Family Values: Filial Piety and Tragic Conflict in Antigone and King Lear

Stephen P. Adamian
Department of English
McGill University, Montreal
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ABSTRACT

Most people place their sincerest hopes for emotional fulfillment on a rewarding family life. The “loved ones” that constitute our nuclear and extended familial worlds are the primary beneficiaries of our affections and of the fruits of our labors. In return for the primacy we accord our family members, we expect their behavior to demonstrate their loyalty to the clan. However, at a certain point obligations to the family can conflict with the needs of the individual. In this thesis I examine how filial duties influence the plights of the tragic heroines in Sophocles’s *Antigone* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Both Antigone and Cordelia organize their lives around the virtue of family honor, and yet the strength of these commitments is not sufficient to spare them from their respective, calamitous ends. Their unwavering dedication to the sanctity of family bonds leaves them susceptible, as individuals, to great harm.
RÉSUMÉ

Pour la plupart des gens, une vie de famille gratifiante est le meilleur gage d'épanouissement personnel. Les êtres aimés qui constituent nos proches sont les premiers bénéficiaires de notre affection et des fruits de notre travail. En retour, nous attendons des membres de notre famille qu'ils soient loyaux au clan. Or il arrive que les obligations familiales entrent en conflit avec les besoins de chacun. Dans la présente thèse, j'examine comment les obligations filiales influencent le destin tragique des héroïnes d'Antigone, de Sophocle, et de King Lear, de Shakespeare. Tant Antigone que Cordelia organisent leur vie autour de la vertu de l'honneur familial, mais la force de cet engagement ne suffit pas à les sauver de leur triste sort. Leur attachement entier aux saints liens familiaux les expose en fait aux pires maux.
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Introduction:

Family Matters

In his book *Reciprocity* the philosopher Lawrence Becker states that the parent-child relationship is "unlike any other that the people involved can construct. In it, some things that would be insignificant in any other context are profoundly important. In it, some things that would be terribly significant in any other context have very little importance."¹ The obligations felt between parents and children are given an unquestioned priority that has no counterpart anywhere else in our society. Honoring these freighted biological and social bonds often entails skewing normal behavior in the hope of realizing some advantage for progeny or progenitors. However, at a certain point an unconditional allegiance to the family can become a menace to the well-being of the individual and, ironically, a destructive force to the very entity such behavior is intended to benefit.

The issue of duty and obligation to the family has a significant, current cultural resonance as "family values" has become a code for a restrictive agenda championed by a conservative, moralizing segment of the society. An exceedingly vocal minority huddled under the moniker of the "moral majority" has created a high-profile ethical paradigm with the values of the family situated squarely at its center. "Family values," in this

context, are seen as the antithesis of all sin and immoral behavior, particularly that of a
trenchant individualism which, by its very existence, is perceived as a threat to the well-
being of the clan. Thus, the family is viewed by many as a privileged social body
deserving of special allegiances; even to the extent that they preempt allegiances to the
individual, to other individuals, or to other social bodies. But at times our innate
predisposition to favor these biological affiliations and value behavior that conveys
advantage to family members must be balanced out against our own self-interests.

In this project I will analyze the effects of an exclusive devotion to ideals of
family piety on the tragic protagonists of Sophocles’s Antigone and Shakespeare’s King
Lear. Antigone and Cordelia both attempt to organize their lives around the virtues of
family honor, and yet the strength of these commitments is not sufficient to spare them
from their respective, calamitous ends. Their misguided loyalties to the ties of kin and
kind above all other obligations ultimately empower harmful elements which emerge
from the bosom of the clan and eventually lead to its destruction. It is precisely because
the agents of their misfortune also happen to occupy the privileged roles of family
members that these vulnerable young women are rendered incapable of self-preservative
action. The integrity of the family proves to be indefensible when it is sabotaged from
within.

An objective examination of filial obligations must begin by acknowledging that
our sanctioning of the interpersonal relationships within the family above all others is the
product of our own specific cultural biases. Friedrich Engels, in The Origin of the
Family, Private Property, and the State, saw the development of the nuclear family as a
pragmatic social adaptation to facilitate the smooth transfer of private property through the system of primogeniture and as a means of subjugating individuals as a source of readily available, cheap labor for the production of goods by exploiting their obligations to provide for the members of their families. The sentimental family is thus seen as a cultural construct; an emotional facet that was developed over time to solidify a series of relationships that were initially conceived of as principally economic in nature. "The names of father, child, brother, and sister are no mere complimentary forms of address; they involve quite definite and very serious mutual obligations which together make up an essential part of the social constitution of the peoples in question."² Engels viewed the omnipresence of the nuclear family as the primary social and economic unit in modern society as the wholesale endorsement of an implement of oppression and advocated nothing less than its abolition.

Modern-day defenders of the family would take offense with the tenor, not to mention the fervor, of Engels’s ideas. Within our own society, they consider the family to be an institution unacceptably besieged by constantly shifting political and social forces. A persistent relaxing of cultural mores which had customarily provided widespread reverence to kinship structures and a comforting stability to the nature of family relationships is seen as auguring a society that validates the rights of the individual over obligations to traditionally accepted social groups. Supporters of the centrality of the family in our society contend that people have begun to define themselves in terms of

ideological and cultural affinities instead of by the biological and social ties linking them to their families.

Critics of the “family values” platform claim that its advocates offer unqualified support for a conventional image of the family unit which is tainted by patriarchal biases that are out of touch with the reality of the modern family. This veneration of one particular conception of domestic lifestyle above all others has resulted in a fractious debate with far-reaching political and social consequences. Feminists contend that the family has been employed as a mechanism to sustain centuries of a male-dominated status quo. Champions of the rights of homosexuals assert that the traditional depiction of the monogamous, heterosexual, nuclear family excludes them entirely from any portrayal of a healthy family life. Supporters of “family values” counter that the spread of a plurality of family lifestyles actively undermines the integrity of the traditional family unit and brand those who espouse such alternative visions of family life as being “anti-family.”

Yet, however contrary to our natural instincts the impulse may seem, the question of the priorities we choose to give to allegiances to the family begs to be treated in a morally objective fashion. The dictates of the family, like those of the civic governments of which it is frequently seen as a microcosm, should not be submitted to blindly. At times our functioning as autonomous moral agents requires that the demands of the family, that primary, sanctioned, building block of our social universe, be rejected.

The politicization of the debate surrounding the return to “family values” has “upped the ante” in terms of the significance of critical studies regarding the domestic
unit. It should come as no surprise that much of the current analysis of the role of the family in both Attic and Renaissance drama is the product of a feminist epistemology. Early feminist scholarship was integral in incorporating political, social, and historical contexts in the pursuit of a fuller understanding of dramatic literary texts. In a backlash to centuries of academic study where the “authoritative critical voice”\(^3\) was one that excluded the scope of female experience, this reclamation of the domestic realm as a domain ripe for feminist interpretation seems quite natural.

The ascendancy of new historicism and its examination of works of literature specifically as products of the particular cultures from which they emerged has provided a further impetus to investigate the dynamics of the household at various, relevant temporal junctures. New historicism’s preoccupations with the influence of cultural institutions like the family, the church, and the state on the constitution of individual identity and, by extension, the production of literary texts would presumably offer a critical climate receptive to a project analyzing the role of filial piety in shaping the self-destructive behavior of the tragic heroines presently under examination. By seeing the texts in their cultural contexts we could hope to expand our understanding of the nature of the internal familial power relationships that induce Cordelia and Antigone to embrace courses of self-effacing action in the name of the greater good of the family.

To the extent that they “view history and contemporary political life as determined, wholly or in essence, by struggle, contestation, and power relations,” the new

historicists foreground their criticism in Marxist and Foucaultian thought. However, new historicism’s conception of power relations seems to be limited to conspicuous displays of civic and royal authority and less concerned with the routine transactions of domination and submission that typify everyday life. They appear to be obsessed “with displays of public power that have consistently marginalized the mundane in favor of the spectacular, the domestic in favor of the more overtly political.” The reliance on cultural documentation which is obviously much more readily available for the lives of kings and courtiers than for those of average citizens results in a prejudicing of the quotidian interactions of husbands and wives and parents and children in favor of those of officials wielding clout on the grander stage of public affairs and presents us with a very narrow depiction of the dynamics of power.

Part of the problem in giving a cultural context to the role of the family lies in trying to characterize temporally distant societies simultaneously with the effects of a particular social institution embedded within those societies. In the case of the family, our ability to make sound historical generalizations is further complicated by the sheer diversity of forms, functions, and attitudes regarding the entity itself, a diversity that shows up not only over time but also at any given point in time. “A family is not a standard product of some universal social mix, but an organization of discrete individuals interacting with one another in a *sui generis* familial world created by and large by that

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interaction." Many cultures view these interactions as deeply personal and private, shielding them from the public eye and placing a further barrier to a general comprehension of the dynamics of the family. Yet despite the opacity of the interactions among its members and the uniqueness of each distinct domestic contingent, the dominant impression of the family is still that of a thoroughly integrated social unit and as such a reliable reflection of the larger surrounding world. The family is variously seen as a faithful mirror of the body politic, an accurate barometer of the dominant culture of the day, and a microcosm and docile servant of the state.

But these images of the family fail to take into account the fact that throughout history loyalty to family, that privileged social body, has usually superceded loyalty to other social bodies. Historically, when people thought about the continuity of society, they thought less about a centralized “state” than they did about the succession and success of individual members of their own household and among their own kin. This primacy of familial relationships presents us with direct conflict between “public” and “private” interests. The privileged position we give to family ties is, by its very nature, subversive of our allegiance to other social structures. Obligations to the family can supplant obedience to civil authority and nurture anti-egalitarian behavior that confers advantage on kin at the expense of those outside the clan. And thus, on moral grounds, the question must eventually arise, when and at what point is it safe to challenge the preeminence of familial obligations?

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This project is envisioned principally as an interdisciplinary work of literary criticism. I will build on foundations laid in the fields of feminist and new historicist literary criticism, the social history of the family, and contemporary moral theory in constructing my reading of the plays. The tragedies of Sophocles and Shakespeare are certainly areas where copious quantities of critical ink have already flowed. I hope to use this abundant body of criticism as a base from which to explore questions concerning the moral life of the family. While the volume of critical literature extant on these two plays is enormous, it is my contention that there is a paucity of criticism exploring the ethical implications of the absolute devotion to ideals of family honor for their tragic protagonists.

I intend to consider the tragedies through the lens of moral philosophy. Central to my work will be the ethical theories of the family put forth by Lawrence Becker and Jeffrey Blustein. Becker views our interactions with family members as dictated by non-voluntary reciprocal obligations whereby we are expected to return good in proportion to the good we receive and make reparations for the harm we do. Morally, we are obliged to treat family members preferentially to the extent that we have been the beneficiaries of similar preferential treatment. Blustein, in *Parents and Children: the Ethics of the Family* gives an overview of the treatment of family issues in the Western philosophical tradition and explores the moral complications inherent in according undisputed primacy to family obligations. Both Becker and Blustein see our obligations to those who are “closer” to us as obviously outweighing our obligations to complete strangers, but as also constrained in numerous ways by self-serving, pragmatic concerns. Nevertheless, neither of them
advocate a blind adherence to oppressive obligations to family members in situations where they pose a threat to our personal well-being.

The greatest debt for my argument’s theoretical framework lies with the work of the ethicist Martha Nussbaum. In *The Fragility of Goodness*, Nussbaum examines the works of the Greek tragic poets as a means of explicating the moral theories of Plato and Aristotle. She sees in the tragedies an articulation of the human aspiration towards self-sufficiency represented by an invulnerability to the capricious winds of fortune. Nussbaum, however, contends that our attempts to master fate can only come with a sacrifice of the “richness” and “fullness” that typify the good human life.

To more fully understand the role of filial piety and how it serves to motivate the personal sacrifices made by the female protagonists in *Antigone* and *King Lear* I will begin by examining the representation of the human good life in these dramatic tragedies. Transcending our modern concept of “happiness,” *eudaimonia*, or as Nussbaum, coopting a phrase from the writer John Cooper, renders it, “human flourishing,” describes an active pursuit of excellence rather than the static pleasurable condition conveyed by the English word. Thus, human flourishing is not something that just happens to us, but something that is achieved through the active pursuit of a morally upright way of life.

Most of us would imagine that a complete picture of human flourishing could not exist in a life that was not enriched by deep interpersonal relationships. Our most special, most intimate bonds are forged with specific individuals who we refer to as our “loved ones.” However, the family unit is constructed out of distinct human beings who, with the possible exception of husbands and wives, are not freely chosen. The social and
biological ties which bind the individuals together in a family are a microcosm of the forces that hold the whole society together. With this in mind, I will examine, in depth, the social history of the family in an effort to discover why we are taught to accord such primacy to these attachments and how the nuclear family has evolved to become the emotional center of our world. In our social lives we are encouraged to privilege, by our conscientious actions, those to whom we are linked, whether by genes or by choice. A historical continuity enables us to see in our actions in this domain a fulfillment of reciprocal obligations and a validation of ourselves as members of the family. Paramount to a sense of gratification in our culture is a satisfying family life.

For Antigone and Cordelia, as for most moral agents, attaining this goal entails giving precedence to ethical principles which sometimes bring a measure of personal discomfort in their execution. Far from a complacent contentment, *eudaimonia* frequently demands the renunciation of acknowledged goods in order to secure greater goods. However, accepting the presence of a plurality of valuable things in one’s life ensures a certain vulnerability to conflict where the contingent nature of one’s loyalties may make it impossible to honor all of these goods simultaneously. Tragedy views these circumstances where someone is forced to prioritize her commitments as moments that are profoundly revealing of an agent’s moral character. It is precisely these “contrary claims” that force us to examine what it is that we really value most.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche states that “art, rather than ethics
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constitute(s) the essential metaphysical activity of man.” Following Nietzsche’s cue, I will explore the use of tragic poetry as a means of explicating complicated moral issues. Philosophers and poets from Plato onward have expressed strong opinions on this subject and I will try to give a brief synopsis of this debate. Central to tragedy’s representation of the intricacy of moral life is its depiction of the complexity of the human being. Of particular significance to my examination of Antigone and Cordelia is the multiplicity of familial roles by which they define themselves. In an effort to comprehend the multifarious nature of these tragic protagonists in their guises as family members, I will invoke theories of modern identity propounded by Charles Taylor and Seyla Benhabib. Taylor and Benhabib see the act of individuation as being a process of valuation where a person actively chooses which facets of her world are most important to her. Thus, the fact that Antigone and Cordelia identify themselves so completely by their familial affiliations means that they prioritize their family identities over any other aspects of their beings.

Our commitments to the family are frequently seen as taking precedence over all other commitments. It is clear that rewarding family relationships enrich our existence and provide an integral component for a life of human flourishing. Less clear are the sacrifices that must be made in order to preserve the favored status of our family relationships. The predisposition to alter our normal behavior in an effort to compensate family members for the accumulated good we have received as a result of their actions

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may cause us to make decisions which benefit certain family members at our own expense. Lawrence Becker examines this aspect of reciprocal familial obligations and their ability to generate the semblance of a “debt that cannot be repaid.” Both Cordelia and Antigone are driven by their deep commitments to family honor to undertake actions which have serious negative consequences for the young women. However, their conduct is an expression of their acceptance of their duties to the family and, in turn, their neglect of the detrimental ramifications these actions bring about for them as individuals. They make conscious sacrifices of their personal well-being in the name of the greater good of the family. Becker is acutely aware of this ironic aspect of family obligation, noting that: “It is tragic that the very traits that make a good life possible can also sometimes force destructive burdens on the people who have those traits.”

Antigone and Cordelia prioritize their moral choices such that dedication to family honor supercedes all other obligations. Such a rational ordering of their duties exemplifies what Martha Nussbaum describes as a reasonable attempt to reduce their exposure to the capricious winds of fate. By placing their commitments to the family above all other duties, Antigone and Cordelia make an effort to diminish the possibility that serious conflict can afflict their lives. Nussbaum devotes an entire chapter of *The Fragility of Goodness* to a detailed exploration of Antigone’s reductive moral universe and in the end finds it wanting, acknowledging that “a conflict-free life would be lacking

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8Becker, 178.

9Becker, 225.
in value and beauty next to a life in which it is possible for conflict to arise.\textsuperscript{10} The desire to simplify one’s life by paying obedience to a single, over-arching duty is hampered by a concomitant inability to enjoy a life of fullness and richness. The potential for conflict can be diminished but never eliminated, and sometimes the all-encompassing loyalties embraced to achieve this goal guarantee that when a conflict does arise, it will be cataclysmic in nature.

Our attempts to honor a full slate of human values will of necessity expose us to some level of conflict. While it is in our best interests to reduce this risk wherever possible, efforts to minimize these dangers threaten to leave us with a narrow and impoverished vision of the good life. The contingent nature of many of our moral claims ensures that at some point a prioritization becomes inevitable. On the surface it seems that by simplifying our moral commitments such that kinship bonds are given priority over all others we could facilitate the resolution of conflict and diminish the likelihood of its occurrence. This would presumably make \textit{eudaimonia} a more attainable aspiration. The result of this rational ordering of our world, however, as evidenced in the tragic plights of Antigone and Cordelia, can become what Nussbaum terms a “specifically mortal, vulnerable excellence.”\textsuperscript{11} Our unwavering commitments to the sanctity of family bonds, to the exclusion of all other social and moral obligations, can leave us susceptible, as individuals, to great harm.


\textsuperscript{11}Nussbaum, 422.
The family is currently being held up by moralists as the paragon of all virtues. Perhaps this is a manner of mourning the dissolution of the uniform, “traditional” nature of the nuclear family which once served as a shared touchstone for almost all members of our society. The rise of divorce, single-parent families, and same-sex parenting partnerships are all viewed by these moralizing pundits as antithetical to their idea of “family.” However, these desires to return to a image of the family that belongs to another era are in fact cynical and overly simplistic attempts to impose unilaterally a universal moral code. It is my belief that there is much to be learned from an exploration of the perceptions of the family in ancient Attic and Renaissance English societies. An examination of family dynamics in exemplary dramas from these periods which are so central and formative to our modern Western identity can help to elucidate a fuller understanding of filial piety and what the family really means in our culture.
Most parents love their children. For many people, the pleasures of a fulfilling family existence are among the greatest rewards that this life has to offer. The affective and biological ties that bind the family are commonly acknowledged as transcending all other allegiances that people feel bound by. They envision the family as an emotional preserve where they can escape the pressures of the external world and count on a measure of unquestioned loyalty from its constituent members. Parents also see their offspring as a genetic legacy: something that will remain after they themselves are gone giving them a measure of immortality. Children provide parents with a sense of continuity linking the past of their ancestors and the future of their descendants. This perhaps explains a common tendency of parents to dote on their children: they see them as physical extensions of themselves. Parenting is a demanding and sometimes thankless task, but its joys can encourage selfless norms of behavior and sacrifices that are unimaginable in most other social contexts.

