

Power and Equality in Intimate Relationships¹

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As I sit down to write, my wife Rebecca is in the other room nursing our three-month-old daughter Rachael. The presence of a child has changed our relationship forever—something tender and quiet has come between us. Sometimes we find ourselves standing beside the crib just looking at our daughter without speaking. We both wanted children from the beginning, and it was a possibility we discussed several years ago during a desert hike in a hot Tucson autumn when we were just getting to know one another. That day seems as distant as a dream now. New dreams come quickly with a new child, although sleep has been scarce during the past months.

A new child comes in a package with a huge range of new decisions to be made, new obligations and new chores, along with the benefits. Most of these are pleasant and enriching, but of course not all of them are. Contrary to the preconceptions of non-parents, dirty diapers are among the least significant of the unpleasant burdens that come along with the benefits of new parenthood. Because of these new burdens when children come, parents are often forced to re-evaluate the structure of their own relationships. It is impossible to avoid questions of how these new burdens and benefits will be distributed. I have heard some people say that the arrival of their children led them to "sort out their gender roles." What they meant, I believe, is that they decided to distribute these burdens and benefits according to traditional gender roles, placing most of the excess burden on the woman.

The possibility that children might do this to our relationship was not appealing to me or Rebecca. Both of us are pursuing careers, and we hope to share joys and burdens together, as much as possible. It might be that the easiest way to deal with new decisions is to fall back on traditions, but traditional mores have commonly run roughshod over the preferences and interests of women. Besides this, the social circumstances that made more traditional roles possible have passed. For many couples, it is no longer possible to get by with one wage-earner and one "homemaker." The two-

career family may once have been defended in terms of women's right to work and her need for financial independence, and championed as a vehicle for women's social equality. But for many couples, economic circumstances have turned this vehicle into a necessity.

However, even among couples who are pursuing dual careers, women's careers are often taken less seriously, and two career families do not typically distribute household burdens and benefits equally even when careers are in other respects equal. This raises a serious question: how can family members find a way to distribute these burdens and benefits fairly and justly, and in a way that will respond appropriately to the needs of parents and children alike? Jean-Jacques Rousseau said many questionable things about families in his novel *Emile* (1762), but one insight that deserves to be preserved is his insistence that it is in families that children first learn virtues of justice and self-command. This idea has been resurrected in recent feminist writings on the family, although feminist writers are sometimes uncomfortable with the insistence on justice, which some see as a moral concept that has its home in a patriarchal conception of moral relationships. Some feminists regard justice as a peculiarly male virtue that might be eliminated entirely if people were more readily motivated by altruism, empathy and care for others. The point Rousseau makes, however, is hard to deny, whether one frames it in terms of justice or in terms of other normative concepts. By watching parents relate to one another and participating as a member of a family, children learn social and moral skills that they will later bring to their own relationships.

The challenges faced by families are serious. Adults in contemporary families often do not relate to one another in terms of justice and equality and, all too frequently, inequalities in relationships reflect stable patterns not momentary lapses. If families are themselves unjust, with benefits and burdens within the family distributed in ways that are arbitrary or unfair, the moral development of children may be seriously impeded. It is symbolically significant, in what is probably an unfortunate way, that Rebecca is in the other room nursing our child while I am in my study writing. In our culture, and most others as well, women bear most of the burdens involved in childcare and housework—the work necessary to keep a household together—while men carry a larger share of the authority and decision-making power within the family.²

The ideal of relationships reflecting equality and mutual respect stands in stark contrast to the structure of families which is radically inegalitarian. "Women's work" has traditionally been work within the home, while men have traditionally had far more freedom to indulge in cultural and intellectual pursuits. It is relatively rare even for avowed feminist couples to move to follow a woman's career, although it is quite common for women to move

wherever their husband's career takes the family. It is well documented that women do most of the housework and childcare even in families in which both parents work full time and earn similar salaries. And men frequently exercise more authority and power in family decision-making, and exercise most of the control over the family finances. If the family is, as Rousseau insisted, a kind of school where children learn how to relate to others and where people learn the virtues of justice, respect and equality, what are children likely to learn in families that are marked by the injustice of traditional sexism and the arbitrary inequalities that still characterize most contemporary families?

There are many kinds of families. I do not mean to sidestep important questions by restricting my discussion here to heterosexual families with children. Often, especially in contemporary American political rhetoric, the term "family" is used in a way that excludes gay families and single parent families altogether. Calls to "reinforce the family" are usually smoke screens for proposals that systematically ignore the needs of families that do not fit the standard heterosexist definition. As I understand the term here, a family is simply a voluntary association of people who come together to enjoy the benefits of an intimate relationship. Ideally, family members love one another and are willing to share burdens and joys.

