

On Love and War: Reflections on the Abuse of Technical Rationality

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“Militat omnis amans.”

—Ovid, *Amores* 1.9

“El amor y la guerra son una misma cosa.”

—Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha* 2.3.21

“*MILITAT OMNIS AMANS*: Every lover battles, and Cupid holds his fort; Atticus, believe me, every lover battles. The age that’s good for war, is also right for love.”¹ Ovid expresses an ancient insight when he describes the affinities between love and war (artistically represented in song already by Homer and later in the many classical and Renaissance images of the attraction between Ares and Aphrodite, between Mars, the god of war, and Venus, the goddess of love).² Cervantes expresses

¹ “Militat omnis amans, et habet sua castra Cupido; Attice, crede mihi, militat omnis amans. quae bello est habilis, Veneri quoque convenit aetas.” Ovid, *Amores*, 1.9.

² See Homer, *Odyssey* 8.266–366 and Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 2.559–94 and *Metamorphoses* 4.167–92. For the secondary literature, see: Annette Teffteller, “The Song of Ares and Aphrodite: Ašertu on Skheria,” in *Brill’s Companion to Aphrodite*, ed. Amy C. Smith and Sadie Pickup (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 131–49; Maureen J. Alden, “The Resonances of the Song of Ares and Aphrodite,” *Mnemosyne* 50 (1997): 513–29; Bruce Karl Braswell, “The Song of Ares and Aphrodite: Theme and Relevance to *Odyssey* 8,” *Hermes* 110 (1982): 129–37; Rachel Kousser, “Mythological Group Portraits in Antonine Rome: The

this even more succinctly when he has Quixote exclaim, in defense of a young lover's behavior in winning the hand of his beloved: "love and war are one and the same thing."³ In both quotations, the poets are affirming that the ways of love are like the ways of war. If this is the case, might the study of one help us better understand the other, especially in the American context?

The ways of love and the ways of war: a striking feature of the last fifty years is that Americans are becoming less and less successful at both. During these past fifty years, our wars have rarely attained the stated goals for which they were undertaken and have wreaked cultural, economic, environmental, and human havoc on friend and foe alike.⁴ The American way of love has fared no better. The marriage rate in the United States is now at an all-time low, while the divorce rate, although down from its record levels, is still troublingly high (around 45% of all US marriages now end in divorce).⁵ Cohab-

Performance of Myth," *American Journal of Archaeology* 111 (2007): 673–91; Diana E. E. Kleiner, "Second-Century Mythological Portraiture: Mars and Venus," *Latomus* 40 (1981): 512–44.

³ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha* 2.3.21: "El amor y la guerra son una misma cosa."

⁴ Research on this topic is vast and varied; I wish only to point out that concern for why America has fared so poorly in war over the last fifty years and for the human costs of these wars transcends distinctions between the political left or right. Authors as diverse as Tom Engelhardt, on the left, and Jon Basil Utley, on the right, have drawn readers attention to this issue. See, for example: Tom Engelhardt, "America at War: A Record of Unparalleled Failure," *The Nation*, June 10, 2014, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/america-war-record-unparalleled-failure>; Jon Basil Utley, "12 Reasons America Doesn't Win Its Wars," *The American Conservative*, June 12, 2015, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/12-reasons-america-doesnt-win-its-wars>; James Fallows, "The Tragedy of the American Military," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2015, accessed November 3, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/01/the-tragedy-of-the-american-military/383516>; Peter R. Mansoor, "Why Can't America Win Its Wars?" *The Hoover Institution*, March 10, 2016, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.hoover.org/research/why-cant-america-win-its-wars>. See also Andrew J. Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016) and *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008).

⁵ Center for Disease Control / National Center for Health Statistics, *National Vital Statistics System*: "Provisional Number of Marriages and Marriage Rate: United States, 2000–2014" and "Provisional Number of Divorces and Annulments and Rate: United States, 2000–2014," accessed November 3, 2017, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/marriage_divorce_tables.htm. For analysis,

itation has not proved to be a panacea, either: only about thirteen percent of those couples stay together.⁶ Perhaps the most disturbing statistics concern the growth of American solitude: over the last half century the number of Americans living alone has doubled, with almost a third of our country living alone.⁷ And when it comes to raising children, if in 1960 less than 10 percent of our children were raised in single parent homes, that number has now reached a staggering 34 percent: one third of our children.⁸ Clearly, Americans are having difficulty pursuing the ways of love and family life.

