

The Value of Marriage in the Era of the Glorified Self

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Among nonhuman animals, selfhood is rudimentary: perhaps a sense of bodily integrity, a bit of competitiveness, simple decision making, membership in some group, and perhaps quasi-ownership of some territory. The human self is vastly more complicated. One of its idiosyncratic and least understood functions is as a basis for values.

Baumeister (1991) concluded that people operate as if they had four needs for meaning. Of these, the need for value and justification is the most difficult to satisfy in modern society. This is because the rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness of something depends on invoking a more fundamental value: For example, helping a troubled swimmer to shore is good because it may save the person's life, and saving lives is good. At some point, however, the buck has to stop, and one must invoke a value base, which is something that is itself accepted as an inherently positive good on its, without reference to other, even more fundamental values. For religious people, God's will serves such a function. That is, the question, "Why should we do this?" can be answered by saying that it is God's will—but they are not inclined to ask, "Why should we care about God's will?" These things that are good in and of themselves, without requiring justification by appeal to other values, are called value bases.

The key point is that modern society has severely weakened many of the value bases that provided foundations for moral judgments. Fewer people (especially educated people) believe in God than in the past. Even among believers, fewer organize their everyday lives and choices based on directives alleged to come straight from God. Other once-mighty value bases have lost considerable power too. Social change and technological progress have transformed "traditional" from "tried and true" into "old and obsolete." Patriotism has lost much of its force, especially in the west, where relentless intellectual critiques have transformed Western civilization from the wonder of the world into a history of evil. Even heroism has lost much of its inspirational value, thanks to improved journalism that all too often transforms last year's heroes (think Lance Armstrong) into despicable cheaters.

To fill the value gap, Baumeister concluded, the self has taken on ever more luster as a powerful value base. For a generation or two, popular culture heard endlessly recited mantras such as "I have to be myself"

as justifications for whatever people did. Eventually the principle of needing to be oneself became so widely accepted that it was no longer necessary even to say so (Twenge, 2006). The self-esteem movement brought up children to feel good about themselves no matter what they did, resulting in an epidemic of narcissism (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

Making the self into a value base set the stage for the change in marriage that Finkel, Hui, Carswell, and Larson (this issue) discuss in a provocative and disturbing article. Marriage was once an economic arrangement designed to enable a farming family to operate the farm (because both men's and women's work needed to be done) and, among the upper classes, to manage the transfer of property and cement alliances among powerful groups. Then it became a haven in a heartless world and a nexus of intimacy and joy.

With the rise of self as value base, however, marriage, like many other institutions, gradually came to rely on personal fulfillment and advancement in order to justify itself. The question of whether one should stay in an unhappy marriage—or, crucially, even a reasonably happy but not entirely fulfilling one—would be answered in quite different ways. Our forebears who regarded marriage as a sacred or religious obligation would not have seen any right to seek divorce simply because the marriage was not facilitating their self-actualization. Those who saw marriage in the context of family duties, and who valued family above self, would likewise find it hard to walk out on any but the most painful and abusive of marriages. But the modern individual who accepts as fundamental truth that one has to do what is best for oneself sees the question of staying married in a very different light. The modern person who places high value on selfhood may feel not just a right but even an obligation to extricate him- or herself from an unfulfilling marriage.

The family's traditional function as sustaining life included both the lives of the individual husbands and wives, who had difficulty surviving without an opposite-sex partner to accomplish the other gender's vital contributions to survival via the family farm, and the life of the family, through reproduction. Nowadays marriage does not need to sustain life. Single people can live just fine on their own, and they can reproduce without marriage or even a partner. Many couples marry but choose to be childless.

Freed from its traditional function, marriage can be put to other uses. Instead of sustaining life, marriage is expected to sustain *meaning* in life. Instead of serving God, society, and the extended family, it is expected to serve the all-valued self.

The rise of the self as preeminent value, combined with the shift in personality toward more self-centered, self-focused, selfish self-ism, creates additional problems for modern marriage. We briefly and speculatively outline several here.

We suspect that raising children has undergone a similar shift. Indeed, one of the best replicated findings in all of social science is the reduction in happiness due to parenthood. Baumeister (1991) proposed that having children increased meaningfulness at the expense of happiness. Yet some very recent data paint a different picture: Nelson and colleagues (2013) found that parents no longer reported a lower level of happiness than nonparents. Perhaps this is a fluke finding. But it could also reflect a change in how parents approach the task of raising children. For most of American history, parents saw their job as instilling discipline and virtue so as to make their offspring into productive, morally upright members of society. The parents' duty was thus to society, and the value base that justified their actions was the best interests of the society as a whole. Nowadays, perhaps parents care little about society as a whole and simply want their children to be happy and grateful toward their parents. They side with their children against society, rather than the reverse. When a child had trouble at school, once the parents sided first with the teacher to put pressure on the child to improve; nowadays, more often, they side with their child against the school. (No doubt this has contributed to reducing the attractiveness of school teaching careers.)

