

## EPILOGUE

### *Morality of Appeal and Answer* *Ethics and the Sacred Character of Family as Mystery*

#### *Ethics and Everyday Life*

Ethics is always on the lookout for moments when life no longer appears to be self-evident, when it is no longer obvious what one should think and how one should act, when daily routine is disturbed. This attentiveness may easily create a perverted impression of morality. The questions of good and evil seem to arise first of all in relation to this interrupted life and not to life in its everyday routine, the familiar everyday reality. By taking family as its object, this study aims for a different ethical approach. It does not localise the ethical relevance of the theme of family primarily in concrete, hot issues like divorce, same-sex couples or the familial duty to care or to donate organs. Its focus is on what family might mean as an everyday reality, something all people are all familiar with, even though they live their family lives in completely different ways. This means we do not start with asking what a good family should be or how family members should behave, but with what it might mean to be members of a family. This implies an open view as regards different forms of family life. Family is where people experience it.

Why is family in its everyday character a theme that is relevant to ethics? Because moral problems rise not only in relation to the well-known exceptional hard cases, but mostly in everyday life. Here people also experience the special appeal of family members. In the context of family, they are responsible for each other, for the upbringing of their own children as well as for orphaned grandchildren, grandnieces or nieces like Ruth and Lucille. Here they have duties of care, sometimes even for relatives they have never met. The family tie thus lies at the basis of many moral expectations, but why? Why do people feel strongly responsible for family members, or why does the law hold them responsible even if they do not feel this? This basis seems mostly self-evident – it is only when one experiences a conflict of appeals that one may start to ponder or

question it. That this moral character is largely self-evident implies a difficulty for ethical reflection. For it turns out to be difficult to formulate what the family tie might mean. It is this difficulty that we have taken as the starting point of our ethical reflection because we think it is crucial for any reflection on family. How can reflection allow for it? This became the first leading question of our investigation.

The second reason to focus ethical attention on what family might mean as an everyday reality lies in its controversial status. Many experience family as a field where great changes have taken place in the past fifty years. Although many people marry, it is no longer an obvious choice. The same holds for having children. In many north-western European countries, taking care of elderly parents is no longer an obvious task for the children. Changes like these have led to a great variety in family life. The moral status of family life is controversial, however. Strong advocates of a family life without obvious patterns and duties oppose defenders of so-called family values. Family is a field where culture wars are fought. It is obviously a theme with a conservative aura. Asking that attention be paid to it is suspect from a progressive perspective unless aims like inclusivity for all forms of family are prominent. It is remarkable, however, that, in these controversies, the question of what family might mean is mostly absent. What family means seems obvious in either of the opposing camps. Those who want to remain outside the controversy are likely to doubt the need for studying what family might mean because it only leads to controversy and also because it seems self-evident. As a result, despite the heated debates on family-related topics, the question of why people experience specific moral appeals among family members is not discussed. It is precisely in this situation of controversy and hot issues, therefore, that it seems important to step back and ask the forgotten question of what family might mean in an open, neutral and basic way. Discussing this question could help shed light on why feelings are running high on precisely the theme of family and on why precisely family-related topics are so prominent among the moral hot issues at present. Moreover, reflection on this question could contribute to overcoming the tendency to be entrenched in positions, the lack of open conversation or debate and deadlocks. What might an ethical reflection that clarifies what is at stake in the current controversial status of family look like? This became the second leading question.

We aim for an ethics that brings the difficult aspects of family to light and explores alternative ways of dealing with them. This is why we chose two fields, givenness and dependence. Here we localised the heart of the controversial status of the theme of family. The moral implications of

family as something given, as a relationship one does not choose but in which one finds oneself, are the subject of contention. Is it right to suggest that relatives are people to depend on, especially for care, guardianship or financial support? Family seems to be reviled and glorified because of a suggested given, inescapable, close relationship of dependence that implies moral duties. This seems to be at odds with ideals of freedom and autonomy, but it is also the basis for moral duties of upbringing and care. More than other relationships, family confronts people in our time with these issues of how to think about givenness and dependence in relation to morality. Apart from this confrontation, family also offers one, so to say, a phenomenon. By reflection on this phenomenon in what may be called a neutral way, outside of or preceding the controversies, it is also possible to discuss the aspects of givenness and dependence embodied in a concrete setting of human life. Givenness and dependence are, in a sense, a matter of fact in families. In this setting, these neutral facts may be investigated as to their moral implications. Therefore, these two fields seemed relevant both to the purpose of exploring the charged, controversial status of the theme of family and of finding different ways to deal with it.