I focus on heterosexual families not because I believe that they represent any kind of moral ideal, but because such families raise special questions about the distribution of power between men and women. While gay relationships (for example) hold a different set of difficulties for partners and for children, such families may be less likely to incorporate the arbitrary inequalities that characterize straight families since many of the most important of these inequalities exist because of socially entrenched gender roles. I focus on families with children because I believe that the presence of children may exacerbate the inequalities that are implicit in these gender roles, and because as a new parent these problems are of central concern to me personally. Because women bear the brunt of childbearing and childcare responsibilities in our society, and because in general women already do most of the household labour, children are likely to increase the inequality of the burden sharing within a family, and to shift power in intimate family relationships away from women and toward men. Such a shift in power within a relationship raises serious questions of fairness and justice.

Many first-wave feminists insisted that the family is a political institution, and that as such families can and should be judged according to political standards. This means considering whether the family is a just institution, whether burdens and benefits are distributed fairly, whether the bonds that tie members together are (or could be) *freely chosen*, whether family members

respect one another's rights, and whether members deal with one another as equals or unequals, whether the structure of families is *democratic*, *hierarchical* or *autocratic*. If there are circumstances in which some family members exercise authority or power over others, the nature of this authority must be examined, questioned and criticized.

But another recent feminist tradition holds that the family is not a political institution, and that familial bonds and relationships cannot or should not be evaluated using the same terms we use to examine political institutions. Families, from this perspective, are neither just nor unjust since "justice" is a category that simply does not apply in the context of intimate personal relationships. As citizens, from the political standpoint, we often deal with one another in terms of the rights we possess. But something has gone seriously wrong when members of a family deal with one another in terms of justice and rights. Family members' assertion of their rights against one another is a sure sign that the bonds of love and affection are broken or damaged. If family members love one another, their interests are supposed to coincide, making justice and rights irrelevant. This view sees justice as a remedial virtue since appeals to justice and demands for just treatment will not be made unless the relationship is already on the rocks.

How family members view this question of justice is important. If people think of their relationships predominantly in terms of justice and rights, this may change the nature of their interaction. If they think of their relationships in terms of care, compassion and altruism, this will also influence choices and behaviour. Special problems may arise when different participants view themselves and their relationships differently. In particular, if men and women systematically understand the terms of their relationships differently, this will lead to inequality in control and power. Obviously justice connects with power.

There are different kinds of power that can operate within relationships. At the most basic level people may exercise physical power over one another. In the context of intimate relationships such power is an indication that things have gone seriously wrong. But at a more subtle level, one can measure the operation of power in relationships in terms of whose interests are best served by the terms of interaction. For example, in American society, women traditionally have sacrificed or compromised their careers for the careers of their husbands. This may not reflect an overt exercise of power by men over women, and the choice to compromise one's career may be consensual and cooperatively made. But when social institutions systematically work to benefit some people over others, it is valuable to look into their structure and to come to a better understanding of the way different participants understand the terms of their relationships differently. Only by

looking to such implicit self-understandings can we come to an accurate understanding of the subtle structure of power in such contexts.

This essay focuses on several questions of general concern in moral and political philosophy, and of personal concern to many family members, marriage partners and parents. First, I consider whether standards of fairness and justice are relevant to families and to close intimate relationships in general. I argue that they are. If it is in families that children learn to relate to others as equals, and learn attitudes of respect and justice, then families themselves must be just. But this answer raises a second question: What conception of fairness and justice is appropriate in evaluating families? Under what circumstances is a relationship fair or just, and what kinds of inequalities within a relationship are compatible with justice? This discussion focuses on the concept of exploitation. After considering a contractarian account of exploitation,³ I argue that a minimal necessary condition for the justice of families is that they must not be exploitative in this sense. To say that a relationship is nonexploitive may be scant praise, just as saying that a relationship is nonabusive is not to say that it is healthy or just. But many family relationships are exploitative, making it important, therefore, to understand *intimate exploitation*, and to understand how personality traits and social stereotypes reinforce this exploitation.

Finally, I consider how families exist within a larger social context, and how their structure cannot be entirely separate from that context. I argue that it may be impossible for heterosexual families to be fully just in a society that is characterized by sexism and injustice. If this claim is justified, and if people would like their private relationships to be just, then it would seem to follow that sexism needs to be eliminated in the public sphere as well.⁴

Fairness, Consent and Equality as Family Virtues

I cannot nurse my daughter; I lack the proper equipment and Rachael has stubbornly refused to take a bottle in spite of our efforts. Our decision to breast feed Rachael was one we made together, but it implies a heavy obligation for Rebecca—an obligation that we cannot really share. However, Rebecca was the one who really chose to breast feed, since no decision of mine could possibly have done it. Without Rebecca's choice to breast feed, my choice to do so would have been irrelevant. I am grateful to her for this choice and as supportive as I know how to be. But when supper time rolls around, I can only watch.

