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# FAMILY VIRTUES AND THE COMMON GOOD

Michael J. Meyer\*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Aristotle is famous, at least among philosophers, for having noted that human beings are social animals. Yet, there are few who recognize that Aristotle also said that human beings are essentially family creatures.<sup>1</sup> The social nature of human beings is first and foremost a product of families. At least so said Aristotle.

So also, this theory seems to exist in the latter stages of the twentieth century. For better or worse, families prepare children for life in the public arena. Families prepare each of us to make our mark at the ballot box, and they have a profound impact on what kinds of students and teachers, doctors and patients, inmates and wardens, lawyers and politicians we become. And finally, although it is perhaps obvious, it is no small matter that families prepare us to take our place in future families, as mothers, stepmothers, fathers, stepfathers, uncles, aunts, grandparents, surrogate parents, family-supporting neighbors and friends.

Given the breadth of the issues raised by such facts, I will limit myself to two main points. The first point I will discuss is what I call the problem of the common good. The second point I will discuss can be put as a question: What type of moral language or ethical perspective seems well suited to consider the moral or ethical aspects of the family?

But first let me acknowledge the basic conceptual question: What is a family? Or, if you wish, what is a good family? I will simply make an assumption about this central question. Whatever particular forms families might take in vari-

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1. See ARISTOTLE, *THE NICHOMACHEAN ETHICS* 493-503 (H. Rackham trans., 2d ed. 1934) (part VII.xi-xii discusses the concept of humans as family creatures).

ous cultural or subcultural contexts, the primary moral and ethical role of the family is to nurture children. Families obviously play many other very crucial roles in our lives, but I will not focus on them here. I will also admit incompleteness about why nurturing children constitutes the central moral role of a family. I note only that families are, once again for better or for worse, the primary place that the moral task of nurturing children is or is not tended to.

## II. THE PROBLEM OF THE COMMON GOOD

Some aspects of what I call the problem of our common good can be put this way: American society has strong historical and cultural tendencies to promote individualism, and sometimes radical individualism. Again generalizing, well worn individualist imperatives are of the following forms: take care of yourself; take care of your own. Yet, and here is the problem, it also seems true that society and the individuals therein will flourish to their greatest extent only if we pay sufficient attention to the needs of others. In short, our own families as well as other people's families ought to receive our support. They should, that is, if we hope to live truly good lives in a fully civilized society.

Again painting with a broad brush, I might put the problem of our common good a different way. How can we get whites to care for blacks, black families and black children? How can we get Hispanics to care for Asians? How can we get Jews to care for blacks? How can we get Black Muslims to care for Jews? How can we get "traditional" families, whatever that might mean, to care for "nontraditional" families? How can we get inner city families to care for rural families? How can we get suburban families to care for the inner city families? How can we get the healthy to care for the sick? And, how can we get the present generation to care for not so distant future generations, people who we will surely never know but will just as surely affect through our present actions? A pluralistic society like ours, with a strong tradition of individualism, need not be a selfish and essentially self-centered one. But it will be, without some significant attention to various aspects of our common good. To avoid the shortcomings of radical individualism, we must promote significant recognition of the point that the well-being of others is a central part of our own well-being.

Now, of course, I do not propose to solve this problem. But, my first goal is to register one small point relating to families on this very big topic. While families are clearly part of the problem set out above, they are also part of the solution. However, I do wish to emphasize that families are only part, albeit a crucial part, of that solution. Families are one morally and politically significant way to begin to address the radical individualist's tendency toward selfishness and apathy about the well-being of others.

Both children and adults need places to learn that the first precept of radical individualism, taking care of yourself, will not result in the highest good for them individually nor result in the highest good for their society. Putting the point a different way, in late twentieth century America, adults who are trying to run this world have a deep need to learn that their own good, and the good of every individual, is inextricably tied to the good of others. From the point of view of moral psychology, individuals need to be drawn out of themselves. People need to not only perform their moral obligations to others, but also to fully understand their personal stake in the well-being of others. At their best, families can help us to realize this first step toward a proper appreciation of a common good. Families can help us all embrace the notion that not only do we have obligations to help others, which is a point barely acknowledged by radical individualists, but also that our own true happiness requires the flourishing of others.

