

## Marriage envy

DIANA SCHAUB

A SAMMY Cahn song from the 1950s has it that “love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage.” Despite the song’s bold claim that “you can’t have one without the other,” for much of human history, the horses have followed their own heart and other agents have borne the institution of marriage along. In the ancient world, the purpose of marriage was to produce citizens for the state. Love was for lovers, not husbands and wives. Indeed, the division between love and marriage was so stark that women were not particularly thought of as objects of love. Plutarch epitomizes the homoerotic Greek view: “As for true love, women have no part in it.” Even when erotic desire centered on women, as in the age of chivalry, love was still essentially extramarital in nature. According to Andreas Capellanus’s twelfth-century manifesto of courtly love: “True love is impossible in the married state.”

Although it’s likely to strike us as strange, this older view makes a certain sense. One can see how the health of both love and marriage might have been thought to be better secured by their separation. Upholders of marriage felt that the heart was much too fickle a foundation on which to build a crucial social institution—better that matches be dictated by wealth, status, dynastic considerations, and parental fiat (and perhaps the hope of friendly compatibility). Devotees of love, meanwhile, had no wish to dilute grand passion with the responsibilities and cares of the household and children.

Thus the modern coupling of love and marriage (or pleasure and duty) required a revolution of sorts: love had to be domesticated and marriage idealized. Under the new regime of the love match, young women were released from the guardianship of their fathers and granted affectional freedom. The yoking of love and marriage was accomplished by placing the reins in girlish hands. The old patriarchal domestic order gave way to the radically democratized nuclear family. This bour-

geois transformation is recent enough that even as late as the turn of the last century, Oscar Wilde could raise an aristocratic eyebrow at the spectacle of loving marriages. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon Moncrieff expresses his distaste at being seated near a woman

who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner table. That is not very pleasant. Indeed it's not even decent and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase.... It looks so bad. It's simply washing one's clean linen in public.

In the century following Wilde, our expectation that love should accompany and sustain marriage has only increased further—regardless of the contemporaneous “collapse” of the family. (The high divorce rate might, in fact, be interpreted as a perverse testament to the strength of the modern conviction that as the love goes, so goes the marriage.)

THE latest and most fascinating extension of the notion that marriage follows love is the call for gay marriage. The domestication of love has gone far indeed when wild horses plead for the privilege of the yoke. The “love that dare not speak its name” has found its voice and seeks to make its vows in public. In *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality*,<sup>†</sup> Andrew Sullivan, editor of the *New Republic*, states the case for gay marriage. Like Bruce Bawer in his 1993 book *A Place at the Table*, Sullivan insists that “gay marriage is not a radical step; it is a profoundly humanizing, traditionalizing step”—conservative in the best sense of the word. For Sullivan, the pledging of oneself to another and the civil recognition of that union are vital to human virtue and happiness. He writes affectingly of how the possibility of marriage would transform those young people in future generations who discover themselves to be homosexual:

For them, at last, there would be some kind of future; some older faces to apply to their unfolding lives, some language in which their identity could be properly discussed, some rubric by which it could be explained—not in terms of sex, or sexual practices, or bars, or subterranean activity, but in terms of their future life stories, their potential loves, their eventual chance at some kind of constructive happiness. They would be able to feel by the intimation of a myriad examples that in this respect their

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† Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 205 pp. \$22.00.

emotional orientation was not merely about pleasure, or sin, or shame, or otherness ... but about the ability to love and be loved as complete, imperfect human beings. Until gay marriage is legalized, this fundamental element of personal dignity will be denied a whole segment of humanity.

Although, for Sullivan, it is the heart of the matter, the case for gay marriage is not fully laid out until the penultimate chapter. Most of the book is spent examining (and rejecting) an array of other arguments—neatly divided into the “prohibitionist,” “liberationist,” “conservative,” and “liberal”—about how society should deal with homosexuals. His avowed aim is “to think through the arguments on all sides as carefully and honestly as possible”; rhetorically, of course, the intended result is to give his own position, as the only remaining alternative, the look and feel of impartial inevitability.

**S**ULLIVAN begins with his staunchest opponents and makes good on his claim to intellectual honesty to the extent that he refuses to dismiss them with the imputation of “homophobia.” He acknowledges that the prohibitionist view is not only the most prevalent view, “resonating with the instincts and convictions of the majority of mankind,” but one with a distinguished pedigree, rooted in Christianity and the natural-law tradition: “It has a rich literature, an extensive history, a complex philosophical core, and a view of humanity that tells a coherent and at times beautiful story of the meaning of our natural selves.” The voice of the people *and* the voice of God—together they constitute a pretty formidable team. What Sullivan tries to do is show that the people have mistaken their own voice for that of God.

