

*Family as Mystery*

We opened this study, without any introduction, with the story of the Foster family featured in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*. This novel evokes the question of what family is about, and it makes us aware of the difficulty of answering it. It is not just because of this double evocative power that we began in this way, however. It is also because this story helps us to get a start on a subject, an area of human life that is peculiar in many ways. Family is one of the most common aspects of our lives and one of the most problematic. It is both neglected in research and overstudied, framed both as a dated theme and as one of utmost contemporary relevance.

Family is at the heart of many nostalgic dreams about a return to the good old days in which the roles and patterns of male and female behaviour were obvious. It is a cherished topic among Christians as well as certain neoliberal politicians and nationalistic populist parties. Therefore, family is a suspect subject for the progressively oriented. 'Family' has become a focal point for controversies and culture wars. It is, moreover, a theme that cannot be mentioned without people reacting on the basis of their personal experiences. It rakes up all kinds of individual memories and feelings, often strong ones. They colour one's view of the general need to discuss this theme. This hotchpotch of associations, strong feelings and especially controversies to which the topic of family gives rise makes it hard to discuss. Furthermore, bringing up the topic as such is easily interpreted as serving some hidden conservative agenda – which is not the rationale behind this book.

This study seeks to explore what family is all about without becoming immersed in this hotchpotch. The reason is, first of all, that none of these controversies as such is the inspiration for this book. Its basis does not lie in intense personal experiences with family, whether dysfunctional or exceptionally happy. Our study does not arise from major concerns about the well-being of family in current Western societies, nor is its goal to promote a stronger family life. The reason behind it is not distrust, given the injustices or wrongs, like various kinds of abuse, somehow related to family

life. Nor is it a plea for a more open conception of family, beyond traditional views.

This book's purpose is more basic, open and neutral. Its first question is simply what family might mean. What is family all about? Of course, this question does not come out of the blue. The reason for posing it is first our intuition that in the heated debates for or against the family, as well as in the strongly emotional individual reactions, the basic, open and neutral question of what family could mean is often lost. What family means is supposed to be clear among both family's defenders and its critics: traditional role patterns, indissoluble relations, blood ties, genetic kinship or duties that cannot be cast aside. We aim to step back from these ways of dealing with the topic of family and find ways to address the lost question of its possible meanings.

The second reason is the current controversial character of the topic of family itself. We think it is important to pose the question of what family might mean to avoid what is often the result of the current commotion: the digging in of positions, a lack of open conversation or debate, deadlocks. To avoid these problems, it seems helpful to step back and ask what is at stake in the topic of family in our time. What does family symbolise or stand for that it is such a controversial topic? Why do people love or hate it, regard it as an attractive theme to discuss or something we do not need to take notice of? Understanding what family might mean is thus in this book also a way to understand ourselves better in our time. This means we do not leave entirely open the question of what family might mean. We will focus on the aspects of family that we think are difficult in our time and turn family into a charged, even controversial topic.

Our approach is thus a situated one. It looks for what family might mean in a particular time, in a specific context. This context is a Western one. This qualification is not meant as a precise demarcation or a label claiming exclusivity, let alone superiority. It is meant as a sign that we are aware that we do not speak from nowhere, and that the perspective of our study is limited. We will try to account for this specific situation as transparently as possible. Obviously, it is impossible to speak about family in general or to give a global or universal view of it – that is why we have usually omitted the article 'the' in conjunction with 'family' which is used by default in much literature on the subject. On the other hand, it does not seem impossible that, by speaking from a specific context, insights come to light that are relevant elsewhere as well.<sup>1</sup> In the current Western context,

<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 3, we will deal extensively with this issue by going into recent discussions on the status of kinship among anthropologists. In this discipline, the traditional idea that kinship is a universal fact

family is a controversial issue, as our brief sketch already indicates. It is for others to decide whether this is also true for different contexts with which we are not familiar. Our study is not intended to be comparative.

Apart from the charged character of the topic of family in our time and context, there is a second difficulty in dealing with the topic we discovered in the Prologue. Reading the novel *Housekeeping* with an eye to the theme of family evokes the difficulty of discussing what family might mean. The novel makes the reader feel the strength of the family tie, of the appeal inherent in family relationship, but it also confronts one with the impossibility of objectifying it. The different family members, after all, think about and act on this tie in completely different ways. All these ways of thinking and acting shed light on what family might mean. It is not that one of them reveals the correct meaning. Even if they, like the great-aunts Lily and Nona, defy the family tie as one of care, the tie also means something to them, as they regard the younger aunt Sylvie a better guardian.

Together, family members' different ways of thinking and acting towards each other create a feeling for the family tie in the reader. The story evokes this feeling. It shows that the tie cannot be reduced to one common denominator like blood relationships, relations of care between different generations, or the people who share a household, or even a combination of them. Enumerating these notions would still not give good insight into what a family is. What is more, as soon as such definitions are stated, the exceptions come into view: marriage is not a blood relationship, nor is adoption, and, even when family members do not receive each other's care or share a household, they may perceive each other as family.

When these examples are discussed, we again lose the general topic of the family and see the overarching notion split into all kinds of specific family relationships. This may in part explain why the question of meaning

of human life that takes shape in different cultural forms is heavily criticised. Nevertheless, the term 'kinship' continues to be used in some universal sense that presupposes recognition of this phenomenon across cultures. This is well illustrated by the following remark by Janet Carsten. In response to a recent publication by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins provocatively called *What Kinship Is – And Is Not* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2013), she writes:

Across cultures, eras, and social backgrounds, the sense that kin 'participate intrinsically in each other's existence', that they share 'a mutuality of being', and are 'members of one another' (Sahlins 2013: ix) is intuitively graspable – not as an analytic abstraction, as many definitions of kinship seem to be, but in a way that palpably makes sense of a whole range of human experience as described in the ethnographic record, and also our own. (Janet Carsten, 'What Kinship Does and How', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3/2 (2013): 245–51, at 245)

gets lost in the many debates on the importance or dangers of family. In order to discuss what family might mean we therefore need an awareness of the difficulty of answering that question. This is why we started with *Housekeeping*.

The fact that *Housekeeping* is not a story about a happy family – whatever that may be – helps to protect against what is often deemed to be one of the greatest risks in reflecting on the topic of family: that of forming an idealised view of it. The impression of doing so is easily created if one approaches family not in order to discuss its flaws or injustices but, in a constructive way, to find out which aspects and meanings of human life it highlights – as we will do in this study. Therefore, this criticism will be a central one to discuss in the rest of our investigation. The family story discussed in the Prologue, however, already points out that the problematic and dangerous aspects of family life are never out of sight when asking what family is about. Rather, investigating this meaning should contribute to understanding the specific risks of family life and dealing with them.

Our question of what family is about thus meets with two difficulties. First is that of how it can be dealt with as a basic, open and neutral question when family is such a controversial issue in a Western context at present. Second is that of how meanings of family can be elaborated when they are so hard to formulate in a general sense. These two perspectives will guide our explorations – the former by what we called stepping back, the latter by integrating the awareness of the unspoken and perhaps unnameable character of family in a constructive investigation of what family could mean.

Obviously, we are on moral ground when reflecting on the question of what family could mean. Moreover, our aim of analysing why family is a controversial topic and what is at stake in it, formulated as an attempt to understand ourselves, implies a normative stance. The title of our study, 'Family and Christian Ethics', localises it explicitly in the field of ethics. As the arguments already presented indicate, however, this does not mean we aim to give a normative outline of what family should be or look like from a Christian perspective. Neither are somewhat classic issues related to reflection on family in Christian ethics discussed head-on. The topic is simply too controversial and inscrutable to allow for such a direct approach.

Our study is an attempt to develop an alternative approach precisely by analysing the concrete impasses to which reflection on family in different scholarly disciplines often leads. These impasses reveal the characteristic difficulty of the topic of family in our time, but they can also be analysed as

to their revealing potential in hinting at the alternative ways to approach family in ethical reflection. As such, this book is also an experiment to do ethics – more specifically theological or Christian ethics – in a different way. This ‘different way’ cannot be outlined now, in advance, before having analysed current theorising on family. In this chapter, these analyses of current scholarship will be given, resulting in an outline of our alternative project under the heading of a ‘mystery approach’.

In subsequent chapters, this approach will be both further elaborated and critically assessed in relation to three issues. In Chapter 2, this is the issue of whether it is at all possible to speak about family as a distinct sphere. This will be explored by focussing on the idea of a ‘family tie’ as a mostly unarticulated bond that is experienced as given and as a basis for acting and expecting something from other members of the family. This requires that we delve deeper into what ‘givenness’ might mean, which will be the subject of Chapter 3. Subsequently, Chapter 4 specifies the general attitude implied in the view of family as given by means of the notion of dependence. The Epilogue, finally, takes stock of what approaching family as mystery means for ethics. The choice to concentrate on givenness and dependence, as well as the choice for a ‘mystery approach’ will be explained in this first chapter. All these choices are closely linked to problems that occur in current scholarly approaches to family, and it is to these which we will now turn.

### **‘What Is Family About?’ As a Basic, Open and Neutral Moral Question**

For a moment, we leave aside the second difficulty of formulating what family might mean in order to concentrate on the urgency of reflecting on it as a ‘basic, open and neutral’ question. With this formulation, we are stating that our reasons for turning to the topic of family are not to defend or attack it, not to worry about the vitality of family, or, on the contrary, its impeding influence on individual self-realisation. In the current Western context, such strong pro and contra sentiments prevail and often presuppose a specific understanding of family. This meaning is mostly implicit, not approached as an issue but regarded as self-evident. It is this polarised situation that we hope to open up by stepping back and asking this basic question of what connects family members and in what sense family is a separate sphere of life with perhaps a logic of its own. Dealing with this question sheds light on what is at stake in the current controversy and may thus contribute to overcoming it.

*Stepping Back from Controversies*

To step back, it seems important first of all to regain a sense of family as a moral topic apart from current controversy. The topic of family is at present easily associated with other very prominent topics like divorce, same-sex relations, adoption, domestic abuse, care for elderly family members and so forth. Family, however, is not just a topic of ethical concern because of these hot issues. People experience family as an important reality, a substantial factor as regards their identity and in shaping daily life. Family is acknowledged as a crucial factor in upbringing and care. Notions of duty come into play here. The need for ethical reflection arises as soon as such duties are no longer seen as self-evident.

Examples of this need not be as intense and dramatic as those of the sisters Ruth and Lucille in *Housekeeping* to raise moral questions. They are also trivial and everyday. Is it my duty to help my children with their homework, or is this a task for the school? Should I take a week of care leave when my elderly father has the flu? What is my role as a sister in comforting my brother whose relationship has ended? How should family relationships be given shape when members live far away from each other? In what ways should one be committed to family members outside the nuclear family? Questions like these are part of everyday morality and confront one with the question of what responsibilities family ties imply.

Moreover, the association of family with strained relationships is obvious. The responsibilities one can feel do not always imply that these are good or satisfying relationships. For many people, family relationships are the most difficult riddles of their lives. As a result, moral questions concerning how one should behave towards family members are easy to imagine and the urgency of reflecting on them is felt almost daily. The fundamental question of 'what family is about' underlies these concrete issues. What connects family members in a specific way that is not, or not entirely, comparable to other relationships? It is this question that we refer to as 'basic'.

The focus, subsequently, on this fundamental question as an open one means the present study is not just interested in – to name an obvious demarcation of family – blood ties or what is called 'biological kinship'. We will of course discuss these notions, as they are predominant demarcations in a Western context. However, we are also interested in the ties that bind, for example, a woman to the children of her partner from an earlier relationship and the children to their mother or grandparents. We are equally interested in the ties of a man to his adopted son and to the

so-called biological parents of his son, his genetic sisters and the non-genetic brother with whom he grew up; or in the ties of lesbian spouses to the child one of them bore, to the sperm donor by whom the child was conceived, to the donor's parents who have no other grandchildren and to the aunt of one of the spouses who happens to live nearby.

We have in mind all the experiences of the special tie which people may associate with being family and is somehow distinguished from being friends, neighbours or something else. This does not mean that family experiences may not overlap in part with experiences related to other kinds of relationships. We do not claim any radical exclusiveness for the meanings family may reveal. On the other hand, the starting point of our analysis is that, in our time, in our context, family confronts us with specific experiences and meanings that are not so emphatically found in other relationships.

To explain the neutral character of our approach, it is important to understand the current moral controversies regarding family against the background of a more general moral uncertainty or confusion. This is the result of developments that have been summarised as the increased pluralism of world views and fragmentation of moral traditions. Morality is conceived of as a matter of individual preference. These developments are also visible in relation to family. Forms of family life and ways of living together have become increasingly diverse in the past century, especially since the 1970s, and this diversification has not yet reached its limits.

These changes are well known and may be grouped into three broad categories. There are the changes in the forms of partner relations: marriage is declining while cohabitation is increasing; divorce has become much more common, same-sex relationships are more widespread and legal. Divorced people with children build a new family life, often around each of the partners. Newly composed or blended families come into existence as a result of new partner relations. These developments are partly intertwined with the processes of women's emancipation, in particular their participation in the labour market.

These processes also influence a second field of changes, that of having and raising children. Families have become smaller and motherhood is undertaken at a later age. Having children is no longer obvious but often perceived as a conscious choice. New birth technologies influence these decisions, as well as the possibility of same-sex couples having children. The status of the wanted child has implications for its upbringing. The role of family is emphasised in particular as regards developments on the level of emotions and value. On the other hand, both parents working outside the home or being a single parent leads to an increase in institutionalised childcare.

Third, the position of families within society has changed: in Western societies, the extended family is less prominent as a primary network. Individualisation and emancipation result in more independence of the individual from the family, also economically. At the same time, this individualisation nourishes an opposite development. As more people live alone, family relationships become more important to fall back on in problematic situations. The increase in global migration also changes family life. On the one hand, it means that family is no longer nearby and, on the other, that obligations remain of financial family support or the duty to care for children who are left behind.

### *Beyond Worries, Appreciation and Reluctance*

When these changes in family life are mentioned, the pictures are often accompanied by the suggestion that something is crumbling or eroding. The idea seems to prevail that, due to an enormous choice in form and intensity, family life has become so complex that the question arises as to whether individuals can handle it. Many people are worried about what is called 'the current state of the family', in part because of their own experiences with broken relationships. These worries presuppose that family is somehow a good that should be protected. Ethics may thus easily be drawn in to underpin the goodness of family and indicate that it should be supported and how this can be done. In such types of ethics, the basic question of what family might mean and in which sense it is a good is not a neutral one: the goodness is presupposed and often a specific form of family life as well, with heterosexual parents and their biological children at its core. As we will see, this often means ethics leans heavily on what are presented as facts from social or natural sciences, which confirm the assumed value of family.

On the other hand, this goodness of family and worries over its decline are all but generally assumed. There is wide consensus that the democratisation of family life and the rise of a culture of intimacy with a lot of individual freedom should be valued. Common sense in what may be called leftist circles has it that family life, especially that of the 1950s, is not something to be desired. It is seen as a more or less outdated phenomenon that is surpassed by chosen relationships. If family relationships are taken seriously, it is in terms of this model of conscious choice as well. As a result, raising the topic of family as such meets with suspicion from progressive circles. It is discussed with an eye to its problematic implications, not as a neutral issue.



Given the current moral insecurity, reflections on family thus easily become polarised in oppositions of apparently secure positions in favour of or against family that do not allow for a basic discussion of its meaning. As a result, the fundamental question of what family symbolises is not posed so much as a neutral question. A reluctance for the latter approach may finally also arise from a less negative stance – that is, the objection that family is simply a fact of life which has always been there and will always be there if human life is to continue.

What could be meaningfully said or researched about something so obvious? Why should we bother about family? Everybody seems to know somehow what they mean by family, even in the current situation of great diversity in family life. Nobody is looking for general formulations of meanings, duties or rules – if these could be formulated at all while doing justice to their diversity. People are happy to figure these out by themselves. It is a private affair and there is no need for something like ‘family ethics’.

Moreover, such an ethics suggests that a common denominator can be formulated that covers the enormously diverse forms of family life we find at present. Does not this diversification point out, though, that it is impossible to speak in a general way about what family might mean? Objections motivated by an emancipatory agenda add that such a general speaking easily privileges dominant family patterns and does not contribute to resisting the marginalisation of non-mainstream family life.

Family is thus, on the one hand, an obvious moral topic, but not necessarily in the sense in which we would like to approach it. We aim to contribute to understanding what is at stake in the current polarisations without becoming part of them precisely by posing the basic, open and neutral question of what family might mean. It is basic in that it asks for meaning at the fundamental level underlying different kinds of family relations and behaviour, like those between partners or parents and children. It is open in the sense that we do not define beforehand what a family is, but include what people experience as family. It is neutral in the sense that it is not prompted by worries over family decline or persistence. We pose this question in a time in which family has a controversial status.

We see a better understanding of this status as a central task of ethics. Ethics should bring the difficult aspects of being and thinking about family in our time to light and explore alternative ways of dealing with them. We will see that this approach should not be misunderstood as one of solving the difficulties. In line with the difficulties of naming what family might mean and of speaking about family in general evoked in the Prologue, we aim for ethical reflection that makes us aware of this ineffability and allows

us to explore the boundaries of what may be said and clarified and what cannot be named.

### **A Focus Regarding Family: Givenness and Dependence**

We have already indicated that we do not leave the question of what family might mean entirely open. We will focus on the aspects of family that we think are difficult in our time and turn family into a charged, even controversial topic. As we said, the context from which we start our investigation and which we roughly indicated as Western will become most visible in this focus. It presupposes a specific understanding of our time and context. We will try to account beforehand for this understanding as much as possible in this chapter, but it cannot be made entirely plausible here. Its adequacy will have to be proven in the actual elaboration of the aspects in the following chapters, where we also analyse current academic debates related to these themes. What we can clarify beforehand are the general assumptions that lie behind this focus.

#### *Givenness and Dependence in a Neutral Sense*

We assume that what makes family into something controversial is first of all that family relations are not freely chosen but discovered to be already there, to exist without people having deliberately organised them like this. The field of what is not chosen but somehow given is a sensitive one in our time. It is in this aspect that we localise the first main confrontation the topic of family holds for our context today. The second one has to do with the kind of relations family embodies. We would like to characterise these as relations of dependence. As with givenness, this term is meant in a neutral sense – that is, not yet implying any moral evaluation. Family relations are of such a kind that people are somehow implied in each other's identity. Family members are part of who people are, for better or for worse. It is this intertwinement, entanglement or interwovenness that the term *dependence* indicates here.

The connotations attached to the notions of givenness and dependence lead to the heart of the family controversies. Both concepts are part of what may be called a conservative sphere of meanings. Asking to pay attention to givenness may easily evoke a view of life oriented to what is presented as 'what has always been the case'. Dependence is generally experienced as an unfavourable condition implying a lack of freedom and autonomy, even oppression or a pathological situation. We will deal with these connotations more elaborately in Chapters 3 and 4 in particular.

At first sight already, it is clear that the pros and cons regarding family referred to earlier can be related to different evaluations of these aspects of givenness and dependence. Conservative voices in current family debate regard family as the crumbling locus of life 'as it used to be'. They regard the view of human beings as unique individuals who face the lifelong task of independently giving shape to their own lives as a threat to necessary structures of familial support and care. Others, however, regard family as an important hindrance to developing individual identities. Givenness and dependence seem to be keys that may be helpful in unlocking current controversies on the topic of family and understand what is at stake in them.

We think the experiences that may be associated with these terms are not very often part of the debates on family. Our study aims to make them visible and address them in order to deal with them without ending up in those well-known controversies. For this purpose, we need to evoke these experiences here in a first sketch, while the rest of our investigation will be dedicated to exploring the value of this focus.

#### *The Controversial Character of Given and Dependent Family Positions*

In the Western context in which this book originates family relationships are not of the kind where free choice dominates. This characteristic can be found in phrases like 'relationships by birth', 'blood' and 'biological or genetic relationships'. They express the fact that people find themselves part of a certain network of relationships without having decided to do so. Nobody chooses one's parents, aunts, grandparents, or nephews. Having children may be perceived as a choice, but it is more of a desire, a wish that may be fulfilled or not. When one actually conceives a child, this reality is experienced much more as something 'taking place' or 'happening to one' than as something deliberately chosen. It is different from most of what one wished for or was afraid of beforehand.

Much the same holds for partner relations: one desires a life with the other and may ritually shape an official 'start' or public announcement of one's 'choice for another'. However, most people will experience all the turning and tossing previous to the big 'decision' as of an entirely different order and thus standing in no direct relation to the actual experience of sharing life with a partner or children. This life encompasses much more than what can be taken into account in the moment of actually choosing. One does not know that choosing the other will lead to this life. One decides to share life for better or for worse, but nobody knows in advance what that will mean. At least, this

is a very peculiar kind of decision or choice, one that is not easily kept alive in the face of an overwhelming experience of not being able to choose.

