An Argument for Marriage

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In a recent article in this journal, Dan Moller presents two important arguments against marriage.[1] One examines several ways in which the marriage promise can be explained, and shows that none of them is viable.[2] The other argues that marriage may not be a worthwhile enterprise since marriages frequently fail, in that they become loveless or end in divorce (79, 80–81).[3] I will argue here that there is another way, which Moller does not consider, of explaining the marriage promise that would render it viable; and that notwithstanding the failure of many marriages, this enterprise can still be worthwhile.

Let us first take the argument against the viability of the marriage promise. What exactly does one promise to do when one marries? One suggestion—which can be called the *everlasting love* suggestion—is that when one marries, one promises that one will always love the person whom one marries (80–82). But emotions include a strong autonomous element, and hence cannot be ordered at will. They develop, change, and sometimes fade away on their own. Moller presents disturbing statistics that suggest that in many marriages (perhaps as many as half of them) love dwindles and disappears (80–81). To promise that one's love will not end is to make a promise one may not be able to keep, about what may well be beyond one's control.

Another possible explanation of the marriage promise refers not to staying in love but to staying married (85–87). According to this explanation—let us call it the *interminable marriage* explanation—when one marries one promises to remain married even if one stops loving one's spouse. But this amounts to promising to remain in a loveless marriage (if the marriage comes to that), and hardly any of us think that this is what we are promising when we marry, nor

[1] Dan Moller, 'An Argument Against Marriage', *Philosophy* 78 (2003): 79–91. All parenthesized page numbers in the text refer to Moller's article.

[2] Henceforth in this paper, I will use 'promise' and 'commitment' interchangeably.

[3] Moller does not suggest that his arguments (in their present form) are conclusive, but only that they have more force than may at first appear (90).

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would most of us agree to make such a promise (87). The *interminable marriage* explanation of the marriage commitment is also problematic.

A third possible explanation—let us call it the *marriage when in love* explanation—is that in marriage one promises to continue to be married *as long* as one remains in love (88–90). When one stops loving one's spouse, one may leave the marriage. But if this is the case, it is difficult to see why marriage or the marriage promise are needed at all. One might just as well stay with the other person as long as one loves him or her, and then leave (89).

If these were the only three ways to explain the marriage commitment, this argument against marriage would indeed be very strong. I suggest, however, that there is another, fourth interpretation, that renders the marriage promise viable. The act of marriage should be understood as including at least two elements: (a) a statement about one's emotional situation when marrying, and (b) a promise. The statement is that one strongly loves one's future spouse (I will return to this statement below). The promise is to invest work in performing certain acts that are likely to sustain the love.

This way of explaining the promise may sound odd. When discussing the *everlasting love* explanation, did we not just concede that since love includes a strong uncontrollable component, it cannot be controlled? The answer is that although love cannot be controlled directly[4] and with complete success, there are many acts that indirectly, and with sufficient degree of success, do help to strengthen or weaken, maintain or destroy, love. These acts vary from one culture to another and even among couples in a particular group, but in the modern West they typically include, among other things, supporting one's spouse emotionally; helping him or her to cope with physical difficulties; sharing with one's spouse a significant part of one's thoughts, feelings, and hopes (including those that one does not normally share with others); investing time and effort in enhancing the well-being of one's spouse; sharing recreational activities; showing one's spouse that he or she is considered special to one; refraining from extramarital sexual

[4] It is not clear to me that emotions cannot, to some extent, be controlled directly through decision. One can, for example, decide not to lose hope or to check one's hopes, to increase the degree of one's anger, to diminish one's envy, to overcome or lessen one's fear, or to feel pity rather than callousness, without counterfeiting the relevant emotions. But I will not pursue this line of argumentation here.

