

The Meaning of Marriage

The irrevocable commitment of spouses: Personal perspective

Most people have the capacity to commit, even commit irrevocably, to another person. Respect for human dignity involves respect for this critical expression of human freedom. For society to mishear irrevocable commitment as revocable is to fail to respect the power that lies within the capacity of humanity.

At the core of this premise is the idea that human beings have the capacity to be rational, are inherently relational, and have ‘conscious thought’ allowing for free choices.

Human beings have value systems. Most consider that their freedom extends to the choice to act in accordance with, or contrary to, the values to which they ascribe. People can make commitments – to do (or not to do) something against a predictable (or unpredictable) future.

Commitments are the moral order of society.

Clearly a person who has made any commitment - including one of irrevocable character - retains the freedom to break it. The freedom to violate one’s value system is perhaps the most striking aspect of the power that a human being can exercise over his or her destiny.

If one speaks of ‘a committed relationship’, what is implied? It could be an unqualified and irrevocable one: *I take you as my partner, in sickness or health, no matter how wonderful or disappointing you –or the experience of being with you – may be, for as long as we both shall live.* This is, of course, the essence of matrimonial commitment where marriage is life-long in character.

The commitment could, however, be qualified to a limited or substantial extent: *I take you as my partner for as long as you are kind to me, or for as long as I find the relationship fulfilling.* In this case, a question arises as to whether the commitment truly has any meaning.

In personal relationships, which inevitably involve ‘testing’ qualities – loyalty, patience, generosity, kindness, forgiveness – I question whether one can speak of meaningful commitment when one has not restricted the range of choice in the future.

Why should society pay attention to commitment in personal relationships? *If society is to respect human dignity, based upon the freedom of a person to make moral choices, it must respect a free choice to make an irrevocable commitment within that person's moral capacity.* For society to accept inconsistent behavior to that original commitment would be to profoundly reduce respect for human dignity.

Divorce

To my understanding, civil divorce is associated with the ancillary matters of the personal commitment of marriage – property entitlements, care of minor children, etc. These all may be determined without divorce. The sole necessary consequence of civil divorce is the generation of the right to remarry.

Divorce thus defines marriage as not involving an irrevocable commitment but rather involving a commitment that is revocable. Whatever the social arguments regarding the merits or demerits of divorce may be, society's decision to give its support to revocable commitments in marriage fails to respect the human dignity of those who have chosen to make a commitment that is irrevocable.

If a person seeks to have society acknowledge and respect the authenticity of an irrevocable commitment, then they have a right to conscientiously object to a process – civil divorce – that does not respect their dignity. I would further assert that this disrespect of human dignity is as much an affront to the divorce petitioner as it is to the other spouse who wishes to maintain the commitment.

An irrevocable marriage commitment is a profound statement acknowledging an acceptance of our capacity as humans, our frailty as humans, and the uncertainty of the relationships between humans and other living things. It adds intelligence and wisdom to the individual, the family, the community, and the society.

I conscientiously object to civil divorce.

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