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1. Starting Points

Some accounts consider adultery to be wrong because it typically involves the breaking of a promise and deception. I agree that this is *partly* why adultery is wrong. Still, it does not explain the unique sort of wrong that adultery is. Consider that other kinds of broken promises or deception do not occasion the same sort of hurt that adultery does. To fully understand why adultery is wrong requires understanding how it characteristically hurts people, and showing that our susceptibility to that kind of hurt is not something to avoid.

I ask about what makes adultery wrong in 'paradigm cases'. I accept that there are cases where it is unclear whether something counts as adultery. I hope that my analysis shows why.

I will also assume that erotic love is, strictly speaking, a complex feeling. This feeling gives rise to a disposition that is frequently called eponymously after the feeling from which it originates. While this disposition provides an arena for the exercise of the virtues, it is not itself a virtue.¹

Finally, I assume a neo-Aristotelian moral framework that includes an objective notion of human flourishing or *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is an inclusive goal that is constituted by a number of things that are goods in themselves, such as the moral and intellectual virtues and friendship. My account of friendship owes much to Cocking and Kennett's (1998), and I rely on the latter in my own account of erotic love. Friendship is a condition of willingness to be guided in one's interest by the friend and to understand oneself by reference to the friend's interpretation of you. It is, as they

put it, a willingness to be ‘drawn’ – both in the sense of being led and of being interpreted or depicted to oneself – by the friend.

None of these starting points is uncontroversial, but every argument starts somewhere.

2. Professional Esteem, Friendship and Discernment

Adultery hurts people in a unique way because it is an assault on a person’s self-conception. Let’s consider some related ways in which relations with others contribute to our self-conception.

Consider a philosopher’s opinion of herself as a philosopher. Few of us are so confident of our abilities that we can sustain a high opinion of our professional competence in the face of sustained and universal criticism of our work. Nor should one — at least under most circumstances. On the other hand, few philosophers think that their professional competence requires that they command *universal* assent.

We solve this problem by taking seriously the opinions of those philosophers – who may or may not be friends or colleagues – whom we respect and by which we can be ‘drawn’ in just the way that Cocking and Kennett suggest. We may be led – that is, we may consider taking on board suggestions for revisions. But we also interpret ourselves in light of comments from those whose professional judgment we respect. We form judgments about our competence as philosophers and these judgments may lead us, too. I might, for instance, think that it would be better for me to aspire to be a dean, or to take on a much heavier teaching load, rather than to leave my mark in research.

Contrast this with the way in which we allow ourselves to be drawn by our friends. One of the responsibilities of friendship is that one lead and interpret one’s

friends by means of a sincerely held conception of a mutual good. So, suppose that John likes opera while his friend, Jane, presently has no great interest in it. Out of her friendship for John, she may go along with him to the opera and may come to share his enthusiasm for it. Her friendship for John consists in part in her willingness to be led by him in this way. It would be wrong for John to involve Jane in his trips to the opera if he didn't genuinely think that opera was a good thing. Suppose instead that John wanted only to appear in his company's corporate box with Jane on his arm to impress his boss. It would be a failure of friendship on his part to mislead her about his conception of the good and her place in it. If he confessed that he needed a date for the opera merely to continue the climb up the corporate ladder, Jane might well agree to go with him out of a sense of friendship. But this will presumably be because she either shares John's conception of the good as including professional advancement, or at the very least, respects John's conception of the good life as one that is good for him.

A friend may also act as an interpreter of our own actions and characters. We may, as it were, be guided in the drawing of our own self-portraits by the opinions of our friends. But here, as in the case of one's philosophical peers, the aspects in which our estimation of our self-identity and self-worth ought to be guided should depend on a relation of respect in the relevant domain. Suppose that I am concerned that I haven't been giving my parents the time and attention that a good son should. I ought not be guided in my estimation of whether I really am a good son by the opinion of my friend Dan if I believe that Dan fails badly on every standard of filial piety that I accept.