Children, likewise, generally love their parents. This love gradually evolves from the instinctive reverence of infants for their parents’ sustaining physical presence in their lives to the point where they become capable of demonstrating a sense of conscious filial gratitude in return for the parental care and affection of which they have been the Adamian 15
beneficiaries. As children grow up the goal of making their parents proud of them influences their decisions in many of the situations that they face. Of course, this process of development by no means precludes serious conflicts as children mature and begin to distinguish themselves as distinct individuals beyond the control of parental authority and sometimes impervious to parental desires. Nevertheless, even as the dynamics of its individual relationships undergo incessant change, the family maintains a place of unrivaled significance at the heart of the psychological and emotional lives of its members.

The roots of this centrality of the family in our emotional lives lie in the fact that the family has been the group upon which the physical nurturing of the individual has most often fallen. The task of safe-guarding the well-being of its members is something that the family unit has typically not felt comfortable leaving in the hands of others. From protecting infants incapable of fending for themselves to providing for the education and training of older children in order to improve their prospects when they finally leave the nest, the family preoccupies itself with the best interests of its members. In carrying out these functions family and kinship structures are an important source of a stability that typically benefits not only the individual, but the state and the society as a whole.

Foremost among the concerns of the family of which the state is a direct beneficiary are those of producing and raising a society's future citizens. The family has long been the sole legitimate provider of properly formed young individuals to become the workers and legislators of tomorrow. Cicero noted long ago that the common life of the
household "lies at the root of every city and is as it were the seedbed of the state." As
the fundamental social unit, the family also provides indispensable services of protection,
education, and support which reduce the obligations of the state in these realms.
Sustenance and shelter are almost entirely the purview of the family, with the state often
intervening only in extreme cases where destitution threatens an individual's continued
well-being. The process of socialization begins at home and mundane duties like respect
for others and submission to parental authority provide the rudiments of a civic education.

The family's indispensable role in the provision of the physical comforts necessary
for existence, however, has not always carried over to the emotional realm. We must
remember that our modern, Western conception of normal, healthy, family relationships
should by no means be seen as universal in nature. The sentimental importance we choose
to give to the entity we know as "the family" is the result of decisions made at the
individual and societal levels in accepting this particular social construct over all others.
"In recent years sociologists have increasingly seen the modern family as a web of
symbols and ideas, partly created by the participants themselves and partly by certain
professional interest groups aided by the mass media." Thus, the constraining effects of
assumptions we now make about sex, parenthood, childhood, and kinship as well as the
symbolic significance with which we vest such disparate concepts as "home," "privacy,"
and even "the family" itself must be seen in relation to willed choices that have been made

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by us or on our behalf. In particular, the extent to which ordinary men and women in our contemporary society allow their hopes for emotional fulfillment to rest on their family life cannot be assumed to have been a constant across historical eras and other cultures.

The interpersonal dynamics of life in the nuclear family are largely defined by a dramatic breach that separates the world of parents from that of their children. Adults inhabit a serious world of responsibilities chiefly related to the economic and practical necessities of the family. Children are, for the most part, protected from these preoccupations. Childhood is thought of as a carefree time of blissful innocence. Aware that the demands of the society at large begin to intrude soon enough in the form of socialization and education which promptly introduce children to the competitive world that awaits them outside the home, most parents take pains to try to preserve this brief moment of innocence for as long as they can. William Wordsworth, in “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” wrote of this aspect of childhood and youth as a time of privileged innocence, of how “[h]eaven lies to us in our infancy.” But this briefly-glimpsed paradisiacal state is swiftly snatched from us and replaced with a progressively deepening sense of exile and disenchantment. “Shades of the prison house begin to close/ Upon the growing boy.” As the hardened, restrictive reality of the adult world gradually engulfs the awareness of the growing child, this loss of the pure, carefree, bliss of youth is interpreted as something painful and profound. This awareness of a difficult transitional period from the cloistered world of the child to the unforgiving world of the adult is still

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powerfully present in our society. Adolescents maneuvering through this arduous interval of their lives manifest an alienation from both the world of children they are in the process of leaving behind and the world of adults of which they do not yet feel a part. “The distinctiveness of childhood as a state utterly different from adulthood is deeply ingrained in our culture, and encoded in icons of childhood as different as Peter Pan and Huckleberry Finn.”

The French scholar Philippe Ariès, whose seminal Centuries of Childhood documents the rise of our modern, child-centered conception of the family, sees our belief in this distinctiveness of childhood as a very recent development. His study suggests that our contemporary family arrangements, dominated as they are by the unrivaled importance of the domestic nuclear household, are the result of a great historical change. Ariès’s work, originally published in French as L’Enfant et la vie familiale sous l’ancien régime in 1960 and in English translation in 1962, has profoundly influenced a generation of scholars exploring the social history of the family. His examination of the factors accounting for the rise of the contemporary, “sentimental” family has spawned its own branch of social history, appropriately dubbed “the sentiments approach” to family history.

Before Ariès, research had been based on empirical data demonstrating demographic changes in the makeup of family structures. These data were typically culled from parish registries of baptisms, marriages, and burials and used to construct a

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somewhat impressionistic image of family life in former times. However, many critics argued that these sources were difficult to interpret reliably and uncertain in their relevance outside a small elite. They saw the correlation of demographic ‘facts’ with a set of available community-level variables as an inherently flawed methodology. In response to the intrinsic limitations of this approach, a group of investigators influenced by the research techniques of sociology and social anthropology attempted to illuminate the patterns of family relationships and the changes those relationships have undergone. They attempted to isolate ‘structural’ constraints that affected these relationships, most notably economic and other exchange relationships operating within the family and between family members and others. The main emphases are on the ways in which resources (including human resources) become available to the family and its members, on strategies which can be employed to generate and exploit resources, and on the power relationships which arise as a by-product of these activities. The particular form taken by family behavior is seen as emerging out of these processes, and the norms, meanings, and symbols associated with family behavior are seen, very largely, not as free-floating independent variables, but as a corollary of these structural constraints.\textsuperscript{16}

While these studies were helpful in understanding the rationale for the organization of the household and the existence of property relationships which defined to a large extent many family interactions, they did not go very far in uncovering the private, emotional aspect of family life. Ariès saw signs of the dawning of a “new sensibility” in early modern society regarding the interpersonal relationships within the family that were

\textsuperscript{16}Anderson 17, 65-6.
unexplained by demographic and household economic theories of the family. Evidence of this change manifest itself in realistic child portraiture, children's apparel, games, pastimes, parental efforts to segregate children from adult society, and the reproval of parents for coddling their children. Childhood came to be viewed as a special stage of life warranting special care.

"Before the seventeenth century, though children existed, childhood did not: a child was regarded as a small and inadequate adult, and the concept of the 'childish' as something distinct from adults was a creation of the modern world." There was no recognition of the particular quality of the life of children as fundamentally different from that of adults that we take for granted in our contemporary society. Children lived on the margins of a world defined by adult responsibilities and needs and had little or no room for a distinctive cultural identity of their own. "Their clothes were miniaturized versions of adult wear, they had no special culture of play, no children's literature, there was no idealization of the innocence of childhood."17

The reasons for this absence, Ariès contends, were numerous. In a climate where infant and child mortality rates were extremely high, the bonds of affection between parents and children were of necessity looser than those in modern western society, where most children can be expected to survive into adulthood. This resulted in a culture of detachment which manifested itself from the very beginning of infancy. The most striking evidence of this was that almost every woman with the means to do so sent her infant children off to wet nurses to be breast-fed, thereby depriving both mother and child

17Duffy, 61.
of one of nature's most intimate bonding experiences. "For most people the home was also the workplace, not the center of the loving affectionate family, but a structure for toil, in which the immature adults we call children were an integral part of the workforce."

Rather than the enclave of emotional sustenance that we see it as today, the family was first and foremost the social unit of economic production and all family members were expected to contribute what labor they were capable of towards this end. "The children of the poor worked as soon as they were able to pick stones, glean corn, scare crows, or drive a flock of geese; the children of artisans were apprenticed and went to live with their masters long before puberty; the children of the well-to-do were sent away to school, or to other households to be fostered." The pre-modern house was also a place where there was not a premium placed on privacy and interpersonal familial relationships were in general more public and less intimate than we are now accustomed to. All of these circumstances conspired to create a situation that was hardly conducive to nurturing connections based on affection and respect for individuality.18 So, Ariès asserts:

18Duffy,61.

The movement of collective life carried along in a single torrent all ages and classes, leaving nobody any time for solitude and privacy... The family fulfilled a function; it ensured the transmission of life, property, and names; but it did not penetrate very far into human sensibility.19

apprenticeship as society's primary means of educating its young. Ariès contends that it was only when the pattern of sending children off for vocational training in the faraway homes and shops of craftsmen was gradually replaced by a model of instruction at local schools no longer reserved solely for clerics that the modern, "sentimental" family was born. This development allowed parents to have more extensive contact and a deeper involvement with their children:

The sentimental climate was now entirely different and closer to our [own], as if the modern family originated at the same time as the school, [which] satisfied both the desire for a theoretical education to replace the old practical forms of apprenticeship, and the desire of parents to keep their children near home for as long as possible. This phenomenon ... bears witness to a major transformation of the family: it fell back upon the child, and its life became identified with the increasingly sentimental relationship between parents and children.20

The retention of the child in the home for a longer period of time obviously provided the opportunity to establish more profound connections between parents and children. This in turn magnified the importance of the private familial world as a sanctuary of sentiment in opposition to the emotionally indifferent world of public affairs.

Ariès argues that this change in parents' and society's attitudes toward children does not mean that parents in the past consciously "neglected, forsook, or despised" their children. It was not love that was missing from the pre-modern household, but rather parental and societal "awareness of the particular nature of childhood" and with it care for

20 Ariès, 370.
and involvement in a child’s life. Parents in the past simply did not recognize their children as such; the pre-modern family was only a “moral and social unit,” not yet a sentimental one.21

The result of this transformation was that the family began to withdraw from society and turn inward upon itself. Ariès believes that before this point was reached in the seventeenth century the family had been “a remarkably gregarious and charitable institution, readily deferring to and embracing the world around it.”22 He implies that this open allegiance to the community at large had been a major impediment to the development of a vital private life. Thus, in Ariès scheme, nothing signaled the arrival of the modern family more than the triumph of the desire for personal privacy over congenial, neighborly social obligations. “One is tempted to conclude that sociability and the concept of the family were incompatible and could develop only at each other’s expense.”23

Of course, many social factors influenced this withdrawal from the life of the community and turning inward of the family. As society moved from a subsistence agricultural economy, where the dependence of the family on the communal society was an imperative, to a more market-based agrarian model, a more self-sufficient family unit began to develop. The growth of the market economy also encouraged the development of new economic strata and organizations, particularly the family trading or artisanal shop and possibilities of employment as a free-wage laborer. New attitudes about property

21Ariès 128, 390.

22Ozment, 11.

23Ariès 407.
began to develop whereby men discovered newfound economic rights devoid of social obligations. In time, the rise of industrialization would require many families to abandon the traditional rural lifestyle altogether and relocate to the towns and cities in order to find employment. Existence in an increasingly unforgiving, impersonal, urban environment demanded that the family close ranks in order to ensure the well-being of its members.

At the same time that scholars see an emphasis on increasing family autonomy and cohesiveness, however, there is evidence of a growth in individual autonomy and rights. This is due, in part, to the emergence of a new set of values typified by a “wish to be free” and “sanctioning individualism over community allegiance and self-realisation over collective solidarity.” Our modern conceptions of freedom and liberty are defined to a large extent by this cultural shift which began to recognize the personal needs of the individual as sometimes taking priority over the needs of the community, the extended family, and even, in rare instances, the state. In his examination of the case of England, Lawrence Stone sees this change as due, at least in part, to the fact that customs of deference and obedience in a stratified society combined with an increase in the unity in the interests of the upper classes and the consolidation of state power to allow for the maintenance of the social order while simultaneously granting certain individual liberties. Society’s inherent respect for and internalization of social discipline permitted a loosening of the constraints which had traditionally limited personal freedom. “Individual autonomy...was a new luxury which could now safely be indulged in by the well-to-do,

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and which modified and mitigated the rigidities of a society whose fundamental cohesion was preserved by habits of obedience to legitimate authority.⁵²⁵ Thus, provided that the social order could be maintained, society began to tolerate individual demands for increased privacy and the right to self-expression. This is an illustration of the modern notion that society’s rights to make demands for obedience on the individual in the name of the common good are acceptable to the point that they are necessary for the maintenance of public order, but they are subject to limits where they infringe unnecessarily on personal freedom.

The widespread articulation of these desires for individual freedom was a reaction to the increasing pressure that conflicting social and religious obligations placed on citizens in early modern European society. As schismatic bickering over doctrinal minutiae swept the continent in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, people were impelled towards conformity with the collective will as a public demonstration of their commitment to ideals sanctioned by the church or the state. But as this religious sectarianism began to engender inquisitorial excesses of a violent nature in many quarters some questioned the legitimacy of these intrusions on personal freedom for the persecution of matters relating to largely private, spiritual beliefs.

Renaissance humanist ideologies spreading northward across Europe were directly at odds with these coercive trends, focusing instead on the freedom, potentials, and accomplishments of human beings and stressing the centrality of man in matters spiritual.

and secular. Whereas in the past man had been “conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category,” he now could hope to transcend the narrow constraints that these numerous divisions imposed upon him. Even Dante, whose *Divine Comedy* is heralded by many as the foundational document of a national literature for Italy, proudly proclaimed, “My country is the whole world!” The move was distinctly towards a universalization of human experience. “An objective treatment and consideration of the State and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such.”

Early modern European society was to be defined by the clash of these conflicting ideologies: the one demanding unconditional doctrinal conformity in the name of collective unity, the other sanctioning the right of the individual to freedom of action and inner belief. Socially, the divisive nature of these quarrels played itself out on the grand geo-political stage against a backdrop of nascent nationalist sentiments and the struggles of a hegemonic, hierarchical, and increasingly defensive church shaken to its very foundations by the cataclysmic social changes of the era. But these conflicts also raged on the battlefields of individual consciences, where independent thought was being subtly encouraged by the general upheaval seen in the worlds of science, philosophy, and theology. A new conception of human dignity and the importance of the individual enabled people to confront inequity and injustice in their world and question whether its

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existence was an inevitability.

The reorientation of man's position in the world brought with it a reexamination of his relationship to his environment. Passive resignation in the face of disease, exploitation, poverty, and suffering, seen before as the will of God and something to be endured, was replaced by a belief in the efficaciousness of action. No longer was man restricted by the constraints of custom to a docile acceptance of his lot. He was encouraged to pursue his own personal pleasure now, instead of waiting for the promises of the afterlife. "This new attitude could lead to anything, from the experimental breeding of specialized dogs and horses and cattle, to the use of sex for pleasure rather than for procreation by taking contraceptive measures, and to challenging the wishes of one's parents over the choice of a spouse." 27

Economic changes further facilitated the rise of individual independence by creating social conditions which liberated the individual from inescapable obligations to the community of neighbors and extended family members. These changes in early modern society, the nascent roots of modern capitalism, allowed certain individuals, so disposed, the independence to replace a slate of values prefaced on the well-being of the community, with values prefaced on the well-being of the individual. The rise of a market-based economy was critical in enabling economic self-interest to displace altruistic communal values.

But it is generally not possible for human beings to be completely independent outside of a community. We require some form of society to meet a host of needs that we,

27Stone, 232-3.
as individuals, are incapable of meeting on our own. In this respect, the household serves as our fundamental social association; a group of people united in an effort “to secure for themselves a measure of material self-sufficiency—an answer to the scarcity which is such a central part of the human condition.” With the arrival of the possibility of disengaging from the community, man sought to fulfill his essential human need for some sort of communal life in the family. Our family affiliations are in this sense pragmatic alliances knowingly entered into in the hope of relieving ourselves of some of the burdens of single-handedly supplying all of the physical necessities of our existence. The interdependent relationships which define the household afford its members a measure of individual independence.

The political economist William James Booth has explored the role of the household in providing its members with the requirements of life and, by extension, freedom from dependence on others. The affective, altruistic community of the family, like all communities, is marked by a set of shared objectives. This primary economic community subordinates the expenditure of its human and material resources to the desires of the family members as determined by the group’s leaders. This is to be contrasted with the economic community of the marketplace where the common interests governing interpersonal exchanges are more impersonal in nature and altruism is largely discarded in favor of an “optimizing rationality.” Booth, taking his cues from Aristotle and Marx, reminds us that the economy is first and foremost a moral space, “a relation among

persons, which may, under specific historical conditions, assume the appearance of a relation between persons and the things they make and consume.”

Booth examines the ancient Greek household (*oikos*, the root, both conceptually and etymologically, of our economy) as a moral space integral for individuals attempting to achieve a measure of independence. The *oikos* was “an association of persons united in a certain purpose and mutuality, in relations of domination and subordination, and striving for those ends that composed the good life as they understood it.” Household management was the essential task of marshaling resources in pursuit of autarky and leisure. The productive capacities of the family unit were subordinated to the attainment of these goals; freedom from poverty and from the “freedom-robbing dependence on others.” “The household is the institution in which we labor to provision ourselves in the things necessary for life; but it is also where we seek to emancipate ourselves, as far as we are able, from the drudgery that is our estate.”

At the center of the *oikos* economy was production harnessed for the satisfaction of need. Need meant primarily the physical requirements for existence, but beyond that it also encompassed the deeply-held desire for unconstrained activity for the household’s free members. The *oikos* was a rigidly hierarchical institution and the benefits of the household’s economizing of its productive capacities were conferred to only a select few of its members.

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29Booth, 3,6.

30Booth, 1, 8.
The struggle for livelihood required sweat and toil and bound humans to a web of compulsion from which the only escape for some was the servitude and wasted lives of others. The earth not being spontaneously bountiful, it was best to have slaves, and if one was too poor to own slaves, women and children could fulfill their functions.  

Freedom for a chosen few was purchased with the constrained labors of others who were considered part of the household but were denied a share of the benefits which were derived from their work.

Individual independence is unattainable in isolation. The oikos provided an insular community that was capable of pooling its resources in order to minimize the costs of acquiring the biological essentials for life. The productive initiatives of the family unit were subordinated to the will of a patriarchal leader whose decisions were made taking into account the well-being of the communal entity. The application of these collective efforts in the pursuit of economic autonomy produced benefits that were shared in varying degrees by the household’s members.

