

Book Review: How the family will come to flourish personally and politically in all its many forms

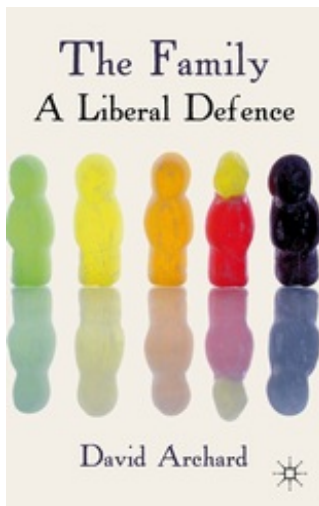
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/03/13/book-review-the-family/?pfstyle=w p>

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Annette Foerster finds out what the future holds for the 21st century liberal family.

The Family: A Liberal Defence. By David Archard. Palgrave Macmillan. December 2010.

“The family is a deeply contested phenomenon.”



In his latest monograph, *The Family: A Liberal Defence*, David Archard deliberates on what the family is, if there is a distinct right to start a family, how the family is constituted, if there is an ideal family, the family's relation to justice, and last but not least, what one can expect for the future of the family. These are important questions to ask, especially at a time when divorcing couples in England are now obliged to undertake [mediation sessions](#) before seeking court action, and the Prime Minister makes no secret of his belief that [two-parent families](#) promote responsible societies.

Archard, Professor of Philosophy and Public Policy at [Lancaster University](#), suggests a functional, minimal definition of the family in modern Western societies, as a “*multigenerational group, normally stably co-habiting, whose adults take primary custodial responsibility for the dependent children*”. A family's purpose is to care for, control and educate children, which leaves no indication that the custodians need to

be married, heterosexual or a couple.

On that basis, Archard discusses what position the family holds in modern Western societies, concluding that it remains both private and public: state and society define what counts as a family and decide which forms of the family are supported. Liberals need to provide justification of that authority and also of that of parents over children, which is founded on the interest of children and society in there being future well-functioning citizens. There is no alternative institution that can do a better job in raising the citizens of the future, and families work best if they are left to themselves. Privacy needs to be granted, but that privacy has limits. The state may intervene if parents do not meet their duty to provide the children with a minimally decent existence as well as in cases where rights of family members are violated.

Liberal justification is needed on a second level, namely in respect to justice. The family firstly supports justice as it produces future citizens motivated by a sense of justice. However it also subverts justice, as the liberal principle of equality of opportunity cannot be realized as long as families provide their children with unequal chances, injustice is thereby perpetuated from one generation to the other. The liberal trilemma (the equality of life chances and formal equality of opportunity colliding with the autonomy of family to bring up their children) must, due to a balance of considerations, be decided in favour of the last: Liberalism only draws lines to freedom when the rights of others are violated. Families need room to flourish. They not only need to be tolerated but also supported by society, as society benefits from raising their future citizens in a decent way.

The argument holds for all of the forms the family might take, and artificial reproduction opens new options to start families, such as creating children with three biological parents. While Archard discusses several possibilities of artificial reproduction, he hardly covers the ethical concerns such techniques do raise. However the forms of families may change, the institution as such remains the best for the job: to raise the future citizens of the society in a decent way.

The book is accessible with a primary philosophical knowledge, partly repetitious, but a nice read. Many pros and cons as well as different perspectives on family life and how politics influence it enable the reader to form their own opinions. Archard clearly shows why something as common as the family deserves spending some time thinking about, out of philosophical, political and personal endeavor.

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