It was clear from the start that such a general reflection on what family might mean must defend itself against the reproach of so-called essentialising. Is it possible to speak about family in general or 'the phenomenon of family'? How can one descry some common denominator in the current multitude of family forms? Does the question of what family might mean not tacitly presuppose a specific family form that is subsequently taken as normative, as a 'structure of life'? In addition, this question can be readily suspected of the tendency to idealise family. Does not the interest in family presuppose that it is a good? How might such an open investigation be critical of all the problematic sides of family life? Can these injustices be accounted for and critically addressed if one starts with the general question of what it might mean to be members of a family? These suspicious questions have accompanied us throughout this book.

This suspicion, together with the central attention to the difficulty of naming what family might mean and for the controversial moral status of the family theme, could easily have made our project negative in nature. However, Gabriel Marcel's notion of family as mystery has provided us with a concept to express this difficulty and with impulses to incorporate it into a constructive approach. We discovered its relevance when analysing current fields of family research. Marcel interprets the character of family as mystery in the sense that one cannot objectify family as a problem apart

from oneself. One is always involved in it. Marcel opposes a mystery approach to a problem approach. Research topics that are demarcated as problems are placed at a distance in order to analyse their factual character and to arrive at objectively convincing insights and solutions. We recognised this problem approach in current family research with its focus on all kinds of problematic aspects of family life, with the aim of solving them. The basic question of whether and in what sense family is a distinct sphere of morality is not prominent in these approaches. It seems to be presupposed but not addressed as such. Therefore, we found little points of connection in these studies. The alternative indicated in Marcel's mystery approach starts not with a clear, insightful demarcation like the problem approaches, but with 'evoking' the mystery first of all. The 'soul should be awakened to its presence' (*Homo Viator*, 66). For Marcel, this mode of 'evocation' is particularly necessary because, according to him, his time lacks sensitivity to mystery. A basic attitude towards life, having to do with an awareness of what one receives in life, with being thankful and with answering this given by creatively shaping it oneself, is missing. It is an attitude of respect and piety. If family is approached with this attitude, it may be possible 'to catch a glimpse of the meaning of the sacred bond which it is man's lot to form with life' (82). For Marcel, approaching family as mystery thus implies a 'sense of holiness', a feeling for the sacred.

Evoking the mystery means not presenting the theme as a generally comprehensible content, but in such a way that it appeals to readers, appeals to 'inner resources'. For this purpose, we turned first of all to expressions of family in literary and artistic works. We selected expressions in which family ties come to light in such a way that the reader or viewer also becomes aware of the feeling for the sacred needed to descry it. We found them in Antigone's references to the divine character of the duty to bury her brother, in Rembrandt's Holy Family paintings and in the lived 'adulterous family' of the book of Hosea as an image of the relationship between God and believers. By starting from these literary and artistic expressions, we could avoid letting our reflection be dominated from the start by the controversial character of the theme of family which has unavoidably seeped into the recent academic discussions. Moreover, as Marcel indicates, these literary modes of expressions are better suited to evoking mystery than conceptual reflections. They leave more room for ambiguities and allow for the reader's involvement in the theme. They evoke a transcendent dimension in ways that do not need a strong, confessional religious language and can therefore be related to a broad reflection on what family might mean.

In these literary and artistic works, family ties come to light as mostly unarticulated bonds that are experienced as given and as a basis for acting and expecting something from other members of the family. Family members interpret this tie differently, however, which gives rise to conflict. The ways in which the ties come to light differ as well – from the extreme case of Antigone's being prepared to die for the illegal burial of her brother to a common everyday family scene like that in Rembrandt's Kassel painting or the restoration of Hosea's adulterous family. These evocations of family ties gave rise to reflective questions on how it is possible to formulate what a family tie might mean and how obvious it is, given the conflicts on it between Antigone and her family or the presence of a curtain and frame in Rembrandt's painting. The latter reveals that it is not family as such, but family as an image, that brings a family tie to light and enables reflection on what it might mean morally. The book of Hosea with its lived image of an 'adulterous family' enabled a further exploration of this image character. Here the tensions related to the concrete, everyday dependence of family members become an image that reveals a broader, even fundamental dependence of all life rooted in God.

