

Is adultery immoral?

I believe that with any question we must first know exactly what we are being inquisitive about if we seek to find any answer that has any pragmatic use, thus much of this essay will be dedicated to finding a meaning of adultery that considers its etymological roots as well as its adjustments and use in modernity; more specifically in the sexual revolution. *Adulterare* is the Latin root meaning ‘to corrupt’, and *moicheuthēnai* is the ancient Greek verb ‘to commit adultery’ used in the Synoptic Gospels. Branching from its etymological roots we will then consider modern forms of pair bonding and the dating scene most specifically in the western world whilst acknowledging patterns of ‘extra marital affairs’ globally so that we have a greater insight into how strong the proclivity is *adulterare*. We may then deduce from our inquiry and what it presents us, whether our meaning of adultery should be applied as a moral code; a categorical imperative to *not* commit. The acts of consent and negotiation will be used to refine our attempt at finding moral judgement as then we can observe with greater detail how malleable the judgements can be; with the introduction of the profile of a ‘High value person’ we will see that the act of adultery can be justified as morally sound if we use secular reasoning. Hence this essay is a philosophical investigation into how modernity’s sexual revolution has provided means to justify what were once, and still are considered, immoral acts as to be *at least* not condemnable under any moral gavel. We will consider scholars with expertise in linguistics and their evaluation of consent and forming contracts and will see whether or not *adulterare* is still to be considered as corrupting as it once was. Possibly if still true then its moral implications may have shifted away from the monogamy of the Bible and now rest of the breaking of an agreed contract.

Jesus once said: “But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.” (The Holy Bible: Matthew. 5:32). G.J Wenham goes on to highlight these revolutionary thoughts Jesus had regarding adultery; ‘...the teaching of Jesus that revolutionised this situation, that put both man and wife on an equal footing as regards conjugal rights, so that both had to be totally loyal to each other.’ (*Gospel definitions of adultery and women's rights*, 1984). These words helped form a story that were written in-between 70-110 CE (Sim, 2022), which went on to be canonical for the most widely practised religion in the world today (Deshmukh, 2022) with the help from significant figures that served as missionaries to spread the teachings of Jesus Christ, one of which being Saint Augustine. He went on to further explain the, at times cryptic and poetic, teachings from his sermons and conversations; some regarding sex, value and chastity; he even went on to move further away from certain pagan judgements that held if a woman were to be raped, she had still sinned, and thus was corrupted. Augustine, being no fan of fame and praise that rely merely on public eye and opinion said that the relationship with God is personal, it was contract that only one subject held with the almighty, so if a woman were to be unwillingly forced to have sex outside of marriage, it was not deemed immoral because of the non admittance of consent (Winiarski, 2006). This safeguard of consent is core to what helps us discuss the morality of adultery, it seems even from the time of 30CE we know where the ball stops rolling, it stops at consent. If either party of a pair bond were to not consent to extra marital affairs and it were forced upon them, we cannot see this as adultery, which implies that the intention matters.

These ideas of monogamy and adultery have been significant over the course of thousands of years, albeit in their presence they have unknowingly highlighted something even more interesting about human nature other than the fact we choose, or God chose, for us to pair-up

- we have always committed adultery. Even Augustine himself famously said ‘Give me chastity and continence but not yet.’ (Augustine & Pusey, 2010). Indeed even the most pious of people, devoted to serving God and teachings of Jesus Christ still had mistresses (Fisher, 2017a). Whilst in the eyes of the classical theistic God this is sinful and without valid justification, many have claimed that there is a sexual double standard in regards to chastity. Hume deduced that from a stable organised society, a nuclear patriarchal family is ideal as the men cannot be sure that the baby is his own whereas the woman can be certain. Hence to compensate the artificial virtue of chastity holds a greater weight on women to ensure that the men are confident that the child they're helping to rear is their own (Levey, 2011). Rousseau around a similar time suggested that the relative duties of men and women are not the same and this inequality is not derived from prejudice but from reason; he claims a woman’s infidelity is against nature (Pagani & Rousseau, 2021). Here we are starting to see justifications for Augustine starting to pile up and the essence of the word *adulterare*, as if we are to concur with opinions of Hume and Rousseau, quite literally means *to corrupt*.¹ As we begin to find more exits for the adulterous man to run, he is still never free from the damning judgement of God. It is this hard to shake off judgement of the Almighty that I propose a line of sentimental reasoning to theorise that even a pious man may be justified, to commit adultery.

Discernment is a gift from God;

‘And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.’ Philippians 1:9-10 (*The Holy Bible -The New International Version*)

¹ Although neither Hume or Rousseau claimed that infidelity committed by a man was *good*, in fact they still claimed it was *bad*; just less bad than the same act committed by a woman.

