Institute for American Values

A Letter of Ideas
and Findings
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Propositions

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Dear Reader,

Harlequin sells a lot of romance novels — about 160 million in 1998 to an estimated 50 million readers worldwide. In the last three years, a number of successful Harlequin books have focussed in particular on fatherhood. With titles such as *Do You Take This Child?*, *The Secret Baby*, *McCallister's Baby*, and *The Father of Her Child*, these books offer an interesting glimpse into the current state of courtship, marriage, and romantic fantasy in our society.

Here is the basic plot line. They meet. The situation gets hot, she gets pregnant. The situation then gets very cold. Maybe he's not ready to commit. Maybe circumstances keep them apart. Maybe she doesn't even tell him about the baby. She is facing a life of loneliness; her baby is facing life without a father. Then, at the very last moment, he (or some other guy) confesses his love for her, they get married, and they live happily ever after.

In *Do You Take This Child?*, Dr. Sheila Pollack is an unmarried mom-to-be, about to give birth to the baby conceived on her one night of passion with Slade Garrett. As she feels the contractions coming on, and is preparing to go to the hospital, she murmurs to the baby inside her, "I have no idea what your dad is like, except for sexy and pushy. Very sexy." But then, in the hospital maternity ward, something amazing happens. Slade shows up, proposing marriage! For it turns out that Slade has been doing some thinking. There are certain things he wants in life after all: a wife, a child, a chance to rejoice in everyday routines, time "to stop and smell the baby powder." Sheila is very reluctant at first — "Slade, I don't believe in marriage" — but soon enough, just before the baby is born, she says "I do." Can their "nick-of-time nuptials" last forever? Well, not to give away the ending, but the answer is yes.

What should we make of this story? In some ways, it's quite old-fashioned. The lady is rescued by her Prince Charming. Sexual passion is redeemed and elevated by romantic love, which, when all is said and done, takes the shape of marriage.

But in other respects, this story is quite new. For one, the sequence of events is very modern, maybe post-modern. The old chronology was love, marriage, sex, baby. The chronology in *Do You Take This Child?* is sex, baby, marriage, love. In other similar Harlequin books, the order may be different, but it's never the old order. We thus see in these stories the complete disappearance of any culturally defined courtship roles and stages, and only the most tenuous and idiosyncratic of connections between marriage and procreation — but still, a happy ending.

Second, not only does Prince Charming rescue the lady, but he does so despite her plans and intentions. This is a big change. In the older courtship story, men were formally the initiators — he asked her out on a date, not the other way around — but women typically had much (I believe most) of the power, and the women knew what they wanted. In the new story, women have sex with men and have babies, all while anticipating and planning on getting along without husbands:

"Slade, I don't believe in marriage." It's now the *men* who figure out that relationships are important and thereby saves the day. This is not romance. It's fantasy.

Lonnae O'Neal Parker, "The books of love," *New York Post*, February 27, 1999. Marie Ferrarella, *Do You Take This Child?* (New York: Silhouette Books, 1996), 38, 47.

Bad Signs

Each Tuesday, in its "Health and Fitness" section, the *New York Times* features a round-up of current health-related research findings called "Vital Signs," and therein hangs a tale. "Good News for the Children of Divorce" announced a "Vital Signs" headline in August of this year: "The divorce rate for adult children of divorced parents has declined over the past two decades, a new study has found." Wow! Such a finding clearly suggests that, for children, divorce is becoming less harmful. Specifically, a lower divorce rate for the adult children of divorce would indicate a welcome reduction in the intergenerational transmission of divorce.

The only problem is, the story is bogus. As anyone familiar with this issue knows, the divorce rate for the adult children of divorce has not declined. It has increased significantly. In the early 1970s, about 35 percent of ever-married adult children of divorce were themselves divorced. By the early 1990s, the number had increased to 45 percent. Yet during this same period, the divorce rate for everyone else increased even more. In the early 1970s, about 18 percent of ever-married adults raised in intact homes had themselves divorced. Twenty years later, the number had jumped to 35 percent.

