle – to have the expense and anxiety of children – perhaps quarreling.

Loss of time – cannot read in the evenings – fatness and idleness – anxiety and responsibility – less money for books etc. – if many children forced to gain one’s bread. – (But then it is very bad for one’s health to work too much)

Perhaps my wife won’t like London; then the sentence is banishment and degradation with indolent idle fool – 2

If we abstract from the typical nineteenth century setting and mentality with its veneration of the sanctuary of the home and the wife as its soul and maintainer, Darwin’s reasons for married life

1 Opening address given at the INTAMS Colloquium held in Leuven and Sint-Genesius-Rode/Brussels on 9 and 10 March 2007.

promote various motives which have been brought forward throughout history: children, somebody to go through life with, and an assurance for care in old days.

However, what renders Darwin’s arguments so "modern" is that he perceives them as profoundly ambivalent and therefore subject to personal choice. It is precisely what can be said in favour of marriage that can be used at the same time as an argument against it: Undoubtedly, children are a warranty for one’s achievements in life to be carried on as well as a source of personal happiness and joy – but children have to be fed and they do quarrel sometimes! Surely, a life of loneliness lacking companionship appears far from desirable, but does it measure up against the quest for self-fulfilment and autonomy? The question was as serious for someone of Darwin’s accomplishment, who had undertaken adventurous expeditions, as it is for our contemporaries who pursue professional careers or who just foster the dream of an independent lifestyle that today, admittedly, includes things other than reading books in the evening or having stimulating conversations in men’s clubs. And after all, to have somebody to take care of one when lifetime comes close to its final stage is certainly a reasonable option, but who honestly thinks of old age when embarking on a trajectory that will cover many productive years yet to come?

There has always been and still exists today a "normative discourse" in which church leaders or policy makers, social theorists or theologians recommend marriage because they believe it instrumental to some good cause. When Augustine set off to counter the Manicheans’ condemnation of procreation he found in marriage a welcome excuse and a way to minimize the risk of succumbing to the almost inevitable sinfulness of sexual intercourse. Luckily, over time the church pushed aside the idea of the relative goodness of marriage that undergirded Augustine’s conception, coming to regard the threefold goods of offspring, fidelity, and indissolubility as simple blessings. Thomas Aquinas did not have to be convinced that marriage is a natural institution and therefore good in itself. Elaborating on the Augustinian bona he laid the groundwork for the idea of the ends or purposes (fines) of marriage, thus showing how well and intelligently nature and its heavenly creator had provided for a union in which man and woman assist each other and make use of their sexuality for the overarching purpose (finis primarius) of perpetuating the human race through procreation.

Probably the scholastics as well as subsequent generations of theologians and church jurists could afford to look at marriage in the abstract since there was little need to persuade people of its advantages. That, however, has changed today and so the contemporary discourse has not only become more secular but has also exchanged the benefits of a previously unquestioned institution for the personal gratification connected with an individual’s choice of marital lifestyle. It goes as follows – and here I am quoting a publication in which not so long ago respected US researchers made "the case for marriage" on the ground of empirical evidence:

Marriage people live longer, have better health, earn more money and accumulate more wealth, feel more fulfilled in their lives, enjoy more satisfying sexual relationships, and have happier and more successful children than those who remain single, cohabit, or get divorced.3

What else could one aspire to? So, get married and stay married – q.e.d.!

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However, we know only too well that *le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ignore* – "The heart has its reasons which reason know nothing of" (B. Pascal). Darwin’s heart, by the way, finally joined his reason and tipped the scale toward marriage: he married his cousin Emma Wedgwood in 1839, had ten children with her and confessed on his deathbed after more than forty years of marriage what a good wife she had been for him.

Today’s context is different, of course. When faced with the question "to marry" or "not to marry", our contemporaries will find themselves in a situation in which the choice is not between companionship and singlehood, but rather one in which a shared decision has to be taken as to whether or not an existing partnership should be solemnized by formal marriage. Compared to Darwin’s times, the alternative seems less radical and therefore also less relevant for today’s couples. Is it surprising then that in the general perception the difference between marriage and other forms of living arrangements is increasingly being levelled out to the effect that it does not really matter whether you are married or not?

Yet, while marriage is becoming less dominant on the one hand, it appears to become more distinctive on the other. Paradoxically, marriage still remains popular. If we are to believe the statistics, more than 70% of the population in Western societies either have been or will be married at least once in their lifetime. And if it is true that the majority of today’s newlyweds have been cohabiting before marriage, are not they the ones who distinguish clearly between cohabitation and marriage? What value do they attach to marriage when they come to believe that, at least from this moment on, cohabitation is only the second best option? If the step to permanently living under the same roof is much more the result of having once left a toothbrush in the beloved’s apartment than of careful consideration and decision, the same is not true for marriage. You do not slip into marriage as you fall into love or move in with your friend; you need good reasons for getting married, particularly at times when it is no longer necessary.

What are these reasons and what makes them convincing for today’s couples? Are the arguments which make partners massively shrink away from marriage the same which convince others to become married? But then, do we have to suppose that there are two types of partnerships, the "marriage-type" for whom the conjugal union is the crowning of a committed relationship and another one for whom it is not and will perhaps never be? Or is it rather that the significance of marriage these days varies greatly depending on the context and situation partners find themselves in both in their individual and relational biography?

It is amazing that we do not have much empirical evidence to answer these questions. Instead, whether in secular or ecclesial milieus, we are used to focusing on demographic trends: we take low marriage rates, the constantly high number of divorces and an increasing rate of alternative domestic arrangements at face value and adopt, according to our ideological preferences, either a perspective of decline or of resilience with regard to the institution of marriage. However, if we regard marriage as only a demographic condition, we risk imposing a rigid definition to which reality will, but more often will not, correspond. What we thus overlook is that more than a normative

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concept, marriage is also what a US researcher has called a "discursive arena" in which people select, modify, re-define, retrieve and create meanings. Marriage obviously challenges people at some point in their individual and shared life course to reflect on their experiences and to concretize how they expect their relationship to develop in the future. The wedding ceremony, whether civil or religious, thereby offers them a way to comment on themselves to a variety of audiences. People thus make their own experiences and expectations bear upon our normative discourses, constantly revisiting and reconfiguring them. Herein lies a broad and interesting field for reflection and study – for sociologists and marriage researchers, but particularly also for theologians who should be as concerned about the "saving mystery of marriage" as about its lived reality.

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