

## Chapter 10

# The Heart of the Matter: The Family as the Site of Fundamental Ethical Struggle

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Why is the family debate so heated? Why do the same arguments appear over and over again, whatever the state of the empirical evidence? Why does the ideological *cri de coeur* so often substitute for careful argument in discussions of the family? In this chapter, I argue that we can understand the volatility and intractability of the family debate because the family generates so much heat. It is the site of our deepest longings and most terrifying fears. Families decoct and intensify every basic human urge, from our most generous capacities to give life to and sustain others, to our most passionate desires to dominate. As Saint Augustine taught so many centuries ago, the *libido dominandi*—or lust to dominate—is a restless engine that never sleeps. The family is not immune. If the urge to dominate or to manipulate is curbed in favor of loving authority, families will nurture us, care for us, and mold us in ways that send us forth into the world well equipped for its complexities, tests, dilemmas, and possibilities. But, as we all know, if children are subjected to systematic humiliation, apathy-inducing neglect, and soul-killing cruelty, they are sent into the world in ways that reproduce such horrors and damage children—often irreparably.

The family debate is so intractable in part because so many find it difficult if not impossible to do what scholars are supposed to do—to stand somewhat outside themselves and to look dispassionately, in the best sense of that word, at the complex evidence ready-to-hand. And if you take a good, hard look, it turns out we actually do know a few things, including something about optimal child-rearing arrangements for a society organized such as ours. This is a society that values education and work; a society laced through and through with the constitutive norms of both equality and human freedom; and a society that, at its best, nurtures its vulnerable, and none is more vulnerable than the newborn child. It is that epicenter from leftover but not left-behind issues having to do with families that we, as adults, often find so frightening to focus on. For when you focus on children, on that soft-shelled baby, it does things to your view of adult freedom and adult responsibility. It reminds you

that no decent human being can or should remain as free and as carefree as before, once he or she takes on the responsibility for a child.

Even as all the pressures and possibilities of a life decoct to that throbbing point of origination, the family, so all the pressures and possibilities of our culture do as well. I am going to take up four of these essential points of contact between broad cultural forces and family life. If we think about these forces in and through a family lens, it helps us to understand the forces themselves better. The four are:

1. The public and the private as refracted in our liberal society.
2. Genetic technology and human reproduction, or revisiting questions of biology and nurture.
3. The pervasive influence of television, film, music, the Internet, and literature—in a word (or two) popular culture.
4. The demands of work life, including the stress of two-income family life on marriages and children, or economics.

Let me add that there are many ways you could place the family in the center of things as a powerful magnet around which nearly everything sooner or later collects. Philosophically, one could look at what is called “the particular” and “the universal.” One could approach the matter teleologically: Is there some actualization of family immanent, as Hegelians might say, within its very form? One could look through the lens of “liberalism” and “communitarianism.” One could take up, as I and others have from time to time, the family as connected to and a part of a democratic civil society. I am going to be more modest here and stand down from the lofty heights to grub about on the hardscrabble of where the family meets various understandings of itself.

### Public and Private

The public and the private are inevitable within, and vital to, any liberal democratic form of politics. That does not make sorting it all out simple. As I argued two decades ago in *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*, images of public and private are “necessarily tied to views of moral agency; evaluations of human capacities and activities, virtues, and excellence; assessments of the purposes and aims of alternative modes of social organization.”<sup>1</sup> Clusters of images concerning the excellences of men and women are part of this story. Public and private are twin force fields that help to create a moral environment for individuals, singly and in groups; to dictate norms of appropriate or worthy action; and to establish barriers to action,

particularly in areas such as the taking of human life, the regulation of sexual relations, the promulgation of familial duties and obligations, and the arena of political responsibility. Public and private are embedded within a dense web of associational meanings and intimations and linked to other basic notions: nature and culture; male and female; as well as views of work and ideas about authority, community, death, and God. In Western culture, public and private are fundamental, not incidental or tangential, ordering principles.

Part of what has thus been ordered is a general view of what is political and what is not; what belongs under the purview of politics and what does not; what in principle should be included under the political label and what should be off-limits; and what activities or relationships not now included under politics or public life can and should be thus incorporated.