The study cited in "Vital Signs," which was conducted by Nicholas Wolfinger of the University of Utah, does show that the gap separating the two groups has narrowed. But this development has nothing to do with declining divorce rates. On the contrary, the convergence cited in Wolfinger's study is entirely the result of a remarkable increase in divorce-proneness in recent decades of U.S. adults who were raised in intact families. This is good news?

Actually, it's terrible news — not only because divorce has increased, but also because the convergence described by Wolfinger suggests that, in a high-divorce society, everyone's marriage is made weaker. Today, divorce and its consequences are everywhere, affecting even those who were raised in intact families. One result is a general, across-the-board weakening of the ideal of marital permanence. As Norval Glenn of the University of Texas presciently suggested more than a decade ago, in such a society we would expect to see a gradual convergence of divorce rates, at increasingly higher levels, among various subpopulations. And that is exactly what we are seeing, even as we are reassured by the *New York Times* that the entire phenomenon amounts to "Good News for the Children of Divorce."

"For Single Parents, One Less Worry" announced another "Vital Signs" headline in October of this year: A new study finds that "in and of itself, single parenthood seems to have no effect on how a child does in school." Wow! Such a finding is significant because it directly challenges the work of many leading researchers, most of whom have consistently found that growing up with a single parent is a significant risk factor regarding the child's educational achievement.

The problem is, the story is worthless. The researcher being cited, Henry N. Ricciuti from Cornell University, examined an extremely limited range of outcomes — vocabulary and math test results and mother's reports of behavioral problems — affecting the very young children (age 6-7) of mostly young, lower-income, poorly educated mothers. These are severe, important restrictions. The age limitation is especially problematic, since many of the ill effects of growing up in a father-absent home only show symptoms (especially symptoms clear enough to be detected by crude social science instruments) *after* the child's seventh or eighth birthday. Even if the study were competent, it could provide no basis for the global assertion that "single parenthood seems to have no effect on how a child does in school."

But the study is not competent. Ricciuti crumbs his entire inquiry by playing fast and loose with the definition of "single parent." If the unmarried mother has a live-in boyfriend at the time the questionnaire was administered, Ricciuti counts it as a two-parent home. That's quite a trick. Since many of these young mothers have boyfriends, and since many of the problems associated with unwed parenthood are made *worse,* not better, by the presence of boyfriends in the home, Ricciuti can, in one fell swoop, transfer much of the bad stuff that would have been in column A over to column B.

That's quite enough to invalidate his study, but Ricciuti is also a devoted practitioner of what I described in an earlier letter (Spring 1998) as the "per se" argument. For Ricciuti, the issue is never single parenthood; it's always single parenthood "per se." Here is how he puts it: The results [of this study] do suggest that in the presence of maternal and household and family characteristics favorable to young children's development, single parenthood *in and of itself* need not represent a risk factor that by definition implies negative developmental consequences for children." That sentence deserves a prize. Let's translate it. If the mother has adequate financial resources, and if the mother has time to spend with her child, and if the mother has other family and community resources that are "favorable" to her child, then the mere fact that the child's father is absent from the home does not necessarily, in every case, by definition, harm the child. In short, if we pretend that the child has all the advantages that typically accrue from having a father in the home, then it doesn't matter (necessarily, in all cases) whether or not the father is in the home. Well, what a relief. Or as the *New York Times* puts it: "For Single Parents, One Less Worry."

Articles like these have consequences. Our friends over at the Council on Contemporary Families, whose main scholarly mission is defending the divorce revolution, will probably be citing this stuff for years. Divorce is becoming less harmful for children. Single parenthood has no effect on how children do in school. Don't you remember? It was reported in the *New York Times*.

. . . one might also expect the "parental divorce effect" to be stronger in low-divorce populations than in high-divorce ones . . . in a high-divorce population, a parental divorce may be largely superfluous in producing insecure feelings about marriage.

