FRAMED FOR FAILURE

Understanding the Collapse of Virginity Pledges

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In the face of growing pressures from government and society to adopt sex-education programs, a number of schools in more conservative, Christian locales have opted for an abstinence-only approach. As an alternative to the prevalent contraceptive-based approach, these programs usually entail a pledge to be made by individual students to remain chaste *until marriage*.

However, as a means to counteract the temptation of premarital sex, these pledges frame the problem in such a way that creates cause for concern. First of all, the virginity pledge focuses primarily on the decision of the individual apart from the rest of society. While the pledge may be presented in a group setting, the content of the pledge primarily focuses on the individual's own resolve to remain chaste. Also, these pledges explicitly identify marriage as the end that chastity serves. In doing so, the pledges frame the situation such that the individual would likely perceive a lifetime of un-married virginity as failure. Game theory, a tool of economic and sociological analysis, can provide reasons why such pledges fail, as well as point to new solutions.

The Method

Game theory, as a relatively new and somewhat controversial method, purports to be a powerful tool in helping to explain a wide range of social and political phenomena. One of its more salient characteristics is its focus on individual decisions. Many game theoretic models are founded upon the choices of an

individual or of a small group of individuals. Due to this focus, game theory can expose dynamics of a decision-making process that quite often are masked in a group.

In order to control for a variety of factors and to simplify complex interactions, game theorists must make a variety of assumptions regarding values, choices, and outcomes. Therefore, it is important that game theorists note that the applicability of the results of their models is constrained by the assumptions that were made when setting up the game. In the end, while the method is meant to model reality, it inherently will be a simplified version of reality, and therefore the conclusions drawn from the model must be interpreted in light of the assumptions being made.

Nevertheless, of the many dynamics of the decision-making process, game theory is useful in modeling incentives. Certain incentives can be either present or absent, they can be linked to others, or their effects may be nullified in the presence of other factors. Unsurprisingly, in comparison, game theory shows that purely verbal accounts of incentives can easily become unwieldy. Hence, by controlling certain aspects of choice and focusing on other features through the use of mathematical concepts, game theory is a useful tool for supplementing the examination of people's decisions. The model presented in the following section is meant to examine individuals' incentives, but, as noted above, since it makes some fairly restrictive assumptions, the conclusions will have to be limited to the factors underlying the motivations for premarital sex.

There are plenty of other contentious details about game theory, such as the assumption of rationality, but they are not immediately relevant to the problem at hand. It is important to note that these assumptions will be treated as simplifications of reality and will be accounted for in drawing conclusions from the model.

THE MODEL

One model developed by Tim Harford in his book *The Logic of Life* (2008) explores the interactions of men and women who are seeking potential matches in the "marriage market." The marriage market is a controlled, theoretical environment in which an equal number of men and women are each paid 100 dollars if they pair-up before exiting the market.

The simplest way to begin is to consider the interaction between two individuals, a man and a woman. If they decide to pair-up and exit the market together (i.e., get married) then they both receive 100 dollars. This simple interaction is formalized in the four-by-four game matrix labeled **Figure 1**.

Woman

	Yes	No
Man Yes	100, 100	0,0
No	0,0	0,0

FIGURE 1

According to this matrix, there are four possible states that can result from the decisions of the two individuals. One state is noticeably more enticing than the rest, as payment is rendered only in the event that they both agree to get married. Thus, all else being equal, both the man and the woman will opt to get married whenever they are given the choice.

Now, in the real world, marriage is not this simple! Rather, lots of men meet lots of women, and some get married and some do

not. For the sake of simplicity, this decision can be applied to 100 couples. Now assuming that there is nothing differentiating the men from each other and the same for the women, every individual will pair-up with a member of the opposite sex, since they are all equally attractive and the cost of remaining single is essentially 100 dollars.

It is important to note that there is no uncertainty regarding the future for these individuals. If they find spouses they each get paid 100 dollars; if they do not, they receive nothing. But the prospect and decision of getting married is not always certain. So, in order to introduce uncertainty, one of the women is taken "off the market," and now there are 100 men and 99 women. In the end, there will be ninety-nine couples who get paid and one bachelor who leaves empty-handed.

Considering the case of the bachelor, he is faced with the prospect of remaining single while those around him are getting married. However, he may soon realize that he does not necessarily have to accept defeat. In order to woo a spouse away from one of the other men, he may approach her with the offer of splitting his payoff, say fifty-fifty. The woman, then, all else being equal between the two men, will leave her first "fiancé" and accept the better offer of the second. This more complex dynamic between these two individuals is illustrated by the game tree, labeled **Figure 2**.

