

WHAT IS A FAMILY? CONSIDERATIONS ON PURPOSE, BIOLOGY, AND SOCIALITY

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In this article, I examine and analyze paradigmatic conceptions of the family that are based upon a number of assumed *primary purposes* that the family serves for its members. In doing so, I argue that existing paradigmatic conceptions of the family do not capture the unique primary purpose of the family. I then suggest that a reconceptualization of the family is necessary to move away from inadequate paradigmatic conceptions and toward a more robust conception of the family. The approach taken in this article requires an examination into the way(s) the family has been defined *descriptively*—specifically, how families have been defined historically—as a means to determine what a *normative* theory of the family might look like. The goal of this inquiry is to define the family in normative terms, which consequently moves the definition of *the family* to a new conceptual landscape. Last, I present my own account of familial relations that aims to capture a normative understanding of the unique primary purpose of the family.

It is challenging to identify a conception of the family that is uncontroversial, uncontested, or inclusive of the many diverse groups who understand themselves as such. The family is perhaps the most universal kind of affiliation that we have, while, at the same time, one of the more diverse. Because the concept *family* seems at once so intimate and familiar to us, yet also so complex and contestable, we feel a certain way about how the family ought to be understood and what the family ought to stand for both personally and politically. Consequently, there are many different interpretations of what the family should be—its desired member composition, its primary purpose, and its cultural significance—and many different examples of what families actually look like across the globe. In this paper, I examine the most paradigmatic conceptions of the family that are based upon the supposed *primary purpose* that the family serves for its members and for the state. I then suggest that we ought to reconceptualize how we understand and

define the family in an effort to move away from these paradigmatic conceptions. This approach requires that we examine the way(s) in which the family has been defined *descriptively*—that is, how families have been defined historically—in an effort to determine what a *normative* theory of the family might look like. As such, the goal of this inquiry is to define a family in terms of what it *ought to be*—a goal that moves our understanding of *the family* to a new conceptual landscape. To this end, I ultimately present my own account of familial relations that aims to capture a normative understanding of the unique primary purpose that the family serves for its members.

I. METHODOLOGICAL DEVICES

I adopt two starting points for examining the conception of the family that are the most promising for identifying its characteristics and meeting basic moral principles. First, I start with the assumption that a family is a social group. This is not a very controversial assumption; many philosophers have claimed that the family is, in fact, a paradigmatic social group.¹

Social groups are comprised of members who knowingly share a common feature with one another—a belief, a value, a practice, and the like—that differentiates one social group from another.² Social groups are not mere aggregates of individuals that may inadvertently share some common feature with one another, such as biological markers (eye color, height, genes, diseases), location, or the like.³ As with many social groups, a family is comprised of a certain number of group members—family members—who knowingly share some common feature with one another. This leads to my next methodological premise: We can only determine what differentiates social groups by identifying the *primary purpose* that guides each of them. Identifying the primary purpose of a social group brings the shared beliefs, values, practices, and so on, to the forefront of group identification. This approach is significant because it proposes a clear criterion—*purpose*—to distinguish social groups from mere aggregates of individuals who do not knowingly share whatever feature they may have in common. Additionally, because social group members knowingly share some common feature(s), they must be committed to *continue* to share the common feature(s) with one another, or else the social group would dissolve.⁴ Identifying the primary purpose of a social group, then, furnishes us with the ability to differentiate between social groups and ascertain their trajectories.

I propose that we understand the family as a unique social group with a particular primary purpose—to provide care in intimate settings for the mutual flourishing of all family members. The important point to note here is that the objective for using *primary purpose* as a means for differentiation is to distinguish between different *kinds* of social groups, and not strictly as a means to distinguish one individual social group from another. By this, I mean that individual families

may each be said to share the primary purpose of providing care in intimate settings for the mutual flourishing of all family members, yet we would not say that they *altogether* comprise one indiscriminate social group; there are other means to distinguish *between* individual families even if they all share the same primary purpose.⁵ What I aim to do here is to provide a means of distinguishing *families* from other *kinds* of social groups by identifying the primary purpose of each kind of social group. For instance, it may be the case that the primary purpose of a group of stamp collectors is to collect stamps, and through this process, they all come to intimately care for one another. We would not *identify* the group of stamp collectors by their intimate caring relations; we would instead say that this particular group of stamp collectors seem to be engaged in some intimate caring relations. However, if these intimate caring relations were to become the paramount or *primary* reason the group members engaged with one another, I would argue that they have ceased to be a group of stamp collectors and may now be considered a family (a family that also happens to collect stamps).⁶ Hence, the *primacy* of intimate caring relations found within the family is what distinguishes it from other kinds of social groups. That being said, it may be the case that colloquial definitions of the family allow for the family to have other purposes because families *are* created and maintained for other purposes. I turn now to discuss three distinct primary purposes that have been historically and philosophically prevalent in conceptualizing the family. Ultimately, I conclude that none of the three discussed primary purposes is sufficient for distinguishing the family from other social groups; hence, none of them captures the unique primary purpose of the family.

2. THE PURPOSE OF THE FAMILY

Historically, there have been two prevailing reasons that have been given to justify the creation and maintenance of families. The first suggests that economic considerations yield family commitments: persons come together and form economic unions to protect private property and ensure that their assets are passed down to particular others.⁷ The second suggests that doctrines of perpetuation and expansion of systematic beliefs influence who we choose to commit to, and shape our desires to pass our beliefs and traditions to others.⁸ I will argue that, while both kinds of commitment schemes do lead to the genesis and maintenance of social groups, neither approach accurately captures the unique kind of commitment that defines *familial commitment* and, hence, neither approach actually characterizes a *family*. It is important to note that I am proposing that we understand the family as being *normatively* defined by its primary purpose, which serves to establish what makes the family a unique social group. This means that other colloquial definitions of the family may not always satisfy the normative criteria that I will specify and, in turn, they may not sufficiently pick out anything unique about the

family. To avoid potential confusion, we may call these non-normative families *de facto families*.

