


1993

# Love's Constancy

Mike W. Martin

*Chapman University*, [mwmartin@chapman.edu](mailto:mwmartin@chapman.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/philosophy\\_articles](http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/philosophy_articles)

 Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Martin, Mike W. "Love's constancy." *Philosophy* 68.263 (1993): 63-77.  
DOI:10.1017/S0031819100040043

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Articles and Research by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [laughtin@chapman.edu](mailto:laughtin@chapman.edu).

---

# Love's Constancy

## **Comments**

This article was originally published in *Philosophy*, volume 68, issue 263, in 1993. DOI: [10.1017/S0031819100040043](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100040043)

## **Copyright**

Cambridge University Press

# Love's Constancy

MIKE W. MARTIN

'Marital faithfulness' refers to faithful love for a spouse or lover to whom one is committed, rather than the narrower idea of sexual fidelity. The distinction is clearly marked in traditional wedding vows. A commitment to love faithfully is central: 'to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part . . . and thereto I plight [pledge] thee my troth [faithfulness]'.<sup>1</sup> Sexual fidelity is promised in a subordinate clause, symbolizing its supportive role in promoting love's constancy: 'and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her/him.'<sup>2</sup>

Marital commitments to love have been subjected to a barrage of objections. They have been criticized as unintelligible, unreasonable, inhumane, unnecessary, non-binding, and incompatible with love. I respond to these objections in Part I, seeking to uncover the partial truths as well as the confusions they embody. Then, in Part II, I explore why marital faithfulness is a virtue, that is, a morally desirable feature of spouses who make lifelong commitments, rather than simply a matter of individual preferences. Throughout, I develop a conception

<sup>1</sup> Church of England Prayer Book (1549). I will understand marriage as a moral relationship centred on lifelong commitments to love and significantly involving sexual desire at some time during the relationship, whether or not the marriage is formalized in legal or religious ceremonies, recognizing homosexual as well as heterosexual marriages, and independently of government intrusions. On the latter see David Palmer, 'The Consolation of the Wedded', in *Philosophy and Sex*, 2nd edn, Robert Baker and Frederick Elliston (eds) (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1984), 119–129.

<sup>2</sup> Or its *presumed* supportive role. Some couples, of course, enter into (or transform their relationship into) 'open marriages' in which they permit extramarital affairs while retaining lifetime commitments. For an early and especially interesting example, see Nigel Nicolson's portrayal of his parents in *Portrait of a Marriage* (New York: Atheneum, 1973). Two illuminating (and contrasting) discussions of the rationale for traditional links between lifetime marital commitments and sexual fidelity are: Edmund Leites, *The Puritan Conscience and Modern Sexuality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), and Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

## Mike W. Martin

of 'true' (erotic) love as value-guided attitudes and relationships that constitute special ways to value persons.<sup>3</sup>

### I. Commitments to Love

Consider the following conversation from Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*.

'Yes, but how is one to understand what is meant by "true love"?' said the gentleman. . . .

'Why? It's very simple,' she said, but stopped to consider. 'Love? Love is an exclusive preference for one above everybody else,' said the lady.

'Preference for how long? A month, two days, or half an hour?' said the grey-haired man and began to laugh.

'Excuse me, we are evidently not speaking of the same thing'. . . .

'Yes, I know . . . you are talking about what is supposed to be, but I am speaking of what is. Every man experiences what you call love for every pretty woman.'

'Oh, what you say is awful! But the feeling that is called love does exist among people, and is given not for months or years, but for a lifetime!'

'No, it does not!. . .'<sup>4</sup>

The cynical gentleman, who we learn later has murdered his wife, thinks of erotic love as a feeling based on sexual desire, a feeling which comes and goes with sexual interest. The lady initially portrays love as a paramount preference, hinting that love is a way of valuing persons (which involves but is not reducible to feelings). In her subsequent remarks, however, she agrees with the gentleman that love is a feeling, and the disagreement then shifts to how long the feeling can last. This brings us to the first objection to marital commitments.

