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For the Sake of Character: A Trinitarian Family Ethic

Michael W. Austin
Department of Philosophy and Religion
Eastern Kentucky University
Richmond, KY

Abstract: In this paper I explore connections between the parent-child relationship, the Trinity, and character formation in the context of family life. I first offer a Trinitarian argument for the existence of parental rights. I then discuss ways in which the doctrine of the Trinity is relevant to how we understand the family. Next, I argue that a Trinitarian understanding of the family, which includes the claim that the family should reflect several important attributes of the Triune God, underscores the relevance of a variety of character traits including patience, humility, forgiveness, and love.

I do not offer a sustained philosophical argument for one conclusion, but rather engage in a philosophically oriented approach to important issues related to family life at the theoretical and practical levels. The claim this paper does lend support to, however, is that reflection upon the Trinity and related theological concepts has great potential for articulating and defending a Christian understanding of important issues related to the family in general, and the parent-child relationship in particular.

A Trinitarian Foundation for the Family

Several aspects of the Trinity are relevant to the family. For example, the divine persons exemplify a variety of virtues that are important for a flourishing family, including humility, patience, love, and forgiveness, among others. The Trinity is interpersonal, i.e. members of the Trinity engage in psychologically intimate relationships with one another. These relationships are essentially loving, and also form the basis for the mission of God in the world, namely, building his kingdom. The same can be said for the family, ideally.

In order to see one way in which the Trinity arguably serves as the foundation of the family, I will first offer an argument for the existence of parental rights that reflects and depends upon the nature of the Trinity as it is reflected in human nature. My main goal here is to show how reflection upon the Trinity can be philosophically fruitful in the context of the family. In this case, starting

with goods exemplified by the members of the Trinity, and reflecting upon how they can be instantiated in family life, leads to the conclusion that there are parental rights.

I start, then, with a fundamental interests conception of human rights. In order to understand this view of human rights, a few key terms need to be defined. A fundamental interest is something that is crucially important to human life. On such a view, a human right is a claim of assistance or non-interference with respect to something that is crucially important to human life. Such rights are grounded in the fact that humans have fundamental needs that make certain goods and freedoms important to our continued existence and well-being. Such goods and freedoms, then, constitute our fundamental interests. These interests are significant insofar as their satisfaction sustains human life and fosters human flourishing.

Several of our fundamental interests are relevant here, including psychological well-being, engaging in psychologically intimate interpersonal relationships, character development, and the freedom to pursue goods that bring satisfaction and meaning to life. The family is one of the significant realms of human life in which these goods are available. A flourishing home will include relationships and ways of living that foster the satisfaction of these interests and the cultivation of virtue, both individually and corporately. I have argued that these sorts of considerations justify the claim that parents have conditional rights, as parents, based not only on the parental interests that are in play, but also on the interests of children and society.¹ The argument is as follows:

(P1) Each fundamental human interest generates a correlative prima facie negative right.

(P2) The fundamental interests of human beings include human flourishing in the physical, psychological, and spiritual realms (including but not limited to being in close relationships with others characterized by love).

Therefore,

(C1) Each of the interests in (P2) generates a correlative prima facie negative right.

(P3) Each significant and distinct means for satisfying a fundamental interest generates a correlative prima facie negative right.

¹ *Conceptions of Parenthood* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); and *Wise Stewards* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2009).

(P4) The parent-child relationship provides a significant and distinct means by which these fundamental interests can be satisfied.

Therefore,

(C2) Parents have prima facie negative rights, as parents.

I will not engage in a detailed discussion of the argument, premise by premise, but rather make some more general points and then move into some related considerations.

By way of explanation, a prima facie negative right is simply a conditional right of non-interference. In this context, to claim that parents have such rights as parents is to claim that they possess a right to be left alone by the state and others, as long as they satisfy the conditions required for exercising that right. So much for (P1).

