

A Model of Love

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Plato argues in Book V of the Republic that, to create harmony in the ideal city, everything should be shared in common. He states that the best women should share the same duties and lifestyle as the best men and that private property should be eliminated so that there is no tension between citizens over what is theirs and not theirs. Under this heading of 'private property', which includes the ownership of houses, money, and other possessions, he adds the having of families. By treating wives and children like items of private property, they are potential causes of conflict. Plato suggests that the way to solve this problem is to eliminate private families and share women and children in common. This claim is immediately challenged by Polemarchus and the other participants in the discussion, who press Plato to describe how the elimination of the family would be achieved as well as the benefits which would ensue if it were accomplished. This paper will focus on Plato's arguments defending the sharing of wives and children in common and, thereby, the elimination of the family, and will argue that it is neither beneficial nor possible for such a state to come to be.

Plato makes the claim that the sharing of wives and children in common is beneficial because it will help to keep the city together and make it function as a whole, whereas the opposite, having your own wives and children, would make the city more like a collection of separate entities, creating division. Since the greatest good is that which binds the city together and the greatest evil that which pulls it apart (462b), it is best to do that which makes the city function as a whole. He then gives an analogy to support his claim; that of a person who has a pain or feels pleasure in one of their parts but experiences it with their whole body and soul.(462c-d) Since the ideal city functions in the same way as this individual (462d), any pain or pleasure experienced in one part of the city must be shared and experienced by the whole. Since the more possessions citizens have in common, the more pleasures and pains they will have in common, it is concluded that women

and children, in that they constitute parts of the city, must be shared by all citizens in common. Thus, the sharing of women and children in common is argued to be beneficial.

However, although Plato emphasizes the importance of sharing everything in common, he then goes on to limit with whom women and children can be shared. The rulers are to impose strict regulations regarding which women are to be shared by which men and where and by whom the children must be raised. In other words, neither women nor children are to be shared freely by all but only with select people. By comparing the production of humans to the breeding of dogs, Plato asserts that 'the best men must have sex with the best women as frequently as possible, while the opposite is true of the most inferior men and women.'(459d) He, then, sketches a kind of lottery by which who partners whom will be controlled by the rulers so that the 'best' men will be prevented from sleeping with 'inferior' women and the 'best' women from sleeping with 'inferior' men.(459d) Thus, women are only shared selectively with some of the males of the city, not *in common* with them all.

Similarly, it is said that children must be shared by the whole city, but they are not. Rather, upon birth, the children of 'good parents' are taken to a 'rearing pen situated in a separate part of the city' and the children born of 'inferior parent's are '[hidden] in a secret and unknown place.'(460c) Thus, they are removed from the rest of society as well as being separated from each other. In other words, children are not shared *by the whole city* either, but rather, by only parts of it. Therefore, while Plato insists that women and children must be shared in common to achieve the greatest good of the city, they are not shared in common, so he has not successfully proven that the city, as he describes it, is the most beneficial.

Besides simply not being the most beneficial arrangement, it can be argued that it may, in fact, lead to disharmony and the degeneration of the city. The text is ambiguous as to whether Plato thinks the breeding program of mating the best women with the best men and the sharing of children in common applies to the city as a whole or whether it applies only to the guardian class. However, whichever way it is interpreted, the conditions described can be shown to cause harm to the city and, thus, show that the sharing in common is not beneficial at all.

Plato could have meant for only the guardians to share women and children in common. He might suppose that only they would be able to understand the need and the benefits of the arrangement and be able to meet its demands so as to best benefit the city. If this is the case, however, and only the guardian class is sharing possessions in common, then Plato is deviating even further from his tenet that the whole city should share as much as possible in common. If women and children are only shared among the guardians, then harmony is only being created in one part of the city and there will still be conflicts over possessions among members of the other classes and between members of the other classes and the guardians. Aside from the fact that tension will not have been eliminated, greater division may occur because there will be more significant differences between the classes and, accordingly, even less shared in common. Therefore, if sharing wives and children in common is interpreted as applying only to the guardians, the benefits which Plato envisages will not be produced for the entire city, as proposed, but rather, greater division may be created.