The decision to breast feed is a good context to consider the distribution of power and obligation within a family. For just as the choice to breast feed can be made only by a woman, the decision itself imposes a burden that cannot be fully shared. This decision meant that for many weeks Rebecca

was up on nursing duty every two hours or so, whenever Rachael woke up hungry.

It is easy to *say* that such burdens can be shared or compensated. For example, couples can get up together to tend a midnight baby, or men can take over extra household chores to compensate for women's late-night nursing. Rebecca and I at first tried to share this burden outright: every time the baby woke up, I would go to her, comfort her, and bring her to Rebecca to be fed. But since then, we have agreed to distribute burdens temporally: in these early months, while Rebecca has time off from work, she has borne an extra share of the childcare burdens. When she goes back to work and my teaching term comes to an end, I will take over. We are hoping that Rachael will be able to take a bottle by then. We have not distributed burdens equally (in part because Rebecca was able to take time off from work, while I was not), but we have tried to do it in a way that was mutually agreeable and best for all three of us. Does this make it fair? Does our mutual agreement guarantee that it is just?

Fairness as free, consensual choice

One conception represents fairness in terms of free choice. If a person freely chooses to join an association, implicitly choosing the corresponding obligations, labours and benefits, then an arrangement is fair. This conception interprets fairness within a relationship as analogous to fairness in a market contract: if a person freely consents to a contract, then it is fair to hold her or him to whatever terms that contract stipulates. Applied to relationships, this conception would hold that as long as people freely enter into relationships, their continued free participation guarantees that the terms of interaction must be fair. A consequence of this view is that as long as the agreement to associate is a free choice, parties cannot complain if benefits and burdens are unequally distributed. So, for example, using this conception of fairness, the feeding arrangement we made might not be unfair, even though it distributes burdens and benefits unequally. Unfortunately, this conception of justice does not take into account the determinants of "free consent." If women "freely" accept an inequitable distribution of burdens only because they have implicitly accepted the social stereotypes that assign heavier burdens to women, this might well undermine the sense that the agreement is truly free and fair. If the society a couple lives in is sexist, how can they avoid or minimize the influence that such stereotypic associations may have on the structure of the relationship?

Consider this first from the perspective of a man who believes that his partner's preference to "stay at home and care for the kids" is informed by her identification with the stereotype that assigns women the predominant

burdens of childcare. It might be advantageous for men if women identify with this stereotype, since it would leave men freer to pursue their own careers without having to make difficult choices between family and career. On the other hand, men who want the best for their children and for their spouses may worry that such stereotypes systematically disadvantage women, and may be unwilling to accept them. How should men respond in such cases? Surely it would be unacceptably paternalistic for men to override their partners' "free consent" on the grounds that this consent is socially informed and therefore not fully free. If men were to simply override women's *expressed* consent in favour of their own conception of women's *true interests* it would hardly be an improvement. Rather it would be just one more example of men failing to take women seriously.

The problem may be no less difficult from a woman's perspective. Women in sexist societies may discover that their own preferences derive, in part, from harmful stereotypes and traditional understandings of a "mother's role." Recognition of this fact might be disturbing, but this disturbance may not be sufficient to bring about a preference change. The problem is made more difficult by the fact that traditional stereotypes are not unmitigatedly bad: the association of motherhood with care and compassion, and with willingness to sacrifice for one's children makes the traditional conception of motherhood attractive in many respects.

When obligations and decision-making authority are distributed equally, there may still be residual problems. For women, such equality may leave residual feelings of guilt since many women have absorbed a stereotype that assigns them a weightier obligation than equality implies. In the same egalitarian circumstances, men are likely to feel that their behaviour is supererogatory, and that they are exceptionally good fathers. When obligations and authority are distributed equally, men will exceed social expectations while women will fail to meet these expectations. So this kind of equal distribution may still yield an unequal distribution of feelings of guilt and pride. When the sources of consent are so complex, it is difficult to accept a contractual account of "fairness as free consent" as fully adequate. But alternatives to this conception of fairness may fare even worse in comparison.

Fairness as equality

Another account of fairness represents fairness as simple equality: when people bear equal burdens in a relationship the relationship is fair. Whenever burdens and benefits are distributed unequally the relationship is unfair. According to such a simple egalitarian conception of fairness, the feeding arrangement on which Rebecca and I settled seems to be unjust. But such a rigid conception of justice may sometimes be impossible to put into practice:

often there is no practical way to arrange a precisely equal distribution of burdens. I will stay at home to care for Rachael in the morning, after Rebecca goes back to work. But I cannot claim that this will equalize or compensate for the burdens of pregnancy, delivery and nursing. I am deep in debt, and if fairness requires precise equality, it seems unlikely that I can ever provide full compensation for the burdens that only women can bear. One may be deeply committed to the ideal of perfect equality, but unsure how to go about it. But it would be premature to conclude from the fact that pure equality is not always possible, even when family members are trying to be just, that justice is not relevant within family or other intimate relationships. It would be too easy, too self-serving to claim that "justice does not apply" in such circumstances. Such a conclusion might sometimes be tempting as it provides an easy way to get off the hook: if families were a context in which justice does not apply, then there would be no need even to try to make them just.