The above reflections highlight the importance of *discernment* as a virtue. I will not offer an account of the nature of this virtue but only point to some of its effects.

The person with discernment avoids various kinds of errors by dint of his judgments about people and the limits of their influence upon him. In the present

context, discernment is required in the matter of both determining whom one should regard as a professional peer and the limit of the effect of this person's judgment. Discernment is similarly required in the formation and continuation of friendships. We cannot know in full the potential friend's conception of the good – and so her view of the good *for us* as friends – prior to close association. Yet to enter into the relationship of friendship requires that one surrender oneself to the other's conception of the good to at least some extent. Willingness to be led and interpreted by the friend is a precondition for entering into friendship. Discernment is what allows us to avoid being corrupted through friendships with people of bad character.² People worry about their children's friendships precisely because they – rightly – do not yet trust them to be discerning in these matters. We can become bad people through good friendships – that is, friendships in which we have a mutual willingness to be drawn by the friend's (perhaps misguided) conception of our common good.

3. Erotic Love and the Self

Erotic love is a complex of feelings through which a person acquires and maintains a *profound* willingness to be led and interpreted by his or her lover out of the lover's conception of their shared good. It thus involves the same disposition as friendship – though to a far greater extent. This is not to say that erotic love *just is* friendship, or even that it lies along a continuum with friendship. Erotic love is the *feeling* through which one *acquires and maintains* the sort of disposition that has much in common with friendship. We may use the term to refer to both the feeling and the disposition it induces, but this would be by extension.

Other feelings may establish a relatively profound willingness to be led and interpreted by another out of the other's conception of the good, yet because the

feelings are different, this is not erotic love: the disposition to be drawn – though perhaps equally profound – has different dimensions and limitations.

The feeling of erotic love does not give rise merely to this profound willingness to be drawn, but also to sexual desire for the beloved and the desire that this desire should be reciprocated.³ The latter desire has consequences for the way in which we become disposed to be drawn by the other. Recall that being drawn has two aspects: being led in one's interests and being interpreted. I may be led to try all manner of things (and in particular ways, places, or imaginative frameworks for making love) that I would not otherwise try because of my love for someone. Moreover, I come to interpret myself in certain ways as a result of the reciprocal sexual desire that arises from the feeling of love. Assuming that my lover feels a similar love for me and that I am aware of this fact, I come to see myself as someone who is desired by someone who is herself pre-eminently desirable.

Suppose that we accept that selves are – if not wholly, then partly – *constituted* by such relations of *recognition*. Our sexual identities may not be entirely determined by the way in which we see ourselves in the reciprocated desires of our lovers. They might nonetheless be sharpened and filled out in this way. I might come to think of myself – and become – someone who is a sensitive, 'metro-sexual' lover because of the way in which my lover draws me. However great the extent to which our lovers might guide our identities as sexual selves, our sense of self-worth as fit objects of sexual desire is greatly increased by the reciprocal desire that flows from feelings of erotic love.

But erotic love is not just about our sexual identities or feelings of self-worth as sexual beings; it gives rise to a profound willingness to be drawn by another on the basis of the other's conception of our shared good. When this willingness is reciprocal,

I might see myself as someone whose projects and prospects are sufficiently important that my lover would move countries to enable them. (And similarly, of course, on my part. Such mutual willingness to be led and interpreted makes it a practical imperative that we clarify a shared conception of *our common good*.) It tells me something about me if I recognize through my lover's actions and words that I can inspire a willingness to be drawn in another that is as profound as my willingness to be drawn by her. And it is important that I see this willingness *in her in particular*, for *she* is someone for whom I would put my career second if it promoted her well-being.

It is distinctively important to erotic love that this mutual willingness to be drawn arises from a feeling that is simultaneously a source of reciprocal sexual desire. I might recognize in my mother a profound willingness to be drawn in her interests and self-understandings by my judgment of our common good. But because this willingness arises from very different feelings, the recognition involved does not constitute me as the same kind of self (perhaps it constitutes me as a filial self). The willingness to be drawn that arises from erotic love is different in its origins, so it is also different in its character and scope. The recognition of this sort of mutuality constitutes me as an *erotic self* – a lover who is sufficiently valuable to my lover that my willingness to be drawn by her in accordance with her conception of our good is matched by a similar willingness on my part.

