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# The Moral Bonds of the Family

Arthur J. Dyck

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I begin with two quotations:

The breeding function of the family would be better discharged if public opinion and religion conspired, as they have until recently, to crush the aspirations of women for a life of her own. But the gain would not be worth the price.

Children add to the weight of the struggle for existence of their parents. The relation of parent to child is one of sacrifice. The interests of parents and children are antagonistic. The fact that there are or may be compensations does not affect the primary relation between the two. It may well be believed that, if procreation had not been put under the dominion of a great passion, it would have been caused to cease by the burdens it entails.

Who made these statements, and when were they published? These were not written by women nor published during the '60s or since.

The first statement, in which childbearing is placed in direct conflict with the aspirations of women for lives of their own, is from the famous sociologist E. A. Ross and his book, *Social Control*, published in 1904; the second, which sees parents, both men and women, in an explicitly antagonistic relationship to their children, is W. G. Sumner's famous book, *Folkways*, published in 1906. The quotations are taken from an article first published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1916, by Leta S. Hollingworth.

But, you may concede, even though there may have been strong attacks on the family and on parenthood at the turn of the century, it is only now that this philosophy is coming to roost. Consider this study on the "Motivation of Childless Marriages." The author used students' reports of the reasons couples they knew were choosing to be childless. The author begins his list of reasons with the term "self-centered," which he uses "for lack of anything better, to cover such comments as 'social climbers,' 'wanted to be free to travel,' and the like." Our author continues by providing the students' reports:

Mr. and Mrs. A. are "too busy working and making money to bother with children." In the case of the B.'s, "wife wants to teach; husband wants to hunt and fish; each wants to follow own inclination and a child would disturb both of them." The history of the C.'s is a common type: "They wanted to save for a home and furniture first, but never reached the point where they were satisfied." The D.'s think an apartment is no place to bring up a child; and they simply couldn't consider living anywhere except in an apartment! Mrs. E. can't afford a maid, and she is certainly not going to let a child interfere with her club and social activities. Such histories are typical of a large number.

Perhaps a dozen of the wives have avoided pregnancy because, as they frankly told their friends, they feared the experience would spoil their looks or figures, and they did not want to make that supreme sacrifice. They are well matched by an equal number of men who insisted on sterility because they were afraid a child might take first place in the wife's affections, leaving them to "eat at the second table" of affection. . . . Four couples had foregone parenthood . . . because . . . "They were so much in love with each other that they couldn't bear to think of children that might come between them and spoil the perfection of their romance." This is the much advertised Companionate Marriage raised to the *n*th degree!

2. "Wife's career" covers those cases in which the wife gave up maternity to work, not because she needed the money but because she preferred the outside occupation and did not want to interrupt it. This classification is large because so many of my students are teachers, social workers, and the like, and report the cases of their own friends in the professions.

Mrs. F. "doesn't like to stay at home," so she works instead. Mrs. G . . . has taught for 20 years and has not only "got the habit" but does not want to lose her retirement pay, which will soon be due her. Most of the stories under this heading are of a commonplace type: the wife was educated for a career, not for motherhood, and she wants her "freedom."

This is a study by Paul Popenoe appearing in the *Journal of Heredity* in 1936.

Why cite this older material? Because if you took these statements and these studies as the growing edge of our society's attitudes and practices, you would say exactly what sociology textbooks were telling students like me in the '50s. In their textbooks, sociologists were predicting the end of the family and the depopulation of the United States at the very period in American history when the percentage of those married was high and rising, and family size was also climbing up sharply. In short, we were entering the baby boom while sociologists told us that increasingly, people had little reason either to marry or to have children. Interestingly enough, the Marxists under Lenin in Russia also proclaimed that the family was passé. Yet all that I read about the family in Russia affirms its strength and, ironically again, the strength of the Russian family astonishes those who have studied it.

What do current studies tell us about American attitudes toward childlessness and childbearing? Edward Pohlman, director of the Birth Planning Research Program, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California, finds what he considers to be a very significant shift in attitudes toward childlessness and small families. He makes a distinction

between more traditional colleges and more avant-garde colleges in his sampling of students. In traditional colleges, he finds that in 1965, zero percent wanted no children. In 1970, six percent wanted to remain childless. At the same time, in these same traditional colleges, in 1965, 68 percent wished three or more children, whereas in 1970, 63 percent wanted no more than two. Those who wanted three or more had dropped to 30 percent. Turning to the more avant-garde college students, in 1965, 10 percent desired no children, while in 1970, 18 percent were similarly inclined. In 1965, 52 percent wanted three or more children, but in 1970, 55 percent wished no more than two, and the percent desiring three or more dropped to 19.