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affairs; and refraining from revealing secrets or issues that one's spouse considers private.[5]

These acts frequently influence love to a considerable degree, and they are largely controllable. This is not the only instance where we perform controllable acts in order to influence our emotions, notwithstanding their largely autonomous nature. We avoid the company of this or that person so as not to be hurt. We perform a certain deed in order to feel proud of ourselves. We postpone till tomorrow the discussion with the neighbour so as not to become even angrier. We read about a certain danger in order to feel less fear. Such acts are common. Every day we engage in many acts whose propose is to avoid or downplay certain emotional states, and create, maintain, or augment others. Of course, we are not always successful. We may have chosen the wrong act with which to influence this or that emotion, or other factors may have a stronger influence on our emotions than our own acts have (what the neighbour said was too vexing for the decision to count to ten before answering to be effective). We also have to accept that emotions do have their own not completely controllable dynamics that we frequently do not fully understand. Nevertheless, we can, and frequently do, influence our emotions. It is incorrect, then, to describe emotions as uncontrollable, if by that one means that they are completely immune to the influence of deliberate acts.

This is also true of love. Acts that we perform in order to strengthen love are not always successful. We may perform such acts yet see love diminish or evaporate altogether, or refrain from them yet see it persisting or growing. Over and above other factors that affect love (among which are the spouse's own behaviour) and the mistakes we may make in choosing the controllable acts with which we try to influence it, love also has a rhyme and rhythm of its own that is not completely controllable. But love-sustaining acts frequently do influence love to a considerable degree. It is to the performance of these acts that we commit ourselves in marriage.

This suggested understanding of what we promise in marriage does not suffer, then, from the problem Moller finds in the *everlasting love* explanation. But does the present suggestion not suffer instead from a problem similar to that which Moller finds in the *interminable marriage* explanation, i.e., that it commits one to perform love-sustaining acts even when one's love no longer exists?

[5] Some of these are not, strictly speaking, acts, but consist of refraining from acts (e.g., not revealing secrets). However, for simplicity's sake I refer to all of them in this paper as 'acts'.

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No. If it is indeed clear that love is completely dead rather than is merely going through a crisis or a low point, one is not bound to continue, e.g., to share one's thoughts, feelings and hopes with one's spouse, to leave time for shared recreational activities, or to show one's spouse that he or she is considered special to one. Doing that would be insincere and unhelpful.[6] (One should continue to refrain from some other behaviour, such as revealing secrets or issues one's spouse considers private, even after love stops; but this for general moral reasons.)

But, it might be argued, if one may stop performing love-sustaining acts when one ceases to love, does not the account suggested here suffer from a problem similar to one Moller finds in the *marriage when in love* explanation? It might be suggested that when one loves one anyway performs love-sustaining acts, and when one ceases to love one anyway stops performing them. If so, one is in fact simply promising to continue to perform these acts *as long* as one loves, and once again it is difficult to see what the point of the marriage promise is. The promise appears redundant: one might just as well not promise, and let oneself do what one would anyway do.

However, it is not the case that when we love, we anyway perform love-sustaining acts. People frequently do love, even strongly, yet neglect to perform these acts due to inattentiveness, laziness, distractions, akratic components in their nature, a tendency to be passive when in love, or the force of external circumstances (e.g., tensions at work). Commitment is needed to help withstand these factors just as it is needed to withstand them when one wishes to lose weight, improve one's cardiovascular ability, or become a better philosopher. We know that people who wish to lose weight do not eat less anyway; that those who want to improve their cardiovascular condition do not exercise anyway; and that those who wish to become better philosophers do not work, read and think a certain number of hours a day anyway. We know that despite these interests and wishes, people frequently eat excessively, fail to exercise, and do not attend sufficiently to philosophical pursuits, because of distractions, temptations, laziness, crises, and other external and internal forces. A commitment to refrain from some foods, to run four times a week, or to pursue philosophy a certain number of hours a day helps overcome or diminish the effect of the obstructing forces. The same is true of the commitment to perform love-sustaining acts. Such a commitment, then, is not redundant.

[6] Like Moller (86 n. 7), I am not here taking into account special circumstances such as the health of the spouse or the existence of children.

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I believe that this explanation of the marriage promise makes sense of it and renders it viable: the marriage promise is a promise to perform love-sustaining acts. However, as mentioned above, I take the act of marriage to consist of yet another component: when we marry, we are also declaring that at the time of marriage we deeply love the person we are marrying. This is not, strictly speaking, part of the marriage promise; however, it is related to it. If there is no initial love for the love-sustaining acts to maintain or augment, the marriage is more likely to be loveless. Love-sustaining acts are frequently strong enough to maintain or augment love, but only seldom powerful enough to create it.

