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Family and Polis : The Socio-Philosophical Legacy of Plato and Aristotle at the Present Time

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Family and *Polis* The Socio-Philosophical Legacy of Plato and Aristotle at the Present Time

Abstract: The current debate on family is subject to rapid social changes which have had colossal negative impact on economy itself and on the economy of entire countries. The purpose of social and family life is not to bound, but to develop the human being. Thoughts about the future of the family are associated with education in the very sense that is pointed out by human experience. It can be said that Aristotle's legacy is as follows: for subject, it is necessary to reflect *pro futuro* basic demand of how to be "together with others," to act "with others" and, on which depends realization and completion of the subject's being.

Keywords: *polis*, family, man

Introduction

The dynamic nature of social life causing momentary tensions between an individual and the community requires adequate philosophical reflection which would bear in mind that a man projects his or her future adequately on the basis of constant retrieving of the past. The isolation of history obstructs the use of experience of previous generations and produces dangerous totalitarian ideologies. This paper focuses on the philosophical and social legacy of Plato and Aristotle which cannot remain unnoticed in the current discussion about the role and meaning of the family. It highlights the fact that decisions of an individual are made with regards to the family as the oldest social group which is

closely interconnected by various relations, functions, and activities that satisfy the needs of family members and society as a whole.

The current debate on family is subject to rapid social changes which have had colossal negative impact on economy itself and on the economy of entire countries: a sharp decrease in the number of large families, rising age of the first-time motherhood, changes in sexual behavior, increasing number of children born outside marriage, secularization, divorce explosion, a shift in the women's approach to maternity from a lifelong mission to merely a short episode, and, above all, the absolutization of a decision made by an individual is no longer irreversible. Although the social conditions after World War II are characterized by the boom of family life, the unprecedented increase in the birth rate, economic growth which is associated with the rise of living standards of broad social classes (mainly in the US and in the countries of Western and Northern Europe), absolutization of the will of an individual who is oriented towards production, consumption, and profit, as well as strengthening the role of the state in the social sphere have created conditions where the so-far successful solutions to problems are failing. These changes have also been reflected in the arrangement of marital relations, that is, in the move from hierarchical to egalitarian relationship between the partners, the shift from the relationship of normative definition of roles to the relationship which respects individuality and individual roles of partners. However, the most problematic issue seems to be an egoistic emphasis on benefits of the marriage, on taking from the relationship more than on giving or self-giving of one to another.¹

Polis—Good for Everyone

Decomposition of the tribal society led to the creation of *polis* which is characterized by a rapid development of tools, consistent division of labor, the use of slaves for agricultural and craft work, development of trade, introduction of cash economy, and colonization of the nearby areas. All these factors brought economic prosperity. The head of *polis* was god who protected it.²

¹ The paradox is that unwillingness to share and to keep profit to oneself leads to endangerment of the involved by poverty, as he or she loses synergistic effect. Cf. Mária Potočárová, Ladislav Baranyai, "Rodina a výchova," in *Európske pedagogické myslenie od moderny po súčasnosť*, ed. Blanka Kudláčková and Andrej Rajský (Trnava: Typi Universitatis Tyrnaviensis, 2012), 147–48.

² Cf. Irina Dudinská, "Rodina ako sociálno-filozofická téma vo filozofii Sokrata," Platóna a Aristotela, in *Rodina v spoločenských premenách Slovenska* (Trnava: Vydavateľstvo SAV, 2010), 203.

According to Plato, *polis* has a divine nature and ensures full life as well as satisfaction of one's needs. A man is not self-sufficient; therefore he or she associates with others and creates a community where labor is redistributed and individuals specialize in certain field. Plato developed a model of a perfect *polis* which had three functions.

1. Provision of food and profit for citizens.
2. Protection of the state from the outside.
3. Rational government of the state.³

According to the stated functions, Plato divided citizens into three social classes: producers, auxiliaries—guardians, and guardians—rulers.

The aim of the state is to secure human welfare and needs of people, while morality plays an important role in its actions. According to Plato, communities of people are destroyed mainly because of materialist interests that influence human behavior and action. Therefore, the primary role of the ruler is to ensure education for guardians and other people. Guardians did not have right to private property, which was supposed to protect them against materialist interests and the damaging effect. Plato claims that community where people are divided into the rich and the poor is not one, but there are two communities.⁴ Women can also be part of the army if they are suitable for the job. There is no family in the military society. There is only a connection of man and woman which is supposed to bring children. It is a “marriage” that does not lead to the family.