In 1971, Susan Gustavus and James Henley presented a sociological study of voluntary childlessness. Their subjects were 72 childless couples who, during the previous two years, had obtained surgical sterilizations through the Association for Voluntary Sterilization. They viewed the subjects as people who were strongly dedicated to childlessness, given the irreversibility of sterilization, and the rather young age at which sterilization was sought. Forty-nine percent of these couples were married no more than three years. Sixty-seven percent were married no more than five years. Sixty-one percent of these couples came from the northeast, 40 percent from communities of more than 100,000 people, and most of them had learned about the possibility of voluntary sterilization through magazines (33 percent), TV or radio (19 percent), or other agencies (20 percent). They were well-educated. Seventy-four percent of the husbands had some college; 62 percent of them had a college degree or more. Similarly, 65 percent of the women had some college, and 37 percent had a college degree or more. Forty percent of the husbands and 36 percent of the wives professed no religion. This contrasted with the population at large in which four percent of the males and one percent of the females professed no religion.

From these brief glimpses into the sociological literature and from the fact that our birth rates have maintained a lower than replacement level for the past few years, we might conclude that a favorable attitude toward childlessness and a negative attitude toward parenthood is widespread and will take over our society, especially if you add the notion that we are becoming increasingly and militantly secular. Yet, a word of caution is necessary. Peck and Senderowitz (1974) tell us that in the United States four percent of couples are voluntarily childless.

How shall we assess the situation? I think it is relatively superficial and almost meaningless to try to understand the nature of the family and to understand why people have children by canvassing current psychological and sociological literature on attitudes and practices. As our brief glimpse of that literature revealed, there have been wide shifts in attitudes and practices, and the studies of these are always hopelessly dated by the time they are published. If sociologists had

any understanding of why people form families, they would not repeatedly be making the mistake of predicting the end of the family. Those who think of the family as destined for obsolescence make four fundamental assumptions in characterizing the family. First, parents and children are portrayed as atomistic individuals, each with their own conflicting and even antagonistic interests. Second, loyalties to the family are seen as conflicting with, or antagonistic to, loyalties to society. Third, the bonds that bring a family together and hold them together are not understood as moral, but rather as serving the self-interest of the individuals in the family unit. Furthermore, self-interest is generally understood as conflicting with or being antagonistic to moral demands. Fourth, self-interest is often seen as thwarted by traditional moral and religious duties.

It is my contention that these assumptions are unrealistic or at least plausibly challengeable, given the history and durability of the family. I wish to suggest that there are some very strong bonds that lead us to form and sustain families and that these bonds have a moral basis that human beings of various religious traditions and societies tend to share. In the relation between a man and a woman, something more is involved than sexual attraction and sexual intercourse. These can be experienced outside the context of the family. This fact has often led commentators to predict the demise of the family.

In Plato's *Symposium*, an amusing fable depicts the first human beings as made up of both man and woman. But in this form, each four-legged, four-armed individual was so powerful and swift that the gods found it necessary to split them up. Ever since, these two halves pine for one another and seek to unite in one whole and entire being. This desire and this pursuit Plato calls love.

Plato's fanciful tale does introduce the key concept for understanding the moral basis of the family, namely "love." Love is a very strong bond and it goes far beyond its sexual expressions. There are at least two expressions of love at the root of family structure and its continuity: love as the bond of friendship, and love as the bond of community. Love as a bond uniting friends refers to an intensely personal form of interpersonal relations. Love for community refers to an intense bond uniting persons across generations past, present, and future. Love for community is love for life, for its continuity and for its flourishing.

### Love as Friendship

Friendship may be based on the pursuit of utility, pleasure, or virtue. Aristotle tells us that a friendship based on utility is unstable and does not tend to endure:

The friendship of utility is full of complaints; for as they use each other for their own interests, they always want to get the better of the bargain, and

think that they have got less than they should, and blame their partners because they do not get all they "want and deserve" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, chapter 13).

Friendships of utility are legally recognized in the form of partnerships. Seeking utility through friendship is commonly expressed in efforts to improve one's status, wealth, or vocational opportunities. As Aristotle rightly predicts, those who fail to obtain what they are seeking through these friendships of utility will be prone to complain or become bitter before ending such relationships.

Friendships based on pleasure are not stable either. Such a relation may not long survive once pleasure diminishes or the prospect of more pleasure from some other liaison beckons one or the other of these pleasure-seeking partners. If our aim in friendship is totally our own pleasure, and if that becomes focused upon sexual pleasure, we are inviting exploitative, degrading, and brutal relations to other persons.

