

# **THE ETHICS OF THE FAMILY**

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The ethics of the Family by Samuel Hayden Tufts

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**SAMUEL HAYDEN TUFTS**

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THE point of view of the student at the present time in approaching such a problem as that of the ethics of the family makes his task less simple than that of old. He cannot depend upon an infallible intuition or an infallible deduction. He must consider consequences, on the one hand, and psychology of men and women, on the other; he must consider social conditions and the evolution of human personality. Doubtless there are seemingly constant factors—the thrill of passion and the necessity of rational control; the love of mother for child and of child for mother; the effects of habit and the power of social convention; the conflict between individual choice and public opinion—all these in a sense reappear in generation after generation. They claim their place in any treatment, but love between the sexes has been made in many respects a different thing because of all that fiction and poetry, as well as church and state, have done to it. Recently the industrial revolution, the conditions of city life, the progress of higher education, the general movement toward emancipation of woman, have combined so to change both the controlling conditions of human life and the mental attitudes and temper of men, women, and children, that the problems long since comfortably and confidently settled clamor for reconsideration. Ethics may or may not reach conclusions as to marriage, divorce, economic dependence of woman, parental responsibility, distinction between legitimate and illegitimate birth, which agree with the judgments of the past, but no ethics can simply reaffirm these past judgments without noting the changed personalities and changed conditions.

We may well recognize, first of all, that instead of the ethics of the family, we might more properly speak of the ethics of families; for the ethical questions which are really uppermost in the middle class family of to-day are very different from those

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which are at the front in the working-class family. Nevertheless, there are some general considerations which apply to both.

Moralists sometimes make a distinction between positive and negative morality. Positive morality offers values: negative morality says "Thou shalt not!" There is perhaps no field of ethics which in the past has had a point of view more prevailingly negative than the morals of the family.

(1) It has said little about a duty to marry, but much against sexual relations except in marriage; little about a right choice, much about divorce.

(2) It has said little as to the positive value of children, but has tabooed such questions as restriction or illegitimacy.

(3) Since the whole sexual nature is so liable to become the cause of evil, it has urged that we know and talk as little about it as possible; that we do not mention to a girl any of the unpleasant possibilities of communicable disease; that we bring up children upon the basis that innocence is the only virtue for the young, and that there is in any case no positive value in at least the physical side of love.

We are not entirely satisfied with this negative morality. It doesn't work well in several particulars. Some of the facts which challenge attention are the following:

(1) There is a small and decreasing birth-rate among the educated classes, which means, unfortunately, that these classes are constantly passing out from our population. In this country some of us, at least, believe that the stock which settled in New England and moved on into New York and the middle west was a good stock. We do not like to see it disappear, but it certainly is disappearing, and relatively to other stocks it will, according to present indications, be less and less influential in the future life of the country.

(2) There is increasing divorce.

(3) There is in some parts of the western world increasing illegitimacy. This may or may not be true for this country, since we have so little accurate registration that it is difficult to know, but in certain European countries the increase, particularly in large cities, is striking. In Berlin, between the years 1891 and 1909, legitimate births decreased 19 per cent (from 47,000

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to 38,000); illegitimate increased 39 per cent, and are now at the rate of about one in five of all births.

(4) The double standard of morals persists, and prostitution as a profitable commercial enterprise is as strong as ever.

(5) The "social diseases" are far too prevalent.

(6) Various social agencies find so many of their problems thrust upon them by bad family conditions that the waste and expense of the situation are becoming increasingly evident. The defective children, the retarded children in the schools, the weak who swell the number of prostitutes, the boy criminals in our large cities, the deserted wives and children, the family troubles which come to light in our juvenile courts and courts of domestic relations, all tell of failures which may or may not be out of proportion to what should be expected in any human institution, but are, at any rate, sufficiently numerous to be a challenge to our existing ethics.

(7) Finally, the vast literature upon various aspects of the woman question reflects the friction which may not find outlet in the courts or the charities, but which, none the less, is very real in certain classes of families.

Negative morality had good reasons for many of its prohibitions, and when there was no reason that we may now wish to call a good reason, there was at least an explanation. Passion needed and always will need stern limits set by reason, by authority, and by public opinion for the protection of both men and women, and particularly for the protection of women. There is also an element of true psychology in the taboos which the race has fixed upon excessive attention to the sexual life. While the original motive for these taboos may very likely have been in large part fear of contracting feminine weakness or fear of the ghosts that might be presumed to hover about at such a time as the birth of a child, there is, no doubt, a certain instinctive modesty which is one of the strongest supports to chastity and purity and which should not be broken down. Besides these valid reasons, there are special explanations for our inherited attitude. When people lived in small towns and knew each other intimately from childhood; when parents knew the habits of their neighbors' children almost as well as those of their own, and when daughters



