To control the definition of a thing is to control the thing itself. This was the great insight of Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll’s fantasy, Alice in Wonderland. Recall the dialogue: After he defines “glory” as “a nice knock-down argument,” Humpty-Dumpty explains the point to a doubting Alice: “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.” When Alice responds that the real issue is whether you can change the meaning of a word to make it mean what you want it to mean, Humpty Dumpty demurs: “The question is which is to be master — that’s all.”

The great political and social contests of the late 20th century can often be reduced to debates over the meaning of words — who will be master over words such as “liberty,” “democracy,” and “justice.” I suggest today that the central modern conflict in social policy has been over the definition of just such a word, “family,” and that debate has now been engaged at the United Nations, with most unfortunate results.

This contest began in the 1930s, when the Swedish social scientists Alva and Gunnar Myrdal made an extraordinary discovery: as advocates for socialism, modernity, feminism, and secularism, they did not need to attack the family as an institution of oppression and reaction. This had been the great error of the late 19th century Marxists, who had linked the existence of the family to private property and had so demonized the home. Rather, by redefining the family as a malleable, evolving institution, the Myrdals saw they could co-opt the family — and the warm sentiments surrounding it — for socialist, secularist ends.

As they explained in their 1934 book, Kris I Befolkingsfragan [Crisis in the population question], the family had first to be ripped out of a stable moral framework. Being philosophical materialists, they argued: “Morals are essentially a function of institutions, and in turn a function of total social development, which in the last analysis is propelled by technology.” In this vein, they said that reactionary calls to “save the family” were irrelevant to the reality of social evolution, which dictated a never-ceasing sweep of material change.
Accordingly, the Myrdals argued that family “change” was also absolutely necessary, simply to bring this social institution into harmony with twentieth-century, urban-industrial realities. This effort required, they said, a redefinition of the family, where it abandoned identity as an autonomous social unit rooted in religion and tradition, and assumed instead a role as part of a “great national household,” fully industrialized, where women stood by men as comrades in industrial labor, where children became a social responsibility, and where traditional attitudes gave way to social cooperation.

Family policy focused on “prevention,” they said, would be the engine through which to achieve the revolution: a revolution that rested on changing the meaning of a word. Where industrialization had already “socialized” families relative to production (that is, few families still raised their own food or made their own clothes and furniture), the new imperative was to socialize family consumption patterns as well. Indeed, the contemporary crisis in family life — evidenced in the rapidly declining Swedish birth rate — opened up new vistas for state intervention. As the Myrdals put it, the population question could be transformed “into the most effective argument for a thorough and radical socialist remodeling of society.” They urged the creation of comprehensive day care centers, paid maternal leave, in-kind subsidies, and other programs designed to transfer the child-care burden to society at large, in order to create the new model family.

The Myrdals purpose in 1934 was, ironically, to raise the birthrate in Sweden, which required — they said — a new family form incorporating feminism, socialism, and a militant secularism. Today, as the experts want to slash birthrates, they turn to the same kind of intellectual and political legerdemain. Since the 1950s, population control advocates have consciously sought to disrupt the natural family to achieve their ends, relying in turn on a redefinition of the family to veil the radical nature of the scheme.

Writing in 1958 for the journal Social Problems, sociologist Richard L. Meier showed the way to achieve this revolution within the form, retaining the outward appearance of “family” while radically altering the core. He described the “catastrophe” that continued population growth in the Western world invited. Many theorists, he noted, thought that coercive controls might be necessary to eliminate such growth and the three- and four-child family system that had created it. Yet Meier rejected a direct assault on the family, arguing that there were alternative ways of achieving population control goals: “Satisfying lifetime roles should be established which do not require parenthood, but would, in effect, discourage it [Under this system, a] fraction of the adult population could be depended upon to be sterile and this fraction [would] be modifiable by incentives normally available to democratic
governments.” The most effective strategy for increasing the number of sterile adults, Meier continued, would be to move women into jobs that demanded geographic mobility, thereby making stable home and community lives impossible: jobs such as truck driving, airline piloting, engineering, sales, and firefighting. Easy divorce, he added, would also facilitate more sterile marriages. In sum, the family model resting on marriage, motherhood, and work in the home should be purposefully eroded, a revolution to be achieved under the cover of redefinition (Richard L. Meier, “Concerning Equilibrium in Human Population,” Social Problems 6, Fall 1958: 163-75).

