

#### WHY FAMILY?

The pull of the family strongly affects its members, both in its contemporary Western idealized nuclearity and in its less atomized historical antecedents or culturally multivarious conceptualizations. People often feel their families to be the locus of their true identities, where the falseness of their social selves can fall away. Others, less sanguine, find their families oppressive but somehow inescapable, often attempting to build their own, better familial structures. Nor can this importance be escaped by leaving a family behind. Doctors as well as psychiatrists, states as well as strangers, demand answers about individuals' families in the hope of better understanding those individuals.

Structurally, politically, and personally, families function as the most important determinant for most people.<sup>1</sup> And yet contemporary political theorists spend relatively little time on the roles that families play.<sup>2</sup> As befits a culture based on the ideology of liberal individualism, family life usually seems better left to anthropologists, sociologists, and public policy experts. The ideological use of a deliberately normativizing

discourse of “family values” forms one major exception, of course, but even this approach tends to be used unproblematically: deployed by politicians or attacked and discounted by its opponents. Few inquire into the power and status that such uses attempt to draw upon. The particularities of familial experiences, and the relative importance such engagements have for people in their quotidian existence, get left behind.

The critique of the family as a patriarchal institution has been done elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Some of what follows dovetails with those familiar feminist criticisms, in large part because the history of the family as the exemplary touchstone of political life remains closely tied up with the genealogy of sex and gender. The authority of the patriarch and the patriarchy of the state mutually constitute one another, as many of these feminist theorists have pointed out. But this book is less concerned with these particular models of the family (though it is difficult to disentangle the contemporary Western imaginary from the nuclear heterosexual child-rearing model) than with the generality and commonality of imbricated communal oft-trans-generational relationships.

#### WHOSE FAMILIES?

“Imbricated communal oft-trans-generational relationships”? In the common nomenclature, these locales are “families.” Children get raised, by someone, and develop bonds with and make demands on them. Adults choose people to fall in and out of love with, live with, travel with, invest and get old and play with. Love, envy, gratitude, anger, jealousy, helpfulness, violence, caretaking, and sharing play their own important roles in these connections. Each of us is imbricated in networks of these ties, from our childhoods to our individual lives to our chosen relationships to our institutional dependences.

Each of these families, of course, has its particular form. One might consist of a man, woman, son, daughter, dog, and station wagon; another could be a twelve-year-old boy, his aunt, and her lover; still another could be a gay man, his ex-wife, and his current boyfriend. A grown woman who has cut all ties with her controlling mother but remains close to her step-grandfather and his daughter-in-law’s daughter from a previous marriage

has her own peculiar and specific relationship. It is not the form of each family that is significant, for the purposes of this book, but the concrete and pragmatic reality of familial life, of the intimacy and attention and feeling and interest that we feel for those close to us. Families matter because they matter to those within them (and often to those excluded from them), and those matterings have infinite variety and organization.

In an academic work about the family, one might expect a careful and precise definition of which affective communities count as such: how, in other words, will “the family” be defined here? Such a definition would likely include a dynamic of biological reproduction, a locus of a cultural socialization, an existential historicism, a sense of emotional and communicative immediacy, and a sphere of physical intimacy. For reasons that will become apparent through this work, including the provable insufficiency of any of these characterizations, no such definition appears here. Rather than regulating an ideal form, I prefer to accept families as they are, in a kind of democratic determination. Presume that all families are made up of different and constantly negotiated affective ties that exceed their formalization in law, biology, parenthood, or even our own minds. (Many people are surprised to find themselves still connected to a parent or sibling they thought they left behind and who was no longer of concern for them, for example.) Those who hold that some kinds of families somehow *count* less than state-sanctioned ones may be correct in some ways (e.g., such families may lack legal claims on one another), but the intensities and continuities of those relationships exceed the definitions of such moralizing. Using the self-identifications of “family” serves better, in that the reasons why people claim (or reject) familial ties where they do underlie the concerns of community and incommensurability are explored herein.

