

Introduction to Political Theory:

Is the abolition of the family the only way to achieve equality of opportunity?

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Introduction.

To understand the question at hand, we must define the key concepts. George Murdock, an award-winning American Anthropologist, defined the family in the first line of his book ‘Social Structure’ as “a social group characterised by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults”¹. This definition comes at a cost when analysing familial structures outside the normative western family, referred to hereout as the Nuclear Family. For this essay, I have defined the family as “A social unit of more than one individual, holding a relationship through descendancy or otherwise.”. This allows for a less strict and more open approach to family structures that may differ from one’s own.

The central question is not that of “what is a family” but a more nuanced approach to whether the family inherently promoted or hinders “equality of opportunity”. The McCoy Family centre for Ethics in Society (Stanford University) talks in detail what the term “Equality of Opportunity” means – it is my understanding of the text² that allows me to conclude, Equality of Opportunity is the state in which all individuals are treated fairly, and without prejudice, in relation to the opportunity to acquire favourable prospects. It is the hypothesis, upon which we shall explore, that while the family may perpetuate the inequality of opportunity – abolishing the family is not the only way to achieve this equality.

¹ George Peter Murdock (1949). *Social structure*. [online] The Free Press, New York. Collier-Macmillan Limited, London, p.vii. Available at: <https://ia801307.us.archive.org/18/items/socialstructurem00murd/socialstructurem00murd.pdf> [Accessed 24 Nov. 2024].

² Stanford University (2022). *An Introduction to Equality of Opportunity | Equality of Opportunity and Education*. [online] edeq.stanford.edu. Available at: <https://edeq.stanford.edu/sections> [Accessed 24 Nov. 2024].

The evolution of the Family.

The Family, as an institutionalised unit, has evolved significantly over time, reflecting changes in socioeconomic and political structures within cultures. In pre-modern society, such as Anglo-Saxon Britain, family structures were deeply integrated within broader kinship and clan systems. These kinship systems provided a sense of security and togetherness within a society of lesser nationalisation and state-citizen interaction. This can be seen through the legal functions of the family, for instance the concept of blood feuds and wergild (“the amount of compensation paid by a person committing an offense to the injured party or, in case of death, to his family”³), placed responsibility on the greater kin for the actions of one person. This allowed for the self-regulation and enforcement of social norms via the family and allowed greater levels of security within the kin as interfamily conflict was strife.

Historically, clan chiefs (The head of the family, of which other branches and septs recognise as their leader) were the sole and central figures in the admiration of justice within highland clans. Clan chiefs, and their chieftains (who oversaw individual branches of the clan), would act with arbitrary power to resolve disputes and settle grievances within their territories and clans. However, it is generally thought that about 70% of all Scottish families were not aligned or associated with any of the ancient clans of the highlands or the islands,⁴ therefore their level of ancient law enforcement is speculative. While these systems exist within modern society, their effectiveness as legal authorities have all but died out leaving behind romanticisation, traditional gatherings and heraldic property.

³ Encyclopaedia Britannica (2019). Wergild | Germanic law. In: *Encyclopædia Britannica*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/wergild> [Accessed 6 Dec. 2024].

⁴ DeBrohun, D. (2020). *Were my Ancestors Part of a Scottish Clan?* [online] Scottish American Insider. Available at: <https://scotaminsider.com/2020/02/belonging-to-a-clan> [Accessed 27 Nov. 2024].

With the rise of the modern state and the decline of Clan-based systems, the nuclear family emerged as the dominant model. This shift reflected a move towards more individualistic societies, where opportunities were beginning to be based on merit rather than familial connections, matched with the rise and fall of industrialisation within the west. However, while the nuclear family has become more privatised, its role in the continuation of inequality has not yet disappeared. In fact, families today remain a critical factor in the shaping of the outcomes and prospects of the future generations. Families with more resources can typically provide a better education and economic benefits to their children, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience significant barriers to social mobility (“the degree to which an individual’s or group’s social status can change through the course of their life.”⁵.) Therefore, with this in mind, a view that the family is an obstacle to equality of opportunity can be explored.

⁵ Polansky, D. (2024). *Social Mobility* - Wiktionary, the free dictionary. [online] Wiktionary. Available at: https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/social_mobility [Accessed 28 Nov. 2024].

The Family as an obstacle to equality.