Perhaps both of these conceptions of justice miss the mark to some extent. The first contractarian conception presents a model of the family-as-marketplace in which people participate and cooperate, but only when they can be certain that it will be individually profitable for them to do so. Families should not be like that, should they? Family members share burdens for one another, and are supposed to act from love and to contribute to one another's interests even when this involves personal sacrifice. "Fairness as equality," at least in its simplest form, does not seem appropriate either. There are circumstances in which it seems appropriate to distribute burdens unequally as different family members have different abilities and different needs. Within a loving family it is sometimes appropriate for some to bear unequal burdens for the sake of others. Families can call on the allegiance and altruism of their members in a way that is not well captured by the market conception of fairness as free acceptance of burdens. Perhaps it is considerations like these that have led some people to conclude that it is simply inappropriate to apply standards of justice to families. Family members *care* about one another, and any adequate analysis of family structure must incorporate the relevance of mutual care and concern that family members will ideally have for one another.

But such a conclusion would be premature. The fact that family members ideally relate to one another on the basis of care and compassion does not imply that families and intimate caring relationships cannot sometimes be unjust, or that standards of justice and rights do not apply to such relationships. For while the care, love and altruism that are supposed to characterize the family are crucial moral virtues, they are virtues that render people vulnerable to certain kinds of exploitation and mistreatment unless

they are accompanied by reciprocal attitudes in others. Some feminists have argued that women understand moral relations differently from men, and that while men typically understand such relations in terms rights and duties, women typically understand such relations in terms of care and empathy (Nodding 1984; Gilligan 1982). This type of argument carries with it serious risks, for if women's moral understandings are different from those of men, these differences may be a result of conditioning in a sexist society.

If women in sexist societies tend to be more compassionate, altruistic and caring than men, as some feminists have argued, these forms of caring must be critically examined before they can be incorporated into a self-reflective feminist ethic (Davion 1993). Such gender-linked compassion and care may cease to be virtues if they lead women to overlook their own interests. Altruism can be carried too far if altruists passively allow others to take advantage of their good will. An ethic of care may easily pass into a morality of weakness and passivity if care is not qualified by proper self-respect. It might serve the interests of men quite well for women to be altruistic, compassionate and caring, especially if it were true that men conceive of moral relations exclusively in terms of individual rights and the reciprocity of free exchange. But if the moral psychology of men and women is different in the way some feminist writers suggest, then there seems little hope that relationships between men and women will ever escape the inequities in power that still characterize most heterosexual relationships. Many feminists have recognized this and have forcefully argued that the moral universes of men and women are not so distant from one another.⁵

Exploitation, Altruism and Choice

An appropriate understanding of the morality of intimate relationships must account for the significance that care, compassion and love have in such relationships, but must also explain the limits of such motives. If caring and a propensity to altruism make people susceptible to certain kinds of exploitation, then a full understanding of their operation in a healthy, egalitarian relationship will include an account of when caring relationships become exploitative and oppressive.

To this end, David Gauthier (1986) offers a contractarian account of exploitation. In general, contractarians evaluate human relationships by considering whether their participants could freely consent to participate in them. If not, then the terms of interaction cannot represent a fair contract. It follows from Gauthier's contractarian view that a relationship is exploitative if the terms of association do not offer expected benefits to those involved. But Gauthier excludes from consideration those benefits that people might

enjoy as a result of their altruistic or caring attitudes toward others. According to Gauthier, relationships are non-exploitative only if participants would agree to their terms even if they were selfish egoists:

the contractarian sees sociability as enriching human life; for him, it becomes a source of exploitation if it induces persons to acquiesce in institutions and practices that, but for their fellow-feelings would be costly to them. Feminist thought has surely made this, perhaps the core form of human exploitation, clear to us. Thus the contractarian insists that a society could not command the willing allegiance of a rational person if, without appealing to her feelings for others, it afforded her no expectation of net benefit. (Gauthier 1986:11)

Gauthier does not explicitly apply this standard to relationships, and may not have intended that his model be so extended. But these remarks surely suggest a general account of exploitation. Exploitative institutions, in Gauthier's view, are institutions that people would reject if they were egoists, although they might actually accept them if they care for others, feel compassion for them, or love them. One might plausibly wonder why such a conception of exploitation should be relevant to persons like ourselves, since we are *not* egoists or sociopaths, and since we are often moved by love and care for others. Caring spouses who stay with their partners to nurse them through crippling terminal illnesses are often motivated simply by their love for their partner. If we applaud such behaviour and regard such relationships as non-exploitative, it cannot be because of the compensatory benefits such caretakers receive.