Norval Glenn and Kathryn Kramer, *Journal of Marriage and the Family,* 1987

"Good News for the Children of Divorce," *New York Times*, August 17, 1999. Data on divorce rates of ever-married children of divorce and ever-married children of intact homes from Norval Glenn, University of Texas. Nicholas H. Wolfinger, "Trends in the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce, *Demography* 36, no. 3 (August 1999). Wolfinger, "Coupling and Uncoupling: Changing Marital Patterns and the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (Chicago, August 1999). Norval D. Glenn and Kathryn B. Kramer, "The Marriages and Divorces of the Children of Divorce," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*

49 (November 1987). "For Single Parents, One Less Worry," *New York Times*, October 5, 1999. Henry N. Ricciuti, "Single Parenthood and School Readiness in White, Black, and Hispanic 6- and 7-Year-Olds," *Journal of Family Psychology* 13, no. 3 (September 1999).

Children from one-parent families do less well than their peers on four out of five indicators [of educational achievement]. Their test scores are lower, their expectations about college are lower, their grades are lower, and their attendance record is poorer.

Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent,* 1994.

Norval Glenn (University of Texas) *replies*: "The Ricciuti study is in some respects even worse than you say it is. You are of course correct in pointing out that live-in boyfriends shouldn't be considered to be 'parents.' Furthermore, the study should have distinguished between step-families and families including both biological parents, because there is evidence that the effects of the two kinds of families on some child outcomes are typically different. Even more important, as Ricciuti admits, just looking at family type at age six or seven, as was done in this study, is not adequate. It is family history that is important. Consider that a child who lived in a single-parent family for six years, but whose mother recently married, is classified by Ricciuti as living in a two-parent home, while a child who lived for six years with both biological parents who recently divorced is classified as living in a single-parent home. These deficiencies in the definition and measurement of the independent variable make the findings of the study essentially meaningless."

All Worked Up

What is the most frequently repeated campaign promise of this decade? The answer, I submit, is the promise to "help working families."

Vice President Al Gore's main campaign slogan is "Change that works for working families." In one 60-second Gore commercial, the announcer sums up Mr. Gore's purpose: "His cause is working families." Presenting his new campaign manager to cheering supporters in Nashville, Gore literally shouts his admiration for her: "Twenty years of fighting for working families!"

Senator Bill Bradley's three main policy speeches to date — on health care, "working families," and children in poverty — are also described collectively on his web site as part of an overall effort to "help working families." Nor are Democrats alone. Even GOP candidate Gary Bauer has established a political action committee called the "Campaign for Working Families."

The funny thing is, it appears that no one in public life was fighting for, or had even heard of, "working families" before about 1982. A Nexis search of major U.S. news databases turns up nearly 30,000 references to "working families," but only one prior to 1982. Before that, it was just "families" or "the family." Nor, prior to about 15 years ago, did politicians so regularly feel compelled to use some variant of "family" as a synonym for "voters" or "citizens" or "the people."

But if "working families" are who we most want to help, who exactly are they? Well, no one knows for sure — that's part of the term's appeal. But my nonscientific investigation of how politicians and opinion leaders have used the term in recent years does suggest three implicit (and often overlapping) definitions.

First, working families are not on welfare. Even if they are poor, they are struggling through hard work to escape poverty. They deserve our respect because they are independent and self-supporting. Relatedly, and at the level of connotation, these

families are not dysfunctional; they “work.” Of the three politically salient definitions, this one is not in my view the most important, but it is the broadest and most inclusive.

Mr. Bradley has made helping working families a central part of his agenda.

New York Times, news story, October 29, 1999

Second, working families are not rich. They can’t afford to be idle. In the Massachusetts gubernatorial election of 1998, in which both candidates spoke of little else but their abiding commitment to “working families,” an aid to the Democratic nominee, Scott Harshbarger (who lost), defined “working families” this way: “They barely make ends meet. They’re people who get up every day and go to work and play by the rules and still find themselves working harder and longer just trying to keep their heads above water. They’re working like dogs. Like dogs!”

