

THE RHETORICS OF FAMILY

Why do political philosophers turn repeatedly to the family to explain power? From Plato to Foucault, the family has served as both an exemplary location of politics and a source for resistance to larger forms of power. Whether a model for the *polis* or a micropolitical site of subject formation, theorists posit the family as the central model for political order and disorder.

Yet this modeling takes a bewildering variety of forms. For various writers, family has one or more of the following functions. It justifies authority, underpins conceptions of power, explains states, serves power emblematically, organizes community, centralizes power, naturalizes monarchy, stages patriarchy, motivates attachment, differentiates political power, formulates normative sexuality, and provides the emotional intensity of political life. It is not particularly interesting to determine which of these interprets the relations between family and politics most accurately, since all seem somewhat correct yet limited. Instead, the question arises: why so many functions, in so many places and times? Whatever the justification

desired, the family seems an irresistible and aeonian spring from which political authority can draw refreshment.

The family's important role in politics generally takes a traditional, grounding role. Of course, in contemporary political culture, issues and debates are often framed in terms of what is best for "working families" or "the nation's families" or even "family morality." But those debates concern the proper treatment of families by political institutions and actions, where families serve as a particularly powerful interest group. That is, they assume that families are secondary where law, policy, and institutions are primary, that the success or failure of families depends on the particularities of politics.

This may well be true. The form of the family, as many historians have pointed out, has changed profoundly over time and through space and culture.¹ Kinship networks and familial concern surely exist within certain periods and social formations; to presume that any particular makeup is natural and universal shows a profound ignorance of human experience. But the assumption that families are formed by politics ignores an equally important reversal: *politics depends on families*.

Conceptions of legitimacy, authority, and political identity did not form in a historical vacuum. Western political philosophy, in its long history of developing justifications and organizing state power, has fundamentally relied on the family as a source of political organization. For many theorists, paternal authority forms the basis of authority; as the most natural and fundamental kind of power, the patriarch provides the proper model for the legitimacy of all forms of organizational and political power. The mysticism of "God the Father" and "the father" both underlie claims to the proper and authentic uses of earthly authority.

This may seem a counterintuitive claim. The dominant narrative of the emergence of modernity presents European thought as the simultaneous overthrow of theology in the name of reason, and of kinship networks in the name of formal, disinterested legal order. The first of these stories has proven a fertile field for debunking, and contemporary scholarship in intellectual history has widely investigated the claim that the magical thinking of the church was dissolved by rational order. But the concomitant

assumption, that with the birth of modernity rights-bearing individuals (not families or kin groups) now have relationships to states, has been far less critiqued.

This familiar story ignores at least one important aspect of the intellectual development of civil individualism. If God no longer forms the basis for political legitimacy, as in the divine right of kings, then other legitimizations must take his place. In each of these histories and theoretical traditions, theorists search for conceptual or metaphorical models from which political authority arises. In each of these various models, one pattern appears repeatedly: families are the site of natural, prepolitical authority, and the proper state is that which develops from and properly expands that source of power. The following section outlines a very few of the many nodes providing those connections, examining how family has long underpinned conceptions of political power, both as representational of authority and as a symbolically differentiated source of power.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF POLITICAL FAMILIES

Both Diocletian and Constantine issued extensive family laws, which made up a large share of their jurisprudence.² Constantine, especially, foregrounded the rule of the *paterfamilias*, minimizing the power of wives to act independently. By formalizing an authority that creates the legitimacy of family life, to an extent that at times intruded on decisions previously made privately (such as denying cohabitation rights between free women and slaves), he connected legal and familial authority closely together.³ Children and wives were expected to obey the orders of the *paterfamilias*, including those concerning marriage and divorce. In turn, the *paterfamilias* had certain responsibilities to his family: marrying daughters properly, not beating sons unduly, listening to family member's opinions before ruling on issues.⁴ Ideally, this led to *concordia*: the ideal of a perfect and continuing harmony of the various parts of a family.⁵

Augustine, too, combined the authority of society with that of marriage, encouraging the future centrality of the family in Christendom. In Augustine's theopolitics, the first natural relationship "of human society" is the "bond of husband and wife."⁶ From this it follows that, short of one's

relationship with God, the family is the social bond from which all others follow: it serves as a model of authority and obeisance.

