Is having a loving family an unfair advantage?

Image: Is it good night for the bedtime story? (Keith Brofsky/ Getty Images)

Plato famously wanted to abolish the family and put children into care of the state. Some still think the traditional family has a lot to answer for, but some plausible arguments remain in favour of it. ***Joe Gelonesi*** *meets a philosopher with a rescue plan very much in tune with the times.*

So many disputes in our liberal democratic society hinge on the tension between inequality and fairness: between groups, between sexes, between individuals, and increasingly between families.

The power of the family to tilt equality hasn't gone unnoticed, and academics and public commentators have been blowing the whistle for some time. Now, philosophers Adam Swift and Harry Brighouse have felt compelled to conduct a cool reassessment.

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Swift in particular has been conflicted for some time over the curious situation that arises when a parent wants to do the best for her child but in the process makes the playing field for others even more lopsided.

'I got interested in this question because I was interested in equality of opportunity,' he says.

'I had done some work on social mobility and the evidence is overwhelmingly that the reason why children born to different families have very different chances in life is because of what happens in those families.'

Once he got thinking, Swift could see that the issue stretches well beyond the fact that some families can afford private schooling, nannies, tutors, and houses in good suburbs. Functional family interactions—from going to the cricket to reading bedtime stories—form a largely unseen but palpable fault line between families. The consequence is a gap in social mobility and equality that can last for generations.

So, what to do?

According to Swift, from a purely instrumental position the answer is straightforward.

'One way philosophers might think about solving the social justice problem would be by simply abolishing the family. If the family is this source of unfairness in society then it looks plausible to think that if we abolished the family there would be a more level playing field.'

It's not the first time a philosopher has thought about such a drastic solution. Two thousand four hundred years ago another sage reasoned that the care of children should be undertaken by the state.

Plato pulled few punches in *The Republic* when he called for the abolition of the family and for the children of the elite to be given over to the state. Aristotle didn't agree, citing the since oft-used argument of the neglect of things held in common. Swift echoes the Aristotelian line. The break-up of the family is plausible maybe, he thinks, but even to the most hard-hearted there's something off-key about it.

'Nearly everyone who has thought about this would conclude that it is a really bad idea to be raised by state institutions, unless something has gone wrong,' he says.

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Intuitively it doesn't feel right, but for a philosopher, solutions require more than an initial reaction. So Swift and his college Brighouse set to work on a respectable analytical defence of the family, asking themselves the deceptively simple question: 'Why are families a good thing exactly?'

Not surprisingly, it begins with kids and ends with parents.

'It's the children's interest in family life that is the most important,' says Swift. 'From all we now know, it is in the child's interest to be parented, and to be parented well. Meanwhile, from the adult point of view it looks as if there is something very valuable in being a parent.'

He concedes parenting might not be for everyone and for some it can go badly wrong, but in general it is an irreplaceable relationship.

'Parenting a child makes for what we call a distinctive and special contribution to the flourishing and wellbeing of adults.'

It seems that from both the child's and adult's point of view there is something to be said about living in a family way. This doesn't exactly parry the criticism that families exacerbate social inequality. For this, Swift and Brighouse needed to sort out those activities that contribute to unnecessary inequality from those that don't.

'What we realised we needed was a way of thinking about what it was we wanted to allow parents to do for their children, and what it was that we didn't need to allow parents to do for their children, if allowing those activities would create unfairnesses for other people's children'.

The test they devised was based on what they term 'familial relationship goods'; those unique and identifiable things that arise within the family unit and contribute to the flourishing of family members.

For Swift, there's one particular choice that fails the test.

'Private schooling cannot be justified by appeal to these familial relationship goods,' he says. 'It's just not the case that in order for a family to realise these intimate, loving, authoritative, affectionate, love-based relationships you need to be able to send your child to an elite private school.'

In contrast, reading stories at bedtime, argues Swift, gives rise to acceptable familial relationship goods, even though this also bestows advantage.

