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Family Values & Social Justice

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The family is a problem for any theory of social justice. On the one hand, children born into different families face very unequal prospects. However those prospects are conceived – as chances of social mobility, of lifetime well-being or income, or simply in terms of quality of childhood experiences - the fact that children are raised in families generates inequalities between them that it is hard to defend as fair or just. On the other hand, any suggestion that we should do away with the family for the sake of social justice, instead raising children in centrally organised quasi-orphanages or the like, is immediately regarded as the kind of crack-pot idea that only a philosopher could possibly envisage. The objection is not simply that abolishing the family would be a recipe for disaster, flying in the face of evidence from sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. Rather, the family is defended by appeal to the kind of rights and duties with which theories of social justice are themselves fundamentally concerned - a claim about the vital role that familial relationships play in human flourishing and the fundamental interest that people have in being able to experience them.

It seems, then, that the family is both an obstacle to the realisation of social justice (because of the unfair inequality it produces) and a key ingredient of a just society (because of the right to parent-child relationships). This kind of tension is familiar to political theorists who, like us, think of themselves as ‘egalitarian liberals’ (or ‘liberal egalitarians’). For us, achieving social justice is essentially about getting the right balance between equality and liberty. Justice requires that people be treated as equals and that requirement has serious distributive implications. It matters that people have equal resources to devote to their life-plans, or that they have equal opportunity for well-being, and on any specification of the approach (egalitarian liberals differ on the details) it is clear that social justice demands that goods be distributed much more equally than they are in the UK today. But, as liberals, we recognise that it is valuable for people to choose their lives for themselves, and important that they be accorded the freedoms necessary for them to live well. These include the freedom to engage in relationships that depend crucially on treating oneself, and particular others, as special - to act partially in favour of oneself and one’s loved ones. Egalitarian liberals care that people enjoy equal freedom or are given equal

opportunity to flourish. The problem, of course, is that the freedoms liberals value tend to disrupt the equality egalitarians value. The family, being the natural home of partiality rather than impartiality, is a particularly stark locus of this crucial tension.

Our aim here is to sketch a theory of ‘family values’ – why, precisely, would it be a bad idea to abolish it? That theory allows us to make some progress towards resolving the conflict between the ‘equality’ aspect and the ‘freedom to be partial’ aspect of our conception of social justice, but it also puts us in a position to say something about family policy more generally. There is a widespread sense that the family is in trouble, and recent years have seen all the major political parties in the UK seeking to present themselves as ‘pro family’. Our view is that public policy, taken as a whole, does indeed hinder the realization of family values; it provides insufficient support for children who need to be well parented and for adults who want to parent well. But it also distributes those values, or access to them, very unjustly. A full account of the place of the family in a theory of social justice will not only address the conflict between the familial partiality and distributive equality, it will also consider the way in which social arrangements currently make it much harder for some than for others to realize family values in their lives.

The normative dimensions of the family have mainly been scrutinized by feminist theorists, and a chapter with our title might reasonably be assumed to focus on gender inequality.¹ We do not doubt that the family as it actually exists has been, and continues to be, a crucial site of gender injustice, but its gendered aspect is not our subject here. Our theory of the family makes no assumptions about how familial or domestic labour is, or should be, divided between men and women; indeed, we do not assume that the family consists of two parents at all, let alone that they be a man and a woman. Our focus is specifically on the family as a social institution in which one or more adults ‘parent’ one or more children. We are interested here in the issues for social justice and public policy raised by parent-child relationships, not parent-parent ones.

Family Values and Relationship Goods

Normative theories of the family variously appeal to the interests of three different stakeholders: children, third-parties, and parents. For some, what would be

wrong with the state-run child-rearing institution is simply that it would fail the children entrusted to it. We want children to be raised in the way that will best serve their interests, and entrusting children to the authority of particular parents in the family happens to be that way. For others the family is justified because the rest of society benefits from children being raised to be cooperative, trustworthy, and capable of trust, and it is only by experiencing the parent-child bond or attachment that people with those attributes will be produced. Still others, including us, think that the family importantly serves the interests that adults have in parenting. Even if the state-run child-rearing institution did as well as the family does by children and third parties, still parenting relationships contribute significantly to the well-being of adults and the family is justified partly for that reason.