The prohibitionist claim is that human nature is heterosexual. Homosexuals as such do not really exist. Homosexual activity is a choice and a wrong one, which should be prevented through social anathematization and legal sanctions. In a certain sense, there is no room for discussion here. Sullivan simply can’t agree; his own experience speaks otherwise. His beginning point is the involuntary (even God-given) nature of the homosexual orientation. All he can do is present a rival, it-takes-all-kinds-to-make-a-world version of God’s creation, stressing its beguiling and astonishing variety:

As albinos remind us of the brilliance of color; as redheads offer a startling contrast to the blandness of their peers; as genius teaches us, by contrast, of the virtue of moderation: so the homo-

sexual person might be seen as a natural foil to the heterosexual norm, a variation that does not eclipse the theme, but resonates with it.

Along with pleading for a place for the few, Sullivan enters into the textual dispute over the meaning and relevance of the biblical passages that prohibitionists use to condemn homosexual behavior. Although he floats the (dubious) Boswell thesis that many of these passages don't refer to homosexuality at all, his main complaint is that the prohibitionists selectively appropriate Holy Scripture for the prosecution of their culture war. From the biblical perspective, the injunctions against other sexual sins (particularly adultery) are "far more profound and common and insistent." Those who cite Leviticus on the abomination of same-sex acts rarely call for obedience to the other provisions of Jewish law relating to sexual matters (for example, prohibition of sex during menstruation), nor do they usually endorse the draconian biblically mandated punishments. Sullivan, moreover, takes heart from the absence of any condemnation of homosexual acts in the Gospels.

As a Catholic himself, Sullivan is particularly interested in the Catholic Church's ongoing attempt to come to terms with the issue of homosexuality. He examines both the *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* (1975) and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's 1986 letter *The Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, documenting the extent to which the Catholic Church, unlike Protestant fundamentalism, has come to recognize "the natural occurrence of constitutive homosexuals."

This dramatic concession notwithstanding, the Catholic Church remains resolutely opposed to "almost anything those persons might do to express themselves sexually." Sullivan skewers the Church for its inconsistency in asserting the blamelessness of the homosexual person, on the one hand, and the moral depravity of homosexual acts, on the other. While Sullivan welcomes the Church's new insight and sympathy into the depths of homosexual identity, he finds that, when compassion is ground through the mill of doctrine, the results can be unintentionally cruel. The present Catholic position dooms the constitutive homosexual to a life of perpetual self-renunciation. By contrast, from the fundamentalist perspective, there is always the possibility of thoroughgoing reformation and a fully realized (i.e., heterosexual) life. (Of course, for Sullivan, this position is cruel in another way, since the notion of a cure is

illusory and likely to cause harm when married homosexuals find themselves unable to sustain the charade.)

WHEN he shifts to the liberationists, Sullivan moves from Cardinal Ratzinger to ACT-UP and Queer Nation, from Aquinas as the guiding intellect to Foucault—and hopes thereby to make prohibitionists and liberationists appear as the mirror image of one another. He does not, however, succeed in establishing the consanguinity of the extremes; on his own showing, the liberationist position is much more offensive to reason.

Sullivan points out how Foucault's analysis of sexuality as a social construction informs (whether knowingly or not) the nihilistic anti-politics of the most radical within the gay movement. He focuses on the practice of "outing" (i.e., the exposure of "closeted" homosexuals):

This tactic sees the nexus of power inherent in the "privacy" that society gives to homosexuals and seeks to resist it at its nerve center, exercising in perfect Foucauldian fashion a form of rebellion against a discourse of power designed to oppress the queer. And, following Foucault, there is no concern in this endeavor that this activity might violate an individual's rights or dignity, since that person is merely a function of the oppression that defines him. There is, properly speaking, no person to violate, and therefore no rights to protect; there is merely a structure to subvert.

In their exclusive focus on the mechanics of power (absent any notion of a social good), the radicals, like Foucault himself, misunderstand both human freedom and human individuality. It is not surprising that the politics of identity so readily became a politics of intimidation, engaged in the forced liberation of others, and employed language as an instrument of control (Sullivan has a fine analysis of the attempt to make "queer" the new, hyper-correct label).

In addition to revealing its totalitarian impulse, Sullivan denounces the empty antics of "queer" politics:

The interaction is not a political one in which an argument is made between equal citizens and a majority decision arrived at; it is a dramatic one, between one party expressing its identity and another party required to react to it. And if the spectators find the performance not to their taste, the only response of the actors is to accuse them of ignorance or stupidity or bigotry.... [This is] not so much politics as theater.

