

ANALYZING THE SHIFT

Robert R. Reilly, *Making Gay Okay: How Rationalizing Homosexual Behavior Is Changing Everything*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 2014.

Same-sex marriage, the latest front in our nation's culture wars, is often framed as a just struggle for equal rights. To guarantee homosexual men and women the same privileges society affords to married couples, proponents of same-sex marriage argue that the legal definition of marriage should be enlarged to include homosexual pairings. There also exists a "conservative" argument for gay marriage: since marriage has a civilizing effect on men and women, allowing gays and lesbians to marry each other might domesticate certain untoward aspects of the gay lifestyle. In his history of society's gradual acceptance of same-sex relations, *Making Gay Okay: How Rationalizing Homosexual Behavior Is Changing Everything* (Ignatius: 2014), Robert Reilly argues that gay marriage is actually the latest step in a long process of legitimizing homosexual activity.

Although he includes a summary of the natural law arguments that favor a traditional understanding of marriage and that discourage homosexual acts, Reilly's book is not exactly meant to persuade the unsympathetic (his repeated use of "sodomy" and "sodomite," for example, would certainly prompt anyone with sympathy for the gay rights movement to put his book down forthwith). Instead, *Making Gay Okay* provides those caught off-guard by the recent challenge to marriage with a history of this societal evolution and an analysis of its deeper consequences.

Rationalization, the process of justifying our habitual actions, is how Reilly describes the cultural shift in attitude with regard to homosexual activity. Everyone acts for the perceived good, and this axiomatic truth identified by Aristotle is echoed in the modern psychological concept of cognitive dissonance. When our habitual

actions do not align with what we believe to be good, human beings have a tendency to either change their behavior or change their beliefs. The latter is usually the easier and more travelled path. Our personal rationalizations are subject to challenge by those outside ourselves. Through legislation, the state can give external approval of our new belief or act as a check on it. According to Reilly, affirming homosexual persons in their rationalizations is the purpose of same-sex marriage.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau plays the part of the villain in Reilly's account, with one chapter dedicated to his political philosophy and ample references to him elsewhere in the book. Reilly traces the intellectual roots for the primacy of the state and the political order over the family back to the French philosopher. If all of the relations that form society are merely the result of historical circumstances and are capable of man-made evolution, then the natural family has no special standing above the other institutions in society. From this conception of reality, marriage is a creation of the state, which serves as the primary intermediary between isolated individuals.

Displacing the family is not Reilly's only complaint against Rousseau. Reilly calls his work the inversion of Aristotle. For Aristotle things find their perfection in their proper act, which for human beings is reason. Therefore bodily goods are at the service of reason. Rousseau instead put reason at the service of satisfying the passions. "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions and may never pretend to any office other than to serve and obey them" (Rousseau, as quoted on pg. 32). This anthropological inversion leads to replacing the natural law with the language of rights. For Rousseau, rights are how we negotiate our various individual, passionate self-determinations.

For Reilly, the acceptability of same-sex activity is integrally connected to this view of reality. He argues that acceptance of Rousseau's view of nature leads one to a relativistic view of rights that is bound to accept eventually the legal protection of a variety

of modes of sexual expression. To illustrate this point, Reilly cites the example of President Obama's evolution on gay marriage. Common evolutions like this one traffic, of course, in a privatized view of morality. The idea of moral and social standards that preexist the state is inherently incompatible with the sort of self-definition and rights at play here.



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The second half of the book is a segment-by-segment examination of the infiltration of homosexual acceptance and its attendant philosophical commitments into various elements of society. By far, the strongest chapter is on the sciences, in which Reilly looks at the psychiatric community's lowering of scientific standards in changing its view of homosexuality. Reilly presents evidence that strong pressure within the field discourages fundamental questions such as whether a homosexual orientation is healthy and whether it can be altered by therapy.

Ultimately, while the book is fairly strong overall, Reilly relies too heavily on emotional responses to buttress his arguments. It is to elicit revulsion in the reader that he frequently mentions the sodomitic act itself. The argument from the unnaturalness of sodomy is so important to Reilly's work that he bothers to mention

that Greek pederasty almost never involved anal sex (pg. 22). Of course, a good rhetorician engages the emotions of his audience. However, Reilly's overuse of this technique undermines the strength of his argument. While it may be useful to point out that the sodomitic act—by which a form of same-sex sexual expression most clearly imitates heterosexual intercourse—fails to fulfill the purpose of the conjugal act, this point cannot be the lynchpin of an effective and compelling argument against same-sex marriage. Unlike what Reilly claims, the sodomitic act in a same-sex marriage is not the equivalent of a true conjugal act (pg. 95). Reilly's argument misses the broader problem with society's contemporary understanding, which has disconnected sexual acts, marriage, and the formation of families. With the diversity of impulses within what is now called homosexual, it seems imprudent to lay so heavy a rhetorical stress on one obviously unnatural act when there are many activities that are problematic.

M*aking Gay Okay* is the kind of book you could never bring up at most office watercoolers. Still less is it a guide for the unconvinced. Nevertheless, it provides an important service to those in the crosshairs of the culture wars. To those inclined to agree that natural marriage is the bulwark of civil society but who are tempted to give ground for the sake of peace, Reilly offers a word of encouragement. What is more, he outlines the untenable consequences that he sees following upon any compromise on this issue. Men and women on both sides of the same-sex marriage debate should take seriously Reilly's glimpse of the future. The book gives a glimpse of how society has changed in surprising ways seemingly overnight.

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