


What is a human being?

Christian and social scientific understandings of human beings in society

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- Understandings of human beings in society: a critical issue for Christian apologetics
 - Example of marriage to illustrate the conflict of views

Outline

Four understandings of human beings in society, applied to marriage:

- Theological
- Evolutionary psychology
- Rational choice theories
- Social theories

1 Theological understanding

1.1 Creation:

- from dust of the ground (Genesis 2: 7)
- in the image of the Triune God (Gen 1: 27): relational, man and woman (Gen 2:20-24)
- rule and responsibility for the created order, exercised through work and rest (Gen1:26, 28)
- capacity for understanding: naming the animals (Gen 2: 19, 20)
- capacity for making moral choices (Gen 3)

1.2 What is the purpose of human life?

Persons in relationships, with purposes (telos)

- to love God and serve him with all our being (Luke 10: 27)
- to love our neighbours as *ourselves* (Luke 10: 27)
- to benefit from, and to care for, the created order (Genesis 1: 26, 28-30)

1.3 Fall and disobedience: Genesis 3

Fall presupposes capacity to make autonomous decisions

Consequences: all three relationships fractured and broken

- separation from God: Adam and Eve try to hide: Babel
- power and deception in human relationships: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel
- interaction with created order becomes 'toil and sweat' (Genesis 3: 17-19)

Image of God is grievously marred and distorted, but not completely destroyed.

1.4 Implications of the Fall for human nature?

- Paul's concept of the 'sinful nature' (Romans 8: 5-8): predisposition to sin, enslaves us
- Consequences for human behaviour (Romans 1, Galatians 5: 19-21): 'acts' of the sinful nature
- Salvation: renewed relationship with God in Christ, enabled to 'crucify' the sinful nature, and to live by the Spirit: fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5: 16-18, 22-25)

(Augustinian theology: some contrasts with....)

1.5 Marriage - an ideal social institution (Genesis 2):

- Relationship: biological identity: 'not good for the man to be alone'
- 'Leaving and cleaving': separating, union of the two, 'one flesh'/ a new family unit
- Jesus' interpretation (Matthew 19: 3-12): inserts 'two', lifelong monogamy
- Context for procreation and rearing of children

1.6 Marriage as a covenant relationship:

- Covenant: basis is mutual love and commitment: analogy of God and his people
- ‘naked and not ashamed’, ‘know’: more than sex – mutual openness, no threat
- Covenant requires: self giving love, sexual relations, provision of material goods (I Corinthians 7)

1.7 Marriage as a sexual partnership:

- ‘one flesh’, ‘know’: sex should involve giving oneself as a person, and receiving the other as a person
- Adultery is an act of betrayal of the covenant relationship
- Procreation is a secondary purpose – not mentioned in Genesis 2 – only in Genesis 4 does Eve become pregnant

1.8 The effects of the Fall:

- ‘desire’ (lust?) is part of the curse
- Marriage as a defensive institution – regulating sexual activity, and protecting women against predatory males
- Marriage in OT Law based on ‘contract for services’ – borrowing from other Near Eastern cultures
- Marriage as a ‘public institution’: a given framework, no bespoke contracts, educative role.

1.9 Divorce?

Old Testament:

- Moses permitted and formalized divorce - Jesus notes provision for 'hardness of heart': divorce a fact of OT communities
- Deuteronomy 24: 1 – divorce on grounds of an 'indecent matter', especially marital unfaithfulness
- Exodus 21: 10-11 - divorce permitted where husband fails to provide 'food, clothing and sex'.

1.10 Teaching of Jesus: Matthew 19 and parallels:

- According to Instone-Brewer, the context is first century AD rabbinic disputes over interpretation of Deuteronomy 24: 1: School of Hillel – ‘for any matter’; School of Shammai required ‘an indecent matter’
- Dispute explains Matthew’s insertion of ‘for any matter’ in v3, and ‘except for a matter of indecency’ in v9, though these are missing from the parallels in other gospels.
- Jesus affirms lifelong monogamy as the ideal
- Permits divorce for a ‘matter of indecency’, but not ‘for any matter’.

