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Scott Yenor
Boise State University

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The Family: What Is to Be Done?

by Scott Yenor
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Marital love implies dependence on another instead of autonomy, and it shows that certain goods (sex and procreation, love and marriage, marriage and parenthood) are connected. We must recover the language of self-giving. The second in a two-part series.

We have seen how the logic of contract and the movement to conquer nature have resulted in a triumph of autonomy and the demise of family. The family thus stands in need of a defense. Defense of the family means defense of an institution, and that defense requires some defense of the nature that these institutions react to and reflect. This is where contemporary advocates have focused their attention. Both the modern principles—the principle of contract and the move to conquer nature—are partial truths, and it is best to understand how they each fit into a proper understanding of married life. We can see the partial truth of these principles by seeing how today's defenders of marriage and family life appeal to anatomy, on the one hand, and love, on the other hand. The defense of marriage and family life in the name of love must ultimately supplement the defense in the name of anatomy.

Marriage-movement social scientists establish the relationship between variables. The greatest living defender of the family from the standpoint of social science is David Popenoe, whose work, helpfully and self-consciously, shows the limits of the social-scientific perspective. Popenoe establishes in his *Life Without Father* that family decline, as encapsulated in the decline of fatherhood, leads to the "human carnage of fatherlessness"—to crime, educational failure, future family failure, lower incomes, future violence, personal dependency on government, and other signs of social and psychic sickness. Contemporary society, in disturbing the nest, reaps the whirlwind.

Popenoe and his compatriots in the marriage movement truly reveal an inconvenient truth, and feminists—ardent separators or de-institutionalizers—tirelessly seek to combat the methods and conclusions of the marriage movement. These critics do have a point, as Popenoe recognized. Today's "human carnage" may well be just a bump on the road toward greater de-institutionalization; new institutions may arise to meet the needs of old ones; and right now we are suffering through the birth pains for an emerging post-nuclear family order.

Popenoe's depth of purpose lies in his attempt to show that there is a natural or anatomical basis for his sociological findings and that we cannot expect any institution to answer the demands of nature as well as the nuclear family can. Popenoe's social science becomes sociobiology with a Darwinian basis, which allows him to attribute some degree of permanence to his findings. Marriage is a solution to the natural problem of childhood dependence, and each spouse is biologically and anatomically suited to provide what is necessary for the other and for the raising of children. Hear Popenoe:

> *Even though family life today is heavily shaped by a massive layer of culture, the predispositions of our biological makeup are ever present. It is almost certainly the case that families are more than just arbitrary social constructs that can be redesigned at will.*

> *They are partly rooted in biology, especially because they intimately concern what is most basic to life—the reproduction of the species.*

Popenoe arrives at the nature of nature through studies showing the historically constant attributes of family life, the traits of men and women, and the needs of maturing children. Nature, for Popenoe and other sociobiologists, does not have a particular destiny or direction; it does not invite us to wonder about the meaning of the historically constant. Nature *is*. Nature is inescapable, and any effort to deny the is-ness of nature involves putting ideology before sound science.

I honor the findings of Popenoe and others, but I do not think they are, of themselves, adequate as a defense of the family. They reproduce the problems of sociology on another level, because it is entirely possible, as feminists suggest, that other institutions could arise in response to the challenges of nature. Further, it is difficult to get modern peoples, so taken with the idea of conquering nature, to respect the is-ness or inescapability of nature. We have so often transgressed the supposed boundaries of nature that we no longer really doubt our power to do so. We need a compelling reason to respect nature and to react to nature's challenges with humility and awe instead of as conquerors.

Unable to find the permanence we need in anatomy, it is necessary to turn to moral philosophy to show how nature, as it manifests itself in marriage and family life, is connected to the permanent human good of betrothed love. For this, we must recover the logic of marital unity and put the necessities that are implicated in marriage and family life in their proper place. This is the logic of marital unity. When marriage concerns serious ends, it makes demands on the time and resources of the couple; the more serious the ends, the more serious the demands. The more time- and resource-intensive the demands, the more members of the family are likely to practice some form of the division of labor to meet those demands. Married couples strive for ends, in other words, that exist in time and space or in life—so they implicate "necessities" within a larger context of meaning.

The necessities of nature gain their dignity by their relation to the ends of marriage. While it is easy for feminists, for instance, to depict the mundane tasks of motherhood and housekeeping as Sisyphean tasks, such necessitous household activities contribute to the building of a home, which is, at least in part, a home of love. In the context of love, the household management of a mother takes on greater dignity and receives higher meaning. Dusting or washing are acts of self-giving that contribute to an environment of nurturing that can best take place in the intense order of family life. There are certainly contractual appearances to this relationship—the husband and wife say "I do" and they agree on how to divide household labors. The contractual appearance, however, is only a moment in the experience of marriage and family life. Marriage may, as Hegel, that oracle of clarity, tells us, "begin from the point of view of contract," but it does so "*in order to supersede it*." This supersession is love, and love is a permanent human good that defines the order of the family.

As we hear so often today, love makes the family. What is love? Most refrain from raising this more significant question, for fear that such a question would give rise to endless controversy or hopeless subjectivity. Here, again, I would suggest that nature or anatomy must be understood in the light of love, the permanent attribute that lends meaning to the natural. Nature points up, toward the love that defines marriage and family life. We see this in sex, which reflects a human search for completion by joining with another, and which cannot be consummated without another. Though sex does not really satisfy that desire for another and sexual desire is soon

extinguished when satisfied, this does not mean that one is alone. Sex happens on the level of the passions and the body, but points to something higher than itself. Genuine love integrates and subordinates the moment of sex within this larger unified framework. A relationship based on sex is not a proper marital relationship—though sex is part of a marital relationship—because it does not put sex in its proper place.

Betrothed love also grows from two becoming one in the procreation of children. A couple practices a form of self-giving in their life together, providing a fertile ground for the self-giving of parenthood. Parenthood is a picture of marital unity. A couple's unified love is literally present in the person of the child, which explains why parents so often love their children more than their children love them: children are living embodiments of marital unity. Married couples are more than parents, yet parenthood points to the betrothed love that makes parents, in part, more than parents.

Modern thinkers, with partial exceptions, initiated a revolution in marriage at the level of betrothed love. They questioned whether self-giving was healthy, possible, safe, or consistent with human liberty and equality. Love implies dependence on another instead of autonomy, and it shows that certain goods (sex and procreation, love and marriage, marriage and parenthood) are connected. When the self-giving of betrothed love is no longer the end of marriage, the preparation ground for parenthood erodes; divorce seems more tenable as partners hold something back; more individualistic principles fill in to justify or define marriage; and sex and procreation, no longer pointing beyond themselves toward a higher good, come to be seen as individual goods or burdens instead of as common goods.

Marriage has contractual moments, but it ultimately, as Hegel writes, supersedes the point of view of contract as the individuals lose their identity by becoming members of the family. A healthy culture recognizes this and laws create a fertile space for such mutual self-giving. It is difficult to see how a healthy marriage culture can exist until we recover the language of self-giving to reflect its continuing reality in our lives. The language of contract is not sufficient to that experience.

Scott Yenor is Associate Professor and Chair of Political Science at Boise State University. *This article is drawn partly from his book* Family Politics: The Idea of Marriage in Modern Political Thought (February 2011).

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