To whom can such a project be addressed? Unlike a moralist, I do not aim to reinforce, defend, or shore up the family from the dangerous forces of the modern world. Unlike a normative theorist, I develop no attempt to determine the underlying superstructure of all families. Unlike a policy activist, I lack interest in showing how a marginalized sense of family turns out to be more like the imagined conventional family than expected.

Instead, this book examines what political and social thinkers can *learn from* familial dynamics. That emotional connections develop their own attendant complexities, that force always coexists with equality, that authority can be diffuse and heartfelt at the same time: these are lessons learned and passed down in families. That they are true at the individual level makes them at least important for macropolitics.

#### INCOMMENSURABILITY

Perhaps the most overt, and most consequent, of these lessons is the ever-present knowledge of incommensurability, a knowledge that many sociologists, political scientists, and philosophers constantly forget. For them, families often serve as a model of a functioning society, a locale where sameness prevails, where language and values and goals are held communally, where the pull of individualism is most firmly held in check by the bonds of common purpose. In common political idioms and in the presumptions of public policy, families stand in rhetorically for stability, unity, and continuity.

It actually takes very little critical thought to recognize the superficiality and inaccuracy of such a picture. Families appear to function smoothly only to those on the outside; in reality they are dens of hurt feelings as much as skinned knees, of arguments and negotiations and silent resentments as much as love and support and fellow feeling. In their everyday functioning, in their continuous building, and in their abrupt disconnections, families take up our energy and our attention. And the fact, generally true, that we know the members of our families better than we know anyone else does not make the negotiations internal to those families any more seamless or easy.

How well do you know your parents, your children, your lover(s)? All too often, the answer is: not as well as you thought. Each one still has the potential (and often the inclination) to make an unforeseen claim, to ask for something unexpected, to abruptly change direction—in short, to surprise you. Each partner, parent, child, and other family member is distanced from every other by temporality, space, inclination, personality, interests, and interrelationships with people outside and inside the family.

One philosophical term acutely describes this reality: incommensurability. The fact of human differences, of the reality that two people never fully understand one another, is closely tied up with the differences in their motivations, valuations, and histories.

On the one hand, such disparity and distance make up the rich bricolage of human life. The infinite depth of others, as Emmanuel Levinas noted, provides the very complexity of experience (as well as the demands upon us) to make us ethical, responsive beings.<sup>4</sup> That we can never completely comprehend those to whom we are closest makes life endlessly interesting, intriguing, and insoluble. In its most dramatic form, such incommensurability leads to a familial life of delight, learning, and wonder.

On the other hand, however, it leads to a familiar catalogue of complaints about those with whom we share our most important emotions, thoughts, and ambitions. Other people are unpredictable, which leads to disappointment; they are unreliable, which leads to anger; they are unclear, which leads to miscommunication. They want different things for us than we want for ourselves; they want different things for themselves than we want for them. In its most dramatic form, such incommensurability leads to a familial life of disillusionment, anguish, and violence.

The concept of incommensurability in contemporary philosophy was largely introduced by Thomas Kuhn. In locating incommensurability at the heart of scientific change, Kuhn both popularized the concept and tied its definition to a problematic invocation of insolubility.<sup>5</sup> By describing change in scientific knowledge as involving a group at a particular theoretical location whose members are fundamentally unable to “recognize, understand, or accept entities revealed through observations made from an alternative theoretical perspective,” Kuhn properly recognized the problems and dynamics inherent in the shift from one perspective to another, but he also reified so-called competing perspectives into totalized, overarching categories.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, of course, families do operate. Even if there are multiple insoluble incommensurabilities between us, we live in and with families. Decisions get made, arguments resolved or forgotten. In the practical actualities of our lives, the fact of incommensurability does not result in insoluble

problems or in irredeemable breaks, at least usually. We need not turn to ancient Greece or to esoteric knowledge in order to see the fallacy of assuming that such incommensurabilities lead inexorably to unending conflict or moral stasis (though, of course, such investigations may help explain why and how they can).<sup>7</sup>

In political theory, the “incommensurability question” links most closely to debates internal to liberal theory. Those theoretical positions which developed from Isaiah Berlin’s recognition that different people’s sense of what is good may never be reconciled or even reconcilable (what is generally termed “value pluralism”) take incommensurability as a tragic condition of humankind and philosophy.<sup>8</sup> But in many ways the value pluralism debate misses the realities of incommensurability. Making moral claims about incommensurability (that it is a tragic condition of human life, for example) also causes its constant and constituent nature to disappear.<sup>9</sup> This book aims in part to displace this question: to show how incommensurability is neither an insoluble problem nor an unfortunate situation to be overcome, but rather the continuing condition of engaged human (and even transhuman) existence, the condition in which we have already happily or unhappily led our lives even within our own families.