Our account focuses particularly on the goods that the family provides for the participants in the parent-child relationships themselves, which is why we call it the 'relationship goods' account.² Children have both developmental and non-developmental (or immediate) interests, and the family is justified in part because no other institution will serve these interests sufficiently well. The developmental interests fall into four overlapping categories; physical, intellectual (or cognitive), moral, and emotional. In addition, the institution of the family allows parents to have a relationship of a kind that cannot be substituted for by relationships with other adults. They enjoy an intimate relationship with a dependent who spontaneously loves them. The parent decides for the child, and even as the child comes to be a decision-maker herself the parent determines the context in which decisions are made. The parent has a special duty to promote the child's interests (including the interest most have in becoming eventually someone who has no need of the parent's care). Since John Locke it has been a familiar idea that parents have fiduciary duties toward their children (though the precise content of those duties is widely disputed). We claim further that parents have a non-fiduciary interest in being able to play a fiduciary role; it is valuable for their children that they play it well, but playing it is also valuable for *them*. The family is justified partly by the fact that it is the institution for raising children that provides this good to adults.

We should immediately clarify two things. First, we

are not claiming that all adults have a significant interest in parenting. Parenting is important enough for enough people to warrant special standing when it comes to public policy – and certainly many go to great lengths to become parents and many who do not raise children feel that their lives have been diminished by that absence. But it makes only a relatively minor contribution to the well-being of some people, and no, or perhaps even a negative, contribution, to the wellbeing of others. Second, it is important to remember that what we are justifying, by appeal to the relationship-goods they make possible, are particular kinds of intimate-but-authoritative relationship between adults and children. We do not claim that parents must be biologically related to 'their' children, nor, as we mentioned above, that there must be two parents, nor, where there are two, that they must be a man and a woman. It is, for us, a virtue of our philosophical approach to 'family values' that it leaves open the question of which particular forms of the family are particularly well suited to producing the goods we have identified.³

Parental Partiality vs Equality of Opportunity

This 'relationship goods' account of why the family is valuable can help us towards a resolution of the tension with which we started: the conflict between parental partiality and equality of opportunity. Our aim, simply put, is to leave room for parents and children to enjoy the goods that the family distinctively makes possible - goods that depend for their realisation on parents treating their children differently from other people's children - while mitigating the extent to which the family undermines equality of opportunity.⁴ It is widely accepted that parents have a duty of care to their children. Assuming that they can, parents must ensure that their children's interests are adequately met – that they are adequately fed, sheltered, kept safe from harm; that they experience the parental love that is needed if they are to develop into people capable of enjoying stable loving relationships with others, and so on. If parents fail properly to discharge that duty, then they forfeit the right to parent.⁵ But in addition to what they *must* do, morally speaking, for their children, there is the issue of what they *may* do for them. Given inequalities of resources (both economic and cultural) between parents of different children, and differences in the motivation to use those resources to benefit those children, parental

acts to further their children's interests are likely to generate injustice. The question, then, is in what ways may parents treat their children as special, beyond what is required of them by their duty of care, without exceeding the bounds of permissible or legitimate partiality? Here the answer that follows from our theory of family values is rather more controversial.

Think of some mechanisms by which relatively advantaged parents tend to transmit their advantage to their children and that tend to produce inequalities between children (and to reproduce patterns of social inequality across generations):

- gift/bequest
- elite schooling/private tuition
- access to social networks
- parenting styles
- values transmission/ambition formation
- reading bedtime stories

We could discuss each of these in much greater detail, and social scientists might even try to estimate the relative importance of these different mechanisms in generating either the extent of the association between the position of parents and children in the distribution of advantage or the extent of the inequality between children.⁶ For current purposes, the interesting point is that as one reads down the list one progresses from more impersonal or 'external' mechanisms, such as leaving money or other property to children, or investing in their education, to more informal and intimate mechanisms, the paradigm case here being parental reading of bedtime stories.

