

What's Wrong with Adultery?

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Introduction

Bonnie Steinbock's "What's Wrong with Adultery?" examines why extramarital sexual relationships are morally objectionable and whether that moral judgment justifies criminal prohibition. The original essay correctly identifies deception and broken commitment as central concerns, but it defines adultery too narrowly, assumes that disease and pregnancy automatically settle the argument, and sometimes confuses private wrongdoing with conduct that should be criminalized. A careful evaluation must distinguish moral, relational, legal, and public-health questions. Adultery can violate promises, undermine trust, expose a partner to unchosen risks, and destabilize families. At the same time, not every serious moral wrong should be punished by the state, and the meaning of fidelity depends on the agreements people have actually made (Steinbock, 1986; Brake, 2012).

Defining Adultery

Traditional definitions describe adultery as sexual intercourse between a married person and someone who is not that person's spouse. Contemporary relationships make the category more complex. Couples may disagree about whether emotional intimacy, online sexual communication, pornography, kissing, or nonpenetrative activity counts as infidelity. Some marriages are consensually nonmonogamous, so sexual contact outside the marriage does not necessarily break the partners' agreement. The ethically relevant concept is therefore not only extramarital sex but unauthorized intimacy that violates a reasonable expectation of exclusivity or honesty. This broader approach prevents moral analysis from treating one physical act as decisive while ignoring deception, secrecy, and the terms under which the relationship was formed (Steinbock, 1986; Brake, 2012).

Steinbock's Central Question

Steinbock's philosophical method asks what feature makes adultery wrong rather than beginning with the conclusion that it is sinful or illegal. This approach is valuable because people can condemn the same act for different reasons: religious law, betrayal, harm to children, sexual jealousy, property assumptions, or public order. Identifying the strongest reason matters when deciding what response is justified. If the primary wrong is breach of a personal promise, then moral criticism and civil consequences may be appropriate while criminal punishment remains excessive. If the act involves coercion, fraud, violence, or exposure to serious undisclosed risk, other legal categories may apply. Philosophical analysis separates these possibilities instead of placing every case under one moral label (Steinbock, 1986).

Promise and Commitment

The strongest argument against adultery is usually that marriage creates explicit or implicit commitments of fidelity. A promise gives another person justified expectations and allows that person to organize emotional, financial, reproductive, and domestic life around trust. Secretly violating the promise uses the partner's continued commitment while withholding information that might change consent to the relationship. The wrong is not simply that sex occurred elsewhere; it is that one person claimed the benefits of an agreement while privately changing its terms. This argument also explains why consensual nonmonogamy differs ethically. When partners openly revise exclusivity, there may still be jealousy or risk, but the central deception-based wrong is absent (Steinbock, 1986; Brake, 2012).

Deception and Autonomy

Adultery often requires lies about time, money, communication, travel, or emotional availability. Deception damages autonomy because the betrayed partner cannot make informed decisions about sexual health, finances, residence, or whether to remain in the marriage. A person may consent to intimacy believing the relationship is exclusive when it is not. The adulterous partner therefore controls information that properly belongs within shared decision-making. This does not mean every private thought must be disclosed or that spouses own one another's sexuality. It means that consent to a relationship depends on material facts defined by the couple's commitments. Sustained deception can be morally serious even when no public scandal or immediate economic loss occurs (Steinbock, 1986; Scales et al., 2010).

Emotional Harm

Discovery of infidelity can produce grief, anger, humiliation, anxiety, depression, intrusive thoughts, and loss of confidence in personal judgment. These effects are not universal and do not prove that adultery is always the worst harm in a marriage, but they show why describing it as a purely private sexual choice is incomplete. The betrayed partner may have invested years in a shared narrative that is suddenly reinterpreted. The harm can be intensified when friends or relatives knew, when gaslighting occurred, or when the affair involved a close relationship. Moral responsibility depends partly on foreseeability: a person who knows that secrecy would devastate a partner cannot treat the outcome as an accidental misunderstanding (Fife et al., 2008; Vanderheiden & Mayer, 2017).

Sexual Health and Reproductive Risk

The original essay argues that adultery leads to sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancy, and abortion. These are possible consequences, not necessary features of every case.

Risk depends on sexual practices, contraception, testing, disclosure, and number of partners. The ethical issue becomes especially serious when a person exposes a spouse to infection or reproductive consequences without informed consent. Public-health facts strengthen the argument for honesty and safer behavior, but they do not by themselves prove that adultery should be criminalized. Consensual nonmarital sex can carry similar biological risks, while deception can be wrong even when no infection or pregnancy occurs. Health concerns supplement rather than replace the promise-based analysis (Steinbock, 1986).

Children and Family Stability

Infidelity can affect children when it contributes to conflict, separation, financial instability, divided loyalties, or disruption of caregiving. Adults may also expose children to details or ask them to take sides. Yet it is inaccurate to assume that preserving every marriage after adultery is automatically best for children. Some couples rebuild trust, some separate cooperatively, and others remain in chronically hostile households. The moral evaluation should focus on how adults handle responsibility after discovery. Children need truthful age-appropriate explanations, protection from blame, stable routines, and continued safe relationships. The existence of family consequences makes adultery socially significant, but those consequences vary and cannot be reduced to one inevitable outcome (Fife et al., 2008; Scales et al., 2010).