A model like Gauthier's may seem so distant and esoteric that it should not be used to evaluate actual relationships. But I would not dismiss Gauthier's account of exploitation so quickly. Gauthier would almost certainly acknowledge that there is far more to intimate caring relationships than can be captured by his simple models. The kernel of insight behind Gauthier's contractarian model is worth preserving nonetheless: People can manipulatively take advantage of one another's care and affection, and such manipulation constitutes an important kind of exploitation. If intimate relationships involve manipulation of the altruistic impulses of others, they are exploitative and oppressive. To understand why such relationships are exploitative, it will not do simply to consider whether participants' preferences are satisfied. When altruism leaves people open to exploitation by others, it is their unreciprocated preference for the welfare of others that renders them vulnerable. In such circumstances, as Gauthier suggests, it may

be appropriate to consider the relationship in abstraction from the altruistic interests of the parties involved. Jean Hampton offers a sympathetic reading of Gauthier's argument:

As I understand Gauthier's remarks, he is not suggesting that one should never give gifts out of love or duty without insisting on being paid for them; rather he is suggesting that one's propensity to give gifts out of love or duty *should not become the lever that another party who is capable of reciprocating relies upon to get one to maintain a relationship to one's cost.* (Hampton 1993a:239)⁶

The problem of exploitation arises, according to Hampton, when one person freeloads on another's altruistic good will. It is arguable that the traditional "feminine virtues" are peculiarly well suited to render those who possess them especially susceptible to such exploitation. And while one may find altruism and care for others to be morally praiseworthy characteristics, in the extreme they may constitute a kind of vice. To care for others so completely that one is blind to one's own interests (allowing those one cares for to take advantage of one's good will) is to lack an important kind of self-respect. Similarly, to manipulate the affections of another person in order to gain that person's cooperation is to treat her or him with lack of respect. There is something repugnant about such a relationship even if the cooperation of the more altruistic party is freely given and motivated by love. The answer is not to eliminate altruism and care or to deny that they are virtues. It is possible to be altruistic and caring but to be unwilling to allow others to take advantage of one's good will. Proper self-respect requires that one be unwilling to exploit others in this way, but it also implies that one should be unwilling to allow oneself to be exploited.⁷

What explains the fact that women in our society bear a disproportionately large burden of household labour, and enjoy a disproportionately small amount of the power and authority in intimate relationships? One way to explain a phenomenon is to show that it should have been expected. If it is true that in North American society women are conditioned to be altruistic and to understand moral relations in terms of care and compassion, while men are conditioned to be less altruistic and to understand moral relations in terms of individualist rights and liberties, then it seems that one should expect to find just what one does find: one should *expect* to find that women bear a disproportionate burden of household responsibilities, and that men enjoy a disproportionate share of power and authority. In such circumstances, it is likely that these inequalities will reflect the kind of exploitation and injustice identified by Gauthier and Hampton. While this account of

exploitation is contractarian, and focuses on the moral standards of choice and consent, it is a virtue of Gauthier's analysis that it explains how exploitation may take place in relationships even when all participants freely consent to the terms of interaction.

Sexual Stereotypes and the Stability of the Traditional Family
 Studies that purport to show that women are in fact "naturally" more altruistic and caring are inconclusive at best, and I do not mean to put too much weight on them here. Perhaps they reflect the influence of a sexist ideal of femininity-as-self-denial that is diminishing in importance as women overcome barriers that traditionally keep social power in the hands of men. Certainly it is in the interest of *men* for women to conform to an ideal of altruistic self-denial. This alone should be enough to lead us to question the ideal, and to consider whether or not it might be an artifact of an oppressive stereotype rather than a revelation of women's natural propensity for care and altruism. Marilyn Frye articulates this worry clearly:

if one thinks there are biologically deep differences between women and men which cause and justify divisions of labour and responsibility such as we see in the modern patriarchal family and male-dominated workplace, one may not have arrived at this belief because of direct experience of unmolested physical evidence, but because our customs serve to construct that appearance; and I suggest that these customs are artifacts of culture which exist to support a morally and scientifically insupportable system of dominance and subordination. (1983:35)

We should not be too quick to regard altruism and care as biologically grounded features of women's psychology. But it is still worthwhile to consider how the images of masculinity and femininity that are implicit in the stereotypes influence the structure of intimate relationships. Perhaps even more importantly, we need to consider how these images and stereotypes influence our own preferences and psychologies. Stereotypes taught and socialized into us can find expression in reality, since we may succeed to some extent to embody them. In this way, stereotypes can represent a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Imagine a society in which many or most heterosexual men, even if they are otherwise committed to gender equity, happen to be attracted to women they perceive to be slightly deferent to their own (men's) talent, intelligence and ambition. In this perhaps purely fictional place, men find women threatening when they are not modestly deferent. Men's passions, fantasies

and patterns of sexual attraction are tied up with these attitudes and, as a result, men and women tend to form relationships and partnerships that incorporate this deference and the consequent inequalities that deference implies. In this place, heterosexual women, even women who are passionately committed to gender equity, are products of the same cultural background as men and, in keeping with cultural traditions, they tend to develop reciprocal patterns of deference to men. Their own expectations, preferences and fantasies are bound to the same cultural patterns as are men's, and their choices reflect this. In such a society, men and women might be passionately committed to each other and to values like equality and democracy, but it is unlikely that the relationships they form would be truly equal or democratic.