And of course God himself has shaped that familial relationship. Augustine's admiring account of his mother Monica's role in her own family serves correspondently for the proper relationship with God. Monica never blames her husband, she forgives his infidelities, she always reasons with him when his temper has subsided. Wives, she says, "should remember their condition and not proudly withstand their masters."⁷ Some contemporary interpreters see Monica's central place in the *Confessions* as merely replicating Roman patriarchy in the religious sphere, and Augustine does clearly mean to perpetuate patriarchal familial dynamics.⁸ But his exaltation of Monica does something further: it shows the reader how the proper attitudes of submission, forgiveness, and continence make one not only happier but more successful. By recognizing her appropriate place in the family, Monica provides an example of how to properly respect authority and to make both oneself and the larger group happily functional.

The Christian world never relinquishes the centrality of the family in its ethics and organization. As Albrecht Koschorke has shown, the imagery of the "holy family" not only forms conceptions of families in the Middle Ages but continues to underpin the contemporary mythological structures.⁹ Indeed, a form of authoritarian paternalism intrinsically prevails in monotheism: God as Father provides the most familiar trope, but the church develops considerable Mary idolatry into its structure as well. The dynamic between mother and child so beloved of Christian art over the centuries clearly links the holy and the human, attitudes of care to those of obedience, and the centrality of parenthood to sanctity.

It is in part against this structure that Thomas Hobbes famously restructures political theory. Hobbes's state of nature has no families, no extended networks of kinship. Indeed, part of Hobbes's project literally defamiliarizes: he presumes that the prepolitical world is a state of unencumbered individuals, lacking family, clan, or social networks. It is the very equality of isolated individualism that makes life insupportable without the overarching power of the sovereign.

Yet the demand for a solution to this radical individualism continually hearkens back to the ways which families solve the same sorts of problems. As Richard Allen Chapman notes, Hobbes fills *Leviathan* with families, with fathers exerting power, even with an overt parallelism between familial and state governance.¹⁰ Even as he undermines kinship, Hobbes conceives power and authority along familial lines, explaining the domination necessary for sovereignty. In Chapman's words, Hobbes "uses the family constantly as an analogy for the state, as justification, as historical example, as a heuristic device to explain political structures and functions, and as exhortation."¹¹

John Locke, in disentangling the modern conception of the state from the theological forms of authority, justifies and limits government in his *Second Treatise of Government*. He famously transforms Hobbes's threatening state of nature into a far more comfortable conception.¹² In Locke's rendition, society comes about slowly, only once property must be preserved and abstracted from immediate needs. The narrative of the *Second Treatise*, however, does not proceed quite that cleanly. As Locke explains this movement from the state of nature to that of government, he suddenly breaks off his narrative to explore the question of "paternal power." It transpires that the power of the father predates all other forms of power, but that it is a form both limited and mutual.

This strangely positioned chapter attacks the parallelism of paternal and monarchical power proposed by Sir Robert Filmer (as did Locke's *First Treatise of Government*). While the details of their debate need not be rehearsed here, the traces are clear: Locke builds his theory of the legitimacy of the commonwealth in ways which depend intimately on the position and responsibility of parents (mostly fathers, though Locke at times recognizes the natural rights of mothers to be superior).¹³ Parents naturally have power over their children, Locke argues, but this power ends once the minors reach the age of reason, and the parents also have responsibilities to their children (such as education).¹⁴

Though Locke sees no necessary connection between paternal and political power, he does reluctantly admit that, historically, one developed from the other. Locke argues that "the natural fathers of families

by an insensible change became the political monarchs of them too.”¹⁵ This transfer makes sense only if the proper use of kingly power is the development and expansion of the property rights of individuals, just as a patriarch trains his children from infancy to maturity. The father’s government teaches his sons to become “accustomed . . . to the rule of one man, and taught them that when it was exercised with care and skill . . . it was sufficient to procure and preserve to men all the political happiness they sought for in society.”¹⁶ Just as we can criticize bad fathers, so can we criticize bad kings; this is simply a matter of the quality of authority. Thus the transformation is in forms of power rather than in power itself. Not in question is the right of parents (or kings) to rule in their respective spheres; indeed the force of Locke’s argument for relative obedience depends on the parallel.

