

made me uneasy.” Obviously, my acquaintance had never seen the onesie.

A final story: A few weeks ago, the *Hartford Courant* ran a photo of a Trinity College freshman who was protesting the execution of a serial killer. He carried a sign that said, “Why do we kill people who kill people to show that killing people is wrong?”—and he was wearing a Che Guevara hat! Talk about sending mixed messages.

Some people take comfort in the fact that Guevara, the Communist who wanted to destroy everything capitalist, has become a commodity. But that comfort is cold—because the unending glorification of this henchman is, yes, an offense to truth, reason, and justice. Think of those who might take his place on those shirts—for instance, Oscar Elías Biscet, one of Castro’s longtime prisoners. He is a democrat, a physician—a true one—and an Afro-Cuban (for those who care). He has declared his heroes and models to be Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Not only does he deserve celebration, he could use the publicity—but nothing.

Part of the Guevara cult, no doubt, has to do with pulchritude (although I suppose Biscet is good-looking enough, despite years of sadistic abuse). More than one anti-Communist has lamented that Che’s cheekbones have caused millions of hearts to flutter, and millions of consciences to crater. Tony Daniels quotes an awed British journalist who met Guevara at the Soviet embassy in Havana in 1963: “He was incredibly beautiful.” Poor Stalin, so stumpy and pockmarked. He could have been a star.

Guevara has a little competition, however, in that some American celebrities have been seen with Subcomandante Marcos T-shirts. Who is Subcomandante Marcos? The Mexican Che, roughly, although it seems unlikely that he will ever overtake Guevara, whose perpetual exaltation is one of the most heart-breaking and infuriating phenomena of the modern age. **NR**

## ■ ESSAY II

# One Man’s Marriage Trap

The ever-shifting, deeply conflicted  
Andrew Sullivan

JUSTIN KATZ

WHEN Andrew Sullivan was seven or eight, the visceral yet distancing medium of television sparked a feeling about which many men will have corresponding stories. A shirtless actor elicited “such an intense longing” that young Andrew “determined to become a doctor” so he could “render the man unconscious and lie on top of him when no one else was in the room.” Its furtive nature may distinguish this from the similar memories of others, but the bewildering indication of inchoate sexuality is familiar.

Years later, Sullivan volunteered to assist a stranger through the final months of life with AIDS. The scene presents an eerie echo: “I remember one day lying down on top of him to restrain him as his brittle, burning body shook uncontrollably with the convulsions of fever.”

If Sullivan noticed the parallel between these moments—described in his books *Virtually Normal* and *Love Undetectable*, respectively—he hasn’t said so, but their implications could fill another book. They portray a child’s undefined desire for closeness, and the solitude of a man’s deterioration; the vision of exploiting a doctor’s power, and the reality of a nurse’s powerlessness; an awakening to sexuality, and to solidarity.

Different people will derive conflicting lessons from these anecdotes, but this is often the case with Sullivan. He is unapologetically homosexual and has been, until recently, devoutly Catholic. His social sympathies are liberal, but he considers himself a conservative. He has written often for the *New York Times*, but he is a leading figure in a blogosphere that sees the *Times* as the establishment it opposes. Taken together, these qualities attract an interesting audience, and conservatives’ criticism of Sullivan’s opinions often begins with confessions of fandom or friendship. In particular, conservatives have generally appreciated his steadfast advocacy of a vigorous War on Terror. The niche that he has claimed, however, has made Sullivan an especially influential advocate of a cause with which many of them do not agree: same-sex marriage. In his various expositions of the case for same-sex marriage over the years, Sullivan has trapped himself in a series of opportunistic contradictions—which may tell us something about the contradiction at the heart of his cause.

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## THE DANCE

*Virtually Normal* (1995) is Sullivan's unique perspective presented as a political argument. As a polemical feat, his strategy is brilliant, transforming the terms of the debate and providing a solid platform from which to volley objections. As an assessment of his opponents' thinking, however, it stumbles on its own cleverness.