Only secondarily did we turn to recent academic debates and other ethical reflections in which family figures. How could a mystery approach be elaborated in relation to these discourses? Our guiding focus has been that of the impasse. We analysed reflections on family with an eye to moments when they get stuck. Here, we supposed, we could investigate the fundamental difficulty of naming what family might mean. To do so, we selected various reflections with both critical and constructive aims and from different times. The recent critical voices we analysed are opposed to the idea as such that family can be studied as a distinct sphere of life because it suggests a sphere that is not political – that is, not shaped by human social arrangements – but a given. This suggestion makes the category 'family' liable to becoming a vehicle of dominant family views. Thus, reflection on family as a distinct sphere contributes to the exclusion and marginalisation not only of alternative forms of family life, but also of the care for dependants that takes place in families. We followed these critical arguments to the point where they reach an impasse. This impasse is often the result of a more constructive element that is not aligned to their critique. Thus, the critical voices of Judith Butler, kinship anthropology and the dependency critique also emphasise the need to reconsider the interdependence of human beings and of environment at large. As a result, they are also critical of the reigning views of being human and of knowing and acting in particular into which this fundamental relatedness is not

incorporated. That family is an obvious context in which this interdependence comes to light is acknowledged. This does not, however, alter their basic focus on the problematic aspects of family, both as a category in reflection and as a phenomenon in real life. This leads to impasses. These proved relevant to our reflection in the mode of mystery because they reveal the need for a different kind of approach able to account for the interdependence that is experienced pre-eminently in the sphere of family, as well as for the risks mentioned. We explored how a mystery approach could live up to this demand.

The constructive approaches showed the need for a mystery approach in a different way. We analysed authors who do reflect on family as a distinct sphere of life that is also important to take into account as regards morality. Here indeed it turned out to be a very complex task to formulate this distinct moral meaning of family and to avoid the impression that family is this special community automatically, in itself. We thus encountered the complexities of Hegel's characterisation of family as embodying the tensive combination of the natural, immediate and unconscious basis of acting. Ciavatta's interpretation of Hegel deepened this complexity by adding the paradox of family as a setting in which one becomes a person by being part of a 'we' – that is, by moments in which one is deprived of one's self-awareness and conscious decision-making. This intricate interwovenness of the individual and the collective in a 'we' is also highlighted in Schleiermacher's understanding of family as the germ of all community. In a similar way, Jean Lacroix's view of family focusses on the desire to be completed by and united with the other as a prerequisite for becoming a person. In these very general and fundamental ethical reflections, at the level of understanding what it means to be a moral human being, we observed the authors struggling to find a way to express the complex, paradoxical moral aspects of family. We analysed these difficulties as also pointing to the mystery character of family and to a different mode of understanding that could account for it. In the recent ethical views of Brenda Almond and Don Browning, we observed how room for the complexity and mystery of family disappears as a result of a strong, one-sided focus on its natural character. This focus does not stimulate moral reflection on what family might mean – an observation that again adds to the need for an alternative kind of approach.

In our analyses of these conceptual reflections, we needed to follow the arguments of the authors very closely in order to let the reader experience the complexities or incongruities as real impasses that ask for a different kind of reflection. Subsequently, we took them as impulses to elaborate

a mystery approach in line with Marcel's thinking in three movements. Before turning to our specifying perspectives of givenness and dependence, we focussed on the primary issue of whether and how family can be approached as a distinct moral sphere, a special kind of being connected, which we indicated by the phrase 'family tie'. A mystery approach pays attention to the experience of this tie presenting itself as a basis for expecting something from family members, and for acting in a specific way. It also points to the intuitive character of this presence; it does not figure so much as a conscious, explicitly mentioned reference point. Nevertheless, the tie may be experienced as a strong impulse for action, as implying certain responsibilities and duties – even though family members differ as to how they act on the basis of this tie. These aspects of the non-disclosed character of the tie and the differing experiences of what it implies turned out to be constructive elements for the further exploration of family as a distinct moral sphere.

