

A STAR BOOK

# MARRIAGE AND MORALS

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GARDEN CITY PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.  
GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

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MARRIAGE  
AND  
MORALS





## CHAPTER I

### WHY A SEXUAL ETHIC IS NECESSARY

IN characterizing 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 interconnections of economics and sex do 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 eco-

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conomic 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 rôle 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 coun-



tries 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 psycho-analysis. 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 every one now 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

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than when it is purely physical. Indeed the view which has passed from the poets into the common consciousness of civilized 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 civilization 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 influential 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

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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 cooperation is essential. The consequence is that most birds are models of virtue. Among human beings the cooperation 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 civilization the rôle 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 enthusiastic 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

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therefore not promptly or adequately treated.

We come finally 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 civilized 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 from a public point of view, while the increasing rôle 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 criticizing 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.

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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 civilized portions of mankind. I shall then proceed to characterize the system now in vogue in Western civilization, and finally to consider the respects in which this system should be amended and the grounds for hoping that such amendment will take place.