We must each ask whether or to what degree our own society fits this hypothetical description. Does this accurately describe the general pattern of heterosexual relationships we see around us and participate in? We are not simply products of our cultural traditions and stereotypes, but we cannot entirely escape their influence either. If the reciprocal attraction of men and women follows the pattern described above, we should expect to see inequalities in power and decision-making authority. We should expect to find that these inequalities characterize many facets of intimate relationships, and that the patterns that create these inequalities are passed on to the children raised in these families.

Social institutions are stable when the norms that sustain and reinforce them are passed on more or less intact from one generation to the next. The institution of the traditional male-dominated family has, unfortunately, been a fairly stable institution in American society and in many others. Clearly stability is not always socially desirable: in political contexts, dictatorial regimes are often more stable than democratic ones, but few people would regard this as a moral argument in favour of dictatorship. In the context of intimate relationships, democratization of the family may well imply a certain amount of instability, since a more democratic family structure requires that family decisions be equally responsive to the needs and valid claims of all members. The instability may have deep social costs. But the stability of unjust relationships may be nothing to celebrate and may cause much greater harm in the long run. The stable perpetuation of the traditional male-dominated family has deep social costs since such families are in an important sense unjust.

This perpetuation works at the deepest psychological level and is not typically the result of intentional or self-conscious sexism or bias. Men are not, for the most part, self-conscious oppressors, nor are women simply an innocent and oppressed group. Such simplistic models of oppression needlessly vilify men and imply that women lack responsibility for their lives and

autonomy to initiate change. Sexist social institutions are passed on in patterns of thought common to both men and women, and both men and women must change before these institutions can be improved.

What are we to do if we find that our preferences are part of the problem in that they result in a family that mirrors the rejected old patriarchal ideals much more than we would like? We cannot simply deny our preferences without being false to ourselves. But if we recognize that these preferences are formed in compliance with sexist socialization and that they serve to reinforce and reproduce this sexism, then we cannot passively accept them either. If we regard the imbalance of social power within traditional families as unjust, then we have good reason to try to minimize the influence of the harmful and exploitative aspects of this traditional institution on our relationships, and to avoid socializing our children to conform to the ideals implicit in it. But how can this be achieved when our own patterns of thought and preference may reflect, to some extent, the patterns we would like to reject?

The problem for some of us may be a real conflict between the desire to be just and the desire to be true to ourselves. In the context of the democratic family, failure to express our care and our willingness to sacrifice for our partner might be a way of being false to ourselves. But to allow others to take advantage of our altruistic tendencies would show lack of self-respect. People who find that their relationships incorporate deep inequalities but who are committed to ideals of equal respect and who are unwilling to allow themselves to be exploited must find themselves faced with a serious dilemma: the distinction between behaviour that constitutes "praiseworthy altruism and care" and other behaviour that constitutes "excessive altruism and willingness to be exploited" may be difficult to draw.

What this dilemma shows, I believe, is that even couples who are seriously committed to one another, who respect each other and who are committed to the democratization of their own families may not always clearly see how to enact their ideals. Without simply denying our preferences and attitudes, how do we reject the inegalitarian structure of the families that these attitudes imply. This problem may be just as difficult for women as for men, since the perpetuation of the traditional family depends on the complicity of both women and men. Only by bringing the inegalitarian features of the institution to critical consciousness can we hope to change it and avoid socializing our children to conform to the patterns it recommends. But there is no guarantee that critical self-examination will be sufficient.

Since our attitudes and patterns of thought are first formed in the context of our families, it follows that if we want to eliminate sexism, we need to democratize the family, to make the family a more just institution.

Such democratization may not be sufficient, but it is surely a necessary condition of sexual justice. More to the point, we need to democratize our own families to avoid, as much as this is possible, passing on to our children the traditional gender biased ideals of family life and family relationships. This is not an easy thing to do as it requires a re-examination of ourselves and of our own preferences and attitudes which are implicated in the institution we would like to change.

Social Inequality and Inequalities in the Family

Many features of contemporary relationships exemplify the inequalities in power between men and women. However, as already mentioned, one feature is especially poignant: it is still rare, even among avowed feminist heterosexual couples, for families to move to follow a woman's career. Couples might take some obvious steps to insure that the decision to move is mutually agreed to be appropriate and best for the family, all things considered. But even if the decision-making process *within* the family is non-sexist and democratic, it does not follow that the decision made is non-sexist. One reason for this has already been discussed: if women are more likely to be altruistic and willing to bear costs for the sake of their spouses, then a democratic agreement may reflect the interests of men more than those of women. Willingness to move for the sake of a partner's career might reflect one's care for one's partner, and one's concern that he or she be happy and successful. When such decisions are made cooperatively and are mutually agreed upon, are they not democratic and fair?