Economic and political considerations have influenced *de facto* familial arrangements for hundreds of years. In such cases, the boundary between who counts as a family member and who does not count as a family member is determined by marriage or child rearing, or legal contracts that specify such relationships between individuals. While such economic considerations especially may have drastically negative consequences, especially for young females in forced marriages,⁹ a large percentage of marriages and partnerships that occurred through the eighteenth century were arranged for strategic reasons.¹⁰ For instance, intermarriage between members of royal families (often first cousins) was a means of solidifying political alliances and kinship ties across generations, especially when children were produced from such marriages.¹¹ Other economic incentives that have influenced the formation of families through marriage or contract (adoption and fostering included) involve the ability to pass property, wealth, assets, and health care coverage to particular others who are members of one's family (i.e., transferring wealth or property to a spouse or child without paying certain taxes, or adding previously ineligible persons to one's health care plan). In some cases, forming a family with another individual through marriage or contract is an effective means for paying lower taxes (such as qualifying for a reduced income tax rate as a married couple, and a further reduction for additional dependents) or to establish grounds for citizenship for non-citizens. These features of families are even understood as part of the purpose of creating families by certain philosophers like G. W. F. Hegel, who claimed that the family is represented as a legal person that has external reality in property; as such, Hegel argued that the family must have property and assets to be recognized by other families and the state.¹² So, there is much evidence and argument to support the notion that the family is primarily created (and sustained for a particular group of individuals) for economic and political reasons, with a commitment to protect social class, political alliance, property, and assets.

A second consideration that has influenced the creation of *de facto* families involves the desire to promote and continue traditions and values that one holds dear. A doctrine of perpetuation and expansion of systematic belief is a strong motivator for creating and maintaining what are considered to be larger and more hegemonic *de facto* familial groups. Often, this family formation process involves marriage or some contract-like process as well, or a religious ritual where one is newly recognized as bearing a certain relationship to a set of beliefs or traditions. For example, "placement marriages" are extremely common among Mormon populations, demonstrating a strong devotion to faith and a commitment to obtaining salvation for one's family.¹³

In less strictly arranged situations, there persists a strong ideological drive to pass one's beliefs down to other family members (particularly children) that

heavily influences whom one chooses as a partner or whom one considers to be a stable member of one's family. In this respect, passing beliefs onto other family members is seen as a crucial component for maintaining families. For instance, Thomas Aquinas and John Locke both argued that parents are the best educators for their own children, and parents have a right to exclusively educate their children and protect their interests in their own ways.¹⁴ More recently, Charles Fried argues that parents have the right to freely form the values of their children and direct the development of their life plans.¹⁵ Fried claims that the family as an institution is maintained by the right of parents to form the values and the life plan of their child, and the right to lavish attention on that child. He claims that these are extensions of the basic right not to be interfered with in doing those things for oneself (in this sense, Fried deems the child to be an extension of the self/the parent).¹⁶ William Galston similarly argues that this is a fundamental parental right, claiming that parents have an "expressive interest" (via expressive liberty) in raising their children in a manner that is consistent with their own beliefs and values.¹⁷

For both Fried and Galston, there is a special bond between parent and child that is based upon the significance of biological reproduction. The biological ties between parent and child grant parents a right to shape the values of their children by viewing the child as an extension of the self. In contrast, Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift argue that sharing values with children lies at the heart of the parent-child relationship because such interactions contribute to "familial relationship goods," and not because some deep biological connection gives parents a paramount right over their children.¹⁸ Despite the significance or insignificance of biological justification for parental rights, it is important to note that all of these accounts hold that there is something significant (some meaningful bond or intimate tie) between parents and children that makes it permissible to pass values on to one's children. To this end, one might choose a co-parent who shares similar beliefs to impart a consistent message to one's progeny, or one might consider someone else to be one's family member only if that individual continues to share the same values and traditions. In such cases, a "family" is created through a commitment to uphold one's beliefs and/or religious faith, and it is maintained through the activity of passing those beliefs, values, and traditions on to others.

These two kinds of approaches—the argument from economic considerations and the argument from the perpetuation and expansion of systematic beliefs—attempt to explain the motivating factors behind the formation of families historically and to provide reasons why, and activities that describe how, families are maintained over time. Both approaches suggest a kind of conscious commitment that family members make with one another at the outset and provide other structural commitments that seem to guide interactions between established family members in an effort to sustain the family.¹⁹ As such, both approaches entail specific primary purposes for the family: the first suggests that the primary

purpose of the family is based upon the commitment to preserve the relationship between members of the family to certain properties, assets, positions, and the like from one generation to the next; the second suggests that the primary purpose of the family is based upon the commitment to promote and pass down values from one generation to the next. While both commitment schemes are sufficient for the genesis and maintenance of a social group (both involve members who knowingly share some common feature with one another—either a relationship to property and/or assets, or a particular doctrine of faith or belief system), neither one is sufficient for creating a *family* because neither commitment scheme is uniquely familial—that is, families may certainly share some of these beliefs, relationships, or practices, but none of them is sufficient to uniquely pick out what it is that makes a family *a family*, and not just some other social group.

In the first case, a social group (“a family”) is formed either with the establishment of legally recognized claims on certain property and assets, or through the designation that a particular group of individuals stands in a particular relation to a social or political position (i.e., the throne of England). Additionally, “a family” may be maintained in this case by upholding these legal claims and titles and extending them to future generations. While a commitment to particular others who all have some relation to specific property or to a set of assets signifies a cohesive group, there is nothing uniquely familial about this commitment.²⁰ Corporations often have board members and/or shareholders that stand in a particular relation to shared property or assets, yet we would not want to call these individuals *family members*. Similarly, cabinet members may stand in a particular relation to a specific political position (i.e., the vice president succeeds the president if the president is unable to serve, and so forth), yet we would not want to call these officials *family members*. As such, a commitment to protect shared property and assets or to solidify political alliance or social position is not sufficient for defining the family because such commitments can be made by other non-familial groups as well. While it may be the case that families do protect shared property and assets and preserve social position—that is, the family may indeed play a specific role in economic life—this cannot be the *primary purpose* that the family serves, or else the family would be indistinguishable from other social groups that have the same primary purpose for their members. Hence, this proposed primary purpose fails to identify anything unique about the family.