Thus, in the pages that follow, I will offer some reflections on the American way of war and suggest how they might help us better understand the current limitations in the American way of love. I wish to do so by focusing on one war in particular, the Vietnam war, and to suggest that the way we fought that war also has important things to teach us about the way we make love. Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate the point I wish to make is by focusing on the example of one particularly influential actor in that war, because of how well he illustrates the issue I wish to address: the abuse of technical rationality to solve human problems. The person in question is Robert McNamara, who was secretary of defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.⁹

see Ana Swanson, "144 years of Marriage and Divorce in the United States, in One Chart," *Washington Post*, June 23, 2015, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/06/23/144-years-of-marriage-and-divorce-in-the-united-states-in-one-chart>.

⁶ Sharon Sassler, "The Higher Risks of Cohabitation," *The New York Times On Line*, December 20, 2010, accessed October 5, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2010/12/19/why-remarry/the-higher-risks-of-cohabitation>.

⁷ United States Census Bureau, "America's Families and Living Arrangements, 2013: Households (H table series), Table H1," accessed November 4, 2017, <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/families/2013/cps-2013/tabh1-all.xls>; Tim Henderson, "More Americans living alone, census says," *Stateline: Journal of the Pew Charitable Trusts*, September 11, 2014, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2014/09/11/growing-number-of-people-living-solo-can-pose-challenges>.

⁸ Gretchen Livingston, "Fewer than Half of U.S. Kids Today Live in a 'Traditional' Family," *Factank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center, December 22, 2014, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family>.

⁹ In what follows, the biographical sketch of McNamara is drawn from several sources, but principally from Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: the Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993).

Although it would be tempting to give a detailed biography of Secretary McNamara, these facts will suffice: when President-elect Kennedy tapped him to serve in his cabinet in the autumn of 1960, Robert McNamara was already a distinguished public figure. He began his professional career as the youngest and highest paid assistant professor at Harvard Business School. Then, during the Second World War, he played a key role in the Army Air Corps' Office of Statistical Control, applying systems analysis technics developed at Harvard to help the Air Corps efficiently bomb its targets in both Europe and Japan. Upon returning from the war, he was part of an elite group of Statistical Control veterans hired by Ford Motor Company to help turn the ailing company around. They were known as the Whiz Kids. Within fourteen years, McNamara was president of the company, which he had helped make financially successful once again. McNamara made the transition from Whiz Kid to New Frontiersman with ease, and was quickly regarded as one of the most gifted and interesting members of Kennedy's remarkable collection of the best and the brightest of his generation.¹⁰

What I wish to consider in these pages, however, is McNamara's remarkable belief that he did not need to know the language, history, or culture of Vietnam—indeed, he admits that he did not know these things at the time—in order to defeat the Vietnamese Communist Nationalists who were attacking the South Vietnamese government. Instead, McNamara viewed warfare as a problem analogous to those faced in business management, which required the efficient application of resources and technology and the rational use of game-theory to attain victory. As James William Gibson has observed, McNamara's approach contained three stages.¹¹ The first entailed reducing the conflict to the level of what could be measured and quantified. As Gibson notes, McNamara viewed warfare as “a problem of organizing *quantities*.”¹² Quantification then enabled the war managers to treat warfare as analogous to a classical managerial problem of costs and benefits in the production of their product, which in this case, was warfare. Without getting too technical, the

¹⁰ See David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Random House, 1992), and Robert Dallek, *Camelot's Court: Inside the Kennedy White House* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).

¹¹ James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000), 79–80.

¹² Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 79 (emphasis original).

goal of the second step in McNamara's managerial approach was to determine the point beyond which production of warfare became too costly for yourself and for your competitor, the enemy. The third step entailed developing models of enemy behavior that viewed the enemy as an agent who would follow the same logic of cost–benefit analysis. This third step was crucial, because, by means of game theory, it would enable planners to predict how the enemy would respond to the government's actions.

