DEMOCRATIC AUTHORITY AND THE FAMILY

By Jean Bethke Elshtain

Familial authority, though seemingly at odds with the presumptions of democracy, is nonetheless a prerequisite for the survival of democracy. Family relations could not exist without familial authority. Such relations remain the best way we know to create citizens, that is, adults who offer ethical allegiance to the principles of democratic society. Family authority is the best way to structure the relationships between adults and dependent children who slowly acquire capacities for independence. Modern parental authority, moreover, is shared by the mother and father. Some may take strong exception to this claim, arguing that the family is patriarchal, even today, or that the authority of the mother is less decisive than that of the father, or that [John Stuart] Mill was right.

Children, however, exhibit little doubt that their mothers are powerful and authoritative, though perhaps not in ways identical to fathers. This ideal of parental equality does not presuppose sameness between the mother and father. Each can be more or less a private or a public person, yet be equal in relation to children.

What makes family authority distinctive is the quality of stewardship: the recognition that parents undertake solemn obligations, under authority that is special, limited, and particular. Parental authority, like all authority, can be abused. But unless it exists, the activity of parenting is itself impossible. Parental authority is essential to democratic political morality, because parents are the primary providers of the moral education required for democratic citizenship.

The *Herzenbildung*—education of the heart—that takes place in families should not, however, be viewed as merely one item in a larger political agenda. To construe it as such is to treat the family merely instrumentally, affirming it only insofar as it can be shown to serve external purposes. Yes, the family helps sustain the democratic order. But it also offers alternatives, even resistance, to many policies that a public order may throw up at any given time.

The loyalties and moral imperatives nurtured in families may often clash with the demands of public authority. For example, a young man may refuse to serve in a war because to do so violates the religious beliefs taught by his mother and father. This, too, is vital for democracy. Democracy emerged as a form of revolt. Keeping alive a potential for revolt, keeping alive the space for particularity, for difference, for pluralism, sustains democracy in the long run. It is no coincidence that all 20th-century totalitarian orders labored to destroy the family as a locus of identity and meaning apart from the state. Totalitarianism strives to govern all of life; to allow for only one public identity; to destroy private life; and most of all, to require that individuals never allow their commitments to specific others—family, friends, comrades—to weaken their commitment to the state. To this idea, which can only be described as evil, the family stands in defiance.

Familial authority simply does not exist in a direct homologous relation to the principles of civil society. To establish an identity between public and private lives would weaken, not strengthen, democratic life. The reason for this is children. They need particular, intense relations with specific beloved others. If a child is confronted prematurely with the "'right to choose" or situated too soon inside anonymous institutions that minimize that special contact and trust with parents, that child is much less likely to be "free to choose" later on. To become capable of posing alternatives, a person requires a sure and certain place from which to start. In Mary Midgley's words, "Children . . . have to live *now* in a particular culture; they must take some attitude to the nearest things 'right away.'"* The family is the social form best suited to provide children with a trusting, determinate sense of "self." Indeed, it is only through identification with concrete others that children can later identify with nonfamilial human beings and come to see themselves as members of a wider community.

Familial authority is inseparable from parental care, protection, and concern. In the absence of such ties, familial feelings would not be displaced throughout a wider social network; they would, instead, be vitiated, perhaps lost altogether. And without the human ties and bonds that the activity of parenting makes possible, a more general sense of "brotherhood" and "sisterhood" simply cannot emerge.

The nature and scope of parental authority changes over time. Children learn that being a child is not a permanent condition. Indeed, the family teaches us that no authority on this earth is omnipotent, unchanging, or absolute. Working through familial authority, as children struggle for identity, requires that they question authority more generally. Examples of authoritarian parents do not disconfirm this ideal case; they do, however, show that familial authority, like any constitutive principle, is subject to abuse. Yet granting particular instances of abuse, familial authority, in both ideal and actual forms, remains uniquely capable of keeping alive that combination of obligation and duty, freedom and dissent, that is the heart of democratic life.

Any further erosion of the ethical life embodied in the family bodes ill for democracy. For example, we can experience the plight of homelessness as a human tragedy only because we cherish an ideal of what it means to have a home. We find it easier to love others if we ourselves have been loved. We learn self-sacrifice and commitment as we learn so many things—in small, manageable steps, starting close to home. Thus, the family, at its best, helps foster a commitment to "do something" about a whole range of social problems. The ideal of family, then, is a launching pad into more universal commitments, a civic *Moralität*. The child who emerges from such a family is more capable of acting in the world as a complex moral being.

To destroy the family would create a general debacle from which we would not soon recover. The replacement for parents and families would not comprise a happy, consensual world of children coequal with adults. It would be a world in which children would become clients of bureaucrats and engineers of all sorts, many of whom would, inevitably, regard children largely as grist for the mill of extrafamilial schemes and ambitions....

*Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 291.

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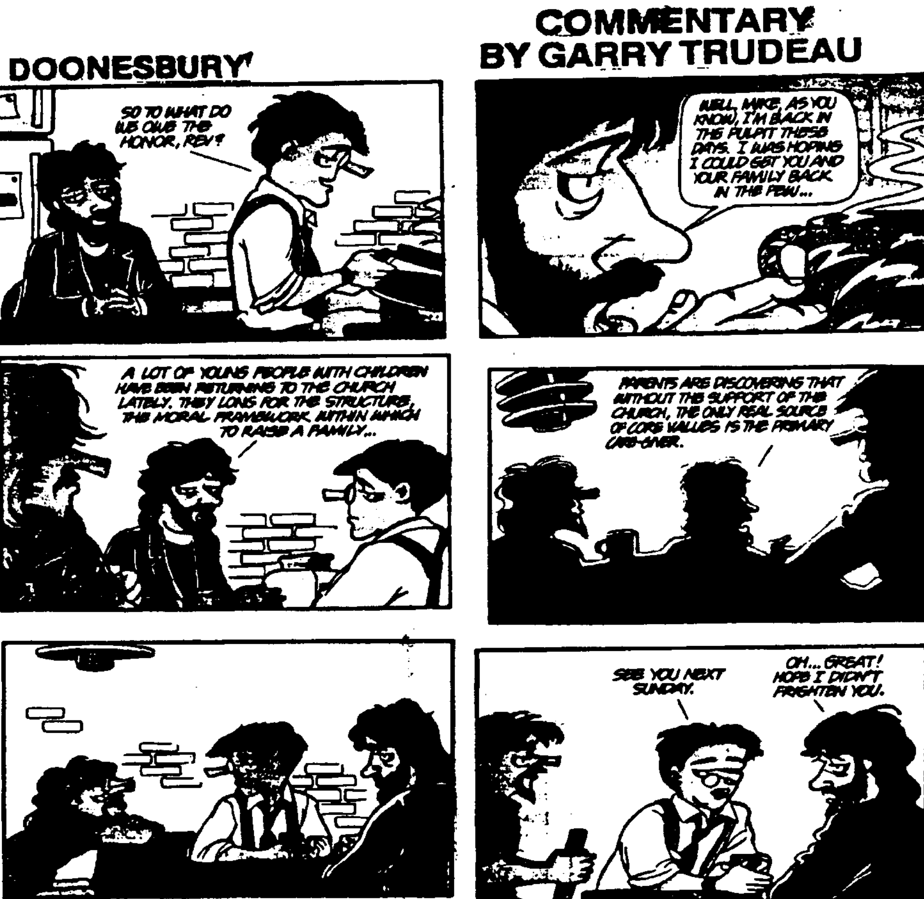

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