

Propositions

Dear Reader,

President Clinton is a lame duck, nearing the end of his presidency. Monica Lewinsky's book tour is mercifully behind us. Not only is Kenneth Starr, the special prosecutor, winding down his operation, but even the horse he rode in on (as James Carville would put it), the Independent Counsel Act, expired on June 30 and is unlikely to be resuscitated by Congress. For this reason, the urgent question today is no longer whether Bill Clinton will be judged or punished for some bit of alleged misconduct, but whether Clintonism as a robust philosophy of governance will outlive Bill Clinton's tenure in the White House.

By Clintonism, I don't mean his positions on the issues (as a Democrat, I often agree with him on the issues), or his personal life and personality traits, or where he is located ideologically on some liberal-conservative spectrum. I mean his underlying strategic approach to politics. This approach was developed during the 1990s primarily by Dick Morris, James Carville, and, of course, President Clinton himself. And while nothing under the sun is completely new, Clintonism as a philosophy contains much that is highly innovative. Indeed, after President Clinton leaves office, his most consequential legacy will probably turn out to be these new political operating instructions, now battle-tested, easy to understand, and thus readily available to anyone seeking high elective office in the United States. The approach is based on three principles.

The first is that campaigning never stops. The fundamental distinction between campaigning and governing, explicitly (if never perfectly) embraced as a matter of duty and honor by all previous presidents, has been virtually eliminated by the Clinton team. Using overnight tracking polls as guides to action, delegating authority to people in their 20s who live on pizza and operate out of "War Rooms," uninterrupted fundraising — these and other features of running for office are now inseparable from the Oval Office itself. Indeed, it often appears that the older ethic of means and ends has been completely inverted: Governing is ordained toward campaigning, not the other way around.

The second principle is to triangulate the issues. Triangulation is a scientific formula for taking stands on issues that work to your political advantage. First, find an issue that the public cares about. Then — here is the science part — take exactly that position on the issue that allows you, on the one hand, to criticize some members of your own party as unrealistic extremists, and on the other hand, to criticize most members of the opposing party as dangerous extremists. There you sit, at the top of the triangle, superior to both ends of the bottom. The basic moral orientation is therefore spatial; the whole goal of the exercise is to drive up approval ratings. Politically, triangulation seems to work well. What is missing from the formula is anything related to conscience, leadership, an independent view of what is important, or the distinction between doing something and appearing to do something.

*I wonder how far Moses
would have gone if he'd
taken a poll in Egypt? . . .
It isn't polls or public
opinion of the moment
that counts. It's right
and wrong.*

Harry S. Truman, 1952

*. . . there is no bitter
after-taste as the
Truman family leaves
the White House.*

Walter Lippmann, one
of Truman's most
consistent critics, 1953

The final principle is that politics trumps morality. The old idea — sometimes honored in the breach, of course, but almost always honored — was that partisan politics operates under, and is accountable to, a larger moral canopy. In contrast, the new idea is that fighting for one's political agenda is one's highest value and truest goal. The moral canopy is shredded. In such a world, "all's fair," as James Carville and Mary Matalin accurately and boastfully put it. If preserving one's political viability means declaring that the moon is made of green cheese, then let the deed be done. As President Clinton put it, when discussing with Dick Morris the political pros and cons of telling the truth: "We'll just have to win." And of course he did win, at least in some respects. But will Clintonism?

At Our Best

Regarding an earlier criticism (Fall 1998) of the philosopher Richard Rorty's widely celebrated "refusal to believe in the existence of Truth," in the sense of "something which has authority over human beings," Steve Petermann from Dallas, Texas, writes: "For all of Rorty's reputed and self-described relativism, it's interesting to see what he does when he needs a standard, some place to stand. In *Truth and Progress*, Rorty calls this place 'we at our best.' For Rorty, this means liberal, tolerant, politically active, and so on. But note that 'we at our best' presupposes a value system. Actually to define 'we at our best' would require Rorty eventually to acknowledge some sort of 'Truth' or moral absolute.