Living together is a strong factor in shaping one's identity. Again, this shaping is not so much experienced as consciously chosen; it takes place, mostly without being noticed. In the case of a partner or a child, one discovers after a while one's life as intertwined with that of the other in deep, ineffable ways. As regards family members with whom people grow up, this interwovenness is even more experienced as one in which one finds oneself. This may be difficult, but the majority of families do not perceive of this as a reality not living up to their choices. The discourse of freely and consciously making choices thus captures aspects of family relationships in the sense of choosing one's partner or deciding to be open to having children, but this does not do away with the dominance of basic experiences of the family setting as something that is not being chosen.

It is this specific meaning that creates friction in a time when people are supposed to be or actively encouraged to become independent individuals in unique ways who freely choose their own paths in life. What about the fact that family members are also 'one of us', share a family history, behave along the lines of family customs and have responsibilities for their non-chosen family members, who also take responsibility for them? To put it briefly, in the Western context, the notion of family seems to stand for the given, non-chosen part of life and dependence upon others in unknown and often unnameable ways. People of our time are not very well equipped to deal with these aspects of life. Family is the place where people are very much faced with the given side of life and in particular with being fundamentally related in deeply uncontrollable ways, in both joyful and sad senses. Family is pre-eminently where people experience the fact that things cannot be managed but simply exist or happen.

Another aspect that adds to these experiences of not actively shaping life but of finding oneself placed in it and determined by others has to do with the character of family positions or roles. The connection between family members is of a kind in which every person has a specific position, indicated by a name – son, daughter, mother, father, brother, sister and so on. These positions happen to one. Outside the context of family, one usually needs to be qualified to enter a particular position or job. This is true of adult professionals, but also of children. For example, to function as a pupil in the school system, one needs a basic command of the school's primary language.

Within families, however, the positions people hold are not based primarily on capacities or abilities. People find themselves present in their roles and are not able to orchestrate them. One may hope to become

a mother, sister or grandfather, but one cannot arrange it by becoming qualified for it. Again, partner relations and having children are the kind of family relations in which at least some orchestration and qualification plays a role. Most people, however, probably marry or have children without having read books about it or attended courses on marriage or raising children. In such cases, they do not enter the position of spouse or parent on the basis of some proven suitability. It happens to them, which is why the language of gift, as well as that of burden, figures in these cases.

This language already indicates another side to these family positions – that is, they largely cannot be undone. In *Housekeeping*, Ruth has a father, and he continues to be her father even though she does not know who he is or where he lives. If he were to reappear some day and make himself known as her father, this could still be a meaningful position, even though he has not been actively involved as her father in the past. In a similar way, the sisters-in-law of Grandmother Sylvia and, later on, Aunt Sylvie appear in the story as Ruth and Lucille's guardians. Their becoming guardians is a result of their family positions, not of their being qualified or familiar with the children. They take care of the children, but they do not become their mothers. People cannot simply replace each other in family positions. Positions or roles are specific to family members. Moreover, their character is dependent on the existence of the positions of the others.

Family is a web of dependent relations in which the knot of each position is constitutive for the other knots. This is also true of positions that are no longer fulfilled, as in the case of dead or absent family members. Marilynne Robinson emphasises this in an interview on *Housekeeping*. In reaction to a question on whether the relationship between Ruth and Lucille breaks up and whether that between Sylvie and Ruth replaces the bond with Ruth's deceased mother, Sylvie's sister, Helen, Robinson argues:

Actually the bond doesn't break between Lucille and Ruthie any more than it did between Sylvie and Helen who have completely lost touch with one another. They don't scatter in the sense of losing consciousness of one another . . . I think there's a way in which your life is appended, is accomplished, by people whom you seldom see, people who, when you *do* see them, you can't talk to them very well, people who have died – the good grandmother, for example – and you exist always in reference to them. So that even though the biographical bonds between people may break or become overextended, the absolute proximity you associate with significant people in your mind never ceases.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Pinsker, 'Marilynne Robinson', 120.

Robinson uses the phrase 'significant people' and does not explicitly refer to family here. It may not be by chance, however, that in *Housekeeping* these 'significant people' are all family. In our view, family in particular confronts one – at least in our time and context – with these associations in one's mind with 'significant people' as being in 'absolute proximity'.

In other areas of life, positions end when one does not fulfil them properly. In the field of labour, for instance, people are in principle replaceable by any other person who has similar capacities. We are familiar with the idea that we have to be qualified in order to achieve positions, but that these qualifications do not make us unique fulfillers of these positions. In families, however, people do not assume a position primarily on the basis of their being qualified for it, nor are they replaceable in these positions. Even if partners separate or parents are no longer involved in the care for their children, something of the position remains, albeit perhaps only in terminology. Of course, people who raise children in the absence of their so-called biological parents usually mean much more to their adopted children than their biological parents do. As, for example, the quests for biological fathers in recent cases of anonymous sperm donation illustrate, these positions are not without meaning.

Precisely as regards these points of irreplaceability and the fact that being qualified for the position is not what leads one to fulfil that position, family relations differ from others. Both aspects add to the character of family positions as not subject to arranging. This is another point of contrast with dominant ways of looking at positions and relations implied in them. This contrast does not mean that there are no overlaps. It matters how people fill family positions, and it is important to perceive of family positions as implying qualities people need to live up to. It is not on the basis of these qualities that they enter into these positions, however. Moreover, in these positions, family members cannot be replaced by other members, although others can fulfil specific tasks or functions.

A final aspect of the non-chosen and interdependent character that relates to the given family positions is the characteristic of inequality. In current Western views of relationships, people attach great value to equality. The person to whom one relates is expected to make a contribution comparable to what one invests in the relationship. Moreover, the other should not dominate or always be in the lead. Also, it is usually preferable to have relationships with people who are not quite unlike ourselves. The democratisation of relationships is a recent but by now firmly established ideal. The plea for children's rights is an apt example of it.

Family members, however, are clearly not related to each other as equals. The family positions involve different tasks as well as a hierarchy or asymmetry. Parents give life to their children and raise them. Children receive life and upbringing from their parents and are dependent on them in the most basic and fundamental sense – without parents they die. Of course, they may be raised in an institutional setting instead of a family, but this does not do away with the fact that the child–parent family relation is one of utmost dependence. What parents give to their children is usually much more and especially of a very different kind from what children give to their parents. Children may be said to be principally in debt to their parents. This is not a debt in the sense that it should be paid off, however. One may even wonder whether the language of balancing and debts applies to being family, for raising children is usually a source of joy to the parents – in that sense, children give their parents a lot, but this is not a reciprocity that makes them equals. The amount of inequality involved in family relations once more makes it contrast with dominant ideals of good relationships.

This first sketch of the difficulties of givenness and dependence as experienced in current family life should not be misread as an attempt to pin down what family means in a direct way. This would be contrary to our earlier comments on the difficulty of naming what family might mean. This sketch should only serve to make transparent in a first, rough way what we mean by givenness and dependence in relation to family, and why we think these are the fields of meanings to investigate further. The experiences to which we refer by the terms *givenness* and *dependence* are not exceptional but everyday. They are experiences everyone has to come to terms with. This is easier when these are good, meaningful experiences contributing to human flourishing. Even when this is the case, however, difficulties remain due to the views of the good life and good relationships that currently prevail. Our study addresses this discrepancy by studying family through the lenses of givenness and dependence.

Given the controversies on the topic of family, it is not easy to find appropriate thinkers for an investigation in the basic, open and neutral sense indicated. Moreover, the big changes in family life, including its moral status, have inspired an enormous amount of research in all kinds of disciplines and the field of what may count as family-related topics is vast. In the current climate of specialisation of scientific research, this leads to varied and detailed research into single family-related topics, but not so much to attention to our fundamental question of what family might



mean.<sup>3</sup> We will elaborate on the relevance and urgency we nevertheless see for our approach in analysing contemporary academic research that seems to have some affinity with our interest.

### The Current State of the Family

In sociological research family comes into view in a more or less general sense in studies on the changes in post-industrial societies after the Second World War. Here, one finds a rather straightforward analysis of the controversial status of the family, which may also be related to our idea that family is currently experienced as standing for givenness and dependence. Family is seen as a crumbling institution as a result of ideals of individual moral freedom and independence. There is agreement on this point among classic sociological accounts of varying kinds, such as those of Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman.<sup>4</sup>

In their analyses from the 1990s onwards, such scholars relate the post-war changes in family life to the great value people attach to free choice and equality in relationships. Moreover, they point out that the nature of the private sphere has changed. Here the intimacy between spouses as regards both sexuality and emotions or the inner life is of paramount importance. This is seen as a recent, post-World War II development based on earlier Romanticist views from the end of the eighteenth century. These sociologists, however, do not agree on how the consequences of these developments for the family should be evaluated.

<sup>3</sup> It is remarkable that 'family' is not a topic for disciplinary introductory handbooks or encyclopaedias in social sciences or humanities. 'Family' is addressed, not as a separate topic for a lemma or article, but only in combination with more specific themes ranging from marriage or couple relationships to resilience and genomics. On the other hand, 'family' has been studied in new disciplinary branches like 'family (evolutionary) psychology' and 'family sociology', or from a more applied perspective in 'family therapy', 'family law' or 'genealogy'. In handbooks on these family disciplines, however, the general issue of what it might mean to be a family does not seem to be reflected on as a separate theme either.

<sup>4</sup> This selection of authors does of course not claim completeness but is meant to point out the agreement on this point among leading sociologists. Another prominent sociological account of family is found in the work by David H. Morgan, who, however, argues in favour of qualitative sociological research into family practices instead of approaching family as a structure or institution (*Family Connections: An Introduction to Family Studies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); *Rethinking Family Practices* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)). A different focus is present in another classic, the recently republished *Families, Children and the Quest for a Global Ethic* by Robert Rapoport (1997; republ. London: Routledge 2018), which focusses on the importance of the contributions of families to the increasingly globalised 'New World Order', localised in raising children who can constructively participate in it.



*The Rise of Love Relationships to the Detriment of Family Relations*

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim interpret these developments as resulting from a new ideal, even a 'latter-day religion' – that of self-realisation through love.<sup>5</sup> Love as the central project of personal life has replaced stable institutions like religion, class, marriage or family roles. Central to this view of love are emotional and sexual satisfaction for the individual, which are considered their own project of trial and elaboration. It is a project that has to be negotiated between partners as well, influenced, moreover, by the love images that the market presents. Expectations are high, which puts a great burden on partner relations, especially because they are no longer strongly embedded in a larger network. Thus, the chances for disappointment are high, as are the risks of an intimacy that turns out to be harmful.

Therefore, the Becks argue in favour of a societal order that enables and supports real (gender) equality in relationships. This seems to mean a reinvention of family. The authors protest the prevalent illusion of a return of the old nuclear family or the invention of a 'post-bourgeois' one but do not elaborate on this new family life (165–6). They largely remain within the boundaries of explaining the current situation with respect to its tensions and paradoxes and corresponding risks. As regards family life, they notice that it remains paradoxically, just like marriage, an extremely important ideal despite its disintegration (171). This contradiction is explained as displaying two sides of the same quasi-religious faith in love. The most telling example of this faith is divorce, where existing family relations are sacrificed for the sake of love, a love that is 'truer' than the one left behind (173–4). There is no attempt in this sociological interpretation to make sense of the phenomenon of family in general apart from the central belief in love.

Giddens' analyses show many similarities to the Becks', but he interprets the developments from the 1950s as 'the rise of coupledness' and understands that rise as the expansion of democratic ideals.<sup>6</sup> Family in the old

<sup>5</sup> This is the theme of the final chapter of Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, translated by Mark Ritter and Jane Wiebel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), in particular 170ff.; the following page numbers in the main text refer to this book until a new text is discussed. In Beck-Gernsheim's later book, *Was kommt nach der Familie? Einblicke in neue Lebensformen* (Munich: Beck, 1998), the focus is not so much the earlier thesis of the central belief in love but the differentiation of family life as regards divorce and post-divorce family making, life planning, the central role of women in care, the chosen child and multicultural families. The latter theme of family in a globalised world, especially the shape partner love takes when partners live abroad or come from different countries originally, is the central topic of the Becks' joint study *Distant Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> See chapter 4, 'The Family', in Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization Is Reshaping Our Lives*, 2nd ed. (London: Profile Books, 2002), 57–8; on this topic compare also his *Transformations of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), in particular chapters 6 (94–6) and 9 (188–96).

sense of the 'industrial world', which was a unit of a primarily economic character, has disappeared. In this model the couple was 'only a part' of the family unit. Bonds with children and other kin were as important as those between spouses and usually even more. At present, however, the couple whose relationship, including 'sexual attraction', is regarded as based on love (59), has taken the place of the old extended family. The 'old ties' between people both within and outside the family have now been replaced by what Giddens calls a 'pure relationship' (61). It is the ideal of a relationship based on love, intimacy in the sense of a 'democracy of emotions' (63) and thus a trusting openness towards each other in an ongoing dialogue.

All these aspects presuppose equality and the absence of 'arbitrary power, coercion or violence' (62). Giddens points out the striking parallel between this ideal and public democracy. This 'pure relationship' also underlies current views on parent-child relations and friendship (61). There can be authority, as in the case of parents over children, but in principle all people are equal. Giddens emphasises the major character of this change and concludes: "Coupling" and "uncoupling" provide a more accurate description of the arena of personal life now than do "marriage and the family" (59).

Giddens describes his time in terms of a straightforward replacement of family by coupledness. On the other hand, like the Becks, he also points to the longing for the so-called traditional family as characteristic of current Western countries (53–7). Of all institutions, family is the most surrounded by nostalgia. Thus, in the Western world more than anywhere else, family is a 'site' and even a 'metaphor' for the 'struggles between tradition and modernity' (53). Giddens criticises this nostalgic longing for its imprecise view of family and blindness to the obvious flaws of the non-modern family – a privileged position for men, inferior roles for women, children and people outside heterosexual marriage and a corresponding 'sexual double standard' with a lot of freedom only for men (54–6).

Giddens does not, however, address the apparent paradox that the replacement of the old family structures with coupledness and pure relationships goes hand in hand with the longing for a traditional kind of family. He does not analyse why family is the battleground between conservatives and progressives. Why do people not wholeheartedly embrace the new 'pure relationship' with its crucial, democracy-promoting implications? That this is not what interests Giddens may at least be partly explained by the fact that he clearly favours the emergence of the pure relationship: the 'democracy of the emotions in everyday life . . . is just as important as public democracy in improving the quality of our lives' (63).

Bauman also reflects on relationships around the turn of the millennium and pays more attention to this tension between current forms of love relationships and a longing for the lost reality of the old family.<sup>7</sup> He regards this tension as fading, however. The 'double bind' of living in the two worlds of unpredictable, troublesome love relationships and the given one of kinship has had its day (26). This was the former situation in which the 'belonging' experienced in unchosen kinship relations somehow compensated for the instability of love relationships dominated entirely by the principle of free choice. It was itself the result of the evaporation of the idea that love relationships could become 'like kinship' (29).

This has turned out to be a passing situation, however. At present, the desire for 'belonging' is stilled by 'communities of occasion' or 'networks' – that is, 'floating coalitions and drifting enmities [that] coalesce for a time, only to dissolve once more and make room for other and different condensations' (34). The vulnerable world of free love relationships – understood as something one may 'fall into' as well as 'out of' – no longer needs the world of kinship or family as its difficult other. The focus is on acquiring skills that help one cope with what is perceived as the inherently volatile character of partner relations.

Bauman evaluates this situation of liquid, fragile love very negatively. He emphasises what is lost by the development of what Giddens calls the rise of the 'pure relationship' – dependency on, unconditional commitment to and trust in others (90). This is a very difficult situation to live in, but Bauman takes it as a fact. His analysis is very critical but not marked by nostalgia. The uncertainty and loneliness that result from liquid love is soil for a hope for togetherness and morality, albeit a hope and not a certainty (93). His aim is not to elaborate on this hope but to diagnose the current problematic situation.

In all three analyses, family only comes into view as a past reality. As such, it is at most the subject of nostalgic desires. The topic of family is taken into account only in the description of the present situation as a contrast to prevailing developments and ideals. Although the new ways of shaping intimate everyday living together are at least diverse and, especially according to Bauman, far from crystallised, it is clear that family is about a world that is past. It is no longer a meaningful category or term for understanding human togetherness.

Love, freedom and equality are the relevant lenses for grasping current relationships. They are used to understand the changes that have taken

<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2003), in particular chapter 1, 'Falling In and Out of Love', 1–37.

place in all kinds of family-related phenomena like parent relations, having children, the balance between work and private life or the role of the state in private affairs. It does not make sense to use 'family' as an umbrella term that indicates a factor these phenomena have in common. 'Family' stands for aspects of life that are no longer relevant – non-chosen bonds or chosen but unbreakable ones with well-defined gender roles, dependencies and authority. For the Becks and Giddens this new situation is to be welcomed, while Bauman regards it as very problematic though inescapable.

Insofar as these analyses give insight into what family currently stands for or symbolises, their approach resonates with that of our study. Moreover, their conclusions are in line with our assumption concerning the tensions between the givenness and dependence characteristic of family life and current ideals of freedom, autonomy and equality. However, the sociological interpretations of interest in family as nourished by nostalgia, and therefore not really to be taken seriously, mean that they no longer regard it as a relevant object of study. For example, they do not consider in detail why family is not simply left behind as a kind of ideal if it is in fact something of the past. Is this only because of conservative sentiments? The sociological accounts do not explicitly address the fact that there is, apparently, something in the topic of family that keeps bothering or attracting people. The approach in our study is, again, more open and neutral than these. If family stands for lasting or given relationships of dependence in particular as opposed to current flexible and fluid ones, are these not meanings to ponder? Givenness and dependence remain aspects of life even if thinking of life as an individual project is more self-evident. May not a closer look at how givenness and dependence are lived in families be a way to take these aspects of life into account and show ways of making sense of it, in practice as well? These questions resonate more with research that criticises the idea that family is something of the past. We turn to these critical voices in order to further relate our approach to current family research.

#### *Unmasking the Contrast Paradigm by Pointing to Family Diversity*

While the aforementioned authors mention family primarily as fragmenting, and as the object of nostalgic longings, there is also research that takes this longing more seriously and opposes the paradigm of family decline. Remarkably, some authors start from a similar analysis of the crucial turn to love and free choice as the basis of intimate relationships but do not portray family as the contrast to these developments. In the historically oriented theories of, for example, the philosopher Luc Ferry – who owes

a lot to the earlier French family historian, Philippe Ariès – it is pointed out that attaching great value to family is a rather recent development.<sup>8</sup> He shares the analysis of our time as dominated by the ideal of free autonomy in choosing one's life course and by the rise of romantic love, including the importance of equality and intimacy.

Ferry does not conclude from this, however, that the importance of family is fading; rather, it is being upgraded. In modernity relationships are no longer considered in rationalist economic terms as a form of contract but are measured by the criterion of love.<sup>9</sup> This is indeed, as the Becks indicated, a great revolution, but it is one that gives rise to a new form of family life, the modern family. Marrying 'for the sake of love' means 'for the flourishing of love in the family, the love of children and, more widely, the bond between generations' (8). The child has changed from a useful economic factor into a treasure that crowns the relationship of the parents and should be approached with great affection.

The framework in which these changes occur is the rise of a separate private sphere. As a result, currently a 'formidable explosion of intimacy values' takes place.<sup>10</sup> Family is one of the few – perhaps the only – social institutions that is alive and moreover stable (98–9). As such, its role in and influence on the public domain is massive. The crucial importance of love as the basis for the partner relationship spreads from the private domain to the public sphere. There it becomes the basic value of society, which results in interest in the aspects of private life as central themes of public policy – health, education, help for the elderly, the environment and the ensuring of the possibilities for personal development and flourishing (50–61, 144–6).

In a similar vein, other, more profound historical accounts go contrary to the views of the history of family life in modernity as one of decline. The historians Georg Fertig and Mikołaj Szofitysek observe a gap between family sociology and historical approaches to family like historical demography; these disciplines are in fact cognate in their approach of the study of family.<sup>11</sup> They argue that in much family sociology the past is taken into account only as a contrast to the present. In particular, sociologists focus on aspects of

<sup>8</sup> Luc Ferry, *Familles, je vous aime: Politique et vie privée à l'âge de la mondialisation* (Paris: XO Editions, 2007); Luc Ferry, *On Love: A Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century*, translated by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Ferry, *On Love*, 44–50. <sup>10</sup> Ferry, *Familles*, 126.