Warfare was thus like corporate competition: victory would come to the competitor who could produce the highest quality product at the lowest cost. As in business, the key to a swift victory would be to engage in practices that would demonstrate to the competitor that he could not win and that, therefore, he should negotiate a deal. In the business world, for example, when your competitor can consistently produce the product at a higher quality and at a lower cost, the rational executive will either sell out to the competition or withdraw from the market. Thus, as General H. R. McMaster has noted, McNamara “defined military action as a form of communication, the object of which was to affect the enemy's calculation of interests and dissuade him from a particular activity.”¹³ McNamara and his war planners believed that, in their use of military force in Vietnam, they could convince the Vietnamese communists to stop their attacks on the South Vietnamese government and to negotiate a lasting peace. (For example, as Gibson has observed, one of the reasons that the war planners were obsessed with body counts, kill ratios, and establishing the “crossover point”—the point at which the Viet Cong were losing troops faster than they could replace them—is that they believed this would communicate to the North Vietnamese that they were losing the war.) As McNamara himself would later explain, “The objective [was] to bend an opponent's will via the threat to continue on up the ladder of escalation.”¹⁴ McNamara believed deeply that the escalation of military force was demonstrating that a negotiated peace was in the interest of the Communist Vietnamese themselves.

McNamara would become increasingly frustrated that the Viet-

¹³ H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper, 1997), 326.

¹⁴ Robert S. McNamara, James Blight, Robert Brigham, Thomas Biersteker, and Colonel Herbert Schandler, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), 160 (quoted by Gibson, *The Perfect War*, ix).

namese never saw this. Years later, when he organized a meeting with his former enemies, who were now the leaders of a united Vietnam, McNamara continued to make this point. He argued that one of the reasons the Vietnam war should be considered a tragedy stems from the failure of the North Vietnamese to see that a negotiated settlement in 1967 would have been possible and would have been in their interest. Not surprisingly, the Vietnamese officials rejected every element of this claim. For them, the war was not a tragedy, but a victory—a costly victory, but a victory nonetheless: they had united Vietnam and, for the first time in centuries, they had liberated it from foreign occupation. From the Vietnamese perspective, the postwar discussions did, however, have one helpful outcome. As one Vietnamese official explained, “We understand better now that the U.S. understands very little about Vietnam.”¹⁵ Without doubt, McNamara had understood very little during the war, and not just about Vietnam, but about war in general. As General McMaster explains, McNamara’s managerial approach “ignored the uncertainty of war and the unpredictable psychology of an activity that involves killing, death, and destruction.”¹⁶ Specifically, with regard to the Vietnam war, General McMaster adds: “To the North Vietnamese, military action, involving as it did attacks on their forces and bombing of their territory, was not simply a means of communication. Human sacrifices in war evoke strong emotions, creating a dynamic that defies systems analysis quantification.”¹⁷

McMaster here articulates a view that was already in circulation in the early 1960’s. Indeed, as early as 1961, many who knew Vietnam well believed that the conflict in that country could not be resolved through military means. Here, for example, is how Daniel Ellsberg, who at the time was a RAND Corporation analyst doing research for the Government, describes his first encounter with the country: “In the fall of 1961 it didn’t take very long to discover in Vietnam that we weren’t likely to be successful there. It took me less than a week, on my first visit. With the right access, talking to the right people, you could get the picture pretty quickly.”¹⁸ Ellsberg explains that he

¹⁵ McNamara et al., *Argument Without End*, 254 (quoted by Gibson, *The Perfect War*, x).

¹⁶ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 326.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 3. Ellsberg is a former Marine officer who at the time was a committed cold warrior working hard to find ways to check Soviet advances

had go-anywhere-see-anything clearance and interviewed American military advisors who spoke Vietnamese and knew the country well. He also spoke with South Vietnamese officials and studied the files developed by the American advisors. Their conclusions were the same: the Diem government of South Vietnam would fall to the communists in one or two years unless Diem was overthrown, in which case South Vietnam would probably fall sooner. The only thing that could delay this outcome would be the massive insertion of American ground troops, but even this, they all believed, would only delay a communist takeover: once the ground troops were withdrawn, the government of South Vietnam would soon fall to the communists.¹⁹ This was not an isolated view: it was French President de Gaulle's view (communicated to the American Ambassador in 1963); it was also the view of the Army's own Chief of Staff at the time, General George Decker.²⁰ How, then, could McNamara and

throughout the world. Here, for example, is how Ellsberg describes his reaction to the situation he discovered in Vietnam in 1961:

