

Foundational Political Values to Guide Governmental and Family Care of Children

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It is a dangerous situation when a philosopher meddles in such practical affairs as government policy and child development. I remember Socrates' experience when he asked some foundational questions of his fellow citizens so many centuries ago; I hope I do not have to watch my wine glass with special care after the conference. But it is my impression that the Athenians' frustrations with Socrates were not entirely with his quest for values; those frustrations arose partly because he mostly asked questions but did not always offer good answers. I will try to ask some questions and also offer some answers; obviously you are free to try to find better answers if you cannot accept my proposals. I am not afraid of disagreement, but please hold the Hemlock.

As a young man I had the privilege of being an academic assistant to the very significant social scientist David G. Myers. His wide-ranging, award-winning research in psychology and sociology was informed by a search for values and principles which would make human life flourish, a kind of Socratic quest. He dared to hope we can identify trans-cultural values which will promote human well-being, happiness, and the common good, and this hope led to his intensive research and extensive writing. He also claimed that it is the big things that have a big effect on human well-being, matters like key ideas and values, whereas he was convinced that many passing fads had relatively little influence on human well-being, no matter how aroused people may become in discussing different government policies and different styles of parenting. So in the spirit of Myers, I will suggest that ideas and values which we can bring into the formulation of policies, programs, and practices in the family, business, and government are more important than many particular decisions which we have to make. Those values and ideas will shape all our policies, programs, reactions, and relationships. Let me illustrate.

1. Children—Gifts or Problems?

At the beginning of all our thinking about children stands a fundamental philosophical question: what is this child? We can make the question more pointed by asking, is a child primarily a gift or primarily a problem? Several years ago a pregnant colleague complained that her medical doctor saw her pregnancy as an illness, a problem, whereas she did not see the pregnancy as an illness or a problem. She saw the child as a great gift. The contrast in basic philosophy of life was stark. Forgive me for speaking plainly, but this contrast, nicely articulated in a medical clinic, is foundational for many matters related to children and child-raising today. It is close to the low birth rates causing the declining population in many developed countries, close to how we treat mothers, close to how we treat each child, and central for policies in business and government.

This is a fundamental existential question that cannot be answered by a study in sociology or economics. Our answer will not only shape our policies and our treatment of each child; the future of western civilization depends on our answer. If we think children are most fundamentally problems to be avoided, we can avoid the problem and bring all of western civilization to an end. And without having clarified and discussed the question, this is the answer implied by our low birth rates in so much of the developed world. In contrast, I see my three children as three of the greatest gifts my wife and I ever received.

I would emphasize that our feelings toward children are an existential decision; by this way of talking I mean it may be impossible to prove to the satisfaction of all people that children are a gift. This is a decision that stands before and influences all our other decisions. A person could choose to see only the problems related to having children, e.g., medical problems, financial problems, loss of time and freedom, worries about their well-being. Babies are dirty, noisy, and expensive. But we can also choose to see the way in which our lives are so deeply enriched by having children, and also desire to pass on the gift of life to another generation. Such a choice is axiomatic in the sense that it comes before and informs rational and scientifically informed decisions. To say it is existential is to say it comes before rationality, provides the basis for rationality, and therefore might not be rationally demonstrable. In a deep sense, it is foundational for all of life, in families, in business, and in the wider culture.

If we decide to value children as gifts, not primarily as problems, this will lead to child-friendly policies in government and business; it will also change our personal reactions to each pregnancy, birth, and child. For example: do we rejoice when a colleague announces her pregnancy, or do we silently complain at the little problems that it will cause for our work? Which we do is determined by our prior value decisions; do we mostly look at the little problems, or do we decide to look at the way in which our lives can be enriched at every level (including the economic level) by the presence of another human being? Our value decisions may appear to be very hidden and private, but that is not really true. All of our actions arise from our value decisions, and in that manner our basic values are communicated.

I would also suggest that the children in our families, businesses, and communities will know from a very young age whether we see them as problems or gifts. Long before children can speak, they know many things at a deep, intuitive level that shapes their experience of the world. If they know that they are welcomed as gifts, they

can more easily respond to life with basic trust, love, and the courage to become good citizens and neighbors; if they are seen as problems, their deepest anxieties are unduly aroused, leading to alienation from society and themselves. This is the path of delinquency, whether this alienation is expressed in drugs, crime, or gangs. Our private value decisions have a life-shaping effect on the children in our families, businesses, and wider community; our deepest feelings toward children set a deep direction to their response to their experience of life.

2. Loyalty Promotes Security

Long before they can express their thoughts in language, children seem to be aware of key elements in the value structure of their environment. This goes beyond the question of whether they are seen as gifts or as problems. It includes the presence or absence of interpersonal loyalty. The problem we need to consider is how to prevent children from having undue anxiety that they will be abandoned, especially abandoned by their parents. Anxiety about possible abandonment, or the experience of real abandonment, can easily cause a fundamental break in a child's relationship to society and to the world at large. Abandonment, or anxiety about abandonment, often undermines a child's basic trust and courage to exist. This is, I am convinced, the background to the very dismal statistics we have all read, about how the children of divorced parents have so many psychological, sociological, medical, and educational problems. These children feel abandoned by the people closest to them, and that experience has damaged part of their basic trust and courage. That is why, I think, that the statistics are so much worse when a woman bears a child as the result of a short relationship and never marries the father; that child was truly abandoned by the father from a very early age. Children as well as adults have a fundamental need for human loyalty. When this loyalty is broken, there is often damage to the spirit of the person, damage which is expressed physically, socially, psychologically, or educationally.

