

Chastity, Morality, and the Schools

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"Abstinence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder," proclaim billboards along Maryland highways. "True Love Waits," declare two hundred thousand placards staked on the Mall in Washington this summer, representing chastity pledges by teens across the country. "In Defense of a Little Virginity," reads the headline to a recent full-page newspaper ad endorsing programs "to help kids make good sexual decisions."

These by no means isolated examples signal a developing movement in and out of schools to curb teenage sexual activity. This movement, and in particular "chastity education" in the schools, responds to three effects of changing sexual mores in America since 1960: the steady rise in the rate of teen pregnancies, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among those under twenty-five, and the growing problem of sexual harassment and unwanted sexual pressure among students. The emergence of AIDS has provoked special concern among educators, for, although the rate of HIV infection among teenagers is low, the lethal effects of such infection lend urgency to efforts at prevention.

But the risk of disease and pregnancy is not the only case the chastity education movement makes against teenage sex. It also makes a moral case: premarital sex is wrong. The two arguments seem to go hand in hand. President Reagan observed in 1987 that nowadays medicine and morality teach the same lesson about teenage sex: abstain. Likewise, a proponent of chastity education, Thomas Lickona, argues that "sexual abstinence is the *only* medically safe and morally responsible choice for unmarried teenagers."

However, we must take care with the idea that medicine and morality teach the same lesson, lest we conflate prudence and morality. The major premise of a *prudential* argument refers to an agent's actual interests, present and future; subsidiary premises indicate how a given course will promote or hinder those interests. Since people's interests can vary, the courses prudence recommends can vary, too. For the actor wanting to prolong his lucrative career, expensive cosmetic surgery may be the prudent choice. For the concert pianist who has arthritic hands, a difficult experimental drug therapy may be a reasonable gamble. For an elderly person, susceptible to complications from the flu, getting a flu vaccine makes good sense.

The major premise of a *moral* argument, in contrast, refers to an agent's duties or rights, which may arise from a variety of sources -- the agent's place in special relationships or roles (think of a parent's obligation toward her child), or her place in a scheme of just institutions (think of the juror's duty to render a fair verdict), or her place in the general human condition (think of the universal reciprocity embodied in the Golden Rule), or her place under the law of Nature or God (think of the duty to turn the other cheek). Medical reasons can enter into moral arguments, since it may be an agent's duty to promote someone's health or not to cause illness or injury to others. For example, the fact that it is prudent for a child to be inoculated against measles gives the child's parent a moral reason for getting the child inoculated, since the parent has an antecedent duty to promote the child's health interests. However, if measles were to be eradicated, the moral reason for inoculation would disappear along with the prudential one.

With regard to abstinence, the situation is different. The moral injunction to abstain from premarital sex would presumably remain in force whatever medical science invented: a cure for AIDS, a vaccine against all sexually transmitted diseases, a foolproof contraceptive method. As a moral ideal, chastity does not stand or fall with the prudential arguments for premarital abstinence. This tells us that medicine and morality *aren't* teaching the same lesson, even when they temporarily converge on the same recommendation. The commands of morality and the deliverances of prudence speak from distinct realms.

Does chastity education teach sound prudential and moral lessons? How does it treat the actual interests of teenagers, and from what moral resources does it draw the duties and rights that underlie its prescriptions?

Prudence

The chastity education movement teaches that sexual abstinence before marriage is the only prudent option for teens (and everyone else): "The *only* truly safe sex is having sex only with a marriage partner who is having sex only with you," Mr. Lickona advises teens. "Abstinence is the only 100 percent effective way to avoid pregnancy, AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases."

Chastity education sets itself explicitly against two other educational strategies. The first, sometimes called "value-neutral" sex education, sets out to teach teens about sexual functioning and how to use contraceptives. In the 1970s, when value-neutral programs were most common, sex education seldom included a discussion of abstinence. The second strategy, which Mr. Lickona calls "Abstinence, But," explicitly recommends abstinence to teens but also informs them how to have sex safely if they reject the counsel of abstinence.