For us, the key distinction is between those kinds of activities that are crucial to the ability of families to produce the relevant relationship goods and those that are not. Noting the tendency of the family to obstruct fair equality of opportunity, John Rawls famously asked 'Should the family be abolished, then?'⁷ The account we have sketched answers that question negatively, because family values are more important than fair equality of opportunity. But only some of the advantage-transmitting and inequality-generating mechanisms in the list qualify as worthy of protection on 'family values' grounds. While the state should protect those parent-child interactions that are needed for people to realize familial relationship goods, those goods do not justify protecting the full range of things that parents currently do to favour

their children.

Why is parental reading of bedtime stories a paradigm case of a protected activity? The parent reading the bedtime story is doing several things simultaneously. He is intimately sharing physical space with his child; sharing the content of a story selected either by her or by him with her; providing the background for future discussions; preparing her for her bedtime and, if she is young enough, calming her; re-enforcing the mutual sense of identification one with another. He is giving her exclusive attention in a space designated for that exclusive attention at a particularly important time of her day. Our theory says that there must be ample space for parents to engage in activities with their children that involve this kind of thing. Bequeathing one's child property, by contrast, or sending her to an elite private school, does not stand in the same relation to the relationship goods that we have claimed justify the family as the institution in which children should be raised. Thinking about why children should be raised in families, rather than in (possibly more egalitarian) state-run quasi-orphanages, we are *not* tempted to answer: 'Because human beings have a vital interest in being able to bequeath property to their children, or to receive it from their parents'. *That's* not why the family beats the quasi-orphanage.

So far we have offered a criterion for identifying those parent-child interactions that, though tending to generate unjust inequalities between children, are worthy of protection because they are important for the production of familial relationship goods. Our approach can be thought of as reconciling family values with an egalitarian theory of social justice because we claim that the scope of such interactions is considerably narrower than is commonly thought. We can properly respect the integrity of the family without permitting parents to bequeath property to their children or to invest in their children's education. The suggestion that the state should limit the transmission of advantage from parents to children in these and similar ways is sometimes rejected on the basis that doing so would violate the integrity of the family. If our account is right, no such violation need be involved.

But our theory also aims to reconcile family values and egalitarian justice in another way. Although all the parent-child interactions listed above do

indeed, in contemporary societies, tend to generate unfair inequalities between children, it is the way those interactions themselves interact with the social environment that produces much of the inequality in question. Protecting the space necessary for the realisation of family values is quite consistent with efforts to reduce the unjust impact of legitimate familial interaction. We could, if we wanted, allow parents to read bedtime stories to their children, or to talk to them at the table, or to take them on holidays, or to share their various enthusiasms - all of which are protected on our account of family values and their primacy over equality of opportunity – without *also* allowing children who have enjoyed those experiences to convert the skills or characteristics that they thereby acquire into social positions characterised by the kinds of inequality that we currently tolerate. Intimate and informal interactions between parents and children may indeed be worthy of protection on ‘family values’ grounds, but the inequalities of wealth and health that those interactions tend currently to produce are not. Reducing inequalities between outcome positions would make it less unjust that children born to different parents had unequal opportunities to achieve those positions.

So, we see strong reasons for protecting the intimate activities through which, in the social environment we currently inhabit, parents tend to transmit competitive advantage to their children, but we reject, as unjustified, attempts by parents deliberately to transmit such advantage and we point to the possibility of a radical restructuring of that environment so as to reduce the unequalizing effects of such familial interactions on children’s outcomes. But the following two qualifications are very important.

First, we have argued specifically that there is no ‘family values’ justification for respecting parental investment in elite education or bequest of money where and to the extent that respecting them would create *unfairly better* prospects than others have. The parents of a child whose prospects would otherwise be unfairly *inferior* to others may create no injustice by paying for her to attend better schools or bequeathing her money which they have refrained from spending on consumption goods. So, in a world in which other mechanisms undermine justice between children, it might be quite acceptable for less advantaged parents to act in these ways. For most poor parents, or

members of ethnic minorities, or parents of children with disabilities, whose children suffer from various biases in education systems and labour markets, bequeathing money, or buying private tuition or elite private schooling, may not conflict with equality of opportunity at all. Rather than seeking competitive advantage for their children, they may be simply providing some of the opportunities that their children would have in a more just society.⁸

