

A Philosophical Reflection on Marriage and the Family

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The Current State of Affairs

We live in times when there is a great deal of confusion, even among those who profess themselves to be Christian, over two of the most elementary realities of our lives as human beings—marriage and the family. In the minds of many, the unquestionable has become questionable, the presumably permanently established now seems uncertain in its stability. That the confusion regarding one, marriage, carries over to confusion regarding the other, the family, is to be expected, for the two are inseparable, as an edifice is inseparable from the foundation on which it stands. But a distinction needs to be made with respect to the confusion that today whirls about these two critically important matters, a distinction between what I will call involuntary confusion and voluntary confusion. Involuntary confusion is the kind experienced by, say, an average Catholic layperson, someone who may never have made it a practice to think seriously about the nature of marriage and the family, but who now cannot help but give them some attention because they seem to be everywhere talked about. From the secular media he receives a steady stream of opinions on these subjects, the general gist of which he finds disconcerting, for they contradict what he has always thought to be the traditional Catholic understanding of marriage and the family. Things become worse for him when he hears disorienting opinions on these subjects coming from high officials within the Church. Such is the plight of the person beset by involuntary confusion regarding marriage and the family, whose unfortunate situation is exacerbated by the fact that, hampered by an imperfect knowledge of his faith because he has since his youth been deprived of an adequate catechesis, he lacks the wherewithal to give an intelligent response to the erroneous ideas that charge the atmosphere of the world in which we now live.

Someone who is in the state of voluntary confusion regarding marriage and the family represents an entirely different situation. He is not the passive victim of his confusion, but its author; his is a confusion which is self-generated, and which he actively fosters. To be sure, his is a real confusion, as measured against reality, for the ideas he entertains about the nature of marriage and the family are, objectively considered, clearly erroneous. But, subjectively considered, he is not confused, for he is convinced in his own mind that the ideas he entertains are quite correct and entirely defensible, and he will often cling to them with stubborn, closed-minded tenacity. Voluntary confusion regarding marriage and the family follows upon and is explained, on the most basic level, by a general alienation from objective reality. A person in this state can firmly believe, for example, that what he calls marriage can be contracted between two men, or between two women, or what he chooses to designate as a family can be headed by two fathers, or by two mothers. I identify the mental state which is the source of such bizarre ideas as confusion, and it is all of that, but it is really, at bottom, a kind of madness, if by madness we mean to characterize that condition which rejects, which even militantly opposes the way things have been constituted by nature. The grossly distorted ideas regarding marriage and the family which are now widely countenanced in contemporary society, are best explained, in the broadest terms, as an expression

of an open war against reality itself. This war against reality takes the specific form of explicitly rejecting the notion that there is an objective moral order, which finds precise expression in a universal moral law, what we call the natural law. Some of the voluntarily confused harbor an implicit rejection of an objective physical order, that is, a material universe firmly set in place and governed by fixed laws. These people are prepared to believe that even the physical realm is open to the alterations, inspired by ideology or mere whim, of contumacious man. Because of a deeply entrenched obtuseness regarding the very concept of nature, if not an outright repudiation of the concept, the notion that something could be *contra naturam*, against nature, is well-nigh unintelligible to the mind-set I am describing here. How could anything be against nature, if there is not a nature to go against? How could anything be morally disordered, if there is no established moral order?

Those who today entertain twisted ideas concerning marriage and the family are not mere theoreticians. Karl Marx proclaimed that the business of philosophy was not to understand the world but to change it. These people can be called Marxist at least in the sense that a key objective of their war against reality is to reconstitute that reality: this takes the specific form of attempting to change the very meaning of marriage and the family, so that, in their minds, they cease to be what they were and are made into something entirely new. If one does not acknowledge that there is a permanently fixed reality, then everything is as so much putty in the manipulating hands of man, to make of things whatever he wills. The principle of contradiction is simply ignored, as if having no applications to the actions of these dedicated militants.

Those who strive to reconstitute reality, in their frontal attacks against it, may represent a relatively small coterie when measured against the size of the general population, but they nonetheless wield a disproportionately large amount of power, and that is because they have potent allies among those who are the governors and the shapers of today's secularized society.

The project of redefining marriage and the family to suit the proclivities of aberrant "lifestyles" receives continuous, warm, and virtually unanimous support from the media, which apparently now see it as their role, not simply to report the news, but to be active agents in making it, by contributing to the bringing about of a kind of social change which is gradually effecting the unraveling of man as man. The entertainment industry in the United States, with its epicenter in Hollywood, not only gives full and enthusiastic support to the ideas representing the new ways of mis-thinking about marriage and the family, but was in good part the originating source of many of those ideas. The possible adverse influence exercised by powerful media like the cinema and television, especially as they affect the young, cannot be exaggerated. Finally, there is a significant number of politicians, irrespective of party, who are publically sympathetic toward those who have shown themselves to be the enemies of marriage and the family, though with what degree of conviction they display that sympathy it is not easy to determine. Being politicians, some of them may have simply followed the expedient of setting their sails to catch the way the wind is now blowing. In any event, even those politicians who are clearly behind the new agenda often prefer to adopt subtle ways of advancing it.