The stumble is most obvious on the matter of religious opposition to homosexuality. Sullivan quotes St. Paul's most indisputable denunciation of it, Romans 1:27, but moves immediately to speculation about Paul's intent—speculation Sullivan fails to corroborate with any chapter or verse. In this account, homosexuality serves for Paul merely as "an analogy" for continued polytheism, an analogy Paul indulges in only because he "seems to assume that every individual's nature is heterosexual." In November 1994, in *The New Republic*, Sullivan called his own interpretation "so obvious an alternative . . . that it is hard to imagine the forces of avoidance that have kept it so firmly at bay for so long." In *Love Undetectable* (1998), he asserted that fear-driven "loathing" of homosexuals and Jews is "fanned . . . by the distortion of a particular strain in Christian theology." By August 2003, he was claiming that the Catholic Church's failure to accept his interpretation indicated a "war on gay people and their dignity."

This is not to deny that Sullivan can be genuinely insightful; but too often, his analysis of competing viewpoints is designed merely to generate elaborate debaters' points—to push opponents of same-sex marriage into a narrow pen, ruling certain lines of reasoning out of order. Similarly, Sullivan uses the old-media technique of loaded labeling to fence in conservatives. For example, because many evangelical Christians back the Federal Marriage Amendment, it is the "religious right amendment"—not a cause of respectable conservatives. When Senate majority leader Bill Frist expressed support for it in June 2003, Sullivan bewailed "how close to theocracy today's Republicans have become." The spark for the charge was one word: Frist had described marriage as a "sacrament."

One smear that is ubiquitous in Sullivan's writing is "theocon." Theoc conservatism, he explained in a 1998 *New York Times Magazine* cover piece, is "an orthodoxy . . . of cultural and moral revolution." (On the cover, a finger pointed over red letters: "The Scolds.") Sullivan noted the position of alleged theocon Fr. Richard John Neuhaus to what Neuhaus calls "secular monism." By this phrase, Neuhaus means the antithesis of true pluralism: In secular monism, a sacralized state claims to be the arbiter of truth, with no reference to or respect for the religious beliefs of its citizens. Sullivan makes "secular monism" seem less threatening, and Neuhaus more extreme, by redefining the phrase as merely "the secular neutrality of modern American law and government." That is a subdued phrasing indeed, from a man who blasts the FMA as "graffiti on a sacred document."

Sullivan confesses, in the afterword to *Virtually Normal*, that the book is "a profession of *faith* in liberal politics" (emphasis added). His essential dogma is "public neutrality and private difference."



Andrew Sullivan

There is a problem, however, with his application of the dogma, because the "centerpiece" of Sullivan's proposal—marriage—is the basic interface between culture and politics: in other words, exactly where the private becomes public.

And Sullivan has had difficulty adhering to this strict bifurcation of public and private. When Sen. Rick Santorum uttered his infamous remarks about the erosion of morality-based laws should the Supreme Court declare a right to sodomy, Sullivan launched into a days-long excoriation. He dismissed Santorum's argument that a Court protection of sodomy would lead to bigamy and polygamy: Both of those, said Sullivan, involve marriage—about which a right to sodomy implies nothing. Two months later, however, reveling in the Court's *Lawrence* decision, Sullivan declared that the expansion of privacy rights "inescapably means the right to marry."

Clearly, Sullivan is not afraid to reverse position on *very* short notice. He has displayed a similar agility on the Full Faith and Credit Clause. In 1996, he wrote in the *Sunday Times* of London that "the punchline" of judicially imposed same-sex marriage in Hawaii was that "every state has to give 'full faith and credit' to the laws of every other state." When Congress debated the Defense of Marriage Act, meant to keep states from being forced to recognize other states' redefined marriages, Sullivan testified against the bill: It was up to the Supreme Court to decide whether states would be compelled to grant recognition. After the bill passed, Sullivan insisted that it was unconstitutional—which, he claimed in August 2003, "the social right knew at the time and still knows."