Yes

Woman

$100 - x, 100 + x$

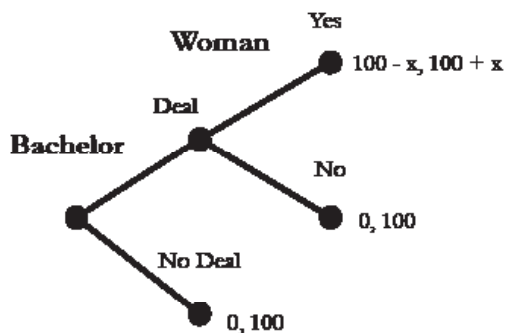Deal

Bachelor

No

$0, 100$

No Deal

$0, 100$

FIGURE 2

Now the initial bachelor has gotten himself a partner, but in doing so he has left another man facing bachelorhood. Nevertheless, this new bachelor will most likely realize the tactic of the first and will follow his example. And so there will be a process of offers and counter-offers in which all of the men will make deals to split their payoff with their potential spouses until the men get down to their lowest possible payoff, which in this controlled environment would be a penny. Furthermore, if that uncertainty were known and felt by each of the men at the very start of the game, the outcome of compromising their payoffs would be immediate. Thus, the uncertainty introduced by removing just one potential mate has profound effects on the actions of the entire group.

The Discussion

While it does not make much sense to think of marriage in terms of a simple pairing with a net two hundred dollar payoff, the above model may still provide some helpful insights into the dynamics involved in trying to find a spouse. Two aspects are particularly noteworthy: the interdependence of the decision-making process and the reaction to uncertainty. While the uncertainty triggers a stark reaction in the individual, the interdependence of action assures that this effect will be compounded and will influence the entire group.

How does this relate to premarital sex? First of all, the interrelated nature of the decision to compromise one's outcome can be related to the decision to engage in premarital sex. It seems reasonable to conclude that, like the bachelor in the model, a young person facing the uncertainty of the future will be tempted to compromise his moral values in a misdirected effort to make a more enticing offer for immediate companionship, assuming that the sexual act has been objectified and is perceived as a potentially desirable good in the near-term. If the commitment to virginity is based on mere self-resolve, then doubt can work away at it, leaving the individual more vulnerable to being overcome by his passions in a time of

Robert Henri - Una Chula

trial. However, if the commitment focuses more on the communal element, then the individual does not have to face these pressures alone. In fact, by communicating with those of his peers who have made similar pledges, he has the opportunity to indicate his own commitment to chastity and, likewise, can receive the assurances and support of his peers.

Considering the classical view of ethics, it is not exactly groundbreaking to note that our individual decisions can affect and are affected by the decisions made by those around us. As Aristotle asserts in the first book of the *Politics* and St. Thomas Aquinas affirms (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 72, a. 4), man is a social animal. Moreover, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle maintains that friendship is necessary for the growth and preservation of virtue, thereby indicating the necessity of cultivating virtue within the context of society and not as an individual apart from society. Thus, any effort to preserve the virtue of chastity should be supplemented by an effort to motivate young people to develop friendships that foster virtue.

While interpersonal ties do play a significant role in this model in shaping the decision to compromise one's moral values for the sake of surer companionship, the most important factor to consider is the uncertainty regarding the outcome of one's decision. A tempting solution may be to reduce the allure of a compromise by putting in place a punishment for doing so. However, the punishment would simply become another non-interpersonal factor in the decision of the individual, failing to radically change the situation.

Rather, a more effective approach is to reframe the issue. In the status quo, the end toward which the players are directed is marriage; leaving the game single would be considered a failure, and so the individuals do their best to avoid this failure through compromise. If an individual makes a virginity pledge for the sake of marriage but sees all those around him compromising on this pledge and, yet, succeeding to get married, he may begin to

doubt the wisdom of maintaining his chastity. Thus, in order to counteract the temptation to compromise, the individuals in the "marriage market" need to be directed towards a goal beyond marriage which would provide a real and effective consolation, such that leaving the market as a bachelor does not become associated with failure.

In terms of virginity pledges, this aspect of the model points to what may be the key to preventing premarital sex. In these pledges, young people promise to remain virgins *until marriage*. While love for God is identified as a reason for this commitment, the overarching assumption is that the goal is to eventually be married. Ultimately, these pledges have little to offer to the individual who does not find a spouse. This is a serious problem! What is the point in remaining chaste if it only leads to failing to achieve the goal of marriage? The individual who asks this question needs to be shown that his end entails something greater than marriage, namely holiness for the sake of salvation.

As mentioned above, man is a social animal, and friendship is integral for maintaining a virtuous life. And yet, while our earthly friendships may provide some assistance, they do not completely solve the problem. A commitment to virginity cannot be sustained if it is directed only to preserving the dignity of marriage. Rather than pledging virginity with the earthly end of marriage in sight, someone committing himself to chastity must be prepared to accept that it may become a lifelong commitment, directing his actions to that which is beyond this life. One such alternative is supplied by the Angelic Warfare Confraternity (www.angelicwarfareconfraternity.org), which is a group committed to the promotion of life-long chastity as a means of serving God. As the prayers of this group implore, Lord grant *that I may advance with a pure heart in Your love and service, offering myself on the most pure altar of Your divinity all the days of my life. Amen.*

Aquinas Beale entered the Order of Preachers in 2011.