It is for you, then, as their lawgiver, who have already selected the men, to select for association with them women who are so far as possible of the same natural capacity. Now since none of them will have any private home of his own, but they will share the same dwelling and eat at common tables, the two sexes will be together; and meeting without restriction for exercise and all through their upbringing, they will surely be drawn towards union with one another by a necessity of their nature—necessity is not too strong a word, I think?⁵

This connection is prepared by rulers who aim to connect only the best.

It follows from what we just said that, if we are to keep our flock at the highest pitch of excellence, there should be as many unions of the best of both sexes, and as few of the inferior, as possible, and that only the offspring of the better unions should be kept.⁶

³ Cf. Hans Joachim Strörig, *Malé dejiny filozofie* (Praha: ZVON, 1995), 125.

⁴ Cf. Jan Patočka, *Aristoteles* (Praha, Vyšehrad: Vyšehrad, 1994), 23.

⁵ *The Republic of Plato*, trans. with introduction and notes Francis MacDonald Cornford (Oxford: OUP, 1945), 157.

⁶ *The Republic of Plato*, 159.

According to Plato, women and men may bear children only in years of the prime physical and intellectual vigor. The best years for women are between 20–30 of their age and men may continue until they are 50 years old. In case that they conceive a child above or below the prescribed ages, the child should not see the light, and if the child is born, he or she cannot be maintained. The proper officers will take care for children. However, officers will take care only for healthy offspring of the best citizens; whereas the remaining children shall be hidden away in some mysterious and unknown place. Children are for a reasonable time breastfed by mothers who are full of milk, but no mother shall know her own child.⁷

From an early age, children are brought up in a way that would make them the best guardians.

Horses, which they must be taught to ride at the earliest possible age; then, when they are taken to see the fighting, their mounts must not be spirited chargers but swiftest we can find and the easiest to manage. In that way they will get a good view of their future business, and in case of need they will be able to keep up with their older leaders and escape in safety.⁸

The common ownership of property, women, and common education of children are required, because thanks to them the state becomes a family for everyone.

In the ideal republic, each class of citizens excels in certain virtue. Producers must excel in modesty, guardians in bravery, and rulers in wisdom. Plato suggests the method how to select the right class for every individual. He claims that it is important to educate children of any origin and to educate both boys and girls. Education is the responsibility of the state.⁹ The basic subject is gymnastics, because it forms the body and teaches children hardness as well as bravery. The second subject is music which forms the soul and teaches modesty and gentleness. Later, other subjects are added: mathematics, dialectics, training in pain, asceticism, and effort. At the age of twenty, a strict exam takes place which excludes students who do not meet all requirements for the ruling positions. Students who pass the exam continue in education for another ten years. Afterwards, a further selection shall be made and these students continue in the study of philosophy for another five years. Young men who accomplish this education have 35 years and do not have any experience. Therefore, they are supposed to gain experience of life for the next 15 years. Then, experienced 50 years old men, who are educated in theory as well as practice, are automatically

⁷ Cf. *The Republic of Plato*, 160–61.

⁸ *The Republic of Plato*, 170.

⁹ Lucia Bokorová, *Dejiny výchovy a vzdelávania I* (Trnava: Trnavská univerzita v Trnave, 2013), 24.

introduced into the leading positions.¹⁰ Plato's notion of education is inspired by Spartan education. He demands that rulers be trained as professional fighters who would be able to act against every enemy—from outside or inside.

However, Plato's pursuit for perfect organization of life brings danger of totality. His ideas on community are dominated by a political principle which dictates how to educate soul in order to secure stability of the state. Both girls and boys "were to be taken to the wars on horseback to watch the fighting, and, when it was safe, brought close up like hounds to be given a taste of blood."¹¹ The characteristic feature of the totalitarian education is intense and permanent mobilization.¹² The ideal republic of Plato treats people in the same way as a wise and strict shepherd treats his sheep—not too harsh, but he must keep a distance. While restoring this ideal state, all seeds and elements of disunity and decay must be eliminated; which means that this perfect state shall be restored with an image of Sparta in mind. According to Plato, first comes the functioning of the state as a whole and only then the proper life of a man which is presented as inserting of a wheel into the gear.