Though usually positioned as Locke’s opposite, Jean-Jacques Rousseau places the family at the origin of politics even more dramatically. “The most ancient of all societies,” he writes at the beginning of *On the Social Contract*, “and the only natural one, is that of the family.”¹⁷ Calling the family “the prototype of political societies,” he explains how other forms of governance are dependent on the exchange of similar favors.¹⁸ The father’s love for the children’s security is the original compact. From that, all else remains merely a question of scale and distance. Indeed, he points out, marriage itself must be battled over by church and state, as it is simultaneously a civil contract, a religious compact, and the basis of society.¹⁹

Family plays a central role in Rousseau’s second and third discourses as well.²⁰ In the state of nature, the only state where humans have been totally self-sufficient and thus free, no families could exist. “Males and females,” Rousseau hypothesizes, “came together fortuitously as a result of chance encounters [and] left one another with the same nonchalance. The mother at first nursed her children for her own need; then, with habit having endeared them to her, she later nourished them for their own need. Once they had the strength to look for their food, they did not hesitate to leave the mother herself.”²¹ Humans do not need parents; for Rousseau, it is only as they come to need one another that kinship relations become important. Families come about as the first stage toward the social. Though

he follows Locke in ultimately identifying property as the necessary spur for the emergence of political society, he clearly places the creation of familial emotional bonds as the beginning point of property. Rousseau refers to the “first revolution”: the uniting of “husbands and wives, fathers and children in one common habitation. The habit of living together gave rise to the sweetest sentiments known to man: conjugal love and paternal love.”²² This attraction led inevitably, he continues, to gender differences, to pride and envy, and thus to the need for property. (Marx and Engels follow Rousseau closely in this genealogy.)²³ Because of families, people become softer and interdependent, and what we see as progress from this state is, in reality, the “decay of the species.”²⁴

John Stuart Mill, in his turn, uses the family as a fulcrum for citizenship. Sometimes this is as a set of recommendations: in *On Liberty*, for example, he argues that families must reproduce at the proper rate for a society, and that states have an obligation to make sure that the proper forms of education are being followed in the home. But far more importantly, Mill argues, the form of the family and the functioning of oppression are interconnected. His profeminist book *The Subjection of Women* repeatedly returns to the family, using marriage as an example of profound social injustice that unnecessarily subjects women to men.²⁵

Mill’s form of political individualism is closely tied to his image of the family as made up of equivalent, if not legally equal, partners. The directional causality of his egalitarianism has been much debated: whether individualism should be first bred within the family to later transpire in the political realm at large, or whether Mill’s commitment to formal equality enables him to critique the inequalities within the family.²⁶ But it is clear that Millian individualism should extend to women both in public life and in the home; whatever limitations women are thought to have are direct results of their social and legal subjugation. When he addresses the question of women’s value and creativity, for example, he argues that the stultifying effects of their oppression in their everyday lives has limited their abilities.²⁷ Mill inherits this concern from Mary Wollstonecraft, who argues for the liberal values of friendship and equality to replace the oppressive state of marriage.²⁸

As many feminist critics of Mill point out, he argues that women are more naturally suited to the care and raising of families, and that even if given free rein, most women would continue to be interested in “domestic management.”²⁹ This early version of difference feminism leads Mill on the one hand to celebrate the realm of the private family sphere, arguing that it has its own kind of worth, and on the other to privilege those few “exceptional” women who can use the moral values that emerge from these interests to the benefit of public life. In addition, Mill argues, once women were no longer legally forced into oppressive situations, feminine “weakness” would disappear. Legal equality, in his vision, “would abate the exaggerated self-abnegation which is the present artificial ideal of feminine character . . . but on the other hand, men would be much more unselfish and self-sacrificing than at present, because they would no longer be taught to worship their own will.”³⁰

