

9 | The (Dis)value of Commitment to One's Spouse

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1. Introduction

Marriage is about commitment: future spouses typically say—among other things—to each other, and to the world, that they are willing to remain in a close relationship “for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.” That is, they declare that the survival of their relationship will not depend on whether the relationship will turn out to be convenient and that their marital intentions do not depend on their future life circumstances. Whether marriage vows are to be understood as a promise, as an attempt to promise, or as a mere statement of intention, they express the future spouses’ commitment to each other. Common sense usage links commitment with a promise to do something or an intention to be loyal to someone or something. Entering marriage with somebody usually involves all senses of commitment.

Many believe that marriage is the paradigmatic case of an attitudinal commitment to another person or to a relationship. Throughout this essay I discuss (marital) commitment as being “to a relationship or to a person,” rather than settling for any of these. Philosophical literature on close relationship and love in general sometimes focuses on the value that a relationship has for an agent, and sometimes on the value that another person can have for an agent. There is clearly a difference between being committed to a relationship—and therefore being willing to do what it takes to protect that relationship and help it flourish—and being committed to a person—and therefore being willing to do what it takes to protect

that person and help her or him flourish. In happy circumstances the two sets of actions will coincide. I believe that the second attitude, rather than the first, reflects love; this may be contentious however, and therefore I do not try to adjudicate here whether love-based marital commitment is to relationships or to persons.

Of course, various people in non-marital relationships can be and are committed to each other. But marital relationships are different from other intimate relationships because they are assumed to be permanent and their purpose is comprehensive and not limited to a certain number of pre-established activities—some of the marital commitment is open-ended. Together, these features of marriage make marital commitment a very high-level commitment and, therefore, a central case of commitment to persons or relationships. First, because marriage is not meant to be limited to a definite amount of time, the promise or intention to stay married is unusually demanding; friends, too, may hope that their friendship will endure, but the level of commitment in friendship is usually lower than in marriage. Second, marital commitment is very comprehensive: spouses typically share their lives with each other, rather than embark together on specific, and clearly delimited, projects. People engage in common long-term, even lifelong projects other than marriage (think for instance, of coworkers in domains from which one never really retires, such as subsistence agriculture or various crafts) but the scope of marriage is unusually broad. As long as it preserves permanency and comprehensiveness marriage remains a paradigmatic case of commitment even if one extends the definition of marriage beyond the usual requirements of heterosexuality and monogamy.

Intimates' commitment to each other is usually assumed to be highly valuable and marital commitment enjoys special praise in most cultures; indeed, commitment is often considered to be *the* feature that makes marriage admirable.¹ Moreover, popular culture sometimes represents the value of marital commitment as a moral value, casting doubts on the character of spouses who break their marriages for trivial reasons—therefore indicating a lack of commitment—and even providing some *pro tanto* justification to the continuation of marriages that are otherwise morally objectionable such as, for instance, abusive or neglectful relationships. One reason why marital commitment is praised is that it is thought to indicate the depth of the love for one's spouse.

In this essay I aim to question these beliefs. I advance and give some support for two claims, one weaker and one stronger. Both claims unfold

against a background analysis of the general good of commitment, discussed in the second section. Much of this argument draws on Cheshire Calhoun's analysis of commitment, which I discuss in the second section. I hope to contribute to the discussion by taking Calhoun's analysis further to suggest that, since commitment has no intrinsic value, and since it is by definition a form of cost, we must welcome situations when the goods to which commitment is usually instrumental can be realized in its absence.

The third section applies the previous section's conclusion to the case of marital commitment. It explores the weaker claim: that we ought to praise marriage and marriage-like relationships only for the good they contain, and not for the fact that spouses are committed to each other. Commitment is only instrumentally valuable; it does not as such add any value to the relationship. Commitment has costs: it partially forecloses the future, and so it makes one less attentive and less open to life's possibilities; therefore, it would be desirable for people to achieve the same goods without commitment. If the marital goods achieved thanks to commitment—and which would be unachievable without it—are less important than the goods one foregoes by being committed, then the price of commitment is not worth paying. (As individuals who intentionally avoid commitments to relationships or individuals must believe.)

The second, and more ambitious, suggestion—which I explore in the fourth section—is that commitment in general, and marital commitments in particular, are problematic instruments for securing the good of romantic and sexual love. It makes sense to prefer that another person's (perhaps, especially romantic or sexual) love for you is sustained by their spontaneous inclination, rather than by their commitment.² Moreover, the pragmatic reasons for commitment are weak when it comes to activities that, ideally, are process-oriented rather than goal-oriented—such as love for another person. Marriage and marriage-like relationships in particular depend on commitment in order to help individuals cope with the often tedious or irritating routines of shared everyday life. As much research suggests, this kind of routine is inimical to romantic and erotic love. Marital commitment may save the relationship and many of the goods it sustains, but it is unlikely to save romantic and erotic love.

The last section discusses some of the implications of my position for the goods of marriage and for the desirability of marriage reforms that aim to break the connection between marriage and permanence (such as temporary marriage) or between marriage and the comprehensive sharing of one's life (such as minimal marriage).

