This book is concerned to offer a defence of the family. More particularly it is concerned to offer a liberal defence of the family, and to defend the kinds of family that are appropriate within a liberal society. By a liberal society I mean one defined by a set of recognisable principles and priorities: equal individual liberty; a fair distribution of social and economic resources; democratic governance; official neutrality on the question of the good. I shall say nothing further about nor defend these principles. I take them to be familiar ones within the tradition of post-Rawlsian English-speaking political philosophy.

Defining the family

I shall however say something about what is meant by ‘family’. That which is not clearly understood cannot be adequately defended. As the Introduction made clear there are a number of enduring disagreements about the nature and value of the family. Can we nevertheless agree what the term ‘family’ picks out? Or are there disabling difficulties in the way of reaching a consensus on the matter? ‘Family’ is not an example of what philosophers have called an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Gallie, 1956). This is normally taken to be an evaluative term, such as ‘justice’, whose general sense is agreed but whose particular application or instantiation is disputed. We all know what ‘fairness’ means...
but we disagree what fairness actually requires. This is not the case with the family. Here the danger is of a different order. It is that a favoured view of what families ought to look like is disguised as or smuggled into a proffered definition.

We need in other words to beware of what have been termed ‘persuasive definitions’ (Stevenson, 1938). A persuasive definition is a statement of what a word means which is offered with the purpose of changing people’s attitudes towards whatever may be covered by the term. A term may thus denote something towards which everyone has a favourable attitude – such as ‘democracy’ – and a definition of that term is advanced with the intention that the favourable attitude should be displayed towards what, and perhaps only what, is covered by the definition. The scope of the definition is often reinforced by emphatic language. The colloquial English phrase, ‘Now that’s what I call an X’, is a wonderful example of a forceful acclamation adopting the surface linguistic shape of a simple report of definitional usage. Similarly, the evaluative definition may be emphasised by the use of such terms as ‘true’, ‘real’, or ‘genuine’ (Govier, 1992, p. 96). Someone might, for example, assert, ‘A real democracy is one in which everyone’s vote makes a difference’. Those whom the persuasive definer is seeking to persuade are being asked in this instance to restrict their use of the term ‘democracy’, with all its favourable connotations, to those cases in which citizens’ votes have a certain practical impact.

In analogous terms someone might assert, ‘A real (or ‘genuine’ or ‘true’) family is one whose parents are married with their own dependent children’. In this manner a claim which purports only to be a definition functions not as a neutral description but as a prescriptive recommendation. ‘A family is a married heterosexual couple rearing their biological offspring’ seeks to persuade the hearer that an arrangement of this form, and nothing but families of this kind, should merit the title. A supposed definition, ‘Only this’ – followed by some particular specification – ‘counts as