Though my criticisms here focus primarily on this liberal tradition, they are not meant as salvos in the ideology battles recurrently raging within political theory. Much of liberalism cannot (or does not) account for the inter- and transpersonal dynamics that underpin these conclusions about incommensurability and community, but most approaches presented as alternatives to liberalism (e.g., communitarianism or republicanism or a host of others) share many of the presumptions that lead liberal theory astray: a belief in plurality as a problem, a sense that incommensurability subverts political action, a trust in the locus of logical analysis to lead to normative solutions to which rational persons will comply. My aim is neither a search for an authorizing discourse for political identities nor an attempt to build connections to overcome incommensurability. Instead, grounded in taking people’s lived lives seriously, it is to identify and learn from the particular and quotidian practices and functionings of mean-

ingful living with others, what Michel de Certeau calls the “practice of everyday life” and Thomas Dumm refers to as “politics of the ordinary.”<sup>10</sup> And an ideal locus from which to examine these lives is one with which we are all not only conversant but implicated, although in infinitely diverse and pluralized ways: families.

#### POLITICAL FAMILIARITY

The specific importances of families in our lives have two interrelated political operations: their conceptual anchoring of our interpersonal connections and their emotional locus of our affective intensities. In the next chapter, I attend to how these have determined the *concept* of the family in the traditions of political philosophy. Why, I ask, have the rhetorics of family been metaphorically synchronous with state power? To answer this question, I note first how the forms of families within liberal societies function to naturalize and depoliticize power, both through their size and through their practices. But second, and more important to their functioning, families are the location where most of our political and ethical negotiations take place, where we learn to make sense of our simultaneous connections to, and distances from, other human beings. Family is, in other words, the site of community most intensely practiced by most people. It has thus served theories of politics of the modern age, especially those interested in justifying state authority, as an almost ubiquitous touchstone, a location of affective, authoritative, and reproductive ties which can be used for (and contrasted with) contractual or formalized national power.

The third chapter explains how those theories justify certain presumptions about unity in the world of contemporary political thought; it is, in short, an attack on the presumption that community requires the elimination of incommensurability. The targets range from political conservatives to progressives, reactionaries to liberals and libertarians, all of whom propose an end to substantive political engagement through a matrix of community. In their imagined communities, they dream of mechanisms and economies of exchange that mitigate true opposition, that allow for the final unity of community to shine forth. To explain why this can never

be achieved, the chapter turns to Immanuel Kant and gay marriage: the latter as an exemplary form of a recently emergent political divide in countries around the world, and the former as the philosopher who best explains (but does not solve) this divide.

But how, overall, do these dynamics work in families themselves? The next few chapters attempt to answer these questions by turning away from theoretical abstraction and instead to the particular, ontic, phenomenological character of families themselves, using family behaviors, identities, and practices to show how incommensurability and families already coexist. In these chapters, I focus on how we *negotiate* incommensurabilities, that is, how our everyday attempts to both reinforce and overcome the distances between us play out in our familial life. The presumptions internal to political commentary and political science which presuppose sameness as the basis for community are undermined by the ways that people live their lives.

Chapter 4 examines one modality through which families can negotiate commonality and incommensurability: through *not talking* about issues which cause conflict. This use of silence goes against the negative implications generally given to silence. We generally presume that silence operates as oppression: when people, movements, groups are silenced, it is seen as a form of subjugation. Certain theorists have recently turned to reconceiving silence in a new way: as resistance to oppression, seeing how students, or prisoners, or women use silence as a mechanism with which to protect their autonomy. However, neither of these interpretations entirely satisfies, because, as the chapter shows, silence can also be used to develop community. It is used, for example, not only by families but also by religious traditions and musical composition in order to open new spaces for the development of collectivity and interaction. Silence ultimately has no definitive politics precisely because it can operate in such plural, multiplicitous, and overlapping ways.