1.11 Teaching of Paul (I Corinthians 7):

- Context of Graeco-Roman culture: divorce simply by separating, and expected end to most marriages
- Instone-Brewer: Paul has Exodus 21: 10, 11 in mind – the rights of the wife include sexual relations, food and clothing
- If a believer is deserted, then spouse no longer fulfilling these obligations, and believing partner is ‘not bound’: implies valid grounds for divorce, and right to remarry.

1.13 Conclusions on Biblical principles

- Marriage – a social institution, forming a new family unit, ideal is lifelong monogamy
- A covenant relationship – involving the heart and the will
- Sexual relations and sharing of material goods are central to marriage
- Effects of the Fall:
 - covenant may become contract
 - marriage regulated as a ‘public institution’
 - provision for divorce as a last resort – unfaithfulness, absence of sexual relations, neglect – but subject to public and formal process.

2. Evolutionary psychology

2.1 Human nature ('evolved psychological mechanisms')
the product of our evolutionary past (Pleistocene era):

- Adaptation: selection for characteristics that solve problems of survival or reproduction
- Inclusive fitness (W D Hamilton): the 'genes eye view' – not just the individual carrier of a gene, but all close relatives
- Implication: natural selection favours mechanisms for 'altruism' when costs are less than benefits weighted by degree to which genes are shared

- Hence ‘evolved psychological mechanisms’ - ‘hard wired’ into our bodies/ brains: source of our behaviour
- Cues to act in particular ways in response to threats to survival or to opportunities to reproduce.
- ‘The primary non-arbitrary way to identify, describe, and understand psychological mechanisms is to articulate their functions – the specific adaptive problems they were designed by selection to solve’. [D Buss, 1999]

2.2 An example: long term mating strategies of men and women

A fundamental biological asymmetry: to pass on his genes, a man only requires a single opportunity of sexual intercourse with a fertile woman, but a woman has to carry the baby for nine months.

'Ancient woman' selects a man who:

- Is able to invest in her and the child: good financial prospects, industrious, ambitious, strong
- Is willing to invest: dependable, stable, loving, interacts positively with children
- Shows good parenting skills: dependable, kind, emotionally stable
- Can provide protection: strong and courageous.

'Ancient man' seeks a woman who will bear his child:

- Reproductive potential: youth, attractiveness (as indicator of good health), body fat, low waist to hip ratio
- Man unable to detect when a woman is fertile and/or prove paternity of a child: so needs to stay around to have sex with her regularly, and to keep other men away: preference for pre-marital virginity (indicator of likely faithfulness in marriage), and for exclusive relationship (marriage).

'Divorce' in an evolutionary framework

- Man looks for multiple opportunities for mating with potentially fertile women: hence adultery and mistresses
- Woman's fertility declines with age, so man seeks to 'divorce' his mate, and look for a younger woman
- Younger woman may look for alternative partners if man is unfaithful

2.3 What are we to make of evolutionary psychology?

- Reductionist – an explanation of **all** human behaviour – E O Wilson, Consilience
- No reason to exclude biological drives – we are part of the created order.
- Evidence for ‘hard wiring’?
- Explanations tend to be ‘Just So’ stories: example of benefits to close kin e.g. inheritance

3. Rational choice theory

(The standard socioeconomic science model- SSSM)

3.1 Enlightenment conception of a human being :

- Individual autonomy
- Rationality – ability to analyse alternatives, ability to make choices – action, behaviour

3.2 Basic rational choice model

- Agent evaluates available alternatives with full information e.g. choice of goods within a budget
- Chooses alternative that maximises utility, or maximises 'well being', or satisfies preferences
- Preferences etc. undefined, but presumed unchanging and complete across all states of the world, well ordered and no contradictions

3.3 Expected utility model

- Agents can attach probabilities to states of the world
- Choices based on maximisation of expected utility (values of outcomes x probability)
- Used in economics to explain gambling, insurance, stock market valuations....
- Criminology – punishment as deterrence (probability of detection x costs of sentence).