A few years later Edward Pohlman — writing in Eugenics Quarterly — argued that America’s families were producing too many children. Looking at the “Baby Boom” of the 1950s with horror, he frankly admitted the desperate need for experts and elites to re-engineer American social life, and quickly: “The population avalanche may be used to justify contemplation of large-scale attempts to manipulate family size desires, even rather stealthily.” The goal, he continued, must be to reverse the existing climate of opinion so that small families and childlessness would be defined as “good,” in noble cooperation with the needs of the nation and world. Meanwhile, the large family of three or more children should be redefined as the “flaunting” of the common good for “selfish ends.” Such a covert manipulation of opinion, Pohlman concluded, could best be achieved by winning over “the most prestigeful strata” of the population and by securing “the blessing of government,” who would then leverage the whole of society against the three-child family system (Edward Pohlman, “Mobilizing Social Pressures Toward Small Families,” Eugenics Quarterly 13, Spring 1966: 122-26).

The turning of American elites and the U.S. government in this anti-natalist, anti-family direction began in the 1960s, and culminated in the late 1970s. Now, “international government” takes its turn at social revolution under the guise of the same “stealthy” redefinition of the family. The United Nation’s “Draft Final Document for the International Conference on Population and Development,” now under discussion, rests on the familiar tactic of co-opting the word “family” through a twisted Social Darwinism focused on evolution, or “change.” As the opening paragraphs of Chapter 5 explain, under “rapid demographic and socio-economic change, patterns of family formation and family life are continuing to undergo considerable change” (V. A.5.1). The document adds that the “traditional gender-based division of productive and reproductive functions in the family often no longer reflects current realities and aspirations ....” In the modern world, “many parents find it increasingly difficult to carry out all their work and family responsibilities.”
Current policies and programs, according to the document, “give insufficient recognition to the existing diversity of family forms” (V. A.5.1). Particularly handicapped by a refusal to adjust to change are “the large number of households headed by single parents” (V. A.5.2).

The same arguments pervade the United Nation’s Proclamation of 1994 as the International Year of the Family (issued in 1991), where the Principle is declared that “Families assume diverse forms and functions from one country to another, and within each national society. These express the diversity of individual preferences and societal conditions” (I. 3.b.). Family policies, the UN explains, must be formulated to bring families into conformity with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which protect the rights of individuals against family claims and intrusions (I.3.a and III. B.25). This document labels family traditions and inherited cultural values, including religion, as obstacles “perpetrating attitudes that have, at times, worked to the detriment of society and some family members, notably women” (III. B.15).

Change, change, change. Inevitable, and necessary. Is that, in fact, the situation we now face? I am here today to say: No, it is not. Indeed, to argue in this manner is to succumb to what I call ‘the Martian Fallacy.’

Consider the proverbial Martian, who comes to earth to study its inhabitants and report back to his superiors. It turns out, however, that the human being the Martian chooses at random to observe, has cancer. So, as the months pass, the Martian sees “changes.” The human under study loses weight. The color of the complexion alters. The level of daily activity shifts, from movement toward lethargy. Finally, the human ceases to eat, and lays still. All this is reported back to Mars as change: no more, no less.

Of course, the Martian’s error is that it has no standard of health by which to judge human behavior, biological function, and appearance. Without such a standard, it cannot recognize disease. “Decline” or “decay” are transformed into “change,” a shift that dangerously distorts the actual development that is occurring and makes impossible actions that might alter the course of the disease and “save” the subject.

