Book Reviews

H. Brighouse & A. Swift


Brighouse’s and Swift’s book *Family Values* discusses the value of the family from a liberal egalitarian perspective. This important contribution to an emerging field does not only target an audience of moral and political philosophers. Written in an extremely accessible style, it should also interest social scientists, educators and family law scholars. This book should be highly helpful to tackle issues such as child custody, family reunification, parental education or surrogacy.

*Family Values* defends a liberal egalitarian justification of the family from which implications for the rights of parents with respect to their children are derived. The book demonstrates that, despite the challenges it poses to liberal egalitarianism, the family should be preserved because it gives access to ‘familial relationship goods’. ‘Familial relationship goods’ describes the objectively valuable contribution familial relationships make to the flourishing of parents and children.

The first part of the book discusses two key challenges the family poses to liberal egalitarianism. Chapter 1 exposes the liberal challenge. For liberals, individuals should be free to choose how to live their own life. Children are not their parents: they are separate individuals. Who (parents? the state?) should have authority over children, and what the limits upon the exercise of authority over children should be? The chapter then responds to the objection that liberalism, which assumes individuals are free and rational, and frames moral issues in terms of rights and duties instead of love and affection, is ill-equipped to deal with the family.

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Chapter 2 focuses on the *egalitarian challenge*. The family is a major obstacle to the realization of fair equality of opportunities, which requires the mitigation of the influence of children's background on their chances of success. The authors suggest we should aim for all-things-considered judgments that involve a balancing of family relationships goods with egalitarian ideals.

Making these balancing judgments requires an explanation of why the family (here, the parent–child dyad) is valuable. This is the aim of the second part of the book. Chapter 3 shows why the family is valuable for *children* and why they have a right to be parented. Because children have specific developmental interests, they are ‘the appropriate object of paternalistic treatment’ and have a right to have their interests taken care of by adults who act as fiduciary. The family is the existing child-rearing arrangement that most reliably provides the loving and intimate relationship, the continuity of care over time and the kind of authoritative regulation children need. Importantly, nothing precludes familial relationship goods from being also realized in less conventional forms of family, such as single-parent, same-sex parents or adoptive families.

Chapter 4 shows why the family is valuable for *adults* and focuses on the right to parent. This right is not grounded on procreation, but on the non-substitutable contribution of parenting to flourishing. Parenting involves love, fiduciary responsibilities and meeting a child's developmental interests. Hence parenting enables adults to develop and exercise valuable capacities. But, importantly, this right to parent is conditional upon adults being good enough parents.

The third part of the book derives some implications of this justification of the family. Chapter 5 addresses the question of whether parents have a right to confer competitive advantage on their children. The authors argue that, among the interactions that confer advantage, those which are essential for relationships goods have strongest claims to protection. These interactions are described as intimate, spontaneous, involving shared experiences and mutual identification. Hence bedtimes stories have a stronger claim to protection than bequests. Unfortunately, the enjoyment of relationship goods may result in the unequal transmission of valuable cultural capital. Whenever it is feasible, the state should break the mechanisms that allow the interaction (which should be protected) to yield the inequality of prospects between children (which should be mitigated). Whenever this is not feasible, the authors affirm familial relationships goods are more important than equality.

Chapter 6 focuses on the right to shape one's children's values. The crucial point here is that value-shaping is the inevitable outcome of the enjoyment of familial relationships goods. First, an enjoyable relationship is spontaneous, and spontaneous parents cannot avoid influencing their children's values.