Ultimately, then, parenting, like marriage, has gradually morphed into a long-running activity with the purpose and justification to serve the self: to make oneself happy and fulfilled. One marries and has children not to serve God or the republic but because supposedly these activities will promote self-actualization and make one feel good.

Psychologists have not yet figured out what aspects of narcissism cause the most problems. Our bet is on entitlement. A narcissist may quietly admire himself without creating any serious difficulties. But the narcissist who expects preferential treatment, which means that other people should give her first choice and the best things, will generate conflict, especially if she is interacting with other narcissists who also assume that they should get the first-choice goods.

Those with a high sense of entitlement feel like they deserve more than others across a range of situations (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004). We suspect that this includes situations relevant to romantic relationships. One implication of this relates to gratitude. If a spouse feels like he or

she is entitled or deserves some benefit from a partner, it would likely diminish feelings of gratitude. Recent research has discovered the tremendous benefits of gratitude for relationship health (e.g., Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012; Lambert & Fincham, 2011). Thus, the increase in entitlement and consequent decrease in gratitude is likely another factor that harms modern marriage. Forgiveness, too, is good for marriages—but narcissism reduces the impulse to forgive (Exline, Bushman, Baumeister, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004). A narcissist's marriage is thus less likely than other marriages to survive a bumpy period.

Despite many changes, marriage continues to be partly about sex. The modern increases in personal entitlement, and the casting of marriage as a means of self-actualization, are likely to have repercussions in the marital bed. Although a full exposure of these difficulties could fill half a book, we briefly suggest a couple.

The desire for sex is a fundamental part of the psyche, but men and women are not equal in this regard. An extensive literature review by Baumeister, Catanese, and Vohs (2001) found overwhelming evidence that males desire sex more frequently than females. (Differential intensity of desire was also possible but far less conclusive.) There is some evidence that when the young couple is first falling in love, the woman's desire for sex approaches the man's, causing both to conclude that they have found the perfect lifetime partner for sexual bliss. Insofar as modern society extols sexuality as a positive, healthy expression of selfhood, this finding of the ostensibly perfect partner would increase the appeal of marriage, so that one can lock oneself into a lifetime of sexual fulfillment.

Unfortunately, this convergence of high mutual desire for sex may be a temporary result of the rise in intimacy (see Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999). Once intimacy levels off, the husband and wife revert to their baseline levels of desire for sex—which means the man wants sex much more frequently than his wife. In the past, many women simply accepted that part of their wifely duties was to provide their husbands with sex. Feminist rhetoric has, however, quashed that sense of obligation and insisted that sex be postponed until both want it. That sounds nice, except that the usually the husband wants sex far more often than the wife, and waiting for her to feel the urge means that marriage for the husband is a long period of sexual starvation. Journalist Bettina Arndt (2009) documented this pattern vividly and extensively in interviews with married couples about their sex lives. In one memorable example, a husband became so frustrated by his wife's refusals of his initiatives that he told her their next sex act would be at her initiation. They had not had sex since that night, nine years ago. Arndt remarked on the irony that many wives did actually love their husbands and would seek to do little kindnesses such

as shopping assiduously to prepare some treat for the man's dinner—but would not give the man what he most wanted, namely, sex.

Thus, today's narcissistic wives invoke feminist rhetoric to deny their husbands sex while also strongly disapproving if their husbands seek satisfaction elsewhere (even through masturbation). Meanwhile, we think today's narcissistic husbands are exceptionally ill prepared to tolerate a lifetime of sexual frustration. Many have gone through prolonged young adulthoods with multiple sex partners and endless access to sexual stimulation via the Internet and other sources. They think that by marrying their sex lives will improve, not gradually wither to a standstill. Although wives feel entitled to refuse their husbands' sexual advances, the husbands feel entitled to the sexual enjoyment that marriage was supposed to bring. The clash of contrary entitlements spells trouble for marital stability.

A second factor that problematizes and destabilizes the modern marital bond is a difference in the time course of mate appeal. Based on both evolved preferences and cultural systems, sexual economics theory proposes that marriage often operates as an exchange in which the man provides money and the woman provides sex (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Women appraise men based on their money; men appraise women based on their looks and other sexual aspects. To oversimplify a highly complex process, any given man and woman may therefore find their respective places in the local rankings and marry an approximate counterpart. But what happens then? The woman's sex appeal diminishes much more rapidly than the man's earning power. Most men earn a higher salary at age 45 than they did at 35 or 25. Hardly any women are more beautiful at 45 than at 35 or 25. Thus, what may have seemed a perfect match may not be so equitable a decade or two later.

One well-established finding in psychology is that people adjust their self-concepts much more readily upward than downward (e.g., Baumeister, 1998, for review). The 45-year-old husband is thus likely to be quite aware of his upward career trajectory and to have a correspondingly greater sense of entitlement than he had when younger. The 45-year-old wife will, however, not so readily acknowledge that she is less appealing than she was (and that therefore she must contribute all the more to the marriage in order to keep it equitable).

Thus, again, the couple's combined feelings of entitlement exceed the available goods, paving the way for problems and clashes.

Note

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