Why is this central to how we think about families? Let us tie together several strands. One problem with the 1970s feminist slogan “the personal is political” is that it helped to underwrite two problematic trends: (1) a politics of subjectivism in which the individual makes no distinction between her inner barometer and the public world; and (2) a politics that obliterates privacy altogether in favor of an overweening public aim, or, alternatively, that creates zones of privacy, legally and politically sustained, that are nonetheless labeled entirely off-limits to public concern. Let us reflect for a moment on the totalizing urge behind a collapse of the public into the private that works either to eliminate the private or, alternatively, to make certain aspects of what is called privacy nigh-sacrosanct.

Imagine an ordinary family, by which I here mean parents and children. Then think about it as a magnet drawing public and private issues into its orbit. Sexual intimacy seems a clear candidate for inclusion under “privacy.” So let us further assume the general correctness of the view that sexual intimacy belongs in bedrooms, not boardrooms nor public streets, or even the Oval Office. That is the easy part. It is much harder to deal with how much of the “world” comes in through the front door and how much of the “public” flows into the “private.” What are the demands the public can make of the private?

There have been two broad sorts of feminist answers to this query. One feminist strand insisted that everything private was grist for the public mill. A second strand demanded political sanction of zones declared off-limits altogether to public concern. In the latter, politics polices the perimeter of the private, making sure government does not enter. Closer examination reveals that this strategy seems to apply principally to one highly fraught issue: abortion. Here the reigning feminist view is that government should have no say over one’s body, ergo, the “abortion option” is a nigh-sacrosanct right. Yet the law, which is certainly not exempt from politics, sanctioned such privacy in the first place, which means the law can amend or alter it at any time. There is

no wall around privacy, for good and for ill. For good, in that we have come to see issues like child or spouse abuse as appropriately matters of public concern. For ill, in that we may consistently fail to discern any concern for the “public” good or “common” good in whether or not fetuses, the unborn, can be aborted at *any* stage of pregnancy and for *any* reason.

For example: If we may compel Christian Scientist parents to seek medical treatment for their children—going so far, in some cases, as to make children wards of the court and to negate the parents’ preemptory rights in this regard because the well-being of children is an overriding good—then we can certainly decide as a society that at a certain point in pregnancy, the well-being of the child-to-be trumps the mother’s (belated) decision to terminate the pregnancy.

Once you open up these matters to public scrutiny, you cannot assume that one ideological or ethical take on the issues will triumph on every occasion. Americans seem to discern, in growing numbers according to surveys, that a privacy right cannot comprehensively cover certain highly fraught issues. They discern this because they see fragile newborns when they think of unborn fetuses; because something of the caring and compassionate dimensions of our natures is triggered by such images. Suffice it to say, there is no bright line separating definitively public and private. Some of the activities that take place under cover of privacy may be corrosive of public life, so they cross over into a public concern. But there is no a priori way to parse this.

The upshot is that one must grapple honestly with these issues. The family becomes the centerpiece in an ongoing, deeply contentious cultural debate and political struggle about how much the public or political should define, control, and intrude into the private. Sometimes help in this matter comes from unexpected quarters. Consider a powerful essay, “What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?” by the anti-Nazi German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer writes about the truths that guide human life within what he calls “the mandates” given by God in the areas of family life, culture, and government. He offers the example of a child who heatedly denies a teacher’s accusation. The zealous teacher asks “whether it is true that the father often comes home drunk. It is true, but the child denies it.”<sup>3</sup> The child speaks a deeper truth, Bonhoeffer insists, than the accusatory teacher. The teacher has strayed into territory that is not her rightful domain. The teacher’s question constitutes illegitimate prying in a public setting. The child gestures to a protective urge generated by the God-sanctioned mandate to the family. The child possesses a wisdom the teacher lacks.

If we pull back the scrim on what goes on within the household entirely, we commit an egregious harm. Some activities cannot flourish in the glare of publicity. But if we do not pull back that scrim a bit from time to time, much

that is harmful not only to private but to public goods may also be permitted to flourish. The family is the magnet. The disputes are endless and essentially contested in a society organized, as is ours, in ways that require a public/private distinction but leave it to citizens to sort out exactly where the lines are to be drawn—within a framework of constitutional restraints, of course. There is simply no way to make these disputes go away once and for all, and that is one reason family life is the heart of the matter.