3.4 Game theory models

- Outcomes depend on other peoples' choices as well as ones own – favourite example is Prisoners' Dilemma
- Concept of Nash or non-cooperative equilibria
- Games played (repetitively) over time – permit more cooperative outcomes

Comments:

- Normative – 'the best thing to do'
- Best defined where payoffs are easily measurable in monetary values
- Failure of rationality in interactive games –strong tendency to cooperate

3.6 Beyond rational choice models: forms of rationality

V L Smith Rationality in Economics (2008)

Hayek: two forms of rationality:

- ‘constructivist’ – standard rational choice
- ‘ecological rationality’ – ‘..emergent order in the form of the practices, norms and evolving institutional rules governing action by individuals, that are part of our cultural and biological heritage and are created by human interactions’ – participants bring social exchange experiences into experimental games.

3.7 Beyond rational choice models: giving content to preferences

- Richard Layard, Happiness: lessons from a new science (2005)
- ‘Happiness is feeling good, and misery is feeling bad’. What makes us happy is not income: but status, security, being able to trust others.
- Happiness correlated with family relationships, financial situation, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom and values (in that order)
- Unhappiness correlated with loss of spouse, unemployment, poor health, loss of freedom
- Genetic predispositions and upbringing.

3.8 Rational choice: evaluation

- Asserts human autonomy, rationality and ability to choose – how explain? Elster's critique
- 'Just so' critique – whatever a person does is presumed rational, reflecting their preferences – only testable content is consistency
- A decision rule, not an explanation, since silent on preferences – compare 'sinful nature' vs. 'Spirit led' in Galatians 4
- Objections to 'self interested' preferences: excludes commitment (Sen); wider values – 'present aim' theory (Parfit).
- Christian understanding of 'rationality': reasons arising from God's normative intentions for humanity (natural ethic), rather than cost-benefit calculation.

3.9 Marriage and divorce

- Enlightenment understanding: contractual model – voluntary contract between two people, and nothing else: no sacrament, no covenant, no social aspect [concerned to counter the ‘abuses’ of parental, state and church involvement].
- Argued for: no requirement of parental consent, equality of men and women in marriage, liberal divorce laws
- Only achieved in second half of the 20th century

3.10 Gary Becker: A Treatise on the Family

Economic analysis of marriage and the family – awarded a Nobel prize for Economics - key elements:

- Family as a firm – market and non-market production – ‘production’ of children – quality and quantity
- Human capital arising from specialisation of tasks and learning by doing
- Implicit prices for household production: external wage for women

- Effect of rise in women's wage: less household production, including bearing and raising children (see next slide)
- Becker asserted that altruism is dominant within the family: even if only one partner is altruistic, but is able to redistribute resources within the family, then selfish partner will act 'as if' altruistic to maximise family income and hence his/her share
- Becker's analysis supports 'traditional' marriage – 'stay at home and have children' is often economically advantageous.

'I believe the major cause of these changes [rising divorce rates, more cohabitation, declining fertility] is the growth in the earning power of women as the American economy developed. A growth in the earning power of women raises the labour force participation of women by raising the forgone value of time spent at non-market activities. It also raises the relative cost of children and thereby reduces the demand for children... The gain from marriage is reduced by a rise in the earnings and labour force participation of women and by a fall in the fertility of women because a sexual division of labour becomes less advantageous. And divorce is more attractive when the gain from marriage is reduced.' (Becker 1981, 351-353)

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3.11 Subsequent developments in economic analysis of marriage:

- Becker's inconsistency – preferences not 'stable' – self interested behaviour in marriage market, altruism in marriage, self interested in divorce (looking at outside 'options')
- Abandoned common preferences and income pooling – some evidence against pooling
- Marriage/ cohabitation modelled as a 'bargaining game' between the partners – 'threat points' – either outside option (divorce/ separation/ new partner) or non cooperative equilibrium within marriage – 'separate spheres' relationship.

3.12 Comparing covenant and contract understandings of marriage

4.1 Marriage as contract vs. marriage as covenant

- Economic contract – marriage as outcome of bargaining game – partners evaluating their shares of the gains from marriage – marriage an implicit long term contract – cohabitation probably implies maintaining options for frequent recontracting
- Covenant – relationship – commitment to agape love – ‘for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death us do part’ – marital goods shared, not bargained over – marriage remains even if **no** gains.