Sullivan closes with a plea to work through the system and

faults liberationism for its inability to address those matters of most importance for ordinary homosexuals, particularly the two "bourgeois" issues: gays in the military and gay marriage, both of which manifest an aspiration to conform, not subvert.

SULLIVAN turns away from the incivility of the liberationists toward the conservatives, whom he credits with "one of the most civilized responses to the homosexual question." Conservatives differ from prohibitionists in that they are really "a variety of liberal"—opposed to state intrusion into the private realm, yet also aware that the public realm may rightfully concern itself with the moral underpinnings of society. With respect to homosexuality, conservatives seek to balance the goods of liberty and order by combining private tolerance with public disapproval, a disapproval expressed not so much through legal proscription as through social shame, a Miss Manners-style "carefully sustained hush on the matter."

The problem for conservatives is that the unspoken "code of discretion," which once prevailed, is increasingly being rejected by homosexuals. Indeed, Sullivan suggests that the general public's willingness to turn a blind eye to homosexual activity so long as it did not draw attention to itself played a role in the development of a gay subculture. While this underground existence contributed to many of the pathologies of gay life (most notably, promiscuity), eventually the gay ghetto also provided the critical mass for the emergence of a new sense of strength and self-confidence. Homosexuals have become unwilling to accept the bifurcation of their existence into a depersonalized public self and a secret private self; they are unwilling that their lives should be "treated with any more discretion than a heterosexual life, or euphemized into invisibility." In light of this, Sullivan feels that the conservative position is simply no longer sustainable. Double standards only work so long as folks cooperate.

Nonetheless, Sullivan does examine the arguments of those who have made the case for continued stigmatization. Academics such as John Finnis of Oxford, E.L. Pattullo of Harvard, and Hadley Arkes of Amherst have argued against increased public acceptance of homosexuality on the grounds that such acceptance devalues and undermines the family (the parallel argument with respect to the military is that open homosexuality undermines morale), and further that societal disapproval is necessary to direct "waverers" toward heterosexuality. The "waverer" argument in particular casts homosexuality in a

strangely flattering light, inasmuch as it suggests that many more individuals would choose same-sex partners if the social disadvantages were not so daunting. As Sullivan presents them, conservatives seem more impressed with the conventional (and in a sense “constructed”) character of marriage and family; hence the need for stern supports, including ostracism of the unconventional. This sort of conservatism, especially if it is reluctant to make strong arguments about the moral evil of homosexuality, risks becoming merely a defense of majority prejudice.

Sullivan strongly objects to the move to place family on one side and homosexuals on the other. Regardless of the verdict on gay marriage, all homosexuals “are already part of ‘heterosexual’ families,” and those families would be immensely strengthened by fully incorporating their homosexual members and healing the rifts of alienation and rejection. Many conservatives may favor private toleration, but the family, as an entity that straddles the public/private divide and exists in a community of neighboring families, is likely to absorb the attitude of public condemnation. Thus homosexuals may be tolerated at the dinner parties of those to whom they are no relation but be excluded from their families’ Thanksgiving dinners.

Sullivan believes that there are better ways to underwrite conservative values. He argues that the present moment presents an opportunity to visionary conservatives—the likes of Disraeli, Lincoln, and Thatcher—who would harness social upheaval to conservative ends. The new visibility of homosexuality is not going to go away. The conservative task should be to provide incentives so that the practices and pathologies of the closet are exchanged for responsible citizenship, including service to country and monogamous union. A conservative stance should be one of constructive “cooptation” of change rather than doomed resistance. Basically, what Sullivan recommends is that conservatives take the “gay” out of homosexuality, not by insisting that gay life is necessarily unhappy but by insisting that gay life become serious and responsible.

Sullivan is able to envision this new conservative strategy in part because he has not been altogether accurate in presenting the conservative case. He stresses the social utility side of conservatism, ignoring the principled ground of their argument. Of the spokesmen he mentions, two (Finnis and Arkes) are professors of natural law. Sullivan, however, attributes natural-law arguments only to the prohibitionists. By dividing those

opposed to homosexuality into two categories, Sullivan tries to make each look indefensible: He casts the "prohibitionists" as fundamentally illiberal theocrats (opposed to the idea of a public/private distinction) and "conservatives" as morally unmoored defenders of the status quo ante. Sullivan is wrong on both counts. Conservatives are not so flexible regarding morality and prohibitionists are not so rigid regarding politics (those who regard homosexuality as a sin or a deviation do not necessarily call for its criminalization).