Strong echoes of Mill’s sort of celebration of family life as emblematic of a better, more caring and well-ordered *polis* appeared in the feminist aspects of the Progressive movement and in the fight for suffrage. Women, it was commonly argued, would bring a domestic tranquility to public life through their kinder and more nurturing instincts.³¹ In turn, the feminine virtues would percolate through the rough-and-tumble of political life, lessening corruption, infighting, and war. Women, heretofore untainted by politics, could bring the lessons of raising a family and organizing a household to the largest household of all: government.

Even the political philosopher most enamored of the state as the totalized ideal of human experience, G. W. F. Hegel, positions the family within a similar matrix. All moral life, he argues in his *Philosophy of Right*, arises from three interrelated and developmentally hierarchic organizations of individuals: the family, civil society, and the state. The family founds the basis of ethical life, where the completion of such concepts of engagement and responsibility reach their naturally fulfilling ends. Marriage, for example, seems initially a limitation of freedom, but because it leads to a greater, more encompassing “substantive self-consciousness,” it is in fact a liberation from the empty liberty of singular subjectivity.³² Indeed, such connection comprises one of the

most basic and fundamental goals of ethical life: the subsumption of two personalities into a greater whole.

But the advent of the social destroys family: “civil society tears the individual from his family ties, estranges the members of the family from one another, and recognizes them as self-subsistent persons.”³³ Only the state, he argues, can holistically complete the authority and order of the family with the freedom and self-realization of civil society. This of course entails the wholesale subsumption of women into a purely domestic familial sphere, as some commentators point out, but—equally important—it uses the family as the locus where all people aspire to being subsumed.³⁴ The human existence within families, where one is freed by one’s obligations to others, serves for Hegel as a minor and preliminary version of the liberation of the nation-state.

Other analogies of communal association have served to justify political power, of course, but the longevity of the family has been dramatic. Even those correlative constructs which emphasize distance from the family end up rooted in familial forms. Michel Foucault, for example, famously argues that patriarchal power differs from the more modern “pastoral” form of power, in which the government is dedicated and self-sacrificing.³⁵ “What enables [the concept of] population to unblock the art of government,” according to Foucault, “is that it eliminates the model of the family.”³⁶ In this conception, the limitations of patriarchal power (its immediacy, its focus on individuals, its particularity) proves incompatible with the needs of a large, instrumental, and territorial sovereignty. The family becomes only a segment or site of power, a “privileged instrument for the government of the population.”³⁷

But this distinction is not only too clean, it is also strangely simplistic. For, as the examples of Mill and Wollstonecraft (as well as modern political discourse) show, the model of the *paterfamilias* never entirely disappears. Foucault minimizes the extent to which familial tropes continued to inform the work of political philosophers, and the ways in which issues of family continue to form democratic political practices. In Europe, for example, the continuation of patriarchy and monarchism determined much conservative political activism, while liberal calls for

political society to serve and protect the family can be clearly seen in both the later Dickens novels and Émile Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* novels. In the United States, too, the model of the government as family not only informed the early-twentieth-century Progressive movement (such as in the banning of alcohol to protect families) but also proved central to the conservative revolution of the 1980s. The pastoral form of power did not supplant the familial form but instead commingled with it, resulting in a conflation of patriarchal and pastoral modes of care and control.

FAMILY VALUES

Why does the family hold such importance for all these various periods and all these influential thinkers? What makes this model (or this trope) such an appealing source of intellectual sustenance? One might think that its power is merely an unacknowledged inheritance from previous thinkers, or that once political philosophy makes such connections they are difficult to renounce. But other narrative inheritances are happily jettisoned: the very newness of new political theories arises from their changes in focus or intellectual dependence. Yet the family reappears, imbricated through theories as disparate as those mentioned above.

