

Dictionary argument against gay marriage

by Francis Bennion

On gay marriage Hugo Rifkind (27 October 2012) overlooks the Dot Wordsworth argument. The union of two persons of the *same* sex cannot be called a marriage because every dictionary of the English language since that language began has defined a marriage as the union of two persons of the *opposite* sex. For the same linguistic reason a substance cannot be called a harmless poison because the dictionary defines a poison as a lethal substance.

There are other etymological objections. The dictionary calls the male partner in a marriage the husband and the female partner the wife. It defines wedlock as the state or condition of being husband and wife. And so on.¹

Following publication of the above letter The Huffington Post UK website posted the following response on 11 November 2012 written by Craig Purshouse:

The arguments against gay marriage are like some form of pathetic hydra: as soon as one is defeated another slightly more tenuous one sprouts up to take its place. The latest unconvincing contribution to this debate comes from Francis Bennion. After the brilliant Hugo Rifkind wrote a column in the Spectator supporting gay marriage Bennion replied to the letters page stating that '[t]he union of two people of the same sex cannot be called a marriage because every dictionary of the English language since the language began has defined a marriage as the union of two persons of the opposite sex.'

He believes this is fatal to the case for a change in the law as it is linguistically impossible to have a 'gay marriage' in the same way that it utter nonsense to say that one can have a 'harmless poison' - the dictionary defines a poison as harmful so it is inherently contradictory to say that it is harmless. Bennion says there are a number of other etymological objections: 'The dictionary calls the male partner in a marriage the husband and the female partner the wife. It defines a wedlock as the state or condition of being husband and wife. And so on.'

Bennion is correct that the dictionary defines marriage in this way. Nonetheless, he has managed to cram a surprisingly large number of fallacies into his short letter and consequently, his argument should provide no impediment to gay marriage making its way onto the statute books.

First, he appeals to 'truth by authority'. That is, the taking of ideas or statements to be true merely because a supposed expert has said them. There may be good reasons for believing what a specialist on a particular subject has to say. A compiler of a dictionary can usually be relied upon to tell us what certain words mean. Similarly we might trust a Regius Professor of Modern History if they were giving us a lecture on the Bourbon Restoration (though they may not be infallible).

However, it makes as much sense to consult a dictionary on how our laws and morals should be shaped as it does to consult an authority on French history on how to perform open heart surgery. Just because someone is knowledgeable about one subject does not mean they can be relied upon to determine the truth of another. A good dictionary rarely makes a good ethics handbook and so it is bizarre that Mr Bennion hopes to rely on the OED to determine how best to organise society.

Bennion's second mistake is that, even if we were to run our lives according to what the dictionary says, the dictionary is not as immutable as the laws of physics. Sixty years ago it

¹ Published in *The Spectator* 3 November 2012.

would have been as ludicrous as Bennion's harmless poison example to say that one could be gay and unhappy at the same time ('gay' was taken to mean 'merry'). Now that language has developed it is much less absurd: gay people can now be as miserable as everyone else.

Bennion here commits the is-ought fallacy, believing that just because a marriage is defined as being between a man and a woman that it ought to be. This is like saying because someone is stupid that they ought to act stupidly: it is completely absurd and simply doesn't follow. There is no reason why dictionary definitions cannot be changed to reflect the law.

Naturally it is not desirable to divorce the meaning of words from that used in everyday speech - it's confusing if nothing else - and we should perhaps be wary of such top-down redefinitions (though the ridiculous spectre that is sometimes presented of an Orwellian cabal of elitist gays trampling over traditions in order to introduce newspeak is so laughably insane it barely warrants rebutting).

However, many civil partnerships are referred to as weddings in everyday speech. Lesbian couples are often called wives; male gays called husbands. And no, this is not only done by that cliché of achingly-PC, Stoke Newington-dwelling, hummus-eating metropolitans, but by a huge range of people across the country.

Without providing further reasons against gay marriage (and Rifkind did a pretty effective job of demolishing the major ones in his original article) Bennion is not left with much of a case. But I'm more than happy to have relieved the burden of those who have been sleepless with worry about the workload of sub-editors of the OED. They can now rest easy and wholeheartedly support this change in the law.

Craig Purshouse, *The Huffington Post UK*, 11 November 2012.

© 2011 F A R Bennion
Doc. No. 2012.023

Website: www.franciscbennion.com
The Spectator 3 November 2012

Any footnotes are shown at the bottom of each page
For full version of abbreviations click 'Abbreviations' on FB's website

References:

None