In these respects, “working families” iconographically resemble “middle class families,” or even better, “struggling middle class families.” A related and almost equally desirable connotation here is “working class” — gritty, blue-collar — but without the “class,” that is, without implying that our society is characterized by a distinct class structure. This suggestion of constant struggle, of “working like dogs” but still not getting ahead, clearly gets us closer to the secret of the term’s political success.

But the third definition gets us to the nub of the matter. For Paul Cellucci, the victorious Republican nominee for governor of Massachusetts, “working families” are “primarily those families where both the mother and father are working or a single mom is working sometimes two jobs to make it. Those are the families I want to help the most.” Clear enough. Working families are child-rearing families in which all parents work outside of the home as paid employees.

Both Gore and Bradley use the term in much the same way. Under a banner on his web site reading "Al Gore is fighting for America's Working Families," the vice president promises to "make it easier to be a good worker and a good parent at the same time." In his policy address on "Working Families," Senator Bradley is equally clear: ". . . for so many working families, and so many working women, they have no choice. They can't afford not to work the long hours that help support the family but prevent them from being with their children." Accordingly, the senator's policy proposals would provide new benefits specifically for employed parents.

All of which may sound praiseworthy, until we realize that politicians who embrace “working families” as their supreme cause effectively consign at least half of the nation’s child-rearing families to political nonexistence. If we look at all families with pre-school children, fewer than half currently meet the Cellucci standard for a “working family” — that is, either two parents working full time or a single mother who is in the labor force. Who is minding the children? Currently, about half of all pre-school children are cared for during the day by their mothers, a group that is by far the nation’s major provider of child care, but one that is nevertheless rendered all but invisible by the prevailing assumption that the only families worth discussing are “working families.”

Similarly, among all married couples with children under age 18 in 1997, about 33 percent consisted of two full-time earners. Another 22 percent consisted of one full-time and one part-time earner. If we relax the Cellucci standard this time by including all of the part-timers — we could quarrel about how many of them are “working like dogs,” but let’s not — we could plausibly say that about half of

But the realities of today's economy have made dual careers essential, not optional, for virtually all families.

Patricia Schroeder, endorsing *Halving It All* by Francine M. Deutch, 1999.

today's child-rearing married couples are "working families." Indeed, tracking the data on this topic over the course of the 1990s, I have noticed that most fair-minded ways of asking this question seem to yield an answer of "about half." For example, how many mothers with children under age 18 worked full time in 1996? About half. (Actually, 47.5 percent).

Also, follow the money. In 1996, the median income of married-couple "working families" — at least one child under age 18, both parents working full time — was about $62,000. That's $23,000 higher than the annual income of married couples in which the father worked and the mother was at home with one or more children, and $10,000 higher than the annual income of child-rearing married couples as a whole. Ironically, then, if financially struggling parents (blue-collar, gritty, etc.) are who we most want to help, then "working families" is a serious misnomer, since two-earner "working families" are, by a considerable margin, the most affluent child-rearing families in the country.

In this light, Senator Bradley's rhetoric of "no choice" becomes especially misleading. Let's follow the logic. When half of our child-rearing families effectively take a parent out of the labor force to care for a child, thereby substantially reducing their income, they are exercising choice. But when the other half keep both parents strongly committed to the labor force, thereby making themselves financially better off than other families, they are doing so because they have "no choice." Make sense?

Finally, pledging allegiance to "working families" above all other families comes very close to making an idol of what might be called "market place families" — families whose ways of living are increasingly tied to, and defined by, the market place. Is this what we want? Is this a trend that we want to praise, subsidize through public policy, and extend further? I know that we need a market economy, but do we want a market society?

Katharine Q. Seelye, "The Ad Campaign: The Vice President Presents Himself," *New York Times*, October 20, 1999. Margery Egan, "Dull duo duking it out over 'working family' vote," *Boston Herald*, October 6, 1998. Martin Finucane, "Candidates woo 'working families,'" Associated Press, February 20, 1998. Bill Bradley, speech on "Working Families," delivered October 7, 1999. Linda J. Waite and Mark R. Nielson, "The Rise of the Dual-Career Family: 1963-1997" (Chicago: Alfred P. Sloan Working Families Center, University of Chicago, 1999). U.S. Congress, House Ways and Means Committee, *Green Book* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1998). U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Money Income in the United States: 1996," *Current Population Reports*, P60-197 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1998).