The family does not only underpin conceptual justifications of authority; it also has centralized power for the contemporary nation. Political readings of the historical emergence of the state have emphasized the necessity of a celebration of the nuclear family in the creation of state power. Robin Fox, for example, has argued that as the Westphalian state system emerged, its major adversary was the clan.³⁸ If the state has absolute or near-absolute authority, other loyalties, especially those arising from extended kinship groups, have to be sundered. Rather than directly attacking such affiliations, Fox argues, liberal state authority rewarded and reproduced individualism, both for people and for families. Insofar as people are citizens, their primary relationship is with the state, instead of with alternate organizations, religious affiliations, or, most importantly, distant cousins and other relatives.³⁹

The nuclear family fits neatly with an individualized citizenry. Within the idealized family, one's loyalties are limited to one's intimates. Re-

inforcing separate, self-contained family units encourages the dissolution of larger affiliations. Fox argues, “in promoting the self-sufficiency of the nuclear family unit, the state is in effect attacking the essence of kinship, which lies in the extension of consanguineal (or pseudo-consanguineal) ties beyond the family into strong and effective kinship groups.”⁴⁰ Families allow for reproduction and childcare, she notes, while depoliticizing the nongovernmental possibilities inherent in relations. What we think of as nuclear families, in other words, *defamiliarize*: they make more difficult the otherwise likely affiliations that arise from kinship.

For those who live within such liberal societies, these family forms seem both vital and normal. Their constant appearance in liberal political theory serves the important function of naturalizing power dynamics. Power differentials always exist in families, ideally in an ordered and ordinary way. Therefore, according to this philosophical subtext, power differentials always exist everywhere. The closer we can come to the natural direction and subjugation of families, such a narrative assumes, the more properly our society is ordered. In other words, such philosophies smuggle the importance of families in our lives into the importance of politics in our lives. Distant and concentrated authority is parasitically justified by intimate and negotiated power. And this is only possible insofar as families already have great importance and centrality in our lives.

Families function so ceaselessly in political thought precisely because they function so ceaselessly in life—they are locales where the impossibility of overcoming human distance clashes most fiercely with the human incapacity to be alone. The family acts as a nidus, in which human concerns, conflicts, and cares rest. Thus the appeal of the family in political philosophy. Once a small-scale ideal commonality can be built (or at least bought into), the only obstacle to a perfectly functioning larger community is the question of scale.

These family dynamics, even those displaced and reformed by political normativities, continue to play a central role in political discourse. Their location in our lives, the fact that they function so well and so often, makes them a ceaseless spring from which to draw new meanings, new histories, new laws, new methods. If authority is to be created and recreated,

it must always reference known and lived authority, and those emotional locations of natality serve the nation equally well.⁴¹ Thus do families reappear at moments when authority must be rooted in experience or emotion, whether by contemporary politicians or long-gone philosophers.

Yet these families have a constant unreality about them. Even in Locke's time, it is as difficult to believe in the prevalence of forbearing, powerful, kind, and stern patriarchs whose families fully obey and respect him as it is to believe in the reality of a state of nature, a land without law or society. Locke may have thought the former as real as the latter (like Hobbes pointing to the Americas as a true state of nature), but his readers understand him to be engaging in an imaginative exercise. The families that justify half of Locke's political philosophy are as fictional as the state of nature that justifies the other half.

Wittgenstein famously noted how bizarre it was to read books on ethics which failed to even mention "a genuine ethical or moral problem."⁴² Similarly, is it not strange to read so many renditions of families which fail to mention any actual conflicts or issues which arise within families? If the family is important precisely because it is the locus of negotiations of unity and difference, the lack of (philosophical) discussion of such negotiations seems more a sleight-of-hand than an actual willingness to engage in these questions. Of course families function easily, ceaselessly, and naturally, the political philosopher implies; any failure to do so is a problem of that particular family, not an issue endemic to families themselves. Isn't that, after all, Tolstoy's point about the happiness of families?