One of the most potent weapons available to those who are making war on reality is language, and they are taking full advantage of its unique power. If marriage and the family are under siege, language, because it has been dragged into the conflict by the aggressors on behalf of their cause, is itself now being severely battered and bruised. Newspeak has become something like a lingua franca in contemporary culture, and those warring against marriage and the family have become positively fluent in it. Newspeak, you might recall, is the language, or perhaps I should say anti-language, that George Orwell introduced to us in his memorable novel, *1984*. It is the official language of the totalitarian regime ruled over by Big Brother and the Party, in which Winston, the protagonist of the novel, finds himself trapped. The whole purpose of Newspeak is to turn language, and the meaning it is intended to convey, inside out, to force words onto a Procrustean bed and so mutilate them that the conventional sign which is the word is made to point in just the opposite direction from that in which it was meant to point. Thus, up becomes down, right becomes left, big becomes small. The words “marriage” and “family” have meanings which are firmly fixed, invariable, and entirely unambiguous. Those meanings do not derive their force from mere convention, but are grounded in ontology, as I hope to make clear as we proceed. The meanings of those words have been assigned to them, so to speak, not by men, but by nature. Therefore, to attempt to apply them to arrangements to which they do not apply and can never apply, is to do blatant violence to language. In the opening pages of *1984* we observe the protagonist Winston staring up at the huge pyramidal structure which houses the Ministry of Truth (“minitruue” as it has been shortened by popular and perspicacious usage), and he sees emblazoned near the top of the building the three slogans of the Party:

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

In light of the anti-language to which we are too often being subjected in contemporary discourse, could there not be added, by way of bringing Winston’s not yet fully progressive world up to date, the following slogans:

ABORTION IS LIFE

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY ARE WHAT BIG BROTHER SAYS THEY ARE While my principal concern is with the efforts to reconstitute reality as those efforts are directed specifically at marriage and the family, it should be noted that the phenomenon is rather large in scope and is manifested in any number of ways. We live in a world that has taught itself to be uncomfortable with the God-given, and is determined to replace it with the calculated reconstructions of man. For decades now we have been witnessing the steadily increasing growth of top-heavy central governments, a goodly portion of which is bureaucratic in make-up, which have arrogated to themselves increasingly broader ranges of power, a power too often exercised by engaging in ideologically driven social engineering which is pronouncedly secularistic in intent. Here we have at work efforts to reconstitute reality on the grand scale. This phenomenon is not unrelated to the subject of this paper, for what many governments have effectively been

doing, in pursuing their secularizing aims, is laying down laws—frequently administrative rather than legislative in origin—that serve directly to undermine traditional, and specifically Christian, understandings of marriage and the family. It would seem that a clearly anti-family attitude is an integral aspect of the secularizing project, for in the state’s efforts to marginalize religion—to render the public square naked of any religious influence, in the poignant imagery of Father Richard Neuhaus—it thus seeks to deprive marriage of its most dedicated protector. And then there is the spectacle of a judiciary which, having abandoned its proper role of interpreting the law, has taken upon itself the task of making law, and in doing so—I am thinking specifically of the situation in the United States—has, by judicial fiat, contributed mightily to bringing about a pervasive transformation in sexual mores. The Supreme Court speaks, and suddenly it is perfectly legal to kill innocent human life; the Supreme Court speaks, and a perfect mockery is made of marriage.

Explanation of the Current State of Affairs

Such then is the situation in which we find ourselves. I would like now to offer some explanations, coming from a distinctly philosophical point of view, which I believe can help us better understand the situation, and by better understanding it, more effectively deal with it. These explanations, given their philosophical perspective, will necessarily be limited in scope, and other explanations, coming from other perspectives, may prove to be more fully satisfactory, but I must leave alternative approaches to others, for it would be presumptuous of me to range too freely beyond the boundaries of my competence. The merits of the approach I am taking here is grounded in my conviction that the distorted notions of marriage and the family we have to deal with today have their root sources in philosophy. How is this so? Let us begin by considering philosophy in very general terms, as the science which has directly to do with ideas, the potency of which we ignore at our peril. In 1945 a professor at the University of Chicago, Richard Weaver, published a remarkable book entitled *Ideas Have Consequences*, in which he compellingly traced out any number of important implications of the message conveyed by the book’s title. Those who think that philosophy, the ideas promulgated by this or that particular philosophy, have no influence on the “real world,” should pause and think again. Abraham Lincoln once quipped that “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.” While admitting to the relevance of that homey truth, we might suggest a modest addition to the world’s store of folk wisdom by making the less poetic but nonetheless defensible assertion that “the hand that writes philosophy books either nourishes or poisons the human mind.” The elementary principle we rely on here is the fact that, by and large, we human beings act according to how we think. If our minds are well stored with good ideas, ideas that are resonant with truth, then our actions, the way we generally guide our lives, will ring with rectitude. My basic thesis, which I will first put in general terms, is this: the bad ideas regarding marriage and the family, bad ideas which inspire and fuel benighted action, have their source in bad philosophy, philosophy which has distanced itself from the truth of things. Bad philosophy, then, the particulars of which I will presently delineate, I cite as the remote, or fundamental, cause of the problems we are now dealing with.