*Objection 1: Love and Will.* Commitments to love are unintelligible, given the nature of love. A commitment implies a resolve or pledge to engage in actions which are under our voluntary control. But love is an emotion, not an action. As such it happens to us; we do not choose it.

<sup>3</sup> Irving Singer develops the idea of love as a special way of valuing persons in his masterful three-volume study, *The Nature of Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1987). Whereas I understand ('true') love as permeated by the virtues, Singer separates morality and love, as a result of his constricted view of morality as demanding impartiality (by contrast with love's preference for one individual). See especially p. 11 of vol. I.

<sup>4</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Great Short Works of Leo Tolstoy*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 361–362. Also see Paul Gilbert's discussion in *Human Relationships* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 9ff.

The idea of committing ourselves to love is as incoherent as committing ourselves to feel grief.

This objection assumes that commitments to love refer to love as a feeling or emotion. I suggest instead that the love referred to is primarily an attitude and a relationship. A commitment to love is a commitment to sustain an attitude of valuing the beloved as singularly important in one's life. Thus, spouses who say to each other 'I love you' are typically expressing a complex and durable attitude that is revealed in patterns of conduct, rather than a momentary feeling. In addition, a commitment to love implies taking on responsibility for a relationship. It is a commitment to activities that sustain the relationship—activities of caring and support, of sharing resources, of living together harmoniously.

In general, talk about 'true love' alludes to desirable attitudes and value-guided relationships. Ideals enter into their very meaning. One traditional ideal is to value another person above others based on a lifelong commitment. This ideal is hardly reducible to sexual desire and feelings, although it involves sexual attraction as an important aspect of valuing the beloved (at least throughout much of the relationship). The ideal, as well as the attitude and relationship grounded in it, are in part constituted by the virtues of caring, fidelity, honesty, fairness—and faithfulness. These 'constitutive virtues' contrast with 'coping virtues', such as courage, prudence, and perseverance which enable love to flourish.

Of course, emotions are centrally involved in loving attitudes and relationships. They include strong affection, but also delight, joy, concern, hope, gratitude, jealousy, anger, pride, guilt, shame, and grief. Hence the objection can be rephrased: Commitments to love imply commitments to have emotions; those commitments are unintelligible because we cannot choose to feel emotions; therefore, commitments to love are unintelligible.

In reply, note first that the issue is not whether love can be created from scratch by a spasm of will. A strong predisposition to love's emotions is already present when the commitment to love is made, especially if we are dealing with freely chosen, rather than arranged marriages. In the early stages of love we are largely passive, as ordinary language testifies: we fall in love, get struck by lightning, are swept away by passion. We cannot voluntarily generate the deeply-felt rush of emotions that signal love (although we can willingly open or close ourselves to such experiences). Commitments to love, however, are not aimed at creating emotions from scratch; they are aimed at sustaining an already-present disposition to have them, and to enable feelings of mutual caring and delight to grow deeper.

## Mike W. Martin

These commitments make sense because emotions are somewhat under our control. To be sure, the idea of committing ourselves to feel exactly this or that emotion at a particular time is problematic, at least for complex emotions. We can promise to try to enjoy a party, where that means setting aside worries for a while, but complex genuine emotions are heartfelt, not mentally manufactured. Nevertheless, commitments to love are consistent with these facts. They do not imply manipulating emotions, nor turning emotions on and off like a faucet. Instead, they imply assuming responsibility for sustaining patterns of acts and thoughts that foster emotions conducive to love.<sup>5</sup>

Conduct influences emotions. A commitment to love implies a strong willingness to choose activities that promote love-enhancing emotions and to avoid love-threatening emotions. Couples can avoid situations which they know cause anger, jealousy, or anxiety. They can choose activities which bring mutual pleasure and evoke mutual affection and intimacy. They can set aside time together and prevent work from encroaching on their privacy. And they can learn coping skills, such as the ability and willingness to compromise, to communicate clearly, and to fight fair (in ways that minimize long-term tension and hostility).