The sexual and the erotic self are intimately related. Contrast the way in which we want our friends to have satisfying sex lives with the way in which we want our lovers to have satisfying sex lives. Out of my friendship for Shawn, I may be led to go to 'pick up' bars with him so that he might meet someone when otherwise I wouldn't go in for that scene. But when it comes to my lover, I don't merely want her to enjoy the good of satisfying sex with *just anyone, but with me*. In each case I am willing to

be led in order that the person should enjoy some good. But in the case of lovers, the origins of this willingness to be drawn in the feelings of erotic love leaves its mark. Because these feelings are also a source of both sexual desire and the desire that this desire be reciprocated, I want to be involved in the person's enjoyment of this good *in a particular way*.⁴ The distinctive way in which I bring it about that my lover – as opposed to my friend – has the good of satisfying sex has implications for my notion of my own sexual self-worth.

4. The Pain of Adultery

My descriptive hypothesis is that adultery is painful because it calls into question a person's *sexual* self-worth. When my lover has sex with someone else, this may not in itself be inconsistent with the reciprocal sexual desire that arises from feelings of erotic love. After all, she may want me too. But I can no longer regard myself as the person who is *uniquely* the satisfactory outlet for her sexual desires. We will consider in a moment the wisdom or rationality of this move from the desire for *reciprocated* sexual desire to desire for *exclusivity*. But we can hardly deny that many people feel this way. Some men even feel diminished by the discovery of their girlfriend's vibrator, while women may feel a parallel challenge to their self-worth when they unearth the boyfriend's collection of pornography.

More serious is the harm that adulterous liaisons may inflict on the betrayed partner's sense of his or her own *erotic* self-worth. This cuts deeper than sex. He may see himself as one who is no longer able to draw his lover's self-conception or interests in the way that characteristically happens with those who experience erotic love. Betrayed partners frequently assume that the partner will *leave them* to make a new life with the new lover. When this happens, he will no longer know himself to be

someone who can inspire and sustain a mutual disposition to be drawn on the basis of sexual feelings.

Few people assume that their partners will be in love with both them and with the new lover. They are right to assume this. The feeling of love gives rise to a profound disposition to be led and interpreted by the lover – a disposition whose extent and nature is related to its origin in such feelings. It is doubtful whether one can have this disposition toward a variety of partners. After all, consider the way in which the goals and self-understandings we arrive at through erotic love may conflict with the dispositions we have to be directed and interpreted as a result of familial love or of companion friendship. Owing to their different origins, these dispositions already pertain to somewhat different and only partly overlapping areas of our lives. And yet in spite of this, they may surely conflict. How then will multiple relations of erotic love not create conflict to an even greater extent?

This, then, is my descriptive suggestion about why adultery hurts many people. Because they efface the distinction between the *reciprocity of sexual desire* characteristically consequent on the feelings and the *exclusivity of sexual relations*, unauthorised sexual relations are experienced as a challenge to one's sexual self-worth. This is a serious matter because of the intimate relation between one's sexual self-worth and identity and one's erotic self-worth and identity.

5. Blocking the Move to Normativity

One could accept the above as descriptively adequate, but reject it as normative. Sure – people *do* efface the distinction between reciprocal sexual desire and exclusive sexual relations. And they *do* infer a devalued erotic self from their perception of a devalued sexual self. But these are mistakes. In fact, they involve failures of the virtue of

discernment discussed above. So while many people are hurt by adultery, they *shouldn't* be. Let me develop this objection a bit more.