2. The Value and Costs of Attitudinal Commitments

Following Calhoun,³ I understand commitment in general to be a species of intention. Agents who commit themselves intend to follow through on the object of commitment even under future circumstances that are such that, had the agents not been committed, it would be rational for them to revise their intention. Commitment, as discussed here, is active rather than passive, although in everyday language we sometimes refer to commitments that are not actively assumed (and even to unconscious commitments). One type of commitment is to the performance of particular acts, as in promises, contracts, and resolutions. Another type is attitudinal commitments, that is a form of dedication to things that are very important to the agents' sense of who they are and to their idea of what a good life is. Examples of the latter sense include normative commitments (that is, commitments to values), but also substantive commitments: to hobbies, causes, persons and relationships, etc. Marriage most likely encompasses both kinds of commitments. Marriage itself is a contract: spouses-to-be promise each other future performances and they sometimes devise and enter specific marital contracts; and the everyday realities of married life contain numberless instances of promises and resolutions. But certainly what distinguishes marriage from other contractual relationships is its attitudinal commitment component. Spouses typically see each other and their relationship as central to their idea of a good life, and, at least in love-based marriages, to their identity. It is the underlying attitudinal commitment that is supposed to support, and give meaning to, the commitment to the particular performances specified by the marriage contract (and often to the specific everyday promises spouses make to each other).

The value of making promises and entering into contracts is relatively straightforward: both are necessary for creating trust and legitimate expectations, on which people's well-being depends. They, unlike attitudinal commitments, are also not likely to be attributed intrinsic value or be moralized. Therefore promises and contracts as such are not the subject of this essay, but in the end I will indicate how claims about the marital attitudinal commitments bear on what sorts of marital contracts ought to be available. Here I address the question of the value of substantive attitudinal commitments in love-based marriages. Why is it important that people commit to those individuals and relationships that are central to their self-identity and to their beliefs about a good life?

Before starting to address this question, I indicate one more feature of commitment: it comes in degrees, depending on how radical the change of circumstances must be in order to challenge the agent's intention. At one end there is no commitment, but rather mere intentions, or very provisional plans: any new desire is a potential trigger for a cost-benefit re-evaluation of what one should do.⁴ Non-committed rational agents should be ready to revise their mere intentions or very provisional plans as soon as better alternatives come along. An intention to have dinner at a particular location, for instance, may change as soon as a better possibility comes along. At the other extreme there is blind commitment, when a cost-benefit analysis of the intention that forms that commitment is off the table under any circumstances. Commitments can be so deep that agents are willing to hold on to them not only in spite of prudential reasons (when overall more convenient alternatives present themselves) but even in spite of value changes. Someone may be so deeply committed to a friend, for instance, that she will continue to remain loyal to the relationship or the person even if, over time, their moral values evolve and become incompatible.

As Calhoun herself notes, commitment enjoys popular praise; committed lives are believed to be better lives for the individual who lives them, and an ability to make commitments is usually considered the marker of maturity. Popular wisdom encourages individuals to commit themselves. But what is the value of commitment to the committed individual?

An obvious value of commitment is pragmatic, or instrumental. Given the limited resources of which individuals dispose, such as time and energy, commitment seems necessary for the achievement of non-immediate goals. In the pursuit of such goals better alternatives are likely to present themselves and the non-committed, or feebly committed, agent is likely to become distracted from the initial goal. But this seems to be an overly simplified picture. First, as Calhoun notes, better options do not always present themselves. Second, and more important, even when better options do appear, agents who have already invested significant time and effort in the pursuit of a goal tend to be reluctant to waste these resources and hop onto a new, more appealing, project. Even if I am not committed to learn German, but I merely intend to, discovering that I like Russian better will not necessarily convince me to change course. Since I am well advanced with German (a language which turns out would not be the language of my first choice, should I make that choice *now*), I will likely stick to it: doing otherwise may mean that I have wasted the resources that I put so far into learning German. (Just as commitment, mere intention may work by ignoring the so called 'sunken costs

fallacy’—that is, by treating past investments as a reason to continue pursuing a goal even when changing course is more likely to yield better outcomes for the agent.) Switching back to an understanding of commitment as the reluctance to engage in a cost-benefit analysis, we do not always need commitment in order to pursue long-term goals: often no new data comes up to challenge the initial cost-benefit assessment. In other cases past investment makes it irrational to change course mid-way. And when new options really are sufficiently attractive to outweigh one’s reluctance to waste past investment, it is not clear why it is rational *not* to change course midway and why commitment would be at all desirable.⁵

Perhaps, however, more should be made than Calhoun does of the following fact: commitment is often needed to achieve non-immediate goals not because without it we would change course and pursue *other* goals, but because in the pursuit of non-immediate goals we are likely to encounter significant adversity. Without commitment we might rarely if ever achieve non-immediate goals because of failures such as weakness of the will or mistakenly discounting the future, rather than due to an abundance of attractive opportunities. The frustrations of learning German may, in the absence of commitment, cause me to postpone my next assignment indefinitely even while I recognize the irrationality of my behavior. And while procrastinating I may end up doing next to nothing rather than pursue an alternative, worthwhile goal such as learning Russian. Calhoun’s analysis of the pragmatic value of commitment touches on this point when she notes the popular belief that life without commitment may well turn into a life lived from moment to moment. But she does not pursue this thread to consider what, if anything, is wrong with such a life. For the remainder of this essay I shall leave to one side the question of whether living from moment to moment can be a valuable way of leading one’s life, if only one could afford to. (On a hedonistic view of well-being it probably is.) Instead, I concede that non-immediate goals are important to a good life and that most often commitment is necessary for attaining them. As I show in the next section, this consideration applies to the case of marital commitment and is a plausible argument in favor of the instrumental value of commitment in marriage.

