

In Defense of the Patriarchal Family

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It should be obvious that nothing, absolutely nothing, is more important to a society than the structure and authority of the family. Around half of people are young or old dependents at any given time, and all people are dependents for some part of their lives. In every society that has yet existed, the family is the institution by which the half that is able to work cares for the other half (after and before being cared for in turn). This transfer of wealth and service far exceeds the redistributive actions of even communist governments. In the family we encounter human dependency at its most naked, and from these dependencies arise our most solemn duties and our largest (indeed, unpayable) debts. What could be more important to men's self-understanding? So it is for good reason that no institution is more important to a conservative than the authoritative domestic society, the patriarchal family. Also, no institution faces such merciless attack from clear-headed leftists.

The maternal and paternal roles

When it comes to the family, the facts are well known. Humans reproduce sexually. Unlike many other animals, our young are born completely helpless and take more than a decade to reach maturity. They require an enormous investment of time and effort from their parents if they are to survive long enough to reproduce themselves. Because it is only the woman who can be pregnant, give birth, and nurse, she is naturally more involved in child care, at least during the early years. For his progeny to survive, the man has had to assume those tasks which the woman can't do while caring for a child—acquiring food and repelling attacks. Men and women have acquired (by natural selection) special physical, mental, and psychological features to assist them in their specific tasks. Patriarchy is the idea which assigns moral significance to these facts. The good toward which the patriarchal family is ordered is procreation. Its basic principle is the embrace of dependency. The child depends on his parents, and the parents depend on each other. These experiences of dependency, both of having others depend on us (and the responsibilities this creates) and of depending on others (and the humility this engenders), are regarded as positive goods. The more deeply each member relies on the other, the more the family can be said to thrive. Thus the family is not merely an illiberal institution; it is positively anti-liberal. Nothing is more opposed to its ethos than independence, in either the sense of autonomy or of self-sufficiency.

However, we have not completely specified the family just by identifying dependency as its principle. After all, dependence on other people is an inescapable fact of human existence. One can imagine an alternative to the family, in which children are raised by child-care experts employed by a large government bureaucracy. The children would still be dependent, but it would be an organization rather than particular people who would be ultimately responsible

for their welfare. Of course, particular people (teachers, nurses, etc) would be assigned to care for the children in various ways, but this would be delegated responsibility; these technicians could be replaced by others at the bureaucracy's discretion. Parental dependency is *personal dependency*: it is the mother and father who are fully responsible for the child, and this responsibility is not delegated to them by the state, society at large, or any other organization. Similarly, the duties of a child to his parents belong to the child as an individual.

Dependency has two poles. One being may depend on another for its internal self-development and the flourishing of its intrinsic nature. This is the nurturing or maternal pole. However, because all animals live in potentially hostile environments, there is another pole. One being may depend on another to protect it from the hostile outside, to prepare it to survive in the hostile outside, or to extract resources from the outside world for use in the home. This is the protector-provider or paternal pole. Together, the two poles form a home, a safe and nurturing place, with the mother as the home's heart and the father at the interface between the home and the outside world.

According to the patriarchal idea, the roles of mother and father are distinct and irreplaceable. The claim is not "a child needs two parents"; the claim is "a child needs his mother and his father". Neither a single parent nor two caregivers of the same sex can adequately substitute for a natural family. Furthermore, the two roles cannot be combined in one person. Nor can they be divided equally by two people, with each parent playing mother half of the time and father the other half. Being a mother or father is not a job, not a role one steps into and out of. It is a vocation by which one understands oneself and orders one's life, and it is the most fundamental level on which one relates to other members of the family. No child thinks, "On formal occasions, X has to play the role of being my father, but underneath it all, he's just my friend X." The deepest level is always, "He is my father." Fatherhood is not a mask that we can go beneath. For the father himself, his vocation is the most fundamental part of his personality. For the child, any other relationship would be less significant.