But before pursuing that matter, it is well that we should first take note of what is the most prominent proximate cause of the twisted ideas regarding marriage and the family that pollute

contemporary culture. I am referring to the infamous sexual revolution of the 1960s, which was the turbulent source of the massive mis-thinking regarding almost every aspect of human sexuality, now become the common fare of a culture which, spiritually, has undergone drastic emaciation. The sexual revolution is adequately explicable only when it is directly related to the tumultuous decade out of which it emerged. The decade of the Sixties proved to be a critical turning point in modern Western culture. It was then that the phenomenon of hyper-individualism, which had been a growing problem within the culture since the eighteenth century, joining hands with a mindless hedonism, gave rise to an unseemly movement which had all the marks of a religious cult. In the wake of the sexual revolution, we now have in the United States a society which is beset by a monomaniacal obsession with all things sexual, a society seemingly in a state of arrested adolescence. It was a successful revolution, for it overthrew traditional sexual mores, or at least managed severely to curb what had once been their pronounced public influence. Common decency gave way to decadence, modesty to brazen shamelessness on full display. But “successful” revolutions tend not to elicit our unqualified approbation, for as history has shown again and again, what they effect is in almost every case a disastrous diminishment of what they revolted against, and the second state is decidedly worse than the first. And so it was with the sexual revolution. The “sexual liberation” which it sought produced nothing but that delusory state which follows upon the attempt to free oneself from the rule of reason. The recommended *modus vivendi* was the very soul of mindlessness: Give free rein to the passions, and let the chips fall where they may. The author David French, in a recent public address, made the pointed observation that the heart of the Culture War we are now engaged in is not the conflict between so-called gay rights and religious freedom; that, he argues, is but a specific manifestation of a larger and more consequential struggle—between the sexual revolution and Christianity. I think he is quite right. The sexual revolution was, in effect, a direct attack against Christian morality as it applies to human sexuality. The vulgar results of the revolution were entirely predictable, for instead of elevating human sexuality, as it supposed it was doing, it has degraded and trivialized it. We trivialize something when we rob it of its central seriousness and innate dignity, a dignity that is grounded in its ontological finality. In sum, what the vaunted sexual revolution did for human sexuality was to estrange it from the human.

To repeat the basic thesis I am proposing here, I assert that the bad ideas now current regarding marriage and the family have their ultimate cause in bad philosophy. Now, to state that thesis in more specific terms, I identify that bad philosophy as philosophical idealism. Philosophical idealism is not a particular philosophical system, like Hegelianism, or Marxism, or Pragmatism; rather, it is an overriding mode of thinking, reflecting a peculiar way of looking at the world, which finds expression in any number of particular philosophical systems. For example, the aforementioned Hegelianism would be a prime example of an idealist philosophy. Philosophical idealism stands in stark contrast to philosophical realism. These two grand modes of human reasoning represent two radically different and exhaustive ways of looking at the world and interpreting reality. Every particular philosophical system, ancient or modern, Eastern or Western, is either predominantly idealist or predominantly realist in orientation.

What is philosophical idealism, what are the salient features of this general mode of reasoning? As suggested by its name, philosophical idealism focuses on ideas, gives primacy of place to them. If I am a dedicated philosophical idealist, I put more stock in my ideas of things than I do in the things themselves. My idea of pine tree, or person, has a way of taking precedence, for me, over the pine tree and the person. The direct psychological result of this habit of giving preferential treatment to ideas is subjectivism, which is the habit of emphasizing the subjective realm at the expense of the objective realm. There is an extreme form of idealism called solipsism which denies the very existence of an objective realm, but that need not concern us here. In any event, the average idealist does not go that far, but his marked tendency is to display scepticism pertaining to various aspects of the objective realm. He is most comfortable dwelling within the subjective realm, the world of his mind, and is not given to the habit of consulting the external world to ascertain the truth of things. One of the explanations for the subjectivism which is part and parcel of philosophical idealism relates to the doctrine of innate ideas, traceable back to its very origins. The doctrine has it that ideas can be in effect permanent features of the mind, and need owe nothing, in terms of their origin, to the external world. By way of contrast, one of the rock bottom epistemological principles of philosophical realism holds that every idea we entertain in our minds has its ultimate source outside the mind. Philosophical idealism, for its part, begs to differ on this critical point, and maintains that there are certain foundational ideas that we are born with; they are part of the original furniture of the mind. Those ideas do not derive from our experiences with the world; rather, they precede those experiences, and are a significant factor in shaping those experiences for us, rendering coherent what otherwise would be chaotic. Given its belief in innate ideas, ideas which, again, do not have their roots in the world, idealism is then tempted to flirt with the possibility that just from those ideas we can generate other ideas, so that over time we can develop a whole family of ideas that are entirely “in house,” the products of the mind alone and not beholden to the objective realm. This way of thinking serves only to accentuate the difference between the subjective realm and the objective realm, while consistently favoring the former. One of the reasons philosophical idealism is reluctant to adopt the position which says that we owe our ideas to information we received from the external world is the skepticism it has nurtured, again from the very beginning, regarding the reliability of sense knowledge, the very means, in fact, by which we gain information about the external world. If I cannot trust what my senses are telling me, the idealist reasons, and if, according to the realists, sense knowledge is supposedly the source of my ideas, then my ideas themselves would be altogether unreliable. But I am convinced that my ideas are quite reliable; therefore, they cannot be dependent on sense knowledge.