Awareness of the character of mystery draws attention to the unnameable nature of the tie and what it implies as well as to the strong experiences of it as something one finds present without having chosen it. The latter aspect already points to the experience of givenness. Attention to the mystery character made us focus on the active attitude that is presupposed in the experience of givenness. This is one of taking reality utterly seriously in order to descry a deeper meaning in it which cannot be objectified. Living in a family may give rise to this attitude because in this setting one experiences pre-eminently what may be called a structure of life. As such, family appeals to people and asks for a response. The aspect of dependence was taken as a starting point to specify what this response might mean. Dependence as lived in a family refers to experiences of being intimately included in each other's lives, not on the basis of choice, and not to a certain degree, but fundamentally, forming one's personal identity. One cannot imagine oneself apart from one's family – however strained these relations may be. The character of mystery points out that this dependence remains obscure and cannot be elaborated in an outline of how to act on the basis of family ties. It also makes one aware of the reticent, closed character of family as a prerequisite for the existence of this special kind of dependence.

This threefold elaboration of the mystery character of family was interwoven with the analysis of the current controversial status of the theme of family. The current difficulties with the theme of family may be understood as related to precisely this character of mystery. This understanding deepens our first introduction to family as confronting us in our time with

givenness and dependence. Family is not just a difficult phenomenon due to the friction with dominant perspectives on relationships like choice, equality and substitutability. Behind this friction is a deeper sense of being at a loss on all three levels of the mystery we investigated. People are at a loss to know how to make sense of a tie which is experienced but cannot be fixed. What is the status of this experience? How should one act on the basis of this tie? Second, this experience can be understood as an appeal or call to find a deeper meaning in life, to approach life as given. This meaning cannot be objectified, however. How then should one respond to this appeal? The appeal may be harmful or beneficial. Many responses can be imagined, and there is no general rule for deciding on their correctness. Neither, finally, does the understanding of this given tie as dependent on others imply a clear view of one's obligations to them. All three aspects of family as mystery thus reveal it as a reality in which people are involved, which appeals to them and to which they have to respond. We cannot, however, objectify the meaning of this reality, define the moral status of the appeal and outline the good response. Thus, family is an awkward theme precisely because of its mystery character.

That our time is at a loss with this mystery character became clearly visible in the ambiguity of the critical views on family that we analysed. Among the critical feminist voices, for example, we discovered a fascination with Hegel's view of family despite the fierce objections to its essentialising character. Family continues to intrigue these researchers despite their fundamental criticism of family as a meaningful category. In a different way, this is shown in the vehement and ongoing opposition to biologicistic views among some kinship anthropologists. They cannot regard the views of family as given by nature as definitively disqualified. Kinship remains an intriguing phenomenon for an anthropology that views itself as being 'after kinship'. This ambiguity and the troublesome status of family revealed in the impasses can be explained by a lack of sensitivity to its character as mystery on each of the three levels we investigated. Thus, paying attention to the mystery character has also turned out to be of help in clarifying the current controversial status of the topic of family itself.

### *The Sacred Character of Family as Mystery*

Our ethical investigation into what family might mean is a theological one that asks what lights up when a transcendent dimension is brought into play. In our view, family is a good topic through which to explore this because its connotations of givenness and dependence touch upon a transcendent or

sacred dimension. In Marcel's approach to family as mystery, which regards it as intrinsically related to the sacred, we recognised a similar interest. His view of mystery provided us with a starting point for our investigation, but no more than that. Marcel did not elaborate on his approach in a more general ethical framework, nor did he feel the need to account for why an approach to family as mystery would enable one 'to catch a glimpse of the meaning of the sacred bond which it is man's lot to form with life' (*Homo Viator*, 82). At the end of our study, we would like to look back on how we elaborated on Marcel's notion. We will look back on the theological ethical character of our approach and relate it more emphatically to our time, which differs from that of Marcel's time precisely on this point of a feeling for the sacred. Our time is already different because the framework of a 'waning feeling for the sacred' to which Marcel could refer rather unproblematically has been complicated by the so-called postsecular critique.<sup>1</sup> The recognition of our time as postsecular does not mean, however, that the secular suspicion of a transcendent perspective in ethics is no longer present. In our reading of present-day authors as different as Butler and Almond, we observed how natural it is to associate attention to a sacred dimension with absolutising tendencies, entering arenas of contention and limiting one's audience to circles of believers. Drawing attention to a transcendent dimension in relation to family is, moreover, seen as only reinforcing the dangers of talking about family in a way that excludes marginalised family forms and sanctions the status quo. Therefore, it is important to return to this aspect of our investigation and relate it to a contemporary author who situates himself consciously in this postsecular debate and whose thinking also resonates with aspects of Marcel's view on the difficulties of making sense of the sacred.