Linda Waite (Working Families Center, University of Chicago) *replies*: "Most people who study the issue argue that families with one spouse working in the home (almost always the wife) live better than two-worker families with the same income, since what the at-home wife produces is pretty valuable. For example, one study estimates that families with two workers need about a third more income to have the same standard of living as one-worker families in which one spouse is at home. So the higher incomes of dual-career families are not as high as they seem. Of course, this is mostly true for families with children at home. One could argue that families without children have less need of the wife's time at home."

Explaining the Anglos

In a forthcoming essay for *The National Interest*, Lawrence Mead of New York University suggests that the major social-political fact on the planet today is "the return of Anglo power." By which he means — how to put this delicately? — that white guys who speak English now pretty much run the world.

English is "the chief language of world power." Communism has largely imploded. The nonaligned movement is a thing of the past. While the Islamic nations are getting bigger and richer, their cultures are not invitational or plausibly universalistic, which hinders them from converting their demographic and economic assets into an equivalent degree of world influence. Western cultural trends and political ideas, especially those emanating from the U.S. and the other English-speaking nations, increasingly dominate and attract the rest of the world. Economically, the movement in most places is toward Anglo-style capitalism; culturally, it's toward Anglo-style individualism.

Margaret Thatcher, the former British Prime Minister, recently called Britain "quite the best country in Europe," then explained why: "In my lifetime all the problems have come from mainland Europe, and all the solutions have come from the English-speaking nations across the world." OK, she's arrogant and boastful. But is she wrong? I don't think so.

What explains this phenomenon? Mead examines a number of the usual historical suspects — success in establishing colonies, geography, natural resources, sea power and military prowess, material affluence and a commercial ethic — but finds all of them unsatisfying. For Mead, institutions and values based on the impartial rule of law constitute "the core achievement" of Britain and the other Anglo societies. This political achievement is the foundation upon which their other achievements, including economic growth and an entrepreneurial culture, largely depend and from which they largely spring.

For me, this analysis raises two questions. One concerns religion. Isn't there a strong connection in all of the Anglo societies between the hegemony of Protestantism and the reigning cultural values of competition and individualism? I realize that these linkages are not simple. In *The Myth of American Individualism*, Barry Alan Shain argues persuasively that Protestant thought and practice at the time of the American founding bore little resemblance to our modern notions of personal autonomy or expressive individualism. When the founding generation spoke of "liberty," they were speaking of a morally determined mean between slavery and licentiousness, a way of behaving that was obedient to reason, restricted by duty, communally oriented, and intelligible at all only within the context of the moral laws of a God-centered universe.

Fair enough. Yet the cultural logic of Protestantism over time has surely been toward individualism. As early as the Second Great Awakening, according to Nathan Hatch, American Protestantism was becoming profoundly "committed to audience" and accepting of "the right to think for oneself," including "the right of private judgement" in interpreting Scripture. In this sense, Protestant leadership in the early 19th century "espoused convictions that were essentially modern and individualistic" and therefore "had the ironic effect of accelerating the break-up of traditional society and the advent of a social order of competition, self-expression, and free enterprise."

In the classical Protestant way of seeing the world (and, for what it's worth, I speak as one myself), life is a pilgrim's progress, centering on one's personal relationship with God. In Protestant culture, then, all larger structures of authority — familial, ecclesial, and political — tend over time to matter less and less, since the individual, and the individual's personal encounter with God, is the central drama. The old Protestant hymn about going to Heaven, "I'm On My Way," declares triumphantly that "If my mother won't go, she won't hinder me." I'm doing it on my own: "I've signed my name, made up my mind." Don't slow me down. I've asked Catholic and Jewish friends if they can imagine singing a song of worship in which life is construed in these terms. They can't. I know I'm simplifying, but Judaism and Catholicism seem to focus on the integrity of religious culture and institutions, whereas for Protestants it all centers on asking the individual, "What is your decision?"