Many times we find the school or state social agencies trying to solve problems in the lives of children that arise because the children were perceived as problems and then felt abandoned by their mother or father. Of course, we need to do all we can to help such people, but we also need to ask about the value structure that will reduce the problem in the future. Part of that value structure is lifetime marriage and family loyalty. Children tend to flourish, with a stronger sense of basic trust and courage to exist, when there is both real and perceived family loyalty; this family loyalty is most often broken by divorce or separation. The divorce or separation of parents very commonly leaves children feeling abandoned, which damages their fundamental courage to live and basic trust toward life. And tragically, the majority of divorces seem to occur after relatively low levels of conflict, levels of conflict which could easily have been overcome or even forgotten.

Without resorting to totalitarianism, there is little a state can do to very quickly eliminate the vast majority of divorces and separations; however, the state can attempt to adopt policies and promote educational materials that will communicate the message that interpersonal loyalty is a fundamental human need. Extreme individualism does not promote happiness; loyalty and lifetime companionship promote happiness and empower our children to flourish. This simple philosophical principle needs to be included in our schools, policies, and laws. It is a fundamental and humane value decision that must be made, implemented, and communicated in the family, in business, and in state agencies. Once this value decision is made and implemented, it can seem to become a self-authenticating and life-giving part of the culture. After implementation of a wise value decision in public policy, that policy or law tends to promote the genuine acceptance of the basic value by the population, even if there is some popular frustration with the policy at first.

3. Unconditional Love and Moral Structure

One of the most difficult challenges with regard to children has to do with the relationship between unconditional love and the need for moral structure. On the one hand, we should all be aware of the way in which children (and probably all people) have a deep need for unconditional love, or as some phrase it, unconditional positive regard. The experience of such positive regard tends to unleash something powerful and creative within a person. In a certain sense, it sets people free. Such positive regard speaks to our deep need for acceptance by others. On the other hand, at the same time, children need practical moral guidance and restraint; they need clear, everyday rules regarding how to act and what not to do. And such practical moral guidance inevitably seems to imply that children (and people in general) are not acceptable if they do not follow the rules; and everyone fails at times.

This leads to a profound complexity at the level of basic values which we hold toward children and which we must communicate to children. Our children are simultaneously gifts which we unconditionally accept (and such loving acceptance has to be communicated) and also recipients of all the rigorous demands of responsible life in society (and these rigorous demands need to be effectively communicated) which are necessary to fulfill in order to be responsible people and good citizens. And such existential complexity has to be effectively communicated in the family, the school, and the society.

In philosophical terms, this is the problem of love and justice, which is also the problem of freedom and form; in the religious tradition it is sometimes called the problem of grace and law. I am pretty sure I cannot solve the problem at the theoretical level; maybe no mortal can give a good explanation. I am also pretty sure that some type of dialectical interaction between the two principles is extremely important for our value stance toward children and for the moral content of our relationship to them. Children have to hear and feel that they are deeply

and unconditionally loved by their parents, by their school teachers, and by other authority figures in their lives, while at the same time they also hear and feel that life is filled with profound demands, some of which we might never completely fulfill. It is almost unavoidable that each person will be unbalanced in this question; some people will easily express unconditional love toward children, whereas others will easily express the demand for discipline and control. And society itself tends to fluctuate between these two poles. True authenticity is reached only at the point of fully embodying and communicating both love and justice, both form and freedom, completely at the same time. But who has reached such a level of personal maturity?

While we may never be able, whether theoretically or practically, to fully express unconditional positive regard (love) and also the need for deep moral discipline (rules and justice), we must take some steps in this direction. At this point, I am mostly forced to draw on my own experience as a parent of three responsible children. We have to consciously take steps to communicate both that we love our children and that life itself (not really us personally) imposes the need for moral discipline. We will need to tell them that certain behaviors are wrong, but we then should also tell them that we love them. We will need to stop our children from doing some actions, but that should be accompanied by our acts of affection, perhaps a hug or an embrace. On occasion children may need to be mildly punished for things they have done, but they also have to hear about our forgiveness when they apologize. And in this process, parents and teachers have to be extremely careful on several matters.

If children are only given unconditional love, without demands and discipline, they can easily become very happy with themselves but irresponsible toward others and toward society, a result none of us here wants. On the other hand, if children only receive discipline, rules, and demands, without much love and tenderness, they easily become bitter and angry toward life, again a result we want to avoid. If children have the feeling that rules and discipline are only the personal demands of a parent or teacher and not somehow the demands of life itself, they will be inclined to look for an opportunity to escape their restraints. And similar to the way in which unduly restrictive civil laws push people into crime, unduly harsh or restrictive discipline in the family or school can prompt rebellion. If children learn responsible behavior with a very small amount of external pressure or enforcement, there is a higher probability that they will internalize responsible behavior and the cognitive value structure that supports such behavior. Children (and probably adults, too) need a living combination of unconditional positive regard joined with sensible (not arbitrary) structure or discipline that fits the demands of life in society.

Comments

There are many detailed questions about child-rearing which resist once for all time, permanent answers. Each child has slightly different needs and opportunities, which have to be assessed by the parents to the best of their abilities. The role of the state is probably to remind parents of this responsibility and to provide advice and testing to assist parents in this responsibility. And many other matters that can seem very important for a short time may have a very small impact on the total lives of our children. They should be seen as matters in which we constantly look for ways to make small improvements, but these improvements should be recognized as small. Here I am thinking about things like the exact schedule of childcare and school, who organizes and pays for their care at what age, exactly how their medical care is organized, how much or which sports at which age, and a thousand other detailed questions. The big things are the big things, and among the truly big things are the ideas and values which we bring into the biggest challenge facing us as individuals and as western society: How do we train the next generation to become people of whom we can be proud and who will be grateful to us, as parents, educators, and citizens, for what they have received from us?

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