This was not good news to me. I was a dedicated cold warrior, in fact a professional one. I had been anti-Soviet since the Czech coup and the Berlin blockade in 1948, my last year of high school, and the Korean War while I was a student at Harvard a couple of years later. For my military service I had chosen the Marine Corps and spent three years as an infantry officer. After the Marines I returned to Harvard as a graduate fellow and then went to the Rand Corporation, a nonprofit research organization whose entire focus was the military aspects of the cold war. My own work up to 1961 had been mainly on deterring a surprise nuclear attack from the Soviet Union. I should have liked nothing better than to hear that South Vietnam was a place where Soviet-backed Communists were going to be defeated, with our help. (Ibid., 4)

It was frustration with both the Johnson and Nixon Administrations' refusal to reveal to the American public the Defense Department's own pessimistic assessment of the history and situation in Vietnam that led Ellsberg to release to the press the documents that became known as the "Pentagon Papers." He had decided on this course of action as early as the Fall 1969, but did not succeed in getting them published until the Summer of 1971 (Ibid., 290-295, 365-386).

¹⁹ Ibid., 3.

²⁰ See McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 22 and 164. General Decker's remarks are worth quoting. In April of 1961, Decker had told McNamara that "we cannot win a conventional war in Southeast Asia" (quoted bid., 22). See also Thomas Ricks, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 228.

his team of war managers be so blind? Did it perhaps stem from their conception of rationality (and of technology) and their way of applying them to human problems? The question is especially germane to the topic of this essay because, when Robert McNamara resigned as Secretary of Defense in 1967 and became president of the World Bank the following year, he surprised everyone by shifting the focus of the World Bank from infrastructure projects to an issue at the heart of love: family planning. Specifically, he identified world overpopulation (along with hunger and illiteracy) as the greatest obstacles to development in the Third World and used the Bank's resources to distribute and promote the use of contraceptives throughout the Third World.²¹ The ways of love and the ways of war: "Believe me, Atticus, every lover battles, and the age that's good for war, is also right for love." Did the blindness that led him astray in war also lead him astray in his efforts at family planning on a global scale? Was he employing a false understanding of technical rationality in both cases? To answer this twin question, we must look more closely at McNamara's understanding of rationality.

Shortly after the debacle in Vietnam, McNamara looked back over his methods and offered the following reflection: "It is true enough that not every conceivable complex human situation can be fully reduced to lines on a graph, or to percentage points on a chart or figures on a balance sheet. But all reality can be reasoned about, and not to quantify what can be quantified is only to be content with something less than the full range of reason."²² Much later on, as he approached his eightieth year, McNamara reflected on his first encounter with higher mathematics as an undergraduate: "My mathematics professors taught me to see math as a process of thought—a language in which to express much, but certainly not all, of human activity. It was a revelation. To this day, I see quantification as a language to add precision to reasoning about the world. Of course, it

²¹ William Clark, "Robert McNamara at the World Bank," *Foreign Affairs* 60, no. 1 (1981): 170. See also Shapley, *Promise and Power*, 471–81 and 498–526. For critical assessments of McNamara's and the World Bank's family planning policies, see Jessica Einhorn, "The World Bank's Mission Creep," *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 5 (2001): 22–35, and Andrew M. Essig, *The World Bank: How It Compromises Economic Development by Promoting a Population Control Agenda* (New York: Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, 2007).

²² See Gregory Palmer, *The McNamara Strategy and the Vietnam War: Program Budgeting and the Vietnam War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 58 (cited by Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 79).

cannot deal with issues of morality, beauty, and love, but it is a powerful tool too often neglected when we seek to overcome poverty, fiscal deficits, or the failure of our national health programs.”²³

This all sounds very reasonable. McNamara is admitting that certain aspects of human experience fall through the sieve of quantification: he affirms that the language of math “cannot deal with issues of morality, beauty, and love.” McNamara saw his method as simply “quantitative common sense.”²⁴ In practice, however, when it came to making concrete practical decisions (whether this was at Ford, the Defense Department, or the World Bank), McNamara wanted to see the numbers. As one student of his days at Ford has observed: “[McNamara] thought that truth could be quantified. And if something could not be quantified, it couldn’t be true. . . . He wanted to measure everything, trying to bring quantification to even sales, marketing and advertising.”²⁵

In the final analysis, McNamara’s approach calls into question the role of qualitative considerations in rational analysis and practical judgment. Do things have natures? Are there qualitative aspects of reality, aspects that touch the heart and the emotions as well as the intellect and, thus, imply that our emotions should have a role in practical judgments? Or is everything reducible to quantities, and is practical judgment simply a utilitarian calculus of costs and benefits? Importantly, McNamara strove not only to base his own judgments on quantitative data: he believed that, in the heat of battle, this is what everyone does, that any rational agent or potential enemy will make his decisions according to a self-interested calculus of costs and benefits. Not surprisingly, when the North Vietnamese failed to act as predicted, their behavior was viewed as irrational. For example, looking back on the war, one of McNamara’s lieutenants affirmed: “The trouble with our policy in Vietnam has been that we guessed wrong with respect to what the North Vietnamese reaction would be. We anticipated that they would respond like reasonable people.”²⁶ In other words, like people who share the American war managers’ views on costs and benefits.