In addition, reflection influences emotions. At the core of most emotions are beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of attention which may be more or less reasonable.<sup>6</sup> Assessing reasons can alter this core and thereby shape emotions. For example, couples can choose to dwell on the bright side of situations so as to encourage positive emotions, or allow themselves to dwell on the negative so as to evoke fear, anxiety, and doubt.<sup>7</sup> They can bring to mind a shared history of good times, and look forward to positive change in order to encourage hope, or wallow in frustrations so as to nurse despair. They can think through mitigating circumstances in order to become more forgiving of their spouses and themselves. In short, conduct and reflection can promote an already-present disposition to love's emotions within value-guided relationships.

*Objection 2: Ought Implies Can.* Lifetime commitments to love are not morally binding, given the nature of morality. Commitments imply

<sup>5</sup> John Wilson, 'Can One Promise to Love Another?' *Philosophy* 64 (1989), 560. Also see Edward Sankowski, 'Responsibility of Persons for Their Emotions,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 12 (1977), 829–840.

<sup>6</sup> Amélie Oksenberg Rorty argues that the core of some emotions is a pattern of attention rather than the more common beliefs and attitudes in 'Explaining Emotions', in *Explaining Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 103–126.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

obligations and hence 'oughts'. As Kant said, 'ought implies can': We are obligated to do only what we can do, or at least what we can reasonably be expected to do. Now, many individuals cannot sustain lifetime commitments since they involve far too many unforeseeable things beyond their control (not just emotions). In J. F. M. Hunter's words, 'a promise is binding only to the extent that its performance is reasonably within the power of the person promising. If I promise to return your book by Thursday . . . you have some right to complain of bad faith if I fail; but if I promise to enjoy a certain film, to become a millionaire, or to be your friend for twenty years, then no matter how serious you take me to be, you would not have a clear right to complain if I failed to deliver. Now, a marriage vow can be seen as a promise of the latter kind'.<sup>8</sup>

To begin with, we should be careful in interpreting the slogan 'ought implies can'. While the word 'ought' is most often used to prescribe conduct, and while there is no point in prescribing that people do the impossible, 'ought' has other uses as well.<sup>9</sup> It is used to ascribe obligations which persons may have even after rendering themselves unable to meet them. Thus, all drivers ought to drive safely—that is their obligation, an obligation which does not disappear when they become too drunk to meet it. At the time they are drunk it may be pointless to tell them they ought not to be driving, but it is true none the less, and later (retrospectively) there may be a point in reminding them of their past failures to do what they ought to have done.

Most obligations do imply the general capacity to meet them. Morality is realistic in this sense: We are obligated to avoid stealing, to show gratitude, and to help others only in so far as we have the general capacity to do so without unreasonable sacrifice. These examples concern duties we all have, independently of our commitments, whereas the objection concerns commitments to do what turns out not to be possible. Do such commitments ever create obligations?

Consider those overly-ambitious and naive business persons who enter into contracts which they cannot meet, given their talents, other resources, and the limitations imposed by the world. Their commitments are unrealistic, but nevertheless they generate legal and moral obligations. Declaring bankruptcy may cancel the legal obligation, but an apology or more substantive expression of guilt and compensation (for wrongs done) may be appropriate where great harm is done to

<sup>8</sup> J. F. M. Hunter, *Thinking about Sex and Love* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1980), 59.

<sup>9</sup> Except when it inspires individuals to do more than they could have otherwise. On this, and on the entire topic of 'ought implies can', see Nicholas Rescher, *Ethical Idealism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

others. What about those lovers who commit themselves to what turns out to be impossible, a lifetime together? Well, is that what they promise? Normally they promise to do everything in their power to make a marriage work, not to do what turns out to be impossible. Hence, we need to look in each case into why the relationship did not work out. If the cause is general irresponsibility or lack of effort, then it may not have been impossible at all. If instead the cause was that one's partner abandoned one for no good reason, or that poverty and tragedy drove the couple apart, we readily excuse or forgive.