At other times, however, Sullivan argues that a constitutional amendment is unnecessary because of the very same Defense of Marriage Act. In July 2003, he said that the act had the power "to stop one state's marriages being nationalized." By November, he was declaring the suggestion that the courts might force one state to recognize another state's same-sex marriages "disingenuous." He wrote in February 2004 that if the courts were to strike down the act—if "one single civil marriage in Massachusetts is deemed valid in another state, without that other state's consent"—he would support a constitutional amendment to "say that no state is required to recognize a civil marriage from another state." His standard of "consent," however, is a tenuous barrier, given his view that state courts are qualified to offer it.

Periodically, this twirling of convenient views moves from frustrating to astonishing. In January, Stanley Kurtz published an argument against same-sex marriage based on an examination of family trends in Scandinavia, where social policy toward gays has long been especially permissive. "Did no one edit this?" Sullivan attacked, saying that Kurtz's analysis "would be laughed out of a freshman social science class." Simply, "the entire premise of the piece—that marriage for gays is legal in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden—is factually untrue."

Yet the previous June, when he thought that evidence from Denmark supported his case for same-sex marriage, Sullivan had written that Denmark's gay partnerships were "almost indistin-

ROMAN GENN

guishable from marriage.” In his 1997 collection *Same-Sex Marriage: Brand Con*, he noted that “different compromises” in Denmark and Sweden “affect the meaning of marriage itself.” Throughout the intervening years, in multiple venues and contexts, he touted “de facto marriages.” In August 2001, for example, he wrote that trends were hopeful during “the first six years in which gay marriage was legal in Denmark” (*Sunday Times*) and that the country provided “real data on the impact of gay marriage” (*The New Republic*).

#### A MESSY MARRIAGE OF CONCEPTS

When he thought empirical evidence in Scandinavia pointed his way, Sullivan conceded that the “importance of the family in society is indisputable.” But his sexual politics do not ultimately emphasize benefits for society, but benefits for *homosexuals*. Any social difficulties that a redefinition of marriage would create he would leave to the “private sphere” to solve. No public norm can be imposed, because the status of “outsiderdom” must be “a cultural choice” not influenced by politics; homosexual identity must be free from “the hands of the other.” (The lapse into postmodern-speak is telling.)

## Sullivan’s prescription for addressing rampant sexual license is . . . legitimizing it.

To conservatives, however, a large part of the purpose of marriage is precisely to discourage “outsiderdom” and to encourage citizens toward specific, society-sustaining identities. To Sullivan, in contrast, marriage is a mechanism to gain “personal integrity” and “dignity,” to become “fully human.” A major source of friction between these two approaches is the effect that the latter’s understanding of marriage might have on the ability to achieve the goals of the former. In that respect, it is relevant what Sullivan considers the fundamental determinant of “full humanity” to be. In *Love Undetectable*, Sullivan raises the concept when discussing the act of sex. Sex, he writes, involves a loss of control and submergence of intellect, and to give those things up “even under the threat of death” would be “to give up being fully human.” Similarly, in *Virtually Normal*, he argues that features of homosexual relationships “could nourish the broader society,” because lesbians’ “sexual expressiveness” and gay men’s “solidity and space” are sometimes “lacking in more rote, heterosexual couplings.” He speaks of “the openness of the contract,” of “the need for extramarital outlets,” of “flexibility.” In response to critics’ seizing on this passage as contemptuous of monogamy, Sullivan has asserted—and there’s no reason to doubt—that he did not intend an endorsement of adultery. Affairs among married homosexuals, he clarifies in the paperback’s afterword, should be “as anathema as” those among married heterosexuals. The lessons implied for heterosexuals “are not direct ones.”