In his article 'Recovering the Sacred', Charles Taylor analyses our time as characterised by a 'pervasive' call for some form of re-enchantment of the world which has 'arisen in the face of modernity' (115).<sup>2</sup> This call is rooted in the awareness that something has been lost in the modern process of disenchantment that should be recovered. The critical question it gives rise to is whether this taking leave of disenchantment has a deep enough awareness of what this disenchantment is about – which is necessary to provide a convincing alternative. According to Taylor, 'enchantment' means

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of theological views of the postsecular, see the special issue Petruschka Schaafsma, 'Making Sense of the Postsecular: Theological Explorations of a Critical Concept' and 'Evil and Religion: Ricoeurian Reflections on Postsecular Reassessments of Religion', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76/2 (2015): 91–9 and 129–48).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, 'Recovering the Sacred', *Inquiry* 54/2 (2011): 113–25.

experiencing the natural world as inhabited by spirits and moral forces by which human life is affected in ways humans cannot understand or control. This popular view is paralleled on a metaphysical level in a theory of the world as reflecting and manifesting a 'Great Chain of Being' (114). In this view, the natural order of the world is the same as the social one. 'Disenchantment' means taking leave of the idea that natural things are 'charged' – that is, have an 'incorporated meaning' (115). Meanings are nothing more than something in the human mind – projections – and are thus arbitrary. As a result, the 'physical world, outside the mind, must proceed by causal laws that in no way turn on the moral meanings things have for us'. 'Re-enchantment' protests the implication of this unmasking – that is, the idea of a universe 'totally devoid of meaning' (116).

Taylor criticises both dis- and re-enchantment because of their indebtedness to the idea that meaning is arbitrarily conferred. In his view, this need not follow from a critique of the enchanted view of the world. When meaning no longer resides in the physical nature of things as such, this does not do away with the experience of certain demands on us that we cannot regard as projective and thus arbitrary. We experience these demands as 'claims made on us by certain times, places, actions and people' (118). These are morally relevant because we cannot simply ignore them; they count as 'strong evaluations' (117). Our response to them is such that they 'genuinely motivate us'. This genuine character must also be understood in a normative sense: our moral sensitivity depends on the ability to be motivated in this way. People who do not experience such claims are thought to have a 'limitation, blindness, or insensitivity'. There is thus something 'objectively right about this response' which should be cultivated. The special character of these strong evaluations consists, on the one hand, in their being 'firmly anchored in our being-in-the world' but experienced as 'sacred' on the other. They are not 'sacred' in the sense of enchanted – that is, as a qualification of specific locations, times, performances, or persons (118). Rather, their sacredness lies in their inescapable claim on us which we cannot regard as a demand that 'just emanates from us' (117). This meaning of the notion of the sacred does not need re-enchantment to become aware of it; it only requires an acknowledgement of the non-arbitrary and genuinely motivating character of some claims on us.

Taylor's attention to the sacred character of certain claims on us may be read as a parallel to Marcel's attention to mystery. Both presuppose a specific attitude towards reality. Marcel uses terms like 'gratitude', 'respect' and 'piety' to characterise it. For him, this attitude presupposes

a feeling for the sacred because it does not relate to the world as either a deterministic universe or as a matter to be shaped by human will. It is an attitude which is open to the world and responds to the appeal of life. It takes responsibility by engaging in life. This appeal clearly parallels Taylor's notion of a claim, a non-projective meaning that is found in the world and has a sacred status in the sense that people experience it as something that cannot be ignored but on whose basis they should act. Taylor sees our time as one in which this sacred status is not acknowledged. The disenchanted views of reality are inclined to regard such claims as nothing but human projections and therefore arbitrary. The calls for re-enchantment, on the other hand, are unable to provide an alternative because they stick to the disenchanted analysis of sacredness as presupposing a world inhabited by uncontrollable spirits and moral forces. This analysis of our time does not just regard it as one of disenchantment. It also recognises a dissatisfaction with the modern project. However, this dissatisfaction is trapped in the terms in which modernity has grasped the problem of the sacred. What is lacking is a feeling for the sacred in the world as making strong claims on us.