Even Rorty, then, has a hard time escaping the fact that there is an objective reality, to which attention must finally be paid. At the same time, the best that we can do is develop an imperfect image or 'picture' of what is true. We can't know something fully in and of itself, but we *can* gain access to objective reality through the pictures of it that we develop. Whether he admits it or not, Rorty is viewing those pictures in his mind when he talks of 'we at our best.' This way of thinking about truth also lends validity to our religious traditions, which not only represent the struggle throughout the ages of peoples trying to discover who they are 'at their best,' but also seek to point, however imperfectly, toward the source of that created 'best.'"

The theologian Bernard Lonergan warns us against believing that truth is so objective that it can get along without minds. Truth is objective, but can only be understood subjectively. That is a big, important idea. It reminds us that answers do not show up from "out there," but instead must necessarily originate from within the frail human person, who can only see the world dimly. This insight therefore reminds us of the dangers of intolerance: the prideful belief that the line separating truth from falsehood runs between me and you. But perhaps even more importantly in this age of despairing relativism, this way of seeing also helps us to steer clear of what Richard Rorty loudly professes but cannot sustain: the idea that moral truth does not exist.

Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5, 53, 55.
Bernard Lonergan, *The Subject* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1968), 5.

Slouching Out of History

Rome, a birthplace of the West, is still one of the world's greatest and most beautiful cities. But on a recent visit there, just walking around, it is striking that there seem to be no children in Rome anymore, only adults. The total fertility rate in Italy is currently about 1.2 childbirths per woman, one of the lowest rates in Europe, and well below the rate of 2.1 that is necessary to sustain the population level. The Italians, who for many generations seemed convinced that large families were a necessary and desirable part of the natural order, have fairly suddenly, and to a remarkable degree, stopped having children.

A new report on children in the Czech Republic suggests that, following the collapse of communism in 1989, the new democracies of central and eastern Europe may be heading demographically in a similar direction. In 1989, the Czech total fertility rate was 1.9. By 1996, it had dropped to 1.2, the lowest since 1918. The Czech rate now matches that of the Italians. From 1989 to 1996, the proportion of babies born to unmarried Czech mothers more than doubled, from 8 to 17 percent. In some northern and western districts, the proportion of babies born to unwed mothers now reaches 30 percent — nearly equal, after less than a decade of political freedom, to the current U.S. rate of 33 percent. The Czech divorce rate is also rising steadily. These are remarkably rapid and important changes in Czech family life. The heady talk from the early 1990s of a third way in eastern Europe — freed from totalitarianism, but also refusing to line up behind the family-weakening cultural trends of the West — now appears to have been . . . just talk. As regards family life, we are all Americans now.

As of 1998, the total fertility rate for Eastern Europe as a region was 1.4, down from 2.2 in 1985. Western Europe's overall rate is 1.4. The U.S. rate is 2.1, the replacement level, but the rate among U.S. married couples is about 1.6, which is also the overall rate for the world's developed countries.

OK, I can hear you: Now the big crisis is depopulation? Wasn't it only a few years ago that everyone was told — and don't many people still believe — that the big crisis is *over*population, and that all morally aware people of child-bearing age should have, as one recent book put it, “maybe one”?

Fair enough, but ponder two questions. What does this growing reluctance to procreate tell us about our attitude toward children, our connection to marriage, and our view of the future? Moreover, will we and our children be content to watch Western civilization begin to slouch out of history during the next half-century or so, having decided voluntarily to pull the plug, as it were, on our own way of life?

Granted the foolishness of crisis-mongering, and granted the continuing concerns about the impact of human populations on the natural environment, but isn't this steady turning away from child-bearing in the rich countries a topic that is ripe for more public discussion?

Jiri Kovarik, Lubomir Kukla, and others, *Situation Analysis of Children in the Czech Republic, 1998* (Prague: Czech Committee for UNICEF, 1998). U.S. Bureau of the Census, Report WP/98, *World Population Profile: 1998* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999), Table A-8. Bill McKibbin, *Maybe One* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1998).

What Makes Us Do It?

