



Roundtable 1 *Beauty, truth and Good in the Family* Virginia Aspe

A discussion on Family matters among scholars is always risky, especially if the members of the table have similar values. Usually the dialogue tends to emphasize unity and exhortative phrases to honor family members by criticizing liberal and modern tendencies. None of these are of my interest. I was chosen here to talk about the relations between Family and Beauty, and my participation faces many risks as both terms have been usually misunderstood, so I will try to face those misconceptions leading the reader not to impeccable arguments, as very little is definite among families, but focusing three characteristics that I see in the relation between Family and Beauty: conflict, diversity and lack of laws. How's that? Yes, It is my conviction that family is the privileged place where the differences are exculpated; as beauty in art, family consists in differences, their members try to harmonize the differences between each other in a fair balanced way, and deal with reasonableness instead of laws; as in the beauty of a piece of art, harmony in the family responds to an imitation of nature, not only because of its biological links but because its members should respond as if necessity provided their basis even though not all the elements of family respond to nature. Families are formed by a previous volunteer pact between men and women, but what forms a family is not only their commitment but the relation established to collaborate in a common target as generation and the education on children takes place. Just as in the beauty of a piece of art, the family is a unique production that combines decisions, actions and expressions. The most relevant thing in family is that it is formed by different elements, none of them similar by nature or by function. In Family we deal with what philosophers call heterogeneity; family members are similar to zoos, those places where you can find the most different animals, you can see birds or dolphins, rhinos or snakes. And this is the peculiarity of families, its expression of diversity. Family is the community which allows asynchrony, you will never find in a family the perfect justice, neither homogeneity, as none of the family members are the same, and their differences make the essence of the whole.

To understand what Family means I consider useful to relate it with the opposite: a business and public life. Both of these are also communities, forms of human organization, but if you work in a company, let's say for example at a bank, you will have to follow a dress code, you will expect the same payment as others when having similar responsibilities, you will work at specific labor hours, have equal vacations, even same time for lunch. In a company, if you do not do what you are expected to do, you are expelled, as your bosses expect you to be well trained and capable; none of this occurs in a family: family members are unpredictable, in their peculiar and minute community there are no dress codes, emotional reactions and distress are frequent, conflict is normal, you cannot be expelled from it, a mother would not be paid for working extra hours or not sleeping when someone in the family is ill; in families, the weak could become the example of the house, and conflicts are common among its members because the strength of its life comes from diversity. The same opposition occurs between families and public life: in the world of citizenship, laws are the same for all its members, the rule of politics is homogeneity, the State provides security and order expecting that its members will accomplish similar levels of development (academic levels, tax payments, obedience to laws and a follow through by the same rules of conduct).



Aristotle observed these differences and gave the definition of family as the world of private property, he named it the world of economy, as family provides its members of the necessary things which they need either in a physical or psychological level; family relates to a world in which relations are by necessity because its members are unequal, in families we refer to a world that doesn't have similar relations, and none of its members are self-sufficient. The necessity of the family is due to its origins: family members are linked by nature, which means that they are necessarily linked by blood and genes, another essential difference with the community of politics, based in free auto-sufficient citizens. Cold as an ice, practical and realistic until the cruelty, Aristotle puts his finger in the wound when he says that the world of family is the world previous to laws, family for him was a step behind citizenship and liberty. In the opening of his book *On Politics* Aristotle said that the father, the wife, the children, the slave and the bull were all needed as elements of a family, and that families were composed by their diverse functions and roles, being all of its members relevant for the community (Aristotle. *On Politics*, I-1).

It must be said that I chose to argue through Aristotle by his focus in familiar natural links. My reasoning does not intend to accept all of Aristotle's thesis about family, many of them attached to his historical moment, for instance the thesis that some men were naturally born slaves, or the one that in families only the husbands were capable to think and command. But I am convinced that penetrating in Aristotle's vision of a family and connecting it with his poetic proposals, would allow us to understand what does it mean that family is the primary cell of society. Going back on Aristotle's argument in *Politics*, we must notice that it emphasizes in heterogeneity.

This brutal argumentation gives us the essence of the family: otherness, complexity, diversity, disorder. The two most common significances of "family" –*fames* and *famulus*– were inherited to Europe by Aristotle's thought; by the first one –*fames*– Aristotle meant *hunger, necessity*, referring it to the world of dependency on others; by the second –*famulus*– he meant *dominancy, authority, subordination*, as referring to natural links, pre-moral links, links that do not necessarily respond to our desires and elections. The peculiar relations that emerge in families are different from those of the public world; if we try to express families by a geometrical figure we cannot refer to it by a horizontal line as if everybody in the family were similar, nor we could characterize it by vertical lines as if family meant the power descending from one into the others, although Aristotle would accept such a model. The reason for opposing to the vertical-descending line is that observations prove that in many times the empowered member of a family serves the minor, an issue that Aristotle didn't observe, although he succeeded when saying that in families, relations are never even. What is for sure, and Aristotle succeeded in this, is the thesis that family is a pre-political issue, that its world develops in a pre-legal organization. Among families you cannot charge for the activities realized, nor will someone put one of its members in jail for being lazy, violent or a serious liar; you don't make contracts in a family, no one dresses the same, nor you are expected to behave as others do because family is a rhetorical matter, the cradle of the differences and complicities. It is the place for rhetorical argumentations; instead of a space where someone poses scientific demonstrations or announces rules conformed by positive laws, families are the encounter with dialogue and persuasiveness. Undoubtedly, family is the point of departure for democracy and for all political models, something that Aristotle envisioned in book IV of *Politics* when he separated family from *politeia* –a sort of *coionia*– the place where its members develop in public matters.