This word is akin to a holy intuition, an ability to judge, think and feel; post faith. Which I contend leaves a lot of room for thinkers to find reasons for an action. As if a man were to be exposed to modern form of relationships with knowledge such as of those we have today in the scientific revolution; then it might be possible that with his faith founded on *doxa* and an archive of studies surrounding philosophy, anthropology, psychology and neuroscience that his holy intuition may lead him to justify adultery even with the *Pikuach nefesh* lurking. The key is in understanding the holy intuition isn't an objective standard of judgement, as it is not uniform with all humans, it is malleable to the situations, hence the *need* to have discernment, as the bible does not guide all in specificity but in direction (Gambescia, 2016). Alluding to the intuition, a pious man is affected by his environment, it is an experienced and felt reaction to what is external to him, inspired by God. There is knowledge accessible to us today that may alter our holy intuition such as knowing that jealousy induced by thoughts of our partners cheating is felt differently to men and women, regions of the brain associated with the violation of social norms are what women typically feel, whilst in men's brains, regions that are associated with aggression are more active (Takahashi et al., 2006). Therefore we might find reasoning in the fact women who have had their partner commit adultery that they will not be as inclined to feel rage and anger so the consequences for this act are not considered *too* corrupting. Blatant, not discreet, forms of philandering is the number one cause for the dissolution of marriages across 160 societies, alluding to the tolerability of cheating in many marriages as long as it is not explicitly shown out of 'courtesy'; much like the young italians in the mid 20th century along the Adriatic coast, they all maintained a known but unspoken '*quasi-institutionalised system of extramarital affairs*' whom of which were all most probably catholics, all found good enough reasons in their eyes (Fisher, 2017b). However Amos Yong wrote 'Christian criteria for discernment will need to be guided by Scripture...the meaning and application of Scripture is the result of life lived according to

and in the Spirit.’ (Yong, 2005). Using this pneumatological framework we can see that the gift of discernment would surely intuit you, once you have faith, to not commit adultery as the gift is inspired by the Spirit, and that spirit is also in part Jesus Christ who was clear that sex outside of marriage was veering from the good.² The ambivalence comes from, how heavy will the intuition be felt and how strongly does the Holy Spirit guide one to interpret literature and act in accordance with God’s Will.

Thus, having modern knowledge of the human body and behaviour, knowing even the most pious men still commit adultery and that Jesus considers it forgivable, the weight behind the act of adultery does not seem to hold much moral distaste, or if it does, many of us have not and still do not care greatly about its consequences. It may not be a stretch to allude to Jesus’ revolutionary thoughts as still being traditional by the sexual revolutionary standards.

Meaning that his intuitive inspiration through the gift of discernment that all with faith hold, may have also adjusted with our time in terms of its potency and hold over a subject. It is possible that the gift of discernment remains *almost mute*, as Jesus could be described on the topic. Subsequently the act of adultery may not be justified under God’s judgement and cannot ever be promoted to good, it can however be reasoned to not be a *detrimental sin* if not continuously committed so that those feelings of jealousy in the unpartaking party are not further antagonised. In short, I wish to claim that a holy intuition might not initially be potent enough to lead us to *not* commit adultery but it certainly will intuit us to not continually do so. For it is clearer in modernity that it disrupts the peace and order of others’ mental well being and thus possibly distracts us from a healthy relationship with God.³

² However, we do see that it is forgivable as he forgave the adulterous woman in John 8.

³ I am aware that if we interpret my claim here to be a case for being true then I would be using the fallacy of *Argumentum Ad Ignorantiam*, as my logic follows that, because Jesus didn’t speak with high frequency on the topic of adultery then this lack of evidence must be indicative of a claim that is true, which is; he didn’t find it that important. However, my speculation does not lead to a truth or a claim to truth, rather, as I addressed in the introduction, it is a philosophical investigation to highlight the array of justifications we find in modernity when one goes *moicheuthēnai*. The pragmatism behind this resides in being aware of the tropes and fallacies

Now released from the damning eye of God we can start looking at empirical studies regarding the evolution of language, the world of linguistics and biology combine and from this we can deduce naturalist conclusions about the use of linguistics and how it may help make a case for objective moral judgement. The ability to make a distinction through speech was essential to early humans as it meant they could communicate at night, whereas the primal forms of gesture language would paralyse an early human into silence and sleep. But over the course of 200,000 years, according to the gestural language theory, gestures ‘evolved’ into speech; and speech into language which became more intricate as it started to help us identify and invent (Corballis, 2009).