The fifth chapter turns to a creature often understood to be a member of the family, but one often ignored in most philosophical and political discussions. What do dogs teach us about the nature and inclusiveness of

families? Most notably, they undermine the conditions generally set for political actors: they do not aspire to equality, they do not want to vote, they do not even make claims to humanity. And yet the time and energy and love (especially love) that we expend on them make clear that our formal commitments to political abstractions (by and large) hold considerably less significance than our emotional and familial connections. The profound incommensurability between dogs and humans neither precludes love nor excludes them from family; instead it interrupts our conceptions of the proper sphere of politics.

Such an interruption does not depend on nonhumans: other humans in our families can have even greater impact. In the sixth chapter, I examine how the imaginative experience of familial relationships in one familiar range of events—the onset of what is commonly termed “disability”—can demand a reimagination of what initially seems obvious. The experiences of love and care for another, this chapter argues, have the potential to change our conceptions of space: we can begin to see it as pluralized, dichotomous, or multiplicitous. Whereas most people presume space to be normatively empty, formal, and universal, the experiences of caregiving can allow space to be more properly apprehended as profoundly different for different people. Here too, familial relationships undermine the presumption that community demands or requires a collective, unified experience; in fact, the requisites of caring for another pull the caregiver away from universalism into the particularities of divergent space.

The book concludes by returning to the linguistic field in which commonality and incommensurability always already coexist. If one is truly interested in the quotidian and everyday practices of human experience, looking at the philosophy of language—especially some of its historically significant debates—proves an excellent summary of where a similar debate has already taken place. People use the same words, meaning similar (though not identical) things by them, leading to profoundly different conclusions. The idea that language should be policed so as to be universally agreed upon and unambiguous has tempted many, but has proven to be unworkable and indefensible. Language works precisely because of

its slippages and reformulations: these give language its power and those who use it (or are used by it) their home in it. Language, in other words, recapitulates familialism.

Yet this conclusion begs the causal question, in that it presumes community's basis in that which it attempts to prove. If we are formed by our families, our languages, our connections to others, and if we simultaneously form our own families, sentences, and connections, what kind of causal relationship is this? Who, ultimately, is in charge of or responsible for our connected subjectivities? This question turns out to be unanswerable. Few linguists would argue that people cannot create original paragraphs, conversations, and narratives within the limits and structures of a given language; few family theorists would argue that people do not become who they are alongside and within a network of people both given to them and chosen by them. Instead of attempting to answer this causal question, the discussion in this book examines the mechanisms of these dueling formulations of pre-given structures and personal creativity, which are here called "negotiations." Negotiation happens every time an individual reconceives what raising a child means, every time a couple weds, every time an event affects the presumed normality of life (as well as every time an author uses grammatical rules to structure a sentence). Negotiation is how we live our lives as both communal creatures and individual actors, feeling and creating our way through roles, expectations, obligations, and potentialities. We learn these skills and their limitations in our jobs, in our writing, in our plans for the future, in our casual interactions with others, and—probably most importantly—in our families.

Thus the goal of this book, and of the arguments herein, cannot be to formulate the "proper" set of policies to encourage "healthy families," or to shore up one mode of family against another, or to decide what sorts of political and ethical commitments make family life stronger. In a prescriptive mode, it is not about families at all. Families do not operate under prescriptive models, but negotiative ones: we operate within our families along complex lineages of obligation, love, anger, sadness, and protectiveness. We respond to other family members along lines which

are both predetermined and original. We rehearse and repeat arguments, grow apart and together, care for and hurt one another. The purpose here is to learn from those realities, to recognize that the prescriptive models used for politics and sociology and policy and philosophy usually fail when stacked up against the experiential natures of families. It is to learn from how people live their lives rather than telling them precisely how and why to live them. It is to take families seriously, for a change.