But how can such a reductionist view of rational judgment take

²³ Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: the Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 6.

²⁴ John A. Byrne, *Whiz Kids: the Founding Fathers of American Business—and the Legacy They Left Us* (New York: Currency/Doubleday, 1993), 400.

²⁵ Byrne, *Whiz Kids*, 254.

²⁶ Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 98.

into account **of** key events in our own military history, let alone in the histories and actions of other nations? How can one calculate a people's desire for freedom or their love of hearth and home, or a warrior's commitment to valor in battle? What sense can war managers make of John Paul Jones' refusal to surrender his sinking ship, *Bonhomme Richard*, in his battle with the *H.M.S. Serapis*, or of General McAuliffe's refusal to surrender his dwindling and surrounded troops in Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge in 1944? Indeed, by the standards of the war managers' analysis of costs and benefits, almost all of George Washington's actions from 1776 until the French entered the war two years later become incomprehensible: the acts of an irrational man.

In this regard, McNamara's early difficulty at Ford with the mysterious character of car sales is instructive. John Byrne, author of the classic study of the Whiz Kids at Ford, describes the situation as follows:

Detroit could not explain exactly how a car was sold and why, measuring it so you could control the process. In the sale of a car, there was a mixture of persuasion and emotion, of impulse and irrationality, of a salesman's sincerity and a customer's enthusiasm, things that you could not count nor measure. To McNamara, however, the car was simply a product to transport a person from here to there. It provided transportation, not status, nor prestige or even fun. It was a product more complex than a hula-hoop, a television set or a tube of toothpaste, but really nothing more than just another consumer product. So he could never understand why his men couldn't break down the sale of the car to look at the process as a science. "We don't know how to count sincerity," explained an executive ordered by Bob to figure it out. "We don't have a sincerity meter. We don't have an enthusiasm meter."²⁷

Sincerity, enthusiasm, honor, self-sacrifice, love of the true, the good, and the beautiful—indeed, the true, the good, and the beautiful as such—these do not surrender to a utilitarian calculus, although they shape the behavior of families and nations. The lesson of Robert McNamara would seem to be that when we try to fight wars without taking into account these aspects of human life, we not only fail: we

²⁷ Byrne, *Whiz Kids*, 255.

sow tragedy also into the lives of all concerned. If this is true of war, might this also be true of the contemporary Western way of love? Are we trying to solve the challenges of love and family life through a utilitarian calculus of costs and benefits that misuses technology and does not take into account the rich qualitative aspects of our lives?

Perhaps no one has confronted these twin questions more directly than the British philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. Anscombe was arguably one of the most important moral philosophers of the twentieth century. A student and later professor at Oxford who attended Wittgenstein's courses at Cambridge, becoming his principal literary executor, chosen by Wittgenstein to translate and publish his manuscripts, she is perhaps best known for her 1958 essay "Modern Moral Philosophy," which has rightly been described as one of the most important papers in ethics of the last hundred years. David Solomon, in his tribute to Anscombe's achievement, reminds us of the context of that essay's composition: in 1956, while she was a research fellow at Oxford University, she was appalled to discover that the University was preparing to grant former U.S. President Harry Truman an honorary doctorate, a man whom she regarded as a mass murderer because of his authorization of the dropping of the atomic bombs on the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The greater shock, however, was that only four of her colleagues at Oxford supported her in her efforts to have the doctorate blocked. Shortly after this, Anscombe was invited to teach an ethics course for a friend who was departing on sabbatical. Her daughter, Mary Geach, explains what happened next.

