CHAPTER 3

THE FAMILY IN TRANSITION
AND IN AUTHORITY

The Impact of Biotechnology

H. TRISTRAM ENGELHARDT, JR.
Rice University, Houston, Texas, United States

I. INTRODUCTION: IN THE FACE OF ROBUST MORAL PLURALISM
AND CONFLICTING METAPHYSICAL ACCOUNTS

If there is anything that characterizes the contemporary understanding of the family, it is the lack of a common understanding. We share no consensus. Indeed, we live in the face of profound and at times angry disagreements. It is not just that we face a plurality of conflicting moral and metaphysical accounts that had once been geographically dispersed or artificially suppressed. Moral communities with radically different views of the family and human flourishing overlap in the same geographical areas, and their disagreements have become salient. In addition, many once coherent traditional accounts have fragmented, if not fallen into incoherence. We confront not just the post-modernity of numerous competing accounts. We also face a post-modernity born of a loss of focus within once dominating accounts. For many, there is a sense of the center failing, so that it is unclear how to understand the family and its place in the good human life.

For many people for whom traditional accounts are intact, or at least robust in their remembrance, there is a profound sense of a need to respond to the pluralism and incoherence. There is a disposition to a cultural counter-revolution through extending or at least recovering the vigor of traditional accounts often rooted in religious commitments with their deep metaphysical accounts of reality.1 Against this struggle on behalf of traditionalists of various stripes to protect, extend, or at least restore traditional understandings of the family and its place in human flourishing, there is an equal passion born of the Enlightenment and the progressivist movements of the 19th and the 20th centuries to criticize, revise, and reform traditional understandings in the name of various liberal, post-traditional construes.
of human flourishing that accent free choice, autonomy, and the value of liberty. These accounts and their protagonists seek to recast, if not displace, the traditional family as autonomous and in authority over its members, often displaying a patriarchal structure.

To make matters more complex, there is no single, critical, post-traditional, liberal account of emancipation or liberation from the anti-liberal constraints of traditional accounts. There is not one liberalism, one feminism, or one view of the proper human emancipation from illiberal structures. Despite the passionate, indeed often desperate invocation of consensus, there is dissensus, disagreement, conflict, and controversy. There is a dogged, indeed robust moral pluralism that vindicates Agrippa, the skeptic of the 3rd century A.D., who in his five tropoi argued for the impossibility of resolving such disputes on the basis that (1) philosophical disputes had over the previous 800 years (i.e., from the perspective of the 3rd century A.D.) failed to bring closure to sound rational argument; (2) attempts at sound rational arguments are always nested or lodged within a particular perspective, so that protagonists of particular views argue past each other; all attempts to resolve such debates through sound rational argument require at the outset conceding particular moral premises and rules of evidence so that those in controversy (3) beg the question, (4) argue in a circle, or (5) engage an infinite regress.

All of this is to say that it appears that controversies among irresolvable moral and metaphysical views define the human condition. They always have. Post-modernity, or our contemporary condition however one might want to characterize it, is one of persistent disagreement in the face of the absence of a common way to resolve cardinal disputes by sound rational argument. This observation is not an affirmation of a moral and metaphysical epistemological skepticism, nor a skepticism regarding the existence of truth. It does not involve a foundational metaphysical skepticism. It recognizes, however, the inability of rational reflective discourse to resolve many core controversies regarding right conduct and the nature of human flourishing. We are confronted with important moral and metaphysical disputes that may require special knowledge of an access to the truth for their resolution.

These deep moral and metaphysical disputes are the stuff of the culture wars. The difficulties we have in resolving our important disagreements shed light on the character of our condition, as well as on the context and nature of our discourse. We are confronted with the task of understanding the status, meaning, and authority of the family in the context of health care and with respect to the new reproductive and genetic technologies, all within a circumstance of moral and metaphysical disagreement. We find ourselves at best able to provide a geography of disagreement. This is not a mean or shallow goal. At least like Socrates, we can understand better what we are unable to know as a society compassing numerous and contesting communities, as well as isolated individuals who forward conflicting and incompatible understandings of the family and its place in medicine, all seen within larger concerns with the human good and human flourishing. We will need to note the place of various communities and partisans of particular ideologies in shaping the nature of the disputes. One will need to attend to how the