Unequal care and altruism may undermine democratic decision-making. In the starkest example, if A's judgment about what the family should do is based only on his own self-regarding interests, while B takes into account both her own interests and those of A as well, then there is a sense in which A's interests have been counted twice: once in his own vote, and again in the consideration for his interests granted by B's care for him. In more realistic cases, both parties may care deeply for one another. Relationships, we may hope, are rarely as starkly unequal as the case described. But milder inequalities may exist, and this may partly explain the fact that couples so frequently make collective choices that imply disproportionate sacrifices for women.

There are additional reasons for thinking that democratic decision-making *within* the family may not be sufficient to guarantee justice within the family. In spite of some efforts to eliminate sexism in the workplace, women still earn far less than comparably skilled men (Folbre 1995). Since family welfare depends to a significant degree on total family earnings and since, in a society that undervalues women's labour, women are likely to earn less than men even if they have approximately equivalent qualifications, it

follows that if families tend to move when total family earnings will increase as a result, families will more often move to follow men's careers. Unfair disadvantages in the workplace will thus yield further unfairness within the family. There are two principal mechanisms by which the unequal social power of men and women produces inequalities within intimate heterosexual relationships. One consequence of the fact that women earn less is that women are unable to maintain their standard of living when relationships fail. While men's standard of living typically increases after divorce, women's standard of living typically plummets (Wishik 1986; Okin 1989). Because of this women are disproportionately dependent on their relationships for the maintenance of their and their children's well-being. Divorce is simply less costly for men than it is for women in general, and consequently men may be less hesitant to use the threat of divorce as a bargaining tool. Even if couples do not divorce and never consider divorce, this unequal reliance on the relationship creates inequalities in bargaining power that can yield deeper power inequalities.

A second way that social inequalities can lead to the inequalities in traditional heterosexual relationships is closely connected to the above: even when family decision-making is democratic and based on mutual love and concern, decisions may systematically benefit men more than women. For example, if family decisions about where to live and when to move are determined on the basis of overall family income, it is more likely that families will move to accommodate men's careers at the expense of women's careers. Putatively neutral grounds for group decision-making may not be truly neutral as they may smuggle in social sources of arbitrary inequality and bias. If families wish to avoid such arbitrary inequalities in power within their relationships, perhaps they must be willing to accept that justice itself may come at a price. Families may find that it is better to strive to make their relationships just, even when this means moving to follow women's careers, and even when this will reduce overall family income. Such considerations also provide an additional reason to promote social and economic equality for women (formal equality of opportunity). Formal equality may not be sufficient for substantive equality, but it is surely necessary. Until women achieve formal equality of economic and social opportunities, couples will be unable to achieve substantive equality or true democracy within their relationships.

Conclusion

There are limits to self-understanding that make it difficult to overcome the barriers implicit in traditional conceptions of men's and women's roles. There are traditional social constructs that are so deeply embedded that we are unable to bring them to critical consciousness and analyze them. Even when we are able to analyze and better understand our thoughts and behaviours, it is often easier to come to an intellectual understanding than to alter our behaviour. Because of these limits, it is appropriate for us to approach our lives and relationships with a degree of humility, and with a ready willingness to question and revise our understanding of fairness and justice in intimate relationships. The conclusions of moral arguments are always tentative and uncertain, since we are fallible and are typically unable to see our own biases and blind spots.

This partly explains why self-righteous moralizing is so repugnant: it betrays a false certainty and implies a condemnation of others who might earnestly disagree with our views. Perhaps one generation sees earlier relationships from a perspective that was not available to those who formed them, and this provides a critical insight that was not possible before. My children may well look at the current institutions with new insight, freed from some of the biases and blindspots of my generation. It is likely that they will find grounds for criticizing the structure of contemporary families and relationships. Parents cannot guarantee that their children will agree with them, or approve of parental choices, but parents can at least hope that their children will respect their effort to make their families both loving and just. By bringing the problems of traditional families to critical consciousness, parents can hope to make choices in a way that is reflective and informed. Perhaps this is the best anyone can do.