What about the second case? Is a commitment to uphold one’s beliefs and/or religious faith, and to pass those beliefs, values, and traditions down to future generations a sufficient condition for creating and maintaining a family? The choice to form a family with individuals who share our values and beliefs—in essence, the choice to *restrict* our possible choices for potential family members—is certainly significant, as is the desire to pass on dearly held beliefs, values, and traditions to those with whom we want to continue to share family membership. We do not choose blindly, so there must be something unique about the relationship between

shared values and the groups we form and maintain—and there is, although it is not uniquely familial. These beliefs, values, and traditions can be shared with extremely large social groups such as congregations, communities, and nations.²¹ For such large groups, it is not necessary for each member to know one another personally to know that all of the members of a congregation or community share a particular set of beliefs, values, and traditions, and a desire to pass them onto others, and that they regularly participate in practices that do pass those beliefs, values, and traditions on to others.²² In other words, a commitment to uphold beliefs, values, and traditions does not require a close connection among group members who share the commitment. This fact runs afoul of the way we think about the family and the accounts of the family discussed above—namely, that there is a special bond among family members, and this bond is not extended to a large number of people.²³

To return to the discussion involving shared values and familial bonding, Brighthouse and Swift argue that it is not merely the sharing of beliefs or values that creates or perpetuates the value of parent-child interactions; value-shaping and value-sharing interactions between parents and children contribute to a healthy, loving relationship between parent and child only because of the level of intimacy and vulnerability involved in such interactions.²⁴ In many instances, parents who try to shape the values of their children do so because they *care about* their children and sincerely believe that their children will be harmed, or that their quality of life will suffer, if they do not come to value the same things.²⁵ Further, parents who share their values are sharing intimate facts about themselves—their core beliefs, desires, and the like—that they most likely do not share with many others. As children grow and develop their own values (provided they are being raised in a healthy, respectful environment), parents may find their values challenged or rebuked. In such cases, without some other shared commitment to keep family members together, it is not difficult to think that parent and child would grow apart, perhaps severing familial ties. This trajectory seems wrong; parents and children do have disagreements about fundamental beliefs (for example, a belief versus non-belief in a God, or a belief versus non-belief in allowing for reproductive choice), yet familial relationships often remain intact. Further, such a strong emphasis on value sharing seems to discount the intimacy that created the opportunity for such value sharing in the first place.

Additionally, some of the beliefs held by group members may be harmful to other members (such as the belief that abortion is wrong even in cases of rape, incest, or a threat to the mother's life) or may not be in the best interest of all members (such as the belief that certain persons should not be allowed to marry based on sexual orientation). These beliefs may oppress certain group members and diminish a group member's quality of life. If the family were to be based primarily on the commitment to promote a shared system of values and beliefs, then it would allow for potential oppression and domination within familial

relationships to exist unchallenged, as family members would not rebuke harmful behaviors that are prescribed by the belief system.²⁶ This goes against what many consider to be the strengths of the familial relationships: a more robust level of trust, concern for well-being, desire to see members flourish, and sense of solidarity, as compared with the relationships we find ourselves in outside of the family.²⁷ It further emphasizes the fact that such a conception of the family does not point to a unique characteristic of the family; oppression and domination that results from the promotion of a shared belief system often happens outside of the family as well.

With respect to this last point in particular, one may worry that the proposed method for determining the definition of the family seems to be conflating what the family *ought to be* with what the family is *descriptively*. For instance, sticking to the conceptual scheme at work in most definitions of the family, we would characterize the examples in the previous paragraph as portraying something like an oppressive *family*—that is, as an instantiation of a *bad* family, but a *family* nonetheless. In contrast, the account I am proposing here threatens to erase any means for distinguishing between *good families* and *bad families* by conceptually eradicating the category “bad family.” Specifically, my account holds that an *oppressive family is no family at all* since it does not realize the primary purpose of the family: to provide care in intimate settings for the mutual flourishing of all family members. But shouldn’t we just call this oppressive group a *bad family*? Why think of it as no family at all?

The ability to distinguish *bad families* from *good families*, based upon some set of criteria, has been historically valuable for theorizing about ways to encourage better familial relations and ways to address problematic familial relations.²⁸ However, by preserving the category of “family” indiscriminately, we conflate the acceptability of all kinds of familial relationships, be they caring and respectful, or abusive and neglectful, in virtue of the fact that these are all *families*. Hence, traditional descriptive conceptions of the family serve, in a practical sense, to preserve morally problematic relations and groups because members of those groups justify their continued problematic relations with one another by appealing to some notion of family that exists independently of the quality of familial relations. As such, individuals are tempted to remain in what we currently term “bad families” because we have a flawed understanding of what a family *is*. By contrast, my account suggests that individuals who are members of these colloquially defined “bad families” ought not consider their group a *family*, but rather a group of individuals who fancy themselves a “family” but aren’t fulfilling the proper function—the *primary purpose*—of a *family*.

In light of this discussion, a commitment among individuals to uphold and promote shared beliefs, values, and traditions does not sufficiently conceptualize a unique characteristic of the family because (1) such commitments are made and upheld on much larger scales, (2) the degree of impersonality that occurs on a

larger scale discounts the intimacy that we associate with the family, and (3) the possibility for shared beliefs and behaviors to negatively affect members' lives is at odds with the family being a safe haven from uncaring and harmful behaviors.

At this point, we have challenged the acceptability of the argument from economic considerations and the argument from the perpetuation and expansion of systematic beliefs for the genesis and maintenance of the *family*, despite their acceptability for the genesis and maintenance of social groups more generally. Before turning to one last methodological objection, I want to briefly discuss one more suggested purpose that the family allegedly serves: producing and rearing children to become future citizens with particular characteristics desired by the state. This type of argument is typically rooted in the importance of the right kind of moral development and the duty of parents (or guardians) to instill the right moral sentiments in their children. It might strike one as a similar kind of argument to the significance of passing one's beliefs down to one's children, but it is important to note that the goal for value shaping differs for the production of future citizens.