It is easy to observe parallels to these dis- and re-enchanting approaches in current reflections on family. Here, disenchantment is prominent in the critical views that oppose any overstatement of the given character of family as somehow 'sacred' and therefore good. In part, they observe the dangers of absolutising the contingent already in the project as such of investigating family as a distinct moral sphere. Calls for re-enchantment, on the other hand, can be associated with the views of Almond and Browning, who aim for a renewal of a kind of spiritual naturalism. They draw attention to the lost awareness of what is natural, which they see as indispensable for revealing the good. In our analyses of both the critical and constructive views, we concluded that the impasses to which these views lead are rooted in a lack of awareness of family as mystery. Following Taylor, we can further specify this lack as one of a transcendent dimension: implicit in it is a view of the sacred as either arbitrary projection or inherent in the natural world. On the other hand, we also concluded that the impasses arise because a sense of mystery is not entirely absent. The critical, disenchanted feminist views and those of the new kinship anthropology display a fascination with family despite their strong opposition to family as a kind of given. In a similar way, the dependency critique – despite its aim to turn hidden family care into a public task – is not unaware of how dependence comes to light precisely in this context of family. The re-enchanted references to the natural in Almond and Browning also hint at

family as something mysterious that cannot be completely accounted for in terms of how the sciences understand what is natural. However, these aspects in which traces of an awareness of the mystery character come to light could not be elaborated within the frameworks of these critical and constructive views because of what we might call their overly minimalist or maximalist views of the sacred. The critical views are too afraid of transcendence because of the danger of a glorification of the arbitrary; the constructive ones are too fully committed to the natural as guiding morality and thus having a transcendent status to allow for an elaboration of family as mystery.

*Family as Mystery: Appeal and Answer*

Taylor's analysis is helpful in gaining a better understanding of how transcendence is at stake in our time also in reflections on family that do not explicitly refer to it. We recognise his aim of formulating a different notion of the sacred beyond dis- and re-enchantment in our theological ethical elaboration of Marcel's approach to family as mystery. Taylor's notion of a 'sacred claim' also challenges us to take a closer look at an important aspect of our elaboration of the moral character of family as mystery itself, which we did not yet analyse separately. Taylor relates this sacred character to the experience of an inescapable moral claim on us that cannot be regarded as a projection. He focusses on the experience of being claimed as crucial for morality. The claim is not formulated as a kind of general rule. The notion of a 'sacred claim' clearly resonates with what we have so far indicated by terms like the 'appeal', 'call' or 'duty' inherent in the family tie.

We came across this appeal in the Prologue. It is prominent in the question of the guardianship of Ruth and Lucille that different family members in turn accept as a matter of course. The story of Antigone also starts from her experience of an appeal implied in the relationship to her brother. For her, the call to bury her brother is inescapable. That she claims it to be a divine law corresponds to Taylor's notion of a sacred claim. The story also reveals that the other family members do not act on the family tie, at least not initially. That they cannot ignore it in the end seems to indicate that they did experience the call right from the start. In relation to the perspective of givenness as well, we reflected on the sacred appeal of family. We first saw this evoked by Rembrandt's image of the Holy Family, where a perfectly ordinary scene can serve as an image of the sacred. This scene, surrounded by frame and curtain, was finally interpreted as a strong

image that can communicate a sacred appeal. It invites the viewer to regard everyday family life as given in the sense of having a deeper meaning. This alternative understanding of givenness does not imply that family as such is sacred or a good. Being open to the experience of family as given means adopting an active attitude of taking life as one finds it utterly seriously so that one can experience the appeal and a deeper meaning can come to light. This active attitude can then continue in formulating an answer to the appeal. The answer need not be affirmative. Nor can it be formulated in general: one has to find one's own way creatively to deal with the experience of the appeal. As such, the experience of the appeal is closely related to the understanding of family as a context in which people experience dependence. Dependency relations are about being claimed and claiming. We discovered this to be a prerequisite of moral formation and thus of becoming a person. Family is a context in which the claims inherent in the dependency relation are felt most urgently. By approaching this dependence as mystery, it is possible to acknowledge the strength of the appeal of the family tie without immediately evaluating it in a moral sense. Rather, it makes one aware of how hard it is to evaluate this appeal.