The aspirations and goals of the oikos were to a large extent a microcosm of the aspirations and goals of the society at large: self-sufficiency and autonomy. Productive surpluses were applied to lessen the laborial obligations of the group’s members. The household functioned as an independent community embedded within the larger community of the city-state. The values embodied by the family’s leaders placed the well-being of the family first and, while not in conflict with those of the city-state or other

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31Booth, 76.
communities, presupposed that exertion expended to achieve the goals of the *oikos* preempted other priorities. Efforts were directed specifically at the success of the *oikos* economy and allegiance to this group supplanted allegiances to larger, inclusive entities.

This precedence given to the management of the *oikos* economy in the hearts of the members of the household and its distinction from the marketplace foreshadowed the rise of the independent family unit in early modern European society. Whereas citizens felt compelling moral obligations to exert themselves for the betterment of the society at large, priority was of necessity given to practical, material obligations which were felt to exist at the level of the household in the struggle to secure for its members the physical requirements of life. Although the duties of citizens were felt to be integral to most conceptions of human flourishing, it was effective management of the household economy which liberated free family members to partake of the good life.

The rigidly hierarchical, ancient Greek concept of the *oikos* relied on slave labor to achieve its goals of autarky and liberty for the household’s free members. This inherently patriarchal conception of the structure of the household was largely maintained in early modern European society, modified most notably in the change from the overt enslavement of laborers to a form of contractual servitude. Prevailing conditions of scarcity in both cases necessitated that the material requirements for the good life: freedom from constraining toil, demanded that the burden of these essential labors be shifted to a servile population. It was this allocation of labors to others affiliated to the household unit, but without complete liberty, which allowed the free members of the family the individual independence to pursue their own visions of human flourishing. For
it was only this liberation from the drudgery of attending to their physical needs that gave family members the freedom to contemplate other things. "For in an empty belly no love of the beautiful can reside."32

To some extent, the development of an insular family world and the concomitant rise of privacy are in and of themselves expressions of a newfound individual autonomy. Independence for the family eventually meant freedom from the need to rely on the extended family and neighbors to meet their basic needs. The advent of a truly private household, safe from the prying eyes of an exceedingly intrusive society, offered the individual an essential respite from the incursions of public life. The English jurist Sir Edward Coke encapsulated this sentiment in words that still resonate with us today: “For a man’s house is his castle, et domus sua cuique est tutissimum refugium [and each man’s home is his safest refuge].”33 The home is the place where a man can escape from the impinging demands of the world and preserve a sense of independence and sovereignty. His existence within the household is not compromised by the myriad social obligations that burden him beyond its doors.

However, the triumph of individualism is not an unequivocal victory for the family. The subordination of personal preferences, ambitions, and goals to the common good which had traditionally served the needs of the community had similarly benefitted the family and the demise of these conventions exposed the domestic unit, as they had the

32Atheneus, The Deipnosophists, 6.270b, quoted in Booth, p. 83.

33Sir Edward Coke, The Institutes of the Laws of England, (1628) Part III, Ch. 73, 162.
community as well, to new dangers. The growth of individual freedoms in early modern societies that appear to have used social obligation and obedience as coercive tools to constrain their citizens can certainly be viewed as improvements. But another facet of individualism, an egotistical and narcissistic side, posed a threat to the cohesion of both the family and the community.

The family was often a beneficiary of the newfound independence of its members: people could withdraw from the community and seek their solace in the bosom of the family. However, the family, as the fundamental community, was also susceptible to seeing its members disassociate themselves when the obligations they owed to the family unit came into conflict with their needs as individuals. We see an example of this that has become quite familiar to us in a tale published in 1476 by a writer living in Salerno, Italy, not far south of Naples. The story followed the tragic love of two young lovers who had chosen death because they belonged to families that were at war with one another and had prohibited the couple from marrying. Throughout the following century this story grew in popularity and was retold frequently not just because it was a gripping tale, but because it also gave a chance to reflect on the impossible demands families could press on their members. In the late sixteenth century William Shakespeare used this plot as the basis for *Romeo and Juliet* (1592). The play is commonly seen as a general criticism of the domestic tyranny of kinship with its collective oppression of the desires of the individual.  

Personal freedom, in our modern conception, is frequently envisioned as being threatened when the individual’s needs come into conflict with those of the society. In this scheme, social mechanisms will be employed to carry out the society’s oppression of the individual. As the case of *Romeo and Juliet* shows us, the family, as the fundamental unit of society, is frequently the mechanism by which this subjugation is achieved. There is a certain irony here, as the family has frequently been viewed by its critics as the prime beneficiary, at the expense of the society at large, of preferential treatment from individuals intent on bestowing advantage on kin and kind.

Plato saw the family as a bastion of individualism: a place where citizens would expend energy to benefit their family members instead of the members of the community. Rather than seeing this behavior, as we currently validate the act of devoting energy for the betterment of one’s family, as pious and honorable, Plato saw it as a manifestation of the “excessive love of self” that he believed to be inborn in most people. Given the opportunity, this tendency would express itself as an inordinate devotion to the interests of one’s own family and a corresponding disregard for the interests of a larger public. Plato, like Marx and Engels many centuries later, saw the family as a conduit for conserving private property within the hands of its members over generations and for that reason felt that it needed to be abolished:

For Plato, the ideal state cannot coexist with private property or the private family. Private property, as an institution, encourages acquisitiveness and tends toward the unrestricted pursuit of private fortunes at the expense of other citizens and the community. One of the principal motives for the accumulation of
private wealth and possessions is the desire to protect and improve the condition of one’s private family.35

Rather than providing a point of intermittent conflict between public and private interests, Plato saw it as an “either/or” situation: in defining your allegiances you had to choose between supporting the needs of the family or those of the state. Even when its retention was vindicated, as it was by Aristotle in his Politics, the emotional center of our world was not seen to be in the life of the family, but rather in the life of the polis. The family’s role was to provide the necessities of life and free men for the nobler pursuits that were possible only in public life.36

To some extent, Plato’s fears of the egotistical nature of the individual’s devotion to the family have been born out in our modern, materialist society. Our families have become our only important unit of community. Our society is defined by a self-serving set of values whereby our only obligations are to procure the best possible situation for ourselves and our family members. Moral obligations to the community at large have largely been displaced by these self-centered aims. Thus in the political circles of certain modern industrial societies, the chorus to reduce absurdly low tax rates for the wealthy and jettison the few public services still available to the poor has become a deafening roar. Facing the ravages of poverty are the responsibilities of the afflicted people and their families. Modern conceptions of altruistic behavior extend only so far as to cover energies


expended to aid our friends and loved ones, not total strangers. Any claims made on more fortunate individuals to assist the unemployed or poor are seen as unjust intrusions on the abilities of those individuals to provide for their own families. This is important because the household, the primary social, emotional, and economic unit of our society, is precisely where we seek our validation. And that validation is measured in terms of the riches we can accumulate which will enable us to confer advantage on family members. The good life in modern Western society is the life with an excess of material wealth.

Our use of language confirms this system of values where monetary and material measures are the markers of success. Someone who is affluent is referred to as “well-off,” “prosperous” (derived from the Latin prosperare “to make happy”), and as “having done well for oneself.” This linguistic mode of validation through material excess extends to our conception of human flourishing in our roles as parents where it is of the utmost importance that we “provide the best” for our children. While ostensibly this phrase is intended to signify that we will do everything in our power to give access to the best opportunities for our children’s future well-being, it frequently takes on the connotation of furnishing a profusion of brand-name and fad items denoting either high quality or an effort to be relentlessly up-to-date in the ever-shortening purchasing cycles dictated by our consumer society. Modern working parents intent on “providing the best” for their children do so by presenting them with an assortment of goods which are intended to show concern for their welfare. Some of these goods, such as expensive private schools, may have nominal value in broadening the range of opportunities open to their children. Sometimes, however, children are plied with costly gifts as a way for parents to assuage
their guilt at being forced by the demands of their careers to provide a hospitable family community without the luxury of spending extensive amounts of time with their children. Success is seen as something that can be guaranteed by providing the best of everything that money can buy. We will procure for them all advantages that will assist them in attaining the material successes sanctioned by our fundamentally materialist system of values. When “providing the best” for our children is measured in purely material terms it implies that this endeavor is devoid of any emotional investment.

Of course, our conceptions of the good life with respect to our families are by no means devoid of an emotional component. In our contemporary society most people’s hopes for emotional fulfillment rest almost exclusively on the interpersonal relationships that define their family lives. The most profound validations we seek from others are those of parental recognition of our accomplishments as children, the chance to cherish the triumphs and independence of our children as parents, and the love and support of our spouses. The family is our primary emotional community, and as such, the members of our family, more than any other group of individuals that inhabits our world, have an outsized impact on the sentimental aspects of our lives.

But our freedom to act within this community is restricted by social norms and the expectations of others. Emotional happiness within familial relationships is a two-way street: it is dependent upon all family members behaving in a way that will allow everyone involved to perceive the particular interpersonal relationship as rewarding to them. The emotionally contingent quality of its constituent relationships is the part of family life which is most restrictive and debilitating to many people. There is an unspoken and
implicit denial of freedom when contemplated actions are recognized as adversely
effecting other members of the family. Pursuing exclusively self-interested behavior in the
context of familial relationships is seen as a transgression in a way that similar behavior
undertaken outside of the familial context is not.

The relationships most vital to our emotional fulfillment are typically found within
the family. In the act of properly honoring these biological and social ties personal
sacrifices must frequently be made. In particular, our actions and expectations are
constrained by the desires of other family members and the duties we feel towards them.
We are not completely free to pursue our own happiness when there is the specter of such
pursuits having a negative impact on the happiness of others. Our happiness itself
becomes contingent upon the behavior of others. We are not entitled to enjoy it fully
unless our family members validate it: asserting that it is a happiness that they can live
with, a happiness that does not impinge on their own.

By admitting a plurality of interdependent interpretations into the process of
determining what human flourishing within the family entails, we underscore the already
subjective nature of the pursuit of the good life. Pluralistic conceptions of human
flourishing contend “that the goods realizable in a human life are genuinely diverse, that is
not reducible to a single species, that genuinely diverse combinations of goods are
sufficient to make a life a good one, and thus that good lives may differ in kind as well as
degree.”37 Even the fundamental concept of what is “[g]ood is indefinable because

37Lawrence C. Becker, “Good Lives: Prolegomena,” in The Good Life and the
Human Good, Eds. Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and Jeffrey Paul, (Cambridge:
judgements of value depend upon the will and choice of the individual." It becomes impossible to articulate a clear and overarching definition of what it means to lead a good life with a pertinence beyond any particular person's specific beliefs. If good is an arbitrary concept then our efforts to measure objectively with moral universals the actions that constitute the lives of others will be confounded. In the words of Iris Murdoch, "[w]e cannot then sum up human excellence for these reasons: the world is aimless, chancy, and huge, and we are blinded by self." 

Yet, it is not to be assumed that the existence of a wide variety of ethical perspectives is detrimental to the moral life of a society. "We are well served, both practically and morally, by ethical diversity, by living in a community whose members have values and priorities that are, at a habit-forming, action-guiding level, often different than our own." Subjective judgements of value and ethical prioritizing are essential if each of us are to determine our own individual moral imperatives and formulate our own personal conceptions of the human flourishing. However, such ethical relativism demands a high degree of cooperation and shared objectives in order to avoid drifting into anarchy.

John Stuart Mill, in On Liberty, his classic defense of individual freedom, advocates the frank discussion of differences of opinion, which suggest differences in

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39Murdoch, 97.

character and experience, as the best cure for the failings of narrow-minded dogmatism because it impels the refinement of crude and imprecise beliefs. He lashes out:

against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development and, if possible, prevent the formation of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own. ⁴¹

The result of these habits is that tenets which are summarily imposed by the “tyranny of the majority” and the “despotism of custom” do not have the moral or legal authority of standards that are arrived at by an honest process of deliberation and discourse over issues of individual conviction. Mill views such conclusions reached without the benefit of exposure to conflicting opinions, those that are not “fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed,” not as “living truth” but rather as “dead dogma.” ⁴² His defense of the advantages of diversity rests on his view that the uninhibited expression of a wide variety of opinions has an implicit value precisely because it is the best way to reach a consensus, as well as the best way to arrive at the truth.

A certain amount of concord and solidarity is essential to the smooth functioning of ethical paradigms within any group. Morality is, after all, not the solitary enterprise of an individual who, as it happens, depends on others for his welfare, but rather, the


⁴²Mill, 63, 136, 97.
enterprise of a community composed of distinct individuals who, of necessity, act independently of one another most of the time. "People of different ethical orientations can--and need to--cooperate fruitfully in practical life while having different interpretations and justifications of general moral or procedural principles." At the communal level, where heterogenous ethical models are a practical reality, cooperation becomes a pragmatic ideal. However, in situations where people hold differing opinions about matters that are profoundly important to them, genuine consensus can be elusive. On issues that they really care about, people exhibit a deep intolerance for the conflicting views of others which frequently induces them to resort to power politics in an effort to further their own objectives, often to the detriment of those of their opposition. Social structures are generally not organized along purely egalitarian lines, and as such are much more likely to hinder than to foster impartial collaboration.

When the personal ethical codes of an individual or group are imposed upon the public at large, whether through the "tyranny of the magistrate" or the "tyranny of the majority," the reaction is, predictably, one of resentment and resistance, be it overt or repressed. Societies have long used the force of prevailing opinion as a goad to control the actions and ideas of individuals. Hierarchically organized systems which have as part of their perceived mandate the dissemination of sanctioned morality have proven to be particularly effective in this capacity. The state has a vested interest in directing the thoughts and behavior of its citizens in such a way that its intentions are furthered. In its

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43Rorty, 53, 38.

44Mill, 63.
capacities as a legislative body, the state is also endowed with an effective mechanism for achieving these aims.

We have already seen how the services of the family have been coopted by the state to serve its needs in numerous circumstances. As a social body with an unparalleled ethical authority over its constituents, the family is particularly well-suited to issuing morally-binding pronouncements in the interest of controlling the beliefs and behaviors of its members. The historically hierarchical structure and close emotional bonds of the family unit make it an especially persuasive instrument for carrying out the objectives of traditionally patriarchal societies. Parents, as the ones who are effectively entrusted by society with the moral education of their children, have a social obligation to instruct them in the approved ethical code. Fathers and mothers also have perhaps a more immediate obligation to inculcate their children in terms of a more personal, individual morality. And children, as they grow toward adulthood, have an individual obligation to themselves to examine the moral education provided by their families and their society, accepting parts and discarding others; ultimately adopting a personal moral code and set of ethical priorities by which they can organize their lives according to their own beliefs. This process of gradual disassociation from the unquestioned moral authority of the family can be a source of great conflict. Thus a young woman's ideas about what are the ethically important decisions for her to make might very well be at odds with what her uncle thinks they should be and a father's conception of his adult daughter's moral priorities might conflict with what his daughter herself believes them to be.

Sophocles' Antigone and Shakespeare's King Lear both probe what happens when
the moral worlds of sovereign individuals collide and the effects that these collisions have on the family and those around them. Antigone and Cordelia are both self-assured young women on the cusp of adulthood who take positions on issues of ethical importance to them which put them in conflict with the patriarchs of their respective families. Their defiant acts are viewed not as the independent actions of youngsters taking the first tentative steps towards adult autonomy, actions expressive of their own individual mores, but rather as treasonous and intolerable attacks against patriarchal power structure of the family and the state.

The *Antigone* presents us with the trials and tribulations of one of Oedipus’s daughters as she attempts to fulfill the obligations she feels towards the tattered remains of a family that are left to her. Her particular dilemma centers on her desire to provide her dead brother, Polyneices, with a proper burial even though this act contravenes an edict issued by the ruler, Creon, who also happens to be her uncle and the father of her fiancé. Antigone’s conflict pits her yearning to honor her fallen family member against her duty, as a citizen, to respect the laws of the state. Her conception of the good prioritizes her proposed actions in the service of her family honor above her civic responsibilities. She adamantly states to Creon that “I know that I please those whom I am most bound to please.” (Line 89) While Antigone is not by nature a malefactor, she feels “most bound” by her obligations to pursue the happiness of her family members and places her obligations for the contentment of the custodians of the law below them. She believes that the responsibility to honor the blood ties of family has an importance that is unrivaled by other duties.
Antigone’s personal moral code places adherence to the divine law which requires her to provide her brother with a proper burial, above any legislation promulgated by the state. When Creon inquires as to whether she was aware of the edict forbidding the burial of Polyneices, and if so, why she did not obey it, she calmly replies:

it was not Zeus that published that edict for me, and since not of that kind are the laws which justice, who dwells with the gods below, established among men. Nor did I think that your decrees were of such force, that a mortal could override the unwritten and unfailing statutes given us by the gods. For their life is not of today or yesterday, but for all time, and no man knows when they were first put forth. Not for fear of any man’s pride was I about to owe a penalty to the gods for breaking these.

(Lines 450-60)

She believes that Creon’s decree is not only patently unjust, but also in conflict with the timeless will of the gods. She is dismissive of his edict as having any claim to being honored by the general public since it contradicts a higher, divine law. It is incomprehensible to her how anyone could feel compelled to honor such a law by the mere threat physical punishment. Even though Creon has declared that the price for disobedience regarding his edict will be death, Antigone is unmoved:

Die I must, that I knew well—how could I not? That is true even without your edicts. But if I am to die before my time, I count that a gain. When anyone lives as I do, surrounded by evils, how can he not carry off profit by dying? So for me to meet this doom is a grief of no account. But if I had endured that my mother’s son should in death lie an unburied corpse, that would have grieved me. Yet for this, I am not grieved. And if my
present actions are foolish in your sight, it may be that it is a fool who accuses me of folly.