The second way in which commitment is usually said to be valuable is non-instrumental: many believe that commitment is constitutive of a good life because without commitment it is difficult to see in which way one’s self and one’s life can be said to be one’s own creations. Making attitudinal commitments—to values, causes, individuals, and relationships—is *the* way in which we take an active stance in determining who we are and

what projects give meaning to our lives.⁶ However, as Calhoun argues, it is enough to have normative, rather than substantive, commitments, in order to ensure unified agency and life plans. Someone who lacks substantive commitments—that is commitments to particular people, relationships, or projects—can nevertheless be the author of their life in the sense usually employed by those who think that having a life plan is essential for a good human life. And some normative commitments—like deliberately seeking the satisfaction of one’s strongest desires—are in fact incompatible with substantive commitments.⁷

But how likely is it, in the first place, that the best lives are guided by a life plan? Some philosophers, such as Charles Larmore, draw on the European Romantic tradition to argue that the aspiration to exert control over the shape of one’s life, reflected by a life plan, is itself misguided. According to Larmore, the well-being “that life affords is less often the good we have reason to pursue than the good that befalls us unexpectedly”⁸ because “we are never in a position to grasp in advance the full character of our good, even in its broad outline.”⁹ In any case—whether or not having a life plan contributes to or diminishes one’s chances to a maximally good life—substantive attitudinal commitments, of which marital commitments are an example, do not seem necessary. Normative attitudinal commitments are enough.

A last reason to believe that substantive attitudinal commitments are constitutive to a good life is that in the absence of such commitments one’s life is less likely to have meaning. It may be true that most of the things that give meaning to people’s lives are those to which they are usually committed. But commitment does not seem to be necessary for meaning; being engaged with people and activities about which one cares is enough. Not all caring amounts to commitment, since not all caring is accompanied by an active intention to pursue what one cares about while making sure that the caring will continue in the future. One may instead care about projects, people, relationships, and causes—and derive meaning from them—without dedicating oneself to them. Following Calhoun again, a person’s life can be meaningful because she spends enough time in the company of people she loves, pursuing causes she thinks are worthy and engaged in activities she finds valuable, even while thinking she might as well spend her time with other people she loves and doing other worthy things.

While substantive commitments may not be constitutive of a good life—because self-identity, life plans, and meaning are all possible without them—they may however be indirectly instrumental to leading a

meaningful life. Most people may be better able to care for complex, rather than simple, activities and it is unlikely—for the reasons given above—for successfully pursue complex activities without some level of commitment. If so, then commitment is indirectly instrumental to meaningful lives, because without it individuals are less capable of successfully pursuing complex activities. If I am better able to care about activities which require that I exercise high levels of skill, commitment to acquiring skill will often be necessary if I am to have access to activities about which I care.

This consideration, however, does not apply with the same force to another source of meaning, human relationships. We typically do not need to master complex skills in order to pursue the relationships that we care about. Having good relationships may require dispositions such as attentiveness, respectfulness, communication skills, patience, or tolerance which can, to some extent, be learned; but one does not have to learn them within the particular relationship the pursuit of which one values. Perhaps a long history of practicing these dispositions in the past is helpful—or even necessary—for having a good relationship now. If so then at most one may need to be committed to cultivating good relationships in general in order to be in a good position to have a good relationship with a particular person.¹⁰ This however doesn't show that good relationships require substantive—as opposed to normative—commitments. Therefore, commitment to a person or relationship does not seem in any way necessary in order to for the relationship to be meaningful. As I discuss in the next sections, commitment is often necessary to sustain marital relationships over time but it seems particularly necessary when other kinds of motivation—like love—are insufficient to sustain the marriage.

Calhoun explains the attractiveness of the view that commitment is valuable by appeal to typical human psychology: many or most people seek familiarity and making commitments affords one more familiarity in how one relates to one's future. Because being committed to something includes the intention to continue to be motivated by that thing's value, commitment can function as a sort of roadmap. But in virtue of what makes it appealing, commitment is also a highly costly attitude for the committed individual. In order to sustain commitments, agents must foreclose certain future possibilities. Whoever wants to follow a map must refrain from roaming too far out of the mapped area: commitment has an inbuilt opportunity cost. In Calhoun's own words, it

involves refraining from putting oneself in the way of temptation, refraining from cultivating activities, attitudes, and ways of life that are incompatible

with sustaining one's commitment, repressing commitment-threatening emotions and desires, and resisting the live option of reconsidering the reasons for having the commitment. That is, commitment entails readiness to engage in a set of refusals.¹¹

On this account of commitment, part of its value is as an instrument to realizing long-term goals, and part of its value is its contribution to individuals' well-being by responding to their need for familiarity. The latter source of value is also dependent on contingent (and by no means universal) psychological factors. But given the high opportunity cost involved in commitment, it seems that it would be desirable if people were less inclined to seek familiarity and therefore less reliant on commitment for their well-being. Calhoun notes that people are willing to pay the cost of foreclosing future opportunities in order to secure familiarity; but the foreclosing of opportunities is likely to also entail foreclosing one's own development—in terms of experience, intellectual gains and, more generally, openness to the world. Hence, if personal development is itself desirable independent of one's psychological inclinations, then it is regrettable that some such inclinations—like the desire for familiarity—can be satisfied only at the cost of limiting it. Less need for commitment would be desirable at least in cases when it is not in fact necessary for securing other goods—such as the acquisition of complex skills, the advancement of worthy causes, and the cultivation of long-lasting good relationships—because individuals are sufficiently motivated by, say, curiosity or love.