Second, we are focusing specifically on arguments about social justice that appeal to the *value of the family*. As we have said, it is quite common for defences of inequality to run through an appeal to the importance of parents being permitted to favour their children in various ways, so we think it worth targeting those arguments and seeing quite what taking ‘family values’ seriously does generate by way of a defence of inequality. But of course *other* justifications of some of the injustices that we claim cannot be defended by appeal to the family may be available. Perhaps, for example, allowing those who can afford it to invest in their children’s education, at a level beyond what the state would be willing to support, is good for productivity and will benefit even the less advantaged in the long run. Perhaps, if parents are allowed to bequeath their wealth, or some substantial part of it, to their children, they might work harder themselves, thus contributing (in an economy structured the right way) more to the benefit of the worse off. In that case, we might have an argument for permitting these inequality-generating transmission mechanisms that appeals to what philosophers call ‘prioritarian’ concerns, where special weight is given to the helping the worse off. In our view, even if that were a valid justification for permitting those transfers (and we are doubtful about the empirical claims in both cases), we should be aware that we are being asked to accept unfairly favourable opportunities for some (and unfairly unfavourable opportunities for others) for the sake of the long-term well-being of the worse-off. Egalitarian concerns are subjugated to prioritarian ones, and the two come apart because of parents’ insistence on favouring the interests of their own children over those of others in ways that, for us, cannot be defended by appeal to family values.

Family Values and Family Policy

We have argued that the conflict between the family

and equality of opportunity is less sharp than is commonly thought. Thinking hard about why the family is valuable, and what that value gives us reason to allow parents to do to, with, and for their children has yielded two conclusions. First, the sphere of interaction between parents and children that must be protected if family values are to be realised is narrower than is widely acknowledged, containing fewer mechanisms by which relative advantage is currently transmitted to children than is widely thought; importantly, it does not contain any interactions undertaken with the intention of conveying that advantage. Second, while respect for family values will doubtless leave room for parent-child interactions that result in children enjoying (or enduring) unequal opportunities to attain unequal outcomes, it is possible to reduce the inequality between those outcomes, thereby mitigating the extent of the injustice generated as a result of respecting the family.

But one might approach the conflict in a third, quite different, way. Rather than framing the issue in terms of a tension between the family, on the one hand, and equality of opportunity for goods such as income, education, and health, on the other, one might instead attend to questions about the distribution of family values themselves. Familial relationship goods are vital elements of human well-being, yet opportunities for those goods are unequally and unfairly distributed. So now we turn towards public policy, and consider what kinds of policy might better promote family values and their fairer distribution. Just as reform of the social environment can help to mitigate its adverse effects on equality of opportunity, so the design of the economy, and other features of social organization, can make it easier, or harder, for family life to flourish.

We can think about the proper goals of policy by remembering the three sets of interests at stake. From a child-centred perspective, we want a policy regime that does not make it unduly difficult for parents to look after and raise their children properly. Policy should help parents do what is needed to realise their children's interests in developing into flourishing adults, with the capacity to regulate their emotional lives and engage in fulfilling and secure affective relationships, and the moral capacity to engage in cooperative activities with others. But of course, as talk of cooperation makes clear, the rest of us also

have an interest in how other people's children turn out. Indeed, much recent discussion on the crisis of the family has focused less on the ways in which we are failing children than on the social problems (lack of 'respect', 'lawlessness', and so on) generated by that failure. And a further third-party interest is at stake. We have reason to care not only about the quality of the children being produced but also about their quantity. Demographic 'time bombs', on the one hand, and complex worries about overpopulation and justice to future generations, on the other, mean that there is a legitimate public interest in framing policies with a view to the number of children that we would like ourselves collectively to be raising. But this, in turn, interacts with parent-centred concerns; our claim that many adults have an interest in being parents implies that policymakers have also to consider the aim of maximizing the extent to which those whose lives would go better for being parents do indeed choose to parent. Finally, parents have an interest not simply in raising children, nor even in raising them well (which is primarily a child-centred concern, albeit one in which the parent too has an interest) but also in having the time and energy to enjoy the familial relationship goods made possible by their being parents.