(Lines 460-471)

Not only is Antigone unswayed by Creon’s attempts to solicit her acknowledgment of her responsibilities as a citizen, but she is openly contemptuous of his claim to both moral and legal authority over her. His claim of power over her: that of the author and enforcer of punitive sanctions for her noncompliance; is ridiculed. His proposed punishment is not only not a deterrent to what she views as her honorable actions, but it is actually a badge of honor. Antigone is irrevocably at odds with Creon as to what is the morally justifiable action in this situation, where “by (her) reverence (she has) earned a name for irreverence.” (Line 924)

Creon considers it unconscionable that someone would put their duties as a family member ahead of their duties as a citizen. “If any man thinks a loved one more important than his fatherland, that man, I say, is of no account.” (Line 184) A person who is capable of valuing his own family members over his fellow citizens has no measurable worth as a civic being, which is the only measure of any significance as far as Creon is concerned. In his eyes, it is precisely our existence as good citizens that gives value to our lives. His belief here echoes an opinion expressed by Plato in the Crito where Socrates, on trial for his life, asserts that “our country is more to be valued and higher and holier far than mother or father or any ancestor, and more to be regarded in the eyes of the gods and of men of understanding.” 45 True piety “commands that you obey the laws of your country,

even if they are unjust, and even if this injustice recoils against you, condemning you to
death. For the city...is more venerable, more sacred, than a mother, a father, or all one’s
ancestors put together.” Like Socrates, Creon believes that once we have accepted the
benefits derived from citizenship we have also tacitly accepted an unequivocal
responsibility to honor the moral code, presented in the form of the country’s laws,
regardless of whether these laws conflict with our personal mores and preferences as
individuals.

   Antigone is unwilling to accept Creon’s argument that we have duties as citizens
that sometimes transcend our duties as family members. She is adamant that her
disobedience of Creon’s edict is in fact an honorable action, rightfully venerating her
fallen brother in spite of her uncle’s legal prohibition. She proudly proclaims that “there is
nothing shameful in respecting your own flesh and blood.” (Line 511) Her conception of
family honor positively requires her to disobey the edict. The fact that Creon is her uncle
and that the stated punishment for her action is death does not even enter into her
calculation.

   Creon, for his part, will not tolerate any suggestions that he hold his family
members accountable to a different legal standard than the rest of his subjects:

   For since I caught her alone of all the polis in open
defiance, I will not make myself a liar to my city. I
will kill her. So let her call on Zeus who protects
kindred blood. If I am to foster my own kin to spurn
order, surely I will do the same for others. For

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46 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Myth and Tragedy in Ancient
whoever shows his excellence in his own household
will be found righteous in his city as well.
(Lines 655-663)

He cannot accept this assault on the civic order represented by the overt disregard for his edict, even when it is made by a member of his own family. His conception of honor demands that he treat his niece, who has openly defied his authority, as he would any other criminal guilty of a similar action. Any hint of favoritism in his treatment of Antigone would color Creon with the taint of impropriety. If he cannot demand obedience to the law from his own family members then he has no right to demand obedience from the rest of society. A ruler cannot interpret the law in a manner that is merely beneficial on a personal level without compromising his integrity as a ruler and diminishing the bond of shared values that holds the community together. For Creon the duty to honor the trust placed in him by the society overrides any obligation to specific individuals, even if they happen to belong to his family.

We presume that as blood relatives Antigone and Creon would share certain moral tenets by virtue of their being members of the same primary emotional community. We imagine that they would be predisposed to make every effort to resolve their differences by falling back on familial and cultural precedents, even to the point of privileging one another's positions because of the family relationship. However, Antigone and Creon present us with diametrically opposed conceptions of the good. Each of them prioritizes a single ethical obligation, valuing it above all others and making it the *sine qua non* of their respective moral worlds. Since each of them believes fully in the virtue of their position
and is unwilling to consider the virtues of the other’s point of view, their conflict is ultimately irreconcilable. Their particular encounter underscores two completely different visions of the good which belong to two distinct individuals and their intractable positions here highlight two distinct visions of moral obligation within the family.

*The Tragedy of King Lear* presents another protracted examination of the far-reaching consequences of a conflict between different ideals of human flourishing and filial piety. The values of paternalistic and unconditional respect espoused by King Lear are thrown into sharp relief against the closely-held beliefs of his daughter Cordelia that true piety within the family resides not in blind obedience but rather in honesty and integrity. The emotional confrontation between these strong-willed protagonists with their incompatible ideals of family life ultimately leads to the dissolution of clan.

Lear demands public demonstrations of affection from his three daughters in advance of dividing his kingdom among them. His hope is that his children will flatter their father and outdo one another in trying to show that their love for him exceeds that of their sisters. These expectations are initially realized in the behavior of his elder daughters. The eldest, Goneril, begins by gushing that:

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter,  
Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty,  
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,  
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;  
As much as child e’er lov’d, or father found;  
A love that makes breath poor, speech unable:  
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.  

(Li.54-61)
Goneril proudly takes up her father's challenge to exceed her sisters in praise with the hope of receiving the "largest bounty" as her dowry. She calmly and breathlessly claims that her love for her father surpasses any love she can feel for anything and, perhaps more importantly, any love anyone else can feel for her aged father. This does little to dampen the fervor of the middle sister, Regan, in trying to surpass Goneril's intemperate adoration:

I am made of the self metal as my sister,  
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart  
I find she names my very deed of love;  
Only she comes too short; that I profess  
Myself an enemy to all other joys  
Which the most precious square of sense possesses,  
And I am alone felicitate  
In your dear Highness' love.  

(1.1.69-76)

While she generally agrees with the quantification of fatherly love presented by her elder sister, she finds that Goneril does not go far enough. For Regan's part, not only does she love her father beyond anything or anyone else, but she goes so far as to profess that her love for him as the only part of her existence which provides her with happiness. She renounces all other pleasures in order to more fully bask in the radiant joy of this affection.

Lear, the proud father, happily soaks up his children's flattery and rewards them with bounteous territories while anxiously awaiting the turn of his favorite, Cordelia, to show everyone the fondness she feels for her father. However, when he bluntly demands of her, "What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sister?" she calmly
responds "Nothing, my lord." (I.i.85-7) The somber "nothing" contrasts starkly with the strident declarations of adoration put forth by her sisters. Cordelia knows their expedient expressions of devotion to be devoid of true feeling. This knowledge inhibits her from voicing her own honest reverence for her father for fear that her emotions will be tainted by proximity to their duplicitous speech. But "nothing" is also a direct reproach to her father for his self-indulgent actions in creating a public spectacle to showcase the love his daughters feel for him. Cordelia resents this act of emotional blackmail and will have nothing to do with it. She "refuses not only to pretend, but also to say anything that might be interpreted as pretense. The kind of acting that she refuses in the first scene is the emotional expression, on cue, of feelings that are really hers. She loves Lear, but she does not want him to control her expression of that love."47

Cordelia's "nothing" stuns Lear with the sudden shock of a slap in the face. He asks her to reconsider her position but she is unyielding: she will have nothing to do with this family charade. He dejectedly asks in response to her refusal, "So young and so untender?" to which she quickly rejoins, "So young, my lord, and true." (I.i.106-7) Cordelia wants to impress upon her father that her behavior is not a expression of hostility towards him, but rather, a refutation of the contrived speech that his public performance piece has solicited and with which her sisters have obliged him. She reminds him that it is he who has created a situation where it is impossible for her to express verbally the true depth of her feelings without depreciating them. It is her silence and not the orchestrated

pronouncements of her sisters that suitably honors the filial bond. It is truth she is striving for, not untenderness, and the emotional trauma that her father feels is just unavoidable collateral damage in that ultimate quest.

Cordelia’s willful speech, or more precisely, her willful refusal to speak, is a demonstration of what Iris Murdoch refers to as “the unavoidable contextual privacy of language.” Where adulation is publicly and explicitly demanded, only silence can pay proper respect to sincere affection. On a stage awash with deceitful praise, true praise can only be denigrated by association. Cordelia’s stubborn silence is a pointed effort to distinguish the strength of her feelings from the empty exclaims of Goneril and Regan. She is staking a claim to sincerity in her feelings and integrity in her actions. In this situation, the only way she can do this is to deny her father’s self-indulgent request to be flattered.

Her valuation of honesty and ethical virtue over the unquestioning compliance expected of her by her father puts Cordelia in conflict not only with her family members but also with socially accepted norms of behavior. It is a defiant act of moral autonomy resulting from the acknowledgment that the fawning proclamations of her sisters do not do justice to the depth of her own feelings for her father. Charles Taylor, in “The Diversity of Goods,” notes that:

For some people, personal integrity is a central goal: what matters is that one’s life express what one truly senses as important, admirable, noble, desirable. The temptations to be avoided here are those of conformity

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48 Murdoch, 33.
to established standards which are not really one’s own, or of dishonesty with oneself concerning one’s own convictions or affinities. The chief threat to integrity is a lack of courage in face of social demands, or in face of what one has been brought up to see as the unthinkable.\(^ {49} \)

Cordelia’s courageous actions directly confront “established standards” and social conventions as well as the expectations placed on her by her father. In overtly contradicting paternal desires she is also embarking on a course of action that she “has been brought up to see as unthinkable.” This blatant break with the tradition of deference to parental authority is undertaken in an effort to validate ideas that she is beginning to realize are important to her as an individual.

His daughter’s personal growth and empowerment as an independent moral agent are of no interest to Lear. He cannot see anything except for the fact that her insubordination is an affront to his rightful authority as father and king. He is clearly stung by an action that he perceives as nothing less than a personal rebuff. His favorite daughter, at the moment when he had hoped to revel in the glory of the public exhibition of her adoration for her father, has bluntly snubbed him. This is a state of affairs that is fundamentally at odds with Lear’s conception of filial piety which is embodied by a world where children respect their elders and submissively indulge their every whimsical demand. He believes in a traditional, hierarchical notion of the family where children defer to parents on issues of any significance as a matter of course. Family honor, in

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Lear's eyes, means, first and foremost, not making your father look stupid in front of an audience. The shock of the refusal of Cordelia, his beloved, to gratify his need to have his fatherly ego massaged in public leaves the king livid. His injured pride drives him to overreact to Cordelia's slight, eventually disinheriting and banishing her. As he proclaims in the throes of his anger, "Better thou hadst not been born than not t' have pleas'd me better." (1.i.233-4) He would rather have no daughter than a daughter who treats him the way that she did.

Lear's happiness is contingent upon a rewarding family life. He is humiliated by Cordelia's withholding the fatuous praise for which he pleads. His departure from the public stage is framed with what he hopes will be glowing testimonials of his superior performance as a father presented before his family and friends. Instead, his most loved daughter at the crucial moment refuses to play the game and disgraces him. The pain he feels from this rebuke is an indication of the central importance of the family in the king's emotional life. His emotional world crumbles at this reproach. Even though it is clear to almost everyone that Cordelia really does love him the most, the fact that she is unwilling to do as he asks of her, in this instance, to fawn over him and exceed the excessive praise that her sisters have lavished upon him, is taken by Lear to mean that she does not care for him at all. His reactions are those of a man who has been deeply wounded by his daughter's rejection.

Cordelia's conception of the good exposes her to reprisals from the family member who she loves the most and who her behavior is ultimately intended to benefit. In esteeming truth over false tenderness she is trying to protect her father from the
opportunistic depredations of her sisters. Her assertion of an ideal of family honor valuing direct honesty over empty flattery locks her in a battle of wills with her father and leaves her susceptible to the vengeful caprices of his fury. Lear interprets his daughter’s behavior as a personal attack. He reads her “nothing” as a withholding of the love to which he, as a father, feels entitled. He responds with the only weapons that he has, alienating her both emotionally and financially by withholding his affection as well as her dowry.

There is a gaping chasm between Lear’s idea of human flourishing within the family and the one espoused by Cordelia. The king demands unquestioning allegiance to the needs of the monarchy and the patriarchy. Failure to comply with these demands is met with repressive force designed to compel compliance. In elevating the merit of personal honesty above subservient acquiescence Cordelia has fundamentally challenged the value system of Lear’s world.

In the cases of Cordelia and Antigone we see clear illustrations of young adults confronting issues of moral importance with newfound autonomy and the effects that these episodes have on the loved ones who are implicated by their ethical choices. These women espouse individual integrity that is disruptive to traditional family structures where subordination to other duties and obligations is the norm. Their independent actions are understood to be disavowals of social responsibilities that threaten the status quo.
Chapter Two

Tragedy and Individual Identity

The history of moral philosophy has been, at its heart, an extended inquiry into the nature of the good and the principles that ought to guide our lives. For centuries philosophers have preoccupied themselves with the search for universal criteria in defining human excellence. But there seems to be a difficulty in finding an unimpeachable moral compass in our world and little consensus about what such an ethical absolute would comprise. Iris Murdoch expresses that opinion when she states that “good is a transcendent reality,” something to be found elsewhere, something outside the realm of our normal experiences. This “means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is. It is an empirical fact about human nature that this attempt cannot be entirely successful.”

Our limited experience with the good leaves us ill-prepared to make the decisions necessary to live a life of human flourishing, even when our honest intentions are to do so. “By and large men have incomplete or mistaken notions of what their happiness consists in; and they find, with dispiriting frequency, that it does not lie where they take it to lie.”

The difficulty for human beings

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in making judgements regarding the transcendent reality that is the good is a direct result of our lack of familiarity in this realm.

It is certainly dispiriting to imagine that we are capable of such ineptitude in an area that is so central to our contentment and well-being. If the human good really is a transcendent reality, then how are we, as moral agents, to distinguish from among the range of our possible actions as we strive to fashion a morally upright existence?

Immanuel Kant believed that it is a man’s intention that is the crucial factor in determining if his actions are good. It is not an action that can be judged to be good or not, but rather the agent’s volition in acting:

Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a Good Will... The sight of a being who is not adorned with a single feature of a pure and good will, enjoying unbroken prosperity, can never give pleasure to an impartial rational spectator. Thus a good will appears to constitute the indispensable condition even of being worthy of happiness.52

Our hopes for leading the good life depend upon our ability to analyze objectively the desires behind our actions and insure that they are pure. The superficial trappings of material success are not to be confused with genuine happiness. In this respect, the visibly happy and prosperous man devoid of good will is not only unworthy of happiness, but also unaware of the extent of his own unhappiness.

This presents a particularly uncomfortable situation for our prospects as moral

beings, for good will, even as a necessary condition for our well-being, appears to be notoriously difficult to teach. The motivation behind our actions is either pure or it is not, but it is difficult to imagine that this is something which we are capable of easily changing. Yet, the human capacity for introspection and our aspirations, on an emotional level, to live the fullest and most rewarding lives possible, make the knowledge implicit in Kant’s comments about good will a powerful tool. Sir Philip Sidney, in his influential essay “An Apology for Poetry” expressed his belief that good will is not something that we are endowed with but rather something that we must be taught. “Our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it.” Post-lapsarian man is unlikely to pursue moral goodness unless motivated to do so. Rather than a predisposition to seek out the good, an external goad is needed to “move men to virtuous action.” For Sidney, there is no force more effective in doing this than poetry. Its ability to “teach and delight” means that poetry is uniquely qualified to engage man and simultaneously instruct him in the pursuit of an ethically admirable way of life.53

This theme is taken up by Aristophanes in the fifth century B.C.E. in his work Frogs. In the course of a dialogue between the tragic poets Aeschylus and Euripides, Aeschylus asks: “For what qualities should a poet be admired?” to which Euripides responds: “Skill and good counsel, and because we make people better members of their communities.” Later, Aeschylus adds: “For children the teacher is the one who instructs,

but grownups have the poet. It’s very important that we tell them things that are good.”

Central among the duties of the poet is that of providing a moral education to his public.

Great literature evokes a heightened emotional response from us. This reaction makes it particularly well-suited to conveying messages for the moral edification of its readers. As Iris Murdoch notes: “Art, far from being a playful diversion of the human race, is the place of its most fundamental insight, and the center to which the more uncertain steps of metaphysics must constantly return.” It is through the vehicle of artistic creation that we have our best hope of approaching the transcendent reality that is the human good. Whereas philosophy attempts to instruct us solely by our intellects, art captivates our senses and emotions and uses them to guide us to a more subjective, interpretive kind of truth. Art’s unique ability to embrace the full range of our humanity leaves it better-suited to provide insight into the personal world of an individual’s moral choices than philosophy. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche succinctly puts it, “existence can be justified only in esthetic terms.” Art is able to transcend limits which philosophy seems incapable of doing.

Our modern sensibility seeks to reward the artist for this enhanced ability to discern and interpret the subtleties of our world. The perceptions of the creative artist are thus vested with a heightened value. Our romantic conceptions of the creative process lead us to worship the artist for this vision that distinguishes him from the rest of society.

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55 Murdoch, 71-2.

56 Nietzsche, 9.
This is apparent from the number of actors, musicians, painters, and writers who are prominently represented among the most revered of our public figures. It is assumed that fame is bestowed upon these people because of their ability to move us emotionally with their artistic renderings. In examining the place of the artist in our modern society, Charles Taylor remarks that:

There is a set of ideas and intuitions, still inadequately understood, which makes us admire the artist and the creator more than any other civilization ever has; which convinces us that a life spent in artistic creation or performance is eminently worthwhile. This complex of ideas has Platonic roots. We are taking up the semi-suppressed side of Plato’s thought which emerges, for instance, in the Phaedrus, where he seems to think of the poet, inspired by mania, as capable of seeing what sober people are not... But there is also something quintessentially modern in this outlook. It depends on that modern sense that what meaning there is for us depends in part on our powers of expression, that discovering a framework is interwoven with inventing.  

The artist is valued by society specifically because these enhanced powers of perception in his possession can open up windows of understanding for the rest of us. In their ability to represent the extremes of human emotions, art and the artist retain an unparalleled capacity to instruct us on moral matters. It is for this reason that we single out artists to worship and treat like creative gods.

Art’s role as a persuasive pedagogical tool in the teaching of ethics has been the

subject of spirited debate since Plato's banishment of the poets from his ideal republic. Plato sees the form of literary art practiced by "the tragedians and the rest of the imitative tribe" as intentionally deceptive and immoral.\(^{58}\) It is particularly poetry's recourse to the emotions which Plato considers to be dangerous to society. Aristotle, on the other hand, both in the formalist dialogues of the *Poetics* and in the discussion of the education of young citizens in the *Politics*, acknowledges the value of poetry as an effective means of imparting ethical norms. The representation of and appeal to the emotions is, in Aristotle's view, of undeniable value in our efforts to grasp moral truths.\(^{59}\)

In *The Fragility of Goodness*, Martha Nussbaum examines in depth the confluence of ethical thought found both in the philosophy and tragic poetry of ancient Greece. She contends that:

> The segmentation of the professions in modern life had obscured from us the evident truth that in Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., the tragic poets were widely regarded as major sources of ethical insight. The philosophers set themselves up as competitors, not simply as colleagues in a related department.\(^{60}\)

The philosophers and the poets were vying for the same position as the ethical conscience of Athenian society. Hence, Plato's comments in *The Republic* regarding the banishment


\(^{59}\)Nussbaum, 378.

\(^{60}\)Nussbaum, xv.
of the poets take on undertones of being one salvo in a larger turf war over who ultimately has the right to exercise moral authority in the education of young citizens.

