

Marriage from the Standpoint of Practical Reason: A Dialogue

by Michael Flood (December 2014)

A crowded airport departure lounge in the American Midwest in mid-December, 7:00 pm. The arrivals and departure screens show nothing but delays and cancellations. Outside the windows a blizzard blows, creating whiteout conditions. Sitting at a Starbucks near Gate 42 two old acquaintances, A and B, catch up.

A: "It's good to see you again. How long has it been?"

B: "Four ... wow, five years since college. It really has been a long time."

A: "What are you up to these days?"

B: "Working in insurance. And you?"

A: "Also working. Teaching philosophy in my spare time."

B: "Still imitating Socrates?"

A: "I prefer emulating."

B: "Working as a mason?"

A: "I find management consulting a bit more lucrative. Do you like insurance?"

B: "It's good for now. I mean, the pay is decent. I'm thinking about going back to school, though – maybe do Law. I see a ring on your finger – still with Karen?"

A: "Yes, four years this July."

B: "That's great."

A: "Thanks. Are you and Rachel still ..."

B: "Yes, we just bought a house together."

A: "That's good. ... Do you not believe in rings?"

B: "Oh ... no, we're not married."

A: "Why not?"

B: "Can we not do this?"

A: "Not do what?"

B: "You always did this when we were in college – corner me and turn an ordinary chat into a deep discussion. You're going to do that, aren't you?"

A: "I was just asking a question, but now that you mention it it is a good philosophical question. Well, we're snowed in. Is your flight leaving anytime soon?"

B (checking flight schedules): "No."

A: "So do you have anything better to do?"

B (looking around, sighing): "Can't say that I do. Do you have any hemlock?"

A: "I strive to emulate Socrates, not perfectly imitate him."

B: "Not for you ... for me."

A: "Cute. So why not get married?"

B: "What was that you always accused me of doing back when we were undergrads? Moving the proof?"

A: "Shifting the burden of proof."

B: "Yeah, that's it. You're shifting the burden of proof."

A: "Am I? How so?"

B: "You're asking me to argue why Rachel and I should not get married or don't need to be married to live together."

A: "Actually, you hold the burden of proof – marriage is the culturally accepted outcome of

human pair bonding. It's very common and has been through all of history. You're the one proposing a novelty, to live with a romantic partner without getting married, not me. The person proposing the innovation has the burden of proof and must argue for their position."

B (sighing, resigning himself): "Well, I can't see why we should bother. I mean, half of all marriages end in divorce, right?"

A: "You know that statistic's not true, right?"

B: "Well, I never checked. But okay, maybe it is. Divorce is still a possibility though, right?"

A: "If you believe it is."

B: "What do you mean?"

A: "Well, it's only a possibility if you believe that giving up on something important is an acceptable way to deal with difficulty. Also, don't you believe your relationship is special enough to beat the odds?"

B: "Well maybe I don't want to be tied down."

A: "And you're buying a house together? A mortgage and joint financial commitment seems pretty heavy to me.."

B: "Well, marriage is an oppressive institution."

A: "Ah, there's the English major I knew. You're saying that if you put a ring on Rachel's finger you'd start oppressing her?"

B: "No, of course not."

A: "Do you think I oppress Karen?"

B: "No, other than making people engage in philosophical dialogue with you, you never seemed like the oppressive type."

A: "Tell me, what do you mean by oppressive and how specifically is marriage oppressive?"

B: "Okay, I'll bite. Oppression is restricting the freedoms and possibilities of another person in a way that prohibits their full development. For centuries marriage has been an oppressive institution for women. It stunts their mental growth, it enslaves their bodies for

reproduction, it also saddles them with unequal housework.”

A: “So sayeth Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Marlene Dixon. But it hasn’t been that way for many decades. No fault divorce is legal, and in most places it’s much easier to separate yourself from an abusive spouse than it once was. Women also have the same rights as men in the Western world, and aren’t regarded as second class citizens or as property. Married couples are also free to work out their living and housework arrangements however they want to. How is that oppressive? Also, it’s a long stretch from ‘some marriages are oppressive’ to ‘all marriages are oppressive.’”

B: “Well ...”

A: “And have you ever wondered why those critics were all opposed to marriage?”

B: “Because they wanted freedom?”

A: “You know that many cults oppose marriage, right?”

B: “Yes.”

A: “They do so for the same reason Plato wanted the Guardians in his Republic to have no marriages – love is a threat to the power of the State or the Church. The radicals you were quoting wanted to *free* people to take part in some revolutionary struggle, not to be free to do whatever they wanted – which may have included getting married, settling down, and raising children.”