<sup>11</sup> Georg Fertig and Mikołaj Szofitysek, 'Fertilität und Familienformen in Europa: Eine historische Perspektive', in *Handbuch Bevölkerungssoziologie*, ed. by Yasemin Niephaus, Michaela Kreyenfeld and Reinhold Sackmann (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016), 179–200, at 180–1.

current family life that contrast with what they perceive to be the ‘classical family’ – that is, the modern nuclear family of breadwinner father, housewife and children in their private sphere. This modern family is seen as different from the extended family of premodernity, which was largely defined by its economic function. Initially, historians agreed with this picture, but from the 1970s onwards, it has been revised in such a way that the result is the opposite: an orthodoxy opposed to such popular theories of modernisation. Fertig and Szoltysek analyse this change as fitting in with what they regard as the general academic historical approach of criticising common sense views of history.

As regards family-related topics, historians counter the generally acknowledged picture of modernity and the twentieth century in particular as a time in which individual autonomy becomes the standard for the good life, which is distinguished from premodern life as determined by social conventions. Historical research emphasises the varieties in family life chronologically but also geographically. It points out, for example, the relative autonomy of the nuclear family as typical for centuries already of north-western Europe. Since the seventeenth century in particular, the tendency to marry freely chosen partners at a later age can be seen. The popular idea that reproduction becomes a conscious choice only when having children is no longer economically necessary is also denied on the basis of historical data.<sup>12</sup>

Other research contradicts the common-sense assumption that a stronger state is automatically detrimental to family ties. It shows that – at least in Europe – kinship played a central role in the rise of the modern class society.<sup>13</sup> Case studies reveal that changes in the organisation and status of family are, rather, directly related to changes at the level of politics. Thus, family life has played a constructive role in times of political change, in particular in the formation of strong nation states in modernity. The historians Simon Teuscher and David Sabeau demonstrate this in a periodisation that counters the simple contrast model of premodern versus modern. They distinguish between two major transitions in the

<sup>12</sup> Fertig and Szoltysek, ‘Fertilität’, 183, 186–9.

<sup>13</sup> A recent historical study of kinship in Europe displays this general corrective thesis and uses concrete case studies to contradict the assumption that modernity is the history of the ‘decline and contraction towards the modern nuclear family’ (David Warren Sabeau, Simon Teuscher and Jon Mathieu, eds., *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Development (1300–1900)* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), x and passim). Fertig and Szoltysek refer to David Sabeau’s own historical case studies (1990, 1998) as an important example of the so-called Göttinger approach to historical demography, which was a pioneer in taking into account what actually happened inside the household, instead of regarding it as a ‘black box’ (Fertig and Szoltysek, ‘Fertilität’, 186).

shape of European family life up to 1900.<sup>14</sup> From the end of the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, an overall increase in the importance of kinship relations in Europe can be seen in a vertical and hierarchical sense as regards property, inheritance and succession (4–16). From the mid-eighteenth century on, a second change follows that leads to a stronger emphasis on horizontal family relations as emotional relations, which can be seen, for example, in the increase of endogamy (16–24).<sup>15</sup> The latter change parallels the rise of a new bourgeois wealth that was no longer related to land or monopoly but based on direct money (17), and of the coming into existence of a class society (22). The nineteenth century is called ‘kinship-hot’ in the sense that ‘enormous energy was invested in maintaining and developing extensive, reliable, and well-articulated structures of exchange among connected families over many generations’ (3).

Teuscher and Sabeian argue that the prevalent ‘old story of the rise of the nuclear family and the decline of the importance of kinship’ is not just historically incorrect and in that sense an ‘innocent’ misconception (23). It is completely interwoven with current Western views of human beings as autonomous individuals, ‘cut loose from the responsibilities of kin, and cut out for the heroic task of building the self-generating economy’. As such, it has also influenced views of non-Western societies as dominated, in contrast, by kinship relations. The latter are studied in a specific discipline, not history but anthropology. Among anthropologists, however, this critique of contrastive kinship views as underlying presupposed binary oppositions between ‘the West and the rest’ is found as well. We will analyse these self-critical arguments in detail in Chapter 3.<sup>16</sup> These debates have not just resulted in a methodological renewal in kinship anthropology but also in an interest in how family or kinship take shape in current Western societies, in particular under the influence of new reproduction technology.

<sup>14</sup> David Warren Sabeian and Simon Teuscher, ‘Kinship in Europe: A New Approach to Long-Term Development’, in *Kinship in Europe*, ed. by Sabeian, Teuscher, and Mathieu, 1–32, at 3.

<sup>15</sup> Fertig and Szołtysek argue that this phenomenon of marrying within the same social layer, or even the same family, only changes from the twentieth century onwards (‘Fertilität’, 189).

<sup>16</sup> Susan McKinnon and Fenella Cannell collect empirical research in anthropology to unmask the ideological character of the view of modernity as anti-familial. An original example of the current ambiguity regarding family to which they refer is the study of one’s personal family history, supported by television series and popular books, which is pointed out as ‘the fastest-growing hobby in the United States – and one of the most popular in Europe, Canada, Australia, and beyond’ (Susan McKinnon and Fenella Cannell, eds., *Vital Relations: Modernity and the Persistent Life of Kinship* (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013), 8). Underlying these interests in family is, in their view, ‘the feeling that modernity is a space in which kinship is constantly under threat of being lost’ (11).



In the field of pedagogics, critical attention has likewise been drawn to the large, quasi-historical sketches of developments in the family that predominate in current family studies. In a recent German 'Handbook Family' Burkhard Fuhs concurs with earlier reflections by Karl Lenz and Lothar Böhnisch on the widespread ahistorical tendencies in family scholarship. They call for 'myth hunting' – a critical review of prevailing, emotionally charged 'myths of family imagination'.<sup>17</sup> Lenz and Böhnisch identify three such myths that originated in the nineteenth century parallel to the rise of family studies. These myths share with the aforementioned images the fact that they contrast present family life to that of former times. The contrast may be one of size: the family of the good old days was large – three or more generations – while the family of the present is small. Or the family of former days is seen as one of harmony versus present-day conflictual forms, which presupposes another scheme of gradual family deterioration.

A third myth concerns the continuity of the family through the ages as a community of feelings and emotions. These modern myths came into existence in the struggle of the industrialising societies to cope with developments of democratisation. They serve to underpin both conservative and progressive reactions to it. They offer a model (*Leitbild*) of family, rather than the actual historical situation. For example, the public discourse about the family in the twentieth century after the First World War is characterised by pessimism, worry and the plea to protect family life.<sup>18</sup>

A counter-narrative emerged with the rise of empirical qualitative and quantitative family research from the 1950s onwards. It emphasises that family does not gradually disappear in modernity but receives new functions and takes new shapes. In recent empirical family sociology, the optimistic counter-narrative may still be easily noticed. It can be seen in, for example, the tone of relief found in concluding sections of such studies or summaries for popular, non-academic media. Here family life is said to be 'alive and well'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Burkhard Fuhs, 'Zur Geschichte der Familie', in *Handbuch Familie*, ed. by Jutta Ecarus (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2007), 17–35, at 18; Karl Lenz and Lothar Böhnisch, 'Zugänge zu Familien – ein Grundlagentext', in *Familien: eine interdisziplinäre Einführung*, ed. by Lothar Böhnisch and Karl Lenz (Weinheim: Juventa, 1997), 9–63, at 11. For the concept of 'myth hunting' ('Mythenjagd'), Lenz and Böhnisch refer to Norbert Elias, who uses the concept to describe the central task of scientific research as such: unmasking myths as actually unfounded.

<sup>18</sup> Fuhs, 'Zur Geschichte der Familie', 20–1.

<sup>19</sup> For example, towards the end of the twentieth century, research into the topic of 'family solidarity' clearly showed an increasingly worried tone, combined with mostly reassuring conclusions that the current situation should not be described as one of 'solidarity lost' but as 'solidarity changed' (Petruschka Schaafsma, 'What Is at Stake in the Family? Ethical Reflections on Recent Sociological Research into the Family', in *Family: Kinship That Matters/ Familie: Verwandtschaft die den*



Relief, reassurance and a triumphant tone of having unmasked popular pessimistic views characterise these statements. They presuppose some controversy or polemic as lying behind and perhaps providing the reason for the studies – one, moreover, that is not devoid of moral overtones concerning the good of this fact that ‘the family is alive’. But they do not engage in direct dialogue with opposing views, for example, those of Giddens or Bauman. Contrary to the critical, historically oriented meta-studies just mentioned, these empirical sociological investigations are not introduced as arising from such a controversy or as aiming to shed light on it. Rather, the main denominator of the reasons given for most family sociology may be formulated as mapping the changes in post-war family life.

Further support or justification of the need for this mapping does not seem to be required. It results in studies on a magnitude of topics related to family. As a result, empirical research into these changes of course provides information about current family life, but only in a fragmentary way. Although the term ‘family’ is mentioned in reassuring conclusions like the ones just provided, the relation between all these specific topics and the general theme of family is not the focus of this research. The same holds for much historical research. Investigations into the specific character of the family in different historical periods has opened the eyes to the synchronic variety. Factors concerning variety are not just size or composition but also the moral norms of family life. These differ at specific moments – for example, among different classes of society. As a result of this consideration of synchronic and diachronic diversity, however, speaking about family generally becomes less obvious.

The educationalist Fuhs nevertheless thinks empirical approaches can be of great value to family research, but he observes little reaction to it in current pedagogy (21). The theme of family is still usually discussed in terms of protecting the family from decline, which is in line with popular generalisations. The question of what the actual state of the family is, however, is not thoroughly investigated. Nor is the contrast with family life of the past, particularly in terms of a suggested loss of functions to the state, supported by factual references. Thus, here too a pessimistic view continues to prevail, despite empirical findings to the contrary. At the same time pedagogy holds family in high esteem and expects a lot from it for the purpose of education. According to Fuhs, this esteem remains ‘theoretical’ and ‘detached from the family in practice’ (32). This is partly

*Unterschied macht*, Beihefte zur Ökumenischen Rundschau, Vol. 92, ed. by Gerard den Hertog and Jan Roskovec (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), 22–37, at 27).

the result of the informal, spontaneous sphere of education that family embodies. Pedagogical aims of coming to grips with education are more easily achieved outside the sphere of the family.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Need for a Constructive, Fundamental Ethical Approach*

We turned to this descriptive research on family because it criticised an all-too-easy paradigm of family decline in modernity. In this research, family is, contrary to the sociological accounts, not seen as something of the past. The great diversity of current and past family life comes into view. By means of detailed case studies and large overviews, the prevalence of pessimistic views about family and their protectionist consequences are denounced. These studies are thus very well aware of the controversial character of the topic of family. They aim to solve the controversy by referring to the facts. The research is descriptive in nature and focusses on empirical data from concrete case studies.

As a result, the analysis of the controversial status of family is not what the studies aim for. There are brief reflections on the reasons behind pessimistic views, but these are not carried out in a systematic way. For example, a reverse trend in more recent research on family resilience to the mood of relief goes unnoticed and unexplained. While the sociologists interpreted the controversial status of family as a result of the difficulty of giving shape to new ideals of love relationships, these empirical approaches explain it as arising out of myths. An analysis of the reasons behind this contrastive, mythical thinking is not what they aim for, however, and thus their contributions to understanding the current charged and controversial character of the family remain limited. Moreover, the attention paid to the great diversity in family as such stands in the way of speaking about family in general.

It is precisely at this point that our aims differ. What does it yield, we will ask, when we do take this charged character into account but regard it as an impulse to investigate constructively what is at stake in family? This approach can integrate insights from both streams of recent family research that we just analysed. It can account for the sociological understanding of family as a difficult phenomenon that does not easily square with dominant ideals of freely chosen intimate relationships. It does not, however, need to put this in

<sup>20</sup> Fuhs refers to Rousseau's *Emile* as an important impulse to the Enlightenment theories about upbringing that isolate pupil and teacher from the family. The ideals behind these theories are influential up to now ('Zur Geschichte der Familie', 32).

terms of a grand narrative of contrast with family life of former times. It would, moreover, remain attentive to the dangers of speaking of family in general.

At the start of this study, the question of whether it is possible to inquire into what family could mean is an open one, given the diversity of family life in all times. In our view, the risk of overgeneralisation does not mean completely closing the door on any reflection on what family means. We see possibilities for an inquiry into 'family in general' by starting at points where family is a controversial topic, where it embodies or symbolises aspects of life that are difficult to take into account, those of givenness and dependence. It is at these points that the experiences of and speaking about family do in fact concern this general level, which is at the same time connected with a diversity of concrete situations.

The difficulties of dealing with the givenness of family and with being dependent on family members are experienced in different ways. The aforementioned sociological accounts may illuminate these 'confronting' experiences as resulting from the rise of a new religion-like faith in love, which makes certain aspects of family life difficult. The more historically oriented research and empirical studies criticised this view as too general and schematic to do justice to the diversity of family life. Our reflections on family will not approach the difficulty of family as solely the result of changing views of intimacy, nor does this approach take the line that this difficulty can be explained away by focussing on the particularity of current, diverse family life. The former does not leave enough room to study experiences that do not easily fit into the new paradigms of consciously agreed love. The latter does not aim to analyse the tension between family and prevailing ideals. A different, more fundamental way of dealing with the complexity of family in our time is needed. The themes of givenness and dependence will enable us to develop such an approach.

Our focus on givenness and dependence implies a normative perspective. Here, the ethical character of our study becomes explicit. In that sense, it is not surprising that the much more descriptive nature of the family research we analysed so far does not show complete affinity with our normative questions and interest. On the other hand, the analysis so far reveals that even in these more descriptive approaches normativity is not absent. The controversial nature of the topic of family is visible. This means it is all the more important to investigate what family might mean and its controversial character at a fundamental level. The next step in the elaboration of the specific approach of our study is therefore to relate it to current ethical family studies. Do we find there an interest in the charged status of family and a desire to reconsider

the phenomenon at a fundamental level in a self-critical but also constructive reflection on the difficult aspects it confronts us with in our time?

### **Family as a Moral Problem**

Ethical reflection on family as found in philosophy gives the impression that it is a discipline itself, like family sociology or kinship anthropology. This reflection does not take the form of a ‘family ethics’ in a broad sense that would cover moral issues on all the family-related fields, ranging from work–family balance to gender issues or reproductive technology. Such topics are not absent from philosophical family accounts, but they are addressed through a specific lens, that of parenthood. Nevertheless, the general label ‘family’ is used for such reflections. ‘Family ethics’ is thus, even in many book titles, largely equated with the ethics of parenthood. In addressing the broad range of family-related topics with an eye to the well-being of parents and children, the latter perspective – that is, that of the children – has moreover been put forward recently as a corrective one. This should be an innovative starting point that frees reflection in this field from its earlier one-sided focus on the parental side.<sup>21</sup> This critical renewal does not do away with the fact that this ethics of parenthood focusses mostly on questions that are, in a sense, timeless or classic. In particular, they concern the issues of whether the enormous influence parents have on their children is in fact desirable, what the precise character of their unequal relationship is, and what parents and children owe each other.

#### *Demarcating and Securing the Good Functions of Parenthood*

Parent–child relationships are studied in ethics because they clearly imply moral dangers or risks. There are the risks of the inequality that is fostered by raising children in families. Family is here addressed as part of the given aspects of life that influence or determine people’s socio-economic status, chances of development, physical and mental well-being and the like.

<sup>21</sup> For example, philosophers Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift argue that liberal philosophy implies a view of human beings as adult agents and focusses on the protection of their freedom to act as they want to because this is crucial to human well-being. In this view, the specific character of children’s positions and interests does not come into view. For Brighouse and Swift, this specificity lies in that children are dependent, vulnerable and have no grasp of what is good for them on the one hand but have the capacity to develop into ‘nonvulnerable and independent adults’ on the other (Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent–Child Relationships* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 62).

John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, 1971) is often cited as the classic formulation of the principal conflict between growing up in a family and the fair equality of opportunity to participate in society to develop one's talents. Another group of risks concerns the power relations within the family. Parental influence might not leave room for the child to develop its own, unique personhood; parents may expect too much from the child in return for what they have given it, or they may abuse the child in mental or even physical ways.<sup>22</sup> These issues may also be addressed from a meta-perspective by analysing the nature and status of upbringing within the family in comparison to public education or by investigating what power the state may exercise in shaping its junior citizens and in protecting them, also against abuse within the family.

These moral issues of the precise nature and the risks of upbringing within the family have bothered philosophers from Plato on and may thus be called 'classic'.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the controversial character of the family is in these studies not primarily formulated as resulting from the post-World War II changes to family life in the Western context. The increased family diversity is addressed, also by means of concrete cases, but more in the sense of giving new urgency to the old question of what good relationships between parents and children might be. In dealing with all kinds of topical family issues, those of marriage and, in particular, the rise of non-marital partnerships and divorce are recurring themes. The general term 'family' occurs more frequently as a label or summarising title when the relations between parents and children are discussed and not so much in studies concerned with marriage.

<sup>22</sup> Brighouse and Swift make a similar distinction between 'challenges which the family poses to any theory of justice'. The egalitarian challenge concerns compensating the inequality that exists between families, and the liberal challenge has to do with the issues of freedom and authority (*Family Values*, 2). The two challenges are explored in the first two chapters of the book and the aim of the study is to resolve the tension between taking into account equality and the freedom of individuals as much as possible (3).

<sup>23</sup> Plato is cited in much of the ethics literature as the first pronounced example of what we will call a suspicious approach to family, which was also a controversial view in his day (Penelope Murray, 'Tragedy, Women and the Family in Plato's *Republic*', in *Plato and the Poets*, ed. by Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 175–93, at 177). In his reflections on the ideal state in Book V of the *Republic*, he points out that the upbringing of children in the family makes them focus on the interests and well-being of their fellow family members to the detriment of feeling responsible for the community at large. The unity among the citizens of the polis is moreover threatened by private fortune or sorrows and conflicts. The class of people charged with public tasks, the guardian rulers, should therefore not have wives of their own or care for their own children. The education of their children should be taken care of by the state, which would, moreover, raise them to become the responsible citizens they cannot become within the family. Penelope Murray points out that the abolition of the family in the *Republic* is entwined with the removal of tragic poetry from the educational programme because the 'very life blood' of tragedy is the depiction of 'familial strife' (192).

In spite of the classic character of the issues related to family understood as parenthood, the few examples of 'family ethics' published in recent decades present themselves as pioneering. A close look at these examples gives a good impression of what is characteristic of ethical reflection on family understood as parenthood. The much-cited *Parents and Children: The Ethics of the Family* from the 1980s by the ethicist Jeffrey Blustein formulates its pioneering aim as giving 'some philosophical respectability' to a 'long-neglected area of social philosophy'.<sup>24</sup> The first half of the book therefore consists in an overview of the forgotten history of Western philosophical thinking about family from Plato to Hegel.<sup>25</sup>

When Blustein points out the urgency of altering this negligence, the contrast between the modern and the pre-industrial family figures again. In modernity, family no longer 'limits one's life prospects' (4) in the sense that 'occupation and status' are transmitted from parent to child. For Blustein, the classic moral issues related to family have become more complicated in modernity because of their focus on the well-being and interests of the individual family members. How should parents equip their children with the capacities to autonomously choose their own life course and become who they want to be? How can they keep their own autonomy and authority while also fostering the autonomy of their children?

Blustein focusses the general modern attention on the autonomy of the individual on the child. He does not aim for a radical position on the autonomy or rights of children, but he does argue that parental rights and responsibility should be adjusted to the welfare of the child (10). He also formulates the threat of life in a family to the well-being of the child in terms of inequality and social justice. Children have unequal chances in part because of their upbringing in a specific family. Here we see the aspect of the givenness of family return, in the sense of shaping children's socio-economic starting positions in life. It seems obvious that inequalities as a result of this should be compensated for by partly organising education in a kind of 'common upbringing' (14). What should be the balance, though, between private and public child-rearing? This returning question reveals that family is here approached somewhat suspiciously as a way of life that is to be evaluated as to its contribution to the well-being of the individual members, in particular the children. Moreover, this suspicion is seen as the critical contribution of the ethical perspective, which is highly

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey Blustein, *Parents and Children: The Ethics of the Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 15.

<sup>25</sup> According to Blustein, after Hegel, the relationship between parents and children became a 'sideline' in systematic ethical reflection (*Parents and Children*, 95).

necessary because of the widespread self-evident commitment to family as the best place for child-rearing.

Blustein aims to contribute to this critical evaluation of the value of family by focussing on what good parenthood is. He does so by prioritising the duties of parents over their rights. This focus on duties reveals that, for him, parenthood is not so much something to be protected but rather to be stimulated as to its true functions, which confirms that his basic attitude towards family is a somewhat suspicious one. Ethics should outline the parental duties that follow from the needs of the child because parents do not automatically fulfil their children's interests. The core duties of parenthood are specified as not just raising the child to autonomy but also as fostering its health and respecting it as a unique individual.