This is the fundamental flaw that warps the United Nations’ treatment of the family in the documents under review. It is simply false to argue that there is no relatively fixed definition of “family.” The human record, honestly confronted, shows that the family is a natural, universal, and irreplaceable community, rooted in human nature. The “family” in all ages and in all corners of the globe can be defined as a man and woman bonded together through
a socially-approved covenant of marriage to regulate sexuality, to bear, raise, and protect children, to provide mutual care and protection, to create a small home economy, and to maintain continuity between the generations, those going before and those coming after. It is out of the reciprocal, naturally recreating relations of the family that broader communities grow, such as tribes, villages, peoples, and nations.

This basic pattern of social organization can be found in all healthy human communities. For example, anthropologist George Murdock, in his classic cross-cultural survey, Social Structure, found the institution of marriage “in every known human society,” with the only major variation being the choice between monogamy and polygyny. Also universal, he said, was “a division of labor by sex,” rooted in the biological differences between men and women in reproductive functions but extending as well to production and consumption roles. In those relatively rare situations where a family of this sort cannot be found, the cause is commonly either extreme conditions or a decadence caused by defeat in war or contact with more advanced cultures (G. P. Murdock, Social Structures, New York; Macmillan, 1949; and William N. Stephens, The Family in Cross-Culture Perspective, New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1963).

Some philosophers, such as my colleague Thomas Fleming, believe that we can trace this common family structure to human biology, through the shared genetic inheritance found in human DNA. Other contemporary writers find the universality of the family validated through social research, seen particularly in the strong relationships found between social disorders and family break-up. Still others hold to an older understanding of the same reality, believing that the family is the pattern of human social life ordained by God, grounded in natural law.

Without question, the universal family model can show signs of strengthening or weakening. For example, some historical developments — such as the rise of an agrarian order resting on independent family farms — appear to strengthen family life and an openness to children, a development seen in the United States between 1750 and 1840, and more recently in Mexico during the land reforms of the 1940-65 period. Similarly, certain historical developments can place great pressure and stress on families, leading to decline, disorganization, and crisis. Over the last century-and-a-half, the union of corporate capitalism with centralized state power has had a pronounced negative effect on family living, stripping the individual of the protections offered by the family and leaving each man, woman, and child increasingly at the mercy of the “corporate state.”
The consequence of this historical pressure in most developed countries has been *family decline*, not some neutral change. In a compelling article appearing in the August 1993 issue of *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Rutgers University sociologist David Popenoe argues that the family in the United States (and, more broadly, the Western world) is in serious decline, in three ways:

- *as a demographic reality*, with family households decreasing in size and as a percentage of all households; and surviving as groups for shorter times and for a smaller part of the average lifespan;
- *as an institutional presence*, with family turning its last few functions (such as meal preparation, early child care and the regulation of teenage sexuality) over to corporate or state entities;
- *and as a cultural force*, with the value placed on family life having been diminished relative to both “the self” and “the greater welfare” claimed by the state.

We must be clear, however, that this “decline” is not the inevitable result of historical change. There are too many counter-examples of viable, family-centered societies, still extant or in the recent past, for us to accept a cheap Marxist dialectic of “inevitability” or a perverted social Darwinism resting on the concept of “evolution.” Rather, “decline” should be seen as the partial consequence of deliberate efforts by individuals and ideological movements to weaken the family — even to eliminate it — so that the individual will be left helpless, in a dependent relationship with the masters of the modern corporate state. Toward this end, measures offering effective protection to families in an industrial environment — such as the goal of a “family wage” once shared by labor unions and progressive employers, or a tax code giving preference to marriage and children as found in the United States during the 1948-63 period — have been the object of regular attack. At the same time, both intellectuals and state bureaucracies have worked feverishly to disrupt the natural bonds of wife to husband, and of parent to child.

