

Why Sexual Morality May be Far More Important than You Ever Thought

[Kirk Durston](#) Dec 1

The Proposal by Sir Alma Tadema, 1892

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One winter afternoon I was relaxing with a half-dozen fellow graduate philosophy students discussing theories of law and punishment. About an hour into the discussion, it occurred to me that some moral laws might limit pleasure and enjoyment in the short term but in the long term minimize suffering and maximize human fulfillment.

A few days ago I finished studying [Sex and Culture](#) for the second time. It is a remarkable book summarizing a lifetime of research by Oxford social anthropologist J.D. Unwin.[1] The 600+ page book is, in Unwin's words, only a "summary" of his research—seven volumes would be required to lay it all out.[2] His writings suggest he was a rationalist, believing that science is our ultimate tool of inquiry (it appears he was not a religious man). As I went through what he found, I was repeatedly reminded of the thought I had as a philosophy student: some moral laws may be designed to minimize human suffering and maximize human flourishing long term.

Unwin examines the data from 86 societies and civilizations to see if there is a relationship between sexual freedom and the flourishing of cultures. What makes the book especially interesting is that we in the West underwent a sexual revolution in the late 1960's, 70's, and 80's and are now in a position

to test the conclusions he arrived at more than 40 years earlier.

Unwin's cultural categories

Unwin described four “great patterns of human culture” and degrees of flourishing measured in terms of architecture, art, engineering, literature, agriculture, and so forth. The primary criterion for classification was how they related to the natural world and the forces it contains.[3]

1. **zoistic:** Entirely self-focussed on day-to day-life, wants, and needs, with no interest in understanding nature. Described as a “dead culture” or “inert”.
2. **monistic:** Acquire superstitious beliefs and/or special treatment of the dead to cope with the natural world.
3. **deistic:** Attribute the powers of nature to a god or gods
4. **rationalistic:** Use rational thinking to understand nature and to make day-to-day decisions.

Unwin's degrees of sexual restraint

Degrees of sexual restraint were divided into two major categories—prenuptial and postnuptial. Prenuptial categories were:[4]

1. **Complete sexual freedom**—no prenuptial restraints at all
2. **Irregular or occasional restraint**— cultural regulations require an occasional period of abstinence
3. **Strict Chastity** —remain a virgin until married

Postnuptial categories were:[5]

1. **Modified monogamy:** one spouse at a time, but association can be terminated by either party.
2. **Modified polygamy:** men can have more than one wife, but a wife is free to leave her husband.
3. **Absolute monogamy:** only one spouse permitted for life (or until death in some cultures)
4. **Absolute polygamy:** men can have more than one wife, but wives must “confine their sexual qualities (i.e., activity) to their husband for the whole of their lives.”

So what did he find?

Hesperus, the evening star, sacred to lovers by Joseph Noel Paton, 1857

I have prepared a 26-page collection of quotes from his book that summarize his findings (2), but even that would leave you with a significant under-appreciation of the rigour and fascinating details revealed in data from 86 cultures. Here are a few of his most significant findings:

1. **Effect of sexual constraints:** Increased sexual constraints, either pre or post-nuptial, always led to increased flourishing of a culture. Conversely, increased sexual freedom always led to the collapse of a culture three generations later.
2. **Single most influential factor:** Surprisingly, the data revealed that the single most important correlation with the flourishing of a culture was whether pre-nuptial chastity was required or not. It had a very significant effect either way.

3. **Highest flourishing of culture:** The most powerful combination was pre-nuptial chastity coupled with “absolute monogamy”. Rationalist cultures that retained this combination for at least three generations exceeded all other cultures in every area, including literature, art, science, furniture, architecture, engineering, and agriculture. Only three out of the eighty-six cultures studied ever attained this level.
4. **Effect of abandoning prenuptial chastity:** When strict prenuptial chastity was no longer the norm, absolute monogamy, deism, and rational thinking also disappeared within three generations.
5. **Total sexual freedom:** If total sexual freedom was embraced by a culture, that culture collapsed within three generations to the lowest state of flourishing — which Unwin describes as “inert” and at a “dead level of conception” and is characterized by people who have little interest in much else other than their own wants and needs. At this level, the culture is usually conquered or taken over by another culture with greater social energy.
6. **Time lag:** If there is a change in sexual constraints, either increased or decreased restraints, the full effect of that change is not realized until the third generation. (**Note:** I’ve added a clarifying footnote at the end of this article. See footnote #13)

How does this compare with our culture today?

Unwin published his findings in 1934, long before the sexual revolution that occurred in the West. We now have an opportunity to test his conclusions by observing if our own culture is following the predicted pattern. Unwin’s “generation” appears to be approximately 33 years, so it should take about a century for us to see the cultural changes take full effect, but we are far

enough along in the process that we should be able to observe certain predicted effects.