The visceral emotional impact of tragic poetry, so problematic to Plato, is artfully and effectively employed to explicate complex moral issues. Aristotle, who recognized tragedy as the highest among the poetic art forms, believed, along with the tragedians, that depicting and provoking strong feelings was an integral part of elaborating an intricate ethical tableau and essential as a means of instructing on issues of morality. Aristotle and the tragedians were in agreement on the emotional force inherent in the literary and dramatic arts. "The tragic poets maintained, and in their choice of literary forms displayed, the belief that powerful emotions, prominently including pity and fear, were sources of insight about the human good life." Tragedy's passionate depiction of these intense feelings is a means of penetrating the quotidian facade of our behavior that cloaks the emotional heart of our human existence. The vivid emotional responses provoked by the ethical conflicts at the core of most tragedy impel us to scrutinize relevant aspects of our own moral lives.

Tragedy leads us from an emotional reaction to the plights of individuals whose stories are presented to us to an examination of the implications that the predicaments of these fictional characters have in our own lives. As T.S. Eliot, in his essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" states:

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61 Nussbaum, xv.
All great poetry gives the illusion of a view of life. When we enter into the world of Homer, or Sophocles, or Virgil, or Dante, or Shakespeare, we incline to believe that we are apprehending something that can be expressed intellectually; for every precise emotion tends towards intellectual formulation...The essential is that each expresses in perfect language, some permanent human impulse.

We are initially swept up by the emotional force of the tragedy and then formulate a subjective, cerebral response that attempts to interpret the metaphysical aspects of the drama. However, Eliot stresses that it is the quality of the expression eliciting this emotional reaction rather than the quality of the philosophy behind it which makes literature great, which makes it “strong, true, and informative...useful and beneficial in the sense in which poetry is useful and beneficial.”

Tragedy, in its representations of the extraordinary, in its efforts to make sense of the evil that sometimes befalls people, in its attempt to give meaning to disturbing episodes that some see as incomprehensible, is, by its very nature, a transcendental art form. Aristotle, in his formal description of tragedy, explains that it is “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in a language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament.” The language of tragedy, in keeping with the weighty nature of its themes, should distinguish itself from everyday usage. The poet should employ linguistic forms that are beautified with the full range of expressive and

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rhetorical flourishes that are available to him. Specifically, it should be a language that is “stylized,” “elevated,” “complex,” and “intensified.” Use of such language deepens the sense of artifice involved in the enterprise of its production, further emphasizing tragedy’s distance from the ordinary. Tragic poetry employs this high language to heighten its emotional impact on its audience.

Portrayals of the extraordinary expressed in eloquent forms that effectively distinguish its action from the familiar are the staple of tragedy. These depictions frequently address the moral quandaries that result from individuals’ hesitant aspirations for and specious comprehension of the transcendent reality that is the human good. Our mundane perceptions of the world bind us to a circumscribed area that we feel capable of interpreting and understanding. These constraints must be eclipsed if we are to realize hopes of experiencing the full range of human emotional life. Tragic poetry helps to demolish these barriers by presenting us with representations of situations that exceed what we could normally expect to encounter in our lives. In his extensive commentaries on tragedy, Georg W. F. Hegel notes that the tragic form serves to bridge the gap between our inner, moral world of uncertain, deliberative abstraction and the external world of concrete actions and deeds. “This higher language, that of tragedy, gathers and keeps more closely together the dispersed and scattered moments of the inner essential world and

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the world of action.”65 Tragedy functions as a consolidation and distillation of human action and experience in a way that presents a direct corollary to the internal world of ethical contemplation in its depiction of the external world of works and deeds.

The selective representation of highly consequential human activities and the harrowing repercussions these activities call forth, which together form the substance of tragedy, focuses our attention on the contingent nature of our moral existence.

The experience of tragedy achieves a coherence in a way that the emotional experiences of real life generally cannot because they are too close, too cluttered with detail and partiality, to be seen in perspective. Tragedy makes us feel that we understand life in its tragic aspects...it is this sense of understanding that is the “message” of tragedy.66

The artful imitation of real life is capable of realizing precise emotional effects and a sense of ethical consequence that transcend what we might expect to experience in the course of our own day-to-day undertakings. In elaborating the anguish and pain of others, tragedy not only elicits our sympathy, but also imparts a significance to this suffering which we, as an audience, are then able to assimilate and, in reflection, apply to the resolution of our own moral struggles. Although tragedy does not attempt to reconcile, it allows us to effect a subjective, personal reconciliation.

The distinctive power of tragedy lies in the fact that it arouses our feelings and


directly ties those emotional reactions to "a sequence of moral and intellectual complications which is set out and examined." Characters in possession of specific, recognizable human flaws are confronted by irreconcilable demands that are being made of them. The tragic element stems from the fact that these incompatible claims can both have valid moral bases for being honored. However, the nuance of the situation precludes its being resolved by a simple preference. "There is an objective moral order, but our perceptions of it are such that we cannot bring rival moral truths into complete harmony with each other" and can hold no hope of making a rational choice between the two that will resolve the conflict. "For to choose does not exempt me from the authority of the claim which I chose to go against."\footnote{Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory}, (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 1981), 134.}

The force exerted by these conflicting moral obligations which compel the agent towards incompatible courses of action gives tragedy a "spiritual" appeal that transcends its mere effect on our sensibilities:

\begin{quote}
The reason why the tragic conflict thus appeals to the spirit is that it is a conflict of the spirit. It is a conflict, that is to say, between powers that rule the world of a man's will and action—his "ethical substance." The family and the state, the bond of parent and child, of brother and sister, of husband and wife, of citizen and ruler, or citizen and citizen, with the obligations and feelings appropriate to these bonds; and again the powers of personal love and honour, or of devotion to a great cause or an ideal interest like religion or science or some kind of social welfare—such are the forces exhibited in tragic action...And as they form the substance of man, are common\end{quote}

\footnote{Taplin, 11.}
to all civilised men, and are acknowledged as powers rightly claiming human allegiance, their exhibition in tragedy has that interest, at once deep and universal, which is essential to a great work of art.\footnote{A. C. Bradley, “Hegel’s Theory of Tragedy,” in Oxford Lectures on Poetry, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1963), 71.}

The essence of tragedy is the division of the human spirit: the “powers that rule a man’s will and action.” This breach results when profound moral obligations, each with legitimate claims for being respected, are placed in direct confrontation and assert exclusive rights to the agent’s allegiance.

The prominent characters in tragedy are defined, to a large extent, by their social and institutional roles. It is the plurality of these roles and the influence they exert on the ethical deliberations of the individual that produce the rival demands that engender tragic conflict. The “protagonist would be nothing without his or her place in the social order, in the family, the city. Her or she is what society takes him to be. But he or she is not only what society takes him or her to be; he or she both belongs to a place in the social order and transcends it.”\footnote{MacIntyre, 134.} Her place in the social order determines a significant part of who the tragic heroine is. But the root of tragedy lies in the fact that circumstance requires a person to venerate one facet of their being, be it a particular social role, or a specific value, to the exclusion of all others. However, in being obliged to honor only one from among the numerous values worthy of her respect, the heroine is forced to relinquish a part of herself. The misgivings that the protagonist experiences as a result of being caught up in

the conflict between the demands of incompatible moral values are evidence that she exists not as a one-dimensional representation of a specific human trait, but rather as an embodiment of the full range of human complexity.

Tragedy, as a reflection on the intricacies of human moral existence, must take into account the multi-faceted nature of the process by which we define ourselves as individuals. This process involves formulating a unique personal hierarchy of social and institutional identifications and allegiances. The act of prioritizing from among the myriad possible choices to be made in the relative valuation of group loyalties, occupational preferences, and spiritual and moral predispositions results in the construction of a distinctive, individual character. Rather than the abstract intellectual exercise of evaluating these diverse aspects of my existence, the formation of a personal identity refers to “the actuality of my choices, namely to how I, as a finite, concrete, embodied individual, shape and fashion the circumstances of my birth and family, linguistic, cultural, and gender identity into a coherent narrative that stands as my life’s story.”

To the extent that the agent participates actively in this act of self-definition, it is in giving weight to this subconscious process of evaluating and prioritizing a wide variety of identifications and allegiances.

The search for the roots of individual identity entails disentangling the profusion of social, cultural, and psychological forces that influence a person’s self-image. This appears to be a daunting task. Most people’s public expressions of their identities are

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stated initially in the form of the officially recognized identifier that is their name, and
then in terms of membership in some social, ethnic, or national group or as practitioners of
a specific profession. In response to the question, “Who am I?” no one would be taken
aback if I were to answer “I am Stephen Adamian” or “I am Armenian” or “I am a writer”
or even “I am Gabriel’s father.” However, if I were to respond that “I am a person who
values esthetic representations of religious euphoria from 14th century Siena above any
other cultural artifacts produced in the last 500 years,” people would think (aside from the
fact that I was unbearably pretentious) that I had at least one and probably several screws
loose. People would be startled by my defining myself in terms of my preferences in art
because it is inconceivable that this information could have more bearing on who I am
than my social and professional affiliations. The implication is that my level of self­
knowledge, as indicated by making such a statement, would have to be suspect. In this act
of prioritizing my allegiances, I have prioritized badly or even incorrectly. Such details
about a person are given secondary importance and relegated to the peripheral category of
hobbies or interests: facets of a person’s identity which might very well round out his
character, but do not shed meaningful light on any central feature of who that person is. In
the valuation of the various aspects that constitute a person’s identity, each facet of that
person’s existence cannot be given equal weight: my favorite color is not as important in
determining who I am as my genealogical heritage is.

We are incapable of elaborating a coherent system of evaluation in a vacuum.
Human beings are social animals and our interactions with others are constituent of our
moral lives. “The human infant becomes a ‘self,’ a being capable of speech and action,
only by learning to interact in a human community." These fundamental, defining communities, most commonly the family or larger kinship groups, initially, at least, restrict the child's behavior and impart the rudimentary values sanctioned by the community through the imposition of their own internal ethical standards. These smaller, emotional communities operate under the aegis of the society at large, which also imposes countless constraints on ethical behavior through both direct legal restrictions and the pressures of social stigma. The growing child develops an independent morality as he starts to question the predisposition to blindly accept the community's sanctioned social and ethical mores that he has been raised with. These tentative steps of inquiry into what it means to be an individual distinct from those who surround you, are the beginning of identity.

Establishing a personal identity is a largely subconscious deliberative process of valuation. We do not actively set out to differentiate ourselves as distinct individuals, we merely make choices in ascertaining what is important to us and in so doing determine exactly who it is we are. This activity is usually influenced by and sometimes wholly defined by social convention. It is for this reason that the statement of group affiliation is often among the first ways that we identify ourselves. As Charles Taylor notes in *Human Agency and Language*:

\[T]\o be a full human agent, to be a person or a self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth. A self is a being for whom certain questions of categoric value have arisen, and received at least partial

\[72\]Benhabib, 4.
answers. Perhaps these have been give authoritatively by the culture more than they have been elaborated in the deliberation of the person concerned, but they are his in the sense that they are incorporated into his self-understanding, in some degree and fashion.\(^73\)

Our moral judgements are primary examples of "distinctions of worth," where we must choose one good over what we perceive to be a lesser good. In ethical discourse the term "values" is employed to refer to the customs and ideals believed to be most important to a person or group of people. Frequently, these values are understood to be a common moral fiber that binds a community together. However, these values are, to a certain extent, dictated by the group, in the sense that moral education is largely the purview of the family and, to a lesser degree, the community at large. Thus the range of choices available to an individual, unless he is willing to risk ostracism, are circumscribed by the mores of the group. It is this threat to individual liberty that John Stuart Mill railed against when he warned of the "tyranny of prevailing opinion."\(^74\) Popular opinion is reified into community standards and deviation from these norms is seen as a fundamental assault on the moral integrity of the group.

Of course, Taylor rightly acknowledges that at some level, the individual agent makes the conscious decision to accept these community values and assimilates them into his own personal moral code. But we must remember that the "community is not simply an aggregation of individuals," but is also "constitutive of the individual." The self-


\(^{74}\)Mill, 63.
understanding that the individual employs in evaluating the range of moral choices he is faced with, is a self-understanding that evolves from the process of linguistic and cultural interaction that defines the community.75 Through this process, the community informs the development of the individual's ethical sense such that, at least in part, the individual's value system is derived from the set of values sanctioned by the community.

We are likely to define ourselves by our group affiliations only to the extent that membership in the group significantly informs our sense of what is important. If my ethnic heritage, my regional or national identity, my religion, or my profession have a marked influence on my conception of the good, on what it is that I consider to be valuable, then it is highly likely that I will identify myself through these associations.

"The full definition of someone's identity usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community."76 Allegiance to specific social groups can also be a salient feature of one's individual identity when it is perceived that certain characteristics shared by the constituents of the group are endowed on the individual through the alliance. "If my being of a certain lineage is to me of central importance, if I am proud of it, and see it as conferring on me membership in a certain class of people whom I see as marked off by certain qualities which I value in myself as an agent and which come to me from this background, then it will be part of my identity."77

The acknowledgment of the group as a constituent factor in the individual's identity

76Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27, 36.
77Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 34.
amounts to a recognition of the organization’s role in defining the fundamental values held by the individual.

Our moral lives are complicated at all levels by the desires and expectations of others. Our membership in social groups entails abiding by the ethical standards and code of conduct set by the group. The laws and dominant attitudes of the society at large impose their own restrictions on what is considered to be acceptable behavior. Social life typically involves interaction that consequentially implicates those around us. All interpersonal relationships exist in a contingent realm where reciprocal recognition of the needs of others profoundly effects the range of possible action available to an agent. We try to assess the impact of our conduct on others and this mental calculus usually figures prominently in our judgement process. As moral beings, our decisions to undertake certain courses of action frequently require us to “put ourselves in someone else’s shoes” in order to see their perspective on an issue.

It is within our closest emotional relationships that the wishes of others most directly intrude on our lives. In particular, the complex, psychological bonds of our primary emotional community, the family, greatly restrict our ability to act freely as individuals. The family is defined by “relationships that are intimate, intense, intricate, encompassing, and filled with strong feelings.”78 The complicated dynamics of family life often require us to be acutely aware of the emotional, financial, and ethical ramifications of our actions on a wide circle of others. The intricate web of interdependencies that characterizes the family demands a level of cognizance of the consequences that our

78Becker, Reciprocity, 186.
actions hold for others that is unique in our social world. Seyla Benhabib, in describing the peculiar nature of the interpersonal relationships which constitute life in the family, notes that:

To be a family member, a parent, a spouse, a sister or a brother means to know how to reason from the standpoint of the concrete other. One cannot act within these ethical relationships in the way in which standing in this kind of a relationship to someone else demands of us without being able to think from the standpoint of our child, our spouse, our sister or brother, mother or father. To stand in such an ethical relationship means that we as concrete individuals know what is expected of us in virtue of the kind of social bonds which tie us to the other. 79

The roles that we occupy within the family require a sensitivity to and awareness of the implications that our behavior holds for our fellow family members in a way that does not exist in any other part of our social lives. Benhabib argues that the ability to inhabit the point of view of our relatives is an indispensable aspect of our existence in these roles. It is only by willingly adopting the perspectives of our family members that we can properly understand the depth of the reciprocal obligations that characterize these relationships.

The family is our fundamental emotional community. Kinship structures provide us with our primary moral education and socialization. Our family associations furnish us with our elementary value systems. As the group from which we emerge, at birth, in a state of utter dependency and are cared for until we reach the point where we can begin to care for ourselves and, eventually, repay the debt of gratitude to those who have nurtured

79Benhabib, 10.
us; the family is also a place where allegiances can be unusually strong. It is not surprising, in this context, that our family relationships are marked by an uncommon level of empathy and a preoccupation over the way our actions and their effects are received by others. Our responsibilities as family members are acknowledged as deserving a special degree of our attention, sometimes to the point that they take precedence over our responsibilities to our own happiness and comfort. Whereas all social affiliations imply some level of accountability to the needs and desires of others, membership in the family, with the web of biological, psychological, emotional, and social bonds that this affiliation carries, involves paying heed to a complicated network of duties and obligations that exerts an influence over our individual behavior that is unrivaled in our society.

As the traditional focus of our sentimental lives, the place that many of us invest with a disproportionate share of our aspirations for emotional fulfillment, the family typically plays an important role in establishing our conception of human flourishing. Our sense of worth, which we have seen to be integral to our understanding of the good life, is affected by the fact that we are raised to respect the values that are held by the members of our family. These values are further entrenched by our innate predisposition to support the interests of our family relations as they tend to be closely aligned with our own self-interests. Thus it is the family, more than any other group, which gives us our moral orientation, and the social roles we inhabit within the family, to a greater degree than most other associations that we maintain, which initially define our personal identities.

Our family roles are among the many factors that enter into the determination of our individual identities. However, it is important to remember that our interactions
within the family are multifaceted. The family functions as a web of interpersonal relationships. Much like the divergent valuation we assign to different aspects of our personalities, the variety of family relationships that one is a part of have a varying degree of importance to an individual’s sense of who he is. I may define myself by what I consider to be my most important social role within the family, but that does not necessarily diminish the importance of my other roles within the family. Perhaps it is my role as a father that I see as central to my individual identity. Nevertheless, I cannot escape the fact that I still must dedicate the energy required to execute my roles as a husband, as a son, and as a brother, even if these roles are clearly of secondary importance to me in my conception of who I am. The web of relationships that constitute the reality of family life never allows us to settle comfortably into just one role to the exclusion all others.

It is this convoluted connection between life within the family and an individual’s sense of identity that is central to my analysis of the tragedies of Antigone and King Lear. Antigone and Cordelia are both young women who place a great deal of importance on their family lives. Their conceptions of family piety are among the goods that they hold in highest regard and their senses of self are tightly bound with their social roles within the family. Allegiance to their family affiliations dictates their respective courses of action. And yet, the complex and compromising nature of their familial obligations expose them both to terrible consequences as a result of these allegiances.

In King Lear and the Gods, William R. Elton’s examination of the significance of the abundant pagan allusions in Shakespeare’s play, the author addresses the concept of
“identity in multiplicity.” His initial reference is to Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* where he interprets fatherhood as the act of generating proxies to carry out the diverse tasks that one is incapable of carrying out alone. He later goes on to elaborate his idea as a way of showing Lear and Gloucester as composites of the various identities of their children into whom they gradually dissociate. I would like to adopt Elton’s idea of “identity in multiplicity” as a means of examining the tragic dilemmas of Antigone and Cordelia.