Because of the subjectivism that goes hand in hand with idealism, epistemological relativism, which relativizes truth in general, inevitably follows. If someone believes that the germinal sources of his ideas are to be found in his own mind rather than in the world outside the mind, then the same must be true for others as well. Given that state of affairs, there is then no common ground, no shared territory, by reference to which the matter could be settled if one mind says that X is true and another mind says that X is false. Truth becomes something which is relative to individuals; we must then waive a melancholy goodbye to the notion of objective truth. Once epistemological relativism is in place, moral relativism, relativism pertaining specifically to the

question of the goodness or badness of human behavior, follows hard upon it. If we cannot be certain about truth in general, we cannot be certain about truth as it relates to moral matters. The skeptical attitude philosophical idealism takes toward sense knowledge, combined with its penchant for believing in innate ideas, can make it vulnerable to entertaining doubts about the specific make-up of the external world. Is it in fact as it seems? Am I seeing the world as it actually is, or is the world a construct, an invention, of my seeing it, combined with my thinking about my seeing it? That line of reasoning, fanciful though it might seem, reflects the thought of some of the most famous scientists of modern times. Idealism is by no means restricted to philosophers, and it is part of my thesis that, though it owes its theoretical formulations to an intellectual elite, the ideas they spawn trickle down and eventually dampen the general population.

What can we now say of philosophical realism? If philosophical idealism starts with ideas, and never manages to get completely beyond them, philosophical realism, for its part, begins with things, real entities which exist in a realm external to and independent of the human mind. Realist philosophy takes its departure from the common sense conviction that there is a real world out there, and we have real knowledge of that world. Philosophical realism does not succumb to an unfounded skepticism regarding sense knowledge. We can trust our senses implicitly; they put us in immediate and sure contact with the external world. However, while not making ideas the principal and proper concern of the human mind, as is the way of idealism, realism does not in the least bit diminish the critical importance of ideas, for they are recognized as the absolutely essential means by which we come to have full, that is, intellectual, knowledge of things. When St. Thomas Aquinas asks, "What is the proper object of the human intellect?" he does not answer "ideas," but "the concrete objects to which the ideas refer." It is not my idea of dog that is the focus of my knowledge, but the dog. Ideas are, to be sure, the one and only means by which we know things in the world, but they are the means, not the end, of knowledge. And they are not infallible; ideas can be unsound, and for that reason we need constantly to check them against the things which they signify. One of the key epistemological positions taken by philosophical realism is that the human mind is not the measure of things, but is measured by them. In other words, it is objective reality, not the human mind, that sets the standards. Realism roundly rejects the notion of innate ideas, and holds that all of our ideas have their origins in sense knowledge. An idea is born in the mind as a response to something which is external to the mind. Whereas the mode of thought of philosophical idealism has the effect of divorcing us from the world, and in its extreme forms makes us veritable prisoners of our minds, philosophical realism is wide open to the world. The philosophical realist does not consider himself to be an alien in an alien land, but accepts with appreciation and gratitude his status as a full citizen of the universe.

A brief historical sketch of philosophical idealism as it developed in the West would be helpful. As noted earlier, these two basic modes of human thought span the world, and are to be found in both Eastern and Western cultures. A quick comment on the situation in the East. Of the two great Eastern civilizations, the Indian and the Chinese, the philosophy of India is dominantly

idealist, but in China both of the modes are distinctly present, Confucianism being in the main realist, while Taoism definitely leans toward idealism.

From the very beginnings of Western philosophy, which can be accurately placed geographically and chronologically—Greece, the 6th century B.C.—we see definite strains of both realism and idealism. Two of the greatest names of Western philosophy, and indeed of World philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, are representative figures. Plato can properly be called the father of idealist philosophy in the West, and Aristotle can be assigned the title of the father of realist philosophy. Since the time of these two great thinkers (Plato died in 348 B.C., and Aristotle in 322 B.C.), it has been pretty much a see-saw struggle between realism and idealism down through the centuries, one dominating in this era, the other holding sway in that. The Middle Ages, for example, when Scholastic philosophy came to full maturity, was dominantly realist; however, that domination began to wane in the fourteenth century. Since the advent of modern philosophy, the description given to the philosophical era which began in the mid-seventeenth century and which continues to the present, philosophical idealism has been ruling the roost. This is not to say that there are not people in the world today, even philosophers, who think realistically—all would be lost if that were not the case—but most of those who identify themselves as philosophers, and these would be almost in every case academic types, are either forthrightly idealist in their philosophic loyalties, or are sympathetic towards and in their own thinking affected by the ways of philosophic idealism. But as I have already indicated, the idealist mode of thinking is not limited to professional philosophers or to the intelligentsia, but is suffused throughout contemporary society and infects even popular culture, providing the intellectual atmosphere conducive to the generation of, among other things, the twisted ideas regarding marriage and the family that are now rampant.

René Descartes (1596-1650) is rightly regarded as the father of modern philosophy, and he gave it the deep stamp of idealism. He faithfully signed on to one of the prominent positions of traditional idealism by adopting a skeptical attitude toward sense knowledge. That led him to persuade himself that he could not be sure of anything his senses were telling him, about the goings on in the external world in general, but even as to the existence of his own body. He grandly rejected, at least in theory, the whole philosophic past; he believed that an entirely new philosophy must be created, and the way to begin this ambitious project was with systematic doubt. The would-be philosopher of the future must be prepared, at the outset, to doubt everything, even apparently something so unquestionably true as a mathematical statement like $5 + 2 = 7$. Descartes himself followed the process of systematic doubt devotedly, until he finally reached the point, after claiming along the way that he could not be sure whether he was awake or asleep and dreaming, that there was one thing that he could not doubt, namely, that there was a fellow by the name of René Descartes who was doing the doubting. The telling conclusion he came to was that the workings of his own mind were eminently trustworthy, specifically in the form of their products, what he called clear and distinct ideas—ideas that could not be doubted. He was fully committed to the reality of innate ideas.