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Prior to the sexual revolution which began in the late 1960's, prenuptial chastity was still held in strong regard by Western culture. But, starting in the 1970's, pre-marital sexual freedom became increasingly acceptable. By the early 2000's, the majority of teens were sexually active, to the extent that remaining a virgin until marriage was regarded with disbelief if not ridicule. At the same time, our culture moved from a social norm of absolute monogamy to "modified monogamy".

Unwin's predictions for our culture



Thanks to the rationalist generations that preceded them, the first generation of a society setting aside its sexual restraints can still enjoy its new-found sexual freedom before any significant decline in culture, but the data shows that this “having your cake and eating it too” phase lasts a maximum of one generation before the decline sets in. Unwin wrote:

The history of these societies consists of a series of monotonous repetitions; and it is difficult to decide which aspect of the story is the more significant: the lamentable lack of original thought which in each case the reformers displayed, or the amazing alacrity with which, after a period of intense compulsory continence (sexual restraint), the human organism seizes the earliest opportunity to satisfy its innate desires in a direct or perverted manner. Sometimes a man has been heard to declare that he wishes both to enjoy the advantages of high culture and to abolish

compulsory continence. The inherent nature of the human organism, however, seems to be such that these desires are incompatible, even contradictory. The reformer may be likened to the foolish boy who desires both to keep his cake and to consume it. Any human society is free to choose either to display great energy or to enjoy sexual freedom; the evidence is that it cannot do both for more than one generation. [6]

Looking at our own sexual revolution, the “having your cake and eating it too” phase would have lasted into the early 2000’s. We are now at a stage where we should begin to observe the verification or falsification of Unwin’s predictions.

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Unwin found that when strict prenuptial chastity was abandoned, absolute monogamy, deism, and rational thinking disappeared within three generations of the change in sexual freedom. So how are we doing as we enter the second generation since our own sexual revolution at the end of the 20th century?

1. **As predicted, absolute monogamy has already been replaced with modified monogamy.** Common-law relationships are becoming the norm. Although divorce occurred prior to the 1970’s, the mainstream of our culture still maintained the view that marriage should be for life, and common-law relationships were regarded with some distaste. That has clearly changed. Those who actually practice life-long commitments in marriage have become the minority, with couples born prior to the sexual revolution much more likely to maintain a life-long commitment in marriage.

2. **Deism is already rapidly declining, exactly as predicted.** Prior to the 1960's, a combination of rationalism and a belief in God was the norm for mainstream culture. Not only has belief in God greatly decreased since the 1960's, but there has been a trend to remove the concept of God from government, the educational system, and the public forum. Those who still believe in God sense a strong societal pressure to keep deistic beliefs private. In its place, is a surprising rise in superstition,[7] classified by Unwin as a "monistic" culture, two levels down from the rationalist culture we had prior to the sexual revolution. There has also been a huge increase in the percentage of the population that classifies itself as non-religious, a symptom of the lowest, "zoistic" level of Unwin's categories.[8]

3. **The swiftness with which rational thinking declined after the 1970's is astounding.** In its place arose post-modernism, characterized by "scepticism, subjectivism, or relativism" and "a general suspicion of reason".[9] But it gets worse ... post-modernism is giving way to "post truth". In direct contrast to rational thinking, a post-truth culture abandons "shared objective standards for truth" and instead, stands on appeals to feelings and emotions, and what one wants to believe.[10] People can now "identify" themselves as something which flat-out contradicts science and rational thinking and, in many cases, receive the full support and backing of governments and educational systems. Not only do people feel they have a right to believe what they want, but any challenge to that belief, even if supported by truth and logic, is unacceptable and offensive. Here is a quote from Unwin that has become particularly *a propos* in the last couple decades since our own sexual revolution ...

If I were asked to define a sophist, I should describe him as a man whose conclusion does not follow from his premise. Sophistry is appreciated

only by those among whom human entropy is disappearing; they mistake it for sound reasoning. It flourishes among those people who have extended their sexual opportunity after a period of intense compulsory continence. [11]

Summary of where our culture is going, given Unwin's findings

For the first part of the 1900's, mainstream Western culture was rationalist and experienced enormous technological advances — from horse-and-buggy to cars; from hot air balloons to supersonic flight and spacecraft landing people on the moon; from slide rules to computers. Unwin's three main predictions — the abandonment of rationalism, deism, and absolute monogamy — are all well underway, which makes the ultimate prediction appear to be credible ... the collapse of Western civilization in the third generation, somewhere in the last third of this century.

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Will our culture be the exception?