### Genetic Technology and Human Reproduction: The Family and Nature

What a hornet's nest is here disturbed! Human embodiment, human creatureliness, human finitude—these are matters many do not want to think about. The helplessness of infants and their demand on adult love and care remind us of all three and compel us to focus on the best environments within which that human vulnerability can be honored, respected, and turned into durable strengths. Radical feminists of the era in which I came of age politically insisted that the only way to achieve women's equality was to eradicate nature, or biological imperatives, as well as the family. The “natural,” they insisted, divided us into male/female. That divide, even before the patriarchy began to “construct” social worlds to serve their interests, was itself oppressive. Why? Because women bore children. That was a mark of inequality as such and that must end.<sup>4</sup>

The repugnance at embodiment was palpable in such arguments, together with an extraordinarily naive gullibility about the wonders of a future in which technological instrumentalities would have replaced what was routinely called the “barbarism” and brutality of human birth.<sup>5</sup> Something of this attitude lingers in current paeans to genetic engineering and the prospect of genetic perfection that, oddly enough, now indict nature as not so much cruel as sloppy. Nature makes us imperfect; genetic technology will perfect us. We call upon the laws of nature, manipulated by humans, either to destroy imperfect fetuses or to manufacture perfect fetuses. Either way, we reject nature or the natural as any sort of standard.

The heart of the matter lies in a loss of appreciation of the nature of human embodiment, which is heavily decocted within the family: sexual intimacy, conception, birth; human illness and decrepitude; human mortality; bodily injuries and ailments—all are concatenated within this complex institution. Our bodies both limit and are the modality of human freedom. Anyone can see this in a child's delight at motion—the first tentative, then the more confident steps, then, finally, running and the look of terror on a child's face

when he or she realizes, "I cannot stop running, I might fall." Freedom and flight, the possibility of loss of control, are here on display in their original or most basic form.

Our society teaches us that control is what it is all about. But the body does not bend entirely to our wills. The heart of the matter lies in a loss of appreciation of the nature of human embodiment, something families do not let us forget. We are loathe to grant the status of givenness to any aspect of ourselves, despite the fact that human babies are wriggling, complex little bodies preprogrammed with all sorts of delicately calibrated reactions to the human relationships, that "nature" presumes will be the matrix of child nurture. If we think of bodies concretely in this way, we are then propelled to ask ourselves questions about the world little bodies enter: Is it welcoming, warm, responsive? But if we tilt in the biotech constructivist direction and proclaim that our bodies are whatever we make of them, then the body is raw material to be worked on and worked over. The familial and cultural surround in which bodies are situated fades from view as the Body gets enshrined as a kind of messianic project. One might tag this view "genetic fundamentalism," for we are invited to pay less attention to socially shaping better child-rearing environments and more attention to genetically perfecting human products as an act of voluntary design.

The body we currently inhabit becomes the imperfect body, the one our families know all about, the one subject to chance and the vagaries of life, including illness and aging. This body is our foe. The new body to come is to be our gleaming fabrication. For soon, surely, we will have found a way around the fact that our poor foremothers and forefathers, living in a less enlightened era than our own, took for granted—that the body must weaken and one day pass from life to death. The future perfect body will not be permitted to falter. So we devise multiple strategies to fend off aging. We represent aging bodies as those of teenagers with gleaming gray hair. Rather than approaching matters of life and death with humility, knowing that we cannot cure the human condition, we seek cures in the assumption that the more we control the better.

The current cloning debate focuses all these energies, anxieties, and fantasies like a laser beam on the family. This is the gravamen of Leon Kass's powerful arguments against cloning. He points out that merely technical or meliorist approaches "all ignore the deeper anthropological, social, and indeed ontological meanings of bringing forth new life. To this more fitting and profound point of view, cloning shows itself to be a major alteration, indeed, a major violation of our given nature as embodied, gendered, and engendering beings—and of the social relations built on this natural ground."<sup>6</sup>