The need for distinct roles is particularly evident for the father's protector role. One cannot be a protector unless someone else allows herself to be protected. A useful contrast would be to a company of soldiers. There is a sense, of course, in which soldiers protect one another. One man standing the night watch is protecting his sleeping companions until he is relieved and protected in turn. However, because the roles are continually switched, they cannot be the basic way that the soldiers understand their relations with each other. In fact, we would not want one soldier to feel protective of another the way a husband should feel for his wife and children. A good husband would never allow his wife to take a turn on the front line. A chivalrous man will insist on protecting any woman or child, and since chivalry is a good thing, we should not undermine it by having women in the military or police.

The distinction of roles is also important for their ability to represent authority to the child. The mother is the practical and compassionate face of authority. As the nurturer, she commands what is good for us and forbids what is bad for us or for other members of the family. There is another, no less valid, face of authority. This is the face of objective law: laws of God, laws of nature, laws of custom, laws of the state. Basing themselves on the absolute claims of morality, these laws are implacable in their demands and indifferent to our desires or the desires of those close to us. As the interface with the outside world, the father is the natural representative of this authority. As the representative of objective law, he is the one who is compelled at times to stand as an outside judge of his own children. To fail to do so would stunt their moral development. However, as a representative of the “outside”, the father lacks some of the empathic closeness to his children that the mother enjoys. The mother, in turn, must use the face of objective judgment much less often to avoid compromising her indispensable nurturing role. To put it another way, although a child should always know that his parents’ love is unconditional, it is good that there is one parent whose respect he feels he must earn. A boy is propelled toward independence partly by this desire to be seen as a man in his father’s eyes. It is important that the father give this respect, but, for it to be real, he can’t give it indiscriminately. We see some recognition of this duality of sex roles in the world’s mythologies: it is usually the sky/father god who is lord of law and justice, while the nurturing earth/mother goddess is far less morally vindictive.

Obviously, it is neither possible nor desirable for the roles of mother and father to have no overlap. The overlap is considerable. Of course fathers feed their children and mothers discipline them. Of course a mother must defend her children from outside attack if the father is absent and none of the sons is of age. However, the roles must remain basically distinct. It is not a question of whether, for example, a woman can do the things a father does. “Mother” and “father” are not jobs. They’re not what you do; they’re what you are. A woman can’t be a father. “Father” is a way of understanding one’s duties and one’s place—it is incompatible with (although complementary to) the idea of “mother”.

Masculine and feminine virtues

To be a man means to be a father, at least potentially. That is, it means that one is “father material.” Similarly, to be a woman means to be a potential mother. Motherhood and fatherhood are the ideas which allow us to make sense of our sexual natures. Why do women have breasts? To nurse their children. Why are they on average far more empathic and linguistically adept than men? So that they can raise and educate their children. Why are men on average much stronger and more aggressive than women? So that they can protect their families. The patriarchal ideas make biological facts meaningful. Note that statements about sexual natures are essential rather than empirical: to say that physical strength is a masculine quality is not the same as to say that men are stronger on average than women. A certain woman may be stronger than many men, but this would only be an accidental quality for her sex; she wouldn’t

understand her strength in terms of a gender-specific calling to service, the way a man would. Accordingly, there can also be statistical differences between men and women which are not essential differences. For example, men seem to like steak more than women, but since this fact has no relevance to his paternal duties, it is meaningless. A man who lacks the strength to defend his family is lacking in masculine perfection, but there's nothing wrong with a male vegetarian. In societies which accept the patriarchal ideas, "man" and "woman" are not just biological givens; they are ideals toward which one must strive. To say that someone embodies the ideal is a great compliment. ("What a woman!" "Now there's a real man!") Masculinity and femininity each have their characteristic virtues. The manly virtue is called "chivalry". It is the virtue of one who has internalized the ethos of the protector. Courage in danger, prowess in battle, mercy to the vanquished, courtesy toward women, gentleness towards children, piety towards elders—these are the qualities of the chivalrous man. Feminists often attack chivalry because it legitimates male aggression. However, male aggression is a biological fact which will be with us whether we legitimate it or not, unless one plans to turn men into docile weaklings using conditioning and drugs (a path that parents and teachers seem regrettably eager to pursue). The ideal of chivalry ennobles this biological given by allowing men to understand it in terms of a moral duty. In fact, there is no way to explain feminist's horror of domestic violence without invoking chivalry. If men have no special duties to women, then why is it any worse for a man to beat up a woman than for him to beat up a weaker man?