It turns out then, that durable and praiseworthy friendship is not found in pursuing either utility or pleasure, but rather, as Aristotle observes, friendship is a set of relationships with another comparable to those we have to ourselves. In friendship, we wish for another what we wish for ourselves; we practice the Golden Rule. A friend, then, is (1) a person who wishes and does what is right for the sake of a loved one (friend). This will take many forms, but includes the kind of fidelity expressed in promise-keeping, truth-telling, and equality. This equality is expressed in reciprocity, basic respect, and a willingness to share. (2) A friend is a person who desires the moral improvement of the one who is a friend. (3) A friend is a person who wishes that the loved one (friend) exist and live, as parents do on behalf of their children. (4) A friend is a person with whom one shares one's life and goods. (5) A friend is a person with whom one grieves and rejoices.

Aristotle considers love to be "an excess of friendship," felt only toward one person. In the Koran it is said that a man may have more than one wife, but only if he can do them justice. Here the Koran appears to share as ideal for marriage the concept of love expressed by Aristotle, since it would be difficult to argue that one can do justice to an intimate relationship involving more than one man and one woman. The New Testament speaks of marriage as a "one flesh" union.

The selection and cultivation of a friendship based on virtue is a deeply private and personal matter. Yet communities have an interest in this intimate bond. There are failures in justice, failures in reciprocity, between those who profess love and friendship. Deception is one such failure. A person may profess the love of the well-being of another, but may turn out to be pursuing utility or pleasure in the form of self-gratification. Persons deceived in this way need societal protection from such failures in friendship. They can be abused and exploited. Thus, our courts have moved to protect those who have not even been legally married but have lived together.



A professed friend may also turn out to be an evil person. And so, for example, physical abuse of children or spouses can and does occur. Here again, society will not permit this behavior in the name of privacy and personal intimacy.

Another failure in friendship may arise from a great disparity in the extent to which partners pursue what is right and what is good. It may happen that one friend grows spiritually and morally while the other does not. This problem often arises, when it does, from friendships that are begun at a young age, but it is not confined to these.

Because these kinds of failures may occur in the intimacy of friendship, societies are concerned about legalizing marriage and protecting individuals when liaisons or marriages result in conflict or dissolution, even though this involves the public in very personal, intimate, and private matters. This, then, brings us to love as love for community.

### Love as Love for Community

Love is nothing if it is not a respect for human beings — past, present, and future. If we ask ourselves how it is possible to form and sustain a community, respect for human beings will be a starting point. At one time the nation of Israel and the community of Judaism consisted of a band of escaped slaves in the desert. In the midst of great hardships and a chaotic lack of social organization, the question of how to begin, shape, and continue community had to be raised. This band of slaves recognized that it was necessary to love that Power which delivers persons from abuse, oppression, and injustice. Love for that Power would express itself in respect for human beings. Such respect was to include a willingness to refrain from killing, stealing, lying, adultery, and envy. Who would enter into a community where individuals were not pledged to observe these constraints against injuring oneself and others? Why would anyone enter into joint ventures with anyone else if that person had no qualms about killing or stealing, or the like? Imagine, for example that you are about to climb a mountain with someone. It is a high mountain and the two of you will be roped together. The night before the climb, you are discussing various things with this person and you hit on the topic of morals. This person tells you that morals are relative. Although you are used to hearing this kind of thing, you say to your companion, "Well, what about the preciousness of human life?" And your companion replies with great recklessness, "Your life is a matter of indifference to me." I ask you, would you climb the mountain with such a person? I wouldn't.

Respect for human beings also takes the form of honoring one's father and mother. It is not hard to see why this is essential to the sustenance of community. Honoring one's mother and father is expressed

in at least three very important moral bonds: procreation, nurturance, and moral formation.

Procreation bestows on persons the gift of life. It is a very basic way in which we repay that good, that gift of life, that was bestowed on us. Such gratitude in the form of repaying good for good is a very deep and primitive notion. Marcel Mauss in his book *The Gift* describes this strong moral bond in archaic societies. Through children we can express the desire that life, one's heritage, and one's community continue. In his discussion of immortality, Plato identifies three ways in which people strive to achieve it. One way is through intellectual and artistic creation. Through books, paintings, or buildings, a person contributes to the community and is remembered by it. Courageous or heroic deeds help assure the continuation of our community and a remembrance of what has been accomplished by it. The third form of striving for immortality is through having children. This Plato recognizes as the most common way in which people acknowledge their past and aim to leave a predictable mark on the future and memory of their community. Is it any wonder that the attempt to implement compulsory sterilization in India aroused such ire and failed so decisively? Sterilization takes away the capacity to choose to contribute to the human community by way of having children. It strikes a blow at this profound bond we have to our community.

There is a second moral bond between us and our parents. It is nurturance. We have been nurtured and in turn, when we have children, we can nurture them. In the context of a family, affection can take the form of nurturance.