Bewilderment at this passage is understandable, but it distracts from what is truly problematic here. Sullivan seems to take for granted that heterosexuals are driven toward “timeless, necessary, procreative unity,” whereas homosexuals must be given space beyond the “stifling model of heterosexual normality.” He is even willing to place procreative marriages on a pedestal. In the spring

of 2003, he proclaimed the “unique and miraculous . . . connection between male-female sex and the creation of new life,” and asserted that this connection’s alignment with “a marital structure . . . is obviously vital to defend.” But at the heart of his cause is an effort to reorder that structure from within. In this regard, here’s the truly disquieting statement: “The truth is, homosexuals are not entirely normal; and to flatten their varied and complicated lives into a single, moralistic model is to miss what is essential and exhilarating about their otherness.” The truth that Sullivan evades is that flattening into a model is precisely marriage’s social purpose—and furthermore, his arguments for same-sex marriage are in conflict with the desire he expresses in this passage to preserve homosexuality’s “otherness.”

After all, how can “otherness” be preserved if distinctions are effaced? Sullivan’s writing overflows with appeals to equality untinted by distinctions, as when he rejects “the mealy-mouthed talk about civil unions as some sort of options for gay citizens.” The exclusion of same-sex couples is indefensible when, he says (incorrectly), “the living, breathing reality of civil marriage in America” is coupling and nothing more. Just before Thanksgiving this year, he pushed his equality-based argument almost to the

point of making the case for the FMA: “The basic problem for the anti-gay marriage forces is that they are upholding a marital standard for gays that no one any longer upholds for straights . . . Once it was obvious that this standard did not apply to heterosexuals, the [Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court] had *no choice* but to strike down the inequality . . . that’s why you really do have to amend a state constitution to prevent its guarantees for equality from being applied to gay citizens” (emphasis Sullivan’s).

Of course, Sullivan opposes amendments intended to prevent the law from locking in mere coupling as the open-ended definition of marriage. He’s also quick to attack those who seek to bolster marriage’s vital connections in other ways. In July 2001, for example, he expressed astonishment at Lawrence Kudlow’s implicit support for adultery laws. “Give me an adulterer over an ayatollah any day,” wrote Sullivan. He has lambasted “screw-tightening” fundamentalists for targeting divorce, fornication—the whole arsenal of practices subversive to marriage. Yet, in January 2004, he said of the same group that, when they “start proposing measures that would infringe on heterosexual abuse of marital privileges, I’ll take them seriously.” In short: If social conservatives target heterosexual as well as homosexual immorality, they are fanatics; if they don’t, they are hypocrites.

In parallel debates among Catholics, Sullivan’s prescription for addressing rampant sexual license is . . . legitimizing it. “Why can we not hold up marriage and committed loving relationships as the goal but not punish and stigmatize the non-conformists or those whose erotic needs and desires are more complex?” But it simply isn’t clear how he thinks society should promote its supposed goal. In *Virtually Normal*, for example, he challenges the notion that it is better for a “waverer” to choose heterosexuality. And in a later argument with William Bennett, he asks what is



“so bad, after all, [about] mutual objectification”?

Sullivan has written that many gay men value their sexual freedom, while many “yearn for anchors.” In *The New Republic*, in August 2001, he cast his sympathy with the former, and in June 2002 admitted that he would be among “those who choose not to marry.” This may be surprising, given his long advocacy of what he calls “marriage rights”; but in *Love Undetectable*, he describes sex itself as “almost a sacrament of human existence,” and in February 2003 he said it’s “one of the greatest and most exhilarating gifts our nature has given us.” In fact, he wrote in March 2002, “reduction” of it to “pure, heterosexual, procreative sex” is “excessively strict, given the not-so-terrifying moral dangers of other forms.”

So, in Sullivan’s complex world of sacramental sex and moralistic marriage, what defines “full humanity”? Can it really be his position that men outside of legally recognized relationships are not “fully human”? Of course not; to him, it’s possession of *choice* that defines humanity. For gays, therefore, to have “full humanity” is to have the same range of choices that straights have. Whether the extension of a particular choice to homosexuals is at odds with the fundamental reason the choice

“where marriage questions rightly belong.” In July 2003, he reflected in the *Sunday Times* that the courts were changing hands to “judges who reflect contemporary understanding.” (Apparently, they do so better than the public’s elected representatives.) After *Lawrence*, Sullivan confessed that he was happy that the ruling had gone far beyond “the narrowest possible grounds.” *Goodridge* in Massachusetts convinced him “how impossible it is that any reasonable court” could deny gays marriage. For Sullivan, “democratic deliberation” must be a process whereby judges implement federal law; in the slow version, they do so state by state. Any movement to insist on actual votes indicates a “hysterical and polarizing campaign” and “unbounded paranoia with respect to courts.”