Chivalry is closely connected to courage, but courage itself is both a masculine and a feminine virtue. The female virtue of femininity is a special kind of courage: the courage of allowing oneself to become vulnerable. By the woman's characteristic empathy, she opens herself to others' pain. In marriage, she sacrifices some of her own defenses so that her husband can assume his role. In pregnancy and childbirth, she offers her own body for her child, an offering which has cost many women their lives.

Of course, each nature has its characteristic deformations, but it is always a gross error to identify a thing with its deformation. Machismo is a deformation of chivalry for men who have forgotten that their prowess is to be put in the service of the weak. The bully's manliness is imperfect. Similarly, one should never identify femininity with girlish vanity and frivolousness. Masculinity and femininity are essentially relational virtues. They inform all of our closest relationships, which are always relationships of dependence. It is only for very superficial relationships that I can say that the relationship would be no different if my partner were a man rather than a woman, or vice versa. This is why the drive to eliminate masculine and feminine personalities must be resisted. An androgynous person would lack both the male and female capacity for intimacy. A man who sacrifices masculine virtue does not thereby acquire feminine virtue. Nor does a woman gain masculine virtue by losing her femininity. An effeminate man is not maternal, and a tomboyish woman is not paternal.

The family as a society

The family is meant to be a nexus of dependency. It can only serve this function if it is sufficiently reliable that the family members can count on its services. Therefore, the duties of each member must be absolute and indissoluble. If divorce were allowed under any circumstances, the family would no longer be essentially a society of total self-offering and dependency. As a practical matter, each member would have to hedge his or her bets given the possible defection of other members. Indeed, the possibility of divorce is often invoked to discourage husbands and wives from becoming “too dependent” on each other. As intelligent beings, the anticipated future has a present reality in our minds. This is why it makes no sense to say, for example, “I am totally yours, but only for today,” or “only as long as we continue to get along,” or “only as long as you do your part.” A total commitment is bound to extend itself through the whole field of one’s consciousness, including the future in all its contingencies. The marriage commitment can demand tremendous sacrifices, but that is why it is so greatly honored. We honor spouses for the same reason we honor soldiers—because of the magnitude of their commitments. If soldiers were allowed to desert in times of danger, what would there be about them to admire? Similarly, as divorce becomes more common, marriage necessarily falls into contempt. In order to function as a unit, the family must have a center of authority. At first appearance, it would seem that the mother is the natural center of authority. Her primary job is nurture, while the father’s primary job is defense, and it is obvious that defense exists for the purpose of nurture, and not vice versa. Since ends should always dictate means, one would conclude that the wife should command the husband. However, all known societies have reached the opposite conclusion, that the husband should rule. The reason lies in the ways that mother and father symbolize authority. The father has a particular duty to represent the objective, transcendent moral law, and the authority of this law overrides every other consideration, even the good of each family member or of all put together. Therefore, the father holds ultimate authority.

Finally, the family can only be a nexus of authority if the members do, in fact, rely on it. Now, it is appropriate and just for the wider society to assist families that, due to extreme poverty or misfortune, cannot provide for their members. However, government agencies must never interfere in the family to such a degree (e.g. to preempt mistakes on the part of the parents, to compensate for their defects, etc.) that the dependence of family members on each other is reduced to a formality, while the real dependence is on the bureaucratic organs of the state. Nor should the state intrude in education or discipline in any way that would compromise the father’s authority.

There is a more insidious threat to family independence which comes from industrial capitalism and commercialism. To alienate family functions to the marketplace is an even worse error than to alienate them to the state (which can at least symbolize authority in some way). As late as half a century ago,

household production by the housewife contributed nearly as much to the wealth of the typical American family as did the husband's income. The family was significantly self-supporting and independent. A century before that, most families were totally independent on subsistence farms. Today, American families depend on factories in China for everything they consume. Even their children are raised by television and day care. Employers no longer need to pay a family wage now that women have been "liberated" from the home—much better to hire both husband and wife and pay each half as much! Ennobling dependence on loved ones has been replaced by servile dependence on corporations and the state.