Clearly, identifying the proper balance between these different considerations is a complex task, even before we factor in the other desirable goals with which they might compete. Here we can offer no more than some general thoughts about the policy direction implied by our theory of the family. Our, non-expert, reading of the empirical evidence is that the social environment in the UK today provides disincentives for parents (i) to have children at all,⁹ (ii) to spend as much time with their very young children as would be optimal for their children's development, and (iii) to spend as much time with their children throughout their childhood as would be optimal for the parents' enjoyment of familial relationship goods. We do not claim any originality for these observations, nor, in the UK context at least, is our aim to suggest a radically different approach to family policy from that currently on the agenda.¹⁰ Rather, our aim has been to provide a normative or philosophical framework for thinking about familiar policy issues.

The mechanisms that currently hinder the achievement of the goals we have identified include:

- a substantial 'fertility penalty', in terms of lifetime earnings, suffered by parents (usually women) who leave the full-time workforce to raise children
- too many parents are too poor, and income replacement policies too meager, to enable them to leave the workforce and look after their children for long enough
- employers (rationally) prefer full-time over part-time work, and prefer insecure part-time over secure part-time work; working hours are too long
- policy has been focused rather on providing childcare than on facilitating parental leave
- the gender pay gap makes it rational for women rather than men to take parental leave.

Policy in the UK, as we have said, is certainly moving in the right direction. Things are changing quite fast, with recent developments such as:

- an increase in parental leave to 9 months paid, 3 months unpaid from April 2007 (with the avowed intention to increase this further to 12 months paid);
- the right to request flexible work arrangements
- the right to request up to 12 weeks unpaid parental leave during a child's first five years
- manipulation of the tax code (family tax credits etc.) to reduce child poverty
- maintenance of, and currently talk about increasing, child benefit
- the Surestart policy initiative is being given new emphasis on parenting skills and child development

Still, despite these positive moves, the UK has not taken the steps necessary to regulate the labour market so that it adequately serves the interests of children and adult-as-parents. We have not seriously addressed the interface between work-life and family-life, and, despite the striking emergence onto the political agenda of 'wellbeing' or 'quality of life' issues, policymakers have yet wholeheartedly to reconceive their understanding of what makes people's lives go well. Economic criteria have tended to dominate policy-making. Thus, for example, childcare policy has primarily been aimed at getting mothers back into the labour force - an aim that

happily combines considerations of productivity and economic competitiveness with those of gender equality - rather than at giving parents of both genders the opportunity to spend time with their children. And such emphasis as has been given to children's interests has tended to focus rather on their cognitive development, and on equipping them to become productive citizens, than on their emotional and personal development, where parent-child relationships, or at least very high-quality (and very expensive) childcare arrangements, are widely agreed to be of crucial importance.¹¹

Our suggestion that more be done to promote the realisation of relationship goods and their fairer distribution raises a number of further problems. Any policy will distribute costs and benefits unequally between different people, and it is always appropriate to ask whether those costs and benefits are being allocated fairly. Here are three different perspectives from which to view the justice issues raised by any family policy:

- **Men and women**

Although we have put gender to one side, we suspect that some readers will see it as our blind spot, identifying us with that branch of the 'family values' lobby that seeks to restrict women's labour market opportunities. Fully to respond to that charge would take another paper, but here is the essence of our position: If permitting some kinds of gender inequality were the only way adequately to meet children's developmental interests, then we would face some very hard choices and, in our view, the onus would be on feminists to explain why gender equality was more important than the proper raising of children. But that is a very big if. We are not persuaded that permitting gender inequality is necessary for children to be raised well. Men can adequately parent even very young children, children can prosper through attachments to more than one adult, and, to the extent that it is more valuable, for children, that mothers rather than fathers spend time with them in the early months, that would be no reason for society to construct gender *inequalities* on that fact.

Still, we accept that these thoughts, envisaging shared parenting and/or gender differences without gender inequalities, are a long way from current reality. Although we are optimistic about recent

developments in fathering,¹² we accept that getting from where we are now to a position that is good enough for children and gender-equal may be less realistic than getting to one that is good enough for children and gender-unequal. To move most directly and immediately, from here, to a position where children are well parented might indeed imply a backward step for gender justice. That would be an example of the kind of 'trade-off between values given actually existing feasibility sets' that makes the real, intransigent, world a more challenging place than the elastic worlds imagined and re-imagined by political philosophers.

