



BRILL

JOURNAL OF CHINESE HUMANITIES 12 (2026) 162–176



brill.com/joch

The Entanglement of Family and State, and the Bleak Prospects of *Jia* Philosophy

Tan Ankui 譚安奎

Professor, School of Government, Sun Yat-sen University,

Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

tanankui@mail.sysu.edu.cn

Received 31 March 2026 | Accepted 7 April 2026 |

Published online 16 September 2026

Abstract

Western political philosophy has historically employed political ideas to shape the imagination of the family, rather than envisioning politics as an extension of the family. The modern political theory of individualism, however, grounded in an instrumentalist conception of the state, renders the family entirely absent from political philosophy, at the cost of evading the problem of the continuous reproduction of political society. The originary experience of existing through the generations, as implied by the family, can open an ontological space for addressing this problem, though doing so gives rise to a tension between ontology and ethics. The modern state's requirement that the family perform a function of moral cultivation is premised on a shift in the family's center of gravity from the vertical dimension of intergenerational relations to the horizontal dimension of the conjugal relationship. At this point, the family as artifact furnishes us with an ethical paradigm for understanding the state as a constructive political community. Yet a conception of the family centered on this horizontal relation is precisely what signals the ontological rootlessness of modern politics. The complex entanglement between family and state across the functional, ontological, and ethical dimensions portends the bleak prospects of *jia* philosophy in modern society.

Keywords

jia philosophy – relationship between family and state – intergenerational existence – relationship between husband and wife – political community

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/23521341-12340221

© TAN ANKUI, 2026 | ISSN: 2352-1341 (online)

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.

In recent years, an important theoretical trend in Chinese-language philosophy has been the attempt to develop a philosophy of the family, or *jia* philosophy (*jia zhexue* 家哲學), that is both rooted in Chinese cultural heritage and is of universal significance. In particular, the phenomenological-existential orientation expressed by the family, one of ceaseless existence across generations, and its theoretical potential for reflecting on and even supplanting the metaphysical assumptions of modern individualism, have received increasing attention recently. Naturally, there are differences in the positions held by different scholars. Sun Xiangchen 孫向晨 adopts an affirmative attitude toward the modernity of Western individualism, and argues that the individual and the “love of kin” (*qinqin* 親親) constitute a “dual ontology” (*shuangchong benti* 雙重本體). Zhang Xianglong 張祥龍 (1949–2022), by contrast, argues more emphatically that among the three entities of the individual, the family, and the collective, only the family is genuinely “originary” (*yuanfaxing* 源發性) and “self-sufficient” (*zizu* 自足), and therefore enjoys the status of “primal ontology” (*yuan benti* 原本體).¹

Any philosophy of the family, it seems, cannot avoid confronting the question of the relationship between family and polity. On the one hand, the various philosophies of the family are formulated in opposition to the modernity of individualism, and they are all what American philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) called “comprehensive doctrines,” encompassing theoretical implications across ontology, ethics, and political philosophy. On the other hand, the belief that the family belongs to the private sphere and that its internal life should be free from political interference is almost universally regarded as a commonsense conviction.

Given that *jia* philosophy is explicitly self-conscious about a Chinese-Western comparative perspective, and even harbors a strong intention to correct the course of Western modernity, this article begins by reflecting on the relationship between family and state in Western political theory. The analysis presented here will show that the failure of the family to serve as a foundation for Western politics and political theory is not in itself a distinctively modern problem. Whether political theory requires the family to play any role at all, however, is a question on which antiquity and modernity fundamentally differ. On this basis, the article will employ a threefold analytical perspective

1 For relevant discussions, see Sun Xiangchen 孫向晨, *Lun jia: geti yu qinqin* 論家：個體與親親 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2019); Zhang Xianglong 張祥龍, *Jia yu xiao: cong Zhong Xi jian shiye kan* 家與孝：從中西間視野看 (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2017), 39; and Zhang Xianglong 張祥龍, “Daiji shijian: jia de zhexue shenfen” 代際時間：家的哲學身份, *Tansuo yu zhengming* 探索與爭鳴, no. 10 (2021): 61.

to reveal the complex entanglement between family and state in functional, ontological, and ethical terms.