If we move in the direction of cloning, a direction that advocates such as the law professor Laurence Tribe have advanced as part of the zone of hu-

man privacy and choice, Kass warns that we enter a world in which unethical experiments “upon the resulting child-to-be” are conducted. We deprive a cloned entity of a “distinctive identity not only because he will be in genotype and appearance identical to another human being, but, in this case, because he may also be twin to the person who is his ‘father’ or ‘mother’—if one can still call them that.” We deliberately plan situations that we know from incontrovertible empirical evidence are not optimal arenas for the rearing of children, namely, family fragments that deny relationality or shrink it. We “en-shrine and aggravate a profound and mischievous misunderstanding of the meaning of having children and of the parent-child relationship. . . . Cloning is inherently despotic, for it seeks to make one’s children . . . after one’s own image . . . and their future according to one’s will.”<sup>7</sup>

You cannot talk about contemporary and promised future techniques of controlling and manipulating human birth without tending to the family, for once again, it is also the heart of this matter. Bonhoeffer understood this. In “The Natural” in his unfinished *Ethics*, he tells us that humans possess only a “relative freedom” in natural life and there are “true and . . . mistaken uses of this freedom.”<sup>8</sup> If we destroy the natural, we destroy freedom. If we misuse or distort nature, we misuse or distort freedom. This distortion is on display in the contempt shown for ordinary embodiment, and it violates, he argues, the Christian teaching that rejects the view that the body is simply a prison for the immortal soul. For our bodies are ends in themselves. Nowhere is this more evident than in families and the intense focus on the preciousness of the body of this singular, unique child given to us to sustain and to love.

### Popular Culture

Pop culture bashing is popular, but I do not think it is very helpful. Instead, one should focus on what fears the family draws down upon itself where popular culture is concerned. We have some pretty good ideas of what these are. Parents fear they are losing their children to an excessively materialist, frequently violent, hypersexualized culture. This culture is represented to children through all the media to which they are exposed—television, music, film, the Internet. Parents have some measure of control over the films their children see. But even G-rated films partake of some of the qualities parents most fear.

For example, contrast such classic Disney films as *Snow White* with current Disney fare. I am thinking of *Hercules*; you may have your own favorite or unfavorable example. Hercules looks like Arnold Schwarzenegger on steroids, and I hope you take the full force of that. The female in question looks like a

Barbie doll who has had multiple breast implants. The film is riddled with double-entendres, winks and nods, and lots of sexual heat. Yet this is okay for our four-year-olds.

My concern is not about the overhyped innocence of children. Children are not innocent in the moral sense. Children exhibit rage, jealousy, and plenty of ordinary garden-variety malevolence in their dealings with others. But children are innocent in the ways in which noncombatants in time of war are innocent: They do not have the power to defend themselves. That is why parents must be the first line of defense. That is why those who proclaim loudly children's rights where access to all forms of media is concerned are so wrong. Parental fears are magnified daily given stories about Internet pedophiles and predators and plans hatched in Internet chat rooms for a teenager to "hook-up" with some real but fictitious person he or she has "met" on the Internet.

The disembodiment of contemporary communication, particularly where the Internet is concerned, is arguably more insidious over the long run to our sense of integrity toward the family and the complex, intimate relations it enshouses than are the annoying bulging biceps and bursting breasts of recent Disney films. And, truth be told, I am not that worried about a popular rap artist like Eminem, either. The energy and anger in his songs is an intelligible human response, however troubling aspects of it might be to real human situations. (Although, it must be said, there is some rap and hip-hop that, in its violence and misogyny, must be opposed. But as with everything else, not all rap is created alike.)

In a nutshell: I do not think popular culture has simply gone to hell or is taking us there. But I do believe contemporary technologies pose a challenge if not a threat to the concrete, embodied nature of family relations, as well as those of friendship, pedagogy, and so on. The family decocts concrete embodiment in a particularly potent way. Let us turn to Bonhoeffer again. In *Life Together*, written in 1938, when the world was collapsing all around him, he meditated on the theme of community.<sup>9</sup> Community cannot exist without the physical presence of others, he argued. Why? He responds theologically, "Because a human being is created as a body; the Son of God appeared on earth in the body for our sake and was raised in the body. In the sacrament the believer receives the Lord Christ in the body, and the resurrection of the dead will bring about the perfected community of God's spiritual-physical creatures."<sup>10</sup>