One of the main differences between relations in families and the public ones is that blood, flesh and genes are the basis of its members. Opposed to public life, where the world of citizenship comes from relations established by land, proximity, culture and traditions, in the family the permanent distance between its members does not cancel its essence. It is true that Aristotle said in book IV of *Politics* that land was not the primary criteria for citizenship, but working at a specific territory and participating in judicial and magisterial activities was what formed citizens. Instead, you can have many models of families and various functions in families (mono-parental; cared exclusively by a widow; extensive families, where not only nature establishes links among each other; immigrant families, separated for the sake of jobs and survival; divorced families, functioning still as a family for the sake of its members; complex or ensemble families, linked by many reasons...), in all of these cases still the origin of the family relies in a natural, biological point of departure, a principle that gives its original name by a different significance if compared to other contemporary models where small communities pretend to be considered as “families”.

This leads us to a first conclusion: family relates to natural and biological links, and family adapts to different models of communion. That means that family is the origin of all sorts of posterior social organizations, and that family is the first *nucleus* in human realities. This first conclusion appears clear at first sight but the actual idea of family is completely different; it is characterized by equal relations (for instance men with men), by democratic points of views (for instance establishing education with identical criteria for all of its members) whereas those other tiny communities formed by individuals are not linked by biological elements nor by necessities by nature. Those new visions search a legitimate place for justice and reward, they tend to organize almost as an *utopia*: a private entourage surrounded by affectivity where people as individuals stay together because they are willing to do so; it is a liberal commitment with no biological elements and, as it intends to emulate traditional families, we see their failure not being capable of biological links, that is the reason why their first movement is adoption, that means, the need of a legal action to complete them as a families whereas families are not ruled by legal actions.

In the Aristotelian model, family members stay together by necessity, they could be unhappy at times, even not willing to pertain to such a community, but they cannot erase each other's pre-ethical links, which depend on necessity. In this model none of its members think by themselves when acting as a community: Aristotle explains it saying that the father needs wife, children, slaves and animals for the sake of familiar needs and to provide the others for what they need, he owes to the others and the others need him; extending this interpretation to today needs it seems to me that we could understand this paternal role by including mothers and not only fathers, as in Aristotle's time women were not educated but today they are. This interpretation of a family model, linked by blood, nature and necessities, seems paradoxical from today's liberal point of view, as it turns out that the worse someone behaves in a biological family the more linked the others are to this member because he or she has more necessities. The line that I envision in this model of family is a circular line: all of its members are centered, there is authority by parents, but authority follows natural laws, not their volunteer will.

The weapons that family members face to win the battle of heterogeneity are those of dialogue, example, emotional responses and persuasive attitudes. Those are its rhetorical weapons, a theme that connects us with the relation of family and beauty.



The way in which a family connects to its members is by dialogue. Basically, families chat; in a spontaneous way, its members express their wishes, their dreams, their rejections and fears. They sing –usually freely, with no technique, maybe washing in the shower. If they dance, it is only for the sake of expressing a state of mind or an emotion; communication is informal, without order, spontaneous, because family doesn't pertain to the legal world where the principle of homogeneity is the rule.

Beauty is the first expression of Family because of its heterogeneity; Aristotle said that life and its development was due to otherness (Aristotle. *On Phys.*, IV). Following in a partial way Anaximander's concept of *apeiron* (undetermined principle), he proved that a world without differences could not survive; for him, undetermined situations are the ones that allow evolution and growth (Aristotle. *Phys.*, II, IV). In an identical world, there is no possibility for development. Aristotle extended this biological characteristic of nature to social organizations, he knew that change and growth implied different principles: as in his ontological proposal which included the interchange of matter, form, and privation, in the world of human relations, communities evolve and interchange between their members. This meant that the guarantee of families relied in its natural diversity. Aristotle was convinced that there was no possible development in families without the combination of diverse elements, and that this occurred either in substances or in families, that is why he proposed family as the basic cell of society and considered it the remote origin of citizenship; families turn to be the primal place where humans assume their differences for the sake of the common good.