Do most people view their marriage promise in the way represented here? Most, I believe, are not completely clear about the nature of the promise they are making, but seem to understand it as combining nebulous versions of the *everlasting love* and the *interminable marriage* explanations. Perhaps, however, it would be useful for some to consider the suggestion presented here. Moller separates the philosophical discussion from actual life (79), but considering the present suggestion may assist some people in their married lives.

Let us turn then to Moller's other argument, which suggests that marriage may not be worthwhile since many marriages fail (I shall henceforth refer to this as 'the second argument'). It is certainly true that marriage carries with it the risk of failure. However, the same is true of many other endeavours, such as buying a lottery ticket, looking for work, trying to become a first-rate sculptor, or starting a business. And notwithstanding the possibility of failure, in certain circumstances we consider the devotion to some of these projects as worthwhile and rational. I cannot hope to present all the parameters that should be taken into account when deciding whether to opt for a certain project, but will mention here a few central ones.

Obviously, one parameter is the probable success of the endeavour (it is this parameter that makes almost all lottery gambling irrational). As mentioned above, Moller suggests that the rate of failed marriages is about half. This is indeed a high rate. However, this rate is influenced also by people who marry at a very young age; who marry after knowing each other for a very short time; who confuse love with sentimentality, sexual excitement, or aesthetic admiration; who are generally unstable and irresponsible; who are frequently inattentive, lazy, or akratic; and who do not perform love-sustaining acts. If one belongs to such groups of people, the probability that one's marriage will fail is even higher than the rate

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that Moller cites. Moller's second argument applies to them even more than he suggests, and perhaps they should consider refraining from marriage.[7] But if one (and one's future spouse) does not belong to such groups, the probability that one's marriage will fail is significantly lower than that suggested by Moller.

Moreover, not every failed marriage is one that should have been avoided. 'Worthwhile failures' should also be taken into account. One may indeed aim for a lifelong loving marriage, but accept as a worthwhile, even if inferior, alternative a twenty-year-long loving marriage that ends amiably and fairly.[8] On the other hand, many would consider an acrimonious marriage that lasts only three years and ends with much pain and many complications as a failed marriage that was not worthwhile. Members of groups more likely to have stable marriage are also more likely to have, if the marriage fails, a worthwhile failure than are members of other groups.

Another consideration that should be taken into account is one's situation if one does not opt for the endeavour. For example, a person looking for work may be in a bad economic situation that makes the effort to find work worthwhile even if the chances of success are slim; the alternative is hunger. Similarly, some people consider living without stable love (i.e., without love at all or with only very brief love affairs) very painful indeed. For others, this prospect is not problematic or is even comfortable. It might be more rational for members of the first group to marry. For others, it is more rational to avoid marriage.

Yet another parameter has to do with the effort and the investment in the endeavour. Some people find it easier than others do to perform love-sustaining acts and to dedicate time, attention, and emotional energy to another person. It is more rational for members of the first than of the second group to enter into marriage. Members of the second group should indeed consider refraining from marriage.

Of course, these are not the only parameters that should be taken into account when considering whether to opt for a project that might fail. But the discussion of these parameters is sufficient to show that Moller's second argument is only partly correct. There is, indeed, a risk in marriage, and those who wish to marry should not

[7] This does not, of course, imply that all unmarried people are lazy, akratic, unstable, etc. Many unmarried people simply do not want to be married, others have not met satisfactory spouses, yet others stay unmarried because of further reasons or causes different from those mentioned above.

[8] Moller alludes to such a possibility (80, 91) but does not explore it.

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take it lightly. They should think well and seriously before undertaking the enterprise. But the risk is not similar for all people. Moller combines all groups into one, homogeneous population, citing for all of them the same probability of failure, and drawing from it for all of them the same conclusion. But for some, the risk is much higher than Moller suggests, and for them his second argument against marriage is not radical enough. For others, the risk is much lower than Moller claims, (although it still exists, and should not be taken lightly), and to them his second argument is less applicable. To people of the latter group, marriage may be a well worthwhile enterprise.[9]

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