

# 12 The Family as Mystery

## Why Taking into Account Transcendence Is Needed in Current Family Debates

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Mentioning family, transcendence and moral compass in one sentence will set off alarm bells for many people. A chapter on family in a volume on the transcendent good as imagined in a ‘moral compass’ may easily suggest a kind of conservative agenda aiming for a clear-cut standard for a good family. This is the opposite of what I aim for in my ethical research on family. Therefore, when I first contacted Cristina L.H. Traina to invite her to contribute on the topic of family responsibility to an expert meeting of the Moral Compass Project, I immediately added a disclaimer. I introduced the focus of the project as how one can meaningfully think about a ‘moral compass’ and then hastened to say:

This may sound pretentious or naïve, but what we intend is theological ethical reflection on the search for a good that transcends our personal preferences in a situation of moral pluralism. ... We ask these questions in the secularist Dutch climate, in which relativist tendencies dominate as regards issues of morality and pluralism and are opposed to religious views. Obviously, the project relates to the classical ethical notions of divine law or natural law.

I could easily have added a lot more problematic aspects than pretentiousness or naivety, which Traina spells out concisely in her introduction. It is the “ideologically and politically fraught” character of the term ‘family’ that makes it “hopelessly poisoned.”<sup>1</sup> The term is too often used in an exclusionary way, which does not do justice to the enormous variety of family forms. At the same time, governments impose the heavy burdens of care on any family connection alike but without guaranteeing the room to make it work. How to be a family as a single mother combining small jobs to make a living? These tensions and paradoxes characterize current ways of dealing with family.

1 Cristina L. H. Traina, “Family/ies and Transcendence,” in *The Transcendent Character of the Good: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Petruschka Schaafsma (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), 194.

Nevertheless, Traina found a reason to take up the challenge and investigate the pair family and transcendence for its potential to get beyond the obvious conservative interpretations. To escape the poisoned character she starts from human precarity as constituting a first moment of transcendence. Humans experience a call in each other's precarity, a "call out of oneself" to care for and love the other.<sup>2</sup> This is a "moment of transcendence," according to Traina. In this article, I will start from this proposal of regarding the general human characteristic of precarity as a transcendent moment in the family. I will focus on how this proposal may be related to the general framework of the Moral Compass Project underlying this volume. This project introduces the transcendent character of the good as important for discussing morality in the current pluralist and relativist context. I will argue, in particular, that precarity may be a good starting point to avoid the above difficulties of the conservative aura but contributes little to articulating the specific character of the family. Instead, I will argue that more attention to this specificity of the family sheds a different light on the transcendent nature of the good. Paradoxically, this difference has to do with an emphasis on the obscure, unnameable character of the family's meaning and the moral call related to it. But let us start with further elaborating what Traina means with precarity as a transcendent moment.

### 12.1 The Call from Precarity: A Negative Access to Human Connectedness

Traina's first elaboration of the combination of family and transcendence starts from the notion of 'precarity,' which she relates, among others, to the thinking of Judith Butler. I recognize this association of family relations with Butler's thinking.<sup>3</sup> Traina does not explain it in detail, but I think it is in particular Butler's eye for the non-chosen but inescapable givenness of our human connectedness that nourishes this association. I would like to point out, however, that it is far from obvious that Butler comes to mind when thinking about the family. Therefore, this association needs further reflection, in particular when Butler's insights are invoked to underpin precarity as a transcendent moral moment that comes to light in the family.

For Traina, family is "the node, the point, at which we become aware that we are always already connected to all people through a network of intimate bonds."<sup>4</sup> This fundamental human connectedness is a major theme in Butler's work. But for Butler, awareness of this connection is

2 Traina, "Family/ies and Transcendence," 197, 202.

3 See in particular Chapter 2 of my monograph *Family and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

4 Traina, "Family/ies and Transcendence," 196.

raised by quite different ‘nodes’ than the family. These nodes are all negative, ranging from fear, loss and genocide to questions of which lives are publicly grieved and which not, and of whether we are inclined and able to respond ethically to distant suffering, also of people alien or hostile to us. Butler aims to bring to light the difficulty of the social nature of life. Human beings depend upon each other and upon living processes in a broad sense, but this interdependency is “not always a happy or felicitous experience” or a “promising notion.”<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Butler admits that her aim with pointing out these negative experiences is constructive: “it is true that I am trying to struggle toward an affirmation of interdependency.” But the negative character comes first. It is only by becoming strongly aware of the difficulty of ‘managing’ our dependence that we can try to arrive at a more egalitarian way of living it. In order to fathom these difficulties more deeply, reflection on the aspect of the unchosen character of the interconnectedness is crucial for Butler.<sup>6</sup> It is this aspect in particular, I think, that for Traina as well as for me calls to mind the phenomenon of the family. Family seems the example par excellence of such an unchosen interdependency. But family is a theme that is remarkably absent in Butler’s reflections on precarity and the ethics of an unchosen becoming “somehow implicated in lives that are clearly not the same as my own.”<sup>7</sup>