On the other hand, if we interpret this section of the Republic as referring to the whole city on the grounds that it is more beneficial to the city that it should share as much as possible in common - including women and children, then Plato's whole set-up for the ideal city is self-defeating and will lead to its own degeneration. Plato states that the best women must have sex with the best men as frequently as possible and that inferior men and women should, as much as possible, be prevented from having sex.(459d) The fact that Plato is advocating this state of affairs implies a presumption that the coupling of 'best parents' will create the greatest chance of producing virtuous offspring; a statement which he supports by asserting that this arrangement will lead to a population of the 'highest possible quality.'(459d) Given this assertion, in addition to the fact that unlawful children, children of inferior parents, and children with defects are hidden away and not raised at all,(460c & 461c) it becomes apparent that, gradually, the numbers of inferior persons will decline and that the numbers of the ruling class will grow in proportion to them. Since no method is proposed to prevent the elimination of the lower classes, the process will continue until, eventually, there are insufficient members of the lower classes to produce food and provide services for the guardians. Should this occur, the guardians will either have

to begin to produce food and provide services for themselves - which would mean partaking of a craft for which they are not best suited, thereby creating injustice and disharmony in the city - or they will starve to death. The first case leads to the elimination of the *ideal* city, and the second case leads to the elimination of the *city*. Either way, Plato's breeding program leads to the disintegration of the ideals for which he was aiming and cannot be said to be very beneficial.

Therefore, whether the text is to be interpreted as sharing women and children among the guardian class or among the entire city, Plato's sharing of 'possessions' will, at best, not be any more beneficial than the situation in any other city and, in the worst scenario, lead to its own destruction.

However, there is an appealing consequence to Plato's suggestion of sharing women and children in common. 'Private' families will be eliminated and, so, the conflicts that arise between people protecting what is 'theirs' is also eliminated. With this proposal, Plato is introducing the idea that we ought to treat everyone impartially and that personal feelings toward particular people should not be allowed to bias our actions more favourably to certain individuals. The idea that all people would treat others with equal care and consideration is alluring, and may immediately strike us as a beneficial proposition.

While this proposition may seem initially appealing, it, nonetheless, loses much of its attraction once the implications are considered. In order to be able to treat all people with equal consideration, we ought to eliminate all things that unduly influence our behaviour towards certain individuals. Since families are a major source of partiality, they would have to be disbanded in order to prevent us from treating some members of society, namely our siblings and parents, more favourably than other citizens. In doing so, however, we would be depriving ourselves of the values that we learn while growing up in a family, such as love and respect, a sense of belonging and of self-worth. People need to feel this close connection with other people in order to feel like they belong and are special. While it is possible that people can learn these values from other social groups, the bonds formed between members of these groups are similar to those formed in families. Consequently, partiality would still exist. Severing all kinds of close ties (which even Plato does not suggest) would mean that we would not have

anyone from which to learn love and friendship, and a great void of emotion may result as a consequence. Since this occurrence would certainly not be deemed beneficial, giving up families and close special ties seems too great a sacrifice to achieve impartiality.

In summary, sharing women and children in common in the ideal city is not proven to be beneficial. They are only shared to a limited extent which does not serve to create harmony among all citizens but may, because of the regulations which govern how they are shared, create more division and disharmony and, eventually, destroy the city.