My mother settled down to read the standard modern ethicists and was appalled. The thing these people had in common, which had made Truman drop the bomb and the dons defend him, was a belief which Anscombe labeled "consequentialism." I believe she invented the term; it has come to mean much the same as "act utilitarianism," but without the view that the good is to be equated with pleasure and evil with pain. As Anscombe first explained it, however, consequentialism is the view that there is no kind of act so bad but it might on occasion be justified by its consequences, or by the likely consequences of not performing it.²⁸

²⁸ Mary Geach, "Introduction," in G. E. M. Anscombe, *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally

In preparing her class, Anscombe came to the conclusion that the only way to offer a more adequate account of the moral life was by returning to the ancient question of human flourishing. Elizabeth Anscombe was perhaps the most gifted of a remarkable group of women philosophers at Oxford (along with Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, and Mary Midgley) who had come—each in their own way—to the conclusion during their wartime studies that there was such a thing as human nature, as well as the true, the good, and the beautiful, and that human happiness and fulfillment depended upon living in harmony with these realities. Instead of seeking certitude and precision in the reductive language of mathematics, Anscombe invited us to turn our attention to the way we use everyday human language in the rich and varied events of ordinary daily life. Following the lead of her mentor, Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his later work, she invited us to return to the “rough ground”²⁹ of normal human language as we use it in the rich embodied events of human life, which is an animal life, a life embedded in a community and its history. Mary Midgley, in her autobiography, describes the effect of Anscombe’s thought on Midgley and her contemporaries:

Repeatedly and carefully she spelt out how our thought about language has to be rooted in the complexities of real life, not imposed on it from outside as a calculus derived from axioms. The special importance of language does not, then, flow from its being a particularly grand isolated phenomenon. It arises because speech is a central human activity, reflecting our whole nature—because language is rooted, in a way that mathematics is not, in the wider structure of our lives. So it leads on to an investigation of our whole nature.³⁰

(Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic Press, 2005), xvii (cited by David Solomon, “Elizabeth Anscombe’s ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’: Fifty Years Later,” *Christian Bioethics* 14 [2008]: 110).

²⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation, 50th Anniversary Commemorative Edition 3rd Edition*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001) I, no. 107 (p. 40). See also Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

³⁰ Mary Midgley, *Owl of Minerva: A Memoir* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 159.

Any consideration of the whole of human nature eventually comes to the study of marriage and family life. By the mid-1960s, Elizabeth Anscombe became increasingly concerned that the same consequentialist logic that had led to atrocities in the Second World War was now influencing views concerning the use of technology in family planning, views that she regarded as introducing a profoundly reductionist conception of sex into the heart of the rich reality of Christian marriage. In her provocative essay from 1966 entitled “You can have sex without children, Christianity and the New Offer,” she sounded the alarm that Catholic Moral Theology needed to address the moral status of contraception (that is to say: of artificial means of controlling fertility and of blocking conception during sexual intercourse) because of the rapid development of technologies that were making new forms of contraception possible. She further argued that theologians needed an adequate philosophy of action and intention that would allow them to consider contraception in the context of human life as it is actually lived.³¹ Ten years later, in an essay entitled “Contraception and Chastity,” she would apply her own earlier groundbreaking insights into human action to the problem of contraception. Specifically, she would address the indissoluble link between the unitive and the procreative aspects of sexual intercourse.

A full account of Anscombe’s analysis would explain her understanding of an intentional act and its relationship to an act’s intrinsic character. It would also present her view that, just as an acorn remains intrinsically ordered to becoming an oak even if it never becomes one, so too the act of sexual intercourse remains intrinsically ordered to procreation even if it does not lead to it. For our purposes, however, what is especially interesting is her belief that, once you employ technology to separate the unitive from the procreative in sexual relations, it will become difficult to understand why sex should occur only within marriage and why it should only be between a man and a woman. Writing in 1975, Anscombe asks:

If you can turn intercourse into something other than the reproductive *type* of act (I don’t mean of course that every act is reproductive any more than every acorn leads to an oak-tree but

³¹ G. E. M. Anscombe, “You Can Have Sex Without Children: Christianity and the New Offer,” in *Ethics, Religion, and Politics, The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 91.

it's the reproductive type of act) then why, if you can change it, should it be restricted to the married? Restricted, that is, to partners bound in a formal, legal, union whose fundamental purpose is the bringing up of children? For if that is not its fundamental purpose there is no reason why for example "marriage" should have to be between people of opposite sexes. But then, of course, it becomes unclear why you should have a ceremony, why you should have a formality at all.³²