This absence is not by coincidence. Butler’s book on *Antigone* is illuminating as regards her reasons for not dealing with the topic of the family.<sup>8</sup> Sophocles’ play *Antigone* is a classic for its reflection on the meaning of the family as a distinct sphere of life. Such reflections mostly

5 Judith Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26 (2012): 141, 149.

6 E.g., Butler, “Precarious Life,” 150.

7 Butler, “Precarious Life,” 149.

8 Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim. Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Personally, Butler also has plenty of reason to emphasize the exclusionary power of dominant family images or concepts. Butler’s work has provoked aggressive public responses and death threatening protests from people who, among other things, present themselves as ‘defenders of the family’ and regard her work as a threat to it. This happened, for example, when she received a doctorate honoris causa in Bordeaux (2011), and the Theodor Adorno Price (2012) but also in Brazil where she was co-organizer of a conference (Scott Jaschik, “Judith Butler on Being Attacked in Brazil,” *Inside Higher Ed*, November 13, 2017, accessed September 30, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/13/judith-butler-discusses-being-burned-effigy-and-protested-brazil>; Oliver Basciano, “Death Threats and Denunciations: The Artists Who Fear Bolsonaro’s Brazil,” *The Guardian*, November 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/nov/07/brazil-artists-death-threats-censorship-intimidation-jair-bolsonaro>). See also Butler’s article “Is Kinship Always Already heterosexual?” (*Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13 (2002): 14–44) in which she discusses French protests, in particular that of Sylviane Agasinski (29–31), against gay parenting and the legitimization of gay marriage in 1999–2000.

build on what is perceived as a Hegelian distinction between the private realm of the family and the public one of the state, embodied in the protagonists Antigone and Creon respectively. Butler opposes this interpretation. In her view, interpreting the figure of Antigone as exemplification of what it means to be family does not account for the destabilizing character of Antigone: she is a hero who precisely breaks through given orders of kinship, gender and the human. What is more, such an interpretation suggests that family or kinship is a natural, pre-political sphere, unaffected by the contingencies of time and place. This suggestion is of course also very popular outside the realm of academic interpretations of *Antigone*. But according to Butler, this suggestion is deeply problematic because it professes existing social conventions to be eternal and therefore definitive of what is truly human. When family or kinship is thus understood as a distinct, natural category, it leads to exclusion of those who do not fit into dominant, in particular heteronormative, forms of family life to the level of the nonhuman.<sup>9</sup> This is clearly illustrated in the Antigone interpretations in which she is, in the end, referred to the level of being “entombed” as the “essential and negative feature of the norm” which is itself in fact “rearticulated.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, Butler proposes a “radical kinship” perspective. This aims to “extend legitimacy to a variety of kinship forms” and “refuse[s] the reduction of kinship to family.”<sup>11</sup> Kinship is eventually called a “socially alterable set of arrangements that ... organize the reproduction of material life, ... ritualization of birth and death, ... bonds of intimate alliance, and ... sexuality.”<sup>12</sup> It changes constantly. Therefore, speaking about family in terms of a distinct category is inadequate for Butler. This explains the absence of the topic in spite of Butler’s great sensitivity for the non-chosen character of human connectedness.

But, precisely Butler’s critique of the dominance and consequent exclusionary character of certain views of what counts as a family is another aspect that may explain why Traina turns to Butler. In ways similar to Butler, Traina sketches the “fantastic variety of family formations” through the ages and states that transcendence is thus “not [to] be found in their form” but in the actual practices of “doing family.”<sup>13</sup> Butler’s critique of the notion of family as a distinct sphere because of its exclusionary, status quo affirming nature is thus clearly something Traina recognizes. Therefore, Traina moves the spotlight to “precarity” as the morally relevant transcendent moment in family. By trying to relate precarity to the family, however, she also goes beyond Butler as

9 Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 79.

10 Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 76.

11 Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 74.

12 Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 72.

13 Traina, “Family/ies and Transcendence,” 198, 202.

I clarified above. For Traina, recognizing our precarity as humans is a transcendent moment. It reveals our non-chosen connectedness. This moment may be found in the “embodied, concrete practice of *fam-ilying*” which she summarizes as involving “virtuous commitment to the members’ holistic goods and the common good calibrated to our ability and resources.” This commitment is the conscious, voluntary care that ideally follows the call from precarity. It is voluntary but also “draws upon power that we do not generate ourselves.”<sup>14</sup> In comparison to terms like “virtuous commitment” or even “the good,” Butler’s vocabulary of precarity is quite different, more negative. She seems to want to avoid any suggestion of a kind of givenness of this commitment or good, and emphasizes its contingent, politically contested character. For Butler, precarity means we are always already “given over to the other.” The alterity of the other means the self is “put at risk.” Relationality is not about one subject that decides to relate to another. It is a decentering reality, one of “dispossession.”<sup>15</sup> Here lies the “ethical content” of our relatedness.<sup>16</sup> Butler refers to Hannah Arendt to point out that this unchosen character of our relatedness is the condition of our freedom. In this context, she calls this connectedness “cohabitation” with “those who are given to us.” We cannot do away with it without “destroying plurality.”<sup>17</sup>