Obviously the economic and political implications of seeing the world in this way are breathtaking. Don't they explain, at least in part, many of the most distinctive features and successes of the Anglo societies? And as an analytic rule of thumb, don't the typically potent cultural effects of religion require us always to question or at least qualify the suggestion that politics drives culture?

My second question concerns one of the main price tags for this success. Mead doesn't mention it, but these same Anglo societies now bestriding the world like a colossus also lead the world in nearly every measurement of family disintegration. Exceptionally high rates of divorce and unwed childbearing. Lots of children growing up apart from their fathers. Declining fertility rates. A dramatic weakening of marriage as a social institution.

In the coming decades, will the Anglo societies simply continue to get richer and freer, remaining the destinations of choice for dreamers everywhere and the cultural trend-setters for the world? Or will the triumphant side of what I am calling Protestant individualism eventually be overshadowed by its dark side? Yes, more and more people are watching our movies, responding to our advertisements, and coming to our meetings. But our families are getting weaker, our communities are getting hollower, and we are putting more and more of our young men in prison.

Lawrence Mead, "The Return of Anglo Power," *The National Interest* (forthcoming). Warren Hoge, "Thatcher's Back and She Hasn't Changed a Bit," *New York Times*, October 7, 1999. Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 162, 180, 14.

Lawrence Mead replies: "I don't see good government in the Anglo countries as provoking the individualism you mention, at least not initially. At the outset, the rule of law in England involved an acceptance of mutual obligations between rulers and ruled. Kings obtained consent for the laws, and subjects then committed to obey them. Britain was, and still is, first of all a dutiful country where the culture is less rights-oriented than in America. Remember that the rule of law and government by consent were established centuries before the Reformation or any form of modern individualism. At the same time, Britain showed greater tolerance

for freedom within the law than elsewhere in Europe. Hence her embrace of the market economy and religious toleration earlier than most other countries. Possibly, the immense strength of the regime domesticated individualism, making it safe and thus promoting it more than elsewhere.

The eventual fruit of good governance was the industrial revolution and the unprecedented affluence of the last two centuries. Blessed with the greatest peace and prosperity the world has known, the Anglo countries may now be succumbing to an excessive individualism, in the form of family dissolution. So triumphant is their public life that they are abandoning private life. People would rather associate with fellow workers and citizens than, more intimately, with family members. The street and the office have become their living rooms, to the detriment of children. This situation is the reverse of what prevails in many Third World countries, where families are stable — and distrust the regime."

Against the Primacy of Politics

On *Larry King Live*, a caller asked Vice President Al Gore an interesting question: If you had known in 1992 everything that you know today about Bill Clinton, would you still have decided to run for vice president on the same ticket with him? Yes, Mr. Gore answered firmly. He then listed Clinton-Gore policy achievements in areas ranging from economic growth to crime control to balancing the federal budget. The vice president argued — and I suspect most people would agree — that these policies have contributed significantly to improvements in the quality of life in the U.S. since 1992.

But in making this case, the vice president is clearly arguing in favor of what might be called the primacy of politics. When it comes to political life, he is suggesting, moral and character issues are meaningful, but secondary. What ultimately matters is public policy — one's track record and accomplishments on "the issues." The truest way to judge a politician, then, is through the use of distinctly *political* criteria.

I lean the other way, for two reasons. First, in politics, I no longer believe that a bad tree can produce good fruit. I believed it in 1992, and on that basis voted for Bill Clinton, who then made a fool of me — not because of the policies he advocated, but because his narcissism and mendacity did more that Jerry Springer or Donald Trump ever could to debase our society. And since I am far from the only person to whom this has happened, I suspect that Vice President Gore will be heavily punished in the coming months by voters who may admire the vice president's policy accomplishments, but who also, and more importantly, know things today about Bill Clinton that they did not know, or at least pretended not to know, in 1992.