The issue of the functions of good parenthood is first investigated without taking into account the concrete shape families may take. The question of who the parents raising children should be is dealt with in the second instance so that the function becomes the criterion for the form of the family. It is clear that given this function, social conventions that take family to be a biological relationship are not *prima facie* convincing. Why should biological parents be better able to develop the self-respect and autonomy of their children? A justification of the best ways of raising children should be built on showing how it contributes to the well-being of all involved, including the larger community. Empirical 'observation and experiment' are central to this justification (160).

Blustein focusses not only on the moral duties of the parent but also on those of the child. This theme of 'filial duties' is also presented as a classic one in ethical reflection on parent-child relationships. Duties are at stake on the part of children as well, although in a very different way than in the case of parents because children develop from completely dependent beings to conscious moral actors. Their duties differ across the stages of their development. A distinction is made between duties of owing and of friendship. The first involve indebtedness and gratitude and are expressed in an attitude of respect, while friendship implies a more consciously chosen affective relationship associated in particular with adulthood. In dealing with these classic distinctions between different kinds of filial duties, the suspicious ethical attitude is not prominent. Blustein takes the filial duties as an indisputable fact. The difficult task of ethics is, of course, to determine the content and limits of these duties. Family may ask too much of children. Here the danger of the abuse of parental power within the family is again an issue.



The suspicion returns in the third part of the study where the issue of social injustice in relation to family policy is the focus. Why, Blustein asks, is the commitment to the family as the primary setting of child-rearing so strong when it leads to so much inequality? Again, empirical data from psychology are important for answering this question. These data show that, for healthy emotional development, upbringing by parents is crucial. To such insights, ethics adds a fundamental reflection on the views of 'health' and thus of personhood and being human involved in this psychological perspective.

Blustein emphasises in his reflection the importance of exclusive and intimate relationships for developing self-respect and being able to establish deep and loving relationships oneself. Moreover, raising children in such exclusive and enduring relationships creates moral diversity: families vary in their ideas of the good and ideals. This variety is morally beneficial for families, individuals and society at large. The moral importance of variety does not mean that the increasingly diverse forms of family life are all morally equal. The issue of whether marriage has a special value is also discussed in relation to the interests of the child. The enduring character of relationships is seen as the heart of the good of the family, specified as sharing a common history, experiences that enrich the 'deep ties of companionship and love' (249) and the opportunity to be involved in an ongoing process of attaining self-knowledge, also in the contacts between parents and adult children. Of course, institutions like marriage cannot guarantee this, but they do support enduring family ties. A case is made for a policy that links parenthood and marriage because this institutional support of enduring relationships is clearly more beneficial to children.

Blustein's pioneering ethics of the family thus turns out to pick up on classic issues that centre around the value of parents raising children – that is, in a family setting. These are moral issues because this upbringing clearly has drawbacks that are reasons to be suspicious about family, in particular because its good is largely considered self-evident. Families are enclosed mini-communities with their own values and ideals, a sphere that cannot be easily controlled. Moreover, family members privilege each other. Family determines one's starting position in life also in a socio-economic sense.

Modernity has specified and intensified this classic issue as the tension between being a community and taking into account the autonomy of individuals, which is further illuminated by psychological and pedagogical insights. Theories of basic rights and duties are invoked to determine the degree of autonomy of family members, and the balance between family and the public sphere of the state. The controversial



nature of family is therefore not as topical in this ethical approach as it is in the sociological accounts. There the issue was the suggested fragmentation or disappearance of family due to a changed focus on the value of chosen, intimate love relationships. In Blustein's ethics the modern importance of the value of intimacy and love is rather presupposed. It is not perceived as problematic for the family; family life can be attuned to it.

In a similar unproblematic way, the current diversity of family life is presupposed. This diversity leads to questions as to whether all family forms are morally equal, but it does not as such make family into a controversial phenomenon. What is more, family is self-evidently understood as characterised by enduring and exclusive relationships. While these are clearly aspects that can be associated with givenness, this givenness does not become a problem. Endurance and exclusivity are thought to be compatible with intimate love. Together, these aspects are crucial to self-formation and autonomy. Despite the fundamental suspicion, a morally non-controversial, acceptable family is thus conceivable, although it may be hard to realise in practice. Ethics outlines the criteria for a good family and stimulates critical moral reflection on the specific value of family in child-rearing and the balance between private and public upbringing.

Another study that is presented as pioneering is the 'first family ethics anthology' in 1999 edited by Laurence D. Houlgate.<sup>26</sup> The texts collected in this volume are mostly contemporary with a few historical examples ranging from the classic opposition between Plato and Aristotle on the value of family to that between Hobbes and Locke and the communist views of Friedrich Engels. More than in Blustein's book, the starting point of the anthology is formulated in terms of the current controversial status of family and implies speaking about family in a more general sense instead of focussing only on parents and children. The controversial nature of family is understood as the result of the increased diversity of family life since the 1960s.

Disagreement is said to be unavoidable in current reflection on family because advocates of the traditional family and those of a diversity of family forms are on opposite sides. What is the role of ethics in dealing with this opposition? The suggestion that disagreement can be resolved by giving

<sup>26</sup> Laurence D. Houlgate, *Morals, Marriage, and Parenthood: An Introduction to Family Ethics* (London: Wadsworth, 1999). The main reasons mentioned for the publication of this book are the recent 'excellent writing on the problems of family ethics' and the need to present these as part of a 'new subfield of applied ethics', one that 'stands on its own', like medical or business ethics (x).

a clear definition of family is briefly explored but soon dismissed. Such a definition will always exclude some forms that are nevertheless recognised in practice as a form of family or become so open that it no longer expresses the distinct character of family relationships. In fact, however, the traditional type of family often functions as a reference point in relation to which other forms are viewed as 'more or less family'.<sup>27</sup> This variety of 'more or less' is briefly illustrated by a selection of texts from historical and cultural research. The moral question that is central to the main part of the anthology turns out, however, to be not that of the form family takes but of its functions and value. As in Blustein's approach, this focus on functions leads to an openness to different forms. The current controversy on what constitutes a true family is thus solved by an ethical reflection on the functions of family. The functions centre on respecting the individual in a loving, intimate relationship.

A similar approach is visible in the texts that are subsequently presented to illuminate the family-related topics of marriage and parenthood. Like family, marriage is introduced as a topic that should be reflected on given the increasing variety of partner relationships. The ethical evaluation of this variety again focusses on function. Special attention is therefore also given to dysfunction as a result of the patriarchal character of marriage and family roles, divorce and family violence. Here the suspicion, which is also visible in Blustein's approach, becomes apparent. While Blustein sees this as a reason to start from parental duties instead of rights, Houlgate selects texts on both.

These issues are usually not discussed from a contemporary perspective but presented as self-evident, classic ones. Do parents have a right to privacy and non-interference by the state in child-rearing, which includes raising children according to their ideals? Are there limits to this right? Or should the focus be on parental duties to raise children so they acquire morally right beliefs? The issue of parental rights is also discussed at a more fundamental level, which does have a contemporary emphasis: given that people can choose not to have children by using contraceptives, is having children a moral issue? Or is it something 'natural'? Both arguments could lead to the view that having children is a field in which no outsiders can judge, let alone interfere, as well as to putting limits on this freedom because there are cases of 'unnatural' conception or of not having the rational or other capabilities basic to be respected as owners of rights. These

<sup>27</sup> This view is presented by the sociologist William J. Goode in the text 'Defining the Family: A Matter of More or Less', in Houlgate, *Morals, Marriage, and Parenthood*, 27–30.

questions arise in particular in cases in which outsiders are somehow involved, as in the case of abortion for medical or other reasons or the extreme example of having a child to enable medical treatment of a sibling.<sup>28</sup> Finally, the rights of parents are related to the liberty of children and filial duties. As in Blustein's approach, the latter issue is presented as a classic one, without any references to the contemporary situation.

The first impression of family ethics as being or having become a distinct field of research, which elaborates in particular on the value of parent–child relationships in reflecting on classic questions, becomes even stronger in twenty-first-century publications. General volumes that aim for a 'family ethics' are still hardly found, but ethical publications abound on the classic issues mentioned. Usually, the studies are no longer emphatically presented as pioneering.<sup>29</sup> As in Houlgate's anthology, the topicality of the established moral issues does emerge in that many publications discuss the increased diversity of partner relations and family forms and the ideological divides in the evaluation of this diversity.<sup>30</sup> The scope of these changes and

<sup>28</sup> This real-life case is analysed in the volume by the philosopher Nancy Jecker, 'Conceiving a Child to Save a Child: Reproductive and Filial Ethics', in Houlgate, *Morals, Marriage, and Parenthood*, 206–11.

<sup>29</sup> For example, two general overviews of family and parenthood ethics from the past two decades do not mention any specific contemporary reasons for their volumes in their introductions. A 2010 edited volume starts from the couple and then broadens to parents and children, the relationship to the larger community, law, welfare and new, birth-related technology (Stephen Scales, Adam Potthast and Linda Oravec, eds., *The Ethics of the Family* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010)). A new book series on 'family rights' opens with an anthology on parenthood with articles from 1990 to 2014 from both philosophy and law (Stephen Gilmore, *Parental Rights and Responsibilities*, Library of Essays on Family Rights (London: Routledge 2017)). On the other hand, a recent volume with reactions on the aforementioned 2014 parenthood ethics by Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift (*Family Values*) does call the interest in the field of political philosophy on the 'micro level' of familial justice a recent one (Andrée-Anne Cormier and Christine Sypnowich, eds., 'Special Issue on *Family Values* by H. Brighouse and A. Swift', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 21/3 (2018): 279–405, at 279). The topics of this special issue are clearly classic – for example, the issue of family and inequality and the advantages of public education, the autonomy of parents versus the independence of children, or the right to parent as distinct from the right to procreate. Brighouse and Swift themselves indicate the topicality of their study is a broader exploration of the 'normative aspects of family' than the ones given in family studies so far; the latter originated mainly from a feminist background and focussed on the injustice of gender relationships within families or on their practices of care (Brighouse and Swift, *Family Values*, XIII–XV). The complete equation of family and parenting can be clearly seen in their description of the second part of the book, which 'seeks to justify the family – to explain why it is good that children be raised by parents' (48). This focus is specified as the question of 'whether there should be "parents" at all', followed by that of 'which adults should parent which children' (49). Linda C. McClain and Daniel Cere explain the reasons behind their volume on family as a correction to the excessive attention paid to the theme of marriage in family studies (*What Is Parenthood? Contemporary Debates about the Family* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 1). As a result of this limited focus on marriage, the underlying assumptions regarding parenthood remain out of sight while they do play a crucial role in the views of marriage.

<sup>30</sup> An example of such interest in family ideologies is the arrangement of the contributions in the volume by McClain and Cere, which is determined by placing an advocate of a more traditional,

their influence on the well-being of family members are often discussed by referring to specific social scientific studies on these topics.<sup>31</sup> Of course, empirical data are judged differently or different data are highlighted, which leads to different ethical conclusions.<sup>32</sup> The role of policy and law in discouraging or stimulating certain parental practices, in particular by giving privileges to either marriage or to other legally recognised partner relations, is much discussed in ethics as well, as is the role and value of family in society.<sup>33</sup> Family ethics with its focus on the parent–child

heterosexual family (integrative model) beside a defender of a diversity model. The first focusses on form, the second on function. The tension between the two models is identified as present in academia but also in ‘public opinion’ (*What Is Parenthood?*, 4).

<sup>31</sup> A book that explicitly aims to develop perspectives on family law and policy based on social scientific data is a volume with a variety of different views on family edited by Elizabeth S. Scott and Marsha Garrison. They present ‘empirically grounded analysis’ as offering a ‘neutral lens that, by enhancing understanding, may sometimes even produce a consensus across ideological divides’ (*Marriage at the Crossroads: Law, Policy, and the Brave New World of Twenty-First-Century Families* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3).

<sup>32</sup> A good example of oppositions among views that refer to their own selection of empirical data on the well-being of family members, in particular that of children, are two parts of the volume on the meaning of parenthood by McClain and Cere (*What Is Parenthood?*). Part IV concerns the question of which family model yields the best outcomes for children and society. The legal scholar Margaret F. Brinig points to empirical data on children’s well-being that show they do better when growing up in legally recognised family relations. On this basis she opposes current tendencies to dismantle ‘the legal protections given to marriage and biological or adoptive parenting’ (Margaret F. Brinig, ‘A Case for Integrated Parenthood’, in McClain and Cere, *What Is Parenthood?*, 147–70, at 167). Psychologist Fiona Tasker, on the other hand, uses empirical data to show that ‘family type per se makes little difference to children’s well-being’ (Fiona Tasker, ‘Developmental Outcomes for Children Raised by Lesbian and Gay Parents’, in McClain and Cere, *What Is Parenthood?*, 171–90, at 184–5). Part V (193–236) similarly shows how empirical data can be used to support and oppose the idea that the secure attachment of children to their parents or caregivers has biological bases and evolutionary functions. As regards the role of marriage in creating stable relationships, Garrison and Scott’s position is nuanced (‘Legal Regulation of Twenty-First-Century Families’, in Scott and Garrison, *Marriage at the Crossroads*, 303–25). They acknowledge that social science shows that children benefit from being raised in a marriage-based family. As a result, the class divide between wealthier and poorer families continues to grow. They emphasise this does not mean that law and policy should continue the privileges of marriage or even increase them – it may very well be that people inclined to a less stable love life already avoid getting married. Forcing them into marriage would not create stability but conflict marriages or multiple marriages, which are in fact indicators for a decrease in the well-being of children (321).

<sup>33</sup> A good example of this focus is the work of Margaret F. Brinig on family, which combines law and social science perspectives. She argues that an understanding of family relations in terms of covenant relationships instead of contracts should inform family law in order to support good family ties characterised by permanence and unconditional love (*From Contract to Covenant: Beyond the Law and Economics of the Family* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Unlike a contract, a covenant reveals that a relationship continues to exist even when legal ties are no longer present, as in the case of adult children and their parents, or of divorce (7). A covenant implies a stronger kind of trust than a contract because the latter presupposes the possibility of breaking off the relationship (Margaret F. Brinig and Steven Nock, ‘Covenant and Contract’, *Regent University Law Review* 12/9 (1999): 9–26, at 26). Brinig emphasises that trust is not only a private issue of the family members themselves but exists and grows in interaction with the place of the family in the larger community

relations turns out to have become a broad, interdisciplinary field in which experts on family law, psychologists, sociologists and educationalists, philosophers, political scientists and sometimes also experts in religion collaborate. The different disciplines are presented as needing each other to deal with the issues of good parent–child relations.<sup>34</sup>

To determine the value of parenthood the ethical perspective is often first widened beyond the sphere of the family to general questions of what interests are fundamental to being human and thus of what well-being means.<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, this quest for fundamental interests is specified in relation to the interests or goods characteristic of children and then to those of parents and of partners or spouses.<sup>36</sup> Among the interests, the good of being respected in one's unique individuality is often related to the family

(cf. in particular: *Family, Law, and Community: Supporting the Covenant* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010)). The legal institution of marriage or child custody is a community's recognition of the trustworthiness of the relationship of the couple, or of parent and child. This recognition stimulates trust among the family members. Children learn to trust by imitating their parents. The community's trust in the family and the family members' trust in each other are thus tightly interlocked. Trust is also at stake in the balance between family autonomy and state involvement.

<sup>34</sup> This need for interdisciplinarity in family research is also visible in the existence of a society for family research founded in the United States already in 1938, the National Council on Family Relations, which describes itself as 'the premier professional association for understanding families through interdisciplinary research, theory, and practice' and in the explicitly interdisciplinary scope of one of its journals (from 1951 onwards), *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies* ([www.ncfr.org](http://www.ncfr.org)).

<sup>35</sup> For example, Michael W. Austin (*Conceptions of Parenthood: Ethics and the Family* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)) takes certain 'fundamental interests of both parents and children' as the basis for a 'moderate view' of parental rights (76). These interests include 'psychological well-being, intimate relationships, and the freedom to pursue that which brings satisfaction and meaning to life'. To underpin the fundamental character of these interests, Austin refers to common-sense arguments like the value we attach to privacy and the simple observation that people are unhappy when they lack one or more of these goods and, on the other hand, make great efforts to obtain them (79–80). Rights of non-interference protect the precondition for the satisfaction of these interests (81–2). Brighouse and Swift start their reflection on children's interests in being parented with a discussion of Martha Nussbaum's more elaborate list of general interests of adults which also include aspects like having emotions, experiencing affinity with human and other beings, play and so forth (*Family Values*, 60).

<sup>36</sup> Brighouse and Swift distinguish between the interests of children and parents on the one hand and 'familial' relationship goods' on the other. The latter identify the specific character of what a family contributes to human well-being or happiness (*Family Values*, especially Part Two, 'Justifying the Family'). This includes the good experienced between parents and young children and the pedagogical good of laying the foundations for the ability to form 'healthy and happy relationships as adults' (xiii). In the elaboration of the 'relationship goods', the authors develop a "dual interest" theory' which is concerned first of all with the interests of children but also with those of adults (51, 59). Basic human interests are defined as twofold: those that enable 'well-being or flourishing' and those that contribute to feeling respected as able to judge and choose, 'even where that respect does not make her life go better' (52). A deeper understanding of the specific interests of children and parents is necessary to answer the book's central questions of why children should be raised by parents and what parental rights are.

in particular, something that may also be indicated by the term 'love'.<sup>37</sup> Implied in the special kind of family love are the aforementioned aspects of intimacy and durability, which, in the case of child-rearing, mean knowing the child well and having time and capacities for care and upbringing. This parental love needs to be intrinsically motivated or spontaneous. To underpin the indispensability of this love one often finds references to empirical research from social or neuroscience.<sup>38</sup> An alternative to the language of love, which is usually coloured by a psychological background, is the notion of 'stewardship' as used in environmental ethics.<sup>39</sup> Like in the approaches of Blustein and Houlgate, understanding the function and value of family as rearing children in a setting of exclusive, enduring love implies a criterion for the form of family, a quite open one. Whenever adults care durably and with love for children, they may be called parents.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> The philosopher Laurence Thomas integrates both aspects in a view of family and its relations to society as a whole, in particular in shaping human morality (*The Family and the Political Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)). He argues that the development of moral qualities comes from being recognised and loved as a unique human being by one's parents, as this is the basis for experiencing oneself as a moral being. Psychological knowledge on the importance of constancy in parental love is indispensable to this argument. Love is not enough for good parenting, however; it also requires a sense of what is right and knowledge relevant to parenting. In combining these aspects, family serves as a model for how people should relate to others in society at large. Relationships between citizens cannot be based on equal rights alone but need the parallel of parental love in the form of general goodwill or fellow feeling – that is, the motivation to act justly even if acting unjustly would not lead to punishment (96). This view of family and society presupposes a view of human beings as not self-interested but altruistic – that is, prepared to make sacrifices for the sake of others. The fact that, universally, people want to have children reveals that they are altruistic – an idea that, according to Thomas, is a corrective to contemporary political thought (9). Michael McFall also emphasises the central role of parental love and the resulting self-respect for becoming moral human beings and refers to Laurence Thomas as his source (Michael T. McFall, *Licensing Parents. Family, State, and Child Maltreatment* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 27n43).

<sup>38</sup> Brighouse and Swift specify the core function of parenting as that of at least one single person who loves the children 'consistently over the course of their childhood', and they also refer to neuroscience to underpin this view (*Family Values*, 72).

<sup>39</sup> Michael Austin argues in favour of understanding parenthood as stewardship. As stewards, parents temporarily care for something precious which is not their property: their young children's lives. They raise their children to eventually become autonomous stewards of their own lives. The stewardship should fulfil as many interests of those involved as possible, that is, not just of children and parent, but also of society at large and future generations (*Conceptions of Parenthood*, 59). This means Austin has an emphatically broader scope than, for example, Brighouse and Swift, who regard a separate chapter on 'third parties' apart from children and parents a 'distraction' (*Family Values*, 51).