Traina needs Butler’s argument from precarity to address the topic of family and transcendence in our time. Her elaboration of the pair family and transcendence clearly implies a certain view of the difficulties of our current moral predicament and how to deal with them. It supposes a great diversity in moral opinions and thus in ways of living, like being a family. It suggests that people do not easily respect this plurality but sympathize with the people they identify as their own. To deal with the dangers that follow from this parochialism a fundamental equality based on a shared precarity is proclaimed. By identifying the unchosen obligation to others that follows from precarity as the heart of the family Traina aims to reveal transcendence in the family without falling into the common trap of exclusionary family views. Our obligation to care for the intimate loved ones is just as unchosen as that to care for others outside our circles of relatives, others who live with the same

14 Traina, “Family/ies and Transcendence,” 202–3.

15 The notion ‘dispossession’ has various meanings in Butler, but here refers to the “injurious yet enabling fundamental dependency and relationality.” (Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession. The Performative in the Political: Conversations with Athena Athanasiou* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 2; see for a further explanation of this term in particular chapter 1 and 2 of this book).

16 Judith Butler, “Longing for Recognition,” in *Hegel’s Philosophy and Feminist Thought Beyond Antigone?* eds. Kimberly Hutchings and Tuija Pulkkinen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 126.

17 Judith Butler, “Precarious Life,” 143.

obligation in completely diverse ways. This openness to a plurality of life-forms is further substantiated by pointing to the plurality of family forms throughout history: again, there is no standard family form. Family is not so much a noun, a distinct category with a clear meaning, but a verb, “familying.”

The difference, however, between the ways precarity comes into view – only negatively in Butler, while also positively in Traina – reveals another aspect of current morality that is in my view crucial to address but remained untouched so far. The difference between Traina and Butler reveals that the acknowledgement as such of the experience of being “called out of ourselves” is not so obvious in our time. It cannot so easily be raised by pointing at our shared precarity, I think. At least, in the case of Butler pointing out this precarity does not raise sensitivity for the actual call that comes from those related to us by family ties. Traina briefly touches on this when she states that doing family shows the “chasm between me and the other is not as broad as it appears to her [i.e., Butler].” Later, Traina specifies this and states that “familying” is something positive, the “virtuous commitment” to the good and as such a “school and platform for broader networks of justice.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, Traina specifies the meaning of the family as more than dealing with the call from precarity. I am not sure that this approach to the family via precarity will convince those who, like Butler, have difficulties with the family, who experience the category of family as such as irritating, abusive or putting norms on us, in brief, as a contingent, political structure open to malformation. Nor do I think it is the way to liberate the speaking about the family from its “hopelessly poisoned” character. For the issue that remains unreflected in this approach is what is specific of the *familial* form of connectedness. It is stated to be a “virtuous commitment to the good” but this is not further clarified. Familial commitment is not distinguished, for example, from commitment in other relationships. And I think that pondering this issue longer may very well contribute to finding more common ground in times of pluralism, than Butler and Traina think possible. I will elaborate this alternative view by means of two conceptual approaches to the issue: the family as symbol and as mystery.

## 12.2 Approaching the Family as Symbol

The French philosopher Jean-Philippe Pierron analyzes changes in meanings of the family in late modernity. By this term he characterizes his own French, secularized 21st-century climate but it may just as well be

18 Traina, “Family/ies and Transcendence,” 197, 202.

related to other European and North-American settings.<sup>19</sup> Like Traina, he points out that in this climate the theme of the family is “doubly suspect.”<sup>20</sup> First of all, because of the moralism of the widespread idealized way of speaking of the family which hides the abuse that is specific to this setting. Second, because of the many ways in which family has been instrumentalized for political ends, of conservatism and confirmation of the status quo. Such discourses imply a certain “model family.” At the same time, family sociologists point out there is not a standard, or normal family any more. And these descriptive conclusions often feed into a relativistic statement that normativity no longer exists. Then, a meaningful speaking of the family evaporates. As a result, family is a fraught topic that is difficult to discuss. But unlike Traina, Pierron goes deeper into the question of how family is nevertheless lived and represented in such a climate. Family is primarily approached as a project, an “adventure” in service of the formation of each highly individual life. It is for this project character that Pierron reserves the expression to which Traina also refers: that of family as a verb, doing family, *faire famille* in a “domestic democracy with negotiated roles.”<sup>21</sup> In Pierron’s view, however, this approach to family via the multitude of ways of “doing family” fails to account for what it means to be a family just as much as the quasi-biological speaking in terms of a ‘natural family.’ The latter presupposes that the meaning follows the form, while the former makes the meaning subordinate to individual well-being. Therefore, Pierron explores the possibilities of approaching the theme of the family in a way that avoids the largely valid reasons for suspicion, that is, the idealization and the instrumentalization for a political project, but also the relativist standpoint in which the family is no longer a meaningful category. Besides, he admits that the ethical and political struggle for acknowledgement of the forms of family that are “invisibilized, humiliated or despised” is necessary.<sup>22</sup> But this struggle does not “exhaust everything that the family mobilizes.”