The process of individuation for both Antigone and Cordelia is closely bound to their valorization of their family roles. Honoring the moral obligations implicit in their positions as family members is an integral aspect of their respective quests to lead lives of human flourishing. It is through their experiences within the family that they live the parts of their existences that they view as most rewarding, even if these are contrasted with horrific episodes which also spring from their family lives.

The first line of Sophocles’ *Antigone* hints at the complexity of the tragic protagonist’s family predicament without even touching on the central conflict that menaces her: “Ismene my sister, who came from the same womb as I did, do you know any evil out of all the evils bequeathed by Oedipus that Zeus will not fulfill for the two of us in our lifetime?”(Lines 1-4) Antigone is presented to us in the context of her relationship to her sister, Ismene; through the shared origin of the womb of her absent mother, Jocasta; and through the shared heritage of suffering that was conferred to them by

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their father, Oedipus. The passage continues: “does it escape you that evils from our
enemies are on the march against our loved ones?” (Lines 9-11) Antigone is defined solely
in terms of her familial relationships and these relationships delineate the boundaries of
combat: loved ones persecuted by enemies, friends and foes, us against them. The two
sisters share the blood ties of family and through them are united against common
enemies: those who threaten the well-being of the family.

After discussing with Ismene the edict that has been pronounced by Creon
forbidding the burial of Polyneices, Antigone inquires of her sister: “so you will soon
show your nature, whether you are noble-minded, or the corrupt daughter of a noble line,”
(Lines 37-38) to which Ismene replies: “Poor sister, if things have come to this, what
would I profit by loosening or tightening this knot?” (Lines 39-41) Antigone clearly views
the duty to honor their fallen brother, even though it contravenes Creon’s edict, as a moral
obligation and a litmus test of the noble character of the sisters. She derides the possibility
that her sister could be swayed from executing an ethical duty by the threat of capital
punishment. Ismene sees their quandary in a distinct, more tragic light. The knot of their
family attachments has placed them in an unenviable predicament. Neither honoring nor
ignoring their family obligations seems like a viable solution to her. She sees a situation
where, in order to respect her family responsibilities, she must die, and where, in order to
remain alive, she must neglect a fundamental commitment. She lacks Antigone’s moral
clarity concerning which course of action would be preferable.

Ismene agonizes over the decision of whether to join her sister in her plot to bury
Polyneices. She does not take the issue of disobedience of the law lightly. When she
reminds her sister that Creon has made it a crime to give a proper burial rites to their
brother's corpse, Antigone snaps back: "He has no right to keep me from my own." (Line
48) Antigone sees herself as part of a family unit and not death nor the inconvenient
intrusion of law are sufficient to separate her from that part of herself.

As it becomes increasingly clear that Ismene is unwilling to join her sister in
undertaking the forbidden burial, Antigone ridicules her: "No, be whatever sort of sister
pleases you." (Line 71) Antigone has chosen to define herself solely by her role as a sister
to the fallen Polyneices. Enfolded into her conception of this role is the tacit reverence
that issues from her choice to defy Creon's order. It is not enough just to be a sister: one
must not be a corrupt sister, which is what she implies Ismene is guilty of for her refusal to
partake in the burial, but a noble-minded one who is capable of subordinating her own
physical well-being to the pursuit of family honor.

Initially, Antigone is brash, bold, and unwavering in her embrace of this venerable
stance of personal sacrifice she has embarked on for the good of the family. She does not
admit the possibility of any other action into the realm of her thoughts. She earnestly
believes that Ismene has debased herself by choosing life over honor. As she is to be led
to her death, she describes her belief that even though she has blatantly disobeyed the laws
of the state, she holds expectations of honor from her deceased family members:

I cherish strong hopes that I will arrive dear to my father,
dear to you, Mother, and dear, Brother, to you. For, when
each of you died, with my own hands I washed and dressed
you and poured drink-offerings at your graves.

(Lines 898-901)
While Creon heaps his undiluted contempt on Antigone for her behavior, she explains that it is the respect of her departed family members that has motivated her to undertake her self-destructive action. Her death matters little to her in comparison to the crop of honor she will reap as a result of her reverential acts.

She goes on to present a rationalization of why her identity as the sister to fallen Polyneices demanded that she venerate her brother, even at the cost of her own life:

Never, if I had been a mother of children, or if a husband had been rotting after death, would I have taken that burden upon myself in violation of the citizens' will. For the sake of what law, you ask, do I say that? A husband lost, another might have been found, and if bereft of a child, there could be a second from some other man. But when father and mother are hidden in Hades, no brother could ever bloom for me again.

(Lines 905-913)

It is not that Antigone exhibits brazen disregard for all laws. She reasons that this specific edict conflicted with her obligation to offer the rites of proper burial for her brother. Antigone presents a slate of possible family identities that could have conceivably made demands of her allegiance. She then proceeds with a lucid argument explaining why this particular relationship obligated her to her fated course of action while other family associations would not have. Her logic is interesting for a number of reasons. She subverts what we might consider to be a "normal" prioritizing of the emotional relationships in the family with the relative importance she assigns to her brother’s unsanctioned burial as opposed to similar unauthorized burials of hypothetical husbands and children. Husbands and children are replaceable, but a brother, when one’s parents are
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no longer alive, is not. Perhaps more unsettling, though, is the status of these numerous relationships. Her brother is dead. It is already a fact that no brother will ever bloom for her again. Yet, her valuation of this connection, represented by the honor she pays him in offering proper burial rites under penalty of death, shows this bond to be greater than the flesh and blood bonds of a future husband and children. She chooses to define herself as a sister as opposed to a mother or a wife.

Of course, this choice is loaded with significance in the play because another of Antigone’s family identities is that of fiancee to Creon’s son, Haemon. It is startling when, nearly halfway through the play, as Creon and Ismene discuss Antigone’s fate, Ismene blurts out: “What? You will kill your own son’s bride?” (Line 568) Antigone’s identities as a wife and potential mother are more than mere speculation. With the revelation of this information we begin to see a change in Antigone’s impulsive embrace of her honorable but illegal actions. She does not shrink from accepting the responsibilities for what she has done, but she starts to show misgivings for the family roles she sees herself forsaking. “No, Hades who lays all to rest leads me living to Acheron’s shore, though I have not had my due portion of the chant that brings the bride, nor has any hymn been mine for the crowning of marriage.” (Lines 810-816) She laments, as Creon leads her to her be entombed, that “I have enjoyed no marriage-bed or bridal song and have not received any portion of marriage or the nurture of children.” (Lines 916-918) Although she chooses to valorize her role as the sister of Polyneices, she does so under the emotional duress of recognition that she will thus be unable to fulfill these other family obligations, not the least of which is the continuity of the family line.
The irony of this situation is that the intransigence of Antigone and Creon put them both, in one sense, on similar footing. Antigone’s decision to elevate her duties as sister above all other moral responsibilities threatens her life and, by extension, the continuity of the famed house of Labdakos. Likewise, Creon’s unyielding stance as the embodiment of obedience to the law to the exclusion of all else puts him on a collision course with his son over his treatment of Antigone. Creon discounts the fact that the perpetuity of his family heritage passes through the womb of Antigone. He is dismissive of the point that his son is betrothed to the woman he has just sentenced to death. When Ismene reminds him of this he derisively responds: “There are other fields for him to plough.” (Line 569)

Creon underestimates the power of love, which is at the root of the emotional centrality of family ties. “Love, the unconquered in battle...You it is who have incited this conflict of men whose flesh and blood are one.” (Lines 782-795) Haemon is not interested in ploughing other fields. His father’s unwillingness to see other sides in this dispute ultimately alienates him from his son, who upon learning of his fiancee’s fate, first tries to stab his father, and then decides to take his own life.

Ironically, Creon is unable to see that his reasons for desiring obedience are quite similar to Antigone’s aspirations for family honor:

> It is for this that all men pray: to sire and raise in their homes children who are obedient, that they may requite their father’s enemies with evil and give honor to his loved ones, just as their father does.

(Lines 642-645, italics mine)

In Creon’s definition of a desirable home life, Antigone measures up as an ideal daughter.
She represents potential future family to Creon as his daughter-in-law and real flesh and blood family to him now as the daughter of his sister, Jocasta. What he values most is what he is attempting to extinguish. His inability to accept Haemon’s distinction of worth that values Antigone above and beyond the abstract right represented by the law turns his son into a disobedient child who sides with his father’s enemies. In claiming a responsibility for children to align their interests with those of their parents, he has neglected to acknowledge a corresponding obligation for parents to act in the best interests of their children.

Traditionally, marriage fulfilled a social role concerned much more with issues of dynastic succession and clan liaisons than our modern conception of the loving union of two individuals. The marriage rite typically represents the unification of family lineages and the consolidation of their interests. Marriage is a mechanism for preserving property and insuring the prosperity of coming generations. In Antigone, the perversion of this ritual becomes an expression of the dissolution of the proper ties that unite the family. The procreative aspect of marital union yields to the degenerative face of the family rent by internal strife. Marriage comes to represent not a look to the future and the genesis of a new generation but rather a retreat to the past and a reunion with deceased ancestors.

From the moment we are made aware of the betrothal of Antigone to Haemon, the prospective union is conflated with Antigone’s imminent appointment with death. A messenger announces that: “We turned away to enter the maiden’s stony-bedded bridal chamber, the caverned mansion of Hades’ bride.” (Lines 1204-1205) Antigone is entombed in a place that is repeatedly referred to as a bridal chamber and her new partner
is Hades, the god of the dead. Finally, the marriage between Antigone and Haemon is realized in the clutching embrace and physical union they achieve through their double suicide. "Corpse enfolding corpse he lay, having won his wedding rites, poor boy, not here, but in Hades' palace." (Line 1240)

The perversion of the marriage ritual has a striking precedent in the case of the Antigone. As a member of the house of Labdakos, Antigone and her brothers and sisters are the issue sired by her father, Oedipus, with Jocasta, who he later learned was his own mother. This mythic saga, aside from adding a complex layer to the representation of marriage within the play, also obfuscates the question of the identification of Antigone through her family roles. Ismene touches on this when she recounts their unhappy family history: "Think, sister, how our father perished in hatred and with loss of honor, when, because of the crimes that he himself detected, he smashed both his eyes with self-blinding hand; then his mother-wife, two names in one, with a twisted noose destroyed her life." (Lines 49-54) This tangling of the familial knot twins many of the family relationships. Antigone becomes Oedipus's daughter-sister and she is Jocasta's daughter-granddaughter. Thus, in assessing Antigone's individual identity as a function of her multiple relationships within the family, among them her role as sister to Polyneices, disgruntled sister to Ismene, future wife to Haemon, and prospective mother to Creon's grandchildren, we must add the convoluted connection she shares with both of her parents.

The focus on the perversion of the marriage ritual closely shadows another aspect of the current discourse concerning "family values." In contemporary North American society debate rages over the sanctity of the sacrament of matrimony. Legally sanctioned
marriages for homosexual couples have raised the ire of conservatives who believe that the rite of marriage is reserved for the union of a man and a woman. These prejudices underscore the traditional conception of marriage as a mechanism for legislating human procreative powers and controlling the succession of property between the generations.

The sacrament of lifelong, monogamous marriage, arguments about inheritances and pensions aside, is, in itself, a subversion of individual human autonomy. Friedrich Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* comments on the restrictive process of evolution from which we derived our modern image of marriage:

> The traditional view recognizes only monogamy... The study of primitive history, however, reveals conditions where the men live in polygamy and their wives in polyandry at the same time, and their common children are therefore considered common to them all—and these conditions in their turn undergo a long series of changes before they finally end in monogamy. The trend of these changes is to narrow more and more the circle of people comprised with the common bond of marriage, which was originally very wide, until at last it includes only the single pair, the dominant form of marriage today.81

The traditional view of marriage has at its center the guarantee of legitimacy of offspring that can only be insured by monogamy. Thus, the mechanism which evolved to affirm the legitimacy of children born to a couple has now usurped the claim such that children born outside of legal wedlock are referred to as illegitimate, the same status as for people whose parentage is unknown. For women, in particular, who were traditionally very easy to verify as the parents of their children, the price for these assurances has been quite high.

81Engels, 96.
Modern recognition of a woman’s status as legally married typically demands that she subsume her individual identity to become an appendage of her husband’s identity. The clearest representation of this is in the modification of her legally recognizable identity, her name, to adopt the family name of her husband. In certain circles this change is taken to the extreme that a wife becomes Mrs. (the name of her husband). Marriage represents a legal constraint on human sexuality in the interest of clarifying the issue of paternity. This clarity is purchased by effectively fusing many aspects of the identities of husband and wife into a collective identity as a couple.

The ritual of matrimony illustrates another complicated facet of individual identity within the family. Marriage, traditionally representing the union of a man and a woman for the intention of procreation, is the sanctioned vehicle by which a new family is begun. As it pertains to my examination of the idea of identity in multiplicity, marriage adds many layers of complexity to an individual’s family relationships. A married couple commence together a nascent family relationship where they constitute the seeds from which a new family will grow. Newlyweds also suddenly inherit an entirely new set of family relationships, as additions to their spouse’s family, to which he or she must quickly learn to adapt. These new relationships must, of course, be nurtured without neglecting the family relationships which existed prior to the marital union.

The further tangling of the knot of familial relationships represented by matrimony and motherhood never becomes a practical reality for Antigone. Her individual identity, however, must be considered in the context of these prospective family changes. Clearly, her sadness over the fact that she will be denied the opportunity to animate her roles of
wife and mother attest to these relationships being important to her. The full picture of the family relationships that define who Antigone is must also include the specter of these roles that have been denied to her.

Like Antigone, Cordelia is also a being defined largely by the sum of the family relationships of which she is a part. She, too, is a woman whose individual identity is determined by the multiplicity of these diverse family roles. Central to the conflict of King Lear is the proper emphasis to place on the various roles one must simultaneously inhabit. The significance of the marital bond, particularly in its guise as a mechanism for generational property transfer, and the personal visions of the proper demonstration of family honor, both issues of importance in my examination of identity in Antigone, once again assume positions of prominence here.

Cordelia’s entrance in the play heralds the conflict of her two primary dramatic identities: those of loving daughter to her father, the king, and prospective bride to her two suitors, the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy. Cordelia’s involvement in the courtship seems to be reduced to that of a spectator. Her father announces that: “The princes, France and Burgundy, great rivals in our youngest daughter’s love, long in court have made their amorous sojourn, and here are to be answer’d.” (I.i.44-8) The answer has the air of a business transaction rather than a proposal to enter into a loving relationship. The discussion is strictly over the terms of the young woman’s dowry, placing a pronounced emphasis on the dynastic, alliance-building side of royal marriage. The context of this first scene is, once again, the public love test Lear has demanded of his daughters, ostensibly to use their declarations of affection for their father as a yardstick for
measuring out their respective dowries. After Goneril and Regan offer profuse proclamations of the unstinting nature of their love for Lear, Cordelia struggles to verbalize her feelings. She is very aware of the duplicity implicit in her sisters’ speeches and her objective is to expose this to her father:

Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all.

(Li.99-104)

Cordelia moves almost immediately to address the conundrum of many-tiered familial relationships. If her father is parading her in a public forum which includes at least two men vying for her hand in marriage, surely he must be aware that demands on her affection cannot be exclusively his. Her allegiance must, of necessity, embrace her prospective husband, in addition to her extent family members.

In the process of individuation, Cordelia most closely identifies herself with her role as Lear’s daughter. However, unlike Goneril and Regan, who chatter with excessive pretense in an effort to distinguish their love for their father from that of their sisters, Cordelia flatly rejects the opportunity to present her case as the best daughter. She has no interest in being a sycophant and the only way she sees of satisfying her father is to outdo her sisters in brown-nosing praise. The behavior of her sisters instead induces Cordelia to distinguish herself from them, to show that she really does love her father most, through her silence.
Lear’s expectation that she enter into a contest to surpass the insincere verbal adulation of her siblings is an affront to Cordelia’s dignity. She lets it be known that the long record of one’s behavior should be valued more than grand oral pronouncements which can just as easily turn out to be fatuous lies as honest statements of feeling and intent:

I yet beseech your Majesty—,
If for I want that glib and oily art
To speak and purpose not, since what I well intend
I'll do't before I speak—that you make known
It is no vicious blot, murther, or foulness,
No unchaste action, or dishonored step,
That hath depriv’d me of you grace and favor,
But even for want of that for which I am richer—
A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue
That I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me to your liking.

(I.i.223-33)

Cordelia is direct in her confrontation of her father. Whereas she was recalcitrant and unwilling to speak when she was placed on the public pedestal, she does not hesitate to point out the folly of Lear’s actions. He has derided her because she refused to be party to game of empty words to massage her father’s ego. He is the victim of the “glib and oily art” that Goneril and Regan have opportunistically employed as a way of furthering their avaricious aims. Cordelia offers the stark contrast between her sisters, who will say anything if it serves their needs, and herself, someone who does not need to rely on overblown speech because her actions speak louder than words. Her father is punishing
her because she refuses to behave like a double-talking liar. Her tone is unrepentant when she reminds Lear that she has done nothing wrong in responding to his indulgent request for a public demonstration of adoration with silence. She implies that he should think again about which kind of daughter it is that he really values.

Cordelia shows that she truly does value her father’s love, but not at any price. The distinction of worth that she has made places her personal integrity above the hope for material gain represented by a third of the kingdom more opulent than her sisters’. For Cordelia, an honest relationship between father and daughter is an essential element of maintaining the family honor. Lear feels that he has been humiliated by Cordelia’s behavior and is moved by irrational anger to impose an exceedingly harsh punishment on her. Cordelia feels that by valuing the festooned declarations of Goneril and Regan above her humble pronouncements of filial gratitude, Lear has humiliated himself. Cordelia’s stubbornness in this situation is not an indication of a lack of affection for her father but rather a suggestion of the persistence of her conviction that her father is making a terrible mistake.