<sup>40</sup> This is the core of the answer Brighouse and Swift give to their basic question 'Does it take a family – a parent – to raise a child?' (*Family Values*, 70): children should be raised by a 'small number of particular adults' in 'intimate and authoritative' relationships and with 'considerable discretion' on the part of the adults (xii, 72). It is this constellation that they characterise, on the one hand, as 'rather similar' to the conventional family and, on the other, as limited in the discretion and acting

*Towards a Different Way of Dealing with the Charged Status of Family*

This brief overview of ethical approaches to family reveals that the starting point is mostly not the general question of what characterises a family. The central issue is what children, parents and partners need and whether and how these needs can be satisfied in the family setting. This approach to family is an ambiguous one. The fact that the question is posed of whether the family can fulfil the interests of its members betrays a suspicion.<sup>41</sup> The tension between being raised in families and having equal opportunities is obvious, as is the abuse families may cause. Ethics should remind us of these drawbacks against the common trust in family, especially in the sense of biological relationships. In this sense, family is approached as a controversial topic and has a charged status; its seemingly obvious value is questioned. On the other hand, the classic suspicion of family hardly seems to lead to radical abolitionist positions. Rather, the ethical analyses conclude with formulations of the specific value of the family. Subsequently, the issue is dealt with of how the distinct function of family can be stimulated or, better, ensured and protected. Duties and rights are the classic ethical ways to elaborate on this stimulating, ensuring and protection. The formulations of specific duties and rights correspond to the foregoing discussions of fundamental human interests, which include the desire for procreation and parenting as such. The issue of the protection of the family concerns reflection on

of the parents towards their children and without a 'fundamental right to parent their own biological children' (xii). A comparable mix of convention and openness to newer forms is visible in Michael McFall's argument for the 'neo-nuclear family'. McFall defines it as 'slightly different' from the 'traditional nuclear family' in that it leaves open the sex of the married couple and requires both of them to be 'individuals with a sense of justice' (ISJ), for which a deep sense of self-respect is indispensable. This notion of self-respect is just as necessary for a stable and just society; it minimises 'distrust, envy, or resentment' (*Licensing Parents*, 13). By taking these aspects into account, McFall aims to engage with the problems of the complicated psychological nature of human beings. In his view, these problems are left unanswered in John Rawls' influential theory of a just society because he does not take self-respect as central to raising children in families but regards it as originating from the 'public affirmation of rights and liberties' (21).

<sup>41</sup> The suspicion is most obvious in views that argue in favour of licensing parents to perform their educational tasks. In a classic article Hugh LaFollette defends licensing parents as theoretically justified to protect children, who should be regarded as moral beings ('Licensing Parents', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9/2 (1980): 182–97). He proposes this view over against the idea of parental dominion over their biological children as something natural, following from being their parents' property. In a more recent article he restates his argument and advocates 'a moderate form of licensing' in practice, despite the complexity and risks of such a 'limited licensing program' ('Licensing Parents Revisited', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 27/4 (2010): 327–43, at 341). Here, his main argument is based on paralleling parents with professionals who serve highly vulnerable people – a situation we regulate by requiring licensed professionals. Michael McFall also pleads for licensing by means of a minimal system for which he elaborates the conditions (*Licensing Parents*, chapter 5).



non-interference from outside the family, related to rights on more specific practical issues ranging from home schooling, or knowing one's biological parents, to support for parents by adult children.

The elaboration of the ethical analysis of family in terms of rights and duties of parents, children and partners is classic but not undisputed. Critics claim that the language of rights and duties does not figure in everyday family life. Family is the context in which the issues of 'what I get and what I am due do not loom large'.<sup>42</sup> Houlgate illustrates this briefly by referring to a situation in which he would be asked to donate a kidney for his seriously ill sister. 'Even if I should concede that she has no such right, I would still be left wondering whether I ought to proceed with the donation'.<sup>43</sup> The proper moral character of family is not captured in terms of rights but in terms of love, care and intimacy. The authority of parents should be natural, just as their love for each other is spontaneous; this cannot be enforced on the basis of rights or duties. Such a rights or duties approach easily creates an opposition between individual family members who may insist on their right to have their interests satisfied. This criticism is anticipated in many of the ethical analyses of parenthood analysed earlier but not regarded as decisive.<sup>44</sup> That is again because there is reason to be suspicious. Parents do not always spontaneously and lovingly fulfil all the needs of their children or aim for their well-being and sometimes simply do not know what to do.<sup>45</sup> Reflection on duties and

<sup>42</sup> Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 33.

<sup>43</sup> Houlgate, *Morals, Marriage, and Parenthood*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> This debate on the appropriateness of the ethical categories of interests, duties, and rights has parallels in the debate of so-called communitarianism against 'liberalism' as well as in the corrective movement of virtue ethics and very prominently in different feminist critiques of mainstream philosophy, among them 'care ethics' (see also Chapter 4). In these approaches family is sometimes taken as the pre-eminent example that shows that morality is mostly about acting spontaneously on the basis of sentiments that are proper to a certain practice. This conception of morality as the result of sentiment and convention is contrasted with that of purely individual rational consideration. The classic reference for this is Hume, which has led to what is sometimes called a 'Humean ethics' as an alternative to deontology or utilitarianism and building on virtue ethics (e.g., Tom L. Beauchamp, *Philosophical Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2001), chapter 7). Hume's famous example of family morality is that of the mother who sacrifices herself in order to care for her dying child. This way of acting is debatable in theoretical reflection, but its self-evidence in practice is undeniable. Hume mentions this example in a refutation of the account of morality by, most importantly, Hobbes and Locke, as being secretly motivated by self-love and self-interest ('Appendix II. Of Self-love', in *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*). Beauchamp refers to Annette Baier in particular as taking up Hume's attention to family as giving insight into how morality is learned and operates (247–55).

<sup>45</sup> For example, Blustein, *Parents and Children*, 103–4; Brighouse and Swift, *Family Values*, 17–21. A classic version of the defence of rights as not constituting relationships but as a fallback 'if affection fades' is that by Jeremy Waldron ('When Justice Replaces Affection: The Need for Rights', *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 11/3 (1988): 625–41). Christina Hoff Sommers criticises the



rights is central to clarifying the point at which outsiders may intervene. Moreover, it is possible to identify the specific way rights are at stake in the context of the family. Thus, Houlgate emphasises that, in this context, rights do not follow from voluntary agreements, tacit promises or other acts in the past but are based on the mere fact of being family members.<sup>46</sup> In each situation, one must decide whether family obligations are crucial.

We entered the field of ethical research on family by looking for investigations of what family might mean and of its controversial, charged status that do not regard family as something of the past nor as too diverse to allow speaking about it in general. These views were dominant in the sociological and the more empirical and historical approaches to family analysed earlier. As a result, these approaches were not interested in family as a phenomenon that should be reconsidered at a fundamental level with an eye to its charged status, as we aim to do. In ethical reflection on family, on the other hand, there is definitely an interest in family in general. Moreover, our terms ‘givenness’ and ‘dependence’ may also be said to resonate with aspects of these ethical studies. Families are approached as morally problematic because they foster inequality and are a hindrance to justice. They preserve bad socio-economic situations and favour their members over others – aspects which may be related to givenness. Their closed character and unequal power relations, which imply dependence, make families susceptible to abuse. Family thus also has a charged status in this research. Yet the ways in which this charged status is defined and elaborated differ from our approach in many important respects.

‘sentimentalist tendency’ she observes in especially feminist criticisms of rights- and duties-based ethics and argues in favour of keeping the formal duties approach but attuning it to ‘filial duties’. These are related to the – indeed largely spontaneous – moral practices of family and thus not to be formulated in any general sense beyond this context (‘Filial Morality’, *Journal of Philosophy* 83/8 (1986): 439–56, at 448ff.). Showing similar attention to the value of the formal or juridical approaches are arguments for marriage as a contract against overly romantic views (e.g., Kathryn Norlock, who refers to Immanuel Kant and Claudia Card as protagonists of marriage as a sociopolitical institution, “Teaching “Against Marriage”, or, “But Professor, Marriage Isn’t a Contract””, in Scales, Potthast and Oravec, *Ethics of the Family*, 121–32).

<sup>46</sup> Houlgate, *Morals, Marriage, and Parenthood*, 13. Houlgate refers to W. D. Ross’ theory from the 1930s as an example of promoting *prima facie* duties that follow from being in a morally significant relationship with someone (14). In the case of family, this moral significance is then based on the ‘neutral facts about the biological relationship’ (16). Houlgate does not regard this as convincing simply because it is easy to think of situations in which acting on such biological relations is not morally beneficent. Therefore, Houlgate subsequently takes into account utilitarian approaches as necessary to explain why in special situations the principle of family beneficence should be violated (19).

In the ethical approaches we analysed, the charged status is not a contemporary one but much more classic and obvious, one for all ages, although it increases with the growing importance of the individual in modernity. The suspicion of family is formulated explicitly. It is a result of the obvious tension between being a family and the well-being of the individual or the common good of society. The task of ethical reflection is largely determined by the dangers following from this tension. Ethical reflection investigates what the value of family is, given its drawbacks, and what duties and rights follow from this value for family members. All approaches analysed earlier conclude that such a specific value exists and that the dangers related to the community of the family can be overcome, though not in any simple sense of some definite, overall good state of being family. However, ethical reflection on the specific goods of living in partner and parent–child relationships is seen as of help in improving family life. Moreover, it should help to overcome ideological divides concerning the value of family. Understanding the good functions of family should contribute to solving disagreements on its desired forms, in particular battles with strong advocates of some traditional family standard.

The aim of our study is also to alleviate the charged status of the topic of family. However, we do not think the difficulties of its givenness and dependence are so obvious and explicit. Therefore, understanding what family is about, especially as regards these aspects, becomes a different kind of project. We do not expect that an awareness of the dangers of inequality and power abuse, and the fight against them by means of the formulation of the value of family and of the duties and rights in line with it, is enough to understand and overcome the controversial character of family in our time. A different approach is necessary in which there is fundamentally more room to explore the specific character of family.

When the focus is on the functions from the outset, in particular those of creating stable relations for living together and raising children, family is approached within a framework that might not allow for discovering what may be called its own meaning or logic. For example, the question of what kind of ‘stability’ is found in the family is not prominent in the ethical approaches. It is obvious – one that serves the well-being of the members. Psychological expertise is called upon to specify this well-being as being loved as unique individuals and respected in their autonomy, which is a developing aspect in the case of children.

What seems crucial but is not discussed is that this stability is not first of all lived as a conscious project created to attain well-being but as specific kinds of relations in which one finds oneself, interwoven in a web of

relations. We will ask how this experience of givenness and dependence colours the specific character of these relationships. This means we will focus more on the distinct nature of the community of the family in general, as a broad network of relations extending to the past and the future, and resist translating it immediately into current partner and parent–child relations. It means that we leave the meanings more open and remain at a more fundamental level instead of choosing a particular, concrete angle like raising children.

That we do not leave the focus entirely open but choose to gain access by means of the lenses of givenness and dependence is not inconsistent with this fundamental approach. We choose these lenses to integrate a first, tentative and therefore still open analysis of our time and context in our approach and not as a complete explanation of the present controversial character of family. On the contrary, we will use them in a way that aims to account for the second, fundamental difficulty of formulating what family might mean, the difficulty we opened with in the Prologue. It is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to formulate what family is about in a straightforward sense. *Housekeeping* evoked a feeling for this meaning, precisely by not pinning it down.

Givenness and dependence will guide further exploration of the difficulty of naming what family might mean but also of the possibility of constructively ‘evoking’ such meanings. The idea of ‘evoking’ meanings is taken from the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel. It is inseparable from another key term in his thinking, which he also uses to reflect on family, that of ‘mystery’. In the next section we will analyse his approach and explore its value for our project of finding a mode of ethical reflection that can account for the difficulty of naming what family might mean.

### Marcel: Approaching Family as Mystery

Gabriel Marcel uses the term ‘mystery’ to indicate an alternative to common approaches to the topic of family. In two lectures dating from 1942 and 1943, given at the Ecole des hautes études familiales at Lyon and Toulouse, he opens by distinguishing mystery from problem.<sup>47</sup> He introduces this distinction as central to his philosophy in general (*Homo Viator*, 62). Problems are topics

<sup>47</sup> We will refer to the context of Vichy France for these lectures in what follows. The lectures were published in the later collection of articles *Homo Viator* (Paris: Aubier 1944); we will refer to the English translations by Emma Craufurd and Paul Seaton, ‘The Mystery of the Family’ and ‘The Creative Vow as Essence of Fatherhood’, in *Homo Viator: Introduction to the Metaphysics of Hope*, Gabriel Marcel (South Bend, IN: Graham, 2010), 62–117). Already before the Second World War,

that are clearly demarcated by the thinking subject as objects for reflection. They are discussed with the aim of solving them, and the solutions are expected to be generally acceptable, based on common or factual knowledge. The personal involvement in the problem by the researcher or the one who takes notice of the reflection is irrelevant. A problem is approached in an objective way aiming for objective or conceptual knowledge.

A mystery, on the other hand, indicates a subject whose elucidation requires a different kind of reflection in which this personal involvement is crucial. Mysteries cannot be analysed from outside, as if they are objects. The central mystery of philosophy is 'being itself', which cannot be approached without taking one's own experience of the topic, one's own involvement in it into account. In a similar sense, family is a mystery in which one is 'effectively and vitally involved' (63). One cannot place it over against oneself as a topic to be analysed apart from oneself. In Marcel's view, when dealing with family, philosophy touches the heart of our existence and thus something that is 'too close and too far away' to be examined by thought directly, to be solved and become part of our objective knowledge (64).

### *Mystery as an Alternative to Problem*

In his Gifford Lectures of 1949–50 Marcel also pays attention to family as mystery and quotes a passage on the distinction between mystery and problem from his earlier work.<sup>48</sup> Here he emphasises that the mysterious should not be confused with the 'unknowable' (*The Mystery of Being*, 212). This latter category still belongs to thinking in the mode of the problem; it is its 'limiting case'. A mystery, on the other hand, is therefore a 'positive act' insofar as it is something that should be recognised. The quotes end by relating mystery to intuition and experience as well as to acting. Intuition cannot be grasped in the sense of knowledge, but it does inspire one to act.

family was a topic of interest among French thinkers dedicated to personalism. Marcel belonged to this group, along with philosophers like Emmanuel Mounier (1905–50), Gabriel Madinier (1895–1958) and Jean Lacroix (1900–86) to whom we will return in Chapter 4. For an analysis of the personalist views on family, which are not uniform, see Pierre Bréchon, *La famille. Idées traditionnelles et idées nouvelles* (Paris: Les Éditions le Centurion, 1976, 149–86, <https://bit.ly/3ZwCbSP>).

<sup>48</sup> Marcel goes into family as mystery in 'Presence As a Mystery', the final chapter of the first volume of his Gifford Lectures (1949–50), published as *The Mystery of Being, Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*, translated by G. S. Fraser (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1950), 197–219. In this final chapter he also refers to the articles on family in *Homo Viator* (200). Unlike these articles, however, his focus here is more on the kind of philosophy needed to address existence as mystery rather than family.

In this sphere everything seems to go on as if I found myself acting on an intuition which I possess without immediately knowing myself to possess it – an intuition which cannot be, strictly speaking, self-conscious and which can grasp itself only through the modes of experience in which its image is reflected, and which it lights up by being thus reflected in them. (212)

This quote illustrates well the difficulty of expressing this character of mystery in general terms, which is precisely such that it cannot be defined in words. Mystery belongs, rather, to the category of experiences.

In these experiences the image of intuitive awareness is ‘reflected’. At the same time this means ‘lighting up’ these experiences. In the earlier family lecture Marcel summarises the distinction as that between a problem that should be ‘resolved’ and a mystery that must be ‘evoked’ (*Homo Viator*, 66). The latter means that the ‘soul should be awakened to its presence’. He also uses the term ‘evoke’ in a later text where he refers to music, one of Marcel’s areas of expertise, besides philosophy and playwriting.<sup>49</sup>

He argues that the experience of mystery is one of presence, of ‘being with’ or communion, which does not completely ‘crystallise in an idea’. It is like the moment in which, after hearing only three bars of a melody, one recognises that ‘that is Fauré’. This ‘presence’ of Fauré’s genius is distinct and insofar an idea, but not in the sense that it can be expressed to strangers in words.

No, it is inconceivable that by words I could give an idea of something of a musical order in its qualitative singularity. I could try to do this only by playing it or by representing a significant melody – in other words, by participating actively in this music – in the hope that it will evoke (or, perhaps more exactly, that it will release) in the listeners a kind of inner movement by which they will move toward an encounter with what I am trying to have them hear.<sup>50</sup>

Rather than being discussed in general terms, a mystery is thus something to be evoked. In the Gifford Lectures, Marcel describes philosophy in the mode of this evocation as ‘of a kind of appeal to the listener or the reader, of a kind of call upon his inner resources’. As such, it differs from reflection directed at ‘merely . . . grasp[ing] the content’ which can be valid for ‘anybody at all’ (*The Mystery of Being*, 213). Marcel also uses the terms

<sup>49</sup> The text is a reply to an article by Gene Reeves on Marcel’s idea of mystery in the seventeenth volume of the *Library of Living Philosophers* dedicated to Marcel, which was so delayed it was published only eleven years after his death (Gabriel Marcel, ‘Reply to Gene Reeves’, in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, Library of Living Philosophers, Vol. 17, ed. by Paul Arthur Schilpp and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Carbondale, IL: Open Court, 1984), 272–4).

<sup>50</sup> Marcel, ‘Reply to Gene Reeves’, 273.

‘secondary’ and ‘primary reflection’ for a mystery and a problem approach, respectively.<sup>51</sup>

While primary reflection creates a distance between the knowing subject and the object that should be understood as distinct from other objects, secondary reflection aims to restore ‘a semblance of unity to the elements which primary reflection has first severed’ (93).<sup>52</sup> This does not mean a ‘refusal’ of this primary reflection. Rather, secondary reflection springs from the realisation that the primary understanding of things as well-defined objects cannot be ‘final’. The activity of ‘the mind working on a problem’ is limited (‘Reply to Gene Reeves’, 272). If one realises this limitation, one is calling forth something beyond it. Secondary reflection is directed at this beyond. As such, it is largely, or at least first of all, a negative or critical affair, that of ‘understanding how *not to think of it*’. As Marcel argues in the early articles on family, the sphere indicated by mystery is ‘not easily accessible to us by analysis’ (*Homo Viator*, 81). Such an approach may rather ‘prevent us from understanding’ and therefore ‘our thought has to work negatively’.

A positive moment follows from this. That the two belong together is explained by Brendan Sweetman, who understands Marcel’s secondary reflection as ‘post-reflective’.<sup>53</sup> It begins as ‘the act of critical reflection on ordinary conceptual reflection’ – that is, on primary reflection. It discovers the inadequacy of its expression of the ‘nature of the self, or the self’s most profound experiences’. Second, it discovers ‘the realm of mystery’ and ‘motivates actions appropriate to this realm’. That mystery is related not just to experience but that this also leads to new acting is pointed out by other interpreters as well. Secondary reflection is called contemplation ‘to participate with others to address and meet needs’,<sup>54</sup> a passive ‘opening itself

<sup>51</sup> Marcel mentions these terms only briefly in the second of his articles on family from the early 1940s (*Homo Viator*, 93), but how he introduces the reflective approach to family as a mystery there (62–3) is in line with what he elsewhere calls ‘secondary reflection’. Chapter V of the Gifford Lectures focusses on the distinction between primary and secondary reflection (*The Mystery of Being*, 77–102) and chapter X also characterises the approach to family as mystery as secondary reflection (215–19).

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Michaud emphasises that the expression of this ‘holistic philosophical insight into a mystery’ is first ‘encountered intuitively in concrete, existential experience’. Secondary reflection thus aims to ‘illuminate and articulate’ this intuition in a ‘philosophically intelligible and satisfying account of the nature of mystery’ (Thomas A. Michaud, ‘Secondary Reflection and Marcellian Anthropology’, *Philosophy Today* 34/3 (1990): 229–40, at 223).

<sup>53</sup> Brendan Sweetman, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel: Epistemology, Human Person, the Transcendent* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 59. Sweetman opposes this understanding of secondary reflection as ‘post-reflective’ to David Appelbaum’s, who regards it as pre-reflective involving ‘sensation and embodiment’ (58).

<sup>54</sup> Jill Hernandez presents this understanding of secondary reflection in relation to its being directed at what is beyond representation and going beyond subjectivity and objectivity towards participation

to the calling of Being' or 'the Other' which is 'more ethical than cognitive'.<sup>55</sup> These interpretations also recall the quotation in which Marcel relates the recognition of mystery to finding oneself 'acting on an intuition'.

As regards the topic of family, Marcel explains that the evocation of mystery is needed because there is no direct access to this topic by reflection. Family is both 'too close up' and 'too far away', or, better, these 'contraries are found to coincide here'. Family in the 'close up' sense concerns 'a certain pattern or constellation of which, as a child, I spontaneously take it for granted that I am the centre' (*Homo Viator*, 64). As I grow older, I no longer take this spontaneous self-evident centre position but discover the others as others and the relationship between us. I become part of the intricate dialectics of their presence and absence. I discover myself as a separate self and as part of something greater than myself.

Here we touch on the 'far away' part of family. I come to understand myself in relation to those who have given me birth and through them in relation to my progenitors, and to future descendants as well. The relationship to family members from the past and future is 'far more obscure and intimate' than that of cause and effect, which is the model of understanding in primary reflection. 'I share with them as they share with me, invisibly –; they are consubstantial with me, and I with them' (*Homo Viator*, 65).

Marcel draws a parallel between this mystery of family and that of 'incarnation', which he specifies first as unity of soul and body and, second, as my relationships to those who have given me birth. I 'incarnate' the 'reply' to that power which brought two people together so new life came into being. Becoming aware of this means becoming aware that I am not 'endowed with an absolute existence of my own'.