In order to come to grips with “what the family mobilizes” Pierron needs a different approach for which he uses terms like ‘symbol’, ‘metaphor’ and ‘image.’ Family should be approached as an image, a symbolic reality. Contrary to the quasi-biological terminology an image does not

19 In this chapter I will refer to two articles by Pierron in which the main aspects of his approach can be found: “Repenser la Famille?,” *Études* 4125 (May 2010): 627–37; “Famille et Sécularisation. Penser la Famille en Postchrétienté,” *Théophilyon* 21/1 (2016): 145–65. For further background see his three books on the family: *On ne choisit pas ses parents. Comment penser la filiation et l’adoption?* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003); *Le climat familial. Une poétique de la famille* (Paris: Éditions Cerf 2009); *Où va la famille?* (Paris: Éditions Les Liens qui Libèrent, 2014).

20 Pierron, “Repenser la Famille?,” 628.

21 Pierron, “Repenser la Famille?,” 630–31.

22 Pierron, “Famille et Sécularisation,” 148.

suggest that there is a concrete reality of genes that defines the specific character of the family. Well-known symbolic ways of speaking about the family in terms of a woven tissue, node, blood, tree or portrait do express that family members are connected in a specific way but not in the sense that this needs to be objectively, materially visible.<sup>23</sup> These images remind of Traina's brief reference to the family imagined as a "piece of lace or fishing net."<sup>24</sup> Like Pierron she finds this an apt expression of how the family stretches outward in space and time, and thus connects us to people "far away." But the difference with Pierron becomes clear in her immediate addition that this being connected in the mode of the lace is to be understood literally: "'The human family' is not metaphorical. It is literal." It is this literal connectedness that she grounds in precarity, which is, obviously, also a more factual than metaphorical characterization. According to Pierron, however, the symbolic mode is needed because of the ambiguous character of the family's meaning: it is about ties that are given, not chosen but in which one must also actively recognize oneself. Family presents itself as a structure which one cannot ignore, but which one must shape nevertheless. Traina would not deny this, but does not draw attention to it – most likely out of a concern to ensure the non-exclusionary character of this 'shaping'. Pierron, on the other hand, argues that a shaping is only possible when the underlying structure is acknowledged. This acknowledgement should be conducted by means of symbolic language.

By approaching the family as symbol, Pierron arrives at a much more specific view of what is characteristic of being connected as family. The term "recognition" is at the heart of this view.<sup>25</sup> This has to do with the joy of an unconditional "what a good thing, that you exist," or opposite experiences of suffering due to, for example, not being loved by one's parents.<sup>26</sup> The community that grants this recognition expands beyond the present generation. Pierron speaks of a genealogical recognition generated by a genealogical hospitality that invites to understand oneself as having a place in a community of love. For this genealogical tie genetic kinship is not enough. Recognition is an active process of determining oneself from out of a situation – the family – that determines each member. A further specification of this is that family is about shaping one's identity in a dialectics of making what is different one's own, and one's own different. This happens in the context of everyday life in which the prosaic is not absent and recognition is often refused. Thus, family is a

23 Pierron, "Repenser la Famille?," 632; "Famille et Sécularisation," 151, 154.

24 Traina, "Family/ies and Transcendence," 196.

25 In the 2010 (633) and 2016 (146) articles as well as in the above mentioned books Pierron refers to Paul Ricoeur's *Parcours de la Reconnaissance* (Paris: Stock, 2004) as source of inspiration for his view of the importance of recognition.

26 Pierron, "Repenser la Famille?," 628.



“hermeneutic framework” to understand, invent or deepen oneself in confrontation with the “great narratives, the values and the great images which the family carries.” The family carries a “dialectics of donation and debt,” an invitation to take up a given life so that it does not become a debt.<sup>27</sup> In this way, Pierron reinterprets the project character of the family of late modernity as one of living everyday life against the background of a past and a future, origins and expectations, exemplified in the uncontrollable moment of receiving a child.

The symbolic way of expressing the meaning of the family stimulates to keep it in a dialectics. But it is difficult to let this dialectics be; the symbol is fragile.<sup>28</sup> It is easier to present, for example, sameness and difference as a dilemma, as poles that exclude each other.<sup>29</sup> Often, familial identity is reified, presented as well-defined and, as a result, exclusionary in character also against family members who do not fit, the black sheep. The image may also become an idol instrumentalized for another purpose, political or economic. Or the tension of the ambiguity is avoided by not taking familial identification seriously, for example, because it would harm individual development and fulfillment. Here, Pierron refers precisely to the well-known alternatives of the current moral predicament on which this volume reflects: dogmatism versus relativism. His alternative is to nourish the specific power of expression that characterizes it as a symbol and makes it “robust,”<sup>30</sup> which means the symbol is not explained in a functional sense, nor used in a dogmatic way. This power consists in being able to give expression without suggesting complete clarity or unambiguity, in naming the inextricable or obscure without doing away with it. The symbolics of the family is “dense” because it keeps together opposites like sameness and difference, voluntary and involuntary, given and made, first and last name. But precisely this dense ambiguity gives rise to a “plurality of interpretations” which counteracts reification. There is not one true reference of the symbol and therefore a “logic of superabundance.”<sup>31</sup> Like Traina and Butler, Pierron is thus well aware of the danger of exclusion attached to emphatic use of the notion of the family. He observes the dogmatic understanding of the “model family” as an acute problem. But his alternative is not to start from the fundamental precarity but from a symbolic understanding of the family.