B: “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

A: “Also, have you ever considered that commitment could be a source of freedom?”

B: “What do you mean?”

A: “We’ll get back to it. First, why is choice such a great thing?”

B: “Because ... because it means you’re not being oppressed?”

A: “Now you’re talking in a circle. Why is choice such a great thing?”

B: “Because it lets us choose a better option rather than having to keep doing something deficient.”

A: “But a range of options means that we can choose to do, wittingly or unwittingly, the wrong

thing, right?"

B: "Yes, but it's important to have the freedom to do the wrong thing. Choice doesn't mean anything if you're not free to make poor choices."

A: "Can you have too much choice?"

B: "I don't see how."

A: "What are you drinking?"

B: "A caramel macchiato."

A: "That's the name. What do you get in it?"

B: "Soy milk, no whip, and chocolate sprinkles. Why do you ask?"

A: "Do you always get that?"

B: "Yeah."

A: "Why? Why aren't you out exploring all the other options. I've read there are about 18,000 different combinations."

B: "I don't know. I just like it, I guess. If I stop liking it I'll get something else."

A: "Have you ever heard of the Paradox of Choice?"

B: "Now you're starting with paradoxes. This isn't good."

A: "Don't worry, this is a good one. It's also not a proper paradox but an interesting psychological fact. There's a lot of things you could do with your life, right?"

B: "Yeah, I had a lot of options. I still do."

A: "How do you choose?"

B: "I look at the options and decide which one I like better."

A: "But choices aren't all Option 1 or Option 2, are they, with one clearly better than the other?"

B: "I guess not."

A: "Sometimes there are many, many options: Options 1 through 50 or more."

B: "Yes."

A: "How do you choose then?"

B: "Well you look at the options and compare them ..."

A: "Do you always have time? Also, do you know whether an option is going to be satisfying before you undertake it? I mean, you were pretty keen on investment analysis back when we were in college. What changed?"

B: "Well I got a job at a bank and did it for a while, found out it wasn't that satisfying, and moved to insurance. Now I'm thinking about Law."

A: "Do you know Law will be satisfying?"

B: "No, but ..."

A: "How do you know insurance won't become more satisfying if you stick with it longer?"

B: "Well, I don't know that."

A: "You might go to law school, graduate, article, practice for a few years, then find you miss the carefree days when you were in insurance."

B: "Maybe. I guess it could happen."

A: "How long do you plan to keep looking for the best fit for yourself?"

B: "I guess I can't look forever."

A: "Maybe the options aren't static – I mean, maybe they're not simply trying to find the square hole for the square peg. What if your attitude and commitment have something to do with whether or not the fit is good?"

B: "That's an elaborate way of calling *me* square, Mr. Management Consultant."

A: It's an important point. We'll come back to it. But now for the Paradox of Choice: it comes from our ability to contemplate other options. When we have too many options we can't make up our minds. We decide, and then we're less satisfied with what we chose, always thinking that maybe the other choice could have been better. Anything new on Twitter?"

B: "I don't use Twitter. Why do you ask?"

A: "Because you pulled out your phone while we were talking and started looking at it. Even in the moment you're looking for what is going on somewhere else."

B: "Sorry. I'll put it away. But what does this have to do with marriage?"

A: "To develop anything, to achieve anything of any worth, eventually you have to stop searching and start cultivating. A personal anecdote will help explain what I mean. You know I wanted to be a professor of philosophy, right?"

B: "Yeah, I heard you were going to NYU."

A: "Yes, I did an MA there. Then Karen and I decided to get married."

B: "And she said no to your going on?"

A: "No, in fact she said that she would support me through my graduate studies. Right then I knew I couldn't go on."

B: "How come?"

A: "I knew I couldn't ask her to do that, I loved her too much."

B: "Awww, that's sweet."

A: "Deciding to marry did something else too. You remember what I was like in college?"

B: "Philosophical, intense, always demanding my time to discuss something abstract when I wanted to relax."

A: "Do you remember what I always complained about?"

B: "You were always saying you didn't know what to do with your life."

A: "Precisely. There were too many options and too many possibilities. I chose grad school because I didn't know what to do next, not because I was certain it was the right path for me."

B: "And marriage ...?"

A: "Changed all of that. When I made up my mind to propose to Karen suddenly the future became

a lot more clear. Rather than the future being some vague fog I could picture it as only the possibilities where I was with her. Anything incompatible with my being with Karen wasn't a future for me. Suddenly it became much easier to decide what to do, because marriage closed down a huge range of options. By restricting choice, I was more free."