In this first sketch of Marcel's distinction between problem and mystery, there are already elements that resonate with how we so far have positioned the approach of our study in relation to existing family research. We emphasised from the outset the double difficulty of understanding what family is about. The first difficulty concerns the current controversial character of family. Family is discussed as something that people are in favour of or against. The question of what family might mean is not posed here; it is supposed to be evident. We observed that even research at the academic level,

in the other ('On the Problem and Mystery of Evil: Marcel's Existential Dissolution of an Antinomy', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 23/2 (2018): 113–24, at 119–20).

<sup>55</sup> This characterisation is taken from Martín Grassi, 'Existence as Belonging: The Existentialism of Gabriel Marcel', *Trilhas Filosóficas* 12/3 (Edição Especial) (2019): 29–35, <https://doi.org/10.25244/TF.v13i3.1222>.



which as such is not the result of an ideological debate, pays little attention to this question.

In the sociological accounts we analysed, family stands for given and enduring relations of dependence and is concluded to belong to the past. Interest in family is labelled nostalgic. In the historical and empirical approaches this contrast model is criticised, but this does not result in more attention paid to the question why these models prevail and nourish the controversies about family. In a different sense, the controversy remains unremarked in ethical approaches because the problematic character of family is regarded there as a classic issue and not so much a contemporary one.

Of course, these approaches do give insight into aspects of family life and its controversial status. However, our concern is that the controversy is interpreted too quickly, as if it were obvious what it is about. The question of what family stands for is not recognised as an open issue that needs to be explored first. It is a similar kind of concern that we perceive in Marcel's distinction between problem and mystery approaches. A problem approach, which places topics at a distance in order to analyse their factual character and to arrive at objectively convincing insights also in their value, is visible in much of the aforementioned research into family. It is often focussed on specific aspects of family life, like parenthood or partner relations, and family is not approached in general, as a phenomenon as such. This corresponds to Marcel's observation that, as soon as one approaches family as a problem, one ends up in an 'infinity of problems of every description which could not be considered as a whole' (*Homo Viator*, 62). This implies a lack of attention to something like a distinct logic of the family in general, which cannot be reduced to one of its specific aspects or functions.

### *Mystery and the Controversial Status of Family*

The second difficulty of ethical reflection on family we indicated from the outset is the fundamental one of how to speak about what family might mean. We referred to the story of *Housekeeping* because its literary mode of expression makes the reader wonder what family means. The same cannot be achieved by, for example, enumerating some of the main characteristics of family. *Housekeeping* gives rise to the question of what family is about more than that it answers it. Robinson herself speaks of family relations as 'essentially mysterious manifestations' and of an 'unspoken quality'.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Pinsker, 'Marilynne Robinson', 121, 123.

Can Marcel's approach also be a way to reflect on this second difficulty of the mysterious, unspoken character of family? To decide on this, we need to go into how Marcel elaborates on family as a mystery. As we saw, Marcel first highlights the point that a mystery is a topic in which a researcher is in some way involved. Thus, it is myself, as an existing person, that I approach in dealing with family. This is an 'impenetrable world' in a twofold sense (*Homo Viator*, 66). It concerns the difficulty as such of reflecting on family as revealing one's own existence as related to a past and a future in the obscure sense of 'sharing', of being 'consubstantial' (65). This impenetrability is also a contemporary one, however; it is a result of a blindness to family as mystery that Marcel observes in his time.

Evoking family as mystery is therefore 'extraordinarily difficult'. It presupposes the realisation that 'previously one had entirely lost sight of it' (66). This second difficulty shows that Marcel's mystery approach to family is connected with an analysis of his time and of the controversial nature of the subject of family in his time. This clearly resonates with the aim of our project to relate the two difficulties of the charged character and the general difficulty of formulating what family is about. How does Marcel elaborate this interwovenness?

Marcel finds evidence of a blindness to mystery in 'the controversies of a strictly spectacular order which arose in the period between the wars, whether in the Press or in public meetings, in connection with marriage, divorce, the choice of a lover, the practices of birth-control, etc.' (66). These controversies concern the general issue of whether family is 'an institution which has lost its meaning' or 'still a living reality' (67). The 'incontestable statistics' show 'the huge increase of divorce, the general spreading of abortive practices, etc.' which are proof of a crisis.

Here Marcel seems to be articulating the well-known worried views about family. He continues by explaining that these are 'facts which force us to penetrate deeper in order to expose the roots of these "social facts"'. These roots lie at the 'level of belief, or more exactly, *unbelief*' (67). By this he means that the changes that have occurred in family life should be understood as changes in the 'attitude towards life' (69). This attitude used to be determined by 'a sense of holiness', a 'reverence for existence' and 'a certain state of poetry which the created world produces in us' (69).<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Marcel (*Homo Viator*, 69) refers to Albert Béguin, who quotes Ramuz, but without providing bibliographical details.

This attitude, however, has given way to 'the pressure of pride, of pretentiousness, of boredom and despair' (70). The consequences of this change in attitude 'first become apparent' in the 'domain of the family reality'. This means that the starting point of reflection on family must not be a mere 'moral crisis' in the sense of deliberately rejecting certain traditional principles (69). Reflection should penetrate to the level of the attitude underlying these principles.

Marcel clearly tries to find a way of discussing family without immediately becoming part of contemporary public controversies. On the other hand, he definitely works with a contrast model in analysing his time as one in which a feeling for the sacred is disappearing. This is not simply a straightforward expression of a conservative or nostalgic, religious world view. His project is more subtle and cautious, an attempt to elaborate a different, new kind of approaching the world than he thinks dominant in his time, also in research.

This is the first, negative part of a mystery approach. Marcel characterises the dominant approaches from which he distinguishes his mystery approach as a rational or formal one on the one hand and a naturalist or animalist one on the other (79–81). Rational, formal views are visible in that marriage and procreation are understood in terms of a contract. Marriage as a contract implies that the spouses can revoke it and also that convention reigns and the individual is sacrificed to the interests of society (80). There are no other categories to understand marriage than as the common accord of two individuals or of society.

This perspective may easily 'slide to the grossest form of naturalism' – the second dominant perspective – which sees marriage and family life as parallel to mating and procreation in the animal world. Marriage is then seen as 'a mere association of individual interests' or as a means to arrange reproduction (81). In both the latter biological and the former juridical views, laws of cause and effect or efficiency are the primary principles for understanding family. This causality thinking is also how Marcel characterises primary reflection. This approach is not questioned: it is obvious that family is based on the consent of two partners or understood as indispensable to the survival of the human race. Here again, it is easy to draw parallels with our comments about the obviousness of the meaning of family in recent family research.

It is in distinction to these views that Marcel then arrives at a second, more precise and positive characterisation of a mystery approach. It focusses on family as a unity and not on one of its 'innumerable aspects' (92) which may be analysed in isolation. Over against historical understandings that confront us with the relative character of family life in each

time and place, a mystery approach seeks for a 'constant element' (93). By this, Marcel means a 'demand rather than a law'. This constant element is something that, in his view, can be discerned precisely when it is under pressure, in a 'time of crisis and transition'.

This recalls our initial observations regarding *Housekeeping* where family ties also come to light precisely because they are challenged and even broken. What is the constant element that lights up, according to Marcel? He first points out that an 'exercise of a fundamental generosity' (81) lies at the basis of family which is related to the character of life as creation. Marcel describes an ambiguity, a moment of receiving and of giving in both this generosity and creation. Starting a family is then understood as an 'act of thanksgiving, a creative testimony' (82). Like an artist, the human being is in the family setting 'the bearer of some flame which he must kindle and pass on' (82).

In all these expressions, it is clear that there is more to family life than biology can explain or convention can organise. Understanding family in this way makes it possible, in Marcel's view, 'to catch a glimpse of the meaning of the sacred bond which it is man's lot to form with life' (82). It is this level of the bond with life that doesn't come into view in the naturalist and formal approaches. Because humans are beings with 'spirit' and not 'mere living beings' (78), they have a feeling for this sacred bond. Family is a context in which human beings are addressed as spirit because family incarnates the bond or pact of human beings with life (78). This pact implies two 'realities' – that of human beings and that of life – and a reciprocal movement between them. Human beings have confidence in life, and life responds to this confidence. It is this 'harmony between consciousness and the life force' (81) that family may incarnate. This is the level or sphere of family as mystery which is, as indicated earlier, not 'easily accessible to us by analysis'.

### *The Critical and Constructive Character of a Mystery Approach*

What we recognise in Marcel's reflection on family is first of all an interest at the fundamental level of the family in general, and in what family as a phenomenon is about, as distinct from studies that focus on a variety of specific family-related topics. Moreover, in Marcel's approach to family as mystery the difficulty of answering this fundamental question is paramount. He also distinguishes his interest from the polarised way family is approached in public debate and from historical or naturalist understandings in which it is suggested to be obvious what family means and based on facts.

However, as we saw, when he sketches this public debate, his tone seems to be the well-known worried one, and he refers to the standard controversial issues of divorce, abortion and so forth. Is Marcel not too much part of the controversy to be able to open up an alternative view?

This question also rises in relation to the context of Vichy France in which Marcel's lectures on family were originally given. The topic of family attracted a lot of attention at that time. In particular, from 1940 onwards, the Vichy Regime had developed an explicit family politics in its 'National Revolution'. The regime took strong measures to prevent women from having a paid job and to keep them at home, preferably as mothers of a large family. The importance of family was seen as basic: it was regarded as the 'initial cell' of society and as the alternative for individualism.<sup>58</sup> This politics was, moreover, presented as a return to nature.

Marcel's lectures do not simply go with the tide of idolisation of family, however. They can very well be read as a criticism of the family politics of the Vichy Regime, albeit in veiled terms. He explicitly opposes the views that, 'even during this lamentable period' of the war, 'families have kept their vitality and preserved their unity' (*Homo Viator*, 67) and that 'during the last two years' – that is, under the Vichy Regime – 'a vigorous and healthy reaction has taken place' against forces that harm family (68). On this point, Marcel states that 'the multiplication of catchwords and well-known slogans in official speeches and in the Press should not mislead us' (69).

Apart from these statements, his entire argument is that it is not the family as such that should be resuscitated but the pact with life that family incarnates. This seems to go against the family ideology of his day. The second lecture focusses on the wish to have children, which was clearly a topical issue given the fertility cult that stimulated big families. Here, Marcel is again critical: he opposes the idea that fatherhood is given with procreation as such, and proposes an understanding focussed on 'creation'.

Moreover, both lectures argue against a biological understanding of family or a detached historical one, which he characterises as 'starting from below, that is to say from a biology of racialism or eugenics infected with ill-will' (90). The reverence towards life he aims for cannot be regained by starting from below. Thus, it seems that Marcel's mystery

<sup>58</sup> Francine Muel-Dreyfus, *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine: A Contribution to a Political Sociology of Gender*, translated by Kathleen A. Johnson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2001), 173–7. Muel-Dreyfus does not mention Gabriel Marcel.

approach is not just critical of family-dissolving tendencies but also of pro-family views like that of the Vichy Regime. His fundamental approach un.masks both sides as not taking family in its deeper, true sense into account – that is, as embodying or incarnating the bond with life itself.

The alternative approach by means of which Marcel criticises and aims to get beyond reigning family controversies thus focusses on this bond with life. It implies an analysis of his time as lacking ‘a sense of holiness’, a ‘reverence for existence’ (69). This focus and analysis are introduced rather straightforwardly, however, which gives rise to the question of whether this reflection really can live up to the expectations aroused by the term ‘mystery’. Does it really account for the difficulty of naming what family might mean?

Marcel’s understanding of family in terms of its connection to life is not a conclusion, the end of his arguments. In his Gifford Lectures he describes approaching the family bond as mystery as ‘metasociological’ – that is, as ‘going deeper than sociology does’. It scrutinises family at the level of the questions of ‘What am I?’ and ‘How is it that I am able to ask myself what I am?’ (*The Mystery of Being*, 197).<sup>59</sup> The first thing Marcel points to in relation to these fundamental questions is the need to acknowledge life as a gift, which is precisely what he sees lacking in his time (198). Again, this is not a conclusive answer to the question ‘What am I?’ and a definitive analysis of his time. It is more like the first indication of the attitude needed to arrive at this level of questions and to see these as meaningful questions at all. Approaching family as mystery presupposes this attitude. In the earlier family lectures, he uses terms like ‘gratitude’ and ‘respect’ to characterise it (*Homo Viator*, 93).

We have already mentioned the notion of a ‘confidence in life’ (78, 112) which is reciprocal and can therefore ‘almost equally be regarded as a call or as a response’ (112). The attitude needed to reflect in the mode of mystery may be summed up in the term ‘piety’ (94). Marcel emphasises that piety should not be understood as ‘devotion’ or ‘edification’ but as ‘piety in knowledge’. This knowledge has a ‘sense’ of the ‘metaphysical principle’ that should be acknowledged as the third ‘impulse’ that shapes life, apart from ‘natural determinism’ and ‘human will’ (93). This principle is not arrived at by intellectual knowledge but ‘belongs to faith alone’. It is a matter of ‘sensing its mysterious efficacy and bowing to it humbly’ (93).

<sup>59</sup> In the brief summary of the fifth chapter of *The Mystery and Being* (volume I), Marcel defines philosophy as ‘called upon’ to focus on the question ‘what am I?’ (x), which is also the recuperative question of secondary reflection by which it aims to recover the unity that has been dismantled in the analysis of primary reflection.

To point out this attitude needed for a mystery approach, philosophers have no other ‘weapon’ at their disposal than actual reflection itself. What might this reflection achieve when it starts from a humble bowing to a mysterious efficacy? Marcel himself calls this reflection both a ‘heroic’ and a ‘seemingly desperate effort’ (93). This is the secondary reflection that aims for ‘remaking, thread by thread, the spiritual fabric heedlessly torn by a primary reflection . . . opposed to gratitude and respect for what is sacred’. A strong criticism of one-sided approaches in terms of problems thus goes hand in hand with an awareness of the slow labour of reweaving the mystery. Thus, Marcel’s project of approaching family as mystery is not a matter of wallowing in the arcane.<sup>60</sup>

Marcel’s aim is a constructive one.<sup>61</sup> Awareness of the character of mystery is a positive methodological starting point, not an end point of reflection nor meant to discourage it.<sup>62</sup> It indicates an attitude and a substantial focus. The focus is on family as a phenomenon in which the mysterious pact of human beings with life becomes pre-eminently visible. This has the twofold character of both receiving life as a gift and responding to it. In order to understand family in this way, an attitude of piety and reverence is needed.

It is striking that Marcel rather frankly uses language with religious overtones and emphasises that a mystery approach also implies a feeling for the sacred. As regards the theme of family, the conviction behind this approach is that ‘so-called natural relationships . . . can never be reduced to simple experimental data’ (89). Understanding them from an attitude of piety means acknowledging that these relationships receive their energy, impulse or flourishing, not just in a natural or historical chain of cause and

<sup>60</sup> Marcel realises that this concern may arise. When he introduces the notion of mystery in relation to family at the end of *The Mystery of Being* (volume I) as ‘the notion in which the whole first volume logically culminates’, he suggests that one may object that family is an ‘institution’, a ‘fact’ which ‘can be studied . . . by the methods of positive science’ (204). Is the language of mystery not ‘a touch of vague literary floweriness at a level of discourse where such battered ornaments of speech have no proper place?’ He starts the defence of his approach by pointing out the need to approach family in its current context ‘from the inside’ because it is ‘our situation’ and continues by explaining the idea of ‘presence’ which, as we have seen, is crucial for understanding in the mode of mystery.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Busch uses the term ‘constructive’ in a reply to Paul Ricoeur’s objection that Marcel’s secondary reflection largely takes the form of a critique. Busch observes ‘positive’ and ‘constructive’ ways of secondary reflection – in particular, Marcel’s ‘use of drama to fictionally portray life’. He refers to chapter VIII of the Gifford Lectures, which deals with self-reflection. Here Marcel explicitly emphasises the importance of narrative for the ‘recollective’ act of reflection (Thomas W. Busch, ‘Secondary Reflection as Interpretation’, *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 7/1–2 (1995): 176–83, at 180).

<sup>62</sup> Marcel points several times to what he calls the ‘technical’ character of the category ‘mystery’ (e.g., *The Mystery of Being*, 204).



effect but from the relationship with a deeper or encompassing dimension, life itself, as Marcel calls it.

Deprived of this pact with life, family relationships are not ‘consistent’ or ‘solid’. Natural feelings of ‘tenderness’, ‘compassion’ or ‘affection’ cannot be the basis of family responsibility (101). They may very well be ‘superficial and passing’. What is needed for a family to flourish is a ‘consecration’ (90, 110–11) of human beings to this bond with life. Marcel emphasises that this mystery approach is not limited to a specific religious belief – in particular, a Christian one in his context (86). His analysis of his time as one of a blindness to mystery is therefore not to be seen as some kind of secularisation thesis. Rather, he indicates that his time is not entirely lacking in a ‘*religio* . . . which apart from any essentially Christian spirituality gives evidence of the pact between man and the life-force’, a ‘natural morality and order’ (86). On the other hand, he also uses conceptions and images taken from Christian language to express this pact. For Marcel, these forms of expression do not exclude each other.

### A Mystery Approach as a Theological Contribution to Family Research

We called the frank way in which Marcel takes the dimension of the sacred into account striking. It may be expected that a philosopher points out the limited character of understanding family in terms of statistics, facts, history or nature. But that a philosopher characterises a ‘metasociological’ approach directed at ‘the roots of the “social facts”’ as one of ‘piety in knowledge’ that has a sense of the ‘metaphysical principle’ does not seem self-evident. One may refer to Marcel’s conversion to Roman Catholicism to explain his orientation, but that does not explain the specific ways in which he relates family to the sacred, transcendence and God.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, he uses the term

<sup>65</sup> It is remarkable that the extensive volume on Marcel in the Library of Living Philosophers series does not contain an article on the role of Marcel’s conversion and adherence to the Roman Catholic Church after 1929. In his article on ‘availability’ Otto Friedrich Bollnow briefly touches upon it when he discusses whether Christian faith is ‘an indispensable presupposition of his philosophy’ (Otto Friedrich Bollnow, ‘Marcel’s Concept of Availability’, in Schilpp and Hahn, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, 180). He argues that Marcel’s thinking should not be regarded as ‘denominational’, as is common in Germany: ‘it contains truths that are accessible from a purely philosophical orientation and that are not contingent upon specific theological presuppositions’. In his reply to Bollnow, Marcel agrees to his rejection of the characterisation ‘denominational’. His conversion led him to pay ‘more explicit’ attention to hope. Marcel immediately adds, however, that it is extremely important to realise that, for him, ‘Christianity gives a specific character to a relatively special context of data that can also be accessible to non-Christians’ (‘Reply to Otto Friedrich Bollnow’, idem: 200). In a study of Marcel’s plays, Michaud argues that Marcel is a ‘Catholic playwright’ but in a specific sense (Thomas A. Michaud, ‘Gabriel Marcel’s Catholic Dramaturgy’, *Renaissance* 55/3 (2003): 229–44, at 229). Catholicism is not something accidental or something to be liberated from,

'mystery' not just in relation to family but precisely to indicate all kinds of moments or phenomena in which the sacred may light up. As we have noticed, his attentiveness to the dimension of the sacred is not put in exclusively Christian or religious terms but mostly in more general notions like 'life' or 'being' and attitudes of 'respect' and 'reverence'. It is this seemingly self-evident combination of religious and general, philosophical language that is striking, in that it is not easy to find in our time.

Of course, Christian religious arguments aiming to protect the good of family against threats abound, now as well, but these usually start from the presupposition of the good of family as a somehow divinely ordained institution which should be defended against the current powers that aim to dismantle it. Here again, it is obvious what family means and that it is in crisis and should be protected or revitalised. As indicated earlier, Marcel's approach is not free from such a contrasting scheme. His worries about family and the lack of a feeling for its mystery character, however, do not mean that it is obvious what family is about and that the problems can be identified and solved by some traditional kind of family life. By approaching family as mystery, he aims to get beyond the controversies in which family is seen as either an institution to be restored or an obstacle to get rid of. He draws attention to the difficulty of accounting for what is at stake in the topic of family on a deeper level than that of concrete problems.

Marcel does not arrive at some concrete analysis of the good functions of family life or a definition of its ideal forms. He tries to relate the topic of family, with all its controversial connotations, to deeper, existential questions of creativity, givenness, thankfulness, hope and so forth. In the present day, such a philosophical approach to family that self-evidently uses religious thinking to illuminate the existential 'roots of the "social facts"' is far from obvious; religious language seems to be largely perceived as reserved for the believing community. This study will proceed in the mode of Marcel's mystery approach. We will explain what that means by indicating its relation to other recent family studies that reckon with a transcendent dimension.