This symbolic, dialectic language, however, is all but obvious in late modernity. This may surprise, because this time is just as well that of an

27 Pierron, “Repenser la Famille?” 635–6.

28 Pierron, “Famille et Sécularisation,” 151.

29 Pierron, “Repenser la Famille?” 635.

30 Pierron, “Famille et Sécularisation,” 158–9.

31 Pierron, “Famille et Sécularisation,” 154–9. For his notion of the symbol as well as the term “logic of superabundance” Pierron also draws on Ricoeur (see, e.g., 159, note 14).

allergy to dogmatic family understandings, which may suggest a sensitivity to more ambiguous and open language. Pierron relates the lack of obviousness of symbolic language to the climate of secularization or post-Christendom. Religion is no longer a main provider of symbols. There is, however, a “spiritual dimension” in experiencing the family that demands expression: an “inextricable belonging that inhabits and haunts us.”<sup>32</sup> Pierron relates this “inextricable” in particular to the given, involuntary nature of the family, which cannot be fully elucidated or understood. It is a dimension that can be aptly expressed in symbolic language. How does this happen, now that religion is waning as a provider of symbols? Pierron distinguishes closed conceptions of symbolization from open conceptions. Closed ones are found in a biomedical understanding of family in terms of fertility or an economic one of monetizable care and service. The open ones are found in art, ranging from films to paintings, where images do not pretend to express what family means in a definitive way but articulate its strangeness or “inextricable infinity” that expands in the past and the future, and relates origin to hope. This is where Pierron locates a transcendent moment in the family.<sup>33</sup>

Traina locates the transcendent moment elsewhere, in the acknowledgement of a fundamental human precarity to which families in all their various forms try to respond by a “virtuous commitment” to the good of the other. By drawing attention to this moment she seeks common ground for a moral discussion to overcome the present fraught, or even poisoned character of the family. We signalled, however, that this may not feel like common ground for those who, like Butler, are too heavily confronted with the exclusionary character of the suggested virtuousness of the family. Does Pierron’s attempt to reveal the transcendent in the inextricable opaqueness of the family’s belonging run less of that risk? In my view, Pierron’s approach may still cause alienation, because there are two strands in it. On the one hand, he emphasizes the inextricability, opaqueness of the family’s meaning. In these contexts he also uses the term ‘mystery.’ On the other hand, by identifying “recognizing oneself in a lineage” as the core challenge the family provokes, Pierron does give a quite specific understanding of the family’s meaning. This is not a narrow meaning, as we have seen, neither one that is reified but one that remains open in a tensive dialectics between the poles of sameness and difference. In spite of this openness, I think this more specific understanding may again block the moral conversation with those who are suspicious of the exclusionary character of the category of the family. It may easily be understood as another idealization of the family,

32 Pierron, “*Famille et Sécularisation*,” 154.

33 Pierron, “*Famille et Sécularisation*,” 160–5.

here as the ultimate site of recognition. It may raise critical questions as to whether identification with consciously chosen people outside the family, as well as recognition by them, is not just as fundamental for being human. This may in particular be countered in our time in which we hope for the development of individuals beyond the possibly narrow confines of one's context of birth and upbringing. Moreover, the language of 'recognition' may give way to a psychological understanding of the family which is less directed at a spiritual dimension. Therefore, I would like to explore whether it is not possible to create an approach that gives more room to the first strand, that of the awareness of the inextricability and opaqueness of the family. I find an impulse for this in the thinking of Gabriel Marcel who chooses the term 'mystery' to capture this approach.<sup>34</sup>

### 12.3 Approaching the Family as Mystery

Marcel distinguishes an approach in terms of mystery from one in terms of problems.<sup>35</sup> Research topics that are demarcated as problems are placed at a distance in order to analyze their factual character and to arrive at objectively convincing insights also regarding their evaluation. Such an approach is clearly visible in current social scientific and ethical family research with their focus on all kinds of troublesome aspects of family life, like instability, divorce or same-sex relations. The theme of the meaning of the family in general, as a distinct sphere of morality, is not prominent in these approaches. It seems to be presupposed but not addressed as such. The alternative indicated in Marcel's mystery approach starts not with a clear, insightful demarcation like the problem approaches but by first of all "evoking" the mystery. The "soul should be awakened to its presence."<sup>36</sup> For Marcel, this mode of the "evocation" is necessary in particular because his time lacks a sensitivity for mystery. A basic attitude towards life is missing. This attitude has to do with an awareness of what we receive in life, with being thankful, and with answering this given by creatively shaping it ourselves. It is an attitude of respect and piety. If the family is approached with this attitude, it may be possible "to catch a glimpse of the meaning of the sacred bond which it