Other groups also challenge our traditions of radical self-centeredness. Churches, clubs, schools, neighborhood associations, even political parties, can also point us toward the insight that the best in ourselves is often, perhaps very often, found in joint enterprise with others. I am not suggesting that nothing good comes from purely individual effort, but rather that many of the highest goods of human life are essentially social. The element of truth that is promoted by individualism is that we indeed ought to care for ourselves. However, this theory is distorted by radical individualists who tend to suggest, among other things, that their first imperative, taking care of yourself, is the best basis for understanding the purpose of government and indeed the essence of society in general. Yet, the rewards of social cooperation will arise only from a genuine attention to the needs and the

talents and ultimately the flourishing of others. On a large scale, some positive conception of our national concern for a common good must be discovered; it must if America is to flourish within its broadly liberal tradition and then model the best, and not the worst, of this complex tradition for the rest of the world.

Returning now to the microcosm of the family, I will consider a related and very complex question of whether children should have nurturing fathers. I will hazard a positive answer here, but for a different reason than I think is usually offered. First, let me be clear that my point here is that children should have nurturing fathers; not just any kind of father will do. It seems clear that families should not be held hostage, as they sometimes were in the past and are often still, to the whims or desires of abusive or neglectful fathers. Let me be very clear that, in saying children should have nurturing fathers, I am not saying that biological fathers are in some morally relevant sense necessary. Furthermore, I do not wish to suggest that single motherhood cannot be a noble and successful enterprise. There is absolutely no doubt that it can be.

My point here is a different one. While I think children surely benefit from the experience of having nurturing fathers, it is quite important to note that fathers as well benefit from the experience of nurturing children. When I say that fathers benefit from the experience of nurturing children, I mean that what I would call their moral flourishing is greatly enhanced. Even if nurturing fathers do not thereby become richer in an economic sense, they do lead morally richer, psychologically deeper, and ultimately happier lives than if they failed in this opportunity to nurture their children. No man is an island — at least no happy man.

Now, this last point has further implications. Fathers and mothers, and for that matter aunts, grandparents, and family-supporting neighbors and friends, all live morally richer lives because of their participation in the nurturing of children. The greater society will also benefit. Society not only will benefit because it has children who are more likely to be well cared for, but because nurturing fathers and mothers must take a first step toward a recognition of some common good outside of their narrower personal interests. Families headed by nurturing parents, and sustained by fam-

ily-nurturing neighbors and friends, are one of the best schools at which to study some crucially important forms of our common good.

Finally, a sometimes overlooked moral and political cost of the existence of fatherless children is the existence of childless fathers. A society that simply accepts a social world where even a significant minority of men do not nurture children, within or without of their immediate families, will be a society that to some considerable extent breeds radical individuals. In other words, men who do not involve themselves in the nurturing of children promote the principle that since they are doing it others should also. Radical individuals are, among other things, men and women who think that dependency on others is not a potential benefit to social life, but rather a cruel necessity born of human frailty.

I do not wish to oversimplify the moral and psychological complexity of the human relationship between dependence and independence. Yet, clearly enough, any talk of the importance of community and common good without full support for nurturing families seems pointless. I wish to repeat that the nurturing family is only one small but important step toward the full realization of various aspects of our common good. The divisive separatism that sometimes marks our pluralistic society is an affliction that will not easily be put behind us. But, it must be addressed if we even hope to approximate some notion of our common good and the benefits this ideal has to offer us.

### III. FAMILY VIRTUES

Given my prior assumption that from a moral point of view families exist to nurture children, how should we answer the question of what is the optimal type of moral language to discuss the family and its future? The answer is the language of the moral virtues. First, however, I must emphasize that when I speak here of the moral virtues I do not mean to focus on the narrow realm of sexual morality. Unfortunately, the entire realm of virtues is often reduced by common usage into one subset, such as sexual virtues, teenage chastity or marital fidelity.

However, when moral philosophers speak of "the virtues," we intend to discuss the vast reaches of the realm of morality. I call to your attention here the following moral or

ethical virtues: benevolence, civility, compassion, cooperativeness, courage, fairness, generosity, honesty, loyalty, moderation, self-confidence, self-discipline, self-respect, perseverance, and tolerance, to name just one representative set.

So, what can be said about the virtues and the family? I only wish to claim that the one virtue, the nurturing of children mentioned earlier, ought to be included in our list of the central or the cardinal virtues. Indeed, even if one wishes to distinguish between public virtues and private virtues, the virtue of nurturing children belongs high on both lists.

