

What is marriage?

Discussion thread

Philip, 2013-02-26

This continues the topic of marriage from [the meeting description](#). You can find the handouts from the first meeting on [the handout page of my website](#).

History of marriage

Pat raised the topic of the history of marriage, and I invite Pat to post relevant links and comments.

Personal, cultural, and economic ramifications of marriage

Joe would like to get into the personal, cultural, and economic ramifications of marriage more deeply, and we only touched on these in considering the libertarian idea of privatizing marriage, a topic that Bill raised.

Sexual orientation is learned

After I presented my theory that sexual orientation is learned, Bill asked, "Do you mean to say that you could have been a homosexual?" And I said, "Yes, of course, if I had been raised as such. Sexual orientation is learned by the automatic unit of our mind, so it seems completely natural to us."

Jason responded by explaining more about automaticity, using the example of how natural walking is, yet we know that walking is learned. We can discuss this a bit further to make it clear why something that is learned can come to seem so natural to us that we couldn't conceive of being any different. Cultural differences in food preference provide another example. Many of our food preferences are deeply ingrained in our mind, yet we know that we learned these preferences from our culture. Yet another example is cultural differences in beauty of human appearance.

I address sexual orientation in the following places: *Human Life*, Edition 2, p. 42-47; *In Pursuit*, p. 76-81. I explain the automatic unit of the mind in *Human Life*, Edition 2, ch. 8.

Propagation by natural selection

Wu Ming raised the issue of mutant genes determining homosexuality, and I wish to say a bit more about this using the example of sickle-cell anemia.

[Sickle-cell anemia](#) is caused by a recessive gene that, in a heterozygote, confers some immunity to malaria without causing anemia. A heterozygote, in this case, is a person having one normal gene and one sickle-cell gene. For this reason, natural selection has propagated the sickle-cell gene despite the unfortunate fact that a homozygote for the gene — a person having two copies of the gene — will have anemia, which, historically, is likely to kill the person.

Can we apply this model to homosexuality? The answer is *no* for several reasons.

The most basic reason is that, as in heterosexuality, a genetic based model of sexual orientation would have to be arbitrarily complex. The simplest model is that sexual orientation is learned, and this model allows us to easily explain sexual orientation. Just the same, let's ignore this fact and proceed for the sake of discussion.

Sexual orientation is a highly complex psychological phenomenon that, if it were genetically endowed, would be due to a complex configuration of genes, not a single gene as in the sickle-cell case. But it would take an arbitrarily complex model to explain how a complex configuration of genes could play a role like that of the single recessive sickle-cell gene. The simple dominant/recessive relationship would not apply. In addition, the model would need to include some definitive survival benefit of same-sex attraction

that compensates for the fact that homosexual mating is infertile. Partial immunity to malaria is a definitive survival benefit of a single sickle-cell gene, but, again, it would take an arbitrarily complex model to propose a definitive survival benefit of same-sex attraction.

Model simplicity

The reason that I consistently refer to an arbitrarily complex model is that it is always possible to propose a model that explains something in an arbitrarily complex way. But knowledge is given by the simplest, most accurate model. That is, knowledge is given by the model (axiom set) that maximizes predictive accuracy and, subject to that, minimizes complexity of the axiom set.

For example, we could say that the world is flat and is resting on the back of a turtle. The problem is not logic but simplicity. Such a model is logical simply by saying that we assume the current best scientific model of the cosmos and then we add the assumption that the world is flat and is resting on the back of a turtle and that there is a systematic delusion such that the current best model turns out to accurately predict our observations.

This strategy was actually proposed by the Catholic church in their contention with Galileo in the early 1600s. Galileo was supposed to assert that even though the heliocentric model may be the simplest model of the cosmos, this doesn't imply that God used it. God could have used a more complex model, namely, the geocentric model. This idea has also emerged in the debate over evolution, with some anti-evolutionists proposing that God created the fossil record to make it look like there was a long evolutionary process when, in fact, God did it all in six days.

So when I say that it would take an arbitrarily complex model to achieve a modeling task, think of the geocentric model of the cosmos and think of God creating the fossil record in six days. The simplicity facet of knowledge eliminates such models from consideration. In fact, the simplicity facet of knowledge is so intuitive that scientists don't refer to the idea of an arbitrarily complex model. Instead, if scientists don't have a model that seems adequately simple and adequately predictively accurate, they will simply say that they don't know how to explain the events of interest.

Scientific observations vs. personal observations

Mariah argued for the validity of knowledge that is based on personal observations. She was challenged, and I supported her, but there wasn't time to go into detail on this topic, so here is a bit of detail.

You have no doubt heard it said that scientific knowledge is a special kind of knowledge obtained using the scientific method. My theory of knowledge reveals that this is a fallacy.

All knowledge is given by the simplest, most accurate model for predicting observations, and this goes for personal observations, scientific observations, historical observations, observations of mathematical theorems — any observations for any purpose whatsoever. Scientific observations are simply obtained and recorded in a highly systematic and precise way. This is the only difference. I address this issue in *Human Life*, Edition 1 p. 90-91, Edition 2 p. 99-100.

Furthermore, it is only through personal observations that we obtain direct observation of our experience, and the resulting knowledge is profoundly revealing. In *Human Life*, Edition 2, I present a model of the mind in chapter 8. I begin the chapter with 11 questions about commonplace personal experiences, and the answers to two of the questions tell us more about the mind than Sigmund Freud ever figured out:

Can you decide to know something?

When you're awake, you can decide not to evacuate your bladder, but when you're asleep, how does your mind prevent evacuation?

The answers reveal that cognition is involuntary and is produced by an automatic unit of our mind that never goes to sleep. As I explain in the book, the theory of automaticity goes back to Henry Maudsley, who did his work decades before Freud.

Mariah, 2013-02-27

Very interesting points, Phillip.

I just wanted to mention that the Supreme Court will be hearing arguments on marriage only a few days before the next meeting. I found a website, which links to 14 of the most relevant cases:

<http://www.afer.org/b...>

As I mentioned at the meeting, if same-sex marriage is found to be a constitutional right, it will also be near impossible (in future) to deny polyandrous or polygynous relationships full legal status (in my opinion).

Philip, 2013-02-28

You are correct, Mariah.

As Girgis, Anderson, and George explain, there is a fundamental discrete feature that traditionally defines marriage: coitus — sexual intercourse that naturally serves the purpose of procreation.

As shown by the principle of boundary breakdown — from my theory of knowledge — it is irrational to partition a continuum, so in removing coitus as a defining feature of marriage, there will be no rational way to stop expanding the scope of marriage to include any relation of interest.

A challenge to the idea of boundary breakdown is that the age of majority and the drinking age each partitions a continuum. This is correct, and this is why they are not enforced and interpreted discretely.

The closer an underage person is to the threshold, the less likely police will arrest a violator and charge them with violating the law. Similarly, the closer an underage person is to the threshold, the less severe a judge is likely to penalize a violator. But circumstances will play a role in such judgments because the greater the harm that is done by a violator, the greater the chance is that they will be charged for a violation. For example, if an underage person is close to 21, an alcohol violation will be ignored unless the person caused notable harm under the influence of alcohol.

Another example is speed limits. Although speed limits are defined discretely, they aren't enforced discretely. You have to exceed a speed limit sufficiently in order to get a ticket, and the amount of excess will depend on the judgment of the police officer applied to the circumstances. It is understood that, on a freeway, a smooth flow of traffic is safer than most drivers obeying the speed limit and thereby motivating a lot of passing. So it is typical that traffic flows faster than the speed limit on a freeway.