Chastity education substitutes a different message: "Abstinence Only." It rejects both the other approaches as resting on the false proposition that there can be safe sex outside marriage. Wait until marriage, it insists, in order to be 100 percent safe.

The adamancy of chastity education's "100 percent safe" argument may dissuade some teens from sex, but a thoughtful student will see that it rests upon two questionable foundations, namely an extreme risk aversion and an unspoken devaluation of sex before marriage -- a devaluation that must draw on extra-prudential considerations. Let me explain both points.

First, life is risky. Everything we do puts us in some degree of danger. For example, the only 100 percent safe choice regarding transportation is not to go out at all. Cars crash, trains wreck, ships sink, planes fall from the sky, and pedestrians get run over. Extremely risk-averse persons may shut themselves in and not venture out for any reason, but for most of us the risks of death from driving the highways, say, are worth taking -- and worth taking not just for vital or necessary ends like getting to work or putting food on our tables, but for optional and relatively trivial ends such as driving to the beach to lie in the sun or visiting a friend's house to play cards. The risks from driving are pretty minimal to start with (14 deaths per 100,000 people), and we try to minimize them further by driving cautiously, wearing seat belts, and keeping our cars in good repair. Nevertheless, the risks are quite real. More Americans die in motor vehicles each year and a half than were killed in the entire Vietnam War.

But driving isn't the only risky thing we do. The less risk-averse among us climb mountains, race motorcycles, play contact sports, and go skydiving. In short, they take risks -- even considerably heightened risks -- for adventure, thrill, challenge, and excitement. There is certainly no social consensus that, when they do these things, people act irrationally or irresponsibly.

Thus, a reflective student in a chastity education class, who has just ridden her bicycle to school (700 people were killed on their bicycles last year), might wonder why "100 percent safe" is the appropriate standard to apply to sex when it isn't the standard she or anyone else applies to any other part of life. We always balance risk against gain.

What makes the "100 percent safe" policy seem plausible in the case of teenage sex is an unspoken devaluation of the option it asks teens to forgo: sexual activity. Teens aren't being asked to give up something important by a policy of abstinence. They ought not to be having sex, anyway. So, unlike in

the cases of driving to work or even driving to the beach, teens shouldn't balance risk against gain. There's nothing to be gained.

But how is this so? How does the thrill of sex differ from the thrill of skydiving? The answer must be that the thrill of skydiving is indifferent morally, while the thrill of sex isn't. Teen sex isn't morally proper to start with, so nothing of value morally is lost to teens in forgoing sex.

Thus, the devaluation of sex that's silently at work in the "100 percent safe" argument is a moral devaluation. Chastity education's prudential argument against teen sex doesn't work independently of its moral argument. What, then, is its moral argument?

Morality Mr. Lickona notes a common question about sexual morality: "Isn't premarital sexual abstinence a religious or cultural value, as opposed to universal ethical values like love, respect, and honesty?" He replies that "ethical reasoning alone," without recourse to religious doctrine, can demonstrate that "reserving sex for marriage is a logical application of ethical values." Were this so, chastity education would be very much easier for the schools. Controversial religious grounds could be set to one side in making the moral case for abstinence.

Does "ethical reasoning alone" show that sex outside marriage is morally wrong for anyone? Mr. Lickona invokes two central moral values, love and respect, that don't seem to require religious support, and argues that if "we love and respect another, we will want what is in that person's interest." This is certainly true. But unless we take for granted what is in question here, namely, that it is always against anyone's interests to take the slightest risk for the sake of sex, a person's interests will depend in part upon his or her particular preferences and risk policies and won't always prove an impediment to nonmarital sex.