The next section applies this analysis to the case of marital commitment.

3. How Does Commitment Contribute to the Value of Marital Relationships?

An exceptionally popular TV miniseries from the 80s, *The Thorn Birds*, tells the story of the long-lasting love between a woman called Maggie and a man called Ralph. They first meet when Maggie is still a teenager. In spite of the mutual affection, attraction, and respect they feel for each other, they never become an established couple because Ralph is a Catholic priest. Yet, they remain in touch and throughout their long and winding lives occasionally reunite as lovers. Maggie and Ralph never marry each other because he chooses priesthood over family life; she not only regrets, but is also critical of his choice, yet does not sever her relationship with

him. The mutual love that unites them seems to be, until the end, stronger than her hurt for being rejected and his commitment to celibacy.

Maggie and Ralph are united in a lifelong romantic relationship that survives without them being committed to each other, and in spite of various commitments that each of them has (Maggie marries another man). Stories of lifelong lovers who are kept together by love alone rather than by commitment abound (and many of them are about real, rather than fictional, characters). I have chosen the fictional story of Maggie and Ralph because the narrative setup makes it clear that, in this case, commitment is least likely to have played any role in whatever goods their relationship realizes, including its longevity. They dedicate themselves neither to each other nor to their relationship, and they incur no contractual long-term obligations to each other. Therefore their relationship obviously lacks any kind of commitment. Some will think this kind of relationship is less desirable for this reason (and all other things equal). But others will find particular value precisely in the fact that some people succeed in having a long-term intimate relationship that endures entirely due to love. Here I will explore this latter possibility.

Maggie and Ralph's love relationship is different from a usual love-based marriage in its lack of comprehensiveness: Maggie and Ralph do not share a household, do not raise children together, do not provide companionship, economic security, or social embedding for each other, and do not support each other in everyday small and large endeavors. Unlike most good marriages, in which mutual love is one of the several goods realized in the relationship, the relationship between Maggie and Ralph only realizes the good of mutual love. This may be an explanation of its endurance in spite of their lack of commitment to each other, or to their relationship.

By contrast, comprehensive relationships like marriage are less likely to endure in the absence of commitment. Commitment to one's spouse is one way of ensuring a long-lasting, mutually supportive relationship. One reason why commitment is generally necessary for the endurance of many marriages is of the kind discussed by Calhoun in her general analysis of commitment: other, more attractive partners or valuable activities that are incompatible with partnered life may present themselves to spouses. In such cases commitment to one's spouse or one's marriage can prevent spouses from abandoning the marital relationship. But another, possibly more usual, reason why marriages often depend on commitment lies in the various adversities of comprehensively sharing one's life with another. Even with no better alternatives in sight, it is difficult to interact with a

person, in your own home, (almost) every day and for a very extended period of time.

As I suggested in the previous section, the commitment expressed in the marriage vows indicates spouses' reluctance to engage in a cost-benefit analysis of their relationship, including a willingness to ignore the opportunity costs of continuing the relationship. To commit to a spouse means that one is unwilling to ponder whether being in the marital relationship is, on the whole, to one's advantage. At least, one is unwilling to make the continuation of the relationship dependent on such analysis. Importantly, committed spouses do not compare their partners to other people with respect to how beneficial for them the relationship with their spouse is. Others may be more physically attractive, have more pleasant personalities, make better parents, be wealthier, healthier, or a better personality fit than one's own spouse; being committed means to disregard these facts as practical reasons for changing spouses.

Some instances of commitment to one's spouse can be irrational—for instance, if one is married to a partner who is a particularly bad fit or with whom it is in fact unlikely that one will be able to realize those goods that one wishes to realize in one's marriage.¹² But marital commitment can be rational, and therefore instrumentally valuable if, in the longer run, it is likely to advance marital goods sought by the spouses. Many such goods—raising children well together with a partner, providing economic and emotional security and familiar companionship—are long-term goals and therefore unlikely to be realizable if one is (too) ready to change partners.

If commitment to one's spouse has mere instrumental value, then it seems regrettable that we usually need commitment in order to sustain marital relationships. Like other attitudinal commitments, commitment to one's spouse involves a type of “locking up the future.” By committing oneself, one rules out a number of future possibilities and this comes with epistemic, existential, and, in some cases, moral costs for the individual. The high costs of marital commitments are recognized even by its boldest defenders. This is how Brenda Almond, an advocate of old-fashioned marriages based on a very high degree of commitment (a type of marriage that rules out the availability of no-fault divorce) describes the opportunity costs of commitment: “. . . marriage may mean the sacrifice of other friendships or other potentially enriching personal relationships.” She seems to agree with Calhoun on why it is worth it to pay the price of commitment: “For many people, marriage remains an institution that provides some solidity for the project of building a coherent life plan.”¹³