Conservative thinkers, and I have in mind here Bill Bennett's popular work *The Book of Virtues*,<sup>2</sup> have rather a jump on liberals and feminists in the broad public discussion of the virtues. Traditional liberal concerns for individual rights and privacy, as well as traditional feminist concerns about the structural features of patriarchy, both display a general tendency to cede discussion of the virtues to conservative thinkers. I am, however, aware of important exceptions to these general tendencies among both liberals and feminists.<sup>3</sup> I simply wish to emphasize that it is a mistake to cede public discussion of the moral and ethical virtues to conservatives as if, for example, discussion of the rights of families was sufficient to chart the moral and political dimensions of the family.

Moreover, I do not wish to suggest that we must consider family virtues because feminist concerns with the ingrained structures of patriarchy are not morally important. They are important. Nor do I mean that liberal concerns with individual rights and privacy are not important or are somehow incompatible with a concern for the virtues. Individual rights are, without a doubt, morally important. And, the alleged incompatibility between rights talk and virtue ethics has been greatly overstated.<sup>4</sup> Liberals can take rights seriously and still discuss the virtues, which are one key to public discourse about the family. In short, liberals and feminists have plenty of "theoretical" room for taking virtues seriously. The moral and political need to do so is critical.

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2. *THE BOOK OF VIRTUES* (William J. Bennett ed., 1993).

3. Compare WILLIAM A. GALSTON, *LIBERAL PURPOSES: GOOD, VIRTUES AND DIVERSITY IN THE LIBERAL STATE* 213-40, 257-89 (1991) (liberal view of virtues) with Patricia Boling, *The Democratic Potential of Mothering*, 19 *POL. THEORY* 606 (1991) (one feminist's concerns about virtues).

4. See Michael J. Meyer, *Rights Between Friends*, 89 *J. OF PHIL.* 467 (1992).

Bennett calls his *Book of Virtues* a "‘how-to’ for moral literacy."<sup>5</sup> And, in some respects, it is. Indeed, his book is admirable in many ways; however, it is clearly lacking in others. But, there is no question that more needs to be said by liberals and feminists about family virtues. A liberal and/or feminist discussion of the virtue of nurturing children could be especially powerful. Calling attention to the nurturing of children as a virtue does have the result of emphasizing once again the benefits of living in accord with this virtue for both children and adults.

My brief remarks here are only meant to help promote the public discussion of the centrality of the virtue of nurturing children. Any detailed discussion of the particular form of this virtue must wait for another time.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Let me conclude with a brief postscript of sorts on two parts of the topic of ethics and public policy. First, I wish to suggest that there is no simple path from discussions of ethics to recommendations of public policy. There is simply no algorithm for moving from moral prescription to public program. In other words, there is no substitute for genuine public dialogue. We must share our moral ideals as conservatives and feminists, young and old, Democrats and Republicans, pessimists and optimists, and parents and nonparents alike. And we must fashion policies that enable all of society to take responsibility for this essential virtue of nurturing our children.

I do not wish to suggest that any of this will be easy in either the present political climate or life in general. But, my primary aim here has been ethical. I have not offered a survey of attitudes, or even less a prediction of things to come. Rather, I have tried to provide an evocation of ideals.<sup>6</sup> One indispensable moral task before us all is to envision a society fortunate enough to be made up of, and supportive of, nurturing adults. That is, we must sketch pictures of possible lives and recount stories of those very real lives which can ennoble and inspire the ever imperfect present. In so doing, we need not hearken back to some past golden age. But we should

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5. See *THE BOOK OF VIRTUES*, *supra* note 2, at 11.

6. See STEPHEN MACEDO, *LIBERAL VIRTUES* 254-85 (1990).

honor some of the best ideals of our past, as when Abraham Lincoln spoke of "the better angels of our nature"<sup>7</sup> and Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of a time when our children "will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."<sup>8</sup> While the road from such ethical ideals to public policies is nothing if not circuitous and contentious, ethical ideals are valuable maps for paving the necessary paths of public policy.

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7. 4 COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN 271 (Roy P. Basler ed., 1953).

8. *Excerpts from Addresses at Lincoln Memorial During Civil Rights March*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 29, 1963, at 21.