

freedom, and to political representation, can only be seen as having suffered from the newly idealized family type.¹

There are other feminist critiques of the contemporary family. In "Marriage and the Unjust Treatment of Women," Susan Moller Okin argues that the distribution of both paid and unpaid work between husbands and wives within the family in most cases is unjust. Moreover, she says, the injustice of this distribution is usually overlooked by theorists of justice. There is, of course, no necessary connection between the concept of family and any particular distribution of paid and unpaid work, but the fact that husbands usually do more paid labor and wives do more unpaid labor in the family is an issue of justice that must be addressed by any serious theory of family ethics.

A Proposal to Abolish the Private Family

Plato

Plato (427–347 B.C.E.) is generally regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of the Western world. Deeply affected by the execution of his teacher Socrates, he began to reflect and write widely on many philosophical themes. He founded the Academy in Athens, a society or fellowship devoted to lectures, discussions, and guided research on a variety of topics.

Socrates: The law . . . is to the following effect,—“that the wives of our guardians are to be common, and their children are to be common, and no parent is to know his own child, nor any child his parent.”

I do not think that there can be any dispute about the very great utility of having wives and children in common; the possibility is quite another matter, and will be very much disputed . . .

Glaucon: I think that a good many doubts may be raised about both.

Socrates: You imply that the two questions must be combined. Now I meant that you should admit the utility; and in this way, as I thought I should escape from one of them, and then there would remain only the possibility.

Glaucon: But that little attempt is detected, and therefore you will please to give a defense of both.

Socrates: . . . I should like, with your permission, to pass over the question of possibility at present. Assuming therefore the possibility of the proposal, I shall now proceed to enquire how the

rulers will carry out these arrangements, and I shall demonstrate that our plan, if executed, will be of the greatest benefit to the State and to the guardians. First of all, then, if you have no objection, I will endeavor with your help to consider the advantages of the measure; and hereafter the question of possibility.

Glaucon: I have no objection; proceed . . .

Socrates: You, who are their legislator, having selected the men, will now select the women and give them to them; and they must live in common houses and meet at common meals. None of them will have anything specially his or her own; they will be together, and will be brought up together, and will associate at gymnastic exercises. And so they will be drawn by a necessity of their natures to have intercourse with each other . . . and this, Glaucon, like all the rest, must proceed after an orderly fashion; in a city of the blessed, licentiousness is an unholy thing which the rulers will forbid. . . .

. . . [T]he principle has been already laid down that the best of either sex should be united with the best as often, and the inferior with the inferior, as seldom as possible; and that they should rear the offspring of the one sort of union, but not of the other, if the flock is to be main-

From Plato, *Dialogues of Plato*, Trans. B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), *The Republic* 457d–460d. Used by permission of Oxford University Press.

tained in first-rate condition. . . . And I think that our better and braver youth, besides their other honors and rewards, might have greater facilities of intercourse with women given them; their bravery will be a reason, and such fathers ought to have as many sons as possible . . .

The proper officers will take the offspring of the good parents to the pen or fold, and there they will deposit them with certain nurses who dwell in a separate quarter; but the offspring of the inferior, or of the better when they chance to be deformed, will be put away in some mysterious, unknown place, as they should be.

Glaucon: Yes, he said, that must be done if the breed of the guardians is to be kept pure.

Socrates: They will provide for their nurture, and will bring the mothers to the fold when they are full of milk, taking the greatest possible care that no mother recognizes her own child; and other wet-nurses may be engaged if more are required. Care will also be taken that the process of suckling shall not be protracted too long; and the mothers will have no getting up at night or other trouble, but will hand over all this sort of thing to the nurses and attendants.

Glaucon: You suppose the wives of our guardians to have a fine easy time of it when they are having children.

Socrates: Why, and so they ought . . .

Glaucon: But how will they know who are fathers and daughters, and so on?

Socrates: They will never know. The way will be this:—dating from the day of the hymeneal, the bridegroom who was then married will call all the male children who are born in the seventh and tenth month afterwards his sons, and the female children his daughters, and they will call him father, and he will call their children his grandchildren, and they will call the elder generation grandfathers and grandmothers. All who were begotten at the time when their fathers and mothers came together will be called their brothers and sisters, and these . . . will be forbidden to intermarry. This, however, is not to be understood as an absolute prohibition of the marriage of brothers and sisters; if the lot favors them, and they receive the sanction of the Pythian oracle, the law will allow them.

Glaucon: Quite right.

Socrates: Such is the scheme, Glaucon, according to which the guardians of our State are to have their wives and families in common. And now you would have the argument show that this community is consistent with the rest of our polity, and also that nothing can be better—would not not?

Glaucon: Yes, certainly.

Socrates: . . . is not that the best ordered State in which the greatest number of persons apply the terms “mine” and “not mine” in the same way to the same thing? . . .

Glaucon: Quite true . . .

Socrates: . . . [W]ould any of your guardians think or speak of any other guardian as a stranger?

