

# Hang Together

"We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately." Benjamin Franklin

## Ain't No Functionalism Here

Posted on **October 2, 2012** by **Daniel Kelly**

We've spent a fair amount of time around these parts on whether marriage is dead, and if so, what is to be done about it. That discussion has been both instructive and revealing. One of the things it has revealed is a need to address an unexplored assumption, to wit, how we determine where the state may legitimately intervene in our lives. I operate on the historical understanding that government has a limited role that is best expressed as the responsibility to protect our rights. Greg apparently has something more extensive in mind.

Greg says "I think Dan has made a pretty key mistake that needs to be addressed before we carry the broader conversation further. In social science, the mistake that I have in mind is known as 'functionalism.' This is a method for explaining human behavior that was fashionable for a short period but is now generally recognized as a fallacy." I agree. Well, not that I've made that mistake, but that we need to discuss this before the conversation can broaden.

I find myself frequently saying that I agree with Greg. That shouldn't be surprising – Greg is frighteningly intelligent, and before he says anything, he puts a huge amount of thought into it. So when he takes me to task for engaging in functionalism, I know that, lurking beneath the surface of that short post, there is a wealth of research and rumination. And while I agree with everything he says about that model, I plead "not guilty" to the charge of using it. Here's why.

Greg accurately describes functionalism's (functional?) limitation as its inability to describe *why* people do what they do. He says "[f]unctionalism assumes that the true meaning of human behavior is unrelated to the subjective experience of the one engaging in the behavior." He explains, by way of example, that functionalism cannot adequately describe a rain dance because observing participants' physical behavior says nothing about the subjective reasons for engaging in that activity. And he concludes that "[f]unctionalism fails because it cannot account for the behavior it describes. The tribe would not do the rain dance if they didn't believe it made rain."

All that is true, and would be relevant if I had said you could reverse engineer the true and complete meaning of marriage by looking only at the third facet of marriage. But I didn't. In fact, I distinctly remember saying there are three facets – the interpersonal, the relationship between the couple and God, and the relationship between the couple and the state. The first two facets cover the “why” and the metaphysics. And while I've described the third in functional terms, I've never suggested that it accounts for the totality of the institution of marriage.

What I *have* done is propose that when we banished the third facet, we killed the institution of marriage in its traditional form and replaced it with something no longer tethered to legally cognizable rights and responsibilities. That, however, does not imply the third facet is a sufficient basis for understanding traditional marriage, only that it is a necessary one. This is no more functionalistic than noting that without lungs you're, well, dead. We are not completely defined by our lungs, yet we're nowhere without them.

So the reason I have not been using a functionalistic model is because I have not been trying to define the whole of marriage through the government's role in it. Instead, I have had a much smaller goal in mind, *viz.*, identifying the properly limited, but essential, role of the state in traditional marriage. That role does not define the whole of marriage; you still need to account for the other two facets, which I have. And so, by Greg's own definition, I am not engaging in functionalism.

Hang on, it looks like the jury is returning . . . . Ahh, not guilty.