34 Gabriel Marcel uses the term 'mystery' to indicate an alternative to common ways of approaching the topic of the family in reflection in two lectures dating from 1942 and 1943, given at the *Ecole des hautes études familiales* at Lyon and Toulouse (translated as "The Mystery of the Family" and "The Creative Vow as Essence of Fatherhood," in *Homo Viator. Introduction to the Metaphysic of Hope*, (South Bend: Graham 2010), 62–90, 91–117).

35 In "The Mystery of the Family," Marcel introduces the distinction between 'problem' and 'mystery' as central to his philosophy in general (62).

36 Marcel, "The Mystery of the Family," 66.

is man's lot to form with life."<sup>37</sup> For Marcel, the approach to the family as mystery thus implies a "sense of holiness," a feeling for the sacred. In the terms used above this may be called a transcendent moment. Evoking the mystery means presenting the theme in such a way that it appeals to readers, calls upon "inner resources" instead of as a generally understandable content.

But what is it that is evoked when the family is approached in this way? In contrast with problem approaches a mystery approach does not focus on one of the family's "innumerable aspects,"<sup>38</sup> which may be analyzed in an isolated way, but on the family as a unity. Over against historical interpretations that confront us with the relative character of family life in each time and place, a mystery approach seeks for a "constant element."<sup>39</sup> By this, Marcel means a "demand rather than a law." At the basis of the family lies an "exercise of a fundamental generosity."<sup>40</sup> The generosity that constitutes the unity of the family is also explained by Marcel in terms of creation. In both this generosity and creation Marcel describes an ambiguity, a moment of receiving and of giving. The family shows us that we cannot give an existence to ourselves, any more than to another. However, we can entrust ourselves to it. A child is not there for our sake nor for its own. In this way family connections point beyond themselves to life, a much larger connection. Starting a family is then understood as an "act of thanksgiving, a creative testimony."<sup>41</sup> Like an artist, the human being in the family is "the bearer of some flame which he must kindle and pass on." In all these expressions, it is clear that there is more to family life than biology can explain or convention can order and organize. Life is something we cannot comprehend yet which does not exist without our own irreplaceable place in it and contribution to it.<sup>42</sup> The family also shows that we have a past and a future. Through the bond with our relatives, we are even connected to the whole of humanity.<sup>43</sup> This way of understanding family clarifies further the transcendent moment of catching "a glimpse of the meaning of the sacred bond which it is man's lot to form with life." Marcel understands this pact as a reciprocal movement: human beings having confidence in life and life responding to this confidence. It is this "harmony between consciousness and the life force" that the family may incarnate.<sup>44</sup>

37 Marcel, "The Mystery of the Family," 82.

38 Marcel, "The Creative Vow," 92.

39 Marcel, "The Creative Vow," 93.

40 Marcel, "The Mystery of the Family," 81.

41 Marcel, "The Mystery of the Family," 82.

42 Marcel, "The Creative Vow," 113.

43 Marcel, "The Mystery of the Family," 65.

44 Marcel, "The Mystery of the Family," 81.

Marcel's interpretation of transcendence in the family in terms of its connection to life must not be misunderstood as a statement that serves as a conclusion, the end of his arguments and in so far a clarification of the mystery. It is rather a starting point, a way to indicate the attitude of approaching the family as mystery. In his Gifford Lectures he describes this approach as "meta-sociological," that is, as "going deeper than sociology does."<sup>45</sup> It scrutinizes the family at the level of the question "What am I?" and "How is it that I am able to ask myself what I am?" The first thing Marcel points to in relation to this fundamental question is the need to acknowledge life as a gift, which is precisely what he sees lacking in his time. The attitude underlying this acknowledgement may be summarized by the term "piety."<sup>46</sup> Marcel emphasizes that piety should not be understood as "devotion," or "edification" but as a "piety in knowledge." This knowledge has a "sense" of the "metaphysical principle" that should be acknowledged as the third "impulse" that shapes life, apart from "natural determinism" and "human will."<sup>47</sup> This principle cannot be known. Recognizing it is something which "belongs to faith alone." It means "sensing its mysterious efficacy and bowing to it humbly."