Lifetime promises may prove impossible to keep because of unforeseeable difficulties that were beyond the ability of a couple to handle, or beyond what is reasonable to expect them to do. It is often difficult to tell when that is, as I will emphasize later. But until those difficulties become clear, couples can intelligibly make morally-binding lifetime commitments.

I should add that marital faithfulness involves a commitment *to a person*—to love, honour and cherish one's spouse. It is faithfulness *to a promise* in a secondary, symbolic way. Why should the wedding promise be kept? The secondary answer is that the promise was made; the primary answer is to preserve, further or restore the love that led a couple to make the promise in the first place. In this way, faithfulness is primarily aimed at the substance of the wedding vow—the loving relationship itself—rather than at the one-time marital promise.<sup>10</sup> The longer the love continues, the wider the scope of faithfulness: Faithfulness is to the love in its full historical development, its actual past, its present achievements, and its projected future.

*Objection 3: Changing Identities.* Lifelong commitments to love are not morally binding. They lack moral import because they are unconditional and falsely presume that spouses will retain their present identities. Each of us will change dramatically over a lifetime, so much so that we can think of a person as a series of selves rather than one unified self. How can my present self morally bind a substantially different later self to do anything several decades from now? That is like trying to make a promise for another person, whereas promises are only binding on the person who makes them. Again, how can I (with moral cogency) commit myself to a partner who will be remarkably different several decades later? That is like making a blanket promise to someone I do not know.

Are marriage vows unconditional? Surely wedding vows are tacitly conditional, as Hunter argues: in the course of a marriage 'a couple may become entirely different persons, with ambitions, tastes, idio-

<sup>10</sup> Cf. P. E. Hutchings, 'Conjugal Faithfulness', *Human Values*, Godfrey Vesey (ed.) (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978).



syncretisms or emotional attachments or aversions that could not initially be foreseen, and given which it would be utterly absurd for them to marry. That being the case, it seems reasonable to treat such vows at a minimum as implicitly containing some such clause as "assuming you are substantially the person I believe you to be, and that neither of us changes, as the years go by, in ways more extreme than are common to human beings as they grow older".<sup>11</sup>

Susan Mendus rejected this view and insisted that marital vows are unconditional. She drew a 'distinction between . . . the person who promises to love and to honour but who finds that, after a time, she has lost her commitment (perhaps on account of change in her husband's character), and . . . the person who promises to love and to honour only on condition that there be no such change in character'.<sup>12</sup> The latter person is not committed unconditionally, in the spirit of traditional marriage vows. The former person makes the appropriate commitment and revokes it later, something which is perfectly intelligible as a morally binding promise which, perhaps for good reason, must be broken. There is a genuine obligation, but it is not absolute; there are conditions under which it is justifiably broken. She adds that vows are unconditional when 'I cannot now envisage anything happening such as would make me give up that commitment'.<sup>13</sup>

Mendus's distinction is important, but her account of unconditional vows is implausible. Surely most spouses can envisage circumstances that would lead them to abandon their commitments to love each other, at least if 'envisage' means imagine. For one thing, they can imagine their spouse being transformed into a spouse-beating, child-abusing monster.<sup>14</sup> In making their lifelong commitments, they presuppose that will not occur, and in that sense their commitments *are* conditional.

For another thing, they can imagine their spouse leaving them; indeed, they likely fear that at one time or another, whether as a general possibility given today's fifty percent divorce rate or for reasons directly related to their partner. They would not feel obligated to sustain their marriage if their spouse abandoned them, and hence this is a second way their marital vows are conditional. At least today, wedding vows have 'escape clauses', however vague or extreme. They are implicit in the wedding ceremony in which vows are made together, conditional on their partner's reciprocal vows.