Through his discussion of one concrete community, Bonhoeffer helps us to criticize what he calls all spurious forms of idealism that invite us to live in a psychic or disembodied "reality" like cyberspace, in a "dream world . . . and to abandon ourselves to those blissful experiences and exalted moods that sweep

over us like a way of rapture.”<sup>11</sup> Real communities make real demands on us, and they include those who are weak and vulnerable. The concrete, nitty-gritty, tactile nature of real community is far different from that reality called “virtual.” The danger here is that to the extent children are invited to live in virtual reality, then to that extent the friction of the real world where human wills clash—and it is in families that we learn to mediate this clash—may be lost on them. Some of the cyberspace scenarios extol as the manifest virtue of cyberspace the fact that all boundaries disappear—between self and other, male and female, anything and everything. We can be anyone we want. We can go anywhere we want. We can do anything we want. Yet the burden of parents is precisely teaching children that this is *not* the way of the world.

Does it seem exaggerated to suggest that to the extent we become adept at imagining a world in which all boundaries disappear, then to that extent the boundaries that exist in reality will come to seem insupportable? We will want to wish such boundaries away, too, if we can. Cybercommunity is a form of modern gnosticism: Everything exists in abstract messages purified of their taint by the embodied, the material, the carnal. The embodied, the material, and the carnal are what families are all about. With other media, we are not so much invited to escape reality altogether as to engage it, at least much more so than in cyberspace. Negotiating all of this is part of a parent’s task. That requires time. Time requires presence—the actual physical presence of embodied adults, of mothers and fathers—and time is what we seem to have so little of. This brings me to my final point of contact between the family as a magnet and the wider society, the world of work and time.

### The World of Work and the World of Love

The goal of feminism—the goal of liberal, not radical, feminism—was to “free” women of household obligations so they could work outside the home, in the wage-labor system. (Whether this is a worthy ideal of freedom is a debate in and of itself, but it is not one that I will take up here.) Another part of this ideal was that men would then be obligated to spend more time in the home. Somehow this would all even itself out in the ideal scenarios that required massive government-funded day care centers to care for the children as moms and dads busied themselves in paid work life. The overriding presumption was, and is, that leaving home to work for pay is bound to be more “fulfilling” than staying home with young children. As a culture, we were urged to convince ourselves that this would also be better for the children.

It has not quite worked out as planned. That is not entirely correct; some of it has. The wage gap between male and female workers has nearly closed.

With same-age workers under the age of fifty years, it has either disappeared nearly altogether or women now earn more than men. Most of the remaining wage gap can be explained by the fact that more women than men continue to choose to work part time. As male wages have stagnated, women's wages have risen for more than a decade at a rate above the rate of inflation. Jared Bernstein of the Economic Policy Institute (described by the *New York Times* as a "liberal research group in Washington" that monitors the workforce) notes: "The wage trends for men are unequivocally bad." Even with the current economic downturn, "women's wages are still growing."<sup>12</sup> The reasons for all of this are complex. Much of it has to do with the shift to a service economy and the massive loss of industrial jobs held by males at relatively high wages won by unions.

Is this a feminist victory? I cannot say. But what this does tell us is that men and women alike are caught up in the economic scramble; hence, the tensions of making provision for families in between the demands of work. In other words, feminists who care about families should not look at the statistics about rising female wages and falling male wages and declare victory, for a number of reasons. Victory in behalf of what? It is of course the case that you cannot educate people and then expect them not to use their educated powers to their fullest. But the vast majority of the jobs we are talking about have to do with what jobs have always done: Pay the rent or the mortgage, buy the food and the clothes, set aside some for a rainy day, try to save for the children's educations. We are told on pretty good authority that the average worker today spends 163 hours more a year working than in 1980, that is, a whole month stolen from family, church, community, and citizenship. Some 71 percent of school-age children have no parent at home full time compared with 43 percent in 1970, yet only 13 percent of mothers with preschool-age children say they want to work full time. Moreover, our tax code remains biased against parents, although this is getting better. But, truth be told, we have a culture tilted against concrete, hands-on time spent with children.<sup>13</sup> We rationalize our way out of this with great cunning. But the kids know better.

