

Kantian Aspects in Marriage Counseling

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Abstract: Kant's conception of the interactions between individuals is that they contain an inherent dichotomy, that is, a compulsive attraction for each other's company but an equal need and necessity to maintain personal space based on respect for the autonomy of the will in oneself and others. The modern discipline of marriage counseling contains and uses aspects of two of his theories on human interaction: the unsociable sociability of mankind and friendship. This paper seeks to identify and analyze the presence and application of Kantian thought in marriage counseling, noting efforts to develop and implement maxims of love and respect between marriage partners in order to counter the unsociable sociability of man's inclinations.

Kant's conception of the interactions between individuals is that they contain an inherent dichotomy, that is, a compulsive attraction for each other's company but an equal need and necessity to maintain personal space based on respect for the autonomy of the will in oneself and others. Using Kant's conception of interpersonal relationships in human beings, this paper will analyze the modern discipline of marriage counseling, noting the Kantian stresses on respect for the dignity of the other in the form of personal space and respect for autonomy.

At this point, the author wishes to note that in order to limit the scope of this paper, the operational definition of marriage will be defined in the traditional Western sense as between one man and one woman. Likewise, terms such as "man's sociable unsociability" will be used to refer to humankind collectively, that is men and women, for the sake of simplicity, and are not intended as political or social commentary.

Origins of Social Discord

Why do human beings come together to live at all, much less create a supposedly permanent unit and live as husband and wife? Once together, assuming a natural desire

for the company of others, why does conflict then arise so naturally and frequently? Kant maintains that it is a matter of “man’s unsocial sociability” that prompts him to enter into society. In his work, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, the philosopher argues that man has a “tendency to enter into society” but that this is combined with “a thoroughgoing resistance that constantly threatens to sunder this society.” This latter trait is the unsociable part that consists in an individual wanting everything to go his own way.

Man enters into society because in such a state he can be more than what his natural capacities can develop. As he anticipates resistance to his will on the part of others, so he also anticipates resisting the will of others. This inherent antagonism results in conflict and competition with others, driving man to develop his dormant capacities. In a sense, having to live with others goads an individual to mature towards his or her potential, whereas the absence of conflict impels no development of the quite amazing abilities locked within our race.

Whereas Kant intends this theory and understanding to be part of a greater argument on the cunning of nature (which uses this natural antagonism to develop us towards its end), it is more revealing of his fundamental understanding of human interactions.¹ Yirmiahu Yovel further analyzes this understanding of human interaction by pointing out that, according to Kant, man

“...is attracted to social life not to ensure his *natural* survival but to satisfy his *consciousness* or ego. As a free subject man needs the confrontation with another free subjectivity, from which he will secure recognition and esteem, whom he will rival, and whom he might also recognize eventually as his equal.”

¹ Kant, *Idea for a Universal History*, 31-32

The hostility initially felt towards other men and an inability to ‘tolerate’ them is a result of the “danger they pose to his *will*.” That is to say,

“As an ego-centered principle of will, I, like every other man, want everything to be run according to my subjective wishes; but the other denies the centrality of my will and tries to force his will on me. As long as each will operates in a merely *particular* mode, unmediated by a universal principle, a general conflict of wills is inevitable. This conflict...[occurs] because they are subjects endowed with consciousness and will, each trying to subject the other to his own will.”²

As such, within the state, “the goal of progress” is to create a civil society which allows movement from “mutual conflict to mutual acknowledgment by all citizens of each others’ equality in freedom.”³

Marriage: A Society of Two

Marriage is, for all intents and purposes, the smallest society possible. The same understanding about human behavior can thus be applied to marriage. Partners within a marriage attract and repel each other based upon each person’s desire to have his or her own way in the relationship. Each seeks to run things according to how they he/she thinks things should be while his/her their partner is doing the same. Whether or not they can resolve this inherent conflict by developing their capacities depends largely on their own particularities. Ideally, a couple can arrive at this type of middle ground on its own. However, a couple may experience an eventual breakdown in its society later on or never develop any middle ground at all until the situation becomes intolerable. In these cases, marriage counseling can be helpful in potentially averting a separation or divorce by working to develop and reconcile the wills of the individual partners.

Marriage Counseling and Reconciling the Sources of Antagonism

² Yovel, Yirmiahu, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, 148-149

³ Yovel, 151

What is marriage counseling then? Gerhard Neubeck defines counseling as “a process of planned intervention into the life of other persons.” This intervention is contracted by the party to be counseled. It hinges on the recognition by the individual or individuals (either conscious or unconscious) that “he or she wishes to make changes and is not capable of executing these changes alone.”⁴

Nathan Hurvitz, in his article *Hypotheses in Marriage Counseling*, highlights the concept of a society or social system formed by a couple. In the case of couples in need of counseling,

“...the spouses’ marital problems have structural and not intrapsychic causes; that is, their problems arise from their interaction as members of a social system they have formed and within which they perform the roles appropriate to this system to achieve goals associated with their values.”⁵