Gender and Historical Double Standards

Adultery laws and customs have often treated men's and women's behavior differently. In many societies, a wife's infidelity was punished more severely because marriage was connected with inheritance, paternity, and male control of women's sexuality. A husband's extramarital conduct might be tolerated unless it threatened another man's household. Modern moral analysis should reject this double standard. If the wrong is deception or breach of mutual commitment, the principle applies regardless of gender. It should also apply to same-sex marriages and to any partner whose conduct violates agreed boundaries. Equal treatment does not require ignoring differences in power, economic dependence, or vulnerability; it requires that moral rules not be built on ownership of one spouse by another (Brake, 2012; Scales et al., 2010).

Religious and Secular Reasoning

Many religious traditions condemn adultery as a violation of sacred covenant, and believers may reasonably interpret marriage through those commitments. A philosophical argument addressed to a plural society, however, should also explain the wrong in terms accessible to people who do not share one theology. Promise, honesty, autonomy, harm, and fairness provide such reasons. Religious language can deepen the meaning of fidelity for adherents without serving as the sole basis for

criminal law. Conversely, secular reasoning should not dismiss religious commitments as irrational private preferences. For many couples, faith is part of the promise they made. Ethical evaluation is strongest when it recognizes both the specific covenant and the general moral principles involved (Steinbock, 1986; Scales et al., 2010).

Privacy and State Power

Calling adultery private does not mean it is morally harmless. It means that intimate conduct occurs in a sphere where government intrusion requires strong justification. Criminal law uses investigation, prosecution, public judgment, and punishment. Applying those powers to consensual adult sexual behavior can create selective enforcement, blackmail, discrimination, and invasive evidence gathering. The state may protect property, custody, support, and safety without criminalizing every breach of marital trust. Divorce law can consider financial misconduct in limited contexts, and civil or professional rules may address conflicts involving supervisors, clients, or public duties. The question is proportionality: does punishment prevent harm more effectively than less coercive responses? (Steinbock, 1986; Brake, 2012).

Why Criminalization Is Difficult to Defend

A criminal adultery rule faces problems of definition and equality. Must intercourse occur, or do digital and emotional affairs count? Does an open marriage create a defense? How will consent between spouses be proved? Enforcement may target women, minorities, political opponents, or people whose relationships become public while others remain private. Criminalization can also discourage honest disclosure or counseling. Serious wrongdoing does not automatically require a criminal statute; betrayal by a friend, cruel parenting, or many forms of dishonesty may be morally severe without leading to imprisonment. Steinbock's distinction between moral condemnation and legal prohibition is therefore persuasive, even for readers who believe adultery is deeply wrong (Steinbock, 1986).

Cases That Involve Additional Wrongs

Some affairs contain conduct that is independently coercive or abusive. A supervisor may exploit authority over an employee, a therapist may violate professional boundaries, a partner may use shared money secretly, or a person may knowingly transmit infection. These cases should not be treated as "mere adultery." The law and professional ethics can address harassment, assault, exploitation, fraud, misuse of funds, child neglect, or public corruption. Separating the wrongs improves accountability because it avoids assuming that the sexual label captures everything. It also prevents consensual relationships between adults from being punished simply because outsiders disapprove. Ethical analysis should identify the actual violation and the person harmed rather than rely on scandal (Steinbock, 1986; Scales et al., 2010).

Repair after Infidelity

Moral judgment should include responsibility after wrongdoing. Repair may require ending deception, disclosing relevant health information, testing, accepting consequences, answering questions without manipulation, and allowing the betrayed partner genuine choice about the future. Couples therapy can help when both partners participate voluntarily and safety is present. Forgiveness is not owed on demand, and reconciliation is not proof that the act was minor. Separation is not proof that the relationship failed completely. The goal of repair is to restore agency and truth, whether the marriage continues or ends. A person who focuses only on being excused repeats the original problem by treating the partner's response as something to control (Fife et al., 2008).

Evaluating Steinbock's Argument

Steinbock is right to resist vague claims that adultery is wrong merely because most people dislike it. Her strongest contribution is the demand for a reason that explains both the wrong and the proper social response. Promise-breaking and deception provide that reason more convincingly than general claims about changing sexual behavior. The original critique is also correct that practical consequences deserve attention, but it overstates them as automatic and uses them to move too quickly toward legal restriction. Steinbock's argument is strongest when it separates moral blame from criminalization. It would be improved by fuller attention to unequal power, sexual health, children, and the diversity of contemporary relationship agreements (Steinbock, 1986; Brake, 2012).

Conclusion

Adultery is morally wrong in typical monogamous marriages because it violates a commitment, deceives a partner, undermines informed consent, and foreseeably risks emotional, financial, sexual, and family harm. The wrong is not defined by gender, nor is every form of intimacy outside marriage identical. Consensual nonmonogamy changes the promise, while affairs involving coercion or fraud contain additional violations. Steinbock's analysis correctly challenges the assumption that moral wrongdoing must become a crime. Criminal adultery laws are difficult to define, intrusive to enforce, and vulnerable to inequality. Fidelity should be supported through honest agreements, responsibility, counseling, and fair civil rules rather than through a state claim to police every private betrayal (Steinbock, 1986; Brake, 2012; Fife et al., 2008).

Works Cited

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