Some years ago, the notion of "quality time" gained credence. It is surely no coincidence that "quality time" emerged in tandem with rising misgivings about spending less and less time with our children and increasingly giving our children over to others to care for. So celebrants of the zeitgeist hit on the idea of quality time, different from that old-fashioned sort of time with its complex, natural rhythms that flowed and bumped along as hours unfolded in which the task at hand might be work or play, baking cookies or learning how to ride a bike, reading a book, taking a bath, taking a "time out," watching Mom or Dad in the kitchen, Mom or Dad gardening, doing homework, doing nothing but doing it in one another's company. No, quality time was that little

window of opportunity that opened between 7:00 and 8:30 P.M., after a rushed dinner and before being sent to bed.

Why the rush? The answer is obvious. Because every adult in the home and the neighborhood was now in the paid labor force, children either fended for themselves during the hours of danger left unsupervised after school hours, or they awaited a harried parent at “after care.” Mom or Dad raced home, raced through supper, and were then enjoined to engage in that magical moment of quality time. Somehow the snatches of quality time here and there made up for all the time apart, all the absences, all the harried bits and pieces that make up the ever more typical day of ever more typical American parents. As the economist Allan Carlson has pointed out, modern capitalism and modern states have a “vested interest” in family disaggregation, a point made interestingly enough by conservatives and Marxists alike: “Family bonds interfere with the efficient allocation of human labor, and household production limits the sway of a money-based economy.”<sup>14</sup> Much of what we have measured as economic growth over the past forty years, Carlson continues, “has simply been the transfer of remaining household tasks uncounted in monetary terms—home cooking, child care, elder care—to external entities such as Burger King, corporate day-care centers, and state-funded nursing homes.”<sup>15</sup>

This is called progress. Is it? Quality time is part and parcel of a monetizing of everyday life. Time is parceled out into measurable, hence more efficient chunks—and families are notoriously inefficient. There are many wonderful day care centers, of course, staffed by loving if notoriously underpaid people. Many of these are church based. I have no interest in criticizing either day care workers or overworked parents. But if we think of the family as that magnet drawing the tensions of the society into its very heart, then it obliges us to raise questions about our priorities and the many ways we fool ourselves into thinking things are better than they really are.

Love—family love, not the errant, foolish, venal nonsense on television now in those bachelor and bachelorette “reality-based” programs—involves tough-minded, hard work. Loving children, as caring mothers and fathers throughout the years have recognized, is about profound attention. Attention requires being there. One must be cued in to the nuances of the child’s needs as these change, sometimes from day-to-day in the case of babies and toddlers. We say the devil is in the details. So is love. Love is not a sentiment. It is a craft. It is a craft practiced in the family. It is learned there, or it is not learned at all. I submit that we are forgetting this craft of love, in part because the nature of economic life is driving us away from it. In our frenzied lives, we cannot spend the time and attention it requires. Love is the heart of formation, of what it means to initiate children into a way of life, to help them to understand what a decent, loving life is all about.

We want to believe that we are doing the right thing. We give our children so many choices nowadays, we explain. But a two-year-old does not need five dozen options. He or she needs trust and love and the confidence that we are competent to do God's work on earth by holding and nurturing those born of our own acts of co-creation. This is the product of that attunement to the nitty-gritty details, to time in all its complexity, for it takes time to learn what children need, time to tend to these tasks. We all need this sort of loving attention paid to us. The dignity of the human person lies in the fact that we are beings to whom a certain loving attention is owed. And that really is the heart of the matter, finally.

### Conclusion: Not Yet an Ethical Polity

In *Public Man, Private Woman*, almost a quarter of a century ago now, I described the goal of a critical and ethical feminism as one of moving us toward an ethical polity. We are not there yet. And, of course, we never will be—not in a perfect sense. But I submit that looking at how the family is faring helps us to think about how near or far lies that ethical polity. The family is rather like the canary down the mine shaft: It gives us an early warning system of societal stresses and strains, of where things are wounded and broken and need to be healed or mended.

A central feature of this ethical polity I characterize as the redemption of everyday life, of its simple joys and pleasures tethered to recognition of the inherent dignity of everydayness, of the doing of simple tasks in peace, by which I mean a form of Augustinian "right order." Let me conclude with words drawn from the final pages of that book.