The significance of our evolved ability to make distinctions of objects and people is that what is contingent within the distinction itself is the information for what something is not, and with the *convention*, accompanied by a natural inclination to form one, of a monogamous or contractual relationship comes the psychology of objectification. Much like the philosophy of Buber and his ‘I-It’ relation we often approach other humans with the intentions to *gain*. He claims that this form of relationship reduces a person to means to an end (Buber & Smith, 2013). Moreover, the forming of a monogamous relationship in terms of its linguistic significance resides in the language we use around it; *my spouse*; *my other half*. Whilst pragmatic, it's also unearthing of what we find significant. I claim that the link between the evolution of language and its distinctive qualities are indicative of a natural behaviour to identify what is *our own*, providing the ground for negative reactionary emotions to be prevalent when the property we claim to be our own is under threat of being taken away; thus the jealous reaction aforementioned.⁴ Stemming from this claim, the formation of contracts

one may use when discussing this topic and especially when one attempts to shake off the omniscient overseer.

⁴ This naturalist position is not only inferred by the prevalence of a jealous reaction, but it is also founded upon evolutionary thought that replaces the carrot on the stick guiding the donkey with the notion of ‘proliferation’. Everything we do under this theory, is in order to survive and proliferate; this provides problems when trying to

can be seen as an evolutionary necessity, although language and culture do not evolve in the same sense of our genes across the span of tens of thousands of years— our natural inclinations to protect ourselves could have inspired the forming of contracts in order to minimise the negative emotions associated with our property becoming threatened; thus the birth of adultery.

Our array of justifications, abundance of modern knowledge on human anatomy, history and biblical studies we can see there are plenty of reasons we can form to commit adultery. Our problem still arises when we seek to find a judgement for it and for this problem I present the profile of the 'High Value Person' (HVP). This person can be described as a highly desirable person in any given society, meaning that they have the option to marry, settle and proliferate their genes with an exponential number of people, it is for these high value persons that we can find examples of not-immoral accounts of 'adultery'. As typically what comes with a person of high value is resources, usually in the form of money - it provides more stability and increases the chances of their genealogy transcending across many more generations. The projections of prosperity, stability and comfort economically are prised out from the relationship, symbolising the potential of what is to come from their partnership. If a high value person could provide such great potentiality for themselves and their partner then it would seem fitting to further enquire what the other half can give to the relationship, thus the negotiation (contract) becomes relevant. Maybe the high value person would only ask for loyalty, devotion to them, their loyalty should bleed into their vernacular, mannerisms and interactions with the world at all times, and they will provide them with complete economic freedom if those conditions are kept.⁵ It is this profile that addresses the etymological

form moral judgments, however it does give us a theory for *why* we do things as opposed to our post-action judgement.

⁵ Lest we not forget the grand benefits that come from vast amounts of money across many generations. It might then be agreed that if the high value person provides multigenerational benefits and all they ask for is devotion, purity and dedication then they might agree that the high value person is allowed to commit

sources of adultery; *adulterare* might only be seen as corrupting as for most people, the negative reactionary emotions we have evolved when aware of the breaching of a contract are enough to destabilise a life, to send another into despair and heartbreak. ⁶

In conclusion the HVP does not give a definitive moral judgement, simply it is an example of the most exaggerated justifications one can find to *do what they want* in spite of the contract they have formed because of the benefits that one party offers the other. It seems that we could define these relationships as a form of polygamy and thus performing acts of sex in any form or flirtation with extra parties could be seen as being protected from words such as adultery; as it is *agreed* that it is acceptable. I contend that with the rise of the sexual revolution and the multitude of forms a relationship can take, in order to find any objective strange of moral judgement outside the Bible we must look at our proclivity to form contracts and our reactionary emotions to when those conditions are broken. If we are to break the conditions, in any form of contract, then we can conclude with conviction that it is immoral, *for most*, founded on a disregard for naturalist properties, undermining the ontology of the human species using sentimentalism to sign post us to what is *bad* about it; the key is in our sensitivity to be jealous. The abundance of justifications for adultery people find, provide more so a case for the idea of a sexual double standard rather than the act of adultery actuated by deceit, greed and a proclivity for entertaining hedonistic behaviours. Concluding that an objective strand may be impossible to find using secular reasoning and epistemic forms of knowledge but there seems to be a convincing case for a 'morality for the masses' position which has to consider a person's societal, economical and generational worth in evolutionary

adultery; hedonistic it may be and envy it can induce, in terms of the relationship, it's still seems to be a fair deal, in terms of what they both get from it.

⁶ However, it can be said the HVP's super abundance of wealth and romantic options may be enough of a distraction to mitigate the initial sting for themselves and for the other party that did not break the contract of the relationship. An existentialist may be aghast at such a proposition, however this is not a case for *shoulds* and *oughts*, it is a case for presenting the array of justifications one can use to make a sound moral judgement.

terms; rendering the act ‘*adulterare*’ as only corrupting if *everyone* thinks they can justify it morally.

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