

Sex is believed, by some, to be a universal language, one that is free of grammatical errors and spelling mistakes; a language that can be “spoken” and understood by two complete strangers who may have nothing in common. When two individuals engage in an act of sexual intercourse, they begin to experience a profuse amount of euphoric feelings. In today’s modern western society, these feelings are clearly understood as the release of endorphins and enkephalins into the brain, generating immense pleasure. However, most people would claim that sexual intercourse is more than the release of chemicals into the brain; sexual intercourse is a much more complex series of behaviours and emotions. Philosophically speaking, sex is a very broad subject, with many complex facets of discussion. One of the important topics involving sexual intercourse is that of adultery. Adultery, in the oxford dictionary, is defined as: “Voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and a partner other than the lawful spouse.” (Oxford English Dictionary, pg.32). Now, given the first few points about the pleasures of sexual intercourse, is it morally just, to limit or prohibit the partners with which an individual may engage in sexual intercourse?

According to Wasserstrom and his article *Is Adultery Immoral*, it is acceptable to place restrictions upon an individual and the number of sexual partners that he or she may have, if and only if, that person is lawfully married. Wasserstrom supports and defends his points, claiming that adultery is wrong because it is immoral. And it is immoral, because it breaks a promise, it deceives an involved party (actively or passively) and finally, because it does not aid in the development of a nuclear family. I will attempt to explore these points and state whether or not these objections (if any) establish that

disapproval of adultery is justified, and further, if there are other objections which do? - Or, is disapproval of adultery simply unjustified.

What first got me interested in Wasserstrom's article was the fact that his primary goal was not to take for granted the immorality of the sexual behaviour itself. He makes this clear in saying, "The focus of discussion, at least, is whether such things as homosexuality, prostitution, and adultery ought to be made illegal even if they are immoral, and not whether they are immoral." (Wasserstrom, pg.159). Wasserstrom decides to focus on the latter part of that statement. In addition to this, it is important to state that Wasserstrom claims that, "A number of the issues involved seem to me to be complicated and difficult. In a number of places I have at best indicated where further philosophical exploration is required without having successfully conducted the exploration myself." (Wasserstrom, pg.159). Thus, I will attempt to stay within the scope of Wasserstrom's article and make the same assumptions that he makes. I will also, attempt to discuss his arguments more broadly and support or oppose them, according to my own views and with my own opinions. The first assumption that Wasserstrom makes is to "...leave entirely open the question of what it is that makes actions of this kind immoral in this sense of immoral." (Wasserstrom, pg.159). I agree with Wasserstrom here, in the fact that it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss such detail, since that would be an entire topic on its own.

So, this brings us to Wasserstrom's first argument, as to why adultery is immoral. Wasserstrom's states his first argument as: "what makes adultery immoral is that it involves the breaking of a promise, and what makes adultery seriously wrong is that it involves the breaking of an important promise." (Wasserstrom, pg.160). Now, the

question is, do I believe this to be a valid argument, and if so why or why not? When Wasserstrom claims that a promise is made, I believe he means a promise of loyalty and exclusivity. He also mentions that, "...adherence to this promise may be of much greater importance to the parties than is adherence to many of the other promises given or received by them in their lifetime." (Wasserstrom, pg.160). From a completely personal, point of view I would instantly agree with this. In my opinion, I would expect my wife to be loyal to me as I am loyal to her. By loyal, I mean, that she remains honest and exclusive to me. In definition, loyalty is a respectable and virtuous quality. Given this justification, when your spouse is not loyal, the argument can be made that she is being immoral, since loyalty is considered a morally correct trait. Wasserstrom goes on to make some more observations in order to support his claim, about why breaking a promise is immoral. He declares that "it may have been difficult for the nonadulterous spouse to have kept the promise. Hence that spouse may feel the unfairness of having restrained himself or herself in the absence of reciprocal restraint having been exercised by the adulterous spouse." (Wasserstrom, pg.160). Again, I would be inclined to agree with Wasserstrom on this point. I strongly believe, "do unto others as you would like done to you." (Unknown). Based on this, it seems unreasonable that one spouse would be morally justified while committing adultery.

On top of all this, Wasserstrom makes two more points that magnify his intention. He asserts "the spouse may perceive the breaking of the promise as an indication of a kind of indifference on the part of the adulterous spouse. If you really cared about me and my feelings – the spouse might say – you would not have done this to me." (Wasserstrom, pg.160). Some may claim that jealousy is a large contributor to this fact,

but is it unfounded? I do not think so. I believe that when you love someone, you want to be exclusive with them and if they loved you, they would under no circumstances cheat on you...ever; therefore, making mild jealousy a declaration of one individual's love for another individual. Wasserstrom goes on to end his first argument with "...certain kinds of adultery are wrong just because they involve that breach of a serious promise which, among other things, leads to the intentional infliction of substantial pain by one spouse upon the other. (Wasserstrom, pg.160). Yet again, I seem to have the same view as Wasserstrom, because I believe that inflicting pain on another individual is immoral and inflicting pain on a loved one is exponentially more horrible an act. I think this point clearly illustrates how adultery in certain situations can be portrayed as immoral.