- **Parents and non-parents**

The policies we are proposing involve transfers from non-parents to parents, relative to the status quo. Why should the activity of parenting be subsidised in this way? If our proposals were justified solely on child-centred grounds, we could respond by pointing out that since the indirect target of the transfers are children, and all adults have been children, there need not be any deep worry about redistributive effects between types of people; rather we would be advocating redistribution of resources across the life-course in order to spend them where they are most valuable. If we appealed solely to third-party interests, to the benefits that children bring to people other than their parents, then we would need to consider the normative issue of whether it is legitimate to require people to contribute to the costs of producing goods from which they benefit, rather than free-riding on the productive contribution of others. But for us, policy should not be aimed solely at promoting children's interests, and parents cannot simply be conceived as incurring a cost that it may be reasonable to require others to share. On our account, parenting usually yields benefits, in terms of relationship goods, to those who do it. Given that parents reap that non-material good in any case, why should resources also be transferred from non-parents to parents?

This too is a big issue, and again we only have room to sketch a couple of points in response. First, empirical judgments about who is subsidising whom necessarily depend on some baseline of comparison, on some analysis of how resources would be distributed in the absence of the alleged subsidy. It may be true that, *relative to the status quo*, our proposed policies would

involve a transfer from non-parents to parents, but we see little reason to regard the status quo as the appropriate baseline. Falling fertility rates might be evidence that, factoring in the full range of distributive effects that result from current policies, we have tilted the balance against parenthood. If so, our policies might better be conceived as removing a bias against parents than as introducing a bias in their favour. Second, it is important to remember that much of the benefit that accrues to parents, on our account that gives parents an interest in acting as a fiduciary for the child, accrues to them because they are doing what is valuable for their children. If it is good for a parent to be home from work in time to read bedtime stories to her children, that is in large part (though not entirely) because it is good for children to have stories read to them by the parent. Parents' well-being is properly promoted, on our view, but to a great extent it is promoted through policies that might be justified primarily on child-centred grounds. This does not entirely deal with the problem; it might be thought that since parents benefit, in terms of relationship goods, from the exercise of the fiduciary duty, they *should* pay the cost of fulfilling it, or at least part of it. But nothing in our argument suggests that parents should suffer no costs, relative to non-parents, for their decision to raise children. The point is not to make sure that nothing is sacrificed when an adult chooses to invest in family life. It is to make that life sufficiently manageable that parents can provide what their children need, and find it a source of well-being for themselves, without risking unreasonably bad outcomes.

- **Rich and poor**

We have argued that the goods realised by familial relationships are of very great value for all children and for many parents. Yet access to those goods is distributed unjustly between rich and poor. While many of our readers will have been thinking about our arguments in the context of their own difficulties in combining family and career, and while we are sympathetic to anyone in that position and hope that the policies we advocate would indeed make that juggling act less fraught, those who really lose out when it comes to family values are those who do not have a career at all - those in poverty or those who have to work such long hours just to try to meet their children's basic interests in food and shelter that they have neither the time nor energy to provide or

enjoy many of the relationship goods we have been discussing. There are many reasons to tackle poverty, especially child poverty, and tackling it has indeed been an explicit aim of New Labour policy (and one that it has pursued with considerable success). Our perspective adds simply the observation that poor parents find it particularly hard both to provide their children with what they need for healthy development - cognitive, emotional and moral – and themselves to experience the pleasures of family life. So there is a distinctively ‘family values’ justification for focusing on the relief of poverty.