According to Karl Popper, Plato's totalitarianism is honest, as superiority of one class over another is aimed for the stability of the whole and not for exploitation of the working classes.¹³ Exploitation is held within limits that are supposed to secure stability of the whole, because if guardians attempt to get more, it can easily happen that they will have nothing.

[...] if ever a Guardian tries to make himself happy in such a way that he will be a guardian no longer; if, not content with the moderation and security of this way of living which we think the best, he becomes possessed with some silly and childish notion of happiness, impelling him to make his power a means to appropriate all the citizens' wealth, then he will learn the wisdom of Hesiod's saying that the half is more than the whole.¹⁴

This restriction of class privileges seeks stability of the whole, too. Thus, it is not strict utilitarianism in the form of collective selfishness, but rather an attempt to demonstrate the meaning of the responsible acceptance of one's role in the whole universe.¹⁵

Even if Plato's philosophy is chronologically very distant, it still has something to say. Plato's philosophy emerges at the time when *polis* world disappears

¹⁰ Strörig, *Malé dejiny filozofie*, 125.

¹¹ *The Republic of Plato*, 258; cf. 167.

¹² Cf. Karl Popper, *Otevřená společnost a její nepřátelé I.*, 54.

¹³ Cf. Popper, *Otevřená společnost*, 102.

¹⁴ *The Republic of Plato*, 167–68.

¹⁵ Cf. Daniel Slivka, "Od filozofickej hermeneutiky k biblickej hermeneutike," in *Humanum: Międzynarodowe Studia Społeczno-Humanistyczne* 2 (2008): 35–45.

and when this passive universe is replaced by our human world of freedom and responsibility. However, this freedom is not understood as absolute freedom and boundless independence, because freedom is not deity, yet it is a route to something divine.¹⁶

Aristotle: Every State Is Made up of Households

When Aristotle criticized Plato's totalitarian reforms of family life, the central issue was whether Plato's suggestions were good or bad for *polis*, that is for society, as far as one can live one's life only in community and society, that is, to live with others. According to Aristotle, diversity of families is conditioned by providing with basic needs for life, reproduction and raising children. Family, where relationships are given by love,¹⁷ cannot provide basic needs sufficiently and hence it joins in *komé* (village, family community, city district) and more *komai* create *polis* which is complete and perfect community and almost self-sufficient with regard to the needs.¹⁸ Therefore, the aim of joining is to survive, not to gain.

Aristotle, tutor of Alexander the Great, criticizes Plato's concept of an ideal state in his work *Politics*. Aristotle claims that "the state is made up of households."¹⁹ Aristotle describes an ideal state, too. He divides constitutions according to the number of rulers as follows: monarchy—one ruler, aristocracy—rule of the few, *politeia*—rule of many. On the other hand, there are deviant opposites: tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy. He does not prefer any of the stated rules, but he claims that constitution has to follow needs of a certain nation.²⁰ The analogy of these constitutions can be found even in households. For example, relationship between father and son resembles kingdom, because the task of the father is to take care of his children. However, in Persian family the relationship of father and son resembles tyranny as father treats his children as slaves. Moreover, man rules slaves and this relationship is similar to tyranny, as well. The relationship of a husband to his wife has features of aristocracy, because the husband rules the wife in certain matters, but she dominates in other spheres. Thus, everyone possesses what belongs to them by the law. They help one another

¹⁶ Cf. Jan Patočka, *Platón* (Praha: SPN, 1992), 24.

¹⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), 19.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁰ Strörig, *Malé dejiny filozofie*, 137.

er and both of them contribute to the household according to their possibilities. If husband wants to rule over the whole household, he destroys the relationship and thus changes aristocracy to oligarchy. However, it is also oligarchy when the household is ruled by a woman (it is rare, but it usually happens when woman brings great fortune to the marriage). Her rule is oligarchy, because it is based on power and wealth. The mutual relationship of brothers demonstrates features of timocracy as in timocracy they count as equals. A household without master where all members are equal is democracy.²¹ According to Aristotle, monarchy, aristocracy or *politeia* are suitable rules. He states that “father is the author of being which is esteemed the greatest benefit and of maintenance and education; and by the law of nature the father has the right of rule over his sons, ancestors over their descendants, and the king over his subjects.”²² The family consists of a father—head and master of the family, wife, and slaves.²³ “Fewest possible parts of a family are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children.”²⁴ According to Aristotle, family is an economic cell of the state, because the basis of the state is organized and maintained around the family. In family, there is too strong unity of elements—these are relations between husband and wife, parent and child, master and slave. Due to these relations and their unity, family cannot be community. According to Aristotle, the state is the only true community. Only a master—a father who has dominant position in the family stands out from family and enters the state. Even if a wife is able to think in contrast to a slave, she cannot make decisions.²⁵ “A husband and father rules over wife and children. The male is by nature fitter for command than the female.”²⁶ Wife, as well as other members of the family, does not enter politics. Family fulfills primarily a biological function. Economic function of family is wealth that is necessary for free time and it is a fundamental determinant for the political life.²⁷