One issue is the important gap between a reasonable expectation of reciprocal sexual desire between lovers and an expectation of sexual exclusivity. It is a pathology of love to insist that the lover cannot judge anyone else sexually attractive. Couples in healthy relationships may make one partner's judgment that the man who works at the health club is hot a bit of a running joke or, less often, a focus of shared fantasy. Relationships in which such aesthetic judgments of sexual desirability are acknowledged are healthy because each partner has the virtue of discernment. My lover's judgment of my desirability is important, but my discernment about how far and in what ways to take that judgment includes the caveat that it need not be exclusive. Those lovers whose sense of sexual self-worth suffers when they find their partner checking out some pumped-up pecs exhibit a failure of discernment.

One might then argue that what regularly applies to sexual desire *can* apply to sexual relations as well. What is really important is *erotic* identity and self-worth. This involves one's willingness to be led and interpreted by his or her lover in profound ways – ways that *arise from* feelings that are sexual. But this is not to say that the erotic collapses into the sexual. I may have the disposition to be drawn by my lover in ways that I am not drawn by anyone else, while at the same time having sex with others, as evinced by couples in open relationships.

From the concession that some couples *can* separate the erotic from the sexual, a critic might argue that everyone *should*. Doing so involves an advanced exercise of the virtue of discernment. The discerning person doesn't allow a half-baked objection from a Heidegger expert to shake his conception of his own professional competence as a modal logician. The discerning person doesn't allow his wife's judgment that the

buff bloke at the gym is not to damage his belief that he too is a fit object of an attractive woman's sexual desire. Similarly, the person in whom discernment is perfected does not allow his wife's sexual relations with the bloke at the gym to undermine the (true) judgment that he is deemed worthy by her to guide her interests and interpret her to herself out of their shared sense of a common good. While their reciprocal disposition to lead and be led – to interpret and to be interpreted – *arises from* feelings that also give rise to sexual desire, the discerning couple does not mistake the origin for the product. Thus they do not conflate the relatively superficial sexual identity and self-worth with the deeper issue of erotic identity and erotic self-worth.

6. Normativity Regained?

Can we show that the attitudes that make adultery hurtful are not irrational? Can they be shown to be not only rational, but conducive to the achievement of *eudaimonia*?

I start with an observation about the early stages of erotic love. Because it instills a profound willingness to be drawn in light of the other's conception of the good through certain feelings that are necessarily sexual, it engenders a deeper kind of trust than non-erotic friendship. Sexual contact makes us vulnerable. Even if we don't agree with Chesterfield that the pleasure is only momentary and the expense damnable, we might nonetheless admit that, from the point of view of the disinterested spectator, the position is faintly ridiculous. We trust our lovers not to be such disinterested spectators. The mutual trust involved deepens the level of intimacy and engenders further trust. This, in turn, paves the way for a disposition to be led and interpreted that is more profound and far-reaching than in other relations. So the fact that it is connected with sex affects the kind of disposition we form.

A second observation: as a matter of fact, when we are in the process of forming such dispositions – of falling in love – we are often sexually exclusive. The time and attention we give to our lovers in this formative phase of the relationship often pushes out other sexual relations.

A final observation: the process of forming this disposition to be drawn because of these feelings of love is experienced as a good thing. It may be frightening, as well as exhilarating. But there is a sense that we learn something about ourselves: ‘I never thought I could be like that with anyone.’ In forming such a profound and mutual disposition to be drawn by another, we feel as if we are realizing an important human potential. I think we are right to feel this way. I also think that *eudaimonia* consists in part in the actualization of certain distinctive human capacities. Falling in love feels right and important because we are – to this extent – achieving *eudaimonia*.

The case I want to put for sexual exclusivity in a relationship is built around these three observations. Once established, *some* disposition to be drawn by the other could be sustained through causes distinct from those that established it. Some couples are ‘staying together for the children’s sake.’ In such relationships, the partners may exhibit a disposition to be drawn that is perhaps more profound and far-reaching than that exhibited in close companion friendships. Or they may not. What is certain is that the disposition is *not sustained by the same feelings that established it*, nor even by feelings that are close to them.⁵

Should we want our love to be sustained by feelings like those that engendered it? If so, what bearing does this have on sexual exclusivity and adultery?