When the level of commitment to one's spouse is extremely high, it can even entail that spouses are willing to continue their relationship in spite of very serious moral disagreement or even wrongdoing. If moral value trumps prudential value, commitment has overall disvalue in such cases.¹⁴

Commitment has instrumental value because it can secure the long-term continuation of the marital relationship and hence the realization of its long-term goods. But there is another kind of motivation that can ensure the same goal in the absence of commitment: lasting love. (The two kinds of motivation are, of course, not mutually exclusive.) As long as love, understood minimally as the inclination to seek another's companionship and advance her well-being, exists, commitment is not necessary. One need not be committed to one's beloved in order to suspend any cost-benefit analysis of the relationship.¹⁵ The reason for this is that for someone who loves the beloved is not fungible. In spite of disagreement about the nature and reasons—if any—for love, the non-fungibility of the beloved is widely accepted.¹⁶ Therefore the appearance of more desirable partners will not be a reason to leave the marriage if one loves one's spouse. And the various forms of adversity that one is likely to encounter in the course of married life can be weathered by love; people are often inclined to sacrifice their comfort and push their limits for the sake of their beloved or of their relationship with their beloved. It is likely that adversity will test, or even erode love; indeed, in the next section I assume that sexual and romantic love, in particular, tend to be eroded by daily routine and hardship. Another kind of love, like that between friends, is likely to be more resilient. Even so, love alone cannot always secure the endurance of marriage over time—but neither can commitment, given that it, too, can be eroded.

As long as people love each other, commitment seems superfluous. Love and commitment are, of course, often to be found in one and the same marriage; a plausible explanation is that spouses seek to protect their love for each other with the help of commitment. Depending on what is the right theory of the nature and reasons of love, this may be a wise choice. In the next section, however, I will explore a *pro tanto* reason to doubt the attractiveness of committing in order to protect love—or at least its romantic and sexual variety.

Marital commitment is necessary for the realization of marital goods precisely when romantic love is absent or insufficient. In such cases commitment is instrumentally valuable because it advances other sorts of value such as the security brought by a long-lasting life companion and the ability to plan one's life long-term with a partner. Yet, as already noted,

commitment to one's spouse cannot be *in itself* morally praiseworthy. Commitment can and often is morally praiseworthy because it promotes moral goods—for instance, the protection of the more vulnerable individual in a relationship. But commitment cannot be valuable above and beyond the value of that to which one is committed. This, in turn, means that in cases when the continuation of a relationship comes at a moral cost to the individual, appeals to commitment cannot redeem the relationship on moral grounds. Examples include abusive and neglectful relationships or cases when continuing one's association with one spouse requires complicity with morally reprehensible acts.

Therefore, the work done by commitment would be better done by love because, unlike commitment, romantic love has non-instrumental (as well as instrumental) value and because, as discussed above, commitment—even when rational and morally innocent—has costs. Love, too, has costs in terms of foreclosing future options and hence in terms of personal development—or else it would not be capable of sustaining relationships in the face of more attractive options. But, unlike in the case of commitment, the value of love is not entirely dependent on the value of its object. Even when one loves a morally unworthy individual (and even when one ought, all things considered, to sever the relationship) loving has *some* value.¹⁷ A world where the goods of marriage were achieved without commitment, out of love alone, would therefore be the better world; marital commitment seems to be a second-best solution to securing the goods of marriage.

Perhaps a love relationship like Maggie's and Ralph's could not be sustained as an everyday, more comprehensive relationship. To last, most marital relationships usually need commitment to smooth out the unavoidable disappointments and irritations of daily routine. (Although in the next section I suggest that marriage relationships that would fail to endure over time without commitment are likely to change in nature.) Conceding that most people need commitment to have lasting intimate relationships, would it not be wonderful if they did not?

4. Love for Another Person and Commitment

In the previous section I suggested that love is a (preferable) alternative to commitment in cases when mere intentions cannot do enough to motivate spouses to stay in the marital relationship through tough times. Whatever one's account of love and its reasons, the object of one's love is

not fungible. This means that love can safeguard marriage against the first type of threat from which commitment, too, can protect it: the availability of better partners. Love is also likely to shelter marriages against the second kind of threat, that of disheartening routine and other difficulties of ongoing company: love can motivate people to sacrifice their own convenience for the sake of the interests of the beloved or of the relationship with the beloved. But love itself may be lost, and one reason why people commit to each other and to their relationship is precisely in an attempt to ensure the endurance of their love. In this section I suggest why it may be inappropriate to see commitment as a wise means to securing the kind of romantic and sexual love that tends to drive contemporary marriage. In doing so I am aware that I rely on a controversial understanding of romantic and sexual love—but which, I believe, is nevertheless very plausible.¹⁸

Whether or not it is possible to *ensure* that one will continue to feel romantic or sexual love for a particular individual, it is intelligible to *prefer* to be loved out of spontaneous inclination, rather than because someone made a promise or a commitment, which is akin to a promise, to love you—and as a consequence they took the necessary steps to ensure that their love lasts. This thought is in fact ambivalent between a claim of feasibility and one of desirability. Some believe that it is possible to control one's behavior such that you keep alive—or perhaps rekindle—romantic or sexual love; for instance, by revisiting places where you have been happy with your beloved, or otherwise reminding yourself of the history of your love relationships.¹⁹ Others think it is impossible to control love for a particular individual to a sufficient extent to make one responsible for keeping it alive: individuals can achieve only so much success in their attempts to self-induce love for a particular individual.²⁰ And some philosophers believe that attempting to secure love with the help of commitment in particular is a self-defeating strategy because it allows spouses to take each other for granted which, in turn, undermines love.²¹ But of course, a likely reason to think one cannot fully control one's love stems from the suspicion that part of what makes love so desirable cannot, by definition, be controlled.²² Here I draw on this latter thought.