Economic conditions can uplift — or debase — people and the communities in which they live. But it is equally true that people's values can help them respond to those conditions in ways that are either self-defeating or self-empowering.

Turning the Corner on Father Absence in Black America

Among all children under age 18 today, about 40 percent do not live with their fathers. Among African Americans, about 70 percent of all babies are born to never-married mothers, and more than 80 percent of all black children today can expect to spend at least a significant part of their childhood years living apart from their fathers. What is causing this tragedy?

Too often, the answer to this question takes a curious racial twist. For example, I can't think of anyone who would claim that the huge changes in U.S. cultural values in recent decades — Do Your Own Thing, If It Feels Good Do It, Just Do It — do not constitute a major cause of the explosion of divorce and unwed childbearing among whites. But for my friend Sumner Rosen, who helped found the Institute for American Values, the same, only bigger, explosion among blacks during this period is due essentially to “the decline in job opportunities for black fathers.” Regarding the desire to marry among African Americans, here is his proposition: “Behavior did not change, but the economy did.”

Let's see if I've got this straight. White people change their behavior mostly based on what they think they ought to do and what they want to do. Black people change their behavior mostly based on pressure from outside forces. For white people, therefore, the center of action is inside the person. For black people, the center of action is outside the person. This way of thinking strikes me as deeply misguided.

In *Turning the Corner on Father Absence in Black America*, recently released by our institute and Atlanta's Morehouse Research Institute, a number of us tried to retire this sterile “culture versus economics” debate in favor of recognizing the legitimate importance of both. For example, those who believe that economics is everything frequently cite Harvard's William Julius Wilson. (Rosen cites Wilson in his comments.) But Wilson signed and helped to write the Morehouse statement, which includes this excerpt from a speech Wilson recently delivered at Howard University: “The declining marriage rates among inner-city Black parents is a function not simply of increased economic marginality, or of changing attitudes toward sex and marriage, but of the interaction between the two.” So much for economic foundationalism.

Moreover, thanks especially to Ron Mincy of the Ford Foundation, the Morehouse statement also recognizes the impact of public policy on family behavior. So now we have a fatherhood stool with three legs: values, economics, and policy. All three matter.

Most of all, the Morehouse statement seeks to break a silence. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's famous report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, ignited several years of intense and mostly unhelpful debate, primarily marked by finger-pointing, denial, and extreme racial polarization, followed by three full decades in which most people simply fell silent on the subject. Meanwhile, by 1995, family disintegration among whites had grown to almost exactly the dimensions that had characterized African Americans in 1965. Now, for the first time in a generation, perhaps it will be possible for black and white leaders to work together in a unified fatherhood movement.

Sumner M. Rosen, Letters to the Editor, *New York Times*, July 13, 1999. *Turning the Corner on Father Absence in Black America* (Atlanta: Morehouse Research Institute, 1999).

Say the Word

In many of the rich countries, an intensive drive to delete the word “marriage” from public discourse is being waged by those who want to substitute the word “relationships.” The stakes, both symbolic and practical, are quite high. Linguistically, at issue is whether “marriage” remains a normative word, referring to a recognized and protected social institution, or whether it instead becomes in some instances a taboo word — a word that, if used, would suggest insensitivity and judgementalism — and in all other instances a thoroughly relativized word, referring only to one of any number of equally valid life style choices, which are all subsumed under the new normative concept of “relationships.” Socially, at issue is whether we want to de-institutionalize marriage, turning it into a private relationship, not much different from living together, in which law and society at large have no special interest and over which they exercise little or no control.

In many countries, at least regarding language, it’s hardly even a contest any more. Consider Australia. What used to be the “Marriage Guidance Council,” the nation’s largest secular marriage counselling agency, is now “Relationships Australia.” In Melbourne, the former “Anglican Marriage Education and Counselling Services” is now “Lifeworks.” Just down the street, at Melbourne’s Catholic Family Welfare Bureau, the former “Focus on Marriage” program has been rechristened “Partnerships.”