A critical view of the family argues that it is a direct and significant barrier to achieving equality of opportunity. This can be seen through the viewpoint of Friedrich Engels, in „*Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats*“ (The origins of the Family, Private Property and the State)⁶. Engels's view is that the family, as an institution, has historically (and continues to) reinforced class and gender hierarchies. His argument was that the nuclear family arose with the development of private property and the need to ensure the continuation of wealth. This argument, which implies that the family is no longer a natural unit but a social structure that is designed to protect the interests of the ruling class, is furthered by the idea that the nuclear model of the family did in fact arise post industrialisation. Engels argues that men, who sought to increase the economic (and thus the social) standing of the house (in the archaic meaning of the word), confined women to the domestic sphere, making them responsible for the creation, and care, of the heirs to the estate. Engels emphasises that the nuclear model was designed to control the rights of women – both in labour and reproductive capacities. This is due to the model allowing men to become the primary income source, creating a forced dependency for women preventing them from being able to escape the confines of the marriage - reinforcing a patriarchal system that keeps women subjected to harassment, abuse and a subordinate status in society. An argument, backed by Engel's viewpoints, would conclude that true equality for women would only be achieved via a radical revolution of society – only then would women be free from their

⁶ Engels, F. (1886). *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums, und des Staats*. [online] *Internet Archive*. THE LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA. Available at: <https://ia903406.us.archive.org/1/items/derursprungderf00enge/derursprungderf00enge.pdf> [Accessed 27 Nov. 2024].

dependencies on men, allowing them to realise their full potential. This ideology is shared, at least partially in nature, by contemporary theorists such as Roemer and Munoz-Dardé.

It is generally accepted that a family should provide for its dependants - be that the young, the elderly or the frail – with that in mind, it is not far-fetched to believe that those with more to provide will generally do so in a way that allows for the continuation of the house, and the growth in ability that it derives, thus those with a greater access to assets are able to aid in the lives of the dependants to a further degree. This can be seen in John Roemer's 'Equality of Opportunity', whereby Roemer suggests one way of equalising opportunities would be to level the 'playing field' via "compensating those with inferior bundles of internal resources with an extra dose of external resources."⁷ This notion implies that there is indeed an aspect of the family that progresses social classism which, like a rampant disease, radically infects aspects of children's livelihoods – including the educational system. It is natural to conclude that only with the radical reformation of the upbringing of children, equality of opportunity (especially when it concerns the educational sector) would be achieved. This can be seen through the idea that children may benefit more from an upbringing separate from their biological kin. Véronique Munoz-Dardé is well known for her work in political and ethical philosophy – particularly her work on the 'well run orphanage'⁸ thought experiment. The theory questions whether the abolition of the family, in favour of an institutionalised orphanage, would promote equality of life. One could argue from the standpoint suggested by Munoz-Dardé that the abolition of the family creates benefits that the retention of the family does not provide, such as a sense of expansive communal solidarity

⁷ Roemer, J.E. (1998). *Equality of Opportunity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: Harvard University Press.

⁸ Munoz-Dardé, V. (1998). *Is the family to be abolished then?* [online] Available at: https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/1109/1/V_Munoz-Darde_Family.pdf [Accessed 6 Dec. 2024].

and brethren hood on a scale that families cannot feasibly deliver. Furthermore, to link back to Engels, the removal of the parenthood could potentially advance gender equality as there would be no inheritability of the estate – and thus the divide between man and woman, may theoretically, be removed. While these points are extremely valid, Munoz-Dardé does provide some counter arguments to the theory, the first being that if there was to be an abolition of the family – there would be a need for an intuition for care of the future generations (The ‘well run’ orphanage) – which would require a state to have complete and utter control over the upbringing of the youth (a requirement which creates issues in of itself, unfortunately not fit for full exploration within this essay, however I shall state that the family, as a social structure, acts as a barrier against the rule of tyranny). Further on, Munoz-Dardé states that within the ‘well-run orphanage’ “children would not be able to develop their moral powers even to the minimum degree for them to ever make full use of their equal liberties as citizens.”⁹ Thus, while there is equality of opportunity through the theoretical intuition, the level at which the moral development of the lowest section of the society would be significantly below the same section within the familial institution due to the impact that familial relationships have on the development of morality – the results of which may not be achievable via the state. This leads onto my next section, where the exploration of other solutions to inequality allows an answer to take fruition.

⁹ Ibidem (Footnote № 8)

Other solutions to the issue, and conclusion.

The question at hand is formatted in such a manner that it asks whether the abolition of the family is the only way to achieve equality of opportunity, thus, to fully answer the question, an exploration into other solutions to the issue of inequality of opportunity is required. Alternative ideologies to the abolition of the family include the hypothesis that equality of opportunity may be achieved via a range of actions from an implementation of state-ran welfare schemes to the complete overhaul of the global economic system. These alternatives, while usually less radical, are much more suitable for actual implementation into society – which the abolition of the family, given the current system at hand, is not. Any universal reformation would have to be done in a two-part series of changes, of which one part consists of structural and institutional reforms and the other, social and cultural reforms.

To achieve equality of opportunity, one must destroy the inequality from its' institutional roots, to dismantle the systematic foundations that bar equality. By creating more equitable systems throughout society, there is assurance that everyone, regardless of their background, has a fair chance to acquire the favourable positions in life. Disparities in resources and opportunities in education limit the future social mobility of students post studies. Reforming this system would ensure that all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic status, have access to the same high-quality education. This could be achieved by increasing the funding of schools in impoverished areas, eliminating resource gaps, and providing additional support to disadvantaged students – allowing for a greater chance of success for those who would not have it otherwise. Universal access to healthcare is as equally vital in the fight against inequality of opportunity as educational reformation is.