<sup>11</sup> J. F. M. Hunter, *Thinking about Sex and Love*, 59. Cf. Derek Parfit, 'Later Selves and Moral Principles', *Philosophy and Personal Relations*, A. Montefiore (ed.) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> Susan Mendus, 'Marital Faithfulness', *Philosophy* **59** (1984), 246.

<sup>13</sup> P. 247.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Soble, *The Structure of Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 166–167.

## Mike W. Martin

If there are always conditions, why do marriage vows fail to mention them and even seem to rule them out—‘for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health?’ And why do not enlightened couples mutter under their breath, ‘unless one of us changes radically’? The answer is obvious but important. Couples have faith that their marriage will endure, that they will keep their commitments, and at the very least that neither will turn into a monster. That faith can waver periodically, and it is compatible with realism about the risk that things will not work out. But marriage is an act of faith—of placing trust in, rather than merely hoping or expecting—as the unconditional tone of lifetime vows conveys. Faith is essential, not only as an expression of love, but because it tends to be self-fulfilling by providing security and trust in which relationships prosper.

*Objection 4: Motives for Loving.* Lifelong commitments to love are (ironically) incompatible with love. Commitments create obligations which threaten love by generating an onerous sense of duty to abide by a contract. As Robert Solomon once wrote, ‘Love is not . . . a commitment. It is the very antithesis of a commitment. The legal tit-for-tat quasi-“social contract” thinking of commitment talk fatally confuses doing something because one *wants* to do it and doing something because one *has* to do it, whether or not one wants to at the time’.<sup>15</sup> ‘The essence of romantic love is a decision, open-ended but by the same token perpetually insecure, open to reconsideration every moment and, of course, open to rejection by one’s lover at every moment too’.<sup>16</sup>

Lifetime commitments do close options—decisively. They do so in order to open better options within sustained, stable, trusting relationships. There are, of course, alternative ideals of love which keep all options open. Those romantics and existentialists, not to mention libertines and Don Juans, who treasure the right to change one’s mind at any moment (without culpability) do well to reject lifelong commitments. These alternate ideals, not commitments and responsibilities, are incompatible with traditional marital love.

Solomon is right about this much: relationships are in trouble once they degenerate into a quasi-legal, tit-for-tat struggle, with each partner preoccupied in asserting the rights generated by promises. But moral commitments are not reducible to contracts in the way he implies. Commitments generate responsibilities which support rather than threaten love’s constancy. They do so largely by remaining in the background, perhaps surfacing in times of conflict and temptation, as

<sup>15</sup> Robert Solomon, *Love: Emotion, Myth and Metaphor* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1981), 224.

<sup>16</sup> P. 227.

reminders that help stabilize relationships. They are reinforcements, not replacements, of caring.

It is important to distinguish between having a commitment to love and the motives for keeping the commitment.<sup>17</sup> The motives are primarily such things as love, caring, joy, a sense of identity and solidarity with, as well as self-interest, and only secondarily (and supportively) a sense of responsibility. The same is true of parents, for example, who have responsibilities to care for their children, but who are primarily motivated by love mixed with elements of self-interest.

*Objection 5: The Power of Love.* Lifelong commitments are unnecessary, given the power of love to conquer obstacles. Commitments and the obligations they imply are inessential, according to Solomon: 'The devotion and particularity of love are such that commitment is quite unnecessary, although it may well present itself as an expression of love'.<sup>18</sup> Lasting devotion does not require commitments, which generate obligations, but only a 'decision to stick with it and see it through'.<sup>19</sup>

So it seems—in the early stage of romance, when love seems to make everything possible, certainly its own continuance. But honeymoons end, and the world intrudes with problems about money, jobs, health, social conflicts, disagreements about furniture, and a thousand other things. Active love, understood as an ideal-guided relationship, typically requires commitments if it is to remain constant (and growing) throughout a lifetime.