THE FAMILY DYNAMIC

The very situatedness of ethics causes grave problems for the formalization toward which philosophers aim: the need for universality in moral judgments conflicts most with historical particularity and locality. The claims of moral philosophy tend to the overwhelming absolute; philosophical self-consciousness of its "own origins and potentialities," to use Bernard Williams's terminology and idea, makes the possibilities of ethics as a "satisfactorily functioning whole" impossible.⁴³ Even when con-

fronted with absolute ethical positions we entirely agree with, we often make decisions and act in ways which entirely undercut those positions.⁴⁴

Attention to the details of ethical practices provides more insight regarding morality than do logically coherent superstructures. But it is the latter which grabs the intellectual imagination. Linda Zerilli describes the constant return to “the political pretensions of epistemology that have a way of creeping back into our thinking.”⁴⁵ Drawing on Hannah Arendt and Wittgenstein, Zerilli suggests contesting this creep by attending to “political actions,” those behaviors and practices by which we not only come to build our own worlds but help create the worlds in which others live as well.⁴⁶ It is in our actions, our everyday decisions, she points out, that our commitments emerge; one can never ultimately predict or predetermine them.

And our families play a central role in these decisions, both as a source of action and as a locale wherein those actions have their effects. Familial conflicts, familial obligations, and familial love shape who we are and motivate these actions, even in their most dramatic forms. The still-fascinating tales of Antigone’s sacrifices and Medea’s vengeance echo in contemporary newspaper stories and television programs about parental dedication or domestic violence. In each, the conflicts between family dynamics and legal and moral rectitude are put in the starkest of terms, implicitly asking viewers of these dramas to judge the propriety of actions taken.

These conflicts need not even be so dramatic to matter. For most of us, even the most politically committed or religiously observant, questions of how to make a living or how to promote a just society fade into the background in comparison to our relationships to our loved ones, our attempts to negotiate closeness to and distance from our lovers, our parents, our children. The clichés of the businessman who engages in illegal action for money he can never spend or the mother who endangers her children by staying in an abusive relationship are merely the most overt versions of these intensities. All of us betray ideals, usually without realizing we are doing so, on behalf of not only our own selfish interests but for those we love and are surrounded by. Indeed, if the intensity of emotion involved

marks the most important aspects of our ethical lives, these personal engagements overwhelm the abstractions. How much energy is expended by people trying to change aspects of their lovers, parents, and children, compared to how much is expended to change the world at large or make their neighborhood an abstractly better place to live? To take a violent, but sadly familiar, example, compare the number of “domestic” murders (where, for example, George cannot allow Martha to leave him and would prefer to kill both her and himself) with the number of attempted assassinations of political leaders. We care far more about those close to us than we do about those who can change the world at large.⁴⁷

Which is more likely to have been said, in your own life, in the past week: “You said you would take out the garbage!” or “Gay people have the right (or, conversely, no right) to marry!”? More importantly, which phrase has, as it were, a higher resonance? Which sentence registers a moral claim that most immediately affects the claimant? The first, obviously, has little perceived “real” import, at least as far as the macropolitical level is considered “real.” But that is not to say it fails to charge a defect of justice or that it is unimportant to the speaker. In fact, one of these sentences could well come before or within a domestic argument that each interlocutor tries very hard to “win,” whatever that could mean in such a context.

Such a demand (namely, the one made when reminding of a responsibility to take out the garbage) should properly be understood as profoundly moral. It bespeaks a presumed ethical responsibility, stipulated by one person of another, absent an authoritative ground of legal reinforcement. In fact, this absence of external reinforcement (the lack of garbage police) reduces the claim to a truly moral one; the “you said” becomes the merit upon which the argument turns. Possible responses, such as “I meant to but forgot,” “Why do I always have to do it?” “I’ll do it later; I have to finish my homework,” themselves evoke moral reasoning to justify the lapse.