As part of a new initiative aimed at strengthening marriage and family life, Australia’s federal government recently published a booklet entitled *Relate: Relationship skills for love, family, and life*. It’s for those who want to know, as the title page puts it, “about relationships and what you can do to make yours better.” The first section is called “Why having a good relationship with your partner is so important.” (Here we are told: “The relationship between couples is of particular significance.”) The second section is “Relationships can be challenging.” The last section is “Twelve tips for a great relationship.” (Number ten: “Be sexually considerate of each other.” Number twelve: “Express and demonstrate your commitment to the relationship.”)

You get the idea. The booklet’s desire to avoid the word “marriage” is obvious and fervent, as if even an indirect endorsement of the “m” concept — *in a publication that is part of a government program whose ostensible goal is to strengthen marriage!* — would be grossly embarrassing, like suddenly forgetting our manners and calling the child of an unmarried mother “illegitimate.” It’s hard to know whether to cheer this new initiative, or weep over the fact that Australia has now officially embraced a solution that dare not speak its name.

If we become ashamed of the word “marriage,” we become ashamed of marriage. For this reason, the current contest between “marriage” and “relationships” is likely to be determinative. If the “m” word is ultimately rendered disrespectful in modern societies — if sophisticated people become as wary of publicly uttering it as they would be about uttering, for example, the word “God” — then what the West used to call “marriage” will have become a ghost institution, at best a private counter-cultural aspiration. If we lose the word, we lose the thing.

Relate: Relationship skills for love, family and life (Melbourne: Commonwealth of Australia, 1999).

The Couples School

A new program from the American Psychological Association for everyone who is “married, engaged, or intimately partnered.”

Philosophy of Life

Tax policy may not be sexy, but Sheldon Cohen, a former IRS Commissioner, gets it exactly right: “tell me a person’s philosophy of taxes and I will tell you his or her philosophy of life.” This proposition, I would add, pertains to institutions as well as individuals.

Take the *Wall Street Journal*. What does the *Journal*’s editorial page think of current Congressional proposals to eliminate the marriage penalty in the U.S. tax code? Not much. “We appreciate the appeal of this political slogan,” the *Journal* recently conceded. But then again, such sloganeering merely “panders to those on the social right.” Besides, reforming the tax code to recognize marriage “is more of a tax shift than a net tax cut,” since the reform would only benefit taxpayers who are married. Several days later, again attacking marriage-penalty proposals, the editors chastised those misguided “groups” whose purpose is “carving out one piece of the tax code for some loud interest’s benefit.”

Behold a tax philosophy that is also a general philosophy. Here is the tax part: Proposals intended to foster economic growth by reducing marginal rates are good. All other proposals are ignoble attempts to pander to interest groups. Here is the philosophy of life: Wealth trumps everything else. All other social goals, including the goal of strengthening marriage, are subordinate to the master goal of greater prosperity.

This philosophy has the advantage of simplicity, but let me suggest an alternative view. The federal tax code is the nation’s most important family policy. Using it to support marriage, and to recognize parents who want to spend more time with their children, is a perfectly legitimate goal, even if the reform would do nothing at all to boost next year’s GNP report. More broadly, economic growth is the servant of the human person and the human family, not the other way around.

“Tax Report,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 1999. “Republicans Wake Up,” Editorial, *Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 1999. “Marital Spat,” Editorial, *Wall Street Journal*, July 19, 1999.

Smoking, Drinking, Getting Married

In Oregon, some state legislators are proposing to double the fee for marriage licenses, from \$25 to \$50, and use the increased revenue to help pay for battered women’s shelters. Governor John Kitzhaber says he supports the idea.

Do you follow the logic? It’s exactly like taxing cigarettes, then using the money to help pay for the increased hospital and doctor bills generated by smoking-related illnesses. Or, like imposing higher taxes on alcoholic beverages as a means of encouraging people to drink less, thereby improving their health, and also as a means of, say, paying for a public service advertising campaign warning against excessive drinking. In each case, we isolate a legal but obviously harmful behavior — smoking, drinking, getting married — in order to single it out for special taxation, partly to stigmatize and thus discourage the behavior itself, and partly to help pay for the social problems that the behavior causes.