In this paper I have argued that standards of justice do indeed apply to intimate relationships, even where participants' interaction with one another is regulated by their care and love for one another. I have stressed Rousseau's insight that it is in families that children learn virtues of justice and care. However, traditional conceptions of justice are inadequate to capture the sense of justice that applies in intimate family contexts. Neither simple egalitarianism nor crude contractualism can be applied directly to family interactions: some family inequalities are not unjust, and sometimes free and consensual interactions can be exploitative. Even when family participation is free and consensual and governed by altruism and care, there remains a possibility that a subtle form of exploitation may still exist, such as when one family member manipulatively uses the care and altruism of another. If families are to be just, such exploitation must be recognized and eliminated. In sexist societies, conceptual associations between traditional ideals of

"womanhood and motherhood" and virtues of "care and altruism" render women especially susceptible to this subtle form of exploitation. Consequently, it is women who are most frequently harmed and exploited in this sense. Other factors contribute to this subtle, intimate exploitation of women: I have argued that systematically diminished economic opportunities leave women disadvantaged when family decision-making is based on considerations of overall family income. Consequently families are unlikely to be fully just until women have achieved formal equality of economic and social opportunities. Such equality of opportunity is not sufficient, but it is a necessary condition for justice in intimate relationships.

The image with which this chapter opened is one that draws on sources of emotion and understanding that are deeply embedded in Western culture. For many people, the image of a mother nursing a child is tinted with warm associations and with a conception of motherhood that celebrates altruism, care and self-sacrifice. I have argued that these associations are not entirely benign, and that they are implicated in a conception of a women's role that is partly responsible for the inegalitarian structure of heterosexual relationships in the United States and elsewhere. There are related, but importantly different associations between this understanding of motherhood and the traditional conception of fatherhood and of the social role of men. Some of these associations are also positive: they include ideals of altruism and care that are crucial elements of a healthy moral psychology, as are the ideals of responsibility and strength that are partly constitutive of our traditional conception of fatherhood. But this traditional conception of fatherhood also includes more pernicious ideals which have allowed men to be single-minded in the pursuit of career goals, and have allowed unequal burden sharing in intimate family contexts. Is it possible to preserve what is valuable in each of these traditional social ideals, and to incorporate those valuable features into a new conception of parenthood that is not gender-associated in an unfortunate and arbitrary way? Those who hope for justice in their personal relationships should hope that this objective can be achieved. I am convinced that it is possible for men and women to form relationships that are truly equal, and that this need not involve relinquishing all of the virtues that have traditionally been associated with women's (or men's) roles. Through thoughtful analysis, we can come to better understand our concepts and our attitudes. There is hope that we can transform and improve our relationships when we bring this understanding to bear on our interactions with those we love. Such analysis may lead to new self-understandings, and may help us find ways to move away from being "women and men," and "fathers and mothers," bound to the traditional roles and associations that these categories still typically imply. Only then can we move toward a critically revised understanding of ourselves as "*persons*" and as "*parents*."

Notes

1. Thanks to the University of Georgia Humanities Centre, and the University of Georgia Research Foundation for providing support for my work on this paper, and to Pam Sailors whose comments and insights were especially helpful. Errors and fallacious inferences are my own responsibility.
2. See Nussbaum and Glover (Nussbaum 1995) for discussion of the degree to which such gender inequalities exist in traditional cultures worldwide. Such inequalities are not limited to Europe and its cultural children.
3. In general, a moral theory is *contractarian* if it regards moral principles as principles that can be freely consented to as the object of a collective choice. Contractarian theories place special emphasis on the moral status of free consensual agreement.
4. Many feminists have argued that the "private/public" distinction is itself implicated in sexist oppression. For example, the view that domestic abuse is a *private matter* has often been used as an excuse to ignore it. While I cannot make the case for this claim here, I believe that there is a useful and non-sexist way to reintroduce such a distinction. It is worth emphasizing, however, that I do not intend to use this distinction in the traditional sexist sense.
5. See Davion (1993) and Hampton (1993a and 1993b), Nussbaum and Glover (1995) and Nussbaum (1995) for arguments against the claim that psychological or cultural differences imply differences in obligation.
6. Perhaps Hampton's reading of Gauthier is excessively sympathetic: a relationship might be "exploitative" in Gauthier's sense even if there were not the self-conscious manipulation of care and altruism Hampton describes. For example, in Gauthier's account, the sacrifices parents make for their children, or the sacrifices partners make for their spouses might be "exploitative" even if these sacrifices take place in a context of mutual love and in the absence of manipulation. This suggests that Hampton's account of exploitation as manipulation is somewhat different from Gauthier's and may represent an improvement on it.
7. Richard McKenzie and Gordon Tullock (1989) offer a similar, although more formalized account of emotional exploitation.

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Fernwood Publishing

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Editing: Anne Webb

Cover art: Richard Slye

Design and production: Beverley Rach

Printed and bound in Canada by: Hignell Printing Limited

A publication of:
Fernwood Publishing
Box 9409, Station A
Halifax, Nova Scotia
B3K 5S3

Fernwood Publishing Company Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Ministry of Canadian Heritage and the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program.

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Men and power

Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 1-895686-32-6

1. Men. 2. Power (Social sciences) I. Kuypers, Joseph A.

HQ1090.M46 1997 305.31 C97-950234-9