We should want our mutual disposition to be drawn by our lovers to be sustained on something like the basis of the feelings that gave rise to it. One bit of evidence for this claim is that people *do* in fact attempt to keep themselves as they

were when their love was young. This is part of the reason that we celebrate anniversaries in romantic ways. We remind ourselves how things were then and attempt to perpetuate those feelings. Doubtless the reason for this is because of the third observation noted above. We experience falling in love as a good thing. That is, we experience the genesis of the disposition to be drawn by our lovers on the basis of these feelings as a good thing. If we were to reflect philosophically, we would categorise this disposition and its genesis as an important external good (in Aristotle's terminology).⁶ Thus we have a reason to wish to remain in love. And because we have experienced this as a good that arises from certain feelings, we have a prudential reason to wish to see our love sustained by those feelings *if this is possible*. The very disposition to be drawn by the other that arises from feelings of love *may* be able to be sustained on a different basis, but we have good evidence that these feelings are sufficient for it.

This takes us on to the final point – a point intimately connected with my Aristotelian presuppositions. We have a reason to explore this possibility because in doing so we exercise our agency. Some Aristotelian virtues concern the way in which we experience feelings. Though we cannot, at the moment at which we are provoked, *decide* to become angry, the agent with the virtue of being even-tempered has made himself the kind of person who will react in a certain way. We become people who will experience feelings in a certain way through a combination of reflection on past instances and training in light of this reflection. If I find that I am too prone to anger, I may make it a policy to, say, count to ten before I display any reaction. Where the display of our emotions leads, our emotions follow.

Erotic love is not itself a virtue. On my view it is a feeling. Yet we may *exercise* a variety of virtues in relation to the lifelong project of sustaining our love on

the basis of the feelings that initiated it. Let us consider some examples. *Sôphrosunê* (often translated as ‘self-control’) is a standard Aristotelian virtue that governs how and what sensual pleasures to enjoy. We may extend the life of the feelings that initially gave rise to our mutual disposition to be drawn by our lovers through self-control. If, for instance, we are attentive and make sure that sex and romance are about *us* – not about me – then we’ll do better at keeping ourselves as we were when things were new. We may engage our capacity for practical wisdom when we arrange our affairs so that we set aside proper time together.

This brings us to the matter of sexual exclusivity. Recall the first two of my three observations about falling in love. First, that the relationship is sexual makes the friendship-like disposition to be drawn a profound and far-reaching disposition. Second, that when we are in the process of forming this disposition, we are typically sexually exclusive. We want the disposition to remain profound and far-reaching, and we have some reason to think that this aspect of it is related to its origins in feelings that prompt sexual desire. We note that in the process of forming this disposition, sexual exclusivity is common. Because we experience the formation of this disposition on the basis of this feeling as a good, it is rational for us to wish to maintain the disposition and to maintain on the basis of those feelings to the extent that this is possible. Doing so not only secures for us long term possession of what we regard as a good, but it also provides an arena in which we may hone and exercise the moral virtues. Of course, we are seldom this explicit about such matters. Few of us frame the thought that erotic love is a constituent element of the good life which it is rational to pursue. Even when we pledge one another sexual exclusivity in a marriage ceremony, we do not consciously think it a strategy to maintain the disposition to be drawn on the basis of the same feelings through which it was formed. Yet I think these are (in part)

the reasons why we have the institutions and customs that we have, whether they be formal marriage or living together with a shared expectation of sexual exclusivity.