There is, of course, much more to be said about way in which various kinds of inequality between parents create injustices in the distribution of relationship goods. We end with just two of them. First, even where a family is not in poverty, economic necessities can obstruct the realisation of family values. One main reason that parents do not take up the parental leave to which they are entitled is that they simply feel that they cannot afford to do so. From a distributive perspective, it is not enough that the state formally guarantee a period of parental leave; that leave must be ‘paid at a sufficient level to make it a meaningful option for all parents’.¹³ The level of payment also affects the distribution of take-up as between men and women; current levels of paternity pay make it hard for lower income men even to take their two weeks of paternity leave, while the gender pay gap makes it rational for women rather than men to take time off work to look after the children. Second, quite apart from issues to do with economic resources and time, some parents lack the skills they need to parent their children well. Such skills used to be learned by observation and practice in large and/or extended families, which were in turn part of broader communities. Nowadays most children do not have younger siblings (very few have *much* younger siblings) and tend to spend a good deal of time inside the home rather than in places where they can observe other young children, yet while many aspects of education have been taken on by schools and other institutions outside the home it is still widely assumed that parenting will be learned privately, within the family.¹⁴ While of course there are difficult normative issues around the issue of compulsion in the case of adult parents, and while some critics are suspicious of all attempts objectively to identify the skills in question, our own view is

that there are some aspects of parenting that can be done well or badly, that it is good for people to have a sense of which is which, and that the state may helpfully, and quite legitimately, provide education for parenthood.

Conclusion

The family is often invoked in justifications of inequality. Parents, it is claimed, have a right, or even a duty, to promote their children’s best interests, and the protection of their freedom to do that severely limits the scope of attempts to create more equal opportunities for children born into different families. We accept that the family is a key component of a just society, and that it essentially involves parents treating their children differently from, and better than, other people’s children. But by considering precisely why the family is such a valuable institution, we can see that respect for it need not require acceptance of many of the inequalities it is standardly invoked to justify. On the one hand, the kinds of interaction between parents and children that must be protected if family values are to be realised are rather fewer than is widely acknowledged. On the other hand, we could respect the partiality constitutive of valuable parent-child relationships while altering the social environment so as massively to reduce its impact on the distribution of other goods. But we can also consider relationship goods as among the goods that our society should seek to distribute more fairly. Rather than conceiving them as obstacles to egalitarian goals, those who care about ‘family values’ should think about the proper content of those values and focus on the needs of those least able to enjoy them.

Footnotes

- ¹ The seminal contribution is Susan Moller Okin, Justice, Gender and the Family (Basic Books 1989).
- ² For a fuller version, see our 'Parents' Rights and the Value of the Family', Ethics 117(1) October 2006, pp.80-108.
- ³ For a similar approach, see Shelley Burt, 'What Children Really Need: Towards a Critical Theory of Family Structure', in D. Archard and C. Macleod (eds.) The Moral and Political Status of Children (Oxford University Press 2002), pp.231-252.
- ⁴ For a fuller and more nuanced version of our argument see our 'Legitimate Parental Partiality' and, for a similar approach, see Colin Macleod, 'Liberal Equality and the Affective Family' in D. Archard and C. Macleod (eds.) The Moral and Political Status of Children, pp.212-230.
- ⁵ It does not follow that such parents should have their children taken away from them. It could still be better, all things considered, for a child to stay with a negligent or incompetent parent than for her to be taken into care.
- ⁶ For sophisticated work along these lines, see S. Bowles, H.Gintis and M.Osborne-Groves (eds.) Unequal Chances: Family Background and Economic Success (Princeton University Press 2005).
- ⁷ John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Harvard University Press, 1971), p.511 (p.448 in revised edition).
- ⁸ A. Swift How Not To Be A Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed Parent (Routledge, 2003).
- ⁹ In the UK, the gap between the numbers of children that people say they would like to have and those actually born is 90,000 per year; M. Dixon and J. Margo, Population Politics (IPPR 2006).
- ¹⁰ Things are rather different in the US, where the current policy regime makes it extremely difficult for many people to realise family values in their lives. To take just one example: unless one has a partner or spouse with appropriate cover, leaving the workforce to care for one's young child means relinquishing health insurance at a time when one is particularly concerned to have it. This creates a strong incentive to return to the workforce earlier than would be optimal for the child, or for the parent's relationship with the child.
- ¹¹ Sue Gerhardt Why Love Matters (Routledge 2004) and Lisa Harker 'What is Childcare For?', Soundings 31, November 2006, pp.66-77.
- ¹² 'Twenty-first Century Dad', Equal Opportunities Commission June 2006.
- ¹³ Harker, 'What is Childcare For?'
- ¹⁴ We are grateful to David Piachaud for this observation.



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