Second, I cannot accept the proposition that, in politics, politics trumps morality. As far as I can tell, the single most important change in public life in the 1990s is the triumph of this idea in so many quarters of our society. Less a debating point now than a shared assumption, a new conventional wisdom that endlessly flatters itself as "tough-minded" and "realistic," this notion of the primacy of politics seems to be popping up everywhere, not just in political campaigns and

among political analysts, but even in those precincts where it ought, one would think, to be distinctly unwelcome.

Consider the recently established Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. Boston College is one of the oldest Catholic, Jesuit universities in the nation. The purposes of the new Center, according to the College, are to "address the relationship between religion and public policy" and to "make sure that serious discussion of religious issues takes place in academe." But then a funny thing happens. The director of the new Center is the sociologist Alan Wolfe — a prolific scholar whose world view is thoroughly secular and whose guiding idea and principle public argument is that politics and economics drive everything else, including morality and religion.

Wolfe argues that "the older moral models are of little help" in confronting the problems of modernity. Specifically, in "looking to religion" to find the rules of moral obligation, "we look in the wrong place." And where is the right place for modern people to look? Why, to social scientists. The core supposition of Wolfe's 1989 book, *Whose Keeper?*, is that "the ideas of social scientists" have necessarily become "the most common guideposts for moral obligation in a secular, nonliterary age." Father O'Malley, no need to call your office.

Flowing naturally from this perspective is Wolfe's argument, made in the *Brookings Review* earlier this year, that theologians and other people of faith should have more scrupulously refrained from bringing "religious judgements" to bear on the "political" matter of President Clinton's conduct, since "faith is a private matter between an individual and his or her God while politics is a public matter involving all the bonds that hold us together as a people." Wolfe's *Brookings* essay is titled "The Perplexing Role of Religion in Public Life," but to me, Wolfe seems the opposite of perplexed on this question. Religion, private. Politics, public. Religion, sideline. Politics, mainline. Any questions?

"I interviewed people about morality, but of course what I'm interested in is politics," commented Wolfe at an Institute symposium in 1998 on *A Call to Civil Society*, released by our 24-member Council on Civil Society. He was discussing his then-new book, *One Nation, After All*, which Wolfe describes as a study of the moral beliefs of middle class Americans. Yet the book's final recommendations are entirely concerned with politics, not morality, since "of course what I'm interested in is politics." Of course.

Similarly, speaking in September of this year to a group at the Manhattan Institute, Wolfe offered a spirited defense of what he terms "moral freedom," by which he means a society where each person develops his or her own subjective and essentially private moral code. Wolfe notes, however, that the triumph of "moral freedom" in the U.S. can "of course be viewed as either a good thing or a bad thing, depending on one's politics." Of course. One's view of morality ultimately derives from one's politics, right?

"Nationally Noted Social Scientist Alan Wolfe to Join Faculty at Boston College," press release, Boston College Department of Public Affairs, May 5, 1999. Alan Wolfe, "Out of the Frying Pan, Into . . . What?," in Wolfe (ed.), *America at Century's End* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 471. Wolfe, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 6-7. Wolfe, "Judging the President: The Perplexing Role of Religion in Public Life," *Brookings Review* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 29.

A World of Molecules

On a TV talk show, a hippie-looking doctor from California is defending the use of herbal and other "alternative" medicines. At the beginning, I'm skeptical. But the guy debating him, another doctor who edits the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*, keeps insisting with growing impatience: "We live in a world of molecules!" There is nothing mysterious about herbs. If there is a substance in a plant that may be medically useful, we can extract it, put it in a pill, and test it on sick people. If it cures them, it's medicine. If not, it's not. If it's real, we can detect it. We live in a world of molecules!