Lear’s fickle valuation of the love of his children shows itself in his ability to symbolically dissolve his paternal bonds to his favorite daughter over what appears to be a minor act of disobedience. “Here I disclaim all paternal care, propinquity and property of blood, and as a stranger to my heart and me hold thee from this for ever.” (I.i.113-6)

Whereas Cordelia has defined herself by her role as Lear’s honorable daughter, he has no interest in being a father to her any longer. The king’s response to his daughter’s defiance is to extirpate her from his world. She no longer exists as his daughter. This is abruptly
followed moments later with his recognition of the extent of his love for her. "I lov'd her most and thought to set my rest on her kind nursery." (I.i.123-4) This, nevertheless, has no effect whatsoever on his decision to ostracize her. His anger abates only momentarily before he launches into his most direct statement of the value he places on this relationship now that Cordelia has antagonized him. "With my two daughters' dow'rs digest the third; let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her." (I.i.128-9) Lear’s valuation of his daughter swings from the prospect of drawing a third of his kingdom more opulent than her sisters’ to having her rightful portion divided among the other two. Her perceived insolence has earned her her father’s unmitigated ire and brought her worth in his eyes to nothing. As he tells her suitors, “when she was dear to us, we did hold her so, but now her price has fallen.” (I.i.195-6)

Cordelia’s presence in the play seems to be largely in the role of Lear’s daughter. The emotional importance she places on this relationship confirms this as a central facet of her identity. However, equally significant to the construction of Cordelia as an individual is the stark distinction between her and her two sisters. The relevance of this role as sister for Cordelia is that of providing counterpoint to the types of sisters we find in Goneril and Regan. She represents a dignified model of behavior in the family to contrast the self-serving machinations of her sisters. As she goes to bid them farewell, it is clear that she reads their loathsome characters perfectly well and that she is frustrated that her father has fallen victim to their wiles.

The jewels of our father, with wash’d eyes
Cordelia leaves you. I know you what you are,  
And like a sister am most loath to call  
Your faults as they are named. Love well our father,  
To your professed bosoms I commit him,  
But yet, alas, stood I within his grace,  
I would prefer him to a better place.  

(I.i.268-74)

Cordelia is stung by the fact that her father is so blind to virtue as to value these two women above her. The familial bonds of love that bind them still retain just enough strength that Cordelia is hesitant to say what she really feels about their behavior: to do so would be unbecoming a sister. Her bond to her father is her priority and it is with great regret that she is forced to abandon him to the hands of these monsters.

The tragedy of King Lear springs from the fact that Cordelia publicly acknowledges, on the eve of her betrothal, that her family allegiances will heretofore be divided between her biological family and the new family she allies herself with. Cordelia’s status as a bride is, thus, another important aspect of her identity. Half of her love, half of her care and duty are reserved for her new husband, giving him an equal valuation with her father, for whom the other halves are presumably retained. In the process of her courtship, in which she maintains a position only slightly more involved than a spectator, she still manages to conserve her sense of honor. When her father announces that her expected dowry has been revoked, the Duke of Burgundy balks at continuing his pursuit of her as his bride. Cordelia swiftly replies: “Peace be with Burgundy! Since that respects of fortune are his love, I shall not be his wife.” (I.i.246-7)

She rejects attempts to regard her only as a conduit for property and fortune. In contrast,
the King of France, on seeing her devoid of a dowry but retaining her dignity, accepts her for who she is. “Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor, most choice, forsaken, and most lov’d despis’d, thee and thy virtues here I seize upon, be it lawful I take up what’s cast away.” (I.i.249-53) His valuation here of Cordelia, perhaps enhanced by her penury, calls to mind echoes of the words of Saint Peter describing the kingdom of Heaven in the Book of Matthew 19:30: “many who are first will be last, and the last first.” The theme of marital union in King Lear carries undertones of the same perversion of the marriage ritual that I examined above in Antigone. When Lear is demanding that Cordelia articulate her love for him she replies: “I love your Majesty according to my bond, no more nor less.” (I.i.92) Upon initial observation one would assume that she is speaking of the normal bond of love between a father and a daughter. However, when she is pressed, she continues: “Good my lord, you have begot me, bred me, lov’d me: I return those duties back as are right fit, obey you, love you, and most honor you.” (I.i.95-8) In return for the normal nurturing care that amounts to little more than a fulfillment of parental obligations, she vows to love, honor, and obey her father. This is a restatement of the betrothal ceremony from the solemnization of the marriage rite in the Book of Common Prayer: “I, ______, take thee, ______, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part.” The conflation of Cordelia’s relationship with her father with her prospective nuptial union is, of course, highly significant to the dramatic message of the play. Lear’s conflict with Cordelia is a manifestation of a father’s anxiety about relinquishing his monopoly over his favorite and youngest daughter’s
affection. Cordelia’s awareness of Lear’s emotional fragility causes her to attempt to position herself somewhere between her father and her future husband, not allowing either one of them to entirely usurp her love and maintaining the fundamental emotional bonds necessary for both relationships.

Cordelia, like Antigone, possesses a sense of who she is that is to a large extent determined by the multitude of interpersonal familial relationships of which she is a part. These women are forced to accommodate numerous others to whom they are tied by the affective bonds of familial love. In these efforts of reconciliation of the needs of others, they are simultaneously pulled in many different directions and can only safeguard their own needs with a diminished vigor. As a way of summarizing, it might be advantageous to invoke the words of Adrian Poole who, in his examination of Attic and Elizabethan tragic drama, comments on this element of “diversity” which he finds so central to tragedy:

Greek and Shakespearean tragedy revel in exploding the solidity of explanations, in decomposing and scattering the agencies of consolidation, public and political, private and psychological. These agencies would have us believe that man’s state is single, solid, and seated. Tragedy affirms with savage jubilation that man’s state is diverse, fluid, and unfounded. Tragedy diversifies man’s universe, severing the certainties that seem to bind human beings together, to make men and women at one with each other, with themselves, with their world. It shatters the assurance of the first person pronouns, ‘I’ and ‘We’. Men and women are torn apart, to confront the diversity in themselves, the diversity of
their selves, and of each other.\textsuperscript{82}

Chapter Three

Family Life and “Vulnerable Excellence”

On the cover of a recent issue of *Vanity Fair* magazine, Drew Barrymore provocatively states that “family to me is associated with, like, strapping 500-pound bricks to your feet and jumping in the water.” That Ms. Barrymore has lived a tumultuous family life should not come as much of a shock to readers of the tabloid press. Nevertheless, the editors’ choice to highlight this particular quote plays on the belief that their readers will be simultaneously amused and horrified by this candid expression of the young actress’s feelings. Many people feel that their family obligations are a personal burden, but the fact that Ms. Barrymore also views them as a threat to her physical well-being will strike some observers as both tragic and, sadly, not uncommon. In most instances where we perceive a menace to our personal safety our reaction is to flee. However, when this peril springs from our associations with those to whom we are bound by the biological and social ties of family, it is, to a certain extent, inextricable, or at the very least, much more difficult to avoid.

Society places a priority on family obligations. This is part of the reason why these duties sometimes seem like an oppressive burden: we know that we are not supposed to ignore them. Commitments to the family are frequently seen as taking precedence over all

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83 *Vanity Fair*, June 2003.

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other personal responsibilities, to the extent that they often supplant our obligations to
ourselves as our primary concerns. The nuclear family has come to function as the
emotional center of our world and most people’s deepest aspirations for emotional
fulfillment are affixed to the interpersonal relationships that constitute their family lives.
As members of our primary sentimental community, relatives often have privileged access
to intimate aspects of our personal lives. The interdependencies of family life necessitate
an emotional closeness and a willingness to share that are sometimes at odds with our
individual preferences. The complex web of family relationships occasionally demands
behavior from us that does not appear to be in our own self-interests and advances the
needs of the family unit at our own expense.

Social life, in general, is defined by acts of exchange—transactions that require both
receipts and expenditures on behalf of all the parties involved. Sometimes these
transactions are economic in nature, but more frequently the exchanges entail things that
we would hesitate to call commodities. When we offer our assistance to someone we do
not always expect to be remunerated in financial terms. The intangible, emotional
exchanges that define love and friendship do not lend themselves easily to quantification.
Nevertheless, it is our inclination to try to preserve some measure of balance over the
course of these interactions. As Lawrence C. Becker notes:

We soon learn that we cannot, as a matter of fact, get
what we want from others (sustenance, love, freedom)
without giving something back. Even infants have a
crude, faltering awareness of how to please, and what
connection that has to getting what they want. By the
time we are aware of ourselves as moral beings, the disposition to reciprocate—to sustain the sort of equilibrium necessary for productive social intercourse—is deeply ingrained.84

Lop-sided social transactions, where one person gives incessantly and the other receives exclusively, quickly become unacceptable to all parties involved. The giver feels cheated if the inequity becomes too clearly entrenched. The receiver suffers from a sense of guilt and diminished self-esteem derived from an awareness that he is taking undue advantage of the situation and not fulfilling his part of an implicit bargain. Both of these reactions illustrate Becker's contention that we are predisposed to reciprocate—"to return good for good, in proportion to what we receive"—as a way of maintaining a moral symmetry in our interpersonal relationships which allows for a climate of constructive social interaction.

The social lives of people connected by family ties, due to the frequency and duration of their interactions, can be marked by a particularly precarious equilibrium. The level of intimacy and the intensity of our emotional involvement with our family members tend to be higher than those of almost any other interpersonal relationships of which we are a part. These close bonds, typically forged over the course of extended periods of time: a lifetime in the case of certain blood relatives, increase the expectations that our family members have regarding our behavior, as well as the expectations that we have regarding theirs. In the family, people are also likely to be less inhibited about expressing their desires and expectations of other family members. The heightened expectations we have regarding the behavior of our close relatives further imperils the delicate balance that

84 Becker, Reciprocity, 81-2.
typifies family life.

The ethical life of the family is distinguished by the ubiquity of non-voluntary moral obligations: obligations to which we are bound but which we "acquire without regard to our invitation, consent, or acceptance." These duties spring from the wide variety of transactions whereby, in the course of normal familial relationships, goods which have not been specifically requested are given by one family member to another. Parental duties for the care and nurturing of young children and familial commitments to assist infirm or aging family members, or other family members in need, are examples of this kind of interaction. The close emotional ties of family life make us more likely to come to the aid of family members than we might be inclined to do for strangers. All of us have been, at some time or another, the beneficiaries of the unsolicited generosity of relatives. Our inherent disposition to return good for goods received means that our domestic relationships are likely to be complicated by the reciprocal obligations generated through these gifts of unexpected familial largesse.

The intricate web of family relationships makes it difficult for us to delineate clear limits to the non-voluntary moral obligations generated by the normal interactions of family members. The physical and emotional proximity of life for people linked by the bonds of family means that its members usually expect family matters to receive a high priority. In a tight-knit family, a staggering number of interactions will precipitate reciprocal obligations among its members. Further complicating this moral tableau is the fact that, barring the dissolution of the familial relationships through death, divorce, or the

85Becker, Reciprocity, 3.
abandonment of the family unit, these obligations continue to be generated by the ongoing day-to-day occurrences of normal family life.

In a close family, there is no way to repay everything you owe, and no way to start fresh. There is no theoretical ‘solution’ to these problems; no tidy argument that limits obligations whenever they begin to be oppressive. Family life for good people just is oppressive at times, in ways that cannot (rightly) be eased. It is tragic that the very traits that make a good life possible can also sometimes force destructive burdens on the people who have those traits.86

The duty to return good in proportion for good received suggests that our interactions within the family will be the source of a great many of our ethical obligations. As the beneficiaries of the love, care, and attention derived from healthy familial relationships, we are morally bound to reciprocate in kind. However, the frequency and intensity of our family interactions risk engendering the semblance of a “debt that cannot be repaid.”87 How much reciprocal good is needed to alleviate what is owed for the years of care and nurturing that parents routinely dedicate to their children? There is a sensation of being, perhaps in an abstract way, eternally indebted to the family members responsible for raising us. This does not change in any fundamental way even as the physical dependency of childhood gives way to the independence of adult life. As Becker astutely notes: “Children grow strong and parents grow feeble but something of the initial inequality

86Becker, Reciprocity, 225.

87Becker, Reciprocity, 178.
Responsibilities to family members in return for the special treatment we have received at their hands due to the social and biological ties we share constrain our freedom to act because of the priority we must accord these obligations. The disposition to confer primacy on our moral duties to the family can be the source of detrimental consequences in our personal lives. Altering our behavior in an effort to compensate family members for the accumulated good we have received as a result of their actions may cause us to make decisions which benefit certain family members at our own expense.

The customs and social norms that characterize the family constitute a distinct mode of life peculiar to each particular family unit. This specific way of life serves to mark off the group, uniting them and simultaneously distinguishing them from the rest of society. Shared interests unify the family. We see an expression of this in the preferential treatment bestowed on its members. Those outside of the family unit often experience this selective behavior as a prejudicing of their own interests. However, even within the family, individual interests can be prejudiced against if it is perceived that these conflict with the interests of the clan.

The family is a community constructed to champion the needs of the group through collective effort. The necessities of the individual are subsumed by the necessities of the family. By virtue of a person's membership in the family unit, her needs, as determined by the hierarchical structure of the family, are thought to be effectively represented as an element of the needs of the group as a whole. Relinquishing an active pursuit of individual

88Becker, Reciprocity, 214.
needs becomes a gesture of solidarity with the common cause of the family. In this context, the desire to distinguish one’s personal needs from those of the family becomes, in some sense, a threat to collective unity and a subversive act.

A complete dedication to the honor of the family requires the reconciliation of the necessities of the family with those of the individual. Some individuals identify so thoroughly with their roles as family members that it is unnecessary to distinguish their personal needs from those of the family unit. They fully accept the premise that their own best interests are effectively represented in the pursuit of the best interests of the family. More commonly, though, an absolute commitment to family piety demands that a person subvert her own individual needs to the communal necessities of the family.

Martha Nussbaum, in a critical study of *Antigone* in her book, *The Fragility of Goodness*, sees such an overarching dedication to a singular ideal as an effort to banish contingency from human life and exert a rational control over fate. In planning our lives, practical wisdom dictates that we do whatever is in our power to avoid situations that threaten our personal well-being. By simplifying our moral commitments, we should be able to reduce our exposure to tragic conflict. The rational ordering of our ethical obligations, placing the sanctity of family honor above all other responsibilities, provides us with a template whereby we can prioritize our commitments and, theoretically, avert serious controversy.

On the surface it seems that by streamlining our moral obligations such that kinship bonds are given precedence over all others we could facilitate the resolution of conflict and diminish the likelihood of its occurrence. Such behavior would presumably remove major
sources of strife from our lives and increase our chances of finding happiness and fulfillment. The result of such a systematic organizing of our world, however, as evidenced by the tragic plights of Antigone and Cordelia, can become what Nussbaum terms a "specifically mortal, vulnerable excellence."89 This type of rigidly rational ordering of a person’s moral universe must, of necessity, exclude devotion to certain principles as a result of dedication to other, irreconcilable ones. The contingent nature of some of our obligations demand that in order to honor them we must disavow ourselves of certain other duties. These choices are not always between the obviously right and the obviously wrong, but often between a right and a greater right. Maintaining an unwavering commitment to the sanctity of family bonds in these circumstances sometimes demands that we forswear our obligations to other people or social groups and leave ourselves susceptible, as individuals, to great harm.

Antigone and Cordelia are confronted with ethical dilemmas that result from their steadfast dedication to ideals of family piety. Instead of simplifying their choices, however, these stark prioritizations of their moral options leave them incapable of defending their own self-interests. Their commitments to the family preclude their heeding other social obligations that also demand their respect. In the first book of the Nicomachean Ethics where he discusses “the object of life,” Aristotle acknowledges this predicament when he notes that “the good for man is an activity of soul in accordance with virtue, or if there are more kinds of virtue than one, in accordance with the best and most

89Nussbaum, 422.
perfect kind." In the pursuit of excellence man must sometimes out of necessity choose not only between good and bad, but also between good and better.

The philosopher Stuart Hampshire sees decisions we make in choosing between acknowledged virtues as particularly important because “morality and conflict are inseparable: conflict between different admirable ways of life and between different defensible moral ideals, conflict of obligations, conflict between essential, but incompatible interests.” He contends that “morality has its source in conflict, in the divided soul and between contrary claims.” It is precisely our valuation of these “contrary claims” that forces us to examine what it is that we really revere most. Tragedy typically views such instances where someone is forced to prioritize her commitments as moments that are profoundly revealing of an agent’s moral character.

Conflict often occurs when people do not share an opinion about the relative importance of a specific issue of moral consequence. Our ethical judgements are subjective interpretations derived from the sum of our experience and our particular perspective concerning the issue in question. Like all of our perceptions of the world around us, they are colored by our individual point of view and profoundly influenced by our personal attachments and individual history. It is erroneous and dangerous to assume that what we see as the salient features of a particular topic will be identical to what is

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92 Hampshire, 9.
perceived as important by those around us.

Similarly, our ethical obligations are not limited to those duties we see as universal moral principles which demand adherence from everyone. The moral claims we feel bound by frequently involve respect for principles which we acknowledge as being important to ourselves as individuals, but lacking in any moral authority to demand widespread consideration. We insist on the right, as autonomous individuals, to elaborate our own private program of moral standards that enable us to encode individual, cultural, and family values into our personalized systems of ethical norms. Problems arise when these personal moral priorities conflict with what other people understand to be universal moral obligations.

Indeed, conflict is the backdrop against which the moral agency of Antigone and Cordelia must be enacted. They are forced to make willed choices between incompatible goods; choices which are further complicated by their dominant commitments to family piety. Their priorities put them at odds with others who believe that their allegiance to other, contradictory moral values is required. Their dedication to the honor of the family above and beyond any other obligations by which they feel bound motivate them to embark on courses of action that benefit certain family members at their own expense. Their behavior demonstrates the constraining effects of reciprocal familial obligations and how a well-intentioned respect for these duties can generate the semblance of a “debt that cannot be repaid.”93 Both Cordelia and Antigone are driven by their deep commitments to family honor to undertake actions which have serious negative consequences for the young

93 Becker, Reciprocity, 178.
women. However, their conduct is an expression of their acceptance of their duties to the family and, in turn, their neglect of the detrimental ramifications these actions bring about for them as individuals. They make conscious sacrifices of their personal well-being in the name of the greater good of the family.

The manifestation of Antigone’s commitment to family honor takes the form of her determination to bury her brother, Polyneices, in spite of the edict issued by Creon forbidding such action. She is incensed by what she perceives as the injustice of Creon’s decision to dishonor her brother’s corpse. “Hasn’t Creon destined our brothers, the one to honored burial, the other to unburied shame?” (Line 22) Polyneices is a member of Antigone’s family. By virtue of that fact alone, and regardless of what else he has done, he is deserving of her efforts to preserve his honor. She implies that Creon’s decision was cruelly arbitrary. However, her understanding of the situation contrasts sharply with Creon’s. Creon does not see shame in his decision to deprive Polyneices of a distinguished burial, but rather sees it in the behavior of Polyneices to the people of his homeland:

“Polyneices...who on his return from exile wanted to burn to the ground the city of his fathers and his family line’s gods, and wanted to feed on kindred blood and lead the remnant into slavery.” (Lines 199-202) His measure of honor is reserved for those who dedicate themselves to the well-being of the city. Polyneices, even though he is Creon’s nephew, is an enemy of the city, and as such, is also, in Creon’s view, an enemy of his family.