Indeed, the United Nations’ documents under scrutiny here must be seen as a continuation of this aggression against the real family, under the guise of pro-family rhetoric and a false “diversity” of family forms. There are, to be sure, phrases — and even whole paragraphs — in both documents which say the correct things, standing alone. For example, it is certainly true — as the Draft Final Document of the Conference explains — “that the family is the basic unit of society, the context for most reproductive decisions and the place where children are nurtured and socialized” (I: 15, 5). It is possible to agree that “Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development” (II.A.2.3., 11). One can assent to
the assertion that “Children have a right to be cared for and supported by both parents and to be protected from economic exploitation and sexual abuse” (II.D.26, 14). And one can applaud the condemnation of “son preference” that leads to the abortion of girl babies, and the rejection of the genital mutilation of girls. In the same vein, the “Programme for the International Year of the Family” affairs — altogether correctly — that the family “continues to provide the natural framework for the emotional, financial, and material support essential to the growth and development of its members, particularly infants and children, and for the care of other dependents, including the elderly disabled and infirm. The family remains a vital means of preserving and transmitting cultural values” (III. A. 6, 11). Indeed, this last sentence comes fairly close to the authentic definition of the family, noted earlier.

Yet such statements, whether unobjectionable or distinctly positive, are placed in contexts in both documents which twist their meanings in deeply problematic ways.

To begin with, the “Draft Final Document of the Conference” gives virtually no attention to the central fact and institution of marriage. In a jumbled discussion of “the empowerment of women,” “of couples and individuals,” and “the rights of children,” this primal and universal human institution regularizing sexuality and reproduction and forming the framework for the family is nearly unnamed. This occurs, I suspect, because the authors of the U.N. Document understand full well that the marital pair is the principle rival to their centrally-directed goals and schemes, an institution that liberates individuals from potential dependence on the state apparatus. As the great English writer, G.K. Chesterton, once said: “The ideal for which [marriage] stands is liberty. It stands for liberty for the very simple reason [that] [i]t is the only one of these [non-state] institutions that is at once necessary and voluntary. It is the only check on the state that is bound to renew itself as eternally as the state, and more naturally than the state” (Works, IV, 256). As Chesterton explained elsewhere, the home resting on marriage “is the one anarchist institution,” meaning it is older than the law, and pre-exists any state, certainly including the “international state” growing under the aegis of the United Nations (IV, 67).

It is in light of this historic rivalry between the “state” and the “family” for the loyalty of individuals that the U.N. Document’s focus on “education” also must be viewed. As the document elaborates, “Over the next 20 years, the world community must ensure that all children, girls as well as boys, complete primary school, that the quality of basic education is improved and that the gender gap in education is closed.” On the surface, this seems a worthy and laudable goal, and would be, if kept within a context of family responsibility and control. But in fact, it actually masks another direct assault on family sovereignty.
No less an analyst than Norman Ryder, Professor of Sociology at Princeton University and then-Director of the University’s Office of Population Research, described this with perfect clarity in a 1983 article for the Population Bulletin of the United Nations. Mass or universal education, he explained approvingly, serves as the modern state’s agent in the release of the individual from obligations to kin: “Education of the junior generation is a subversive influence. Boys who go to school distinguish between what they learn there and what their father can teach them... The reinforcement of the [family] control structure is undermined when the young are trained outside the family for specialized roles in which the father has no competence.”

Ryder continues: “Political organizations, like economic organizations, demand loyalty and attempt to neutralize family particularism. There is a struggle between the family and the State for the minds of the young.” In this struggle, the state’s school system serves as “the chief instrument for teaching citizenship, in a direct appeal to the children over the heads of their parents.” The state school also serves as the medium for communicating a “state morality” and a state mythology designed to supplant those of family and family-centered traditions and faiths. Such changes, he notes with approval, attack the authority of the family, religion, and tradition, and in so doing help reduce fertility and leave the individual, alone and unprotected in a dependent relationship with the state.