If a potential sex partner is unwilling to risk disease or pregnancy, does not desire to have sex, or perhaps even subscribes to a policy or ideal of chastity, we would certainly fail to show moral respect by trying to cajole or bully or induce that person to do what she or he is unwilling to do, has no desire to do, and has a policy or ideal against doing. Respect and love provide moral reasons for abstaining in this case. The ground of these reasons, however, consists in the potential partner's simply *having* his or her particular desires or values, regardless of their moral character. For example, a father who bullies his eighteen-year-old daughter into skydiving against her wishes fails to respect his daughter, but his moral failing here doesn't arise from any moral infirmity in skydiving itself.

Respect and love, then, don't provide *independent*, freestanding reasons for abstinence. If our potential partner wants to have sex, consistently with his or her more stable values and policies on risk, respect and love don't require our abstaining. To see how far respect and love alone can make a case for abstinence, consider our responses to *this* situation: fifty-year-old divorcee and fifty-year-old widower find themselves attracted to each other and care for each other but for perfectly good reasons don't contemplate marriage. Respect and love here require abstinence? Only if sex outside marriage is *inherently immoral*, apart from the desires and values of the two fifty-year-olds. And what does "ethical reasoning alone" tell us about *that* question?

We can understand that persons might make chastity a personal ideal, just as we understand that, for example, some people make vegetarianism their way of life. We should extend to vegetarians and the chastity-supporters the same respect for their choices of how to live their lives that we would like from others for our own choices. But respect by itself doesn't require us to go further and take up the vegetarian ideal itself, nor does it obligate us to take up the ideal of chastity. To show that chastity is a *nonoptional* way to live, we have to press beyond respect and love to identify an independent standard that *every*

person's ideals and interests *ought* to conform to. To supply that independent standard requires a religious doctrine.

This is particularly evident if we consider what looms central in traditional, religiously based moral views about sexuality. These views typically employ a quite special vocabulary. Instead of speaking primarily in the language of rights and respect, sexual morality speaks in the first instance of *purity* and *impurity*. That, after all, is the language the teenagers used in planting their "True Love Waits" pledges on the Washington Mall: they promised to remain "pure" until marriage. Traditional sexual morality is preoccupied with the body and its uses. It teaches that sex outside the bonds of marriage *defiles* and *degrades* the body; it makes it *unclean*. Toward others' sexual wrongs and our own we aren't supposed to feel merely indignation or guilt but loathing, disgust, revulsion. Traditional religious sexual codes, in fact, go hand in hand with related codes having to do with what can be put in the body (for example, certain things cannot be eaten), how the body can appear (for example, parts of the body must be hidden from view; hair must never be cut, or hair-clippings must be discarded in special ways), and how the body is to be disposed of at death (for example, a corpse cannot be allowed near a sacred shrine). It is in the context of this language of pollution and purity -- a language virtually incoherent outside its religious moorings -- that abstinence outside marriage is a nonoptional ideal. In the traditional religious perspective, only marriage sanctifies sex and makes it "clean," as only slaughter in a proper abattoir where the animal is bled properly and the flesh not allowed contact with milk makes meat clean for the Jew, or as only slaughter in which the butcher cuts an animal's windpipe, carotid artery, and gullet while invoking the name of God makes meat clean for the Muslim.

If we drop notions of purity and impurity and consider sex simply as a transaction on a par with any other personal transaction (though of a particularly intimate kind), then sexual morality will reflect just the demands of respect and love, which, as we saw, do not provide independent reasons for chastity. Respect does not show sex outside marriage to be inherently immoral, nor does love, unless it is the love of God and His ordinances.

Thus, to sum up: chastity education's "100 percent safe" proposal for teens can't rest on prudence alone. It must morally devalue teen sex so that there is no basis for teens balancing risk and gain and thus taking some risks. But if chastity education morally devalues teen sex by claiming sex outside marriage is inherently wrong, it will have to invoke a particular religious view. Contrary to Mr. Lickona's hope, it will have to embrace rather than avoid controversy.

Encouraging Abstinence

Does chastity education *need* to rest on the premise that sex outside marriage is inherently wrong? We can certainly drop the premise and still make a case for abstinence by teens. The case, however, won't be as uncompromising as the one made by chastity education.

