

What is marriage?

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For our consideration and discussion, I wish to present the main ideas in the book *What Is Marriage?* (2012) by Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George. The thesis of the book was first presented in an article in *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* in 2010.

The term *conjugal marriage* refers to marriage as civilization traditionally understands it, namely, monogamous, heterosexual marriage. I will refer to this idea as *the conjugal theory of marriage*. The thesis is as follows.

Only conjugal marriage can be discretely defined and rationally defended as a unique relationship that is foundational to a stable and prosperous society. As a result, broadening the definition of marriage to encompass, say, same-sex marriage, would destroy the rational basis for defining marriage in the first place. Broadening the definition of marriage, when carried to its logical conclusion, would imply that all forms of relations between consenting adults could qualify as marriage. For example, two elderly widowed sisters living together for companionship could qualify as marriage.

What are the criterial features of conjugal marriage that set it apart from all other relationships and that establish it as the fundamental, atomic social unit upon which society depends for its structural integrity and its functional efficacy?

There is just one main criterial feature: *comprehensive union*. A comprehensive union among people is possible only in conjugal marriage, and this is why conjugal marriage is a unique relationship.

Let's examine the idea of comprehensive union in terms of three facets:

- ◆ Mind and body
- ◆ Living and procreating
- ◆ Commitment

As stated above, only conjugal marriage can be discretely defined and rationally defended as a unique relationship that is foundational to a stable and prosperous society. The feature of conjugal marriage that discretely sets it apart is coitus — sexual intercourse that naturally serves the purpose of procreation. Coitus is possible only between one man and one woman.

But coitus is much more than just a physical experience. Coitus is a mutual volitional activity that complements the union of mind, and intention, of a man and a woman. And since coitus naturally serves the purpose of procreation, coitus is normally pursued in a relationship of shared living that is open to the possibility of procreation.

Finally, given the union in mind and body, and given the union in shared living and procreation, the idea of comprehensive union naturally includes a commitment that this type of relation will be permanent and exclusive.

Using my theory of knowledge, I will illuminate the logical structure of the fundamental argument of the conjugal theory of marriage. Then, using my theory of ethics, I will illuminate the logical structure of the overall argument of the theory.