Several accounts of the family hold that the primary purpose of the family lies with the production and rearing of children who possess the right moral sentiments to become concerned, cooperative citizens. For some philosophers, the family serves as the primary and most important foundation from which moral development toward citizenship occurs, with parents who instill the correct beliefs (in God, in love, in cooperation and orienting oneself for tasks that satisfy the group rather than just the individual) until their children come of age and are considered independent citizens in their own right.²⁹ On these accounts, families are rendered complete with the creation of children and are essentially terminated once the children become independent citizens.

Other accounts hold that the right moral sentiments (the correct moral psychology) are instilled in children through the right kind of relationship with their parents.³⁰ These accounts hold that a stable and loving environment provides children with tendencies to develop empathy toward fellow citizens when they reach adulthood. The purpose of raising one's children on these accounts is not so much the creation of the *citizen*, but the creation of citizens *of a certain kind* that will lead to an overall just state.

Despite the loftier primary purpose of the family on these accounts, the goal for child rearing and care should not be oriented toward the production of citizens nor toward the production of a certain type of citizen. Such a suggested purpose tasks the family with something dictated outside of the family—namely, producing and maintaining certain kinds of citizens who will behave in the appropriate way *outside* of the family. In doing so, the family becomes merely one among several institutions for civic education, along with schools, the military, and various civil service programs and proposals.³¹ While it may be the case that families do create occasions for value sharing and value shaping, and this may indeed be one

purpose that the family serves for its members, it cannot be the *primary purpose*, for it fails to identify anything unique about the family.

Rather, the primary purpose of the family should originate *from* the family and *for the sake of* the family; specifically, the primary purpose of the family ought to be something that only pertains to the functioning of the family as a social group *independent* of all other purposes that the family might serve in different contexts. The primary purpose of the family may guide the other purposes that the family serves (i.e., it may influence how property and assets are distributed, or what kinds of beliefs and values are shared), but the primary purpose cannot itself be guided by other purposes.

Primary purposes that are assigned to the family that either originate outside of the family (such as the relationship to property or to citizenship production) or that have no unique bearing on the identity of the family (such as religious belief) are not satisfactory for defining the family as a social group, nor are they necessary for the maintenance of the family over time. As we have seen, these other purposes do not point to anything that is unique about the family, and they do not provide us with an adequate understanding of why family members remain committed to one another as a *family* over the long term, as opposed to some other kind of social group. Further, if these suggested purposes should guide the trajectory of the family, then negative consequences may occur for certain family members who are oppressed by harmful beliefs or swindled out of their assets. We are left with the need for a more adequate conception of the family that is based upon a unique primary purpose that the family serves for its members. I will introduce my proposal for the primary purpose of the family in section 4 of this paper, but I must address one more objection first.

3. ISN'T THE FAMILY A BIOLOGICAL GROUP?

Many accounts of the family emphasize biological relatedness as the main component of what determines familial status among a group of persons.³² Our biological connection to particular others is seen as the definitive criterion for determining current family members, past family members, and soon-to-be family members. Our legal understanding of the family and the legal proceedings that follow from such an understanding place biological connection as one of the main ways to determine familial groups and the corresponding rights that accompany them. Biological relation is indeed important—"family" histories of chronic diseases, degenerative illnesses, medical complications, allergies, and the like are important (if not essential) pieces of information for those who are struggling to identify certain symptoms, to prevent complications associated with medical procedures, or to begin precautionary screenings for cancers, dementia-related illnesses, heart conditions, and so on. However, biology itself is not a marker for determining familial connection in the *qualitative* sense. That is, biology, as I

will argue, is not a determinant or catalyst for how much we care for others, or for reciprocal attitudes/affection, or for the possession of similar beliefs, and it is certainly not a determinant for whether two or more persons should be encouraged to cohabit and provide for one another.

Drawing familial affiliation boundaries primarily from biological relatedness is rather open-ended. Biological siblings, for instance, share a significant number of genes and phenotypic features (they may even share a very similar set of genes if they are identical twins). However, to say that their biological similarity is the defining feature of their familial affiliation, bonding, or concern for one another is specious. The siblings may look extremely different from one another, or they may be affected by different illnesses, allergies, or predispositions to certain conditions (especially if their levels of physical activity differ or they follow different diets). As such, the siblings may not be able to donate organs or blood to one another despite their shared genetic material (the same may be the case between parents and children, who often have different blood types and suffer from different ailments).³³ Given these variations, we must ask: Which biological features are the significant ones for familial affiliation? Eye color? Blood type? Skin color? A shared predisposition to develop cancer? Since (1) these features can vary so much even between extremely closely biologically related persons, and (2) these features can be shared with non-familial persons as well (eye color, skin color, chronic ailment or disability, and so on), it is problematic to give so much weight to biological relatedness as the sole criterion for determining familial affiliation.

Even if we were to use biology to determine familial affiliation, when are “relevant” biological connections identified, and when are they not? Do we stop with grandparents, second cousins, or great-great-great-great-uncles? Should we maintain comprehensive records of every single person that we share even a minimal amount of genetic material with and consider those persons family members? For some, the answer is yes—family lineage is an extremely significant mark of one’s identity.³⁴ However, those who do successfully trace their lineage throughout history (those who are fortunate enough to have public records on those historical relations) are not tracing anything *qualitative* about their relationships with those genetic historical relations—that is, they are not tracing anything intimate between themselves and their relations.³⁵ Instead, they are tracing lines of prestige, lines of ownership in relation to specific pieces of property, or perhaps the prevalence of a certain skill, trade, or line of work that historical genetic relations all participated in (professional musicians, blacksmithing, membership in the armed forces, and so on). Those kinds of traits, as I have argued above, are not sufficient for designating *familial* status.³⁶ While certain benefits may come through inheritances based upon these identity claims and appeals to biology, we might argue that those benefits are not deserved and should not be conferred if no qualitative relationship has occurred.³⁷

Some philosophers, however, do hold that biology is an important component in the formation and maintenance of qualitative relationships. As discussed above, Charles Fried and William Galston both hold that there is a special bond between family members (parent and child especially) that is based upon the significance of biological reproduction. These philosophers argue that the reason why we develop caring attitudes and affinity toward our family members is *because* we are related to them biologically—that somehow, biology has the power to create special bonds between family members.³⁸ For instance, Fried writes:

There is evidence that there are pervasive physiological changes of great subtlety associated with pregnancy and birth. Thus—motherhood is an experience which has persistent, biological roots and is not just a voluntary or customary social bond imposed upon the contingently prior fact of birth—it is not as if separating the breeding and the rearing functions could nevertheless yield an unaltered experience of parenthood. Rather, the physical facts are importantly implicated in the resulting social bond.³⁹

Similarly, Hegel argues that children complete an incomplete family; spouses attain objective unity only through the creation of their children, as children represent the objective expression of their parents' spiritual union.⁴⁰ This view is problematic for several reasons. First, it limits (or even downright excludes) the possibility for parents of adoptive children to ever form meaningful or lasting bonds with those children, since the “special tie” that would form between them would need some sort of underlying biological connection (and in the case of giving birth and nursing, it may even preclude fathers from developing as deep a bond with their children as the mother does simply through her biological activities). This discounts the intimate relationships that adoptive parents (and even fathers) form with their children, especially when those parents fight to protect those relationships in custody disputes.⁴¹

Second, it presupposes that biology controls the way that we feel about particular others and dictates the level of care/concern/affection that we show to particular others. It is evident that biologically related persons need not feel warmly for one another; just take a look at any television show, news broadcast, or famous literary work that depicts the myriad ways in which members of biologically defined families despise one another, scheme and bamboozle one another, plot against one another, and so forth. Even worse, there is (unfortunately) a multitude of evidence that biology is no indicator for how family members treat one another—cases of abuse, rape, oppression, and even murder occur on a regular basis between biologically defined family members, especially between parents and their biological children.⁴²

Recognizing the shortcomings of the biological relatedness argument, my account maintains that families ought to be considered *social* groups precisely because of the importance of the qualitative aspects of familial relations and not because of any shared biological features between family members. Biology

certainly has the ability to ontologically carve out different groups of individuals—for instance, biological assessment can identify those who have type 1 diabetes, or those who have cystic fibrosis, or (especially in Western societies) those who have certain skin colors as opposed to others, and can separate those persons into different groups. However, biology is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for demarcating families in the significant sense that inspires the benefits we confer upon them. The benefits that are conferred upon families by states are *social* benefits: recognition of the sociality of the family ought to ground the way that these benefits are conferred and what end(s) they are intended to serve. They are benefits that make it easier for family members to care for one another, provide for one another, to see one another regularly, and to encourage all family members to grow, develop, and flourish.

Social benefits are benefits that appertain to the *relationships* between individuals because they affect the *functioning* of those relationships. As such, social benefits only have meaning when applied to relationships—most integrally, familial relationships—and cannot be applied to individuals apart from their relationships (for instance, one cannot have visitation rights in a hospital or prison if there is no known relation to visit). These kinds of benefits are typically extended beyond those to whom we are merely biologically related already; for instance, in the United States, these benefits are often conferred on our spouses, adopted children, stepchildren, domestic partners, foster families, and so on. Since these *social connections* are already recognized as significantly shaping familial membership, and the benefits already conferred upon families are associated with the relationships between individuals, the family ought to be recognized as a *social* group. Because social groups have shared goals and beliefs and the like in place, it is important to determine what particular goal(s) family members share with one another that make them a family and not some other social group.

4. CARE AS PRIMARY PURPOSE

Having examined claims against the argument from the production and rearing of future citizens and the argument from biological relatedness, in addition to the argument from economic considerations and the argument from the perpetuation and expansion of systematic belief, we are now ready to identify a more adequate conception of the family that is based upon a unique primary purpose that the family serves for its members. I propose that we conceive of the family normatively, as a social group that is based upon a commitment to interdependent caring relations and the fulfillment of mutual well-being through those relations. The remainder of this paper will defend this proposal and suggest that a commitment to interdependency and the fulfillment of mutual well-being through interdependent caring relations is a unique, necessary, and sufficient condition to generate and maintain the family, and, as such, adequately defines it.⁴³

All human beings are dependent for many years of their lives, especially when they are infants and young children. Care theorists recognize that dependency is a universal feature of the first years of our lives, yet they also stress the fact that dependency does not necessarily end with childhood. Rather, they argue that dependency is experienced in various forms *throughout one's life*. Whether it is because they are chronically disabled, injured, have fallen ill, or have aged beyond self-sufficiency, human beings find themselves in states of dependency throughout their lives and therefore—at best—periodically require care at different times (though it is worth noting that persons might also *want* to be cared for in less pressing situations). In light of this fact, I argue that the family is the best place for that care to be provided.⁴⁴

There already exists an assumption that families should be geared toward some long-term goals, and this account holds a similar assumption.⁴⁵ Because of the nature of care—what it means to be a caring person, what a good caring relationship looks like, and what purpose caring activity serves—it is evident that the best scenario for caring relationships is one in which care is given and received in the long term. Joan Tronto argues that care involves *thought* and action—it involves a certain amount of knowledge about those for whom we provide care, and necessitates that those who care for us have a similar level of knowledge about us.⁴⁶ This kind of knowledge can only be gained through intimate relationships that are maintained and enhanced over time. So, there is something unique about the kind of caring relationships that happen between those who are intimately connected over long periods of time. Given these characteristics about the nature of care and caring relations, I argue that the primary purpose of the family is to create and maintain these caring relations between family members because it is an ideal arrangement for persons to care for and receive care from one another.

This conception of the family is meant to challenge those views of the *de facto* family that (either intentionally or unintentionally) preserve problematic relationships in the name of biological relatedness or for some insufficient primary purpose, such as religious perpetuation and expansion, as discussed above. It is also meant to challenge the notion that our family members are a determinate set of individuals regardless of the quality of our relations with them. As argued earlier in this paper, traditional descriptive conceptions of the family serve to preserve morally problematic groups and relations by keeping persons tethered to one another in abusive, neglectful, or oppressive situations by virtue of the designation of “family” on the group. Yes, these descriptive conceptions enable us to distinguish between “good” and “bad” families, but they do so at the cost of preserving “bad families” in perpetuity. My proposed account enables persons to form, maintain, or join families throughout their lives. It also gives persons the ability to *revise* their familial relationships if they are not receiving (or giving) adequate primary care, because families are less rigidly defined in terms of biology and procreation.