Chastity

Let us now consider the act so associated with the marriage bond that it is called the "conjugal act" or the "marriage debt." Here we must confront the modern tendency to reduce all of nature—in this case one's body and that of one's partner—to raw material to be manipulated to serve one's will. Modern men believe that everyone is free to assign his or her own meaning to the sexual act, so they make of it a meaningless recreation, a means to "empowerment", or a sign of uncommitted affection. However, human sexual nature is not a collection of facts that have no meaning until we freely assign them one. Sexual intercourse has a natural teleology; it is ordered to procreation. This natural end provides a context which itself assigns a meaning to the sexual act. This meaning is "natural" in the sense that it "presents itself" to the mind of a sufficiently intelligent participant without requiring any decision on his or her part. If I make love to a woman, it means "I choose you to be the mother of my children." This, and only this, is directly and naturally signified by intercourse. However, for an intelligent being, able to consider the future, it has profound implications. Children require a family, so the sexual act implies an irrevocable commitment; it initiates a new society consisting of the spouses and their prospective children. In the conjugal act, the spouses pledge their allegiance to this society—this also is virtually contained in the act's one natural meaning. It is a grave mistake to think that the conjugal act has two independent natural meanings: a "procreative" and a "unitive" meaning, so that one can frustrate the first while still affirming the second. Sex has one meaning, and that is procreation which implies unity. Without its procreative telos, sex could only signify love by convention, and conventional signification is a much weaker thing than natural signification. In any case, the natural context is inescapable. If one wickedly frustrates the sexual act through contraception or sodomy, one does not simply take the natural meaning of sex "off the table"; one actively rejects it. Unnatural sex acts themselves carry a natural meaning, namely the rejection of what would be positively affirmed by natural sex. "I reject you as the mother of my children." To add a conventional meaning of "I love you", but the action itself speaks against it.

Sexual morality is more than just avoiding evils like birth control and fornication. There is also the positive virtue of chastity. To be chaste is to be alive to a whole world of value and beauty in the relations between the sexes. In a way, it resembles the aesthetic sensibility which allows one to appreciate art, and a man

without this sensibility should rightly be an object of pity, because his cynicism has made him blind to a thing of great beauty. Thus, it is not quite accurate to say that conservatives want to teach teenagers abstinence. A married woman who refuses to sleep with her husband out of mere squeamishness would hardly meet with our approval. What we want to teach is chastity; we want our children to hear the body's own language and to see their bodies as more than just raw material. We would even say that there is value in this appreciation even for those who, out of weakness, surrender to lust at some point in life. A man who fornicates and then feels guilty for desecrating a holy thing is living on a far higher plane of spiritual existence than a man who fornicates without guilt and without thought except for how to gratify his lust in the future.

Chaste man and woman will feel awe that their bodies are capable of expressing in the body's own language the momentous pledge of lifelong fidelity in the marital bond, and they will approach this act with due reverence. Above all, they will recoil from approaching it in the infernal spirit of calculation which seeks to use the act for pleasure, power, or any other private end. Here we see starkly the existential choice between liberal and conservative. Either our acts are meaningless so we are free to do as we will, or our acts do have meanings which must guide us.

Filial Piety

Piety is the reverence due to one's mother and father, and it is every bit as essential to family life as chastity. Filial piety demands several things. Most basically, it demands that one care for the welfare of one's parents, to defend them from criticism and care for them in old age. Still, piety demands more. One must obey one's parents (unless this violates the natural law). Even as an adult, one should defer to them when possible. Still, piety demands more. One must honor one's parents. One must never speak disparagingly or even lightly of them. Indeed, one must cast away even irreverent thoughts about them. In ordering one's own life, one must consider how one's actions reflect on one's parents, and one must strive to be worthy of them. Only thusly can one repay the debt to those who gave one life.