On the whole, the hippie doctor was not impressed with this observation, and neither am I. Perhaps I'm reading too much into it, but the slogan "We live in a world of molecules" strikes me as a shorthand way of proffering a philosophy. In this view, molecules (or more broadly, what we see through microscopes; what scientists in lab coats study) are the objective facts which essentially define the world. Molecules are the primary units of meaning which in turn, and on their own, as it were, reveal the larger meaning and potentiality of things. Many societies have thought that we live in a world of spirits. Some people today think that we live in an information age, in which computers are the basic engines that shape us. This guy says it's molecules, and I'm not buying.

In the first place, long before anyone knew anything about molecules, the Greeks had concluded that knowledge consists less of sense impressions than of the inferences we make about them. All human knowing contains normative and speculative dimensions. Interpretation is an unavoidable component of cognition itself. It is impossible, therefore, to understand *anything* purely in terms of the sensate data impinging upon my sight, touch, hearing, smell, balance, and taste. If I kick a chair, I am quite incapable of separating that experience from my inferences and judgements (most of which I acquired on faith from others) about kicking and about the nature and purpose of chairs. That goes for you and me, and that goes for arrogant doctors making all kinds of assumptions about, say, molecules. In this sense, the only world available to us is a world of persons.

If in any philosophically serious sense we actually lived in a "world of molecules," in which knowing could be separated from the consciousness of the knower, then (as Thomas Kohler has put it) the only meaningful distinctions would be between those who've had a look at the facts and those who haven't. Disagreements would be solved by disseminating information. I can hardly imagine a more untrue thing to believe about the world.

Yet many people apparently believe it. I am constantly struck, for example, by how many social scientists claim that their own work consists merely of reporting "findings" — we live in a world of data! — then go on to imply that any opposing points of view stem from ideology, not science. Sorry, not even close. Certainly fair-mindedness, respect for empirical evidence, and the desire for objectivity are essential traits for anyone wishing to engage in serious intellectual work. Facts, including molecular facts, demand recognition. But it wastes everyone's time to pretend that Professor Smith's findings about divorce or day care have nothing to do with Professor Smith's own consciousness and way of judging the world.

Thought is what we start from: the simple, intimate, immediate datum. *Matter is the inferred thing, the mystery.*

C.S. Lewis, early 1940s.

Perhaps what I am ultimately describing and defending is the religious impulse, or at least a way of conceiving reality that is compatible with that impulse. To me, such a world view is both realistic and adventurous. For example, Jean Bethke Elshtain, in her wonderful book on Augustine, has little patience for "rationalistic triumphalism," largely because Elshtain is so acutely aware, as was Augustine, of "the noetic effects of sin" — that is, the fact that our personal shortcomings inevitably influence our thinking.

Or to take an example from the adventurous side of this sensibility, I suspect that a belief in things unseen, or in things that can only be guessed at, is quite close to the belief that some things may properly be judged too beautiful to be untrue. Stratford Caldecott, reflecting on C.S. Lewis's mythical writings about Narnia, insists that there are some truths that "only the imagination may grasp." A myth, in this sense, is an imaginative story that tells of a deep desire. But the existence of the desire may point toward the independent existence of that which is desired. Even if we have never seen water, the fact that ducks seem to be made for swimming suggests that, somewhere, water might actually exist. The fact that humans seem to be made to search for transcendence — to find a way to overcome death through infinite love — suggests that, somewhere, the object of the search might actually exist.

At a minimum, say Caldecott and Lewis, we should act as if the land of our heart's desire actually exists. As Lewis puts it: "I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia." In this spirit, Caldecott calls religious faith "a categorical refusal to act as though the world were less important, less interesting, less meaningful, than we are capable of conceiving. It may be more; it will not be less."

I still don't know much about the medicinal effects of herbs. And I believe in molecules. But "a world of molecules"? No. Or at least I'm going to live as if that's not so, even if it is.

David Melling, *Understanding Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 132. 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). Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), xii. Stratford Caldecott, "Speaking the Truths Only the Imagination May Grasp: Myth and 'Real Life,'" in David Mills (ed.), T*he Pilgrim's Guide: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

Sincerely,

David Blankenhorn

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