According to Aristotle, it is important that people enter marriage in their best age and at the best time (during the best season). He emphasizes that husband and wife must grow old together at the same time, they cannot enter marriage while they are too young, and the age gap between father and children cannot be too wide. Aristotle suggests that girls should marry at the age of 18 and men at the age of 37. Wedding should take place in winter months. Pregnant

²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Irwin Terence (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999), 168.

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 169.

²³ Milan Fula, *Antropológia ženy a náuka Jána Pavla II* (Bratislava: DON BOSCO, 2004), 46.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 5.

²⁵ Cf. Petra Muráriková, *Hľadanie seba samej. Otázka identity ženy v súčasnosti* (Bratislava: IRIS, 2014), 51.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 19.

²⁷ Dudinská, “Rodina ako sociálno-filozofická téma,” 207.

women shall take care of themselves; they should remain physically active and take sufficient food. Following these rules, their offspring shall be strong and healthy. Sick and weak children will not be maintained. Moral rules do not allow leaving a child when the couple has too many children. When the number of children rises above the specified limit, abortion shall be performed before sense and life have begun.²⁸ Children are mutual good for parents. Parents love them as themselves, because children are a kind of the other Self for parents. Children create a strong bond between parents. Parents are the authors of their being, therefore, children must pay respect to their parents as they deserve it.²⁹

Furthermore, Aristotle describes an ideal education. According to him, it is very important to provide children with the food which has most milk as well as to secure enough physical activity. It is also necessary to accustom children to the cold from their earliest years. Until they are five years old parents should not demand study or labor from children, but they should secure sufficient motion by means of play. Children should stay at home until they are seven years old. It is necessary to direct the education as children must not meet slaves more than it is necessary and hear vulgar speech or see vulgar things. At the age of seven, every child must enter education. Aristotle was convinced that education shall be public and uniform.³⁰ “[...] And since the whole city has one end, it is manifest that education should be one and the same for all, and that it should be public, and not private—not as at present, when every one looks after his own children separately, and gives them separate instruction of the sort which he thinks best.”³¹

Aristotle values marriage and family, and criticizes Plato for his request to sacrifice marriage as well as private property to the state. He emphasizes that the state community needs to be divided into small communities—households.³² “[...] for man is naturally inclined to form couples—even more than to form cities, inasmuch as the household is earlier and more necessary than the city.”³³ According to Aristotle, common things receive less care. Thus, if women, children, and property belong to everyone, everyone would neglect them and rely on someone else to take care of them. He claims that having women and children common destroys love. He criticizes Plato’s idea that parents shall not know their children as the offspring resembles their parents.³⁴

It can be said that Aristotle’s legacy is as follows: for subject, it is necessary to reflect *pro futuro* basic demand for being *together with others*, and acting *with others* on which depends the realization and completion of the subject’s being.

²⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 178.

²⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 169.

³⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 179.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

³² Cf. Strörig, *Malé dejiny filozofie*, 137.

³³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 169.

³⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 22–23.

Conclusion

The purpose of social and family life is not to bound, but to develop the human being. Thoughts about the future of the family are associated with education in the very sense that is pointed out by human experience. Man cannot withdraw from this sense without destroying his own self.

It is essential for the personal subject to be a part of community, to be *together with others* and to act *with others* as it is inevitable for the realization and fulfillment of one's being. "The inclination to give is rooted in the depths of the human heart: every person is conscious of a desire to interact with others and everyone finds fulfillment in a free gift of self to others."³⁵ Self-giving and love imply the definition of a person. "The person is a being for whom the only suitable dimension is love. We are just to a person if we love him. This is as true for God as it is for man."³⁶ "Self-giving love is the oath along which human freedom finds its fulfillment in human flourishing."³⁷ "Solidarity means happiness!"³⁸

The first natural place where a person (me) meets others (you) is family. There is no other natural community which would affect human being and human life as much as marriage and family.