Not just the world, but lovers themselves change, as an earlier objection emphasized. They grow and regress, and undergo a variety of experiences that can mute romance. Commitment generates a sense of responsibility which provides stable trust through fluctuations in temperament. Mary Midgley said in a related context, 'Campaigners against [marriage] . . . have been remarkably crass in posing the simple dilemma, "either you want to stay together or you don't—if you do, you need not promise; if you don't, you ought to part". This ignores the chances of inner conflict, and the deep human need for a continuous central life that lasts through genuine, but passing, changes of mood'.<sup>20</sup> Commitment is not sufficient to maintain love, but it adds an additional motive for not succumbing to, much less seeking out, temptations that threaten love.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Lawrence A. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Solomon, *About Love* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 40.

<sup>19</sup> P. 134.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man* (New York: New American Library, 1980), 303.

## Mike W. Martin

*Objection 6: Creative Divorce.* Lifetime commitments are inhumane. They are essentially commitments never to divorce, and that amounts to cruelty and torture when one or both partners find a marriage unbearable. Divorce can be creative, as well as a painful necessity. Lifetime commitments are immoral because they preclude divorce.

This objection applies within societies that forbid divorce, but not to contemporary societies governed by laws that make divorce a relatively simple legal matter. Suppose that in good faith, with trust and faith that divorce will not occur, partners make lifetime commitments, and then do everything they can to make things work out. They do not succeed, and the marriage disintegrates to the point where it is no longer worthwhile. After every effort is made to repair damage, one or both partners may be fully justified in abandoning their commitment.

*Objection 7: Prudence.* Lifetime commitments are unreasonable, irrational, imprudent. They fail to show proper regard for one's long-term good. A prudent person forms a plan of life that takes into account how changing circumstances or new knowledge can radically alter one's present conception of good, as well as the means to it. Right now love brings happiness, but who knows what it will bring decades later? Lifetime commitments sacrifice far too many options, and hence it is prudent to make only short-term commitments.

Of course, lifetime commitments are unreasonable for some individuals. What is in one's interests and what serves the mutual good of couples varies too widely to generalize about. The same reason, however, should lead us to reject a universal objection to lifetime commitments. That objection omits the good-promoting features of lifetime commitments, in particular the framework they provide for ongoing mutual caring, support, joy, and fulfilment. Marriage closes some options but opens others which may be far preferable, depending on our ideals of love.

Lifetime commitments to love are not prisons; they are vehicles for helping partners deal together with changing situations, interests, and needs. Partners do commit themselves to put the relationship first, to accommodate other things to it, including careers. Other than that, however, relationships are as accommodating and flexible as partners choose to make them.

## II. Faithfulness as a Virtue

Is marital faithfulness a virtue, that is, something morally desirable and admirable? Presumably virtues are intrinsically good. Marital constancy, however, is desirable in some cases but undesirable in others,

depending on how well a marriage promotes the good of spouses and others (especially children). Faithfulness seems more a matter of self-interest, luck, and simple compatibility, rather than morality. Perhaps commitments to love should be understood in terms of intentions but not obligations. That would also free us to approach divorce without being preoccupied with betrayal and blame-mongering. In short, should not the entire topic of marriage be de-moralized?

No—if we value the goods made possible in long-term marriages. Here I will make six comments by way of clarifying faithfulness as a virtue.

First, we can acknowledge that when a marriage is disastrous and hopeless, constancy can be bad rather than virtuous in that it prolongs a bad thing. But it does not follow that faithfulness is not a virtue. Virtues are context-dependent. Michael Slote pointed out that ‘many virtues only count as such when they are attended by certain other virtues’.<sup>21</sup> For example, conscientiousness is a virtue, or at least a highly admirable virtue, only when it involves attention to duties that promote human good, as opposed for example to the conscientiousness of a Nazi. Similarly, Eva Braun’s faithfulness in loving Hitler is not a virtue, nor is constancy in love for a wife-beating, child-abusing, sadistic husband. In general, faithfulness is desirable and admirable only in so far as there is something good about the love. That good centres on caring—mutual caring, support, kindness, and joy—which is morally desirable in itself and which contributes to the fulfilment of persons.