Does this elaboration of family as mystery in terms of making sacred claims on us not once more provoke all the critical objections of essentialising and idealising? People may not experience the appeals in the context of family relationships as contingent, but, when they reflect on them from a distance, they can easily see they are the results of a specific historical constellation. Does Taylor's concept of strong evaluations not open the door again to absolutising the status quo, including particular situations of abuse by accepting claims people cannot bear? The discourse of the sacred in the sense in which we find it in Taylor indicates that certain claims on us cannot be explained as constructed and that these are crucial to understanding morality. This argument does not imply, however, that these claims *are* sacred in the sense that they should be followed or accepted and cannot be rejected. Family is a setting where people experience these claims, but that does not mean this setting is itself sacred or good. Nor is it fixed in its form.

As we emphasised from the start, family is there where people experience it, also outside of blood relations. When family is related to experiences of givenness and dependence, this can be further explained as being called or inescapably experiencing a claim on oneself. Calling this experience sacred is an attempt to further specify the mystery character. That means that this discourse of the sacred claim can be understood as one that tries to express an aspect of life in which one is always personally involved and that

therefore cannot be translated into objective, non-personal language. Such a claim cannot be formulated in a general sense outside of the situation in which one experiences it, nor can it be related to certain fixed forms of family life. This comes to light also in *Antigone*, where the claim is never formulated explicitly. The law to which Antigone appeals is divine in the sense that no one knows its origin; it is an unwritten law. Antigone experiences its claim immediately. It 'genuinely motivates' her, and she regards her response to this law as 'objectively right', to use Taylor's words. However, Ismene and Creon, who are also family members of Polynices, respond in very different ways. Apparently, Antigone cannot convince them of the correctness of her acting on the claim of the family tie, not even by appealing to an unwritten, divine law. Moreover, the cost of Antigone's way of answering the claim of the family tie is high.

This reference to Antigone points to the reverse of the criticism that the notion of a sacred claim implies a dangerous absolutising of the contingent. An awareness of the experience of moral claims as sacred seems crucial precisely to prevent the dangers of abuse in the context of family. The sacred character of the claim implies an appeal that is so strong that one may give in to it automatically, without reflection. Ciavatta expresses a similar awareness in understanding family as the sphere of unreflective morality, evoked so intensely in Antigone's actions. Moral action in the sphere of family is characterised by immediacy. This unconscious level of our moral experience is thus incommunicable. The significance or authority that family members may have for each other cannot be understood by outsiders. Within a family, one experiences it intuitively. The acknowledgement of these moral experiences is crucial in being able to discern the specific risks of family life. The immediate impulses for acting on the basis of the family tie may be so strong that the individual family members deny themselves right up to possibly harming themselves. Lacroix in particular makes us aware of the characteristic reticence of family, its non-disclosing character which requires the secluded sphere of the private. In this secluded sphere, the sacred character of the claim might even be more dangerous because there are less competing claims. Such dangers come to light precisely by acknowledging the sacred character of the claims experienced in a family setting.

Lacroix is aware of these dangers of the closed and intimate character of family. He analyses the concrete practice of confession as expressing the heart of family life, the delicate moral substance of being open to the sacred claim and answering it. He also understands it in terms of sacrifice. This term clearly indicates that the dangers of the sacred claim are not absent. In

a family, people may open to the other in such a way that they surrender themselves to it. Lacroix, however, regards the reticent context of family as one in which it may be possible to arrive at a way of confessing and thus of sacrifice that does not destroy people but recognises them and makes them persons. Here, intimacy and sociability create a sphere in which confession can be reciprocal. That is not possible in the public sphere. The public confession of a criminal is not answered by society. It is precisely by confessing that the criminal is revealed as guilty. The public domain is ruled by the logic of crime and punishment. There is no real deliverance from guilt in this logic. In the context of family, confession may become reciprocal by being answered by the other. Lacroix emphasises that this reciprocity arises by relating to a third, higher dimension. Confession is not just expressing one's love for or guilt to the other, but seeing oneself as part of a unity that transcends the two. Lacroix uses both the notions of family and the sacred for this higher dimension. For Lacroix, the possibility of having a child may serve as a concrete implication of this commitment to a higher 'we'. Taylor's notion of the sacred claim highlights that this moment of confession is not something to which people decide independently, out of themselves. It is to be understood as answering a higher appeal.