For Hurvitz, any “action is social when the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals) takes into account and is oriented toward the behavior of others.” The couples’ interaction takes place within the context of a society wherein “individualistic and competitive values are expressed and enacted in interpersonal attitudes.”⁶ As a result, both parties feel threatened and this triggers defense responses that cause even more problems. This analysis reveals a Kantian understanding of human relationships present in Hurvitz’s theory. Human beings acting socially react and form their behavior according to the behavior and expected behavior of others. This originates from the unsociable sociability of the will. The purpose then of marriage counseling is to help the couple fix the small society that the two have created. The counselor works to help develop ways to mutually deal with and restrict the will in order to respect the

⁴ Neubeck, Gerhard, “Toward a Theory of Marriage Counseling: A Humanistic Approach” 119

⁵ Hurvitz, 64-65

⁶ Ibid.

autonomy of the other. The aim is to reduce and control the antagonism in the relationship stemming from the clash of wills and arrive at a more positive framework.⁷ Neubeck points out that although a spouse loses none of his or her individuality by entering into marriage, (s)he does not constitute a “single independent unit” since a great deal of his feelings and behaviors are connected to and or governed by his partner and vice versa creating a social system.⁸ Recognizing that each spouse at the same time enables and constrains the other’s will and behavior in the marriage, a counselor works to make the spouses aware of this quality in each other. In this manner, he or she can help the couple to develop solutions to undesirable behavior and negative attitudes. By highlighting what exactly elicits the negative behaviors and or attitudes, spouses can learn better responses to each other’s undesirable behavior and work to “extinguish them” while reinforcing positive attitudes. Through identifying and disrupting the cycle in the battle of wills and forming more constructive strategies for dealing with each other, spouses can develop their capacities and move towards a healthier social setting.⁹

What types of behaviors ought be encouraged in order to lead to more constructive and healthier social systems? Again, marriage counseling contains aspects of Kant in terms of the relationship ideal it seeks to develop.

Kant and Friendship

Kant’s views on friendship are outlined in his *Metaphysics of Morals* as part of his analysis on the imperfect duties of human beings toward each other. These duties fall into two main categories: love and respect. As in his concept of society in the *Universal*

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Neubeck, 120

⁹ Hurvitz, 65

History, he considers rational beings to be bound together through attraction and repulsion. “The principle of **mutual love** admonishes them constantly to *come closer* to one another; that of **respect** they owe one another, to keep themselves at a *distance* from one another.” Failure to sustain these “great moral forces” would result in dire consequences, with nothingness or immorality drinking up “the whole kingdom of (moral) beings like a drop of water.”¹⁰

Love in Kant’s view is practical. That is to say, it is not merely a feeling of delight in another person but a maxim of benevolence. Respect is similarly understood as “the maxim of limiting our self-esteem by the dignity of humanity in another person, and so as respect in the practical sense.”¹¹ With this in mind, Kant’s understanding of friendship is based on attraction and repulsion because “[f]riendship (considered in its perfection) is the union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect.” Love causes the friends to draw closer but “the principle of respect requires them to stay at a proper distance from each other.”¹²

Specifically, “[*m*]oral friendship (as distinguished from friendship based on feeling) is the complete confidence of two persons in revealing their secret judgments and feelings to each other, as far as such disclosures are consistent with mutual respect.”

This is necessary because for Kant, humans feel a very real need to “reveal themselves to others” but normally cannot, fearing that others will take advantage of or misuse what he reveals. Under the auspices of a true, moral friendship based on love and respect, an

¹⁰ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 568-569

¹¹ *Ibid*, 569

¹² *Ibid*, 584-585

individual can enjoy “a freedom he cannot have with the masses, among whom he must shut himself up in himself.”¹³

Integrating Kant’s Theories of Unsociable Sociability and Friendship

Given that Kant conceives of interactions between individuals as being antagonistic by nature, how is it that he arrives at a positive theory of friendship? Moreover, can one integrate the two systems and create a positive whole? The answer lies in the development of the capacities into the concept of duty to one another. Clarifying the nature of the two theories of interaction is necessary. The theory of unsociable sociability identifies *what is* the natural way we interact; the theory of friendship outlines *what ought to be* the way we interact. The two systems are reconcilable because one identifies the natural state of things and the other, the capacities we can develop in order to interact with each other on a positive level.

The context in which Kant refers to the unsociable sociability of man is that of the development of his capacities by the clash of the wills produced by his being in society. Eventually, this mutual conflict is supposed to produce a solution for ending these hostilities via development of mutual acknowledgement of each other’s equality and freedom as individuals with consciousness and will. That is to say, a compromise is worked out.

This compromise rests on acknowledging and honoring our duties to other human beings and their autonomy. As such, our *natural inclinations* are subordinated to *our duties towards others*. Our capacity to do so is developed by participating in society,

¹³ Ibid, 587

through the clash of wills, without which we would never have a need to develop control of our will and inclinations. Our duties to other human beings as outlined by Kant are: Love and Respect. In the context of our smallest society possible, the great State of Matrimony, these aspects are key to establishing and maintaining harmony. Furthermore, our capacities to live with and respect others are tested and developed by participating to a greater degree than is required in society.