Second, taking moral commitments seriously does carry with it the possibility of betrayal—of one’s spouse, of oneself, and of one’s ideals of love. At the same time, not meeting an ideal does not automatically imply moral failure and blameworthiness, given causes beyond our control. Marital betrayal is usually the result of not trying, or not trying hard enough. But all the effort in the world cannot by itself achieve marital success—without luck.

Some loves are lucky; others are unfortunate, even tragic, due to circumstances that spouses can only partially influence.<sup>22</sup> Luck, as well as good judgment, plays a role in finding a promising partner whom one finds attractive physically, intellectually, morally, socially, and in terms of shared interests and values. Then, if a permanent relationship is to emerge, partners must be able to trust each other’s commitments. During their shared history, the basis of love must remain sufficiently constant to overcome inevitable difficulties, such as money problems,

<sup>21</sup> Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 62ff.

<sup>22</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 359–361.

## Mike W. Martin

major illness, temporary separations, and changing interests. Later, the relationship must survive the ravages of old age, and at any time the threat of death to one of the partners. In addition, there is luck in having the gifts of temperament conducive to monogamy, gifts that are in part genetic and in part the product of our upbringing.<sup>23</sup> All these factors call for great reserve in judging people who are unable to meet their marital commitments.

Third, it is true that talk about faithfulness and betrayal should be set aside in some contexts. The therapist's office is one such context. In order to help couples or individuals deal with marital or divorce difficulties, counsellors do well to keep matters focused on problem-solving skills, not blame-mongering and credit-grabbing. So do couples themselves, as they try to improve their relationship (rather than engage in exercises in self-righteousness). And observers who know little about the obstacles confronting a marriage should be wary of passing judgment. This does not, however, negate the appropriateness of moral language in other contexts, such as marriage ceremonies which publicly express solemn acts of acquiring responsibilities.

Fourth, acknowledging the role of luck does not remove the vital contribution of effort, responsibility, and moral virtue in shaping good relationships. Unless we are fatalists, who view human life as determined in ways that remove moral responsibility, we must recognize that faithfulness plays an important role. Precisely what role, in a given case, can be difficult to answer.

Thus, in examining individual cases, whether ourselves or others, we confront ambiguities that make it difficult to tell whether inconstancy is the result of temperament, luck, or irresponsibility of the sort that leads us to talk of betrayal and unfaithfulness. Consider Bertrand Russell, who reports that seven years into his marriage he suddenly fell out of love with his wife. 'I went out bicycling one afternoon, and suddenly, as I was riding along a country road, I realized that I no longer loved Alys. I had had no idea until this moment that my love for her was even lessening'.<sup>24</sup>

What does Russell mean by 'love'? He goes on to record that he was no longer sexually attracted to Alys and that also he had become preoccupied with her character faults. In his autobiography, however, he admits the unfairness and self-righteousness in his criticisms of Alys, and in a passage omitted from the final draft of the book he explained the breakup by appeal to his temperament: 'I now believe that it is not

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 26ff.

<sup>24</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1 (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 195–196.

in my nature to remain physically fond of any woman for more than seven or eight years. As I view it now, this was the basis of the matter, and the rest was humbug'.<sup>25</sup> We need not accept Russell's explanation as authoritative, any more than Russell had to accept his own earlier interpretation of events. Some might interpret the bicycle experience as a symptom of the 'seven-year itch' which other couples deal with through marriage counselling or by taking a long vacation together. Possibly Russell was not only self-righteous but, like the gentleman in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, guilty of bad faith in reducing his love to sexual desire and related feelings.<sup>26</sup> He prides himself on his honesty in promptly telling Alys that his love was gone, but perhaps full honesty would lead to a quite different conversation with Alys in which together they explored his troubled feelings with an eye to preserving an ideal-guided relationship.