Contraception is a fraught issue that has divided hearts and troubled consciences in the Catholic world over the last fifty years. From the perspective of this theologian, however, who grew up on the shores of the San Francisco Bay in the 60s and 70s and who had the privilege of studying moral theology with protagonists from both sides of this debate, it seems that discussions of sexual ethics too often have focused on the pastoral concern to not place couple's consciences in jeopardy and on debates about freedom versus obedience to law. Yet, for those recent generations whose motto has been "if it feels good do it; if it tastes good chew it," our consciences have never been troubled (let alone been in jeopardy) about these questions: we were, however, confused. Perhaps, therefore, Miss Anscombe's call to consider family life in the larger context of human flourishing has merit. Moreover, since she so accurately predicted the confusion about marriage that has emerged since her essay first appeared, perhaps she is indeed correct that the incoherence stems from treating sexuality reductively according to the same utilitarian calculus that has sown confusion in our wars. This would imply that our reductionist manner of applying technology to solve human problems is leading to a twofold blindness concerning human nature and its natural, social, and animal environment.

As with every form of moral blindness, Miss Anscombe would have us return to the rough ground of the rich practices of ordinary human life. Shakespeare, when his characters have become blind about themselves and their true vocations, sends them into the dark

³² Elizabeth Anscombe, "Contraception and Chastity," in *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 123. This essay was originally published as a pamphlet of the Catholic Truth Society in 1975 and was based on a talk that Anscombe had given several years before. See Mary Gormally, "Forward," in Elizabeth Anscombe, *Contraception and Chastity* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2003), 3–5.

green of the forest, where they rediscover truths about nature and their own animality, as well as about their spiritual dignity. Thus, for example, when Touchstone, the court fool in *As You Like It*, encounters Corin the shepherd in the Forest of Arden and asks whether there is any philosophy in him, Corin responds with truisms such as: “the property of rain is to wet, and fire to burn. . . . and that a great cause of the night is lack of the sun.”³³ The speech traditionally has great comic effect, but it is nonetheless true that many of us have had to rediscover—sometimes very painfully—these simple but tenacious truths about the natural world, about our own natures and the world in which we find ourselves: stones are hard, water is wet, fire burns—oh, how it burns.³⁴

Perhaps one reason we fear to see the whole context of who we are in our natural world, one reason we flee to a reductionist view—a reason that explains why we fear entering the forests of Arden or of Arcadia—is that we will also find death there: *Et in Arcadia ego*—“I too am in Arcadia,” death reminds us.³⁵ Death: the mystery where war and love truly embrace. But Miss Anscombe is one of those who was confident that death is not the only thing that awaits us in the forest. The contemplation of nature and a return to the fuller, richer practices of family life place us in proximity to something that is more than nature and stronger than death: they place us in the bower of “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”³⁶ These groves may be fallen, but they still contain the paths along which the God

³³ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* 3.2.1143–49.

³⁴ It is George Orwell who has his protagonist say, at the end of chapter 7 of part 1 of *1984*: “The obvious, the silly, and the true had got to be defended. Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth’s centre. . . . Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows” (*1984*, Everyman’s Library Edition [New York: Knopf, 1992], 84). See John Senior, *The Death of Christian Culture* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2008), 33 and 41. Although Professor Senior explicitly quotes only from Orwell, he apparently often began his courses with the quotation from Corin in *As You Like It* (see David Allen White, “Introduction,” in Senior, *Death of Christian Culture*, 10).

³⁵ Bruno Mario Damiani and Bárbara Louise Mujica, *Et In Arcadia Ego: Essays on Death in the Pastoral Novel* (New York: University Press of America, 1990), and Harry Morris, “As You Like It: Et in Arcadia Ego,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26 (1975): 269–75.

³⁶ Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, canto 33.145: “l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stele” (concluding line of *Divina Commedia*).

of love delights to walk. More enchanting than any forest sprite, the Spirit of God delights to reveal the way of the Cross as leading from death to eternal life. The way is Christ. It is in Christ Jesus, the eternal Son of the Father, and through the action of his Spirit that we advance toward the joy of the Father's house. The return to nature, therefore, does not lead only to death, for the Spirit is active in nature, animating it, elevating it, and revealing Christ Jesus as the true way in whom all ways are united, even the ways of love and the ways of war. Christ is indeed a battling lover who makes war on death and reveals the Father's conquering love.³⁷ N.V

37 An earlier version of this essay was given as the Randall Lecture on October 6th, 2016 at Providence College, Providence, Rhode Island.