Family life poses some of the most difficult and disputed questions taken up in contemporary social thought and politics. Often these are issues about which major thinkers of the past have little to offer us: issues about power relations in the family, about the impact of public agencies and mass culture on family life, political issues about school curricula, about biological engineering, and so on. As these examples suggest, if earlier theorists did not speak to our questions about family, this is not--entirely--a matter of their having rested, so to speak, on patriarchal privilege. Nor is it because they ignored family issues: Plato, Rousseau, Hegel all gave thought to questions about family and household as part of their larger considerations of rational social life. But it is true that family was not a matter of primary concern for them: they did not see it as an end in itself. Its importance was more in preparing individuals for participation in the political and cultural spheres in which genuine human experience and achievement were thought to be possible. Reference to outstanding questions of our day suggests that it is no longer so easy to separate family (and economic) concerns from political and cultural questions. Issues raised by the women's movement are evidence of this, but so are questions of education, welfare, healthcare, and housing. And, as the sphere that fundamentally shapes the individual's habits of consumption and definition of needs, the family will play a major role in society's response to the deepening ecological crisis and the dwindling supply of its nonrenewable resources.

If family questions have come to play a more central role in our political life, this does not mean that we have a shared understanding of the importance of family life or of what should be considered appropriate family ideals. On the contrary, family is conceived and experienced with a great deal of uncertainty and ambivalence. An individual may experi-
ence family at one time as the anchor of his or her existence, at another as a crippling fetter that must be torn off, even if at great personal cost. Some theorists may treat family life as having an all-determining effect on personality (for example, in questionable uses of Freud), while others treat family as wholly subject to the play of extra-familial forces (for example, in questionable uses of Marx). If such basic conflicts characterize our feelings and theories about family, it should not be surprising that ideas and claims about family play the most disparate roles in our political life as well. Of late, family slogans figure prominently on the banners of the 'New Right,' with its opposition to abortion and resistance to feminism generally. And family matters have been raised in debates over the causes and remedies of racism in our society. But these have by no means been the first interjections of family-related questions into national politics. To take another example close at hand, support for the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War not so many years ago seemed to many to go naturally with a liberalization of sexuality and a search for new family forms. In sum, our feelings about family are deeply ambivalent, our attempts to understand it are pulled in conflicting directions, and our political uses of family questions seem as confused as they are pervasive.

We speak of "the family." But to what extent may we presuppose a unique family essence, shared throughout society and persisting over time? We must guard against the illusion that the modern nuclear family--working husband, housewife, and children--provides a model of all family structures, either in the past or in our own society. If there are universal family functions (for example, cultivating and sustaining the capacities of persons; organizing household production and consumption), it is also beyond dispute that family structures have undergone vast transformations in the course of humanity's experience. Changing relations between families and the spheres of political and economic life attest to this. We may imagine a historical continuum whose beginning point corresponds to those earliest societies whose activities are organized wholly within kinship structures. This social primacy of kinship relations breaks up with the emergence of civilization and its attendant differentiation of social classes and the appearance of an independent political organization--the state. The other terminus on this continuum is the nightmare vision entertained by many today: a society in which meaningful family and kinship ties have given way to a universal atomization of individuals dominated by large-scale economic and political institutions. Of course, such a continuum is an intellectual construction to which no linear historical process corresponds. It is true that the "great transformation" (Polanyi, 1944) brought about by capitalism has fragmented social life to an unprecedented degree, destroying many of the forms of community existence that once sustained individuals. On the other hand, there is some reason to think this process resulted in a relatively greater reliance on family relations, for material survival in the case of the poor, and for the cultivation of personality in the case of the middle classes. At the very least, this larger historical process involved a far greater