By introducing the primacy of duty over inclinations, Kant arrives at the key to *successful, sustained interaction* with other humans. Whereas a man may possess inclinations favorable to another human being such as affection, loyalty and a willingness to make the other person happy, when his will is challenged or thwarted by said person, those inclinations towards the other might easily change as he defends against the danger to his own will. Inclinations towards this person may shift to resentment, hostility, and resistance to accommodation. The inherent caprice of inclinations at any given moment or “how you feel” towards another person, does not provide the concrete base on which to build a healthy, lasting relationship such as a marriage.¹⁴ Kant, by making inclination subordinate to maxims of duty, provides an invaluable solution to inevitable conflict between partners.

Kant’s Concepts of Unsociable Sociability and Friendship Applied to Marriage

Strikingly, marriage counseling has unconsciously developed in such a manner as to adopt both theories of Kant’s, the unsociable sociability of man and Kant’s theories of friendship. It integrates them into a system of understanding interactions between

¹⁴ It is the opinion of the author that many failed marriages are due to one or both partners never developing their capacity of duty to the other. Unable to subordinate their will to their inclinations, they never develop this solid base and cannot survive inevitable marital discord.

individuals and, from within this framework, seeks to develop solutions to marital conflict.

Firstly, it identifies what is the basis of human interaction, recognizing that man in a state of society competes with others to enforce and protect the supremacy of his will while resisting that of others. Within any marriage, this conflict exists to some degree. By recognizing that this is a natural part of human interaction (instead of some deep-seated deficiency found in one or both of the partners), marriage counseling realistically assesses the situation.

Secondly, marriage counseling seeks to implement what ought to be. Relationships that are built on love and respect foster a safe, close, and positive social system. This type of social system seems to be the key to living together in the micro society of marriage. Man's unsociable sociability represents an antagonistic element in marriages that must be resolved through the adoption and maintenance of the two principles of love and respect. As these two principles are not based on how an individual *feels* at any given moment but rather on establishing maxims of behavior based on duty. This type of relationship is superior as it forms a stable basis for behavior and helps a couple navigate rough patches or fights; periods when they might not 'feel' the same way about their spouses because of anger or hurt. Marriage counseling seeks to establish or repair such relationships, avoiding or controlling competitive behaviors that seek to benefit one spouse at the expense of the other.

Kant's concept of friendship can be used as a model for marriage as evidenced by marriage counseling's goals in implementing this type of relationship. In counseling, the therapist tries to establish love and respect between the counseled parties, fostering

intimacy and leading to more consistent ‘feelings’ of love by altering negative behaviors that prevent all of the above. These efforts are attempts to establish a Kantian friendship between the couple. Such a relationship is based on intimacy and confidence or trust in the other person, made possible by the principles of love and respect.

One of the most frequently cited problems that present between couples is ‘lack of communication.’ This lack of communication denies the basic desire of individuals to reveal themselves to others. Communication once restored offers a freedom not possible in other more casual relationships in the form of safety and stability. This directly relates back to Kant’s conception of friendship and individual desire to reveal the self to another.

Marriage counseling is not a magic procedure by which a therapist waves his wand and magically the couple can get along with each other. Rather, it is a process by which problem behaviors and reactions are identified by the counselor and the counseled; where more positive behaviors are adopted and made habit. According to Hurvitz, continued negative behavior among couples stems from,

“how each imputes a different meaning to the same behavior and therefore has different feelings, how each one, behaving on the basis of his value system, evaluates the other from a different perspective, and how each one in attempting to maintain and enhance his own self-esteem may do so at the expense of the other...”

The role of the therapist then is to show the spouses “how they are involved in several different binds or vicious circles wherein the behavior, its meanings and their feelings are contingent.”¹⁵ Establishing effective communication between spouses is important for destroying this negative cycle. By encouraging duties of respect and love between the husband and wife, the counselor can help bring the couple closer together. Love represents specific duties of beneficence, gratitude, and sympathy towards one’s partner

¹⁵ Hurvitz, 68

and counters attitudes of “envy, ingratitude, and malice”.¹⁶ By developing respect, which necessarily for Kant implies a certain amount of space to be given to the other out of respect for their autonomy, the dignity of the members in the relationship can be preserved. Respect entails curtailing the demands an individual’s will might seek to impose on another out of self-love by recognizing the self-love in another. Vices such as arrogance, defamation, and ridicule may thus be countered. Ridicule is in particular important to avoid in a marriage as it includes “wanton faultfinding and mockery” which often develops into severe problems in a relationship (i.e. the nagging wife, the insulting husband).¹⁷

To conclude, marriage counseling operates on Kantian concepts and standards in relationships, first by its assumption of the battle of the wills and second, through the principles of friendship and duties to other human beings that counseling uses to counter this battle.

¹⁶ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 576

¹⁷ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 579-583

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