Several years ago, state legislators in West Virginia had virtually the same idea. Backed by the state medical association, these policy makers wanted all marriage licenses in West Virginia to carry a “warning label” against domestic violence, just like the warning labels that are already required by law on packs of cigarettes and on bottles of alcohol. Do you follow the logic? The West Virginia bill became law in 1993. South Dakota, Kansas, and Iowa have recently adopted similar laws. Last year, the same proposal was introduced into the Pennsylvania legislature.

Meanwhile, back on planet Earth, domestic violence against women is probably increasing in our society, with much of the increase attributable not to the practice of getting married, but rather to the collapse of marriage, such that women today spend more and more time in the shadow of estranged ex-husbands and (especially) in the presence of live-in boyfriends and others unrelated males, all of whom are statistically much more likely than co-residing husbands to do violence against them. Making marriage weaker is not the solution to the problem of domestic violence. It’s part of the problem.

So here’s an idea for state legislators. Turn the Oregon-West Virginia thesis upside down. Instead of treating marriage as if it were a social pathology requiring state-imposed sin taxes and warning labels, why not tax divorce and unwed childbearing, then use the increased revenue to improve marriage education programs or support new research on how to make marriages stronger?

Consider the question of divorce fees. According to John Crouch, who directs the Virginia-based Americans for Divorce Reform, a resident of Virginia who wants a divorce pays a \$64 filing fee to the court, plus \$12 if she wants the sheriff to serve the papers on her spouse. That’s it. In Oregon, you pay from \$100 to \$250, depending on the county in which you live.

These fees are very low — probably much lower, in most cases, than the real cost to the state of adjudicating the divorce. Especially when one spouse contests the divorce, the actual cost to the state of Virginia of John’s divorce is obviously much greater than John’s \$64 filing fee. And that’s only the immediate and direct public cost. If economists could accurately estimate the longer-term public costs of divorce — everything from more money spent by schools to counsel children whose parents are divorcing to the costs of, yes, more restraining orders and more battered women’s shelters — the gap between these small fees, on the one hand, and the actual costs to the state, on the other, would be astonishingly large.

Remember, the idea from Oregon is to adopt a public health model for family policy, in which taxes on costly behavior serve partly to reimburse the state for public expenses resulting from the behavior. Sounds good to me. The proposal to tax marriage is obviously muddle-headed, but why not take the public health model seriously and engage legislators on the basic issues at stake?

“Bill would hike marriage fees to support domestic violence programs,” *The Oregonian*, April 6, 1999. “Frontlines,” *News from the Homefront* (San Francisco: Family Violence Prevention Fund, Spring/Summer 1993). “Dent Introduces Warning Label for Marriage Bill,” press release (Harrisburg: Republican Communications Department, House of Representatives, 1998). “Will a Warning Precede ‘Dearly Beloved’? *The Morning Call* (Allentown, PA), April 2, 1998.

Pursuing Happiness

In a divorce-friendly society, unhappily married people are more likely to divorce. That much is obvious. But what is obvious apparently captures only part of the truth, and therein hangs a modest but revealing tale.

Eight years ago, in a paper for our Council on Families and also in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Norval Glenn of the University of Texas theorized that a decline in the ideal of marital permanence had probably led to an increase of marital unhappiness, therefore at least partly explaining the rise in divorce. He frankly admitted that he could not (yet) prove the point. It was only a theory. But it nevertheless struck many of us at the time as a remarkable insight. For Glenn was warning us: In a culture that is increasingly accepting of divorce, not only are unhappy marriages more likely to end in divorce, but more and more marriages are likely to become unhappy. Now, *there's* a critique — a potentially devastating challenge to the core rationale and inner logic of the divorce culture.

A number of scholars begged to differ with Glenn. For example, here is Andrew Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University arguing against the Glenn hypothesis as it was developed by Richard Gill in *The Public Interest*: “The claim here is that in a high-divorce-rate society spouses feel freer to argue because they know divorce is an option if they can’t resolve their differences. The opposite position could, of course, be argued: that in a high-divorce-rate society there is less conflict in marriages because couples that can’t get along divorce.” Yet Cherlin conceded that the whole question remained “open” since there was no “hard evidence” on either side.