3.13 Covenant ideal vs. economic contract for fallen men and women:

- Economic contract – focus on gains [sexual satisfaction, higher joint real incomes, satisfaction of being parents] – default model to which marriages revert once romantic glow has faded
- Covenant ideal – image of God marred but not destroyed – mixed motives in marriage – genuine love and self sacrifice often present.
- Changes in social attitudes? – decline of Christian values in the West – ‘framing effects’, the contract model may come to determine attitudes

4. Social theory

Starting points:

- Human beings give reasons for their behaviour
- Reasons are culture specific: related to accepted social norms
- Human beings become 'socialised': internalise norms, which are applied 'automatically' or 'intuitively'

What is the origin of 'norms'?

4.1 Social construction

P Berger and T Luckmann, *The social construction of reality* (1966)

‘Strong’ version:

‘Reality itself for humans is a human social construction, constituted by human mental categories, discursive practices, definitions of situations, and symbolic exchanges that are sustained as ‘real’ through on-going social interactions that are in turn shaped by particular interests, perspectives, and, usually, imbalances of power – our knowledge about reality is therefore entirely culturally relative, since no human has access to reality ‘as it really is’,, because we can never escape our epistemological and linguistic limits to verify whether our beliefs about reality correspond with externally objective reality.’

4.2 Social constructionist analysis

I Hacking (1999) *The Social Construction of What?*

Social construction of X: (1) X is taken for granted, X appears to be inevitable; but (2) X need not have existed or need not be as it is, X is not determined by the nature of things, it is not inevitable. Add: (3) X is quite bad as it is, and (4) we would be much better off if X were eliminated or at least radically transformed.

Example: gender (roles of men and women in society) is socially constructed, not an inevitable result of biology, and highly contingent on social/ cultural processes. Moreover current understandings of gender are harmful, and should be eliminated or modified.

Against essentialism – no human nature other than ‘constructed’.

4.3 Evaluation of social constructionism

Areas of study: gender, sexuality, family, race, mental illness, science, quarks, and many others.

Critique of constructionist claims:

- Unclear whether claim is that X itself is socially constructed, or just that our ideas about X are socially constructed
- Self defeating – if strong version is correct then no way to evaluate its claims
- Self defeating on moral grounds – exponents often express strong moral judgements about the areas they study
- Not clear what ‘constructs’. Is it personal agents, or is it impersonal – cultures, conventions, institutions?

4.4 Marriage as a social construct

- Gender roles are a social construct, not based in objective differences
- The 'romantic' model of marriage in the West is not an ideal (and is a quite recent invention historically)
- The married couple 'construct' their marriage by conversation and interaction: there is no 'blueprint', they make their own meanings
- 'Nuclear' family has no natural basis: has served as an instrument for the subjugation of women
- There is no good reason to privilege monogamy and heterosexual relationships.

4.5 Divorce as a social construct

- Reflects the abandonment of the traditional socially validated construct of 'marriage'
- If 'romantic feelings' are no longer mutual, sexual attraction wanes, search for more exciting/ satisfying relationships with alternative partners
- Couple invest too little time in constructing their marriage – too busy with work, outside interests
- Women more independent – equal rights, self-supporting through employment, unwilling to sustain the norms of the nuclear family (for example, stress of caring for small children).
- Divorce 'easy' both socially (no stigma) and legally

5.1 Bases for public policy for marriage

- Economic contract – deregulation, no ‘public institution’ with predetermined contracts – bespoke contracts between partners – no need for the state to be involved
- Covenant – marriage subject to public expectations and procedures – tax laws, inheritance laws, recognition of parental rights over children – educative role of a public institution

5.2 Divorce

- Economic contract – economic efficiency requires no barriers to divorce – marriage contracted on basis of expected gains – very likely that better ‘matches’ will emerge over time – so either divorce/ remarry or re-contract within marriage
- Covenant – divorce is always ‘second best’: should be made more difficult – no rush to marriage, and work harder to make marriage work; divorce only for ‘good cause’ – unfaithfulness, neglect, absence of sexual relations; divorce as a public process – to prevent unjustified or oppressive divorce