This last point strikes a tense chord with traditional theories of care that argue that most of our relationships to other family members are completely unchosen

for many years of our lives. Care theorists argue that these unchosen relationships shape us in significant ways (our demeanor, beliefs, values, and so on) before we are typically given the choice to revise our familial relations. Further, when we do revise those relations, we do so having been heavily affected by those initial familial relations, so we often don't change the kinds of familial relations that we have in a substantial way.⁴⁷

However much we may be shaped by our upbringings and circumstances, Virginia Held argues that we are not *constrained* by them; the relations that we are enmeshed in are capable of being reshaped or changed when necessary.⁴⁸ When we do reshape or change our existing relations, we act with the desire of having better and more caring relations—that is, we replace existing relationships with other, better *relationships*.⁴⁹ While we may not be able to choose all of our family members at a given time, we are certainly able to revise our caring relationships over time to reflect the kinds of familial relationships that we want, which may involve dissolving some (un)caring relationships that we feel are harmful. This does not mean that we go off on our own, completely independent, and without need of caring relationships. Rather, we gain the ability to choose what *kinds* of relationship we are going to be a part of as we grow: we may choose to stay a part of the family that we were born into, or choose to join a different family that welcomes us, or we may choose to start a new family with others who are similarly situated.⁵⁰

That being said, it may not be possible to completely distance ourselves from individuals with whom we've previously had caring (or uncaring) relationships.⁵¹ For example, we may hold some affinity for biological siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, and the like, especially if they have been a significant presence in our lives. We may still *care about* them. However, if (at best) we are not actively *caring for* them and they are not actively *caring for* us, I contend that the *familial relationship* has ceased. We might then say, for example, that we have a “brother_b” (to mark our *biological* brother), who is no longer (or perhaps has never been) our “brother_s”—our *social* brother, which would signify that there is no active care and no recognized family relationship.⁵²

A conceptual analysis of the family that is drawn from the ways we have historically conceived of it may find this account controversial, for it requires not only that we move away from historical and biological conceptions of the family, but that we *reconceptualize* what we mean when we call a social group a *family*. As we have seen, the reconceptualization I have proposed has the potential to shift the boundaries between what we have historically considered to be families and what I am now suggesting we consider to be families. Despite the unease some may have with this reconceptualization project, I contend that it is necessary both for arriving at a more ethical understanding of what the family is and for determining how best to confer social benefits on families so that they are used in ways that benefit all family members. That being said, there is one potential objection to this account that warrants a response here.⁵³

With respect to the knowledge requirement I have specified above, one may ask: If individuals are only members of families as long as, and inasmuch as, they have knowledge about other members' needs, what about apparent family members who seem incapable of having such knowledge? Despite the fact that social philosophers often herald the family as a paradigmatic social group (even apart from arguments made herein), the family presents an interesting challenge to notions of collective intentionality and the makeup of social groups because of the *kinds* of members it has—namely, infants, children, and the cognitively disabled—who seem incapable of intentionality.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, social philosophers define social groups as being comprised of members who knowingly share a common feature with one another—a belief, a value, a practice, and the like.⁵⁴ This epistemological condition, built into the concept of a social group, rests upon a narrow conception of agency that is difficult to extend beyond able-minded autonomous adults. Families, however, are often comprised of members who supposedly lack this developed sense of agency and are therefore considered incapable of consenting to join or remain in a group. Infants, small children, and the cognitively disabled present a problem for the view that family members ought to have some knowledge about one another, especially in caregiving and care receiving contexts. What are we to make of supposed family members who we do not think have the agency to satisfy this knowledge requirement?

Carol Gould suggests that agency be understood as a relational concept with two distinct senses: basic agency, understood as open and inclusive, and developed agency, understood as the development or flourishing of one's basic agency.⁵⁵ A basic sense of agency consists in intentionality or choice as a feature of human action, and is evident in human life activity as a mode or way of being. A developed sense of agency is characterized by the exercise of this basic agency shown by the increase in capacities or the realization of long-term projects or goals—taking both individual and collective forms—that is a process over time. A developed sense of agency presupposes the capacity for choosing, making it possible for the basic sense of agency to remain open to infants, children, and the cognitively disabled.⁵⁶

Gould is not alone in thinking that infants, children, and the cognitively disabled are capable of displaying some form of agency. In a similar vein, Joan Tronto mentions that care receivers often try to reciprocate the care that they receive, arguing that even small infants try to return care to their caregivers.⁵⁷ Likewise, Raimo Tuomela, drawing upon Michael Tomasello's research, claims that young children are capable of agency and, therefore, of we-mode thinking.⁵⁸ So, this worry, while well-placed, is not nearly as restrictive as one would imagine. Despite arguments here that most family members have some level of agency, family in the sense that I understand it could exist even if some members have no agency at all. Families as social groups remain open to all kinds of members, so long as they participate in intimate caring relations with one another.

5. CONCLUSION

The family, in the normative sense that I intend to argue for, is a social group created and maintained by the goal of nurturing the well-being of all family members and the family unit as a whole. When it is recognized that we are all in need of care, and when our desire for caring relations makes clear how much we value care in our day-to-day lives, we seek to form, maintain, or enhance caring relations with others who also recognize and value caring relations. Since families are not often newly created, but are groups that have expanding and contracting memberships over time, families are maintained by joint activity that works toward the shared goal of mutual well-being over the long term. If all family members engage in caring relations with one another, they all actively and interdependently work toward improving the well-being of each member. Since the establishment of caring relations is the shared value amongst family members, in order to keep the family going, a commitment to honor that shared value is necessary.

Hence, the family as a social group should not be defined by some inadvertent common feature that is shared by its members, such as a relation to property or some shared DNA. Rather, the family is a social group because of the purpose that guides the family and elucidates the relationship between its members: the commitment of its members to provide active care in intimate settings over the long term. Further, this purpose is unique to the family and, as a necessary and sufficient condition, contributes toward a clear conception of the family that, when recognized by the state, will help to shape policies that are better suited to address the actual needs of families: those *social benefits*, conferred by the state, that make it easier for family members to care for one another.