Now there is hard evidence. Earlier this year in the *Journal of Family Issues*, Paul R. Amato and Stacy J. Rogers of the University of Nebraska presented their analysis of the responses of 2,033 married persons who were interviewed by phone in 1980, 1983, and 1988 about their marriages and about their attitudes toward marriage and divorce. Using statistical methods that I won’t even pretend to understand (“structural equation models”), Amato and Rogers find little evidence to support the hypothesis that “changes in marital quality affect people’s attitudes toward divorce.” However, they do conclude that “shifts in prodivorce attitudes had a significant impact on marital happiness.” Specifically, “the belief that an unrewarding marriage should be jettisoned may lead some people to invest less time in their marriages and make fewer attempts to resolve marital disagreements.” Therefore: “Ironically, by adopting attitudes that provide greater freedom to leave unsatisfying marriages, people may be increasing the likelihood that their marriages will become unsatisfying in the long run.” This study, the authors report, “is the first to provide empirical support for this idea.”

The remarkable intellectual optimism that accompanied the divorce revolution of the 1970s was largely anchored, as Cherlin suggests, in the hope that more acceptance of divorce would make marriages happier by encouraging unhappy spouses to dissolve their unions. But now we have “hard evidence” that, on the contrary, the divorce culture feeds on itself, creating a one-way downward spiral of marital dissatisfaction and failure. More acceptance of divorce generate more unhappy marriages, which in turn generates more divorce. Norval Glenn was right.

It is obvious that a decrease in the ideal of marital permanence will tend to increase the probability of divorce, but it is not generally recognized that there are strong theoretical reasons for thinking that such a change will lower the probability of marital success as well.

Norval Glenn, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 1991

Norval D. Glenn, "Values, Attitudes, and the State of American Marriage," Working Paper No. 7 (New York: Institute for American Values, 1991), later published in David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and David Blankenhorn (eds.), *Promises To Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 1996), 15-33; and Glenn, "The Recent Trend in Marital Success in the United States," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (May 1991): 261-270. Andrew J. Cherlin, "Nostalgia as family policy," *The Public Interest* (Winter 1993): 77-84. Paul R. Amato and Stacy J. Rogers, "Do Attitudes Toward Divorce Affect Marital Quality?," *Journal of Family Issues* 20, no. 1 (January 1999): 69-86.

Birds Do It?

In a recent episode of *Sesame Street*, the popular educational TV show for pre-schoolers, Kermit the Frog, dressed as a reporter for "Sesame Street News," interviews a little bird in the park, asking her where she lives. The answer is a little complicated. Some of the time, says the little bird, she lives with her mother in that tree over there. But sometimes she lives with her father, who has a separate nest in another tree nearby. Everything is really great, she concludes, in the form of a cute song, because "they both love me."

What is one to make of this little story? Certainly as a child's lesson in zoology, the story is ridiculous, since nowhere in nature do male and female birds build separate nests for the purpose of raising their young. Any species that tried it would quickly face extinction, since the behavior, from an evolutionary perspective, is clearly non-adaptive.

But of course, for the people at *Sesame Street*, the goal is sociological, not zoological. I can think of three possible rationales for introducing a "Birds Get Divorced" theme on *Sesame Street*. The first is to suggest to young viewers whose parents are divorcing: don't feel bad. Things will work out fine. Your parents still love you. The second is to suggest to all viewers that divorce is not especially painful or harmful. The third is to suggest that divorce is normal, almost a part of nature.

At best, the first rationale is a form of romanticism, since it is rooted in the naive belief that sugar-coated words by themselves can somehow, for the child, off-set reality. At worst, it is a form of adult propaganda — it's no big deal when your parents split up — that flagrantly denies the feelings of children who actually experience divorce. Such a betrayal of the child's world view is shocking to see, especially on a program that prides itself on its commitment to children.