This rejection of the family explains, as well, the U.N. Document’s constant attention to, and even perverse affection for, the unmarried mother. Her fate, and the fate of her child, are irredeemably tied to the largesse and controls of the state. If men, marriage, and the autonomous household economy can all be done away with, then the state controls the female breeding machine, where women can be fully integrated into what the Document describes as “The powerful synergistic interactions among good quality family planning services, other programs to improve maternal and child health, and advances in the educational and economic status of women.” The major thrust of the section on “Gender Equality, and Empowerment of Women” is to level the natural complementary between man and woman in marriage, and replace it by government schemes that make men and marriage largely unnecessary. As the U.N. Document’s central objective regarding the family explains, the goal is “to develop policies and laws which better support the plurality of family forms, including the large number of households headed by single parents, and to address the social and economic factors behind the increasing costs of child rearing to women” (V.A.5.2, 29). Translated into a more honest image, the state seeks to construct a “mother-child-state” family system to replace the natural family, forming a kind of
government harem, achieved through the massive subsidy of non-marital childbearing and the heavy taxation of families based on marriage: a pattern pioneered in the Scandinavian countries and now found in a growing number of developed nations.

Further evidence of this assault on the family comes from the obsessive focus of the United Nations’ documents on the rights of individuals, through claims raised against the duties and bonds of the family. The correct way to read large portions of high-sounding declarations such as the “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women” and the “Convention on the Rights of the Child” is direct assaults on the dignity and natural relationships between husband and wife, and parent and child. Protestations to the contrary, these documents deny the social nature of human beings, the complementarity of the sexes, and the natural protections of an intact family, which will always be superior to those bureaucratic substitutes offered by governments.

The state’s campaign against child abuse, to choose but one example, rests on the premise that parents are a likely source of such abuse, and government the source or protection. In fact, children growing up in an intact, two-parent family based on marriage are the ones best protected against abuse and neglect. One study at the University of Pennsylvania found that when compared to children in step-parent or single-parent homes, children in intact families were 40 times less likely to be affected by serious physical abuse (Joy J. Lightcap, et al, “Child Abuse: A Test of Some Predictions from Evolutionary Theory,” Ethology and Sociobiology 3, 1982: 61-67). Research from Canada points to the close relationship between legalized abortion and child abuse, symbolic of how prior stats-driven disruptions of the family will produce “crises” said to demand still more state action (Philip Nay, “Relationship Between Abortion and Child Abuse,” Canadian Journal of Psychiatry 24, Nov. 1979: 610-20).

Once again, such declarations of “Rights” work, at one important level, to separate family member from family member, and leave each individual as a willing object and dependent of the modern state.

There is no doubt, as well, that the U.N. Document’s endorsement of “family planning” mechanisms rests on programs that bypass the family unit. The constant use of the phrase, “individuals and couples,” is the key to understanding that the family — the natural, responsible, self-regulating unit regarding sexuality and reproduction — is to be ignored, as government “family planning” experts focus again on the “atomized” individual, in the pursuit of demographic goals fixed by central planners. True “reproductive rights” exist only
in the context of the natural family, where the family has an absolute claim to be protected from conscious state efforts to manipulate family size, upward or downward.

In the abstract, the idea of an “International Year of the Family” is to be welcomed, as a valuable celebration of the smallest social unit, the incubator of new life, and the source of meaning and mutual protection. In practice, however, the United Nations’ bureaucracy has of late produced documents that would damage and diminish true family rights and family integrity. At the heart of this strategy lies a deliberate redefinition of the family that strips this word of its authentic and legitimate meaning. An effective counter-strategy would begin by restoring the true meaning of the word and then insuring that specific recommendations advance or support that meaning.

Humpty Dumpty, the world’s first philosophical deconstructionist, was wrong: words do have innate meanings, born out of and bound to the natural order of the world. The morally potent word, “family,” is no exception. In the contest ahead, let us side with young Alice, who understood that a world without fixed meanings was doomed to madness and chaos found in that dehumanized land “on the other side of the looking glass.”

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