Furthermore, in his second argument Wasserstrom argues that adultery is immoral, because those who participate in adultery deceive their non-participating spouses. For this argument to be justified Wasserstrom makes the assumption, that generally deception is wrong and therefore immoral. Based on this assumption he expresses that "According to this argument, adultery involves deception. And because deception is wrong, so is adultery. (Wasserstrom, pg.160). He goes on to add that "One clear case of deception is that of lying. Instead of saying that the afternoon was spent in bed with A, the adulterous spouse asserts that it was spent in the library with B, or on the golf course with C." (Wasserstrom, pg.161). At this point it is imperative to mention that so far I believe Wasserstrom is right on par, and that we both share similar views. A counter argument that may be posed is that deception can occur without having to lie, but nonetheless, active or passive deception are both considered immoral based on the

assumption made earlier. In addition, Wasserstrom also points out that when a person engages in sexual relations with someone else, they are expressing feelings for that person. “One way to tell someone – particularly someone of the opposite sex – that you have feelings of affection and love for them is by allowing to them or sharing with them sexual behaviours that one doesn’t share with the rest of the world.” (Wasserstrom, pg.161). Naturally, this expression of love for one person should be considered sacred and not distributed amongst the public. That goes to further show how adultery in most cases must not be revealed and deceptive measures taken to assure the secrecy of the act.

Moreover the article describes that in our western society, sexual intercourse is considered to be very intimate and shared between two people who share similar feelings of love for each other. “For given this way of viewing the sexual world, extramarital sex will almost always involve deception of a deeper sort.” (Wasserstrom, pg.162).

Basically, if the adulterous spouse does not have legitimate feelings for the extramarital partner, then he or she is deceiving that person, because it is more likely than not, that they believe their feelings of love are being reciprocated. However, if the adulterous spouse does have feelings towards the extramarital partner, then he or she is deceiving their lawful spouse, because he or she believes that the adulterous spouse is exclusive. This catch-22 type of deception, clearly states that adulterous behaviour is in fact immoral, given that the assumption made before about deception being immoral still holds.

However, a problem that arises from this argument is the problem of “open marriages.” An open marriage is one in which both spouses agree to having sexual relations and even intercourse with extramarital partners. Given that they are both

consenting to this fact and that both spouses are accepting of the idea, then is it really wrong or immoral? Well, Wasserstrom completely trashes this argument with his definition of what a marriage really is: “Part of the meaning of what it is for two persons to be married to each other...is to have committed oneself to have sexual relationships only with one’s spouse.” (Wasserstrom, pg.164). In addition, I would like to add that an “open marriage” is against the law, since adultery is not legal in this country.

This brings me to the final argument that Wasserstrom makes in his attempt to clarify why adultery is immoral. “Adultery is wrong, in other words, because a prohibition on extramarital sex is a way to help maintain the institutions of marriage and the nuclear family.” (Wasserstrom, pg.166). Although this argument is valid, I do not believe it has the same significant representation that the other arguments do. This argument definitely proposes that marriage is a sanctuary that should be maintained. However, it does not impact as greatly on the fact that adultery is immoral as the first two arguments did. I think this latter argument would be best suited in a case where the discussion was on effective ways to maintain a healthy marriage and not so much on morality.

Given the preceding three arguments and my opinions and attitudes towards them, I believe I have made my stance quite clear. It seems that Wasserstrom has not gone very in-depth in his discussion on the topic of *Is Adultery Immoral*, but based on his arguments and assumptions, it would seem that he did not have to do so. In my personal opinion I would tend to completely agree with Wasserstrom on the fact that adultery is immoral. However strong his first two arguments may have been, I think his third and final argument, instead of being the paramount point, was in essence lacking the success that

his first two arguments benefited from. Yet, I think he managed to portray his ideas in the first two arguments quite convincingly. He tackled a very tough and complex issue and still managed to convince me of his point. Although, I still believe that adultery as an immoral issue will vary based on the society in which the question is posed. For example, in some eastern countries adultery is accepted in the form of concubines and temple prostitutes. There are no promises of exclusivity and there are no deceptions that take place. But, in essence, I believe that adultery is immoral, but not as broadly as we would expect it to be. So, adultery as a moral or immoral issue is really a varying issue from individual to individual and from society to society.