Though Descartes was dedicated to the proposition that philosophy should begin with doubt, he was by no means an advocate of doubt just as such; the whole purpose of the employment of

systematic doubt was to overcome doubt. So, through the doubting process one eventually comes to see that, for example, the existence of the external world, which was once open to doubt, is now accepted as being really existing. That, at any rate, is how it is all supposed to work. However, it was not within the constructed confines of his philosophic system that Descartes was able to free himself of the deadening weight of doubt, but only by calling upon divine assistance, something for which the philosopher Blaise Pascal severely criticized him, accusing Descartes of making use of God as an expedient, to prop up a philosophy which otherwise would collapse of its own weight. Descartes was never able to accept the common sense position that the existence of the external world is self-evident. He was simply too much the idealist to have done that. In the final analysis, it is his ideas regarding the external world rather than the external world itself that he banks on. Instead of accepting extra-mental reality at face value, as self-evident, the idealist philosopher feels obligated to demonstrate that reality through argument. This is something he can scarcely avoid, because he cannot completely free himself from a nagging skepticism. Descartes himself believed that he had successfully emerged from the deep pit of doubt that he had dug for himself, but his own writings tell us otherwise, and he has left to modern philosophy a legacy of abiding skepticism.

Another major figure of modern philosophy whose thought we must touch upon here, for the immense influence it has had, is the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Though Kant did not harbor as sweeping a skepticism regarding sense experience as did Descartes, he did not accept the realist view that sense knowledge is the originating source of our ideas. As the stalwart idealist he was, Kant, like Descartes before him, and like Plato before the both of them, was a loyal advocate of innate ideas. He theorized that all of us possess, as part of the original furniture of the mind, a set of very basic ideas which he called the categories. These he designated as *a priori* ideas, meaning that they were not derived from our experience with the world, but rather that they precede that experience, and as applied to the world lends to it a coherence and intelligibility that it otherwise would not have. In effect, then, the human mind is not that which is measured, but it becomes the measure. One of the specific Kantian categories, or innate ideas, is causality. The realist philosopher maintains that we learn about causality, we form the idea of causality in our minds, by observing the action of real causes operating in the world. For Kant, things work in just the opposite direction. We have the innate idea of causality neatly tucked away in our minds, and we handily apply it to the external world so as to make it understandable to us in terms of causality.

Though Kant did not go as far as Descartes in questioning the reliability of sense knowledge, he nonetheless deprived it of much of its prowess. Philosophical realism holds that sense knowledge puts us in real, concrete contact with things in the world, and that is the first step toward the mind's conceiving ideas of those things, thereby coming to know their essential natures. In other words, realism says that we can know things in themselves. No, we can't, says Kant. For the philosopher from Königsberg, the human mind is permanently incapable of knowing what things are in themselves. All we can ever hope to know are the appearances of things, surface realities; inner realities are forever closed off to us. The practical effect of the Kantian version of philosophical idealism is that it creates an unbridgeable gulf between the human mind and the

world outside the mind. But if I cannot really know the essences of things in the external world, might I not then be tempted to take that world in general with less seriousness, and to want to make of it what I would like it to be?

The Operative Presence of the Idealist Mode of Thinking

Our survey of the main currents of philosophical idealism now complete, we are ready to see how they are reflected in and govern the thinking of those who strive to reconstitute marriage and the family, attempting to transform them into something they are not and can never be. May I repeat a point I made earlier, that what we find among those engaged in this project, at the most basic level, is an attitude that refuses to accept things as they are given to us by nature, such as, for example, the elementary and self-evident fact that marriage is the union of a man and a woman, the principal purpose of which is the procreation and education of children, and to substitute for that fact a chimerical alternative whose foundation is ideal, not factual. Here we have at work the operative primacy of ideas over things, of the subjective over the objective. And the substituting ideas, because they are not grounded in the world, do not reflect the natural order of things, are necessarily unsound. Rather than faithfully reflecting reality, they actually distort it. But in more cases than not this mode of thinking does not stop with distortion, but advances to simple negation, an attempt mentally to wipe out something which has real existence, and this move is followed by the mental operations of replacement and reconstitution. So, first there is the denial of the fact that marriage is what it is, the life-long union of a man and a woman, coupled with the denial that a family is what it is, a natural society made up of a father and a mother and the children they have begotten or adopted; then there is their negation, removing them from any further consideration in terms of their actual, natural identities; then, finally, there is their replacement by entirely novel understandings of the nature of marriage and the family. These novel understandings: a) stand in direct contradiction to the natural understandings of marriage and the family; b) are inherently incoherent, as common sense readily recognizes; c) have no basis whatsoever in fact, but are purely mental fabrications. They are the products of the idealist mode of thinking.

Beyond question, the homosexual movement has been a major force behind the concerted attempt to reconstitute marriage and the family. This is a fact the importance of which is not to be overlooked, for what it tells us is that the foundational ideas driving this attempt are aimed at the accomplishment of a larger and more comprehensive project—the redefinition, or reconstituting, of human sexuality itself. The intent is to reconstitute the reality of human identity at a most fundamental level. The very intelligibility of human sexuality, its natural meaning, as framed by its intrinsic finality, is being roundly repudiated. We thus have unsound ideas built upon unsound ideas.