In such statement appears the beauty of family: ancient and modern philosophers have identified beauty with harmony and proportion. Some of them consider harmony a melodic issue and proposed beauty as a serene and peaceful combination, just as Botticelli painted it's *Spring*; others considered that beauty referred to proportion and not necessarily to harmony, exactly as Picasso considered beauty like a strong and discordant relation between extreme motives, as we can see in his *Guernica*. But all painters and thinkers agreed that beauty came from the combination of different elements, and gave *proportion* the primary importance. As in the objects of art, the beauty of families comes when differences arouse: the role of the father is different from the one of the mother, the role of each member of the family is unique, and relations have only one principle in common: *prudence* and *common sense*, because in families communication is more a matter of likeness and pleasure achieved by poetic connections, a form of language closer to examples and metaphors rather than to concepts and scientific argumentations, demonstrations are strange to families whereas its narrative is closer to myth. In the world of this tiny community what matters is happiness. And, how do their members succeed in such a world? Again, Aristotle says that education consists in learning to smile and to be happy for what we must enjoy, and learning to be sad by the opposite. Family education is a matter of joyful and sadness, satisfactions, pleasures or its contraries: fears and pain. Aristotle considered all of these as the roots towards ethics. That is why ancient Greek culture educated by representations, because human actions were considered the *optimus* way to communicate values; through imitation or *mimesis*, humans comprehend the connections between nature, beauty and the ethical world. In his treaty *On Poetics*, Aristotle says that humans get their first knowledge by imitations (Aristotle. *On Poetics*, 2). Imitation in families turns to be the primal form of learning. Babies begin their actions by imitating, they copy attitudes, they repeat conducts following examples, and they imitate roles and models. It has been proved that this learning is more profound than memorizing or arguing, as imitation is linked to pleasure (Aristotle. *On Poetics*, 3).



Tied as a strong rope in a package, family succeeds in its connections when the communication of its messages is indirect and agreeable.

In the tragedy of *Antigone*, for example, Sophocles relates the drama of a sister, shocked by her two brother's death, in a conflict that referred to each other's death by a quarrel between them. (Sophocles. *Tragedies. Antigone*); complicating her human grief, Creon –the tyrant of Thebes– prohibited under death that anyone gave sepulture to Polynices, one of the two brothers, while the other, Eteocles, received full burial. But Antigone didn't reasoned by the political laws: she had a higher horizon, that in which families develop its values, among transcendental principles and natural connections. She wanted to bury her brother in despite of the law for *peaty* and *philanthropy*, another typical familiar attitude which law almost never refers to. Antigone's myth is the proposal of family values opposing public affairs, and her sister Ismene, that rejected Antigone's idea of burial and disobedience, represents the possible and erratic subordination that a family member can suffer by the power of the State. Why did Antigone decide to cut all relation with the authority? To complicate the story –just as life and family values complicate stories when related to public matters– Sophocles tells us that Antigone was engaged to Creon's son. This element proves that many times people have to choose between affection and family commitments, between religious convictions and political laws, and that treason in that order would lead to the loss of life as a whole (Haimon, son of Creon, boyfriend of Antigone, finally dies due to the misfortune occurred by the clash between Antigone's family values and the civil obedience imposed by Creon). In the tragedy, Sophocles underlines that family values are not only strong natural commitments, but a follow through of divine laws, that means that Sophocles proposes that the laws of the family are higher than civil laws imposed by Creon, as they express the law of conscious, a higher horizon of the law, named as religious law or as the *daimon* of law (law of the conscious), the one that would lead in further years to Socrates's death.

At this time I must tell the reader that the two worlds that I underline here are not opposed but have different conceptions on the road to educate and grow humans; the problem is the possibility of misconception and confusion that comes from not respecting their specific roles. We must note that whereas family and public life opposes, its extremes are not contradictory, and as a whole, political life is human's plenitude in this world. Family is the primal element of society, and promotes the development of the capabilities for citizenship precisely because its world is different from the latter: family comes from natural and biological causes, not from liberty, and its lack of public laws proves the insufficiency of human beings with the pertinence for organizing humans as a whole. But being the world of family a sphere that does not owes its commitments to public organizations, family becomes capable of rising its eyes to other levels: this leads to the human encounter with interiority, the world of human conscious which some cultures call religious commitments, others, natural laws, some, the law of conscience. These laws can only be expressed, as I tried to show here by Antigone's myth, by a narrative that surpasses the language of politics and science; it has to be expressed as fables, with metaphors and poetic elements, as the values that it communicates surpasses this world and deals with realities that cannot be trapped by common language. That is the reason why education in families and the transmission of moral values are better explained by stories, also this is the reason why in family's world example is stronger than sayings or theories. Art and beauty appear in this moment as the most proper way to express family values: through stories and fables we learn the highest possibilities of our souls. But educating in the family through stories give us an indirect learning: through others we learn more of ourselves, this sort

19th INTERNATIONAL FAMILY CONGRESS



Since 1978
IFFD
INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION
FOR FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

of mirror-knowledge reflects humans depending on each other, linked by nature and capable of rising its vision to roads that not only lead to this world.

The beauty of the model consists that it underlines diversity not in a relative way but based in a natural perspective; just as life and its functions need diverse elements to develop and move, not for the sake of pro-choices or pro-rights alternatives, but because its members differ naturally, families learn by stories to accept each other for what they are. This thesis of “familiar-heterogeneity” does not respond to relativism but to reasonability: members of a family accept each other because they get what there is. It’s a matter of common sense, assuming that life will never be perfect because life supposes movement and change. The Beauty of families responds to ontological links: its members accept each other for what they are, not for what they would like them to be.