Brotherhood

The relationship between siblings reveals another beautiful dimension of personal dependency. It is often invoked by various partisans of impersonal dependency such as republicans advocating a "brotherhood" of citizens and advocates of world government, who believe their proposed tyranny would embody a "brotherhood" of all mankind. In fact, these calls for collective fraternity misunderstand the nature of literal brotherhood, which is always a bond between two individuals. Among brothers and sisters, the moral and authoritative element which dominates the parent-child relationships is subdued or absent. The "face" of dependency which predominates is the mutual reliance of comrades; they share common a common loyalty to their parents and the family, and each knows that he can rely on the others in times of need. This is still a form of personal, not

corporate, responsibility. If my brother is in trouble, I personally have a duty to help. There is no collective body called “the brotherhood”, consisting of all siblings, who have this duty, so that I would be acting only as an agent of this body. Whether or not all the brothers cooperate, the duty to help our brother falls on each of us as individuals. The only corporate bodies which contain the brothers qua brothers are the nuclear and extended families, and these only act collectively through the authority of the patriarch.

All that was said above is also true of the relationship between sisters and between brother and sister. For brother-sister relationships, the ordering of the sexes becomes relevant, most notably through the incest prohibition. This rule is designed to protect the intimacy between siblings, not to hinder it. Once it is established that sexual relations are out of the question, family members can be much freer about physical contact. This is also the reason for the incest prohibition between parents and children: it seems to me that a world where a father couldn't embrace his daughter or pat her cheek without her taking it as a sexual overture would be a nightmare.

We can see then why all the talk about brotherhoods of citizens or humanity is so misguided. The idea appealed first to the French revolutionaries primarily because of their hatred of authority; they imagined creating a nation that would be like a family without parents. But there is no such thing—as we noted above, a corporation of “brothers” is an entirely different thing from real brotherhood. It is also an entirely different thing from a real state, in which the moral-authoritarian element always dominates. The image of extended brotherhood is also used by those, like the nationalists and one-worlders, whose main desire is to discourage loyalties to groups smaller than their preferred unit, be it the nation or world government. In this case, the insistence that all citizens or all men are brothers is being used to illegitimately apply the incest prohibition against the formation of smaller units.

Patriarchy and the Christian revelation

It might seem that Christianity undermines patriarchy: didn't Christ say that we must be prepared to abandon mother and father for Him, and that we should not even call anyone but God “father”? In fact, for two millennia patriarchal authority has had no stauncher ally than the Catholic Church. Christians as well as Jews are commanded to “honor thy father and mother”. Christ Himself restored marriage to its pristine dignity by forbidding divorce, and Saint Paul used marriage as an analogy for the relationship between Christ and the Church. From apostolic times, the ministers of the Church have been called “father”, and her leaders have long been called “patriarch” or “pope”, words which mean “father”. The patriarchal bond holds the most exalted place in Christian doctrine, because it is the relation which defines the first procession of the Trinity, the begetting of the Son by the Father. Christ can thus be seen as a perfect example of filial obedience and devotion. In the order of nature, God our Creator can rightly be thought of as mother and father, for He is both imminent and transcendent. The

Christian, however, believes that his relationship with God transcends the Creator-creature relation. Through God's grace, the believer is united to Christ and adopted as a son of the Father. The Christian calls God "father" but not "mother" because he is addressing the Father not just as a creature but as a participant in God's Trinitarian inner life, using a voice "borrowed" from Jesus Christ.

From the Trinitarian perspective, it is true that our Father in heaven is the only true father, and that all other fatherhood can only be a reflection of Him. However, earthly fatherhood must be a real reflection of Divine fatherhood, if Trinitarian language is to be meaningful. The father lost his internal pagan dignity, but he gained a dignity "borrowed" from God as a special image of the Father. In addition, the Church has yoked the paternal relationship to her own service, allowing some men to exercise their paternal vocation in a spiritual way. We call the man who re-presents Christ's sacrifice on the altar "father" because he relates to us paternally. His parishioners are his children—he is allowed no other. A woman could do the things a priest does (excepting the sacraments), but a woman could not be a priest, because a woman cannot be a father. Like all fatherhood, priesthood is a vocation, not a job.