### *Understanding Family with an Eye to Transcendence*

Proceeding in the mode of Marcel's mystery approach does not mean we recognise and endorse every part of Marcel's reflection on family. In particular, we do not follow him in his worries about family life in his days. However, we

but neither is Marcel a Catholic 'apologist or ideologue' (230). His plays are not 'thesis pieces' but inquiries into the 'fundamental antinomies' of human existence.

do want to take up the challenge of further exploring the value of the notion of mystery for moral reflection on family. We will take this up as an exploration of what it may yield to understand the phenomenon of family, the experiences of family life, as calling forth the realm of the transcendent in human life – and, conversely, whether taking a transcendent dimension into account gives a better understanding of family.

While Marcel does so in a rather frank and straightforward interpretation of the controversy on family as resulting from a blindness to mystery or a lack of piety and respect for life itself, our approach may again be characterised as more basic, open and neutral. For us, it is rather an open question what lights up when a transcendental dimension is brought into the exploration of what family might mean in the current atmosphere of controversy. This question stems from our theological background and affinity with Christian perspectives on life. Like Marcel, we seek a language and a mode of reflection that does not limit theology to those already involved in institutionalised religion. In such a project, the choice of topics is crucial. Theology, especially theological ethics, may play a part in broader academic reflection by choosing topics that touch upon religion but are also found outside it and are somehow controversial.<sup>64</sup> In our view, family is such a theme. Marcel's notion of 'mystery' as indicating a level of ethical reflection that accounts for a transcendent dimension is one that we will further explore as to its power to illuminate.

This transcendent dimension was already implicit in the focus to this study that we introduced earlier. The choice to focus on the aspects of givenness and dependence can now be better understood against the background of our interest in religion. We presented these notions as referring to experiences that cannot easily be understood in a meaningful way within the current dominant ways of thinking. Now, moreover, we can point out that these concepts can very well be associated with a religious view of the world and of human beings. Givenness is at stake in the belief that life is not a random coincidence but a gift, created with a meaning or a calling.

<sup>64</sup> For similar reasons, my book *Reconsidering Evil* deals with the topic of evil (Petruschka Schaafsma, *Reconsidering Evil: Confronting Reflections with Confessions*, Studies in Philosophical Theology, Vol. 36 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), see especially chapter 1). It approaches evil as a theme that is largely objected to because of its broadness and vagueness and is often dismantled into concrete problems, while at the same time the language of evil prevails. Moreover, this language seems to have a religious connotation – a hypothesis that is then taken as the main question to be examined in this book.

Such a view implies a fundamental dependence of human beings on the giver, the Creator or the one who calls. Dependence is also at stake in the idea that human beings are called to the good: they do not know the good by themselves nor are they able to accomplish it. Religious notions like deliverance, grace and forgiveness express a fundamental kind of dependence insofar as these are understood to be something that human beings cannot accomplish or control by themselves.

By drawing attention to givenness and dependence as aspects of life people of our time are not well-equipped to deal with, we do not intend to come up with another major contrast between our time as secular and some bygone religious age. Our observation is more neutral: these are themes that theology has had a centuries-long affinity for. They are not the exclusive property of theology, however. They are open enough to include meanings and discussions that are not put in explicitly religious language. For example, an important ethical issue related to givenness is the question of the moral weight of what is called 'the natural given' or, often in contrast to it, 'the cultural given'. In a similar way, there is a broad ethical debate on the moral implications of our human dependency, in particular in relation to care. By focussing on precisely these issues which have a religious connotation but are also discussed more broadly, we aim to explore what theology may contribute to broader debates.

The urgency behind Marcel's reflection on family turned out to be a waning feeling for the sacred, or life itself, as he also calls it. For him, the controversial character of family is related to what can be called the controversial character of the sacred.<sup>65</sup> For Marcel, this starting point is

<sup>65</sup> In a different way, the French philosopher Jean-Philippe Pierron characterises the present controversies on family in terms of the sacred ('Famille et Sécularisation. Penser la Famille en Postchrétienté', *Théophilyon* 21/1 (2016): 145–65; see also Pierron's earlier book *Le Climat Familial. Une Poétique de la Famille* (Paris: Éditions Cerf, 2009), especially chapters 2 and 5). In close association with Charles Taylor's analysis of secularisation as a process of finding new balances between religions and political institutions, he asks how the symbolisation of family could take shape in our pluralist time in which Christian symbolic language is no longer self-evident or understandable. Departing from Paul Ricoeur's understanding of the symbol as opening up to a surplus of meaning by suspending a direct referential meaning (159), he emphasises the need for symbolisation to express the characteristic ambiguity of family as nature and culture, gift and construct, and that of the 'opaque depth of attachment' (155). A functional understanding of family cannot account for these aspects; neither can the currently dominant reductive views of family that present unattainable ideals, a so-called natural phenomenon, or approach it only as a chain of consumers. Over against these 'closed', univocal symbolisations, Pierron argues for forms that are 'robust' but open to a plurality of interpretations (158–9). Spiritual or religious explorations of family and those in the arts are sources that may nourish such symbolisation because they guard an open, creative expression, though they cannot guarantee this (164). See also my article 'The Family As Mystery: Why Taking into Account Transcendence Is Needed in Current Family Debates', in *The Transcendent Character of the Good: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. by Petruschka Schaafsma (London: Routledge 2022), 210–27.

a statement; for our study, it is a question. While Marcel states the importance of the approach to reality in terms of mystery, our study asks what the illuminative power of the notion of mystery in understanding what family is about could be. We do not argue that there is no awareness of family as mystery. What our explorations of family research have revealed so far is a lack of interest in the phenomenon of the family in general. Our intuition that reflection on this general level is crucial to understanding and overcoming current controversies and polarisation regarding family does not seem to be widespread. There is also little attention paid to the unnameable character of what family could mean. We will explore whether the notion of mystery can be a way to constructively incorporate this unnameability into an ethical reflection that reaches beyond the controversies.

### *Creating a Dialogue between Religious and Secular Perspectives*

In this formulation of the aims of our study, we view ethical reflection in a broad sense – that is, not limited to authors who reflect from an explicit religious perspective nor to theologians but as actively seeking a dialogue with what the New Studies in Christian Ethics series calls the ‘secular moral debate’. By creating dialogue between explicitly religious thinking and reflection that does not regard itself as religious, the series’ aims of investigating the value of reflection which is ‘not entirely secular’ as well as the possible ‘distinctively theological justification for moral choices and acts’ can be met.<sup>66</sup> In our study

<sup>66</sup> In the first chapter of his *Moral Passion and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), the series editor Robin Gill analyses the foregoing thirty-four volumes of the series with respect to the role moral passion plays in it. He points out that the first monograph of the series by Kieran Cronin (1992) elaborates the aims of the series in three phases which ‘successfully shaped subsequent books in the series’. They consist of learning from a secular discipline, challenging a purely secular understanding, deepening and enriching it with an understanding that is not entirely secular and, finally, identifying a distinctively theological justification for moral choices and acts, or the framework for it (19–20). An interesting parallel to this ethical approach from the German theological context is the recent family study by Saskia Lieske (*Von der Form zur Beziehungsgestaltung: Zugänge zur Familie in der evangelischen Ethik, Arbeiten zur systematischen Theologie*, Vol. 12 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019)). It opens with an analysis of how marriage and family are understood in German law (chapter 2) and how they are approached in different branches of contemporary sociology (chapter 3). These non-theological disciplines are analysed first in order to gain insight into how families actually live, to ‘contextualise’ the ethical debates and to avoid an ‘all too biased’ presentation of current family life from an ethical perspective (19–20). Subsequently, two theological perspectives by Trutz Rendtorff and Wilfried Härle are analysed and compared. The book concludes with an elaboration of ethical criteria that can be the basis of a good family life. Thus, Lieske aims for a reflection on family that goes beyond the dominant ones that focus on its form and function (305–6).

Another type of theological engagement with other secular approaches to family is found in a seminal article on the European debate on family. It grew out of an ecumenical theological-ethical research group’s consideration of the meaning of family and was discussed in a conference

the most important secular perspectives will come from philosophy, social anthropology and care ethics and, in this chapter, also from different branches of sociology.

The aim of ‘engaging centrally with the secular moral debate’ and exploring what the ‘distinctive contribution’ of theology may be in this broad ethical debate has not yet been elaborated in the series with a separate focus on family. Monographs with a related topic, most extensively those by Lisa Sowle Cahill on ‘sex and gender’ (1996), Adrian Thatcher on ‘living together’ (2002) and Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar on ‘human dependency’ (2017), do pay quite a bit of attention to family.<sup>67</sup> The latter volume focusses on dependency as a central aspect of human existence and will be part of our reflection on this theme in Chapter 4. Cahill’s *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* appeared as part of the ‘Religion, Culture, and Family Project’, directed by Don Browning, to which we will turn in Chapter 3. The project aims to offer a ‘critical familism’: an alternative, liberal and critical, but not leftist, position in the American family debate that had been dominated by rightist pro-family voices.<sup>68</sup> At the heart of this project

with contributions from sociology, psychology and family law (Gerhard Höver et al., eds., *Die Familie im neuen Europa. Ethische Herausforderungen und interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, Symposium: Anstöße zur interdisziplinären Verständigung, Vol. 9 (Muenster: LIT, 2008)). In the opening article, ‘The Freedom of the Family: An Ecumenical Contribution to a European Debate’ (9–60), the four editors find the specific character of the theological approach in focussing on the ‘freedom of the family’, by which they mean an attentiveness to the distinct calling or ‘inherent logic’ (56) of family that also has a ‘moral and theological significance’ (13). They call their analysis an ‘ascriptive’ one, distinct from an empirical, ‘descriptive’ one or the ideal, ‘prescriptive’ one. The starting point of the ascriptive account of family is ‘simply that every human being is *born into* a network of relations’ which implies claims and responsibilities (14). They subsequently relate this perspective to views of and approaches to family in current European family policy, especially as reflected in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and arrive at a critique of the latter’s focus on the social function of family.

<sup>67</sup> There are several brief reflections on family in other volumes in relation, for example, to the ‘given’ character of human nature (Gerald P. McKenny, *Biotechnology, Human Nature, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), chapter 2), to the moral passion for the good in different religious traditions (Robin Gill, *Moral Passion, 167–75*), and to evolutionary theory and Christian natural law thinking (Stephen Pope, *Human Evolution and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chapter 12).

<sup>68</sup> The theological ethicist Brent Waters lists Browning’s ‘critical familism’ as a form of ‘critical adaptation’. This is one of the three approaches Waters distinguishes in contemporary Christian thinking on family, the others being ‘reformulation’ and ‘resistance’ (Brent Waters, *The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chapter 3). He understands these approaches as engagements with the ‘volatile social and political context’ of late liberalism. In this context family is regarded as in ‘dire need of radical reform and political regulation’ (96–7). From its early seventeenth-century representatives, liberalism has focussed on freedom and autonomy in the sense of shaping one’s own life. As a result, family has finally lost its legitimate, independent position between the individual and the state and is only understood in terms of serving the former or the latter (chapter 2). Thus, in the current late liberal context, family has become ‘the object of heated moral debate’.

as well as of Cahill's monograph is thus the intention to overcome the controversial status of family as a result of polarised debates, especially in a Christian setting. Adrian Thatcher is also seen as identifying with the aims of Browning's larger family research project.<sup>69</sup> Cahill and Thatcher clearly elaborate their mediating positions in different ways, however.

Cahill starts from the epistemological issue of moral relativism as a result of postmodern critiques of absolutist views. The fundamental issue of moral objectivity remains a central one in her book. As regards sex, the absolute norms of traditional Christianity were largely restrictive, denying the importance of bodily pleasure and, as to gender, they included fixed roles in a patriarchal hierarchy. As a feminist thinker, Cahill is partly sympathetic to the critiques of these norms insofar as they reveal and denounce oppressive structures and find the highest or most basic moral norm in the equality of all human beings. In her view, the result is that ethics within and outside Christianity has paid less attention to the social context of sexuality, including family. The Christian tradition itself can be a very rich source for nourishing a view of sex and gender that takes its social value to heart and in general for developing a 'social ethics, including and protecting society's judged, outcast, and vulnerable'.<sup>70</sup>

Cahill starts her unlocking of the richness of the Christian tradition in the New Testament. It offers insights into how early Christianity embodied specific values and became a 'dangerously countercultural' factor precisely as regards matters of marriage, parenthood, family, gender and sexuality.<sup>71</sup> For example, it became possible for women not to marry and have children. More equality within marriage was propagated, although within the confines of the time. The reigning views of family were challenged by the option of celibacy for women and men and by the central importance of the new family of brothers and sisters found in the Christian community.

<sup>69</sup> Robin Gill, 'General Editor's Preface', in *Living Together and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), ix. Brent Waters does not list Thatcher's views in the same category as Browning's project but characterises Thatcher's views as 'reformulation' (*The Family*, 103–5). The main reason for this seems to be Thatcher's 'radical reform' (105) in his proposal to extend the concept of marriage to include same-sex couples in *Marriage after Modernity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

<sup>70</sup> Cahill, *Sex, Gender*, 166.

<sup>71</sup> Cahill, *Sex, Gender*, 151. See also Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2000), especially chapter 2. She deals with the different views of family in the New Testament: Jesus' 'anti-family' sayings, Paul's view of the new family in Christ and the especially deuterio-Pauline tendencies to restrict the freedom of slaves and women in an 'acommodationist attempt' (39) to envisage a Christian life within the limits of the status quo. She finally concludes that early Christianity was ambivalent as regards family (39), but that 'Jesus' kingdom teaching of mercy, forgiveness, and compassion' (41) did influence concrete family life.



Because of these challenges, it was less obvious to early Christians that transformation towards 'greater equality, compassion and solidarity' (*Sex, Gender*, 117) could also take place through family itself. For current social Christian ethics, it is crucial, according to Cahill, to regard family as 'an axis of social transformation' (165). This does not mean that Christians should primarily oppose abortion or divorce, as is often the case, but that they should contribute to the transformation of the family life that leads to such problematic situations. That means working to 'overcome every inequity of race, class, or gender' instead of condemning 'the sexual sinfulness of those who are already on society's bottom rung' or 'devalued even by their own family members and religious communities' (215).

To elaborate the outlines of such an ethics, Cahill analyses the Christian tradition throughout the centuries on marriage, divorce, sex and birth control (chapter 6) as well as more recent debates on these topics in which she includes secular contributions. As regards the latter, she analyses new reproductive technology with respect to its underlying views of sexuality and gender. Clearly, the interest in family in this book is one of overcoming current injustices with special attention paid to the social character of human existence. The contribution of Christian ethics to this transformation is a critical rediscovery of its own tradition as both a hindrance to and as giving strong arguments for equality, solidarity and compassion.

A similar positive retrieval of elements from the Christian tradition while also pointing out its harmful effects can be seen in Adrian Thatcher's monograph on 'living together'. While Cahill presents her focus first through a partial confirmation of the postmodern critique of traditional views of sex and gender, Thatcher defines the moral issue of his book first in terms of factual family changes. An 'unprecedented shift in family formation' has taken place since the 1970s: the increase in cohabitation before, after and instead of marriage.<sup>72</sup>

Here the main problem is not, as in Cahill, injustice in the sense of inequality and oppression; rather, Thatcher presents the central problems as less satisfaction in and duration of the relationships, higher chances of abuse and bad economic consequences in the form of poverty. These problems affect all family members, including the most vulnerable ones, the children. Thatcher admits that contemporary data on the spread and consequences of cohabitation may become 'redundant quickly' (4). Nevertheless, he takes them seriously as largely a 'depressing read' that

<sup>72</sup> Thatcher, *Living Together*, 3.

show that cohabitation is 'a state of affairs to avoid' (36). To this negative analysis of the cohabitation data, Thatcher adds that the churches 'nearly unanimously' reject cohabitation (41). A theological perspective on relationships focusses on how people are healed of their brokenness by God in Christ. According to Thatcher, there are 'few indications' that cohabitation offers people the experience of such a healing (43). This does not mean that cohabitation should simply be opposed by Christians. Theology and the churches should take the reality of the increase in cohabitation seriously and offer an alternative which enables people to flourish in their partner relations. Thatcher finds this alternative in a retrieval of the neglected Christian tradition of betrothal. A practice of betrothal helps to develop the couple's early, somewhat cautious longing to live together into a durable one, ending in marriage. This is less likely to happen when cohabitation is seen as a 'try-out'.

Cahill and Thatcher show us different examples of what a theological contribution to a broader ethical debate may look like. They do not focus on family as such, but family is a crucial factor in their arguments concerning sex, gender and partner relations. For Cahill, family is part of the social character of sex and gender that is easily lost sight of in the postmodern reappropriation of the pleasure of sex and the struggle for gender equality. Thatcher points out the value of durable family forms. Durability is threatened by a constant reassessment of partner relationships in terms of individual satisfaction. To put it in the terms of our study, Cahill draws attention to the dependence implied in family life, and Thatcher to its given character.

### *The Specific Character of a Theological Mystery Approach*

Can the theological arguments of Cahill and Thatcher also be understood as ways to approach family as mystery in the sense we introduced it? Both authors do pay attention to the existential level underlying concrete problems of gender inequality or bad relationships, but these concrete problems remain their starting point and focus. They do not start from an interest in the question of what family could mean. As a result, it is also more or less evident at the outset what the good of family is.

Family is about equal and enduring relationships that lead to human flourishing. It is the task of Christian ethics to provide insight into what partner relationships, gender and sex may look like in such a family setting. In doing so, these types of Christian ethics also address the controversial status of family. They oppose the suspicion of family by showing

how family can be compatible with contemporary ideals of individual self-development, freedom and equality, which of course implies a reconstruction of these ideals. A distinctively theological moment is the anchoring of this understanding of family in the countercultural teaching and practice of the early church as the body of Christ in which all are equal (Cahill, *Sex, Gender*, chapter 5), or the parallel between the equality and mutuality specific to the divine love between God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the growing of love towards marriage in betrothal (Thatcher, *Living Together*, 232–6).

These theological arguments also address another suspicion – that the problematic character of family results from its Christian origins. Cahill and Thatcher acknowledge this. Christian views have had detrimental effects on how sex, gender, relationships and family have been experienced. They also point to less well-known Christian ideas that can be used to develop alternative views. At these two levels, Cahill and Thatcher aim to overcome the controversial status of family by showing how it can be understood in new ways inspired by elements from both contemporary ideals and Christian sources.

This way of addressing the topic of the family can also be seen in other studies in theological ethics. Family is often discussed in relation to concrete, contemporary problems and not so much as a general theme by asking what family is about, what it stands for in our time and confronts us with, what is difficult about it. Family is in principle regarded as a good, more than in the philosophical ethical approaches analysed earlier. Family is the context or structure that can shape a good approach to the concrete moral issues of sex and procreation, gender and partner relations. In that sense, family is a solution to moral problems. To be able to function like this, family needs to have a specific character. Christian ethics helps to outline this character with a special recourse to the Christian tradition.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Three recent examples of this type of theological reflection on family show the diversity of its elaborations. Susannah Cornwall (*Un/familiar Theology: Reconciling Sex, Reproduction and Generativity*, Rethinking Theologies: Constructing Alternatives in History and Doctrine, Vol. 1 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017)) calls her method ‘un/familiar’ theology. It aims to discuss contemporary family-related moral problems by opening up ‘the familiar’ and especially its aura of absoluteness or unchangeability by unfamiliar perspectives. These perspectives arise both from family practices and from their reflection in ethical theory. She uses the themes of generativity and natality as lenses because they are helpful in critically discussing the limits of the focus on what is ‘natural’ or ‘biological’ in family life. While Cornwall’s sympathy is clearly with the new, unfamiliar family practices and reflection, legal historian John Witte Jr. points out ‘the continued value and validity of traditional family values in modern liberal democracies dedicated to sexual liberty and equality’ (*Church, State, and Family: Reconciling Traditional Teachings and Modern Liberties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019), xiii). He reconstructs traditional Christian views

There has always been a tension in the Christian tradition between the moral weight of what can be called the natural family and the family of God. This tension can already be seen in the synoptic sayings of Jesus that construct an opposition between doing God's will and following Jesus on the one hand and loyalty to family members on the other.<sup>74</sup> In recent theological ethics one also finds authors who focus completely on this opposition in their reflection on the moral status of family. Thus, they address a different controversy about family, with a different reason for suspicion. Here family is suspected of having too much moral weight and obstructing the view of and attachment to the true community, that of the believers, or the church.<sup>75</sup>

Several ethicists point out that what characterises a Christian view is a relativisation of the importance of family and having children in favour of that of the 'new' family of believers formed in Christ.<sup>76</sup> They criticise

on the interweaving of sex, marriage and family, and of the relatedness of family, church and state for today's liberal democratic societies. A recent Roman Catholic volume edited by Julie Hanlon Rubio and Jason E. King starts from the longing for new reflection that takes into account the 'wealth and insights of the Catholic tradition' but does not remain trapped in the old oppositions related to the papal documents of the twentieth century (*Sex, Love, and Families: Catholic Perspectives* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020), 4). It aims to be more attentive to the specific moral difficulties of current family life, including, for example, the challenges of social media, which shape images of what relationships and sexuality should be, the life-work balances of parents, the power balance between partners, the nature of love and the durability of relationships. It proposes to do so by asking 'new questions' which point to the fundamental level of the values and virtues at stake in these difficulties.