Amartya Sen's work on commitment (in a context unrelated to the discussion of intimate relationships) is helpful in clarifying the difference between being motivated by love and being motivated by commitment. He distinguishes between three kinds of motivation: self-interest, that is, aiming to promote one's welfare; sympathy, that is, aiming to promote a wider sense of welfare, in which the welfare of the agent is not independent from the welfare of the agent's near and dear; and commitment, that is, a type of

motivation unrelated to the agent's welfare (whether understood narrowly or broadly).²³ Love is of the second kind: it seems uncontroversial that loving a person means, among other things, that one cares about the welfare of the beloved such that the lover's well-being is dependent on the welfare of the beloved. Ideally, one prefers that one's intimate relationships be driven by love rather than by commitment. The point holds for particular interactions with those near and dear. As Michael Stocker's famous example illustrates, we don't want our friends to benefit us because they have a duty to do so (even if they do) but because they are genuinely partial towards us.²⁴ But it may also hold in the case of love relationships as a whole: it seems more satisfying to be loved as a result of your lover's spontaneous reaction to you rather than because they consciously remind themselves of the reasons they fell for you in the first place and do their best to keep their feelings alive. Similarly, it seems more satisfying to (continue to) love another independently from the history of your relationship—and believe that you would be inclined to love them if you now met them for the first time—and hence without the help of past commitments. The reason why it is better to love, and be loved, out of inclination so defined is that in such cases love is a direct reaction to the reality of the beloved.

The analysis so far is likely to apply beyond relationships, to many of the activities the success of which commitments can protect: it is better if my desire to learn Russian is independent from all the effort I have put so far into learning the language, that is if I wanted to start learning it were I to encounter Russian for the first time today. But the value of learning languages, and of many other long-term processes in which people engage, derives, at least in part, from the successful attainment of a goal. I may derive a lot of value from the process of learning, but it is the final mastery of the language that makes for much of this endeavor's worth. This is what makes learning a language an appropriate *project*. For this reason, committing to projects is generally prudent; choosing to live from moment to moment carries the risk that one will never enjoy the value of attained goals.

Yet, romantic love and sexual love are not obviously appropriately conceived of as projects: we love each other for the sake of loving, rather than for the sake of reaching a goal. The process may be all that there is valuable to (romantic and sexual) love. (This is not to deny that sexual and romantic love may be conducive to many valuable achievements.) This is a reason to believe that it is misguided to commit to feeling romantic or sexual love for someone even if it was conceptually coherent, and a likely successful strategy.²⁵

On this account, romantic and sexual love is at its best when the lovers are entirely focused on the moment and refrain from attempting to control the future of their relationship *qua* lovers. It is an understanding of love expressed by a popular (judging from its circulation in the electronic media) poem,²⁶ which captures well the appeal of disentangling love from commitment:

After a while / you learn the subtle difference between holding a hand and
chaining a soul / and you learn love doesn't mean leaning and company
doesn't always mean security / And you begin to learn that kisses aren't
contracts and presents aren't always promises.

The costs of commitment are, as I discussed in the previous section, mostly opportunity costs. *Lack* of commitment, too, has pragmatic costs: the likely sacrifice of reaching distant goals. But lack of commitment is costless in the case of activities that should be entirely process-oriented, that is, activities whose value is not dependent on agents accomplishing a certain goal which gives some of the meaning to the endeavor. Intimate relationships are most likely to be of this kind, activities whose aim, as they say, is the journey itself. Merely enjoying the company of another and allowing oneself to be changed by relating to another give value to intimate relationships. For this reason, a lack of commitment is less costly when it comes to intimate relationships than in other contexts such as learning a language, pursuing a degree, or building a house.

Therefore, a person whom one loves, or even the relationship with that person, may be a particularly unsuited object of commitment, *unless one has reasons independent of love to commit to that person*. Such reasons may be moral: raising a child together towards whom the couple has already acquired parental duties, providing mutual aid, or prudential: securing economic welfare, or pursuing various common projects. Indeed, partners in lasting marriage(-like) relationships tend to have such additional reasons to commit.

It is a welcome fact, then, that marriages typically contain a bundle of worthy goods. Should the above reflections be mistaken, and should there be nothing misguided in committing to love another, marriage and marriage-like—i.e. cohabiting—relationships would seem particularly ill-suited to preserve romantic and sexual love. As William Godwin, one of the first critics of love-based marriage, noticed a long time ago: “It is absurd to expect that the inclinations and wishes of two human beings should coincide through any long period of time. To oblige them to act and to live

love, marriage, and philosophical lives together, is to subject them to some inevitable portion of thwarting, bickering and unhappiness.”²⁷ If marriage is a worthy institution, it is so in virtue of its ability to realize other goods than romantic and sexual love.

