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# Is Marriage a Closed System?

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**John Gottman**, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail... And How You Can Make Yours Last* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, 234 pages).

To speak of marriage as "sacramental" is to say that, at the core, marriage is an open thing. In its very design, marriage (as sacrament) is open to the Infinite and thus open to becoming increasingly the image of the Infinite in its expansiveness and fecundity. This is to say that built into the very order of marriage is a constitutive generosity which becomes manifest as fruitfulness. Rather than a hermetically sealed package, marriage is open at both ends - a vessel into which life is poured for the purpose of passing on life. The essential exclusivity and permanence of the marital bond are not threatened by this openness because it is first a vertical openness - an aperture to the transcendent God and through him to generations before and to come. Far from endangering marriage, this openness is what guarantees its vitality.

What happens to the marital bond when the mind of a culture loses its grasp on the essential openness of marriage? What becomes of a culture when marriage is understood to be an essentially closed system - a kind of world unto itself, created and ruled only by the decision of the spouses? Even without reflecting at length on statistics of out-of-wedlock births, cohabitation, and divorce, it is safe to assert that in the cultural mind (and as a result in cultural reality), marriage has been destabilized in recent times. The sheer volume of books in the "self-help/marriage" category indicates that a pervasive question on people's minds is: "How can marriage be restored?"

Dr John Gottman's goal is "filling in the knowledge gap" about why our marriages have become so fragile in order to help prevent the downward spiral to divorce. His opening chapter is entitled "What makes a marriage work?" He continues with chapters on marriage styles, the "downward spiral," the differences between men and women, "diagnosing your marriage," and strengthening the foundations of your marriage... all with diagnostic tests for the reader scattered throughout.

The strength of Gottman's book is the sheer amount of time and attention he has put into observing in detail interactions between spouses in order to understand the inner dynamics of conjugal communication. For two decades he and his team have observed hundreds of married couples as they communicated with each other on a variety of issues affecting their marriage. In this comprehensive longitudinal research, they have monitored heart rates, breathing, and other physiological responses. His team has encoded facial expressions, read body language, and sought self-reports from the husbands and wives they observed.

But the book lacks a chapter entitled "What is marriage and what is it *for*?" Gottman seems to embrace a view of marriage as a "closed system." He writes: "Like the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which

says that in closed energy systems things tend to run down and get less orderly, the same seems to be true of closed relationships like marriages" (p. 61). Marriage is an impermeable circle enclosing wife and husband. Again we read: "If your marriage has been rocky, you may wonder, So just what are *sufficient grounds for remaining married*? While each couple must discover *their own answer* to this question, my research suggests some answers" (p. 223, emphasis added). Note that the individual choice of the couple is the deciding factor in this important decision. A difficulty clearly arises when a couple fails to agree on such a decision to this and other crucial questions. Further, should not the question at least minimally be the converse - what are *sufficient grounds for abandoning your marriage* and the person you promised to stay with until death? Gottman falters on these questions, it seems, because of an insufficient understanding of the nature and purpose of marriage.

When the nature and purpose of marriage are believed to vary widely from one married couple to another, any discussion of ethical content in marital dialogue and disagreement breaks down. Unable to reliably speak on content (the *what*), the focus shifts to method (the *how*). Over and over, Gottman emphasizes a primacy of method over content: he writes: "much more important than having compatible views is *how* the couples work out their differences" (pp. 23-4), and "I may surprise you by claiming that you ought not to worry so much about solving your marital problems as in dealing with the emotions they stir" (p.175).

While it is indeed important to master our emotions, they may also serve as signals that there is indeed something wrong about what is happening. One example may here suffice. In a conversation video-taped in Gottman's lab, "Yvonne" and "Nicholas" are discussing Yvonne's jealousy toward his ex-girlfriends in their marriage. Nicholas is bothered that Yvonne would be upset if, hypothetically speaking, he were to have lunch with a former girlfriend, Jeannie. Here are excerpts of their conversation:

YVONNE: (*Slightly alarmed*) No, Jeannie is a different story. You were lovers...

... NICHOLAS: She's a person that I once liked a lot, and it's a shame to lose touch with her. As a friend. As an acquaintance.

...YVONNE: (*Fearful*) Wait a minute! Do you want to see her? Is that what you are saying?

NICHOLAS: Yes I would. Why not? I'd like to find out how she's doing, talk to her again. Yes.

YVONNE: (*Flooded*) Then I think we have a serious problem... (pp. 111-12)

Yvonne ended the conversation in the state of being "flooded" (emotionally and physiologically overwhelmed). This state, Gottman advises, can be harmful to your marriage. But is not having lunch with your ex-lover - particularly when it upsets your wife - also harmful to your marriage? Is not their serious problem greater than the wife's emotional reaction? Upon this question, Gottman is strangely silent. It is the method of communication that is important here, not the content of the conversation.

As Gottman glosses over the content of discussions on church-going (pp. 47-49) and lunch with ex-girlfriends, one sees that as long as the spouses can mutually agree on their course of action, all options seem to bear equal moral weight. This democratization of options fails to account for different categories of decisions (for example, that deciding "in which neighborhood we will live" is not so weighty a decision as "whether or not we will be open to having children"). Herein lies one difficulty of Gottman's approach: There can be no objective moral standard by which to judge action because marriage is presumed to be an essentially closed system formed entirely by its subjects, the spouses.

Positively, Gottman asserts with clear eyes that keeping a marriage, or salvaging an endangered one, will require much effort from the spouses. The steps he outlines in his book require "vigilance and commitment," they may demand changes in perception, and in order to work need the force of habit akin to virtue (p. 30). He rightly points out that "Nobody wants to bear full responsibility for another's happiness," and that stable couples have been shown to accept the limitations of their marriage and spouse (p. 223). His extensive research on the ties between emotion and physiological response undergird a worldview that holds to the unity of body and soul (*cf.* pp. 115ff). These things are all worth remembering as they may contribute to the building up of marriage.

Gottman's research is impressive and his goals laudable. In the final analysis, though, his contribution to the restoration of marriage is sabotaged by his presupposition that marriage is a closed thing - more an *opus* of the couple than a gift received. As such, his book is recommended only as strictly supplemental to other resources on marriage, and even then presuming a prior solid foundation. His steps and suggestions are good for self-reflection, and they could be helpful if a couple is already otherwise formed in an authentic understanding of the nature and purpose of marriage.

Marriage is something given to us, not something recreated as each new set of members joins its ranks. It is an aperture to the divine and the source of all fecundity. In marriage, humanity has the unique privilege of being custodian of something much greater than itself - a tremendous reality has been entrusted to us, one which we did not create. The order of marriage is a given. The task of marriage is ours to take up.