Marcel's designations of the attitude implied in a mystery approach remind of the sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of the family for which Pierron aims in approaching family in the symbolic mode. But the focus on the symbolic as distinct from a dogmatic or relativistic mode does not so much ask attention for the attitude implied in this mode. It warns against the reification of language. Marcel, on the other hand, asks attention for the attitude that is presupposed in Pierron's appreciation of ambiguity and inextricability. Marcel understands this attitude as an openness to a transcendent moment. By presenting the family as mystery he first of all aims to engage the reader in this openness and not so much to convey certain content. But is this not at the expense of content? Does not highlighting the mystery mean a wallowing in the arcane? Traina and even Pierron, it seems, provide a much more concrete insight into what characterizes the family, that is, precarity and recognition. But what we saw lacking in Traina is insight into the specific character of the family. This is problematic because, as Butler's thinking shows, the family is not experienced by everyone as a pre-eminent context of the call out of ourselves that originates in precarity. The pointing at our shared precarity and the call from it does not yet help to clarify why the idea of answering a call is as such a subject of moral debate at present, nor on how to decide on which calls should be answered. In a

45 Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Volume I: Reflection & Mystery* (Chicago IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1950), 197.

46 Marcel, "The Creative Vow," 94.

47 Marcel, "The Creative Vow," 93.

similar way, Pierron's attention for the moment of active recognition in a genealogical lineage does not clarify why this is so difficult in our time. This difficulty seems to lie not only in the dominant secularity that makes symbolic language less obvious, but also in the idea in itself that something is given, that makes an appeal to us and to which we should respond. For both these difficult aspects, Marcel's approach does seem enlightening: he sees our time as one in which sensitivity to mystery is lacking, an attitude of piety that is presupposed in experiences of givenness and a call from outside.

#### **12.4 A Mystery Approach Related to Topical Moral Issues**

This comparison of Marcel with Pierron and Traina brings us back to the common theme of this volume: how drawing attention to a transcendent good may nourish current moral debate. It may seem odd to suggest with Marcel that precisely a sensitivity to the transcendent may be a common ground to get beyond impasses of the current moral climate. But I think it is precisely through the theme of the family that the strength and necessity can be seen of that movement towards the transcendent implied in a mystery approach. For there are obvious links to the mystery character in everyday family life. Family is experienced as a special relationship, a tie that is largely unchosen. Even when it is chosen it feels more like a given than other relationships, with friends or neighbours. Usually, the family tie seems to be a largely unconscious phenomenon; it is rather self-evident, not something to ponder on. In crisis, under pressure, it may come to light. But when this happens, it is often hard to name its meaning, to explain to non-family members or even to oneself why we feel, for example, responsible for, or called to account by, or just more intensely interested in people in the case of family members. Moreover, acting in such a family crisis seems more difficult than in other morally complex situations. Claims arising from family relationships are not easily accounted for, and thus it is difficult to assess their accuracy. Family relations are notorious for their moral complexity. That is often a reason to shy away from morality in the familial sphere when possible, but also from the topic of the moral meaning of the family in general. This is all the more so in our time which gives prominence to the variety of family forms and the struggle for recognition of less visible or marginalized ways of being a family. To conclude, I would like to mention three examples of this being at a loss and shying away from the family and indicate how sensitivity for transcendence in the mode of mystery may contribute to a different moral approach to this aspect of human life.

In countries in which the welfare state is waning because it is too expensive, the government is increasingly relying on families for

caregiving tasks. Such policy takes for granted that being a family implies caring for one another, although the past era of the welfare state promoted the opposite: a lot of care was outsourced to professionals. It is no exaggeration to say that in that very era the family was narrowed or eroded as a social structure and in that shaky state now suddenly has to bear a heavy burden of responsibility again. In this situation attention to transcendence can, in my opinion, mean the following. It may make people aware of the special nature of this appeal to family responsibility. Family responsibility is assumed to be widely held and self-evidently taken seriously, but not as something that was publicly agreed upon as a kind of constitution or social contract. For, so far, the development of the welfare state had agreed on precisely the opposite. That the appeal to responsibility implied in the family tie is nevertheless invoked again is remarkable. Understanding this tie as a mystery may account for its obscure, non-explicit, yet strong meaning. Highlighting this special nature of the appeal to the family tie may also create common ground for further moral conversation on how society should organize care. With all the plurality in family composition and ideas about how families should live, this appeal is apparently still something to fall back on and may as such function as common ground in a pluralistic situation. This seems crucial to get the moral conversation going. Only when the appeal is acknowledged its constructive and problematic aspects can subsequently also be discussed.

Such a moral conversation that starts from the acknowledgement of the transcendent moment of the appeal differs from the ones to which the views of Traina and Butler, or Pierron give rise. The appeal may be further clarified from Marcel's idea of family as context in which the transcendent moment of the "bond with life" comes to light. Family is a site of what may be called deep experiences of receiving life and of losing it. These experiences are more fundamental and less focused on the individual than those of recognition which Pierron highlights. This fundamental level may open a broader interpretation which may enrich the obvious psychological connotation attached to the notion. Moreover, when the transcendent character of the appeal is foregrounded, it is not necessary to create a tension between family and other relations, as Butler does. On the contrary, family confronts pre-eminently with the transcendental aspects of morality that are also at issue more broadly. Thus the conversation may be broadened from the recognizable, everyday experiences of the appeal inherent in the family tie to that of the givenness of relationships outside the family. This movement of reflection on givenness is different from that which starts from a general, humanly shared precarity. The unnameable yet strong experience of the givenness of being dependent on one another in the family, or of an 'inextricable belonging' is highlighted and not first of all the negative fact of precarity or vulnerability. The starting point is therefore more

neutral, one of wonder. Here, Marcel's terms of acknowledging the gift come to mind. Moreover, acknowledging givenness draws attention to our acting understood as answering this givenness. This enables a more thorough discussion of what seems most difficult in familial morality: discerning between the various calls. The following examples point out this difficulty.