B: "But why do you need marriage for that? Why couldn't you just decide that you wanted to be with her forever and done without the ceremony and the license?"

A: "Have you ever taken an oath?"

B: "No. I mean, I'd take one in court if I had to testify but they always seemed kind of medieval or archaic, you know?"

A: "Have you ever wondered why oaths exist and why they're everywhere? We sign documents all the time that require our signature, a written oath."

B: "Not really."

A: "Oaths are pledges of behaviour. When you take an oath you swear in front of other people that you're going to act in a certain way, essentially forever. Think of the secrecy oaths spies take, and the allegiance oaths that soldiers take."

B: "Okay, but I don't see your point."

A: "Oaths are made in public. A community hears your oath and will hold you to account if you break it. This makes it easier to stick with what you pledged to do. People are variable and changeable, and an oath helps fix them to what they believe is the best thing to do. It's why people who pledge to lose weight in front of others are better able to follow through on their exercise and diet plans than people who just want to lose weight."

B: "What about if you pledge yourself to the wrong thing, like the wrong side of a war? All those Cavaliers swore oaths to Charles the First during the English Civil War, and he was a jerk. Oaths aren't always good."

A: "I wasn't saying they were. I also didn't know you were a Republican."

B: "Not all the time, but I wouldn't have been a Royalist at Naseby."

A: "That's not saying much. You know the Royalists lost at Naseby, right?"

B: "Alright, let's just say I wouldn't have been a Royalist."

A: "Fair enough. Do you think it's always rational to choose the best option?"

B: "By definition, yeah. That only makes sense."

A: "And we find out what the best option is from a set by evidence, right?"

B: "Yes. Sometimes you learn something that makes the option you have seem not as great. So you switch to the other."

A: "Is all the evidence available at once?"

B: "Not all the time."

A: "Do we always know all the options?"

B: "No, we sometimes learn them gradually or a little bit at a time."

A: "Do you think it takes commitment to accomplish something valuable?"

B: "Yeah. I wouldn't be in the shape I am now if I couldn't commit to exercising. Also, we both finished college, which took some sustained doing."

A: "Human relationships require commitment too, right?"

B: "Yes."

A: "But that runs contrary to what you said was the rational thing to do, which is to always be on the lookout for better options."

B: "Oh, I think I know you're going with this ..."

A: "The Cavaliers were loyal to Charles I because that was both who they were loyal to before and because the only way they could increase the value of their relationship was to stay committed. If they dithered constantly back and forth no one would have trusted them, and they wouldn't have had a chance to accomplish anything worthwhile. Oaths fix loyalties, and social pressure makes it easier for us to sustain them over a long time. It helps us break out of the Paradox of Choice."

B: "Okay, I can see how that applies to marriage. But what if my desires change, or yours. Do you think you'll always be attracted to Karen?"

A: "Yes."

B: "How can you be so sure. You just said that human desires change over time."

A: "Yes, but we can do something about it. Do you believe you are just a leaf blown about by the wind? Are your affections no deeper than your attachment to this chain of coffee shop's soy milk caramel macchiato, no whip, with chocolate shavings?"

B: "Well ..."

A: "Answer the question. Do you think that the relationship between you and the world is fixed, so it's a matter of finding the things that satisfy you, or do you believe that you have some say in whether the things will please you or not?"

B: "No ... I mean, I don't know."

A: "Could you start cheating to get ahead in Law school?"

B: "No, that's absurd."

A: "It's absurd because you have a commitment to being an ethical person – the commitment guides and shapes who you are in the future. When you do that, certain options are blocked off. There might be times it would be convenient to cheat, but you won't do it. It's the same when you make a commitment to another person or to a country – you commit yourself to finding good parts about them and to tolerating, ignoring, or improving the bad."

B: "Okay."

A: "Marriage is a means of building something valuable, a deep connection with another person. With oaths and social pressure you are put into a situation that makes you keep acting on your best impulses towards someone else, and cultivating others. Cohabiting can't do that."

B: "Why can't it?"

A: "Because you always have one foot out the door. You'll always be boyfriend and girlfriend, always testing that one toe in the water."

B: "It doesn't have to be that way."

A: "If you aren't married, how are people supposed to tell whether your relationship is serious or not? You won't get that social validation and support."

B: "Well maybe I don't know if I'll always be with her, or sure I want to."

A: "Don't you love her?"

B: "Well ... I mean ... I don't really know."

A: "Maybe you should let her know that."

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