I suppose we can hope, but there is always a tendency to want to believe "it cannot happen to us." Unwin describes this attitude as a "pardonable egocentricity" and a "quaint and comfortable doctrine", that flies in the face of data, which indicate that the pattern of decline happens with "monotonous" regularity. That's another way of saying that "insanity is doing the same thing yet again but expecting different results." The primary

predictions are already unfolding with alarming “alacrity”.

Why is there such a “monotonous” perfect inverse correlation?

The old adage, “correlation does not entail causation”, probably holds true here as well. Unwin makes it clear that he does not know why sexual freedom directly leads to the decline and collapse of cultures, although he suggests that when sexual energy is restrained through celibacy or monogamy, it is diverted into more productive social energy.

Perhaps, but I find it difficult to accept it as a primary cause. Mary Eberstadt’s recent research into mass killings, the substantial rise in mental health issues including depression, and the explosion of identity politics is a “primal scream” due to the loss of identity that was once provided by growing up in a long-term, immediate family with siblings and a sizable group of cousins, aunts and uncles, all of which provided identity—essential for well-being. Eberstadt shows and documents from various studies that this decimation of the family was a direct consequence of the sexual revolution at the end of the 20th century.[11]

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Her research indicates that increased sexual freedom led to the decimation of the family, which resulted in the loss of family identity, which produces Eberstadt’s ‘primal screams’—a massive increase in mental health issues, mass killings, and the rise of extreme identity groups at war with each other ... all symptoms of a society rapidly spiraling into collapse. This appears to

have greater explanatory power than Unwin's psychological suggestion, although the two may actually be closely related, given what Eberstadt shows.

Both Unwin and Eberstadt provide substantial evidence that a sexual revolution has long-term, devastating consequences for culture and civilization. As Unwin states, "The history of these societies consists of a series of monotonous repetitions," and it appears that our civilization is following the same, well-travelled road to collapse.

Back to the philosophical thought

So back to that afternoon in the philosophy seminar when it occurred to me that some moral laws will seem to limit human pleasure in the short term, but will prevent great suffering or maximize happiness and fulfillment in the long term. For years, it has been my thinking that God's moral laws are not simply a bunch of arbitrary rules given to restrict mankind's freedom. Instead, they are like operating instructions designed to spare people from suffering while maximizing human flourishing. Unwin's and Eberstadt's research provides strong rational justification for the inference that God's moral laws pertaining to our sexuality, although they may restrain us from some immediate pleasure, protect us from enormous long-term suffering while maximizing our long term flourishing.



Note: If you enjoyed this article, you may be interested in another article Kirk has written, [‘What Does it Mean to be Human: Vastly More than You can Imagine’](#).

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References and Notes:

1. A downloadable, pdf version of Unwin's *Sex and Culture* [is available here](#).

2. I have prepared a [26-page summary in the form of a collection of quotes](#) that can provide a more detailed understanding of Unwin's book, but it is highly recommended that the reader, at minimum, at least skim Unwin's book to get a better idea of the rigour and breadth of his research, as well as some of the many examples the data provides.
3. See section 7, Unwin, page 13 for a fuller understanding of these terms.
4. Unwin, page 341.
5. Unwin, page 342
6. Unwin, page 412
7. See, for example, Stuart Vyse, ['Why are millennials turning to astrology?'](#), *Skeptical Inquirer*, 2018. and Denyse O'Leary, ['As traditionalism declines, superstition—not atheism—is the big winner'](#), *Intellectual Takeout*, 2018.
8. **Note:** A non-religious culture is not necessarily an atheistic culture. They do not deny or accept the existence of God or gods. Rather, belief in a god or gods is simply not part of their lives; it is irrelevant.
9. Britannica, ['Postmodernism'](#).
10. [Description of Post Truth](#)
11. Unwin, page 413
12. Mary Eberstadt, *Primal Screams: How the sexual revolution created identity politics*.
13. A loosening of sexual constraints probably does not occur in one year or even one decade. In our case, one could argue that the sexual

revolution began in the late 1960's, lasted throughout the 70's and possibly into the early 1980's. According to Unwin, only small changes in a culture occur in the first generation, due to the cultural 'momentum' of the previous generation, which still continues to be a heavy influence in the generation after the loosening (or strengthening) of sexual restraints. The changes become more prevalent in the second generation, but it is not until the third generation, after the initial generation has completely died off, that the changes reach their full effect, occurring rapidly over the course of that third generation. By the end of the third generation, the changes have fully taken place and the culture stabilizes at its new level. However, if it has stabilized at the highest level, then the flourishing of that culture continues to increase in subsequent generations (though Unwin observes that no culture maintains that state very long). If it has stabilized at the lowest level (i.e., a "collapse"), then that culture is destroyed from within, or conquered or taken over by a more "energetic" culture.