Glaucon: Certainly he would not; for every one whom they meet will be regarded by them either as a brother or sister, or father or mother, or son or daughter, or as the child or parent of those who are thus connected with him.

Socrates: . . . Shall they be a family in name only; or shall they in all their actions be true to the name? For example, in the use of the word “father,” would the care of a father be implied and the filial reverence and duty and obedience to him which the law commands; and is the violator of these duties to be regarded as an impious and unrighteous person who is not likely to receive much good either at the hands of God or of man? Are these to be nor not to be the strains which the children will hear repeated in their ears by all the citizens about those who are intimated to them to be their parents and the rest of their kinsfolk?

Glaucon: These, and none other; for what can be more ridiculous than for them to utter the names of family ties with the lips only and not to act in the spirit of them?

Socrates: Then in our city the language of harmony and concord will be more often heard than in any other. . . . And the reason of this, over and above the general constitution of the State, will be that the guardians will have a community of women and children. . . .

Then the community of wives and children among our citizens is clearly the source of the greatest good to the State?

Glaucon: Certainly.

Socrates: And this agrees with the other principle which we were affirming,—that the guardians were not to have houses or lands or any other property; their pay was to be their food, which they were to receive from the other citizens, and they were to have no private expenses; for we intended them to preserve their true character of guardians. . . . Both the community of property and the community of families tend to make them more truly guardians; they will not tear the city in

pieces by differing about “mine” and “not mine”; each man dragging any acquisition which he has made into a separate house of his own, where he has a separate wife and children and private pleasures and pains; but all will be affected as far as may be by the same pleasures and pains because they are all of one opinion about what is near and dear to them, and therefore they all tend towards a common end.

On Plato's Proposal

Aristotle

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) was born in Stagira in northern Greece. At the age of seventeen, he moved to Athens and became a member of Plato's Academy, where he remained for twenty years. After leaving the Academy, he became the tutor to Alexander, the son of Philip, king of Macedonia. In 355, he returned to Athens to found the Lyceum, where he lectured, taught, and conducted research. Aristotle is generally regarded as one of the greatest contributors to Western intellectual culture.

Should a well-ordered state have all things, as far as may be, in common, or some only and not others? For the citizens might conceivably have wives and children and property in common, as Socrates proposes in the *Republic* of Plato. Which is better, our present condition, or one conforming to the law laid down in the *Republic*?

. . . [E]ven supposing that it were best for the community to have the greatest degree of unity, this unity is by no means proved to follow from the fact of all men saying “mine” and “not mine” at the same instant of time, which, according to Socrates [Plato], is the sign of perfect unity in a state. For the word “all” is ambiguous. If the meaning be that every individual says “mine” and “not mine” at the same time, then perhaps the result at which Socrates aims may be in some degree accomplished; each man will call the same person his own son and the same person his own wife, and so of his property and of all that falls to his lot. This, however, is not the way in which people would speak who had their wives and children in

common; they would say “all” but not “each.” In like manner their property would be described as belonging to them, not severally but collectively. There is an obvious fallacy in the term “all”: like some other words, “both,” “odd,” “even,” it is ambiguous, and even in abstract argument becomes a source of logical puzzles. That all persons call the same thing—mine in the sense in which each does so may be a fine thing, but it is impracticable; or if the words are taken in the other sense, such a unity in no way conduces to harmony.

And there is another objection to the proposal. For that which is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it. Every one thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of the common interest; and only when he is himself concerned as an individual. For besides other considerations, everybody is more inclined to neglect the duty which he expects another to fulfil; as in families many attendants are often less useful than a few. Each citizen will have a thousand sons who will not be his sons individually, but anybody will be equally the son of anybody, and will therefore be neglected by all alike. Further, upon this principle, everyone will use the word “mine” of one who is prospering or the reverse, however small a

From Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. Richard McKeon (Random House: New York, 1941), book II, chap. 1, 3. Used by permission of Oxford University Press.

fraction he may himself be of the whole number; the same boy will be "my son," "so and so's son," the son of each of the thousand, or whatever be the number of the citizens; and even about this he will not be positive; for it is impossible to know who chanced to have a child, or whether, if one came into existence, it has survived. But which is better—for each to say "mine" in this way, making a man the same relation to two thousand or ten thousand citizens, or to use the word "mine" in the ordinary and more restricted sense? For usually the same person is called by one man his own son whom another calls his own brother or cousin or kinsman—blood relation or

connection by marriage either of himself or of some relation of his, and yet another his clansman or tribesman; and how much better is it to be the real cousin of somebody than to be a son after Plato's fashion! Nor is there any way of preventing brothers and children and fathers and mothers from sometimes recognizing one another; for children are born like their parents, and they will necessarily be finding indications of their relationship to one another. Geographers declare such to be the fact; they say that in part of Upper Libya, where the women are common, nevertheless the children who are born are assigned to their respective fathers on the ground of their likeness.