As far as the rest of the argument is concerned, what matters the most in this context is that for both parents and children, these interests can be satisfied in a significant and distinct way in family life. Each of the goods listed in (P2) are available to parents and children in the context of the family, and in ways that are unique to that setting. To be sure, there are semblances of family life and the parent-child relationship (e.g. mentoring, coaching) but no other form of human relationship is fully interchangeable with it. With this in mind, parents have rights as parents. These rights serve to foster the satisfaction of the interests of parents and children. And when family life contributes to the flourishing of parents and children, it also contributes to the common good as parents and children interact with others in the community. These parental rights can be forfeited when the conditions for exercising them responsibly are not met (e.g. cases of abuse or neglect).

Note that these interests are fundamental and these goods are available to us because we bear God's image, and because they are features of the divine character and life as revealed in the Trinity. But these goods, if they are to be realized in family life, require certain forms of moral and spiritual formation to be occurring in that context. In the next section, I will focus on these issues.

The Trinity, The Family, and Character

As noted above, one feature of the Trinity is that each divine person relates to the others in relationships that reflect a deep unity constituted in part by transparency and intimacy. But in order for such unity to exist, members of the Godhead must possess certain attributes which we as human beings can analogically possess as well. So rather than trying to understand the Trinity by means of analogies with the family, my aim here is to understand the family by

means of the Trinity, including an ethic of the family grounded in Trinitarian reality. I am seeking to answer a question put forth by Marc Ouellet in his book *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*: “What does the Trinity wish to express through the family?”²

The Trinity can be thought of as the “source and model” of the family, and if we think of it this way we are able “to understand and to live the deeper meaning of the family reality.”³ The family is “a communion of created persons” that both reflects and participates in “the Communion of Trinitarian Persons.”⁴ With this in mind, I want to suggest that God wishes to express elements of his trinitarian nature as well as certain divine attributes via the family, so that he is glorified in particular ways by the relationships and daily realities of family life.

First, the family puts into stark relief a particular way in which human beings bear God’s image, namely, through our interpersonality.⁵ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit essentially exist in relationship to one another. While human interpersonality is not essential in the same sense, the normative identities of members of a family are partially constituted by their filial relationships. This interpersonality is an important way in which the family reflects the Trinity, thereby revealing something of the nature of God.

Second, consider that there are ways in which the family may be a sign of the love that the members of the Trinity have for one another. Both the Trinity and the family can be thought of as a “communion of persons... united in love.”⁶ For such a communion to exist, the persons involved must be such that they are able to form and properly participate in it. Humans must be fit for such communion, in a context of grace, but nevertheless to be in such a relationship necessitates the possession and exemplification of virtue. To be united in love requires certain character qualities or attributes, in part because the virtues are deeply interconnected with and in certain ways depend upon one another.

With this in mind, consider the following from Dallas Willard: “The current Evangelical understanding of salvation has no essential connection with a life morally transformed beyond the ‘ordinary’. Evangelicals are good at what they call ‘conversion’. They’re not good at what comes later, because what is preached by them as the gospel has no necessary connection to character trans-

² Marc Cardinal Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 15.

³ Ibid., p. 35.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 182.

⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

formation.”⁷ However, when we consider conversion as it relates to the Trinity, we see not only how it is essentially connected to such transformation, but also how it connects to family life. In what follows, I assume that theosis—a transformational union with Christ—is a central aspect of the Christian gospel. The doctrine of theosis receives important biblical justification in 2 Peter 1:3-11 (NIV):

3 His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

10 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, 11 and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

But what is theosis? It is not a literal becoming divine or being absorbed into the divine. Rather, it can be thought of as a deep union with Christ in which we become more like Christ. Along these lines, Robert Rakestraw claims that theosis can be thought of as “the restoration and reintegration of the ‘image’ or... ‘likeness’ of God, seriously distorted by the fall, in the children of God.” Moreover, “this is more than the customary Protestant concept of sanctification... In theosis, while there is no ontological change of humanity into deity there is a very real impartation of the divine life to the whole human being,” which includes a realization of “the potential for ontological sharing in the life of