A third bond that links us to our parents and our community is moral formation. We have been disciplined in order to become moral. Disciplining is hard work. In helping someone to become moral, it is sometimes necessary to punish or withhold rewards in the face of wrong-doing and to reward what is seen as right. Parents cannot do this alone. They need community support. Educational and religious associations, as well as laws, are required that encourage what is right and discourage what is wrong, and thus help foster and preserve moral development.

This is a much more important point than many people realize. A whole range of professionals is playing the role of parent to our children. If this were done in a supportive, cooperative way, this by itself would not be a problem. What do I have in mind? Consider, for example, the educator who tells your children during the earliest grades in elementary school, "Read whatever you like. You should read something that is fun to read." Here the educator, instead of assuring that literature of great value is treasured by the child, makes the child the autonomous arbiter with the authority of the educator. Hence, when your children come home and you suggest that the book they are reading is quite unsuitable, they say, "But I like it." And a



very difficult struggle may well ensue. Similarly, you may wish to assure that your child has read some great book that has been treasured for centuries, and they say, "But I don't like it, and the teacher says I don't have to read it," or even that it's not important. Here again one is involved in a struggle that one would have hoped would have been quite unnecessary. Plato knew better. He envisioned a school system in which children were rewarded for reading the materials appropriate to the age of the child and appropriate for moral development. Literature that was not appropriate or that encouraged immorality was not to be part of the curriculum.

But it is not only a matter of what is in the curriculum. The educator is here treating the child at a young age as autonomous and as the one who can choose what should be learned. Neither the parent nor the educator is seen as an authority needed to guide the child toward future adult moral maturity and informed choice making. And once again, the child is treated as an atomistic individual and not as a member of the family.

Physicians are sometimes involved in the same kind of subtle assault on the family. Some tell minors that they need not, and even should not, inform their parents of the privileged and private exchange between the physician and the minor. Here the professional lends authority to the notion that some very important choices, such as the choices regarding the use of contraceptives and even the choice to have an abortion, are not the business of the family, but are choices that the youngsters are supposed to make for themselves. Indeed, such autonomy is even encouraged. Should parents under these circumstances show a great deal of concern, the youngsters feel that they are being treated like children or with a lack of sensitivity for their autonomy and maturity. After all, haven't the physicians made it clear that these are their choices and not familial choices? When this happens, and it happens all too frequently, the arduous though rewarding task of seeing a youngster to moral maturity is undermined because moral maturity is assumed before it has been attained. In Kohlberg's cross-cultural research on moral development, those individuals are rare who attain principled reasoning by the time they reach the early 20's.

But again, there are failures in love as community within the friendship itself that has founded a family. The harms inflicted by various physical and verbal abuses are readily identifiable. The harms of incest are perhaps less obvious to some.

Today there are those who see the taboo against incest as a carry-over of a sexually repressed and repressive society. Talcott Parsons in his book, *Social Structure and Personality*, indicates why a strict taboo against incest is universally found in human communities. The purpose of this taboo is first of all to help the child develop interests beyond the erotic. A second, closely related purpose of this taboo is

to insure that maturing adults will leave their immediate parents to seek their own sexual and procreative partners and form another family. Curiously enough, the incest taboo contributes at once to the development of privacy and autonomy and to the development of a new family unit that extends and bolsters society.

In all of this, I have not argued that every person should found a family. Celibate priests and religious orders, for example, provide unique and significant services to the continuation of our communities. What I have tried to delineate are the human bonds that provide a moral basis for families. These bonds have always been recognized by Christianity and other world religions. These are the bonds of friendship that provide mutual self-fulfillment in marriage and that build community through procreation, nurturance, and moral education. One rather moving expression of the Christian ideal of love in marriage is expressed by Marc Oraison:

Love means the total mutual gift of self; the acceptance of the necessity of a corporate asceticism; the joint training of the sexual instinct and its orientation toward goals that transcend its own quality; the refusal to disassociate sex from its reproductive ends; the curbing in each mate of selfish reflexes even in carnal union. ("The Ideal Marital Union" in *On Being Responsible*, Gustafson and Laney, eds. [New York: Harper and Row, 1968], p. 242).

Thomas Aquinas was right — we are social creatures and a life of our own worthy of emulation is a life united to others in friendship and community. This view is in conflict with the view that human beings are atomistic individuals to the extent that parents and children have antagonistic goals and interests. To have children, on this view, is to make sacrifices. The fact is that children are gifts that reward our most intimate love for another human being. Children are gifts to the parents who nurtured us and to the community that protected our lives and theirs, and that will protect the lives of our children. Above all, children are gifts of the Power Which has created, creates, and sustains all life through the power of love. Children are the gifts of God. No one should claim to love God, the Power of Goodness itself, who does not love all the little ones all their days from conception onward.

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