Several years ago, having decided to bring divorce to *Sesame Street*, the program's producers consulted several prominent authorities in child development, including Dr. Judith Wallerstein, a member of our Institute's Council on Families. These experts warned the producers unequivocally: Because divorce is acutely painful for children, one of the lousiest things adults can do is pressure them to pretend otherwise. The producers wisely put their divorce scripts back on the shelf. Perhaps this time the producers found different consultants.

The second rationale, that divorce is not a serious social problem, amounts to a bold-faced lie. If the weight of evidence accumulated during the last two decades of research in this field tells us anything, it tells us that today's high rates of parental divorce are harming children and weakening our society. Claims to the contrary, however reassuring to the people at *Sesame Street*, are simply no longer taken seriously by most reputable scholars.

The third rationale, that divorce has become normal, is by far the most compelling. No, divorce is not normal for the birds, or for any of the animals, but at least for this generation of human beings in the U.S. and in the other rich societies, divorce is indeed becoming normal. For precisely this reason, the family sociologist William J. Goode urges us to adopt "one guiding principle" for evaluating the divorce revolution: "we should accept the fact that most developed nations can now be seen as high divorce rate systems, and we should *institutionalize* divorce — accept it as we do other institutions, and build adequate safeguards as well as social understandings and pressures to make it work reasonably well." This same principle, I am told by people in the field, will inform the forthcoming book on divorce by the psychologist E. Mavis Hetherington of the University of Virginia, who apparently will argue that divorce in modern societies has by now become "normative" — that is, consistent with, and in some ways indicative of, society's basic moral code.

The key question for us is not whether Goode and Hetherington are accurately describing reality. They are accurate. What they are saying, moreover, is no longer surprising or controversial. Most scholars and most of the public know quite well that marriage is decomposing in modern societies. The pressing question today is whether we as a society, on the advice of many prominent scholars, children's television producers, "relationships" advocates, and other opinion leaders, will accept the trend toward a post-marriage society as a given, striving only to make divorce "work reasonably well," or whether we will refuse this well-informed counsel of despair and do what we can to reverse the trend.

William J. Goode, *World Changes in Divorce Patterns* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 345.

Never Grow Up

Not that anyone on Madison Avenue is worried yet, but I want to beat up on commercial advertising some more. A new magazine ad from Toyota explains why you should buy their car: "Little kids are selfish. Impulsive. They don't make rational decisions. When they see something they want, they want it now. Little kids have a lot of fun. Hmmmm. Introducing Solara . . . It's for you." Another ad features a skin cream from Clinique called "Stop Signs: Visible Anti-Aging Serum." In the ad, the Clinique bottle is shown next to three small birthday-cake candles. And instead of a regular container cap, a baby-bottle nipple is perched atop the Clinique. Another Clinique ad, also showing the baby-bottle nipple, describes Clinique's amazing "turnaround cream" as "Formulated for baby boomers" and reminds us: "Yes, it's true, we're not as young as we once were. But we still want our bottle."

Last year, Mitsubishi ran a series of TV ads called “Life, cars, and getting older.” In one ad, we learn that young men tend to become worried, even panicky, “the first time someone calls you ‘sir’”. The solution? Buy this “sporty new car”: “Hurry, you don’t have much time left!” In another ad in this series, a young girl is whining to the grown man who is driving her home: “You don’t have to worry about being cool any more!” He is mortified at the idea that a teenager would consider him a grown-up. The solution? You guessed it: buy that sporty new car. Hurry . . . !

No, I am not claiming that these ads by themselves are making us permanently childlike, self-absorbed, preoccupied with appearance and sex, mistrustful of adulthood, and inordinately afraid of growing old and dying. Regarding this deconstruction of the adult character structure, many forces in our society are diligently at work, not just advertising. But surely these ubiquitous slogans promising perpetual adolescence do contribute to what David Bosworth, in several powerful essays linking the decline of adulthood to the triumph of scientific capitalism, calls the “economic modeling of adult immaturity.”