Many countries, such as the United States of America, still practises, what most of Europe¹⁰ considerers, a very archaic and outdated system of private healthcare slightly subsidised by systems such as Medicare. These subsidiary systems, which only applies to those in dire need of it¹¹, have caused a national medical debt crisis, in which “People in the U.S. owe at least \$220 billion [USD]”¹². This medical debt crisis affects the disadvantaged at an incomprehensibly higher rate than those with the resources to be able to afford treatment, however it is those who are disadvantaged who are at higher risk of needing said treatment¹³.¹⁴ Another key area for reform would be economic inequality. Implementation of a more progressive tax system, whereby those with greatest share of wealth pay a higher share of tax, would help fund the changes in the educational and healthcare sectors. These services are fundamental in the reduction of the barriers that poverty cause to the access of opportunities. Addressing economic inequality would not only reduce the social disparities, but also create an environment by which all people can thrive and realise their potential.

¹⁰ Cronin, J. (2024). *Which Countries Offer Free or Universal Health Care*. [online] International Travel Insurance Group. Available at: <https://www.internationalinsurance.com/health/countries-free-healthcare.php> [Accessed 6 Dec. 2024].

¹¹ Medicare.gov (2024). *Parts of Medicare*. [online] www.medicare.gov. Available at: <https://www.medicare.gov/basics/get-started-with-medicare/medicare-basics/parts-of-medicare> [Accessed 6 Dec. 2024].

¹² Rakshit, S., rae, M., Claxton, G., Amin, K. and Cox, C. (2024). *The burden of medical debt in the United States*. [online] Health System Tracker. Available at: <https://www.healthsystemtracker.org/brief/the-burden-of-medical-debt-in-the-united-states/> [Accessed 6 Dec. 2024].

¹³ Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (2021). *Poverty - Healthy People 2030*. [online] Health.gov. Available at: <https://odphp.health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/poverty> [Accessed 6 Dec. 2024].

¹⁴ The King's Fund (2024). *Poverty Taking A Heavy Toll On NHS Services*. [online] The King’s Fund. Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/press-releases/poverty-health-nhs-services> [Accessed 6 Dec. 2024].

On the other hand, achieving equality of opportunity requires more than just institutional reforms – it also must change the narrative regarding cultural values, mindsets and behaviours. While structural and institutional changes address the material inequalities, equality of opportunity can only, truly, be achieved once the deep-seated attitudes and societal norms that perpetuate the discrimination faced have been re-adjusted. A key aspect of cultural reform is representation and inclusivity, especially in media and leadership positions. Marginalised communities often do not have the opportunity for roles in these sectors, leading to the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes and lack of respectable role models. However, as important as diversity is in these areas, it is important not to hire specifically based on diversity, as that enforces the barriers that need to be broken. The transformation of gender norms, for example, in society and in the workplace allows for a higher rate of equitable opportunities for everyone. ‘Traditional’ gender roles and stereotypes inflict consequences for both men and women, by advocating for pay equality, shared parenting responsibilities and equal opportunities in fields dominated by either sex, we can shift societal expectations to allow individuals to have the choice to pursue both a career and or a family, without constraint. Finally, addressing racial and ethnic inequalities is crucial. Public dialogue on anti-racism education and confronting systemic discrimination are essential aspects for creating a more inclusive society. Challenging racist ideologies at all levels helps dismantle the disparities that hold marginalised communities back, furthermore, creating a sense of unity within society allows for stronger rates of collaboration and networking across different socioeconomic backgrounds. Community-building initiatives are a great example of ways to help to break down the barriers of inequality and provide higher rates of social mobility and unity.

In conclusion, while the family – as an intuition – has historically contributed to perpetuating inequality of opportunity, especially through class and gender dynamics, its abolition is not the sole solution to addressing the global issue of the inequality of opportunity. The family's role in society has evolved significantly over time, and although it can reinforce these existing inequalities, the focus should be on broader systemic changes. Reforms in education, healthcare and economic policy – coupled with cultural shifts in social attitudes to aspects such as race and gender – offer a more feasible and effective approach to achieving equality of opportunity. So, to answer the question “Is the abolition of the family the only way to achieve equality of opportunity?” - No, the abolition of the family is not the only way to achieve equality of opportunity. In fact, it is my theory that the abolition of the family is so infeasible, it must be disregarded as a way to achieve equality of opportunity, as theorising on the abolition of the family takes up time society could use to build on the foundations of unity and growth. Focusing on what could have been reduces our ability to focus on improving our current situation. While it is purely speculative to suggest that the family will continue to play an important role in providing the care, support and development of the future generations for centuries to come, it is my faith in the ability for humanity to evolve towards common good that allows me to come to such a conclusion.

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