**J**UST as he criticizes conservatives for not being true to what he sees as the best in their tradition, so he criticizes liberals for abandoning liberalism. Sullivan recognizes that liberalism was transformed in the course of its confrontation with the uniquely intransigent American race problem, yet he laments the way in which liberals have blindly applied the same (often illiberal) solutions to other issues. On the basis of an insightful comparison of race and sexual orientation (pointing to significant differences between them), Sullivan argues that the traditional civil-rights route is not suitable for homosexuals. He does not want to see sexual orientation added to the ever-lengthening list of protected categories.

Instead of urging measures to address private discrimination (e.g., anti-discrimination laws and hate-crimes legislation), homosexuals and their allies should occupy "the high ground of liberal neutrality" and confine their demands to the removal of governmental discrimination. This in itself would entail quite substantial changes: "an end to sodomy laws that apply only to homosexuals;... an equal legal age of consent to sexual activity for heterosexuals and homosexuals;... equal opportunity and inclusion in the military; and legal homosexual marriage and divorce." Sullivan believes that his position harmoniously combines the best features of liberalism and conservatism—that the liberal state's indifference to the difference between heterosexual and homosexual relations would in fact bring conservative goods in its train. For Sullivan, all good things go together "like a horse and carriage."

Sullivan claims that "the issue is whether these identical relationships should be denied equal legal standing." Yet we might still wonder whether they really are identical relationships. Having made his case for the bourgeoisification and "virtual normality" of homosexuality, Sullivan himself, in his final chapter, casts doubt (quite unintentionally, it seems) upon



his whole project. In what reads like a belated attempt to prove his bona fides to the gay activists, Sullivan declares:

There is something baleful about the attempt of some gay conservatives to educate homosexuals and lesbians into an uncritical acceptance of a stifling model of heterosexual normality. The truth is, homosexuals are not entirely normal; and to flatten their varied and complicated lives into a single, moralistic model is to miss what is essential and exhilarating about their otherness.

But wasn't it Andrew Sullivan who earlier said:

It's perfectly possible to combine a celebration of the traditional family with the celebration of a stable homosexual relationship. The one, after all, is modeled on the other. If constructed carefully as a conservative social ideology, the notion of stable gay relationships might even serve to buttress the ethic of heterosexual marriage, by showing how even those excluded from it can wish to model themselves on its shape and structure.

Now, we learn that the modeling will in fact be rather free form, with "plenty of scope for cultural difference," as for example, that "there is more likely to be greater understanding of the need for extramarital outlets between two men than between a man and a woman." Just what we need: an extramarital conception of marriage. The marital connection will not be an exclusive, closed and completed circuit, but just one's main plug-in—other service "outlets" will still be available.

Further, we learn that the differences extend beyond the character of the coupling; Sullivan refers to certain ineradicable differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals:

The latter group is committed to the procreation of a new generation. The former simply isn't. Yes, there are major qualifications to this—gay men and lesbians are often biological fathers and mothers—but no two lesbians and no two homosexual men can be parents in the way that a heterosexual man and a heterosexual woman with a biological son or daughter can be. And yes, many heterosexuals neither marry nor have children and many have adopted children. But in general, the difference holds. The timeless, necessary, procreative unity of a man and a woman is inherently denied homosexuals; and the way in which fatherhood transforms heterosexual men, and motherhood transforms heterosexual women, and parenthood transforms their relationship, is far less common among homosexuals than among heterosexuals.

Thomas Aquinas couldn't have said it better. This in a nutshell is why marriage is by nature heterosexual. Earlier Sullivan had

claimed that "the heterosexuality of marriage is intrinsic only if it is understood to be intrinsically procreative; but that definition has long been abandoned in Western society." It is true that with the introduction of romantic love into marriage we have introduced new tensions and new (more individualistic) expectations into the institution. It is now a more beautiful, more free relation (but perhaps also more fragile); nonetheless, the necessitous, species-character of marriage has not been, and I doubt will ever be, completely obscured.

**P**ERHAPS homosexuals will have to rest content with love. As Greek homoeroticism and the tradition of courtly love show, an ideal of romantic love need not draw marriage in tow. It might instead stand forth, unencumbered, as a rival. That would seem to be aspiration enough. Contemporary homosexuality has for too long been focused on sexual activity divorced from real human attachment. Even without benefit of law, homosexual desire could elevate itself a bit. Perhaps poets are needed more than statesmen.

The book's last line speaks of the "beauty in the wild flowers that grow randomly among our wheat." It is an odd final metaphor for a book entitled *Virtually Normal*. Andrew Sullivan can't seem to decide whether he is a wild flower or a "virtually normal" strain of wheat. A less sympathetic reviewer might say he is just chaff, but that judgment would not accord with the so evident earnestness of his person or his pen.