Introduction

The family poses two challenges to any theory of social justice. The egalitarian challenge focuses on the distribution of goods and opportunities between children born into different families. We can conceive those goods in a variety of ways. Economists tend to focus on expected income over the life-course; sociologists investigate chances of social mobility; philosophers typically think in more abstract terms such as resources or opportunities for well-being. But however we frame or measure the inequality, it is clear that children born into different families face unequal prospects.1 Similarly, there is disagreement about how much, or what aspects, of that inequality count as unjust. For some, all inequalities that are not the result of individuals’ choices are failures of justice. Others adopt the more conventional view that justice requires equality of opportunity in the limited sense that people’s chances of achieving desirable jobs should reflect their own merits rather than their family background. But whatever the categories, and however radical the conception of social justice, the concern that children’s prospects should not be too dependent on their social origins is familiar. The egalitarian challenge demands an account of why families should be permitted to create inequalities between children, and what kinds of familial interactions, creating what kinds of inequalities, are indeed justified.

The liberal challenge concerns the distribution of freedom and authority between parents, children, and the state. Liberals think it valuable that individuals be free to make and act on their own judgments about how they are to live their lives; justifying authority requires an account of how anybody can have the right to decide for others. Children are born helpless and incapable of judgment, so somebody else must have the job of deciding what happens to them. Should that be the child’s parents, or does the state have the right to determine what the child eats or drinks, where she sleeps, what television programs she
watches, what school she attends? From the parent’s point of view, any attempt by the state to regulate her dealings with her children may look like a denial of her freedom to live the life of her choice. But children are separate people, with their own lives to live, and it is one of the state’s tasks to protect its citizens, and its prospective citizens, from undue interference by others, including their parents. As they develop, children quickly become capable of forming their own views. What justifies anybody else—parent or state—in retaining authority over them then? The liberal challenge demands an account of who—child, parent, state—should have the right to decide what in relation to children’s lives.

As egalitarian liberals, we take both challenges seriously. Our egalitarianism leads us to condemn the inequalities that arise between children born into different families. Our liberalism makes us worry about the rights that parents and children have over their own lives, and with respect to each other, and about the proper limits of state authority with regard to both parents and children. The two challenges intersect. If parents should be free to act in ways that confer advantage on their children, without regard to any resulting inequalities between those children and others, then we have a deep incompatibility between egalitarian justice and parents’ rights. If the only way to ensure equality between children is to abolish the family altogether and raise children in state institutions, then we can achieve full satisfaction of egalitarian principles only by wholly rejecting the right of adults to parent children. What is needed, and what we offer, is an account of the family’s value—an account of “family values”—that gives it its proper place. One that responds adequately to the egalitarian objection to the family while also providing a coherent account of who—children themselves, parents, and the state—has the right to decide what about children’s lives.

Egalitarian liberals are concerned to strike the right balance between equality and liberty. For us, social justice requires that the state treat its citizens as equals, and that requirement has serious distributive implications, demanding much more equal distributions, of a variety of goods, than exist in any contemporary societies. But, as liberals, we recognize that it is valuable for people to make and act on their own judgments about how they should live, and important that they be accorded the freedoms necessary for them to live well. The problem, of course, is that the freedoms liberals value tend to disrupt the equality egalitarians value. Those freedoms include not only the freedom to pursue their own interests to some extent but also the freedom to engage in relationships that depend on treating particular others as special—to act partially in favor of themselves and their loved ones. A world in which we were required to treat everybody the same—friend, lover, child, stranger—would be a dys-
topic nightmare, a world where nobody enjoyed the relationships that make us human. Some of the most valuable elements in human lives depend precisely on our treating particular others as special. The family, the natural home of such relationships, is a particularly stark locus of the tensions embodied in the view that people should enjoy equal freedom, or have equal opportunity to live valuable lives.

A completely harmonious reconciliation may not be possible. We do not show that plausible understandings of the family, equality, and liberty can be constructed in a way that eliminates all conflicts between the family and equality, or resolves all difficulties concerning authority over children. Our more modest aim is to offer an account of "family values properly understood" that shows the possibility of child-rearing practices and institutions that realize the values distinctively made available by familial relationships, that respects those individual liberties that are indeed worthy of respect, and that mitigates—massively mitigates—the conflict with equality.

The family has only recently begun to receive the careful attention needed to provide satisfactory responses to these two challenges. Public declarations of human rights, devised specifically to provide a consensual focal point, can hardly be expected to venture into controversial matters, so we should not be surprised if their pronouncements are rather vague. Thus, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights tells us that "the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State" (Article 16.3), while the European Convention on Human Rights announces that "everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life" (Article 8) and that "men and women of marriageable age have the right to marry and found a family" (Article 12).²

Previous work by philosophers has taken us a good deal further,³ but in our view none has yet engaged with the full range of issues at stake with the necessary degree of specificity. Taking the challenges seriously requires us to ask why it would be a bad idea to abolish the family. If the family is valuable, then it must be possible to identify the good things that it contributes to human lives. What exactly would be lost, and by whom, if children were to be raised by the state? Our answer to that question, developed in part 2, focuses on a distinctive set of goods, which we call "familial relationship goods"; that answer provides an account of the value of the family that is detailed enough to furnish appropriately nuanced responses to both challenges. Part 1 sets out those challenges in more detail.