My ideal is the preservation of a tension between diverse spheres and competing ideals and purposes. There is always a danger that a too strong and overweening polity would swamp the individual, as well as a peril that life as lived in a polity such as our own will decivilize us. That is, the crises of our time may erode within us the possibility of civic virtue as we increasingly come to substitute private pleasures and asocial inwardness for any sort of public involvement and obligation to others. Within an ethical polity the individual would, or could, have many irons in the fire. The prevailing image of the person would be that of a human being with a capacity for self-reflection as to the ends and means of public and private action. Such persons could tolerate the ineradicable tension between public and private imperatives, thought and action, aesthetic standards and ethical principles. He or she could distinguish between those conditions, events, or states of affairs that are part of a shared human condition—grief, loss through death, natural disasters, and decay of

the flesh—and those human-made injustices that can be remedied or that one can work to remedy. Above all, the human being within the ethical polity never presumes that ambivalence and conflict will one day end, for he or she has come to understand that such ambivalence and conflict are the wellspring of a life lived reflectively and that we are all enriched by the messy reality that is our lot. A clear notion of what ideals and obligations are required to animate an authentic public life, an ethical polity, must be adumbrated: authority, freedom, public law, civic virtue, the ideal of the citizen—all those beliefs, habits, and qualities that are integral to a political order.

We will have kept the moral wager and affirmed our humanity only if, with Albert Camus, we refuse to capitulate to the plague. We must embrace a politics of limits. There are things we must not do, for in so doing we will not only further cheapen already fragile human ties in the present but also undermine the very humanitarian ends we claim to seek. Each of us has the responsibility to make judgments between competing visions of the political imagination, rejecting those that tap primitive rage from those that have as their template our earliest memories of needs met and succor provided within a social context that was our secure universe. Only in this way can envisagements of hope and compassion—private and public ideals that the more clamorous pictures of the rageful would expunge from our world—be kept alive.<sup>16</sup>

The family embodies the coming together of all these hopes and fears. That is why it is the heart of the matter.

### Notes

1. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 4.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" in *Ethics* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), 358–76.
3. *Ibid.*
4. See, e.g., Shulamith Firestone's radical feminist "classic," *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 7–8, which speaks of a biological "tyranny" of men over women, with the division of human beings into males and females constituting a "fundamental inequality" that she extends into the nonhuman animal kingdom. Others making related arguments in this era include Ti-Grace Atkinson, "Theories of Radical Feminism," in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*, ed. Shulamith Firestone, n.p.; and Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975). Brownmiller speaks of a biologically given male propensity to rape. Her argument is that all men are rapists in situ. But that is like saying all women are prostitutes or child murderers in situ. Because some men and women murder and some women sell their bodies does not mean that all men and women are propelled in such a direction and must be coercively held in check lest they kill, murder, prostitute themselves, and so on. Once you start arguing from biological reductionism

and your view of biology is itself crudely reductionistic, you wind up committing all manner of error and folly.

5. On birth as "barbaric" see Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*, 201. It is important to remember that this text and others were not marginal documents but hailed as essential to women's liberation. They were required reading in courses, and it was regarded as dangerously heretical to parse such texts critically, as I learned early on in my teaching experience in the 1970s.

6. Leon Kass, "The Wisdom of Repugnance," *New Republic*, June 2, 1997, 20.

7. *Ibid.*, 22-24.

8. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*.

9. The community in question, for Bonhoeffer, was the Christian community of seminarians at a site called Finkenwalde. He and his seminarians of the Confessing Church that had split off from the so-called Deutsche Christen (the official Lutheran Church) shared a life together until the Gestapo forced the closing of their community.

10. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: Prayerbook of the Bible*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works*, trans. Martin Kasko and Ilse Tödt and gen. ed. Wayne W. Floyd Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996-), vol. 5, 29.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Quoted by David Leonhardt, "Gap between Pay of Men and Women Smallest on Record," *New York Times*, February 17, 2003, A15.

13. Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West, *The War against Parents* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

14. Allan Carlson, "Toward a Family-Centered Economy," *New Oxford Review*, December 1997, 28-35, at 29.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, 351-52.