<sup>74</sup> These are the passages in which Jesus opposes the self-evidence of 'who are my mother and my brothers' (Mark 3:31–35, Matt. 12:46–50, Luke 8:19–21), or points out that one cannot love one's family members above himself (Matt. 10:37) or cannot be his disciple if he or she does not hate them (Luke 14:26).

<sup>75</sup> That this is a different controversy is clearly seen when we compare it to the debate in which Cahill (*Sex, Gender*) is engaged. She also refers to the anti-familial tendencies in early Christianity and later traditions as countercultural but focusses on its potential to promote equality within and between families instead of taking it as a reason to fundamentally relativise the importance of family.

<sup>76</sup> Brent Waters localises this approach in his third category of 'critical adaptation' and labels it 'church as first family' (Waters, *The Family*, 121–6). Under this heading, he refers to the view of Rodney Clapp (*Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), who argues that family should be modelled after the church, which means a relativising that is in the end enriching. He embeds marriage as a covenant in the larger community. In a recent overview article on Christian family views, Thatcher points out the parallel between Clapp's 'American evangelical Protestant' view and those of feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether: both point to the subversive character of Jesus' and Paul's teachings on family and the community of believers. The parallel ends where Ruether argues for a pluralist understanding of family ('Families', in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. by Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 590–607, at 597). Thatcher also points out the likeness to Jana Bennett's 'neo-Augustinian' view that emphasises that it is by baptism and not by their natural family ties that believers receive their identity. It is on the basis of this relationship to God that people participate in their diverse households (Jana Bennett, *Water Is Thicker Than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singleness* (Oxford: Oxford University

theological and church views for adopting the popular glorification of romantic love and of having children and endowing them with both the aura of a natural desire and a divine purpose.<sup>77</sup> These critical views all include a moment of stepping back and asking what is at stake in the topic of the family. But their analyses of the current approach to family are from the start framed by their theological suspicion. In that sense, they are part of the controversy and not so much open investigations of what family is about. Less radical forms of this theological approach only limit the importance of family by giving it the status of a 'domestic church' that is needed within the larger church community. This again means, however, that it is supposed to be clear what family is about and that it is something good.<sup>78</sup>

Our study is different regarding this self-evident starting point. We acknowledge that family is an everyday reality for most people and to that extent it is something obvious. The value of a good family life that makes its members flourish is also beyond dispute. On the other hand,

Press, 2008)). From this perspective she criticises the over-attention to and idealisation of family in many contemporary Christian views.

<sup>77</sup> For example, Michael Banner argues that, from a Christian perspective, one should be critical of the current Western climate, which sanctions the longing for having children 'of one's own', and healthy ones in particular, as a 'natural' need that should be satisfied at almost any cost and, accordingly, regards involuntary childlessness as an experience of immense tragedy and desperation (*The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chapters 2 and 3). Stanley Hauerwas analyses the present status of family as paradoxical in that it is economically marginalised, and superseded by 'public education' on the one hand while romantically idealised as and regarded as providing an 'anchor' in times of instability on the other. For a counterview, he refers to the equalisation of marriage and being 'single' from early Christianity onwards ('Sex in Public: How Adventurous Christians Are Doing It' (1978), and 'The Radical Hope in the Annunciation: Why Both Single and Married Christians Welcome Children' (1998), in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 481–518). For an application of similar critiques – focussed on the modern, romantic, heteronormative view of marriage – to discussions on divorce, women's ordination and homosexuality in Dutch Orthodox Reformed churches, see Marco Derks, Pieter Vos and Thijs Tromp, 'Under the Spell of the Ring: The Role of Marriage in Moral Debates among Orthodox Reformed Christians in the Netherlands', *Theology and Sexuality* 20/1 (2014): 37–55. From a Roman Catholic perspective, David Matzko McCarthy addresses the romantic focus on intimacy and love of the partners regarding its economic and political consequences. He proposes the 'open household' as an alternative that places the nuclear family within a larger social context of a 'neighbourhood economy'. He identifies this 'social vocation' of personal relations as the heart of Catholic social teaching (*Sex and Love in the Home*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2004), 11).

<sup>78</sup> Thatcher categorises this 'domestic church' view of family as characteristic of Roman Catholic theology from Vatican II onwards, in particular confirmed in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) and subsequently developed into a view which gives family and church the same high status ('Families', 597–9). For Waters, these Catholic teachings are the 'resistance' form of Christian views on family which reasserts traditional dogma over against late liberal family views and practices (Waters, *The Family*, 105–15).

family is highly disputed: it is reviled and glorified. In distinction to the theological approaches we have already mentioned, our way of dealing with this controversial status is not to point to the dangers of family life and tap new, Christian sources of meaning to rehabilitate family. We think that it is important to open up the fundamental question of what family might mean and to reflect on what seems to be obvious or intuited. Doing so implies moments of distancing and estrangement from what seems obvious, and some confidence that a new understanding beyond the frames inherent in current controversies is possible.

### **The Mystery Approach of This Book**

In this book we want to achieve the moments of distancing and gaining new insights by analysing various academic debates and literary or artistic expressions about family up to the points where they reach their limits of clarification – points where ambiguities, inconsistencies or ambiguities arise. It is precisely at such points, where it appears that family cannot – as in the views just discussed – easily be seen as a solution to other problems and as something good, that the beginnings of an awareness of the specific nature of family itself, as well as of its inscrutability and unnameability, can be found.

These are the moments when reflection reaches an impasse which is, in the end, not a failure but points to the need for a different approach. We will try to interpret such impasses as openings to approach family as mystery. To put it in Marcel's terms, these are the moments when reflection 'bows humbly' to life as a mystery that cannot be understood but only recognised in faith. In line with Marcel's view, becoming aware of family as mystery is not an end point but a starting point for constructive reflection, a reweaving of what has become separated in the problem approaches. It enables reflection that does not aim to analyse family by demarcating it into different, clearly identifiable problematic aspects in order to solve them, but by being directed at family as a whole. This approach assumes an initial negative moment of 'critical reflection on ordinary conceptual reflection' to discover the nodes where it gets stuck and thus points to the need for an alternative way of thinking.<sup>79</sup> In this way, the realm of mystery has opened up. We also discovered the ethical character of this reflection – it aims at actions that correspond to the awareness of mystery. To conclude this chapter, we will outline how this reweaving from negative to positive or critical to constructive moments will take shape in this book.

<sup>79</sup> For Sweetman's analysis of Marcel, see note 53 of this chapter.

*The Need for a Variety of Sources*

As indicated, the central foci that direct this reweaving will be those of givenness and dependence. These are aspects that pose difficulties in our time with its dominant ideals of independence, freedom and equality. We want to try to overcome this friction, not by creating a view of family that is partly compatible with these ideals and partly nuanced, but by exploring how the analysis of family itself can lead to a different kind of understanding of these difficult aspects. We noted that speaking about family in general, as in formulations like 'the family itself' or 'family as such', is risky given the enormous diversity of family life. We will pay attention to this risk at every step of our reflection. At this point, it is important to emphasise once more that we do not use this speaking in general terms to suggest that there is only one true form of family life but to explore whether there are specific characteristic 'constants' in family, to use Marcel's term. We want to find a way of thinking about family as a whole. Before being able to deal with our central 'constants' of givenness and dependence, we therefore have to address the crucial, critical issue of whether it is possible to approach family as a distinct sphere of its own. We will start with this issue in Chapter 2 and deal with givenness and dependence in Chapters 3 and 4.

When we highlighted givenness and dependence as central constants of what it means to be family, we indicated we are using these terms in a neutral sense so that we do not become part of the current controversies between opponents and advocates of family or those between worried and relieved researchers. In our investigations in the next chapters, we cannot, however, avoid these controversies. Some of the authors we will analyse are clear representatives of the suspicion of family, while others are strong advocates and assume the self-evident goodness of family, are worried about its current state and aim to retrieve what has been lost.

We have selected authors who do not completely submerge themselves in these polarised debates and take a hard position. Rather, they also have points of contact with opposed views, often surprisingly. In contemporary studies, family mainly gets attention in a general sense in those that are fed by criticism and suspicion, as may be expected from the fact that the aspects of givenness and dependence are contentious issues. Nineteenth-century thinkers on family will turn out to be valuable in finding representatives of a different, constructive moral reflection, in particular, Hegel and Schleiermacher. They address the topic of family when dealing with the issue of personhood and becoming a self, and a moral self in particular. In



their view, family is indispensable for developing morality. Moreover, Hegel's view of family as a moral community is fiercely discussed among contemporary philosophers, particularly in relation to feminist views. In Chapter 2, therefore, we will create a coherent cluster of authors who relate to Hegel and also read Hegel himself. In the other chapters, there is no clustering around such a central figure but one based on the respective themes. The aim in all the chapters is to create a dialogue between critical and constructive voices in view of the aforementioned impasses which may serve as openings for a mystery approach.

Another way to avoid becoming involved in the polarised controversies and to find alternative views beyond the ossified positions is to go beyond academic reflection by starting from literary texts and artistic expressions. The very difficulty of naming the specific character of family already prompts one to consult a variety of sources. Marcel states: '[T]he kind of writer who makes the mystery of the family palpable to us is always, for example, the novelist rather than the historian of social institutions.'<sup>80</sup> This may be explained in various ways. The mystery character might be better accounted for in the ambiguous, poetic language of literature than in the objectifying language of reflection which aims to be clear and univocal.

That does not mean that a reflective approach is not valuable. Conceptual knowledge is necessary for describing and understanding what family could mean; a certain degree of objectivity is always required, but its possibilities are limited and have to be broadened by including input from other sources of meaning beyond the academic context. Moreover, approaching family as mystery, as Marcel understands it, means that family is an issue in which the researcher is always involved and can therefore never be completely understood in terms of a detached, objective analysis.

This involved character of the investigation is another reason to look for sources outside of academic reflection. The study of such involved topics like family has to account for the difficulty that people are not transparent to themselves. A method of inquiry that gives one direct access to oneself is not available. Literary sources speak from the inside in the sense that they are situated expressions that tell a specific family story. By opening each chapter with such a literary or artistic expression, we want to 'evoke' – to use Marcel's expression – the issue under discussion in such a way that one identifies with it more or less in a way that is more involved, personal or existential than detached, analytical or conceptual.

<sup>80</sup> Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, 204.

For this reason, we started our study with a first ‘evocation’ of what family is about in the form of Robinson’s novel *Housekeeping*. Here we see how people live their family life as something obvious in spite of the fact that it is all but obvious what family might mean. Aunt Sylvie self-evidently accepts custody of her teenage nieces whom she has never met and without having any experience in ‘housekeeping’. In this situation one niece, Lucille, finally decides to leave and live with a teacher, while the other, Ruth, stays with Sylvie, living as a transient, daydreaming about a reunion with Lucille. It is particularly when family ties are under pressure, when they are not self-evident, that the meanings of family come to light, as is the case after Lucille’s departure. A brief evocation of this family story resulted in an awareness of the specific meaning and power of the family tie without being able to name this meaning in an exact way or indicate how it should be morally evaluated.

In the following chapters, we will start in a similar way with an analysis or close reading of a literary or artistic source. We will do so by giving room to the source itself to tell a story about a specific kind of family experience, as we did in the Prologue. These sources will bring us close to actual family life and challenge to re-enact in ourselves the meanings we find in these stories. Only then will we go into existing interpretative studies of these sources.

To evoke the theme of Chapter 2, that of family as a distinct sphere, captured in the notion of the family tie, we will turn to Sophocles’ play *Antigone*. Antigone buries her brother in violation of the official ban and then has to pay for this act with her death. This ancient Greek tragedy keeps coming up in the history of thinking about the moral status of family up to the present. This rich reception shows that *Antigone* gives a strong impression of what it might mean to be a family. On the other hand, it does not give a straightforward answer to this question. The family members respond differently to the appeal of the family tie. Antigone is the one who acts on the basis of the family tie. The other members do not at first, but in the end they change position and do acknowledge the weight of the family tie. Antigone herself also experiences moments of doubt.

Again, as in *Housekeeping*, we will discover how a story makes us aware of family as a specific moral sphere without emphatically making this explicit at a meta level. The story gives rise to the question of what family means. Family duties are not clearly formulated, but family does give a strong impulse for acting. This acting leads in the end to Antigone’s own death, which gives rise to the question of whether family is morally dangerous. A detailed reading of *Antigone* will be undertaken in Chapter 2 to evoke different aspects of the tie with an eye to their unnameable character. This

will also give new impulses for elaborating the approach to family as a mystery, in particular because Antigone presents her duty towards her deceased brother as a divine demand.

In Chapter 3 we explore the theme of the given character of family by starting from the artistic imagery of the Holy Family, in particular two paintings by Rembrandt. One painting seems to present nothing but an ordinary family. As such, it gives rise to the question of how givenness in the sense of this ordinary scene may have a surplus of meaning, even at the level of revealing the sacred. This question will be elaborated by taking into account the specific character of this painting as a so-called 'strong image', which means that it presents itself as an image and not as a copy of reality or a simulation.

The question, finally, of whether and how the meanings of a given family tie may be specified by the notion of dependence will be evoked in Chapter 4 by analysing the family imagery of the biblical prophecy of Hosea. The character of this imagery is a peculiar one because Hosea has to embody the image; he is summoned to actually start an 'adulterous family' with the woman Gomer. This family is to be a living image in the prophetic call to God's unfaithful people to repent. As an image, it brings to light a broader, even fundamental, dependence that should be acknowledged as rooted in God. The critical power of this prophetic 'call to acknowledge' is analysed with respect to the meanings of family it may reveal.

At the start of each chapter, we will give room to the stories of these works of arts themselves, but we do so with the specific focus on the theme at hand. This focus implies of course a specific interpretation of the stories. Second, we will account for this interpretation and relate it to others that sometimes differ from it to a great degree. This leads to debates in which the controversial status of family once again comes into play – interpreting these artworks as shedding light on what family means is in itself questionable. This is another point on which we cannot avoid the current controversies about family. We aim to get beyond the polarised oppositions and deadlocks that result from it by first letting the works of art tell their stories apart from the debates and then return in the rest of the chapters to the meanings thus evoked, bringing them into dialogue with the voices from the reflective, academic debates.

### *Close Reading to Evoke the Impasse and Get beyond It*

This approach, which consists of giving ample space to the stories themselves and reading them closely, will also be applied in the case of the academic literature. As we indicated, the mode of mystery requires a reading,

understanding and reflection that is attentive to the impasse. This impasse may be the result of the paradoxical combination of a revelation of meaning and an awareness of its unnameability. Impasses may be moments when, for example, apparently clear categorisations turn out to be ambiguous or where an argument is not completed or inconsistent, or much more subtle than expected on the basis of a polemic, robust opening.

Only by giving enough space to the argument of the author is it possible to trace such moments. This 'borehole' reading asks the reader to be willing to go the long route of examining each text in detail without anticipating the outcome. As with weaving, different threads must first be set up before others can be pulled through them to create a pattern. That is why the sources are consulted on the basis of the central questions of the present study, but they also need to be put into context. For the literary and artistic sources (*Antigone*, Rembrandt, Hosea) and classical authors (Hegel, Schleiermacher), this means that central and contemporary interpretations of these sources are discussed as well. Other recent academic texts are analysed as parts of larger academic debates; they show how family is experienced and interpreted nowadays in Western academic circles.

Through this detailed, 'borehole' reading, we aim to discover moments that evoke a sense of mystery. Of course, we will also come across moments in which this awareness of mystery is lacking. We will investigate both moments as to their consequences for the controversial character of the family debate to test whether a mystery approach may indeed help to get beyond it.

In the case of Chapter 2 a first impasse arises from the reading of *Antigone*. The story can be read as giving insight into family as a distinct moral sphere, which is experienced as something that brings with it specific responsibilities. In current reflection on this issue, Hegel is a classic reference point; as he also mentions *Antigone*, the reception of the two texts is often intertwined. It is a critical reception, however. This criticism is directed precisely at our initial formulation of the distinct character of family as a tie of dependence.

Another reason to take this criticism into account is that it gives insight into what is currently at stake in the topic of family. We will focus on Judith Butler's interpretations. She accuses approaches that ask about the distinct nature of family of suggesting an unchanging essence of family that is outside the political sphere of influence, while in fact adopting dominant, heteronormative images. In the case of Hegel's reading of *Antigone* this also means that he cannot, in the end, account for Antigone's autonomous, rebellious acting. A more constructive, positive argument in Butler's thinking points out the moral importance of the fundamental interdependence of all life. However, it is precisely this positive argument that creates an impasse

because, for Butler and other feminist thinkers, family cannot be a context for discovering such interdependence. We will read Hegel himself to gain a better understanding of why Hegel does approach family as the primary locus of morality. Compared to many other readings of Hegel, we will bring more to light how Hegel sees family as characterised by the ambiguity between nature and morality, the pre-reflective and, to that extent, unnameable character of moral duty, as well as its sacredness. These aspects resonate with the understanding of family as mystery and will be investigated as to their value in getting beyond the opposition between essentialist and other approaches.

In Chapter 3 we will build on these aspects of the pre-reflective and sacred character by means of a more specific focus on the given character of the family tie. Here, an even more pronounced and polarised impasse emerges. There are clear advocates and opponents of an understanding of family as given. The central focus of this debate is the interpretation of the family tie as 'natural'. Advocates are found in recent family ethics and opponents in the new kinship anthropology which emphasises that kinship is always a cultural construct.

By analysing in detail different voices from these disciplines our aim is not just to gain insight in the shortcomings of the view of family as natural but also to understand why the language of the natural nevertheless persistently returns both in ethical theory and in the current kinship practices anthropology analyses. This latter effort to understand the persistence is hardly found among the anthropological opponents of biological views, due to their fiercely polemical attitude. This observation confirms the controversial character of the topic of family but also indicates the need to get beyond the impasse of 'nature' versus 'culture', or 'given' versus 'made' in order to make sense of what family could mean. Surprisingly, both advocates and opponents of family perceived as 'natural' will help us do so because their arguments also contain elements that are, luckily, not entirely consistent with their positions. The analysis of Rembrandt's everyday Holy Family as a so-called 'strong image' provides another way to understand the impasse and change it into a constructive moment. In elaborating these impulses into an alternative view of givenness, the approach to family as mystery will take further shape.

In Chapter 4 the general notion of the givenness of the family tie will be investigated for its openness to further specification. Is it possible to be more specific about this interrelatedness as lived in the context of family? Given our attempt to approach family as mystery, the elaboration of this issue demands caution. We enter into it again at a critical moment, another

impasse. It is found in the contemporary debate in philosophy and ethics on the relational character of being human. This relational nature is often specified in terms of a fundamental, inevitable dependence. Current thinking and societal structures are accused of a lack of awareness of this dependence. In this debate, care rather than family provides access to the topic of dependence, and family is seen as one of the root causes of the problem of the invisibility of dependence. This debate therefore enables us to explore the problems of understanding family as a sphere of dependence. It also provides us with a constructive impulse insofar as it emphasises the importance of acknowledging dependence and regards family as a place where this is lived. This gives us a reason to explore what a constructive combination of the two aspects can yield. Can family also be a phenomenon that reveals what it means to be fundamentally dependent? And does a sensitivity to mystery enable a better understanding of this dependence?

With these questions we address two constructive approaches. The first is Schleiermacher's thinking in which dependence is paramount, in a religious sense as well, and family has a crucial role as the basic moral community. The other is that of the twentieth-century French philosopher Jean Lacroix, who highlights the hidden, non-disclosed character of family and sees this character take shape in a specific act, that of the confession of both love and guilt. Introducing mystery into the analysis of these debates can help us gain insight into the limits of these constructive specifications as well as with their critical potential to reveal why dependence is at present such a difficult notion.

Finally, in the Epilogue we will take stock of our attempt to understand what family is about in the mode of mystery instead of problem. We will do this by separately reconsidering the critical and constructive nature of a mystery approach that implies a feeling for the sacred. This reflection will refer to the experience of a moral claim which inescapably forces itself upon us and which may therefore be called sacred. Family seems to be the pre-eminent context in which such a claim may be experienced and answered. Its incorporation into ethical reflection presupposes an attitude of attentiveness to the sacred similar to that implied in a mystery approach. In conclusion we will indicate what such a theological ethics looks like in a brief analysis of the double 'confession' of both love and guilt that Lacroix highlights as characteristic of family.