⁷ Dallas Willard, “The Failure of Evangelical Political Involvement In the Area of Moral Transformation,” from <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/printable.asp?artid=138>

God.”⁸ So, we participate in God’s knowledge, virtue, and love; we do not become God’s knowledge, virtue, and love. Our nature is distinct from God’s nature, but when theosis is a reality in our lives we possess such qualities in part from God and in dependence on God, who possesses them fully and essentially by his nature. In this particular sense, we become divine, practicing and progressively growing in qualities like those listed in 2 Peter 1: faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, mutual affection, and love. All of this occurs in the context of relationship with God via union with Christ in which his love and grace, as we receive them, play essential roles in transforming our whole being.

The foregoing is relevant to the family for many reasons. One is that in order for the family to reflect certain aspects of the Trinity, there is a need for theosis, for character formation in Christ. Another is that the family can function as a means by which such formation occurs. The family can, in perhaps unique ways, glorify God. It should serve as a training ground for forming and participating in deep human relationships. Ideally, this will equip family members to be the sort of persons who foster unity in the church. Such training in the family and in the church will also foster a fuller participation in the communion of the Trinity. Related to this, the interpersonality of human beings as image-bearers is key. This aspect of human nature underscores the need for the formation of variety of character traits that are important for flourishing human-human and human-divine relationships, such as patience, humility, forgiveness, and love.

Members of the Trinity exemplify these virtues (humility, patience, forgiveness, and love). Christian humility, as I understand it, is primarily interpersonal. That is, it is about how we relate to others, being disposed to consider their interests as more important than our own. This virtue is clearly exemplified by Christ, as Paul describes in Philippians 2. Patience can be defined as “enduring discomfort without complaint.”⁹ Each member of the Trinity displays this in relationship to human beings. The Father, for example, exemplifies patience throughout the Old Testament in his relationship with Israel. Forgiveness is a virtue displayed by God and required of followers of Christ, as we refrain from holding grudges against others and release them from any form of moral or spiritual debt they might owe us.¹⁰ Lastly, each member of the Trinity

⁸ Robert Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis,” *JETS* 40 (1997), p. 261.

⁹ James Spiegel, *How to Be Good in a World Gone Bad* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), p. 42.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*, p. 154-155.

is essentially loving—disposed to promote the good of and be united with others—and love is a fruit of the Spirit in the lives of followers of Christ.

I have chosen to briefly focus on these virtues because I think they are especially relevant to the family. Parents should seek to exemplify these virtues in relationship with their children. Mothers and fathers ought to represent the goodness of God to their children. This can only be done as they exemplify Christian virtues, including but going beyond the ones mentioned here.¹¹ They do this by displaying patience in a consistent manner, offering and asking for forgiveness, humbly preferring the good of their children over their own, and doing all of this in love, promoting the good of their children while seeking to foster a close relationship with them. Hopefully, as parents do this, their children will also come to value and pursue these virtues in union with Christ.

The mission of the Christian family as it expresses the reality of the Trinity includes many things, such as cultivating faith in communion with God, evangelization, discipleship, and service of others. To fulfill this mission requires Christlike character.

Conclusion

The Christian family should be conceptualized, loosely speaking, as an interpersonal incarnation of Trinitarian communion and love. When parents value their own character development in union with Christ, and prayerfully and intentionally seek to foster the same in their children, the mission of the family harmonizes with the mission of God. This is especially important in a post-Christian culture. As Paul Evdokimov puts it, “More than ever, every Christian household is before all else an intermediary, a meeting point, between God's Temple and a civilization without God.”¹² A Trinitarian conception of the family underscores the need for the exemplification of Trinitarian communion and love in Christian families. It also emphasizes the need for a focus on the Christlike character that is necessary for such communion and love to obtain in service to the kingdom of God.

Michael W. Austin is professor of philosophy at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, KY.

¹¹ Ouellet, p. 115.

¹² “Ecclesia Domestica,” *L'Anneau D'Or* 107 (1962): 361.