Now, if a realist philosopher who has a genuine concern for the truth fears that his mind is burdened by unsound ideas, he has available to him a way of allaying his fears and checking on the quality of his ideas; he looks outward, to the objective order of things, and measures his ideas against the facts of nature. But one who is debilitated by the idealist mode of thinking feels no need to involve himself in such a bothersome process. What he takes to be the truth of his ideas

is self-referential, and therefore to assure himself of the soundness of his ideas all he need do is appeal to his own mind. His ideas are themselves the standard, the touchstone, for truth. That is why it is virtually impossible to argue with those who are deeply entrenched in the idealist mode of thinking. But how could one not know, we might ask, what marriage and the family are really all about, how to explain a blindness to what is so patently obvious? In answering those questions we could not reasonably rule out the possibility of a willful blindness, a deliberate refusal to see what is there to be seen, because the passions have taken over, hamstringing the free exercise of reason. But I believe the more basic answer remains the operative presence of the idealist mode of thinking. However, the two are never entirely separate, and they relate to one another symbiotically: unruly passions abet idealist thinking, and idealist thinking is ill-equipped to argue against unruly passions.

Running through the entire history of philosophical idealism there is a toxic river of skepticism with respect to man's ability to have certain knowledge about anything beyond the comfortable confines of his own mind. Recall Immanuel Kant's dogmatic declaration that we cannot know things in themselves; that means that we cannot know what they really are. And if we are ignorant on that score, how can we be sure that things have, in themselves, any permanent configurations at all? If all I know are the appearances of things, perhaps those appearances are deceptive, or at least subject to multiple and even conflicting interpretations. People tell me, the idealist says to himself, that marriage and the family have fixed natures, but the nature of things—things in themselves—are, Professor Kant says, inaccessible to me, and if that is so, how do I know there are anything like "natures" at all, which are to be acknowledged, honored, and respected? And, to get down to brass tacks, if marriage and the family have no fixed natures, if they have no intrinsic and permanent character, what is to prevent me from making them out to be whatever I want them to be?

As we have seen, idealism and subjectivism are inseparable, and subjectivism inevitably gives rise to epistemological and moral relativism. Again, subjectivism is that state of mind that gives precedence to the subjective over the objective; it is a form of egoism which systematically devaluates the authority of the objective order of things. The egoistical subject regards himself as someone who does not merely make judgments in accordance with established law, but he sees himself as the legislator, the one who establishes law. And there we have the conditions that make relativism possible, moral relativism in particular. Someone whose mind is oriented toward idealism tends to think along the lines I sketched earlier. "If I cannot be certain about particulars pertaining to the world outside of my own mind, that is, pertaining to an objective physical world, how can I be sure about any kind of objectivity? Specifically, how do I know that there is an objective moral order at all, as some people claim that there is, talking as they do about what they call the natural law? A natural law? That brings up that whole question about 'nature.' To talk about nature suggests that there is something permanently in place. But is there? If there is no such thing as nature, a fixed, ordered whole, then what sense is there in saying something like homosexuality, for example, is 'against nature'?"

Idealism creates the proper mental context for the nurturing of what Alasdair MacIntyre identified as emotivism, the attitude that effectively rejects any objective standards for morality

and reduces it to feelings. Making a judgment regarding the moral quality of an act thus comes down to consulting one's emotional response to the act. There is nothing more subjective, more individual-specific, than one's feelings, so if we make them the final determinants of moral rectitude, it is impossible that morality can be anything else but entirely relative. If an idealist/emotivist has positive feelings about a peculiar "lifestyle" he is pursuing, if it makes him happy, then the narrow logic of his mind-set informs him that it is morally appropriate, and no arguments which appeal to an objective moral order would be able to persuade him otherwise.

The inevitable outcome of a way of looking at marriage and the family that has its roots in philosophical idealism is precisely what we are bearing witness to today; marriage and the family become what ideology prescribes them to be. Reality is thus reconstituted. According to the new definition, handed down from on high, marriage now means the legal union of a male with a male, or of a female with a female. Perhaps by way of magnanimous concession, the new definition still allows the union of a male and a female to be considered a marriage. But with that can the matter be considered to be settled once and for all? Not if the idealist mode of thinking continues to prevail. Once one attempts to redefine what has been defined by nature, thereby breaking the restraints set by nature, and confirmed by reason, then what possible limitations can be set to one's reconstituting ambitions? The ancient philosopher Protagoras, following a typically idealist mode of reasoning, proudly proclaimed that "man is the measure of all things, what is, that it is, what is not, that it is not." By what logic can the reconstituting process be prevented from continuing along the lines already set out, so as one day to allow marriage to mean the union of one man and several women, or one woman and several men? And there are other possibilities that an unbridled imagination, an imagination completely detached from reality, would be prepared to suggest. Undermine the foundation and the edifice on which it rests caves in. Redefine the meaning of marriage, and the meaning of family is open to discussion; it becomes subject to the aggressive manipulation of ideologues who want to reshape it to accommodate aberrant behaviors.

Can a Sound Philosophy Address the Current State of Affairs?

If my analysis is correct, based on the thesis that the root cause of the current deformation of marriage and the family is to be found in philosophy, specifically idealist philosophy, then, granted that the problem is essentially philosophical, can philosophy provide any solution to the problem? I hope I have succeeded in showing that idealist philosophy, taking it all in all, is an unsound philosophy. As such, then, it is not the philosophy to which we would want to turn for help. The antidote to any unsound philosophy is a sound philosophy, a philosophy that opens out onto the real, that gives full attention to the voice of the natural order of things, and that philosophy is realist philosophy. Realist philosophy is most fully and richly manifested in Scholastic philosophy, whose core is constituted by the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, but which embraces what Pope Leo XIII referred to, in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, as the perennial philosophy, which is the name given to the sum total of those genuine philosophic truths which have been articulated throughout the entire course of human history.