To derail such campaigns, Sullivan has pioneered the usurpation of singularly inapt civil-rights imagery. The Catholic Church’s opposition to fundamental changes to the institution of marriage is taken to be akin to its support of slavery in 1866—never mind that the documents Sullivan adduced as evidence of that support demonstrate no such thing. (They concern penal servitude and the like, not slavery.) Similarly, he will jab emotions rubbed bare by religious friction. In his piece about “The Scolds,” Sullivan wrote

## Even if the marriage episode concludes as Sullivan wishes, choices will still be beyond reach.

exists in the first place is, from that point of view, irrelevant.

Given Sullivan’s leveling conception of equality, he can’t wish for homosexuals to gain the choice of marriage without also wishing for heterosexuals to gain the choices that gays’ freedom from procreation naturally grants them. In such a field of options, society would have no remaining leverage to push for marriage. Sure, it could grant material benefits on the basis of commitment. Yet, even if we believe that marriage stops expanding with the inclusion of homosexuals, even if we believe that the standard for monogamy slips no further, Sullivan’s “conservative case” collapses: One cannot simultaneously want no choice to bear stigma while presenting one choice as an expectation.

### BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY

Sullivan has considered every strategy for nationalizing same-sex marriage—and he likes them all. To be sure, he has made it a talking point that time for persuasion is “the genius of a federal system,” the “slow federal process [that he wants] to take place”; warnings of rapid change in the absence of a Federal Marriage Amendment are “scare tactics.” He writes, “The flip-side of leaving Mississippi alone is that we should also leave Massachusetts alone. Deal?” He constantly attacks the Federal Marriage Amendment as an offense against federalism. But when, last February, Ramesh Ponnuru pressed him on the point, Sullivan clarified that while he believes in “winning over the public” and working “legislatively if at all possible,” he would also support a Supreme Court finding that the Constitution demands legal recognition of same-sex marriage from coast to coast.

The judiciary, then, is a central component of his politics. In a December 2002 blog, he explained that “individual states should be able to decide for themselves” about marriage—in state courts,

that it was “perhaps unsurprising that, when Neuhaus gathered a group of public thinkers and ministers to endorse a statement” of their political position, “there were no Jews among the signers.” Unsurprising, indeed, for a letter subtitled, “A Statement of Christian Conscience and Citizenship.”

The charitable explanation is that Sullivan has gotten so caught up in his cause, so feels the tingle of proximate success, that he doesn’t hear his conflicting arguments draining sympathy. Whatever the case, he long ago sank into naked advocacy; his work must now be approached like the material generated by a civil-action lawyer or a lobbyist. When President Bush announced support for a marriage amendment, Sullivan reacted violently: All people of goodwill would have to oppose the president. Sullivan has said that the “fair-minded center of the country that balks at . . . hatred and fear” would never stand for pandering to extremists. But the extremism on display in his writings is chiefly his own.

Andrew Sullivan seems, in short, to have an intellect in deep conflict with his emotions. His language practically glows with warmth when the next generation of gays appears in his writing. Yet he began *Virtually Normal* with this admission: “No homosexual child, surrounded overwhelmingly by heterosexuals, will feel at home in his sexual and emotional world, even in the most tolerant of cultures. . . . Anyone who believes political, social, or even cultural revolution will change this fundamentally is denying reality.” Same-sex marriage took effect in Massachusetts on the anniversary of *Brown v. Board*, and Sullivan naturally drew the parallel. To him, same-sex marriage is a matter of gays’ integration into their own families. But even if the marriage episode concludes as Sullivan wishes, choices will still be beyond reach, requiring redirected advocacy. There will always be something for which to long intensely on the other side of the glass. **NR**

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