Creon and Antigone engage in a confrontation where they disparage each other’s assessment of the treatment that Polyneices merits. Stubbornness prohibits either of them
from seeing any truth in the position held by their opponent. Their dispute invokes a bevy of dualistic terms of classification with which they attempt to analyze Polyneices's behavior and one another's response to it. We quickly become aware that evaluative terms like "good" and "bad," "friend" and "enemy," "shameful" and "honorable," "pious" and "impious," and "just" and "unjust" take on vastly different connotations depending on whether they are spoken by Creon or by Antigone. Their dangerously narrow interpretations of the moral landscape surrounding Polyneices's and one another's actions leave both of them unwilling to concede the minimum of virtue inherent in their adversary's position.

The rigidly Manichean tone of their classifications blinds them to the fact that these evaluative monikers are not mutually exclusive. Just because someone is a friend does not imply, of necessity, that they are also pious and honorable. Likewise, a foe does not have to be a bad or unjust person. "In some imaginable circumstances the values named by these labels will make conflicting demands. Friendship or love may require an injustice; the just course of action may lead to impiety; the pursuit of honor may require an injury to friendship." It cannot even be assumed that allegiance to a single value would guarantee the avoidance of conflict. As Creon, is reminded, it is possible for the justice of the city to be in conflict with the justice of the gods below, and piety to one god may necessitate an offense against another. Nor are any of these values inviolable: they can be abruptly transformed by a change in circumstances or the overriding influence of other values. The chorus laments this fact in the aftermath of the confrontation between Creon and Haemon.

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Nussbaum, 54.
"Love, the unconquered in battle...You seize the hearts of just men and drag them to injustice, to their ruin." (Lines 782-93) Men can be gripped at the root of their souls by the force of strong emotions and fundamentally altered. Our efforts to acknowledge a full slate of human values enhance the likelihood of there being the source of conflict among them.

Antigone and Creon each honestly believes that their set of values is the right one. Their confrontation becomes protracted due to the strength and intransigence of their commitments. Neither of them is willing to accept that the other is also defending a value that is worthy of attention. They exclude from consideration anything that obstructs in any way their support of their fundamental value. However, both of them become aware, over time, of the narrowness of their interpretations. As Stuart Hampshire notes:

Even persons exclusively committed to one clearly delineated way of life, which they are sure is the only right one, ought to admit, if they reflect, that the virtues that they cultivate, and the moral claims that they act on, both entail a cost; even though they are sure that the cost ought to be paid.95

Structuring moral commitments such that one obligation supercedes all others does not nullify the existence of the other obligations. The central commitment must be validated in a way that justifies the cost of neglecting any other commitments which interfere with it. Antigone’s veneration of the value of family honor is presented in this way. From the outset, she is aware that the price of her principled disobedience will be her life. She

95Hampshire, 159.
proudly embraces this fate and believes it to be a mark of honor which serves to elevate the
taste of her act and does not allow it to diminish her moral certitude in any way.
Nevertheless, she acknowledges that her existence will not be complete as she will be
deprived of the joys of matrimony and motherhood which she had anticipated. Creon also
feels very secure in his belief that the honor of the city is a supreme value worthy of his
undiived dedication. He claims to be worried about the shadow of impropriety if he were
to demonstrate a double standard regarding enforcement of his edict because it involves
members of his own family. “If I am to foster my own kin to spurn order, surely I will do
the same for others.” (Line 659) However, rather than the image of Creon struggling with
the conflicting demands of his roles as civic leader and family man, what we really see is
someone who has eliminated any relevance from his family obligations and vested the
entirety of his duty in the service of the city. He has reduced the sum of his ethical
responsibilities to the defense of civic virtue and refuses to acknowledge any other value
which can conflict with it. The tragic aspect of Creon’s fate is that he vehemently denies
there being any cost associated with his particular prioritization of values. It is only when
it is too late that he comes to understand the true magnitude of these costs.

Antigone and Creon confront one another with starkly contrasting visions of
morally-binding priorities. These claims encompass incommensurate ethical valuations
and are ultimately irreconcilable. Their solitary, unwavering commitments to these
singular values bring a certain ominous inevitability to their showdown. Amidst a surfeit
of counsel from friends, acquaintances, and loved ones to be less rigid in their moral self-
righteousness, neither of them allow themselves to doubt the validity of their beliefs. Their
confidence in the relative importance they have attributed to a single commitment, outstripping the need to recognize the pertinence of any other obligation that could impede the execution of their fundamental obligation, enables them to proceed in their chosen course of action with a resolute devotion.

In *King Lear* we witness a similar tenacity in the willed determination of Cordelia and Lear to sustain their principled resolve in the face of spirited opposition. When Cordelia refuses to heap public words of praise on Lear in response to her sisters’ abundant offerings, she honestly feels that she is doing what is right. Likewise, Lear is intent on inflicting a severe punishment on his daughter for what he sees as the egregious offense of her disrespect. Both Cordelia and Lear believe that their behavior is a reasonable expression of their commitment to the honor of the family. Rather than a disagreement over conflicting values, as is the case with Creon and Antigone, Cordelia and Lear disagree over the proper way to honor the same value.

The conflict between father and daughter in *King Lear* hinges on the connection between truth and honesty. Cordelia is aware that the majestic pronouncements of fatherly affection that her sisters issue are motivated by selfish aims. Their words are opportunistic and false. She imagines that she is rendering dutiful service to her father by highlighting the duplicity of Goneril and Regan. When it dawns on Lear that Cordelia will not placate his ego with the balm of public praise, he remarks to her: “So young, and so untender?” (l.i.106) She swiftly rejoins: “So young, my lord, and true.” (l.i.107) What Lear perceives as a callous disregard for her aged father’s feelings, Cordelia recognizes as blunt honesty designed precisely to snap him out of the hypnotic spell of her sisters’ fawning. We are
quickly made aware that truth is not always the easiest option to pursue. When Lear’s loyal attendant, Kent, tries to counsel the king to avoid judging Cordelia so harshly, he is sent into exile for his insubordination. Gloucester comments on the absurdity of Lear punishing his faithful servant in this way. “And the noble and true-hearted Kent banish’d! his offense, honesty! Tis strange.” (I.i.116-7) Kent, the voice of truth and reasoned deliberation, the man of true heart, is castigated for his honesty. Thus, the false adulation of Goneril and Regan is rewarded with ample shares of Lear’s kingdom, while the frank proclamations of unembellished honesty expressed by Cordelia and Kent are compensated with exile.

Lear sees truth as a fixed entity that would be embodied in the unquestioning loyalty of a daughter or a vassal. He confuses constancy and truth, with predictably disastrous results. He imagines the bonds of blood and friendship to be a guarantee of fidelity: a good daughter and a true servant would not publicly confront his royal authority, but would instead quietly defer to their superior. Cordelia and Kent both also understand that the ties of fealty require a certain principled behavior. However, in place of deferential toadying, they envision the obligation of a conscientious attendant or family member to lie in speaking the difficult truths that people sometimes would prefer not to hear. Kent gives voice to these opinions in the midst of his confrontation with the steward Oswald:

That such a slave as this should wear a sword,
Who wears no honesty. Such smiling rogues as these,
Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain
Which are too intrinse t’ unloose; smooth every passion
Integrity is a minimum prerequisite for any pretense of virtuous service. This relationship between servant and master entails distinct responsibilities which cannot simply be cast off when they become uncomfortable. The duty implied here is that of speaking honestly, of "calling a spade a spade," and of confronting the uneasy fact that sometimes fawning falsehood is better-received than cold, hard truth. Kent’s comments about the enduring bonds of allegiance that link a vassal and a master, the "holy cords...too intrinse t’ unloose," are directly applicable to the circumstances of Lear and his daughters. "Intrinse" hints towards a conflation of intrinsic: fundamental, inherent; and intense: profound, potent. These sacred knots that connect us to our family are deep, powerful, not to be taken lightly. Lear, in his fit of anger at the irreverence shown to him by Cordelia, symbolically dissolves these ties of blood and affection that bind him to his daughter. Goneril and Regan placate their father with flattery. These are acts of self-serving dishonesty, and, Kent infers, demonstrate an overt disregard for sanctified familial bonds. Such behavior is the domain of "rats" and "smiling rogues," both of which conjure images of duplicity and opportunistic treachery. These "holy cords," be they those binding fathers and daughters or those between servants and masters, carry with them moral obligations of honesty.

The biological and social bonds that unite a family are immutable. They are "too intrinse t’ unloose," even when we might wish that they were not so. However, that is not
the case with the day-to-day realities on which the members of the family must base their actions. The family is not a fixed entity. New family members are born and old ones die. Marriage realigns family allegiances. Relationships between individuals evolve over time. Children grow up to be independent adults and parents grow old and become dependent upon their children. As Goneril notes as her dealings with her elderly father become more and more frustrating, "Old fools are babes again." (I.iii.19) The biological processes of human growth and decay insure that the interactions which define family life are never permanent.

The constantly changing nature of family relationships is particularly vexing to King Lear. He lives with a memory of helpless young daughters who relied on their father for protection and care. Now, he must adapt himself to the reality that his girls have grown to be young women. He is forced to relinquish his central role in their lives and accept that his importance is, to a large degree, to be usurped by their husbands. This is precisely what Cordelia tells him in exceedingly blunt terms: the days when his daughters can lavish the entirety of their affection on their father to the exclusion of all others are finished, even if her sisters continue to tell him otherwise. This is not a personal slight, but rather just an honest acknowledgment of the natural order of things.

In King Lear, one measure of the passage of time is marked by the movement of celestial bodies. Astronomical motion is seen as a mechanism of fortune and a meter of change. The play is rife with reference to generational passage and succession. In such a context, change is frequently recognized as being fraught with contention. Gloucester, himself trying to settle issues of rightful succession between his legitimate and illegitimate
sons, announces that:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no
good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can
reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself
scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools,
friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies;
in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond
crack'd 'twixt son and father.
(I.ii.103-9)

The revolutions of the heavenly orbs, a representation of the natural order of the universe,
influence the behavior of man. We can try to explain it, but it does not change the fact that
it just is. There is nothing stable in our world. “Time waits for no one, no favors has
he.” The white heat of passion is unsustainable. Our amiable connections with our
fellow man cannot help but fade over time. Even the sacred bonds of family are vulnerable
to this tendency towards entropic decay. “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” And
yet the fundamental challenges of our lives are embodied in our efforts to keep pace and
continually adapt to this incessant process of evolutionary change.

Our world is in a state of constant flux. We cannot fix on a pattern of action and
rest secure in the knowledge that this action will continue to suit our needs. The truths we
seek, those on which we must base our actions, are transient, tenuous and elusive. They do
not lend themselves to easy apprehension and interpretation. As Lear’s Fool informs us:

96The Rolling Stones, “Time Waits for No One,” It’s Only Rock ‘n Roll. New

97William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” in The Norton Anthology of
"Truth's a dog must to kennel, he must be whipt out, when the Lady Brach may stand by fire and stink." (I.iv.111) Truth is not always a welcome guest that is received with open arms. Sometimes it is loath to reveal itself and may be unintentionally banished.

The truth can be painful, particularly if we structure our lives around falsehood. In such situations, the revelation of the truth often destroys fictions that we have vested a great deal of energy in preserving. The discord that overtakes the Lear family is the result of conflicting visions of what is meant by truth. For Lear, being true to someone involves observing protocol to highlight the reverence and admiration that is felt for this person. If this also entails a certain amount of indulgence for the person's egotistical needs, well, that is just part of the price of respect. Cordelia wants nothing to do with the empty formula designed to showcase the love that Lear's daughters feel for their father. She sees it as an affront to her own and her father's dignity and does what is in her power to change it by refusing to be a part of it. Lear is embarrassed by Cordelia's decision to defer in the public declaration of her affection for her father. Cordelia is embarrassed by the entire sordid episode, viewing the spectacle of her sisters' obsequious adulation as pathetic and beneath them. Both Lear and Cordelia feel that the family honor has been compromised by this incident, but for different reasons. Each of them believes that family piety is among the most important virtues, but neither of them can agree on which actions actually sustain this virtue, and which ones undermine it.

Conflicts between two coherent sets of acknowledged virtues or two competing interpretations of how to honor a single virtue do not lend themselves to easy resolution if both parties are convinced of the merit of their specific positions. However, by dedicating
themselves to a particular value, or a particular understanding of how best to uphold a
certain value, moral agents close themselves off from being able to honor certain other
values. The moral decisions we make bind us in an intricate web of contingency. The
deliberative process of making these decisions involves trying to evaluate effectively the
costs and benefits of the specific values we choose to promote and the manner in which we
choose to promote them. Our tendency is to attempt to analyze our moral claims and distill
them down to yield us clear choices to which we can feel thoroughly and unequivocally
committed. Rational explanations are often presented as showing a multiplicity of
situations that fall under the sway of a single principle or rule: the simpler the rule, the
better the explanation. But “there is a very substantial part of morality, and of moral
concern, which requires the recognition of complexity and not the reduction of complexity
to simplicity.”

There is no overriding reason why we should look for simplicity, clarity, and exactness in the conduct of life,
or in every aspect of the conduct of life, as we do look for them in scientific explanation. We have no pressing
need for satisfactory total explanations of our conduct and of our way of life. Our need is rather to construct
and maintain a way of life of which we are not ashamed and which we shall not, on reflection, regret or despise,
and which we respect.8

Our efforts to reduce and simplify the world around us in the hope of more easily
understanding and controlling it are ultimately futile. The virtues embodied in a world that
has been streamlined in order to diminish the likelihood of strife are themselves

8Hampshire, 167, 168.
diminished by these efforts. We realize that “a conflict-free life would be lacking in value and beauty next to a life in which it is possible for conflict to arise; that part of the value of each claim derives from a special separateness and distinctness that would be eclipsed by harmonization.”\textsuperscript{99} As John Stuart Mill noted in his explorations of the merits of individualism:

\begin{quote}
It is not by wearing down to uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth ... that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation; and as the works partake of the character of those who do them, by the same process human life also becomes rich, diversified, and animating, furnishing more abundant aliment to high thoughts and elevating feelings, and strengthening the tie which binds the individual to the race, by making the race infinitely better worth belonging to.\textsuperscript{100}
\end{quote}

It is precisely our diversity and individuality which make human beings so intriguing. As the chorus reminds us at the commencement of the “Ode to Man” in \textit{Antigone}, “Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man.” (Line 334) It is the human life bursting with all its complexity and possibility that makes us such an object of wonder. Any actions we undertake to circumscribe this variety in an effort to limit contingency have the effect of also diminishing an integral part of our humanity.

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{99}Nussbaum, 81.
\item \textsuperscript{100}Mill, 127.
\end{footnotes}
Conclusion:

Tragic Family Values

“Families,” in the words of Lawrence Becker, “are potent.”¹⁰¹ They are the places where we find our deepest emotional bonds and the places where we most often seek our fulfillment. The connections we share with our family members, genetic and affective ties solidified over years of living in close proximity, are unlike the connections we share with anyone else. The domestic realm constitutes an extremely important part of most people’s lives. And yet, family life is not always a bowl full of cherries. Sometimes, in fact, it is the pits.

Conservative moralists have taken up the banner of the preservation of the family as a rallying cry to condemn everything that is wrong with modern society. A return to “family values” is seen as the antidote to the varied problems that beset contemporary Western civilization. Sexual promiscuity, divorce, drug addiction, and crime are all presumed to be directly attributable to the lack of a nurturing family environment and the sturdy values that a traditional upbringing imparts. But these pundits are exceedingly sanguine about the beneficial influence of a conventional childhood and the realities of life in the modern family.

It is in our relationships as family members that we have the most at stake. Our

¹⁰¹Becker, Reciprocity, 177.
emotional happiness is contingent upon our ability to make these relationships work.

While it is true that the family is the site of our most intense emotional connections, it is also true that nothing can equal the emotional devastation we experience when family relationships unravel. The immense value that we place on these affiliations makes them a source of vulnerability for us.

Tragedy has typically invoked the emotional prominence we give to family relationships as the cradle of intractable conflict. The biological and social bonds of the family and the shared life of the household unite us with our relatives in a way that we can never be united with people from outside of the family. When the fundamental values we hold as family members clash with those of other family members, or with other social obligations, it becomes particularly difficult for us to retain our objectivity. As Adrian Poole notes:

> Tragedy asks some difficult questions about our belongings, what and whom we most fear and desire to give up and cling to. Not all tragedies are 'about' children and parents, but all tragedy draws on the models of belonging provided by our experience of family relations, the ones which tax most severely our powers of choice and reason.\(^{102}\)

The family, as the primary place where we “belong,” is the formative group which almost completely defines the earliest phases of our existence. The emotional ties that grow from these early experiences of inclusion bind us to our families for the rest of our lives. However, as children mature, the process of relative dissociation from the protective

\(^{102}\)Poole, 227.
enclave of the family and individuation as distinct entities forces them to take a more active role in deciding how and to what extent they actually pertain to the family.

Antigone and Cordelia are two young women on the cusp of adulthood who are in the midst of determining how, as independent individuals, they will continue to belong to the family. For both of them, the honor and integrity of the family is of the utmost importance. But their unwavering commitment to a particular vision of family honor puts them on a collision course with other family members who hold different views and different priorities. By valuing their obligations to the dignity of the family to the exclusion of all other social duties, they are forced to inhabit a narrowly circumscribed part of their possible worlds, relinquishing the rest. The result of this is, as Stuart Hampshire informs us, a form of psychological death:

A person hesitates between two contrasting ways of life, and sets of virtue, and he has to make a very definite, and even final, determination between them. This determination is a negation, and normally the agent will feel that the choice has killed, or repressed some part of him.  

The decisions that Antigone and Cordelia make demand that they accept something that they see as profoundly important. However, in order to make this acceptance, they are required to deny other facets of who they are. In their aspirations to honor one particular value, they must trample on other ones. In their efforts to sustain their individual integrity, they must break with those who hinder those efforts.

Our lives as human beings are generally not lived in isolation. We are dependent

\[103\] Hampshire, 155.
on others for a wide variety of our needs. Even when we are not directly dependent on others for our basic physical needs, the love and friendship of others are essential if we are to live a life of human flourishing. It is impossible to completely banish our dependence, be it physical or emotional, on that which exists outside of us. This dependency will always leave us susceptible to the incursions of the capricious winds of fate into our personal lives. What we eventually realize is that contingency is an inevitable element of human life. Even when we try to reduce our exposure to chance, we can only do so by making grave sacrifices in the fullness and richness of our lives. As Martha Nussbaum reminds us: "part of the peculiar beauty of human excellence just is its vulnerability."104
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