The moral and ethical components of these exchanges are of course well known: philosophical arguments often use such everyday details as examples of how moral arguments work. One often sees them in philosophy textbooks or essays exploring the necessity of rule-following, for instance. What these examples almost always misconstrue, however, is

that the importance of their use in people's everyday lives far exceeds the importance of the larger use of the general rules they are meant to explain. That is, the authors of philosophy textbooks incorrectly assume the examples merely show how moral argumentation works, so that it can be better applied to the important realms of law, public ethics, or business. They fail to realize that, for themselves as much as for their audience, such uses are not nearly as important as the actual usage of the claims. What they miss: the moral claims internal to families are to most of us more compelling, more important, than the macroethical principles they resemble.

HIGH STAKES

Two major points have been made so far: that the family conceptually underpins liberal conceptions of politics and power, and that the family usually serves as the location where people, in their quotidian lives, most readily and vociferously engage in power struggles. But the connection between these two contentions cannot be reduced to a simple causality. It would be as false to argue simply that liberalism has looked to the family simply to justify itself as it would be to hold that families are important only in so far as they have produced a contemporary *polis*.

The claim made here is a larger one. Families hold such primacy, however they are structured or defined, precisely because they embody the central political problematic of community and incommensurability. *The family is where people have the highest level of identification with one another, but also where their differences and distances seem most important.* Those to whom we are closest are also those we feel need to be both most like us and whose differences provoke the most dissatisfaction or intrigue. These constant negotiations of similarity and difference, of likeness and remoteness, make up the emotional push and pull of the family, and their complexities never end (as any family counselor can attest).

This means, in turn, that predictions of identification can never be as simple as they may seem to someone outside of a family. What theoretical unity can properly represent the admixture of embarrassment, love, disdain, and respect an adolescent feels for her father? Or the combination of affection and exasperation at the center of a fifteen-year marriage? Or the

negotiations of information, influence, and power which emerge when a new mother asks her own mother for parenting advice? None are simple connections, let alone absolute identifications in the way family has traditionally been thought about. Instead, they are complex, plural relationships, reinforcing lines of connection, defensiveness, and mutuality.

Their consequences can surprise. Gay rights, for example, emerge very differently when concretized. A young woman comes out to her parents. How they respond is in part determined by their religious beliefs, in part by their culture, but often just as importantly by their relationship to their daughter. Their apparent political progressivism may be threatened and disappear, or their religious objections may be overcome by their concerns for their daughter's happiness. What is bearable at a distance becomes unbearable in such close intimacy, or vice versa.

Family life concerns home, money, and intimacy; love, desire, anger, and hate are the possible consequences. It is precisely this volatile and vitalizing concoction that makes the role of family so important, in both personal and political venues. Second-wave feminism politicized the personal; no longer can political theorists unproblematically conflate the private with the unimportant with the female with the unpolitical. But paying attention to the family can do more than that—it can personalize the political. Human passions should no longer be excluded from the realm of the legitimate, where philosophy has so long attempted to move them.⁴⁸

It is already well recognized that families play a large role in electoral politics. Politicians often make (or at least justify) decisions according to how they will affect “working families.” These claims function precisely because they take advantage of the intensities of the emotional landscapes we already operate within. At their most basic level, they may help perpetuate what Gill Valentine has named “geographies of fear”: the excitement of life around the unfamiliar and threatening, which depends on the possibilities of dramatic disruption of that life.⁴⁹ Thus the idea that abductions by strangers are more threatening to children than swimming pools, or the common assumption that terrorist attacks are likely to involve a family member: these erroneous assumptions arise from the intensification of fears already extant within familial life.⁵⁰

Even most investigations of the politics of the family have not understood this dynamic. When close attention has been paid to the family, it has still been primarily to suggest changes and improvements to familial life. Susan Moller Okin, for example, has argued that political theory must extend “structures of justice” into the family.⁵¹ As important as Okin’s concern should be, she merely reiterates the common conception that what counts as political engagement takes place in the civil, public world, and that true politics consist in developing concepts and applying them to domestic behavior. Such a conception not only misses that the emotional intensity of political life is dependent on families; it even reinforces the opposite idea.