'The evidence shows that the difference between those who get bedtime stories and those who don't—the difference in their life chances—is bigger than the difference between those who get elite private schooling and those that don't,' he says.

This devilish twist of evidence surely leads to a further conclusion—that perhaps in the interests of levelling the playing field, bedtime stories should also be restricted. In Swift's mind this is where the evaluation of familial relationship goods goes up a notch.

'You have to allow parents to engage in bedtime stories activities, in fact we encourage them because those are the kinds of interactions between parents and children that do indeed foster and produce these [desired] familial relationship goods.'

Swift makes it clear that although both elite schooling and bedtime stories might both skew the family game, restricting the former would not interfere with the creation of the special loving bond that families give rise to. Taking the books away is another story.

'We could prevent elite private schooling without any real hit to healthy family relationships, whereas if we say that you can't read bedtime stories to your kids because it's not fair that some kids get them and others don't, then that would be too big a hit at the core of family life.'

So should parents snuggling up for one last story before lights out be even a little concerned about the advantage they might be conferring?

'I don't think parents reading their children bedtime stories should constantly have in their minds the way that they are unfairly disadvantaging other people's children, but I think they should have that thought occasionally,' quips Swift.

In the end Swift agrees that all activities will cause some sort of imbalance—from joining faith communities to playing Saturday cricket—and it's for this reason that a theory of familial goods needs to be established if the family is to be defended against cries of unfairness.

'We should accept that lots of stuff that goes on in healthy families—and that our theory defends—will confer unfair advantage,' he says.

It's the usual bind in ethics and moral philosophy: very often values clash and you have to make a call. For Swift and Brighouse, the line sits shy of private schooling, inheritance and other predominantly economic ways of conferring advantage.

Their conclusions remind one of a more idyllic (or mythic) age for families: reading together, attending religious services, playing board games, and kicking a ball in the local park, not to mention enjoying roast dinner on Sunday. It conjures a family setting

worthy of a classic Norman Rockwell painting. But not so fast: when you ask Swift what sort of families is he talking about, the ‘50s reverie comes crashing down into the 21st century.

‘When we talk about parents’ rights, we’re talking about the person who is parenting the child. How you got to be parenting the child is another issue. One implication of our theory is that it’s not one’s biological relation that does much work in justifying your rights with respect to how the child is parented.’

For Swift and Brighouse, our society is curiously stuck in a time warp of proprietorial rights: if you biologically produce a child you own it.

‘We think that although in practice it makes sense to parent your biological offspring, that is not the same as saying that in virtue of having produced the child the biological parent has the right to parent.’

Then, does the child have a right to be parented by her biological parents? Swift has a ready answer.

‘It’s true that in the societies in which we live, biological origins do tend to form an important part of people’s identities, but that is largely a social and cultural construction. So you could imagine societies in which the parent-child relationship could go really well even without there being this biological link.’

From this realisation arises another twist: two is not the only number.

‘Nothing in our theory assumes two parents: there might be two, there might be three, and there might be four,’ says Swift.

It’s here that the traditional notions of what constitutes the family come apart. A necessary product of the Swift and Brighouse analytical defence is the calling into question of some rigid definitions.

‘Politicians love to talk about family values, but meanwhile the family is in flux and so we wanted to go back to philosophical basics to work out what are families for and what’s so great about them and then we can start to figure out whether it matters whether you have two parents or three or one, or whether they’re heterosexual etcetera.’

For traditionalists, though, Swift provides a small concession.

‘We do want to defend the family against complete fragmentation and dissolution,’ he says. ‘If you start to think about a child having 10 parents, then that’s looking like a committee rearing a child; there aren’t any parents there at all.’

Although it’s controversial, it seems that Swift and Brighouse are philosophically inching their way to a novel accommodation for a weathered institution ever more in need of a rationale for existing. The bathwater might be going out, but they’re keen to hold on to the baby.

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