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Men's Lives

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Nicholas W. Townsend, *The Package Deal: Marriage, Work and Fatherhood in Men's Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002, 264 pages).

Nicholas Townsend's *The Package Deal* is the fruit of interviews with men who graduated from Meadowview High School in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 1970s. The author intentionally limits his scope to American peers. There are eight chapters in the book with two appendices, notes, references, and an index.

The "package deal" of the title contains four elements: marriage, children, employment, and home ownership: the author examines how these elements affect fatherhood. There are four facets of fatherhood: emotional closeness, provision, protection, and endowment. The relation between the latter three is asymmetrical. They mutually inhere and depend on each other. However, Townsend claims that emotional closeness stands in contradiction to provision (and therefore also to protection and endowment, though differently) because more time spent pursuing provision necessarily means less time spent with the child(ren) and vice versa. It is here that women's mediation is central. For the men Townsend interviewed, the father-child relation presupposes the husband-wife relation. Townsend notes that divorce terminates the woman's role as mediator between the father and child, thereby gravely wounding the father's capacity to live out his fatherhood.

The author laments the tension between fathers' desire to be close to their children and the physical separation of work and home. Home ownership tends to manifest the provision of the father, and provides a space to pursue emotional closeness. However, rising costs of houses in "good neighborhoods" require that the father either work longer hours or that both parents work. If the former is the case, the emotional closeness that is desired is frustrated by another element within fatherhood.

The final chapter allows the author space to draw out some implications from his work. He calls for untying policies from "heterosexual marriage as the only focus of child rearing" (p. 202). Furthermore, he spells out the hitherto underlying assumption that masculinity and femininity, or gendered difference, are "socially constructed and variable" (p. 203).

My first question when approaching this text was: what does the author mean by "a package deal?" What is the nature of the package? What is his understanding of the unity of the package? I was very excited to read the author's contention in Chapter 3, "The Four Facets of Fatherhood," that the "elements [of the package deal (fatherhood, marriage, employment, and home ownership)] are interconnected and mutually dependent. As a complex whole, they can be viewed from a number of different perspectives" (p. 50). My first reaction was to rejoice that he sees the whole as greater than the

sum of its parts. However, it eventually becomes clear that the “whole” is far from being a unity. The package deal is a “constellation... not a seamless whole” (p. 203), because our *cultural vision* is constructed and variable, extrinsic and accidental. The second appendix explains that “the meaning of fatherhood to fathers and their societies changes and is constructed in the context of changing social and economic circumstances and changing definitions of gender” (p. 212). Thus, in the last analysis, fatherhood is the product of social and economic forces.

Both the author and those he interviewed presuppose that children are simply the product of the will of the spouses. Any deeper notion of the family is essentially undermined by the introduction of the principle of “choice” through the acceptance of contraception, with its capacity and propensity to destroy any real sense of vocation. All this being said, the author’s interviews and commentary give excellent insight into the classic American male (p. 5) and the cultural expectations for American men that we are all exposed to, shaped by nominalism (leading to relativism) and voluntarism (leading to the prioritization of the principle of “choice”).

The option that “fatherhood” could be something that exists in itself, that has a form that can be approached, is simply not part of the author’s way of thinking. Both the author and the men he has interviewed assume a way of choosing that is essentially *unoriented* – until they orient it. It cannot even be called a *disoriented* choice, since that would at least imply a proper orientation. *Unoriented* indicates the essential depth to which both the author and those interviewed took the centrality of self as “self-sufficient” (p. 149).

All of this could be said to sanction a kind of “freedom of indifference” which then permits one to construct an ethically arbitrary notion of fatherhood with no reference to the idea of being drawn to the good (pp. 165ff). It is therefore the burden of those who seek the True, the Good, and the Beautiful to salvage whatever they can from *The Package Deal*, while radically qualifying it in Christ. It is he who reveals the Father and, therefore, the meaning of human fatherhood which is essentially filial and receptive, a mode of being that is totally foreign to Townsend’s book.