For more serious, everyday problems, families are supported by professionals such as social workers. Their support is at present often criticized for being too much focused on solving problems, too much interventionist or, once more, too much directed at the well-being of the individual and thus instrumentalizing relationships. From an understanding of the family as mystery these difficult aspects of professional support may be discussed as related to their focus on problems instead of mystery. The alternative of a mystery approach should not be perceived as a complete doing away with a problem approach in the sense of finding concrete solutions, but it may broaden the understanding of the scope of support skills that are needed. A mystery approach may point out the need for an attitude sensitive to the unnameable yet strong givenness of the family tie. This tie should first be acknowledged before its specific shadow or beneficent sides can be recognized. When, for example, the question is at stake whether a child can stay at home or not, a mystery approach makes one aware of the deepest roots of the family. How can those roots be taken seriously in caring for the family and even in any intervention? Recognizing the specific kind of connectedness of family members in comparison with other relations gives insight into the fact that people want to remain loyal to partners, parents, children or further relatives, often despite gross abuses. Of course this loyalty should not simply be confirmed or respected, but it cannot be denied either. The damage sustained in family is so severe because, in a sense, one cannot get rid of one's family. For family life, the indispensable and irreplaceable character of the members is basic. My mother remains my mother, even when I break up with her. Children develop into individuals precisely as part of the 'we' of the family, how problematic this 'we' may be. Starting from this attitude it may come to light that the experienced givenness of the family also means a tendency to close off, turn inward, hold on to its own values and see the outside world as potentially hostile. These insights can not only help to better understand families, but could also be actively used in conversations with families. One could thematize the specific belonging together, the unconditional commitment and the pressure that comes from that as well as the special strength. Particularly in such a conversation it is important to be aware of the unnameability of the family tie as contributing to the peculiar complexity of the family.

Finally, a good illustration of the shying away from the family because of its complexities is the exclusion of family from crucial decisions on



end of life, as in Dutch euthanasia law and policy.<sup>48</sup> The physician who decides whether the euthanasia wish is a legitimate basis for making it happen must make sure that the wish is really that of the client. For this reason, the physician only discusses the final decision of whether the euthanasia should take place with the client and ensures that third parties, in practice mainly family members, have not played a decisive role in the realization of the euthanasia wish. The wish must be identifiable as individual and autonomous. In settings like these, bringing into view the mystery character of the family may be important. It would illuminate both the moment of justified distrust of the family, and the possible experiences of people involved that this distrust does not do justice to the much more varied reality of actual family ties. It may make aware in a much more neutral sense that the family has strong claims on us of which we cannot express the precise meanings. Thus, the family cannot simply be ignored or left out of the picture of the final decision on euthanasia, even if its influence is dangerous. It must be taken into account as one of the important structures of life that bring us into contact with the issue of what is good while this good also remains transcendent. A broader awareness of this crucial place of the family may result in a different kind of regulations which fuel a different kind of moral conversation.

A mystery approach which takes the family's strong but unnameable "call upon us" as a starting point of reflection may open up a different perspective and lead to different policies and professional practices in dealing with the family's strong claims. The above examples concern settings in which moral conversations take place, which does not mean, of course, that we should limit conversations to such settings. Ethics should fuel moral debate that is close to ordinary life in which issues of life and death or family problems are, obviously, not always prominent. The family is a likely phenomenon to initiate moral conversation. I hope to have shown that a mystery approach with its sensitivity to transcendence may enable ways not to let these conversations end up in further polarizations of absolutists versus relativists, as we often see at present. Thus, not only the family may be liberated of its "hopelessly poisoned" image but also ethics that takes into account transcendence.

48 For the text of the Dutch law see: <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0012410/2020-03-19> (accessed September 30, 2021). For an explanation of the law which explicitly refers negatively to the family ('No one should force or pressure the patient. Not family or friends.'). see <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/levenseinde-en-euthanasie/zorgvuldigheidseisen> (accessed September 30, 2021). I supervise a PhD research on the topic of the moral position of family in euthanasia requests in dementia by Trijntje Scheeres-Feitsma who has published on this in Dutch (e.g., *Onderzoek ten behoeve van het maatschappelijk debat rond levensbeëindiging bij mensen met dementie*, Woerden: Reliëf 2020; "In goede en kwade dagen. De rol van naasten bij euthanasie bij mensen met dementie," *Tijdschrift Geestelijke Verzorging* 24 (2021): 26–35).

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