Having completed his discussion about the beneficence of sharing women and children, Plato tries to show that it would be possible to do so. He argues that instead of having a deep love for only your own private family, this love could be extended to encompass all members of the city (this statement herein referred to as 'communal love'). If this were the case, there would be harmony and peace because no one would want to oppose another for fear that she would be harming a member of her 'family'. Indeed, Plato argues that 'shame will prevent him from laying a hand on his parents, and so will the fear that the others would come to the aid of the victim, some as his sons, some as his brothers, and some as his fathers.' (465a-b) However, though it may be considered ideal to be able to love everyone in the city like a member of one's own family, it is not possible for this to occur. The elimination of families can only be achieved with great difficulty and, if accomplished, makes the achievement of communal love impossible.

Plato says that 'there would be a lot of disagreement about whether or not it is possible' (457d) to eliminate families and create communal love and he has good reason to expect resistance. In order for families to be separated, parents would have to be persuaded to give up their children in order that they may be raised by others, and relinquish their spouses in order that they may have sex with other people. For people who married out of love and a desire to be together and who produced children out of that love, for them to 'give away' their spouses and children is almost impossible to imagine. While some families may not be as happy together, Plato would probably consider them an exception rather than the rule since his model for the ideal of communal love is family love. The elimination of the family will, then, not be possible in circumstances such as they are presently.

However, though families willingly agreeing to separation is difficult to conceive, it could be suggested that families should be separated by force. Use of some kind of force would succeed in breaking family connections, but the bitterness and resentment that would be created as a result is hardly an ideal environment to try to foster communal love. The people affected by the division would probably be slow to risk loving again - let alone loving an entire population - especially considering the fact that some of the citizens whom they are supposed to love are those responsible for the break-up of their family. To better understand their position, consider a woman whose husband is cheating on her. She has heard rumours that her husband is having an affair, and finally catches her husband in bed with 'the other woman'. The marriage ends in an ugly divorce. As a result, not only does the woman feel strong resentment against those who were responsible for the breakdown of her marriage, particularly the 'other woman', but she will probably be cautious about loving in the future because of the risk of being hurt again. In the case of the families in the Republic, all the anger of the families will be concentrated and directed towards those responsible for the break-up; who are, most likely, the rulers. For the members of these divided families to be capable of loving so many other people when they have just had their loved ones taken away does not seem plausible. In addition, they are expected to love those who are the cause of their unhappiness, a situation similar to that of the scorned wife being told to love her husband's mistress. Therefore, separating families by force would create huge distress and disharmony in the city, and make it even harder to achieve a communal love.

However, it might be suggested that the situation described above is a necessary evil, which must be suffered in order to achieve Plato's ideal of communal love. In other words, citizens may suffer terribly at the time that their families are separated but the benefit they will gain in the long run makes the pain worthwhile. It is possible that through education and socialization, new generations will eventually heal from their losses, forget what it was like to have - and lose - their own families and, hence, be able to love others.

This suggestion is problematic, however, because without the experience of family love, people will not know in what way they are supposed to treat other citizens. Plato states that people will treat everyone

with respect in the ideal city because each person one encounters may be 'a brother or sister, a father or mother, a son or daughter, or some ancestor or descendant of theirs.'(463c) He adds that people will not only address them as fathers or sisters but also treat them the way they would treat members of their private families. However, the generations about which we are talking were not brought up in private families so they will not know what it means to treat someone like a 'father' because they do not have the experience of having a father. It is true that they can learn to address adult males as 'Father' and adult women as 'Mother' but they will not know the significance of what they are saying. They will, in fact, only be '[using] the kinship names' and not doing 'the actions that go along with the names' (463c) because these names will not hold any meaning for them or provide any guidance for their actions. These kinship names will become unfamiliar terms disassociated with the original relationship from which they were extrapolated. In other words, individuals need to have the experience of a private family in order to learn the care and obligations demanded by kinship in order to be able to extend these feelings to other citizens. Should kinship names lose their meaning and, consequently, their power to influence peoples' actions, there will be nothing controlling or preventing hostility from arising between citizens which was the main goal to be achieved by communal love.(464c-465c) Therefore, since private familial relationships are the basis of communal love, once private families are eliminated and forgotten, it will not be possible to extend the power of kinship relationships to keep peace and harmony in the city.