One of the signal features of Scholastic moral philosophy in particular is the emphasis it gives to the natural law, the universal moral law which, as St. Paul teaches, is written on the hearts of men, by which imagery he seeks to remind us that this is a law that is integral to who we are as human beings, rational creatures with an eternal destiny. St. Thomas provides us with a precise definition of the natural law when he tells us that it is simply the eternal law of God (the law embedded within and governing the whole of creation) as it is known by the human intellect. The natural law is the law we come to know through the light of reason; by it we are able to discern the order that God has incorporated within nature. It is through the lens of the natural law that we are able to see marriage and the family simply for what they are, that is, as they have been constituted by God Himself. In the Second Part of the *Summa Theologiae*, where St. Thomas discusses the natural law, he identifies its three basic precepts; these precepts, he tells us, correspond with three natural inclinations which are common to all men. That is a particularly instructive point, for it calls our attention to the fact that the natural law should not be thought of as something that is entirely external to us—it does indeed have definite objective status, and it could be thought to be “external” in that sense—but it is lodged within us as well. The degree to which we are aware of the natural law and its precepts is directly related to the degree to which we exercise our God-given reason, for we recall St. Thomas’s definition of natural law as the eternal law of God *as it is known by the human intellect*. The second basic precept/natural inclination of the natural law which St. Thomas cites (the first precept is self-preservation) has to do with marriage and the family. He tells us that human beings are simply following the dictates of the natural law when, as male and female, they form unions the purpose of which is the procreation, raising, and education of children. (See *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 94, a. 2) There is no ambiguity here; the natural law makes abundantly clear the nature of marriage and the family. In the supplement to the Third Part of the *Summa*, in which we find no fewer than 118 individual articles devoted to the subject of marriage, St. Thomas, emphasizes the point that the purpose of marriage is not simply the procreation of children, but their education, an education of a very special kind, in that children are to be raised to “a perfect state of man insofar as he is man, which is to say, the state of virtue.” (*Summan Theologiae, Supplementum*, Q. 41, a. 1) The family home, then, should be a school of virtue, where, ideally, children are raised to be saints. If children are to be properly raised in this respect, it is important, St. Thomas goes on to explain, that they be under the tutelage throughout the course of their upbringing of both a man and a woman (husband and wife), for there are certain things which only a man, or only a woman, can contribute to a child’s education.

By way of showing our allegiance to the perennial philosophy, we can profitably take note of what some of the pre-Christian philosophers had to say about marriage and the family. Aristotle, in the *Politics*, identifies marriage as a natural institution, in that it is the logical corollary of sexual differentiation. Possessed of an abundance of common sense as he was, Aristotle simply saw the fact that human beings differ as male and female as making it altogether natural that they should come together to form marital unions. He argued that “there must be a union of those who cannot exist without each other, namely of male and female, that the race may continue.” (*Politics*, 1252a, 25) The family, for Aristotle, was “the association established by nature.” (*Ibid.* 1252b,10) He thus classifies it, along with the state, as a natural society, meaning

that each was the inevitable consequence of the kind of creatures we are: it is simply part of our nature to form families and then, on a larger scale, to create political communities or states. Aristotle clearly saw the family as foundational in relation to the state; healthy political communities are dependent on healthy families. If we were to travel eastward, a couple of generations before the time of Aristotle, we would discover that in China Confucius was teaching the very same doctrine, but with even greater emphasis. This ancient sage taught that a virtuous state would be possible only if there were virtuous families. But then he makes explicit what is implicit in Aristotle's thought, arguing further that there can only be virtuous families if there are virtuous individuals.

Plato provides an interesting object lesson for any philosophical reflection on marriage and the family. In his *Republic*, his plan for the ideal state, he offers a detailed picture of a place where, in truth, we would not want to live. The philosopher Karl Popper accused the Plato of the *Republic* of totalitarianism, and there is some warrant for that harsh judgment. What is of interest to us is the role Plato might give to the family in his ideal state. The fact is, though, that he gives no role at all to the family, as traditionally understood. He simply does away with the family. Men and women, whose tenuous unions are arranged by the state to serve purely eugenic purposes, have their children taken away from them as soon as they are born. From the crib up, children are raised in state institutions; things are so arranged for them that they never come to know their parents, and parents, for their part, are also kept in the dark as to the identities of their own children. All in all, it is a monstrous proposal. One wonders how it was that Plato, who was in so many respects a brilliant thinker, should have devised, if only in theory, so ugly a social system. I believe that a reasonable explanation for this was the fact that, at this stage of his life, Plato was burdened with a severely impoverished understanding of the nature of human sexuality, in that he did not grasp all the implications of its finality. But the story of Plato and the family does not end there, for which we can all be grateful. He lived to retract what he had written in the *Republic*, and in his final work, the *Laws*, which he finished when he was eighty years old, and which, like the *Republic*, is a plan for an ideal state, he acknowledges the integrity and intrinsic dignity of marriage and the family and restores them to their rightful place. I like to think that the explanation for this heartening turn of events is the fact that in his later years Plato arrived at a clearer vision of the natural law, and he thus came to see what, by nature, marriage and the family are. Plato's case can be an object lesson for us because what caused him to once have twisted ideas about marriage and the family was the same cause of the twisted ideas about marriage and the family that abound today—a severely impoverished understanding of human sexuality in terms of its finality.