But I can’t find many people who want to fight over advertising, except for Bill Bennett and, frequently, the Bishops of the Catholic Church. Here is the Archbishop of Denver, Colorado, J. Francis Stafford, speaking in 1996 in Lima, Peru, as president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity: “Idolatry of the self — the worship of my needs, my appetites, my choices, to the exclusion of moral restraints — is now the motive force behind the market economy and our emerging politics . . . In the United States today, more and more people actually believe that whatever they want, they deserve and should have. They learn this lunacy from the advertising industry, which exists to create new appetites and needs, which can then fuel the purchase of new products and services.”

That’s a radical diagnosis, yet one that, as far as I can tell, is neither obviously “liberal” nor obviously “conservative.” Listen to him take one more shot: “The ironies here are immense. This consumer materialism, this ‘atheism with a happy face’ which presents itself as progress and is admired by much of the world, is accomplishing something no totalitarian system ever achieved. It is isolating the individual in the name of individual rights. It is spreading a profound loneliness in the name of diversity and pluralism. It is invading our privacy with technology, while claiming to protect the right to privacy. It is manipulating and dominating the individual in the name of providing products and services to the individual. In fact, it is reducing us to the sum total of what we want and what we own.” Anybody want to quarrel with that? Make a proposal? I’ll try to publish some responses.

Michiko Kakutani, “Adolescence Rules!,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 11, 1997. David Bosworth, “The Cult of the Adolescent: Commercial Indoctrination and the Collapse of Civic Virtue,” *The Georgia Review* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1996); and Bosworth, “The Sacking of Wemmick’s Castle: Economic Modeling of Adult Immaturity,” Working Paper No. 56 (New York: Institute for American Values, 1997). Archbishop J. Francis Stafford, “Crossing the Threshold of Hope Together,” Address to the International Colloquium, “Toward the Synod of America” (Lima: Asociacion Vida y Espiritualidad, VE, 1996).

They denied that Wishes were Horses; they denied that a Pig had Wings; So we worshipped the Gods of the Market/Who promised these beautiful things.

Rudyard Kipling, “The Gods of the Copybook Headings”

The Supreme Court today unanimously struck down a 65-year-old ban on broadcast advertising of casino gambling...reflecting the Court’s growing solicitude for advertising and other forms of commercial speech...

New York Times,
June 15, 1999

So's Your Mamma

What do you do when someone criticizes you? Not your ideas, but you? After years of eagerness to debate and rebut every accusation — and often operating on the principle of “when accused, accuse” — I’ve begun to consider the merits of an alternative strategy: make an honest effort to accept every criticism as valid.

If you try it out in your mind with specific examples, it seems to work beautifully almost every time, if for no other reason than most of us fall short most of the time. As my friend Tom Kohler of the Boston College Law School puts it: “It is completely human for each of us to prefer ourselves before others, and to be tempted to see our case as the one that merits a special exception to the general rule.” (Naturally, I’ve always believed this about *other* people . . .)

What if the accusation is selfishness, or bias, or special pleading? Don’t most charges — even those containing bits of falseness and reflecting their own portions of selfishness, bias, etc. — have some basis in reality? Why not begin by pointing out, and perhaps even elaborating on, that basis? Moreover, in the deeper sense that Kohler describes, we are *always* guilty as charged, aren’t we?

So often, pretending otherwise doesn’t even work. That is why those alumni updates from your college classmates — on a fabulous trip to the Himalayas, we got word that I was up for the Pulitzer Prize — always seem so phony. It’s also why George Orwell so thoroughly mistrusted people who praise themselves. Orwell argued that every man’s life, viewed from the inside, appears as a series of failures.

Finally, a self-critical response to criticism may yield practical benefits. It may help to reduce our fear of criticism. It may also, in a paradoxical way, reduce the power of our critics. Why fear anyone who can’t possibly criticize me as convincingly as I can criticize myself? Where’s the sting? And who ultimately ends up on the defensive?

Mind you, I’m only *thinking* about this new approach.

Thomas C. Kohler, “The Integrity of Unrestricted Desire: Community, Values, and the Problem of Personhood,” in Edward Lehman (ed.), *Autonomy and Order: A Communitarian Anthology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming).

Sincerely,

David Blankenhorn

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