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NOTES

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1. See Bratman (*Faces of Intention*); see Gilbert (*On Social Facts; Theory of Political Obligation*); see Tuomela (*Philosophy of Sociality*).

2. Margaret Gilbert's account of social groups specifies that those who act together as a group *understand themselves* to be parties to a commitment of some shared belief, value, practice, or the like (*Sociality and Responsibility*, 158). In this sense, individuals constitute a social group if and only if each of them thinks of himself or herself and the others as a "we" who share in some action, belief, attitude, or some similar attribute (Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, 204).

3. Greenwood (“Social Facts”).

4. A commitment to continue sharing the common feature(s) need not always involve self-conscious activity that expressly manifests the commitment, but can also be embodied in the practices that originate from the group purpose. Consider a social group comprised of stamp collectors. The members knowingly share a similar feature (collecting stamps) with one another that stems from the group purpose (to collect stamps) and perhaps engage in a practice that originates from the shared feature (they meet regularly to discuss and trade stamps). Should the members stop collecting stamps, they would no longer have a reason to engage in the practice of discussing and trading stamps, and we would be right to say that the social group of stamp collectors had dissolved.

5. For example, families may be distinguished by their individual member compositions: *family X* is comprised of *member A*, *member B*, and *member C*, while *family Y* is comprised of *member D*, *member E*, and *member F*.

6. We can see how this conceptual scheme applies to other kinds of groups—for instance, religious initiates like nuns, priests, monks, and the like—who may similarly come to engage in intimate caring relations with one another. So long as their *primary* reason for engaging with one another is for some reason *other* than caring relations, they do not constitute a family.

7. Coontz (*Marriage, a History*); van Leeuwen, Maas, and Miles (*Marriage Choices*); Hegel (*Elements*); Engels (*Origin of the Family*).

8. Watson (“1948 Secret Marriage”); Fried (*Right and Wrong*); Galston (*Liberal Pluralism*).

9. Forced marriages differ from arranged marriages in that at least one party to the marriage does not consent to the arrangement. Typically, forced marriages involve a young female (sometimes as young as 5 years old) forcibly betrothed or married to a male of a wealthier or more prestigious family for the economic benefit of the female’s family (i.e., bride price or bridewealth). See Beswick (“We Are Bought”); Freeman (“Transforming Human Rights”).

10. Coontz (*Marriage, a History*).

11. van Leeuwen, Maas, and Miles (*Marriage Choices*). Friedrich Engels writes that for a knight, baron, or prince, marriage is a political act; it is an opportunity to increase power through new alliances (Engels, *Origin of the Family*, 141).

12. Hegel, *Elements*, § 169.

13. Watson (“1948 Secret Marriage”).

14. Gutmann (*Democratic Education*).

15. Fried (*Right and Wrong*).

16. In this sense, the argument for passing values onto—and shaping the values of—one’s progeny relies on two premises. The first premise is that biological ties between parents and children specify some paramount right over children by their parents, and the second is that there is a special bond between parents and children that is based upon the facts of biological reproduction. Society has no right to choose the values of a child, but the values must come from somewhere (Fried, *Right and Wrong*, 154). The child does

not belong to the community, but to the mother, and this enlarges the mother's autonomy to develop autonomy in her offspring through the shaping of values that express the personality of the mother (or the parents in general) (Fried, *Right and Wrong*, 155).

17. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism*, 94. It is important to note that the enforcement of this right is weaker for Galston, as he maintains only that parents raise children in a way that is consistent with the children's own values as opposed to imbuing the children with the parents' values.

18. Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift argue that value-shaping interactions between parents and children (those interactions where parents deliberately try to steer their children to adopt certain values over others) that are done with the purpose of benefiting their children are indefensible under that particular description, yet they are justified on the different grounds that value sharing and value-shaping contribute to a healthy, loving relationship between parent and child (*Family Values*, 152). Interestingly, a paradox arises in that, by sharing values and shaping the values of their children, parents actually do benefit their children (with respect to familial relationship goods).

19. These conscious commitments take the form of legal contracts, political or diplomatic agreements, participation in religious ceremonies, and the like.

20. One may object that the role of the family does differ with respect to economic arrangements, in that it serves as the primary model for the acquisition and perpetuation of private property that corporations have subsequently followed. Eleanor Burke Leacock writes that, for Friedrich Engels, "the separation of the family from the clan and the institution of monogamous marriage were the social expression of developing private property; so-called monogamy afforded the means through which property could be individually inherited. And private property for some meant no property for others, or the emerging of differing relations to production on the part of different social groups" (Leacock, Introduction, 41). Engels claims that, of the monogamous family, "it was the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions—on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property" (Engels, *Origin of the Family*, 128). Quoting Marx, Engels makes the case that the family is a paradigmatic economic institution: "The modern family contains in germ not only slavery, but also serfdom, since from the beginning it is related to agricultural services. It contains in *miniature* all the contractions which later extend throughout society and its state" (Engels, *Origin of the Family*, 121–22). Despite the assertion that the family serves this unique role, this is not the entire explanation of the family offered by Engels. Drawing a distinction between the proletarian and the bourgeois family, Engels claims that monogamous marriage (and hence, family) is consented to for different purposes depending on social/economic class. For the proletarian family, sexual love between partners (a man and a woman) is a primary motivator for entering a monogamous relationship, and a primary sustainer of it. In contrast, for the bourgeois family, the primary motivation for entering a monogamous partnership is to secure patriarchal lineage with respect to property: a male could be certain of his parentage and could hence pass his property down to his kin (Engels, *Origin of the Family*, 134–38). So, Engels's account of the family as a model for private property relations only applied to a *subset* of all families, and not to *all* families.

21. For instance, the belief in the Holy Trinity (the belief that God is three consubstantial persons The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) is shared among all those who

practice Roman Catholicism. This Holy Trinity is a fundamental doctrine of the Catholic faith; if a Roman Catholic were to reject this doctrine, she would no longer be considered a practicing Catholic (although she may still be considered a practicing Christian), for she would not be able to practice (with true sentiment) portions of the Catholic tradition, such as affirming the veracity of the Holy Trinity during Mass.