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could have the parents' advice, there was no such tendency to hasty marriages between persons who had had scarcely any opportunity to become acquainted as now exists in the large cities. Under such conditions, too, there was probably far less communicable disease. On the other hand, there was no need of especially inculcating the duty of marriage or the desirability of raising children. When no other way of support lay open to women, the pressure was strong in the direction of marriage. When people live largely an agricultural life, children are very little added expense, and are not only a joy, but frequently a great help to their parents in the house and on the farm. Among higher classes the importance of maintaining the family name and transmitting family wealth was a strong inducement which seems still to operate, especially in royalty and in the country families of Europe; but there is no great sentiment about passing down the family flat, and indeed the absence of any such family tradition is well suggested by the question of the child of one of my colleagues, when passing by a house where the parents had lived—"Is this one of the houses where I was born?" But there were other grounds less rational. The double standard, the harsh inequalities before the law, are survivals of military and aristocratic society. The sex taboos are in part due to outgrown superstitions, to crude beliefs about original sin, to degrading doctrine about woman.

Besides the failures of negative morality, there are certain new values which demand recognition.

(1) For the middle class family the great factor is undoubtedly the new consciousness of personal rights, powers, and interests on the part of women. We cannot expect to have higher education, new avenues of achievement, new means of economic support, new possibilities of freedom, and still retain the special type of monogamy which was characteristic of earlier civilization, and especially of a civilization which in many ways was brutal in its restraint upon woman. Reinforcing these is the extraordinary industrial change which has taken the productive work from woman, has made her a consumer, and has made it difficult, if not impossible, for her to maintain, on the one hand, her activity as an intellectual or executive person, and, on the other, her position as wife and mother.

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(2) The second great positive value is the new recognition of the child. Our vast public school system, originally organized for protection to the state, is now definitely valued as an instrument for giving the child an opportunity to make the most of himself and to develop his powers. Great advances in medical science have restricted infantile diseases and magnified the general esteem of the importance of every human life. Societies for the care of orphans or neglected children, juvenile courts, associations of nurses, are indices of a growing conscience. This increased valuation upon children is not satisfied to continue the old proverb which Ezekiel contended against more than two thousand years ago: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Our older theology sent children unbaptized to limbo or to hell because of their parents' omissions or of the ancestral sin. For some time theology has balked at attributing such a destiny to the infant, but we are yet very slow about going the whole way. We have thus far hesitated to give the child a fair chance irrespective of his parents. We have assumed that the child born in a very poor family cannot expect good sanitation or opportunity for healthful play, or as good an education as the child born to the well-to-do. In the case of the illegitimate child we have been even more chary. But if I am not mistaken, the next generation will look for some way to control and, if necessary, punish reckless sex relations without visiting positively upon the children the iniquity of the fathers.

(3) A third new value is that of the positive significance of sex and of motherhood. There has, of course, always been a literature of motherhood, and individuals have valued their own experiences as mothers or as children, but so much of the older valuation has been associated with limitations upon the life and activity of woman that it is not surprising to find certain writers minimizing the significance of sex in woman's life. They claim that sex has been exaggerated. They would settle the conflict between home and industry by encouraging women to enter gainful occupations. They would make motherhood incidental, rather than principal, in determining woman's plan of living. In contrast with these proposed solutions, which magnify the value of independent occupation and productive work in the world of

industry or commerce, Ellen Key is distrustful of the effect upon woman's life of organized industry, and seeks a new appreciation of woman's sex life. It is not necessary to decide that all women must conform to one pattern, but taking woman as a whole, and taking business and industry as now organized, I should side with Ellen Key as contrasted with the opposing school. For a minority of women the path of freedom and development may lie through independent economic activity, and in case they have families, through such systematized care for children as would free the mother for her intellectual or active pursuits outside, but for the majority I believe that greater happiness, as well as fuller development, lies rather in magnifying family values and freeing them from the survivals of subordination, of unscientific and ill-organized methods, which belong to former days.

(4) The fourth positive value which demands recognition in the ethics of the family is the value of sound, healthy, and well-reared stocks, not merely for the individuals whose enjoyment and achievement are concerned, but for the community and the state. The pendulum swings back and forth between nature and nurture, between the importance of well-bred children and the importance of good environment. Just at present biology is laying great stress upon the former. With its Mendelian law as an instrument of analysis, biology is certainly bringing before us more forcibly than ever the importance of heredity. And as we are learning to think in terms not merely of to-day, but of to-morrow, not merely of the local community, but of the nation, we are gaining a new consciousness of the tremendous value to society of certain stocks. If anything was needed to reënforce this biological truth, the lessons of the war are fulfilling that task. It was the Boer war that awakened England to the deterioration of her population in physical stature. The present war has been a tremendous object-lesson of the value of giving thought to health and fitness. It is even conceivable that it may make its lesson so impressive as in a measure to reclaim from other forms of wastage the frightful waste of the best stock which it is itself displaying.

These four new values—the value of women's freedom and development, the value of the child, the value of sex and especially