What has to happen to dissipate the thick clouds of confusion that befog the minds of so many people today regarding marriage and the family? I suppose one could say, and it would be right to say it, that it would take a massive conversion of hearts and minds, and that could only be brought about by divine grace. While hoping and praying for such a happy eventuality, we need to remind ourselves that grace builds on nature, which means that we will have to do our part in the effort to restore clear thinking with respect to these most important matters. That is to be done, as already suggested, by fostering a vigorous realist philosophy centered on the thought of

St. Thomas Aquinas, and this must begin within the ambit of the Church. Given current conditions, however, such an ambitious project, difficult enough to achieve under the best of circumstances, will prove to be especially challenging. By way of giving a very precise focus to the project I envision, I will state it as follows: Thomism needs to be reestablished as the guiding philosophy of Catholic thought. But “reestablished”? It would perhaps come as a surprise to many even well informed Catholics that Thomistic philosophy, which was once the regnant philosophy in Catholic seminaries and colleges, has, for a number of reasons that cannot be gone into here, very much fallen out of favor; indeed, it has suffered a severe downgrading, and in some cases it is simply ignored. All this happened in the wake of and as part of the general aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. The virtual eclipse of Thomism as a significant influence within the Church goes very far, in my opinion, to explaining many of the problems with which the Church has had to deal over the last several decades. What we very much stand in need of, to effectively deal with the specific problem which is the confusion surrounding marriage and the family, but also to restore clear and rigorous thinking in general, is a new “Thomistic Renewal,” of the kind that was launched by Pope Leo XIII through his encyclical *Aeterni Patris*.

The restoration of a vigorous Thomism could very well have a therapeutic effect on philosophy in general, a surprising suggestion made at the beginning of the twentieth century by the distinguished American philosopher Josiah Royce, who, despite his own idealist propensities, held Pope Leo in high esteem, and saw the importance of the Thomistic Renewal. Thomism gives answer to idealism with commanding clarity and cogency. I noted that one of the specific explanations for current mis-thinking about marriage and the family was a loss of a dynamic sense of nature, of an objective order of things, and this as encompassed within a general dissociation from reality as a whole. Going hand in hand with a loss of a sense of nature is the inability to see that there is a specifically *moral* objective order, which is expressed in the natural law. Those related problems would be effectively addressed once philosophical realism becomes the dominant mode of thinking in Western culture, for what makes realism *realism* is the common sense recognition of nature and nature’s order, with all that order implies.

To bring this reflection to a close I will call your attention to a specific philosophical principle the ignorance of which, or the willful neglect of which, lies at the heart, I believe, of the confused thinking regarding marriage and the family. The principle I have in mind is the principle of finality, and it is succinctly expressed in Latin as, *omne agens agit propter finem*, which translates as, “every agent acts for the sake of an end.” It could also be called the principle of purpose, for what it is telling us, to put it in the most general terms, is that we live in a purposeful universe, a universe which makes perfect sense because everything in it is ordered toward specific ends. Every act, of whatever kind, be it that of an animate or inanimate entity, is necessarily ordered, in its action, toward the realization of a dominant specific end. Finality governs all. Now of course we, as conscious rational agents, are keenly aware that we are purposeful creatures. Our acts are defined, identified, by the ends toward which they are ordered. Persons have ends, precisely with respect to their status as persons, but institutions, such as marriage, the family, the state, have ends as well. To have full and adequate knowledge of

anything at all, we have to know the ends toward which it is ordered, what essentially it is *for*—its principal purpose. As Aristotle puts it, “the nature of any given thing is determined by its end.” (*Ethics*, 1115b, 20) Conversely, not to know the ends of something, or to pretend that those ends are not precisely what they are, is simply not to know what in fact we are dealing with. We may employ the correct name for a thing, but the name is meaningless.

Marriage and the family can be identified with several ends, but one stands out as the principal end, and that is the procreation and education of children. The finality of marriage and the family has its specific, concrete expression in the marital act of husband and wife, which is exclusively proper to marriage. Because by its very nature that act is ordered toward a very specific end, an end that establishes the basic ontological meaning of the act, to do anything to frustrate the realization of its end is to do violence to the very intelligibility of the act. In other words, given its finality, we could say that, at the deepest level of being, the act now makes no sense. It could thus be called, quite literally, an irrational act. But human behavior would be carried to new heights of irrationality were two human beings of the same sex to engage in sexual activity. This would constitute an egregious affront to finality, for here there is no possibility at all that the proper purpose of human sexuality could ever be realized.

We might be inclined to suppose, in light of the above, that the militant secular state’s sanction of so-called same-sex marriage entails a violation of the finality of marriage, but I do not believe this to be the case, and that is because the “marriage” in same-sex marriage is an empty word. It does not, it never can, designate the reality, which is the union between a man and a woman. What this thieving usage signifies, at best, is a tragic instance of barren mimicry. The attempts to redefine marriage to suit aberrant propensities are part of a larger ongoing project furthered by idealist-inspired ideologues to reconstitute reality itself. This has been one of man’s more pathetic preoccupations ever since the Fall. The efforts he devotes to this project, however energetically made, have always been in vain, will always be in vain, and that is because the outcome of any war waged against reality is a foregone conclusion: reality inevitably wins. Marriage is what nature has given it to be, and it is impervious to man’s frenetic efforts to make it other than what it is.