The importance of the family has also meant its continued centrality within governmentality. As governments’ concerns with the management of populations have grown, the family has emerged as a central locus of that management. Jacqueline Stevens has produced perhaps the most devastating critique of democratic states’ continued complicity with, continuation of, and dependence upon familial structures. In *Reproducing the State*, Stevens has shown how ideas of citizenship descend directly from theories of race, which are reiterated and reinforced by families whose critical function is to inscribe regimes of legitimacy on humans.⁵² A child born in Chicago to a Norwegian father and Cuban mother has one confusing but vital set of rights and citizenships; a child born in Addis Ababa to a Sri Lankan father and a Persian mother has an entirely different set. In all cases, the idea that each individual is “truly” one kind of citizen arises from a racialized (perhaps even overtly racist) conception of familial relations. Stevens’s arguments are both damning and compelling. But her underlying premise, and optimistic hope, that the role of birth could be decoupled from the practices of statecraft, remains hopelessly idealistic. For if, as I have been arguing, the power of the family arises from its unparalleled importance in quotidian life, no state can hope to surrender that parasitic dependence and survive.

Taking families seriously leads to one clear conclusion: the inadequacy of the presumptions about them within traditional political theory. For the likes of Locke, the existence of the family necessarily means similar-

ity, even absolute sameness. To those for whom the family functions as the basis of identity, the differences within families must be made invisible. A definitive *paterfamilias* cannot allow dissent, difference, resistance, or correction. This sounds like no families common to us: even the most centralized or authoritarian patriarch must contend with daughters who disobey, sons who subvert, and wives who withdraw. With such an erroneous model of the family underlying liberal conceptions of identity and difference, is it so surprising that we make such poor sense of our commonalities?

As a result, we assume that incommensurability equals the death of community. Most political theories insist that only by drawing together, by discovering, creating, and reinforcing a common identity, can politics continue. But what if we consider that incommensurability and community exist side by side in our everyday lives? What comes of the recognition that the distances between brothers and sisters, fathers and sons, grandmothers and granddaughters are part of what makes those connections so strong? If families really do underpin politics, then community and incommensurability, far from being mutually exclusive, must coexist.

NEGOTIATING FAMILIES

Contemporary political scientists generally, and political theorists specifically, presume that those issues that have what they call “national importance” (or “international importance”) are as a consequence the most important ethical issues. In contemporary national and international affairs, debates over globalization and sovereignty, abortion and health care, or party loyalty and economic integrity are considered the real political issues. For academic philosophers, too, ethics either exists in the abstract sphere of logical coherence and formal equivalence or, if more pragmatically concerned, coalesces around such issues as human welfare, social justice, or imaginary moral choices concerning train switches and innocent civilians who hang around on the tracks. What they predominantly fail to address, overall, are the quotidian decisions and choices made by contemporary humans.

This is not to mitigate the importance of such issues—international

law or abstract ethics can make the difference between going to war and not going to war, between a dishonest and a reputable business. But as conditioned as we are to assume that abortion, for example, stands as one of the defining issues in the ethical contention of American politics, how often do friendships, partnerships, or other personal relationships fray along those lines? One rarely breaks with a friend or lover over his or her positions on the issues of the day. Instead, the pertinent questions of ethical responsibility in quotidian existence tend to revolve around specific instances of trustworthiness, commitment, and obligation. The negotiations between a parent and a teenager over curfews, bedtimes, and familial responsibilities are far more fraught, far more *important*, than more grandiose and distant abstract ethical questions.

Yet ethical questions these are. What parents and friends think, for example, of opportunities gained or choices made matters far more than how those stack up against holy writ or Kantian reason. We make moral choices according to thick, imbricated social communities, which help determine the inner compasses we measure ourselves against. As such, we more often than not are creatures of specifics instead of absolutes. Absolutism works far better as an abstraction than a mode of life. The fully committed theist is more saint than human; the wholly rational logician is more philosopher than citizen. For most, the ethics of particular situations determine the rightness of the response, and those ethics arise from the connections and commitments of those with whom we surround ourselves.