Let's revisit the example of the two unmarried fifty-year-olds. If we respond differently to their having sex than to fifteen-year-olds having sex, this suggests that the case for "waiting till marriage" is age-sensitive. Indeed, Mr. Lickona's argument from respect gains some plausibility when restricted to teen sex. The argument then draws on assumptions we make about teens *not being ready* for sex regardless of their desires, ideals, and policies on risk. Its conclusion, "wait till marriage," really means "wait till you're old enough."

In general, teens are not ready for sex in the sense that they aren't ready to make informed, thoughtful decisions about having sex the way, say, fifty-year-olds are. They aren't able to gauge the emotional repercussions and they aren't able to distance themselves from their immediate desires. Indeed, adults often don't do so well in this respect, either.

The case for encouraging abstinence would rest on the following premises. First, as a general rule, teenagers are imprudent and rash. Excitable, propelled by strong impulses, wanting nothing so much as peer approval, and unable vividly to imagine the full consequences of their actions, teens drop stones off highway overpasses for fun, drive with reckless abandon, play "chicken" with railroad locomotives, and sniff propane to get high. They don't display good judgment, they don't exercise caution, they don't regard other people's interests as they ought.

Second, sex is an especially alluring venue for throwing caution to the winds. In the heat of the moment, little thought is given to the possibility of disease or pregnancy, or to more remote emotional and psychological effects. Sex is also an especially common occasion for moral disregard. Seduction too often takes the form of bullying, cajoling, pressuring, and outright forcing. In light of the ways that matters can go wrong prudentially and morally in teen sex, as a general rule the best policy for any teen might well be abstinence. In conclusion, teens *ought* to be more risk-averse about sex than about other things, because about sex their judgment is often especially impaired.

This case for abstinence as a policy doesn't depend on religious premises and might carry some persuasive force for the reflective teenager. However, since it doesn't claim that *every* teen is incapable of making thoughtful, mature decisions about sex but, rather, asks each teen to take seriously the general tendency of teens to be thoughtless about sex, this case for abstinence doesn't supply the blanket prohibition that chastity education desires to encourage.

But perhaps this is not so important. What students may receive most profitably in courses that strongly emphasize abstinence is *permission* -- permission to resist peer pressure and do what they really want to do anyway, retain their virginity. A lot of teens have sex not because they truly want to but because it is the thing to do. Create a climate in which sex isn't the thing to do, and teen sex may diminish. A recent report by Douglas Kirby and his colleagues for the Centers for Disease Control identifies two programs that, by making the delaying of intercourse a "clear goal" while also providing instruction about contraception, "successfully reduced the proportion of sexually inexperienced students who initiated sex during the following twelve to eighteen months." These are modest results, but real ones nevertheless. It remains to be seen whether "Abstinence Only" can do better.

Some observers may wonder how much any sort of education will affect teenage sexual activity overall. In the past, teens were less active sexually not because they listened to reason but because they lived in a very sexually repressive society. The social penalties of unwed motherhood and the stigma of illegitimacy gave girls powerful incentives to avoid pregnancy, and in the era before the Pill, avoiding pregnancy meant avoiding intercourse. That repression is gone, not likely to be revived. Nor should it be. But the upshot is a formidable challenge to educators: how to persuade students that Abstinence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder and that True Love Waits.

Sources: Thomas Lickona, "Where Sex Education Went Wrong," *Educational Leadership* (November 1993); "In Defense of a Little Virginity," a newspaper ad from Focus on the Family; Laurie Goodstein, "Saying No to Sex in No Uncertain Terms," *Washington Post* (July 30, 1994); Jane Gross, "Sex Educators for Young See New Virtue in Chastity," *New York Times* (January 16, 1994); National Safety Council, *Accident Facts* (1993); Douglas Kirby et al., "School Based Programs to Reduce Sexual Risk Behaviors: A Review of Effectiveness," Centers for Disease Control (May-June 1994). See also Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (Bantam Books, 1991), and William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong And What We Can Do About It* (Simon and Schuster, 1992).