22. To continue the example in the previous endnote, when one attends Mass as a Roman Catholic, one would be right to assume that all other persons attending the Mass shared one's belief in the Holy Trinity and valued the practice of affirming the Holy Trinity during Mass.

23. To be clear, my focus is upon what we consider our more immediate family members: not necessarily immediate in terms of biological proximity, but immediate in terms of the regularity of intimate interactions between family members.

24. Brighthouse and Swift, *Family Values*, 152.

25. For instance, think of a parent who believes that his or her child will suffer eternal damnation if the child does not believe in God.

26. By contrast, an understanding of the family that is based upon a commitment to interdependent caring relations would not endorse a system of beliefs that would conflict with the flourishing of individual members.

27. Plato (*Republic*); Walzer (*Spheres of Justice*, 229).

28. For instance, protective interventionist policies rest upon descriptive notions of what constitutes a bad or problematic family. See Olsen ("Myth of State Intervention").

29. Hegel, *Elements*, § 173–77; see Landes ("Hegel's Conception of the Family"); Locke (*Some Thoughts*, 25–26, 122–27).

30. Rawls (*Theory of Justice*); Archard (*Family*).

31. Hegel, *Elements*, § 294–97; Schwarzenbach, *On Civic Friendship*, 231–34.

32. Almond ("Family Relationships"); Finnis ("Good of Marriage"); Sommers ("Philosophers against the Family").

33. Gentry et al. ("Expanding Kidney Paired Donation").

34. Velleman ("Family History").

35. Brighthouse and Swift, *Family Values*, 158–60.

36. Even if more intimate items were being traced, such as understandings and stories passed down through generations, we would not want to say that we share any qualitative relationship with those genetic historical connections who are featured in the stories. Rather, we would say that those stories serve to deepen intimate connections with the closer relations who tell those stories to us.

37. While this might sound jarring to those who plan to inherit property or wealth from elder family members, I am not talking here about the direct transfer of inheritance through first- or even second-generation relations, such as parents to children or grandparents to children who actively seek to pass their wealth onto their progeny. Instead, I am talking about claims made about having direct ties to property, artifacts, wealth, or the like that have no direct qualitative connection to the original owner—for instance, a person who seeks to inherit the wealth or estate of a late uncle or grandparent whom they

did not know or who were not a part of their lives in any meaningful way. Instead, we might think that property or wealth without an intended inheritor should go to the public domain rather than to a distant (or even not so distant), un-invested biological relative.

38. Relatedly, Rosalind Hursthouse holds that there are familiar biological facts, widely known, that support the view that parenthood, motherhood, and childbearing are intrinsically worthwhile and partially constitutive of a flourishing human life (“Virtue Ethics and Abortion,” 241).

39. Fried, *Right and Wrong*, 154–55.

40. Hegel, *Elements*, § 173; Kane, “On Hegel,” 16.

41. Gavigan (“Parent[ly] Knot”); Shanley (“Father’s Rights, Mother’s Wrongs?”). Relatedly, one could argue that part of the joy in parenting is found in parents noticing how their children look like them or seem to share similar dispositions. For parents of adoptive children or mixed-race children, a recognition of phenotypical difference often works to deepen bonds between parents and children that arise from the social implications of such differences (see Haslanger, “You Mixed?”).

42. Slep and O’Leary (“Parent and Partner Violence”); Hornor (“Domestic Violence and Children”).

43. From this point onward, “family” will refer to the normative conception of the family that I will argue for.

44. It is worth noting here that we are never *fully* self-sufficient; even in times when we can provide for ourselves satisfactorily, we are still economically interdependent and dependent upon others for developing dynamic versions of ourselves (Hegel, *Elements*, § 190–95; Marx, “German Ideology,” 222–23).

45. One might object: What about socialization or education? Doesn’t the family help to socialize individuals for the workplace, and educate them to be moral persons, or to speak a language? Maxine Greene argues that more comprehensive education is gained outside of the family, when we are able to engage in dialogue with those who challenge our worldview (*Dialectic of Freedom*). Similarly, Hegel argues that socialization, especially for civil society and the needs of the market, cannot solely occur within the family, but must also be gained in civil society where persons are able to overcome the particularity of the family for the universality of the market (Hegel, *Elements*, § 190–95). So, the family is not the only, or necessarily the best, place for socialization or education.

46. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 108. In the case of infants and children, a similar level of knowledge about parents/caretakers would be gained over time as the infant/child develops.

47. Fagan (“Relationship between Adolescent Physical Abuse”); Narang and Contreras (“Relationships of Dissociation”).

48. Held, *Ethics of Care*, 48.

49. Held, *Ethics of Care*, 49.

50. Due to a lack of space here, I cannot provide a thorough accounting of examples, but I can suggest a few: LGBTQ youths, rejected or liberated from the groups in which they were raised, come together and develop, over time, intimate caring relations that are sustained in the long term; two cellmates in prison who come to develop, over time, inti-

mate caring relations that are sustained even when one cellmate is freed; family members who, through years of intimate caregiving and care receiving, continually affirm their commitments to one another; and so on.

51. For those groups that are perpetually uncaring, as well as those social families that devolve over time into uncaring groups, intervention may be necessary to restore caring relations, as much as possible, to those persons who still wish to be members of the same family.

52. I am indebted to Virginia Held for this distinction.

53. I have argued against this objection more thoroughly elsewhere. See Kane (“Are Children Capable”).

54. See Bratman (*Faces of Intention*); Gilbert (*On Social Facts; Theory of Political Obligation*); Tuomela (*Philosophy of Sociality*).

55. Gould, *Interactive Democracy*, 39.

56. Gould, *Interactive Democracy*, 39.

57. Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, 152.

58. See Tuomela (*Philosophy of Sociality*, 62). Michael Tomasello, through a series of social experiments that test for altruism and cooperation, has identified a naturally occurring cooperative tendency in small children. Specifically, he presents evidence that children, from around the time of their first birthday, are already helpful and cooperative in many situations, indicating some knowledge about the needs of others (Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, 4).

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