As another possibility, perhaps Russell had undergone a fundamental change in his ideals since making his wedding vows. Perhaps he was rebelling against the Victorian ideals he had been raised with. Not temperament, but a new ideal of love was the reason he could so quickly conclude that his sexual relationship with Alys was over. In any case, some individuals do change their ideals, rejecting marital faithfulness after having earlier made lifelong commitments in good faith. Anaïs Nin, for example, arrived at this view of faithfulness after entering a fairly traditional marriage: 'I really believe that if I were not a writer, not a creator, not an experimenter, I might have been a very faithful wife. I think highly of faithfulness. But my temperament belongs to the writer, not to the woman'.<sup>27</sup> A year later, in the midst of her tumultuous affair with Henry Miller, her attitude changed again: 'The ideal of faithfulness is a joke' and the essential value in love is 'sincerity with one's self'.<sup>28</sup>

Fifth, appreciating marital faithfulness as a virtue does not mean making it the supreme value. Marital obligations are not absolute in the sense of always overriding all other considerations. Consider Paul Gauguin, who after a decade into his marriage, and after fathering five children, quit his job as a successful stockbroker to become a full-time artist. For most of the remainder of his life he did not earn enough money to support his family. It is difficult to avoid saying that he was

<sup>25</sup> Quoted by Barbara Strachey in *Remarkable Relations* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1980), 216.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Midgley, *Wisdom, Information and Wonder* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 157.

<sup>27</sup> Anaïs Nin, *Henry and June* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 29.

<sup>28</sup> p. 229.

## Mike W. Martin

unfaithful. It is also difficult to avoid admiring what he did—in one respect—if we value the art he produced and realize that it could not have been produced except at the expense of his family.<sup>29</sup> We, perhaps like him, may regret that the world did not make possible a happier accommodation of art and family, but we may also view aesthetic values and the moral value of self-fulfilment as providing some reasons for his conduct.

Sixth, we tend to think of faithfulness in terms of staying the same in the midst of changing circumstances, especially changes in our spouse. Shakespeare gave the classical expression of this idea:

'love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds . . ./it is an ever-fixed mark/That looks on tempests and is never shaken'.<sup>30</sup>

Yet it is more accurate, albeit more prosaic, to say that faithful love constantly modifies and adjusts in response to changes. Rigidity can contribute to unfaithfulness.

Dorothy Day recounts how her common-law marriage with Forster Batterham ended because he could not adjust to her decision to have their child and herself baptized in the Catholic Church. Prior to her decision, the marriage had been joyous, and deeply rooted in a shared devotion to social justice—a devotion which Day sustained throughout her subsequent leadership in the Catholic Worker Movement. Yet Batterham was also adamantly anti-religious: 'he was averse to any ceremony before officials of either Church or state. He was an anarchist and an atheist, and he did not intend to be a liar or a hypocrite. He was a creature of utter sincerity, and however illogical and bad-tempered about it all, I loved him'.<sup>31</sup> In order for Batterham to remain faithful, his love would have had to adjust so as to accept, or at least tolerate, Day's new religious outlook.

The best marriages, like the best persons, are often seriously flawed. Faithfulness is a virtue when it supports good though imperfect relationships. The same is true of tolerance and humility. Nietzsche was no booster of marriages, but what he said of strong characters applies to strong marriages: "Giving style" to one's character [and marriage]—a great and rare art! It is exercised by those who see all the strengths and weaknesses of their own natures [and marriage] and then comprehend them in an artistic plan until everything appears as art and reason and

<sup>29</sup> Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, 77ff.

<sup>30</sup> Sonnet 116.

<sup>31</sup> Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), 147–148.



## Love's Constancy

even weakness delights the eye. . . . Here the ugly which could not be removed is hidden; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime'.<sup>32</sup>

*Chapman University*

<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 232.