When we pursue this strategy for remaining in love, we invite the effacement of the distinction between our identity and worth as sexual selves with our identity and worth as erotic selves. This is a strategy for keeping ourselves as we were when our love was young. We can see now why there is a *prima facie* case that there exists a prudential reason for doing so. This cannot then be a failure of the virtue of discernment. Like all virtues, discernment is one that we exercise with an eye to our own well-being. The states that count as virtues do so (in part) because their exercise enables our well-being.⁷ Thus we cannot be deficient in their exercise if doing so would undermine a strategy that promotes our well-being. For this reason, I regard the objection considered in section 5 to be overcome. The unique sort of harm that adultery causes to a person's sense of identity and self-worth may be *contingent* on that person holding certain attitudes. Such an attitude is not only not irrational, but positively rational. This strategy for maintaining our disposition to be drawn by the other both secures the continued existence of something that we experience as a good, but also provides an occasion for the development and exercise of the virtues. To the extent that we succeed in making ourselves the kind of people who will feel a certain way, we achieve the Aristotelian condition of *metriopatheia*: we are masters of our passions to the extent that this is within our power.

7. The Limits of the Argument

It is important to be clear about what the argument above shows and does not show. At best, it shows only that certain widely shared and perfectly rational strategies for maintaining a basic human good – erotic love – leave us open to a special kind of hurt

when unauthorized sexual relations take place. Adulterous affairs may involve promise-breaking and deception too. But they may also be wrong for the additional and special reason that they hurt our lovers in a particularly important kind of way – a way that strikes deeply at our own sense of identity and self-worth.

The argument does not show, and should not be taken to suggest, that sexual exclusivity *inevitably* allows us to maintain the disposition to be drawn by the other that characteristically follows on erotic love on the basis of feelings like those through which it was originally engendered. It is a strategy that history suggests has some measure of success, and plenty of failure too. So the argument does not show that we inevitably have a reason to stay in the same sexually exclusive relationship.

Finally, the argument shows nothing about the morality or immorality of ‘open marriages’. Erotic love is a valuable part of the well-lived life. It is a blessing to find it and a challenge to maintain it. There can be, as John Stuart Mill would put it, many experiments in living. If the next five hundred years shows that open marriages and the separation of the sexual from the erotic is a better strategy for sustaining the relevant disposition to be drawn, and that it does so on the basis of feelings that we similarly experience as a part of the good life, then I might change my mind about the conclusion of this paper. That conclusion, however, is that adultery is wrong because it characteristically harms people in a distinctive and important way. This harm is contingent on persons holding certain attitudes and effacing certain distinctions. Yet I claim that it is rational to hold these attitudes and thus to efface the boundaries between the sexual and the erotic. Indeed, we have some evidence to suggest that doing so may contribute to achieving *eudaimonia*.⁸

1. I thus side with Halwani (2003) against others such as Solomon (2005) who suppose that it is a virtue.
2. See Cocking and Kennet 2000.
3. Of course, many things other than erotic love may give rise to sexual desire, and perhaps even the desire that the desire be reciprocated. Some of them might even be causes of erotic love. Suppose that Jones has a penchant for short-haired brunettes. He meets Smith who fits this description and this alone gives rise to sexual desire in Jones. Knowing Smith better, Jones experiences erotic love. Among the causes of erotic love in Jones may be sexual desire for Smith, and it may be thus be sustained or reinforced as a result of erotic love, for, as I use the term, a necessary feature of erotic love is that it produces in the lover sexual desire for the beloved. Nothing prevents Jones' sexual desire for Smith from being causally over-determined in this way.
4. Noted by Halwani 2003, 97.
5. Because I regard love as a feeling through which a certain sort of disposition is formed and sustained, it is not correct to regard these people as still in love. If you prefer the term 'love' to cover both the feeling and the disposition, you may disagree. But nothing in my argument turns on the nomenclature.
6. I withhold judgment about whether this external good is an *essential* element of *eudaimonia*. Some good lives, such as those of priests and nuns, might not include erotic love.
7. On my view, they enable our well-being by virtue of the fact that their exercise partly *constitutes* our well-being. But I need not insist on this point here.

8. Successive versions of this paper have benefited from comments by Raja Halwani, L. Elaine Miller, Jeanette Kennett, Su Rogerson, Steve Curry, Neil Levy, Steve Matthews, and the staff and students of Mannix College.