Though it seems impossible for future generations to be able to love fellow citizens like kinsmen, as Plato contends, it is worth investigating whether citizens will still be able to treat one another with a more general feeling of love and, thus, achieve the same goal. The immediate puzzle, however, is that, with the elimination of private families and Plato's discouragement of close, loving relationships inherent in the city's constitution, it is not clear how people will learn to love at all.

Plato wants all citizens to treat each other with care and respect and yet, after eliminating the main source from which people learn to love, he does not provide any other examples or role models to take its place in showing people how to love. Although people can still form friendships, the

eradication of families is a striking demonstration that close, personal ties are not to be encouraged. While couples involved in loving relationships usually provide an example of what love is like, such couples do not exist in Plato's city. Women are shared among men at the discretion of the rulers and the whole system of choosing suitable lovers is supremely rational. Since men and women are not supposed to develop any special ties to any one person because this might create conflict between citizens over who belongs to whom, there is no allowance for the development of love. Without the example of love shown by couples such as these to take the place of the love shown by parents, children will not learn what love is by watching these people around them.

Another occasion during which people can observe and experience love, which is not available in the ideal city, is childbearing. In many cases, children know they were conceived out of love and, perhaps, watched their parents care for a newborn brother or sister and get a sense of the depth of feeling involved. However, these acts of conception and childbearing are also impersonalised in Plato's city. Instead of children being conceived as an expression of love shared by a couple, people who may be strangers are matched up according to their natural qualities, and children are simply the natural result of their sexual acts. The number of pairings that are made in the 'lottery' are regulated by the rulers in order that they may 'keep the number of males as stable as they can' in order to maintain the proper size of the city.(460) Hence, an inherent result of sharing wives in common is that child-bearing has gone from being the fulfillment of an act of love to being the result of a very rational system designed for satisfying peoples' natural desires and maintaining the population. Besides the fact that this view of childbearing strikes us as counter-intuitive, it is also unhelpful in creating a sense of love in children or providing them with an example of what it is to love.

Besides merely discouraging close, affective ties among people through the example of eliminating the family, the laws of the city actually forbid certain expressions of love. For example, if two people fall in love (which would almost be an anomaly at this point!), the chances of them being paired up by the rulers are slim. However, because it is unlawful to have sex without permission (460b), if the couple did express their love by having sex

they would, in effect, be committing a criminal act! Should they happen to conceive a child, this would no doubt be an even greater violation, probably resulting in the banishment and eventual death of the child.(461b-d) Such a situation appears grossly immoral and, yet, it is written into the constitution of the city. Therefore, should a child *by some means* even get a glimpse of what love might be like, the laws of the city seem to forbid love's growth or expression.

Therefore, while people cannot learn what love is from their own private family, Plato has not obviously provided any other source from which they might learn how to love. With this disheartening lack of guidance, it is bewildering as to how a child born into a world like this one would learn to love at all. Hence, it does not seem possible, with the lack of role models for love and the impersonal nature of the constitution, that any kind of communal love can exist in the city after families are disbanded.

In conclusion, Plato does not satisfactorily prove that sharing women and children in common and eliminating private families is either beneficial or feasible. Besides not leading to the kind of harmony and peace that he envisions, it may, from one interpretation, result in greater disharmony in the city because of increased dissimilarities between the classes, or, if the principle is applied to all classes alike, result in the destruction of the city. With regard to whether communal love is possible to achieve, once families no longer exist it will become impossible for people to treat others as kinsmen because they will have no recollection of what kinship entails. The best Plato could hope for is a more general kind of love among citizens. This, however, is unlikely to occur because the nature of the constitution does not seem to allow for a source analogous to families from which people could learn how to love. Citizens will, thus, not be benefitted by the absence of families and, after the elimination of these special bonds, it will be impossible for people to be able to exhibit the kind of communal love to which Plato refers.

Bibliography

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