5. Implications for Marriage Legislation

In this chapter I suggested that the attitudinal commitment that gives meaning to the marriage institution has merely instrumental value. Commitment is good because it helps protect several goods realizable in marriage; I also suggested that it is unlikely that among the goods most appropriately protected by commitment to one’s spouse are romantic and erotic love. Moreover, commitment to one’s spouse can have very high opportunity costs. These considerations form a *pro tanto* reason to rethink the goals and duration of available forms of marriage—that is, to consider marriage reform.

The suggestions I have put forward regarding the value of marital commitment give some support to several kinds of marriage reforms. The first kind is temporary marriage, making it possible for individuals to enter marital relationships without permanent commitment. The other kind is the fragmentation of marriage: allowing individuals to split the various marital rights that currently are only available as a package between different individuals, thus making marital commitment less comprehensive. A reform that gets particular support from the argument of this essay is giving special legal protection to the family as a child-rearing institution, rather than to the family as a privileged relationship for the flourishing of romantic and sexual love. In the words of the legal scholar Martha Fineman, this would involve a move beyond the “sexual family.” Below is a more in-depth analysis of how my analysis of the value of commitment to one’s spouse indicates the desirability of these reforms.

The legalization of temporary marriage can be a way of recognizing that the opportunity costs of marriage are onerous. Of course, *de facto* temporary marriage already exists since divorce is legally available. Some critics of the liberalization of marriage deplore the fact that the availability of no-fault divorce has already eroded the possibility of the robust kind of marital commitment that was made by future spouses entering a traditional marriage.²⁸ *Contra* conservatives, this essay indicted that the erosion of the extreme, blind kind of commitment required by marriage without divorce is good news. The existence and legitimacy of no-fault divorce constitute

a powerful argument in favor of making temporary marriage legally available. But divorce is often traumatic and costly. Therefore, it is plausible that temporary marriage is a superior option to the *status quo* of permanent marriage plus divorce. If the latter is legally available, so should be the former.²⁹

Elizabeth Brake has recently argued, by appeal to the liberal ideal of state neutrality, that marriage should undertake a radical reform.³⁰ Her proposal is not restricted to permitting same-sex marriage, but extends to the number of marriages in which an individual may be involved by allowing a fragmentation of (some of the current) marriage rights. Individuals, on this account, ought to be free to engage in several minimal marriages, each centered on the protection of a different good—such as, for example, long-term companionship, or child-rearing, or economic security. Since states cannot legitimately protect controversial conceptions of the good, we ought, on Brake’s account, to eliminate the central role that romance and sex currently have in understanding marriage. However, marriage does have an important function which makes it worth preserving, albeit in a radically changed form: the protection of caring relationships. Because they are a precondition for individuals pursuing good lives, caring relationships are not, as such, part of any controversial conception of the good. But there is no reason for states to restrict the protection of caring relationships by bundling together the various rights that spouses currently enjoy in relationship with each other. The present analysis of commitment supports Brake’s proposal: if marriage relationships were fragmented, the content and value of each marital commitment would become clearer.

In particular, I suggested that, in spite of current legal and social expectations, marriage (as cohabitation) may not in fact be particularly suited to cultivating love, especially romantic and sexual love.³¹ This claim supports another reformist proposal of rethinking the family by moving beyond the “sexual family”; Martha Fineman³² has argued that we should define the family as centered on care-giving for children rather than on the romantic and sexual relationship between spouses. This would entail an adjustment of policy goals and legislation, to give priority to the protection of the interests of the child and her main caregiver (rather than prioritize traditional arrangements in which children are reared by pre-creating couples).

At least in the case of child-rearing, the intended span of marriage will be closely connected with its aims. In the past, several philosophers have made proposals in line with all three points above when they suggested a bifurcation of the institution of marriage into marital

relationships established with the intention to raise children and marital relationships in which future spouses agree not to parent. Drawing on Margaret Mead's work, Jeffrey Blustein argued that the first kind of marriage ought to be permanent, while the second may be temporary and renewable. (Mead's proposal is that marriages start as temporary and move on to the permanent, child-rearing phase once spouses are confident they can sustain the relationship in order to protect the interests of their children.³³) Both Mead's and Blustein's reasoning focuses on the interests of children as the main ground for such a reform. Without denying the importance of protecting children's interest in marriage, the present essay supports a more general case for reforming marriage by appeal to the interest of the future spouses. By avoiding a moralizing stance on commitment it may be possible to think about, and reform, marriage in ways that should satisfy both conservatives concerned with the well-being of children and liberals who are also concerned with protecting the spouses' well-being.³⁴

Notes

1. This thought is sometimes expressed by popular culture. But philosophers have already made the point that commitment is unlikely to have unconditional value; its value depends on the value to what one is committed to. See Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). I do not dispute this claim; I limit my discussion to the value of commitments to worthwhile objects.

2. This part of the argument draws on a tradition of free love that is skeptical of the possibility and desirability of securing love via the creation of duties. For a discussion of this, see Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, chapter 2.

3. The general analysis of commitment in this essay comes from Cheshire Calhoun, "What Good Is Commitment?" *Ethics* 119 (2009): 613–641; her article does not discuss marriage in particular, although she, too, notes that marital commitment is a paradigm case. What I say about marriage is my own analysis, unless specified differently.