In the story of Antigone, this higher appeal is expressed in the divine character of the law she follows. It is in the setting of family that this divine law, this sacred claim, comes to light. The play could easily have been staged in the public domain, but then it would have become a play on whether one can pay final honour to a traitor. By localising the issue in the family, the observer becomes aware of the moral impact of a *sacred* claim the origin of which no one knows. In a similar way, the viewer of Rembrandt's *Holy Family with Painted Frame and Curtain* may become aware of this claim. The painting invites one to descry a deeper meaning in this seemingly ordinary scene. This meaning has to do with the fact that these people belong together in an intimate way in which both love and guilt may be shared. What is an invitation in Rembrandt becomes a sharp admonition in Hosea. The adulterous family reminds the reader that being deaf to the higher appeal means losing solidarity among the people. If the believers do not acknowledge their dependence on God, they become defenders of their alleged right to live, to the basic necessities for life in opposition to each other. They are no longer in a relation with God in which love and guilt are confessed. When the sacred claim is acknowledged, however, a restoration of the family tie that enables this confession is possible.

When we indicate the moral character of the family setting in these general terms as one of experiencing and answering a sacred claim, we should not forget its nature of mystery. Otherwise, the two well-known risks loom large. The one is to regard family as such as a moral good; the other is to be fundamentally suspicious of all moral impulses that appear in the setting of family. It is in taking these risks seriously that we concluded that ethical reflection that approaches family as mystery sees it as a 'strong image'. Family is not a moral good or morally suspect in itself. Family is a 'strong image' in that it makes one aware of the mystery and invites creative interpretations of it. This way of imagining family means being confronted with the given and dependent character of life. By asking what family might mean, our study aims to show how family itself, taken as an image that evokes certain aspects of life, can be studied to find ways to live with this givenness and dependence. As such, it proposes a way out of the polarisations and deadlocks that dominate current ethical reflections on family. By focussing attention on family as mystery, we aim to foster an openness to experiences of givenness and dependence, including their sacred dimension, which is crucial to understanding morality.

It is in everyday family life that people gain these experiences of givenness and dependence. Here, they live with family as mystery. This everyday life may be common or exceptional, but it is never perfect. It is a life like Ruth's and Lucille's, who lose their mother at young age. Nevertheless, the deceased mother is intensely present in Ruth's experience of the world, her understanding of herself and her relation to her guardian, Sylvie. The same obtains for the continuing presence of her sister Lucille after she has deliberately left the family home to live elsewhere. Is Ruth's way of living her dependence on her family members the right one, however? It is clear that Ruth does not serve as a moral model of the correct ways of answering the sacred claims. The reader might identify with her way of answering the claims just as well as with her sister's opposite way. The two options of staying or leaving, of Ruth and Lucille, are alive. Thus, people find their way in dealing with family as mystery. Ethics is not first of all about deciding which way is morally right. This approach is dominant in many an ethical reflection on family-related hot issues. In family issues, this dominance leads to deadlocks between a focus on keeping families intact and a warning against the hindering effect of family. Attention to the everyday character of morality creates a way out of these polarisations. Our approach has aimed to descry the mystery in everyday moral life. This implies taking life seriously in its everyday or even trivial character in order to descry the moral appeal inherent in it as well as distancing oneself from it by discovering its inscrutable nature and unconscious impact.

This means that ethics contributes to becoming aware of the mystery in everyday life in a way that does not aim to control it.

*Housekeeping* looks at family from Ruth's perspective. By identifying with her, the reader is invited to ponder the final reciprocal confession by Ruth and Sylvie, which leads them on a path that seems to be anything but morally preferable – becoming transients. It is hard to imagine family welfare workers who would support this option, but, imagining family from the perspective of Ruth as a reader of *Housekeeping*, one may agree with Robinson's remark that 'the saddest family, properly understood, is a miracle of solace'.<sup>3</sup> It is to such an understanding of this broken, homeless family as a 'miracle of solace' that the mystery approach of this book is intended to contribute.

<sup>3</sup> Marilynne Robinson, 'Family', in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998), 87–107, at 90.