Among these many paths, *the family is the first and the most important*. It is a path common to all, yet one which is particular, unique and unrepeatable, just as every individual is unrepeatable; it is a path from which man cannot withdraw. Furthermore, she knows that *a person goes forth from the family in order to realize in a new family unit his particular vocation in life*. Even if someone chooses to remain single, the family continues to be, as it were, his existential horizon, that fundamental community in which the whole network of social relations is grounded.³⁹

Fichte expressed the specific nature of personal relationship by saying: "A man [...] becomes man among people—there would be more of them if

³⁵ *Posolstvo Svätého otca Jána Pavla II. na pôstne obdobie 2003*, 41, accessed September 19, 2015, <https://www.kbs.sk/obsah/sekcia/h/dokumenty-a-vyhlasenia/p/dokumenty-papezov/c/posolstvo-post-2003>.

³⁶ Ján Pavol II, *Prekročiť prah nádeje*, 178.

³⁷ George Weigel, *Svedok nádeje. Životopis Jána Pavla II. III. diel* (Bratislava: Slovart, 2001), 256.

³⁸ Domenico del Rio, *Ján Pavol II. Očami novinára* (Trnava: SSV, 2002), 149.

³⁹ Ján Pavol II, *List rodinám* (Trnava: SSV 1994), 8. Cf. John Paul II, *Letter to Families Gratissimam Sane* from Pope John Paul II, accessed September 19, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families.pdf.

they have ever been people.”⁴⁰ A man must be called, invited to free decisions, advised and educated, and this can happen only in the company of other people who indeed represent certain limits, but they present also opportunity.⁴¹ If a man does not accept the existence of other man, this person will not be sure about his or her own self, he or she will not find the whole truth about his or her own being and will not discover the extent of his or her own responsibility for his or her own being as well as for being of others.

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⁴⁰ Jonahh Gottlieb Fichte, *Grundlange des Naturrechts*, WW III, 39, in Emerich Coreth, *Co je člověk?* (Praha: Zvon 1994), 160.

⁴¹ “Experiencing another person through the prism of values is inextricably connected with the experience of a hope. It is always the case that either I propose a value for the other person to realize and I have a hope that the other will take up my proposition, or the other proposes something similar to me, cherishing a similar hope.” Józef Tischner, “Etyka wartości i nadziei,” in *Wobec wartości* (Poznań: W drodze, 1982), 87.

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Pavol Dancák

Famille et *polis*
Patrimoine sociophilosophique de Platon et d'Aristote
à l'époque contemporaine

Résumé

Le débat actuel sur la famille subit de rapides changements sociaux qui ont eu une énorme influence négative sur l'économie elle-même et sur l'économie des pays entiers. L'objectif de la vie sociale et familiale n'est pas d'entraver, mais de développer l'être humain. Les réflexions sur le futur de la famille sont liées à l'éducation dans le sens indiqué par l'expérience humaine. On peut dire que le patrimoine d'Aristote est suivant : il est nécessaire pour un sujet de réfléchir « pro futuro » sur le besoin fondamental d'être « avec les autres », de fonctionner avec « les autres » parce que c'est un élément dont dépendent la réalisation et l'accomplissement de ce sujet.

Mots clés: *polis*, famille, homme

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Famiglia e *polis*
Eredità socio-filosofica di Platone e di Aristotele
nei tempi odierni

Sommaro

L'attuale dibattito sulla famiglia è oggetto di rapidi cambiamenti sociali che hanno avuto un enorme influsso negativo sull'economia in sé e sull'economia di interi paesi. Lo scopo della vita sociale e familiare non è impedire, ma consentire lo sviluppo dell'uomo. Le riflessioni sul futuro della famiglia sono collegate all'educazione nel senso indicato dall'esperienza umana. Si può dire che l'eredità di Aristotele sia la seguente: per il soggetto, è necessario considerare "pro futuro" i requisiti fondamentali dello stare "insieme agli altri" e dell'agire "insieme agli altri", poiché da questa considerazione dipende la realizzazione e il completamento dell'esistenza del soggetto stesso.

Parole chiave: *polis*, famiglia, uomo