4. I occasionally use the cost-benefit language for analyzing the value of commitment since, as I hope it will soon become clear, this language is especially useful to clarify when commitment has prudential, or rational value. In this, I draw on Anca Gheaus, "Is the Family Uniquely Valuable?" *Ethics and Social Welfare* 6:2 (2012): 120–131.

5. I develop this point, in relation to commitments to family members, in Gheaus, "The Family." See also Calhoun, "Commitment," 627.

6. Calhoun also notes that commitments also determine what our lives are, i.e., they give lives narrative unity; I choose to focus only on being the creator of one's self and life, given that these ideals seem to be widely endorsed among philosophers and non-philosophers, and hence less controversial than the ideal of narrative unity.

7. Calhoun correctly notes that such a life is different from the life of a person “who, not having made up his mind what he wants, is caused to act by whatever desire is strongest at the moment.” From “Commitment,” 269.

8. Charles Larmore, “The Idea of a Life Plan,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 16:1 (1999): 96–112, p. 96.

9. Larmore, “The Idea of a Life Plan,” 103.

10. Indeed, this is the account of love and friendship implicit in Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*. On this account, love is not likely to be properly accessible to young people who have not yet had the time to learn how to love well.

11. Calhoun, “Commitment,” 619.

12. I discuss this at greater length in Gheaus, “The Family.” See also Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, chapter 2.

13. Brenda Almond, *The Fragmenting Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 23.

14. See Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, chapter 2.

15. This is true, of course, only if commitment itself is not a necessary condition for love. I agree with Brake in *Minimizing Marriage* that it isn’t.

16. This is a recent definition of non-fungibility in the context of discussing love: “If an object having import to you is such that its being taken away ought to be experienced as a loss regardless of the state of other objects that might have or come to have import to you, then . . . that object has non-fungible import.” From Bennett Helm, *Love, Friendship and the Self: Intimacy, Identification, and the Social Nature of Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

17. There are at least two ways of making sense of the belief that love has intrinsic value: as an important contribution to the well-being of the lover (if it is true that people do not regret the love they experience even when they think it is better not to pursue a relationship with their beloved, for either prudential or moral reasons). Or as a way of recognizing the value of the beloved; many think that even the most morally objectionable human being has value. For an account of love as an act of acknowledging the value of the beloved, see David Velleman, “Love as a Moral Emotion,” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 338–374.

18. If love is a way of valuing a relationship with the beloved, and if the justification of love is to be found in historical-relational properties of the beloved, then commitment seems a very appropriate way of securing love. For such an understanding of love see Niko Kolodny, “Love as Valuing a Relationship,” *The Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 135–189.

19. Matthew Liao, “The Right of Children to Be Loved,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 14:4 (2006): 420–440.

20. Brake, “Is Divorce Promise-Breaking?” 23–39.

21. Here is a quote from Montaigne: “We thought we were tying our marriage knots more tightly by removing all means of undoing them; but the tighter we pulled the knot of constraint the looser and slacker became the knot of our will and affection. In Rome, on the contrary, what made marriages honoured and secure for so long a period was freedom to break them at will. *Men loved their wives more because they could lose them*” [my emphasis]. Cited in Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 61.

22. On Brake’s account, Sartre “saw love as prompting an inherently unrealizable attempt to capture permanently the free and spontaneous reciprocation of the beloved.”

(From Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 61) The reason why such an endeavor is impossible is that, in order to be spontaneous, love (whether given or received) should not be fully controlled.

23. Amartya Sen, “Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioural Foundations of Economic Theory,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (1977): 317–344.

24. He writes: “[S]uppose you are in a hospital, recovering from a long illness when Smith comes in. You are so effusive with your thanks and praise that he protests that he always tries to do what he thinks is his duty, what he thinks will be best. You at first think he is engaging in a polite form of self-deprecation. But the more you two speak, the more clear it becomes that he was telling the literal truth: that it is not essentially because of you that he came to see you, not because you are friends, but because he thought it his duty, perhaps as a fellow Christian or Communist or whatever, or simply because he knows no one more in need of cheering up and no one easier to cheer up.” In “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 453–466, p. 462.

25. This is not to say it is misguided to make a normative commitment to pursuing romantic and sexual love in general—it is a claim about making substantive commitments to love particular individuals.

26. Its authorship is under dispute. It has been attributed to Jorge Borges and to Veronica A. Shoffstall. See, for instance, <http://www.rebellecommunity.com/2012/09/15/poetry-lounge-after-a-while-you-learn/>.

27. Quoted in Almond, *Fragmenting Family*, 30–31.

28. Various such sources are cited in Almond, *Fragmenting Family*.

29. For a detailed analysis of, and argument for, the legalization of temporary marriage see Daniel Nolan, “Temporary Marriage,” Chapter 8 in this book.

30. Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*.

31. And, indeed, it is likely that most marriages in history have not been contracted with the aim of securing romantic and sexual love—let alone for the mere sake of such love alone.

32. Martha Fineman, *The Neutered Mother, the Sexual Family and Other Twentieth Century Tragedies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

33. Of course, the ideal case of marriage centered on rearing children need not involve permanence, but rather a span of time sufficiently long to see children safely into adulthood.

34. I am grateful to Elizabeth Brake, Daniela Cutas, and Kalle Grill for helpful comments on an earlier draft. Work towards this essay was also supported by the Swedish Research Council, grant no. 421-2013-1306.