1 The Absence of the Family in Western Political Theory, and the Question of Its Political Use

The relationships of authority and submission within the family seem perfectly natural. This provides imaginative space for drawing some form of analogy between family and polity, or for deriving the political from the familial. The Chinese model of the “isomorphism of family and state” (*jia-guo tonggou* 家國同構), with ruler and father seen as equivalent roles, is the paradigmatic instance of this mode of thought, and the various forms of patriarchal political theory represent its most extreme expression. Although the particular modes of extending the family to the political domain differ, and legal fiction is sometimes required, they all share a common presupposition about the relationship between family and polity: because the relationships of authority and submission within the family are natural, political authority, once extended and elaborated in various forms, also appears to be natural. Here, the family provides a psychological, emotional, and even moral foundation for obedience to political authority, and the moral cultivation that the family imparts is expected to serve precisely this political function.

Modern political theory departs from this view in a most significant way. Once we hold that the political condition and the state are artificially constructed on the basis of consent among individuals, the “natural” chain of extension from family to polity is severed. Moreover, once the individual becomes the theoretical point of departure, not only do the state and political life cease to be natural, but the naturalness of the family itself may be called into question. English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), for example, developed his account of family relations entirely in accordance with his political model: the mother’s initial dominion over the child, and the father’s dominion over the child that derives from his dominion over the mother, have nothing to do with blood ties, parental affection, or natural bonds. Correspondingly, without the support of political authority, the order within the family, including paternal authority, itself subsists in a state of nature and lacks stability, and therefore cannot serve as a force on which political authority might rely. Indeed, following the denaturalization and politicization of the family carried out by early modern natural law jurists and Hobbes above all, political philosophy seems to have abandoned the use of the authority structure within the family as a foundation for political obedience.

Although the analogy or fictional assimilation of family to state may provide a measure of psychological and emotional support for obedience to authority in political life, from a historical or theoretical perspective it would be difficult to sustain the claim that the inherent instability of the political order stems from the absence of the family's political function, or that the existence of this function is the true foundation of political order. Even in the Chinese tradition where the isomorphism of family and state is most deeply entrenched, dynastic "All-under-Heaven" (*tianxia* 天下) regimes were perpetually subject to cyclical upheaval. Conversely, the enduring stability of the Roman Republic, the historical paradigm of durable political order in the West, has never been seriously attributed to the political function of the family. What later ages emphasized most was Rome's institutions, especially its mixed form of government, and then its civic religion. Theoretically speaking, the justification of political order by Western classical political philosophers was also not primarily grounded in the political function of the family. On the contrary, what we find is a relative depreciation of the family. To use the formulation by American philosopher Allan Bloom (1930–1992), Plato (427–347 BCE) held a doctrine of "double nature," the view that both eros and reason, body and soul, are natural, though the former constitutes a lower nature and the latter a higher and even divine nature.² It is especially worth noting that these two natures correspond to the family and the ideal polis respectively. Even for Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who holds a considerably more favorable view of the family, civic friendship is ranked above familial friendship, and the family, as a private sphere, cannot match the value of political life in the polis.

The internal structure of the "double nature" doctrine indicates that in Western classical political philosophy the transition from family to polis is not a natural extension or isomorphic relationship, but rather involves an ethical transformation in kind. Otherwise, one could not fully understand, or would at least underestimate, the classical dictum that man is by nature a political animal. It is true that Aristotle also said that human beings are not only political animals but also creatures of the household. He even stated that the "origins and springs" of friendship, political community, and justice are found first in the household.³ This seems to be an explicit endorsement of the natural extension from family to polis. One of the key reasons he offers for this judgment, however, is that within the management of a single household one can

2 Allan Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," in *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 348.

3 Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, 1242a39–1242b1. The English edition consulted in this article is Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, trans. Anthony Kenny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

observe all the forms of constitution, both genuine and corrupt; the authority of the father is monarchical, and husband and wife together constitute an aristocracy, while brothers form a polity.⁴ This shows that he was in fact not analyzing the constitution of the polis on the model of the family, but rather analyzing the family on the model of the constitution of the polis. To be sure, acknowledging this point is not to deny entirely the political function of the family; if the state is politically and ethically superior to the family, it is entirely natural that the state should entrust the family with the responsibility of cultivating good citizens. In that case, however, it is precisely political imagination that shapes our understanding of the family, and not the reverse. As for the most extreme patriarchal political theory in the West, it is fundamentally not employing the image of the family to shape politics, but rather furnishing politics with a theological foundation. This is precisely the case with the patriarchal theory of English political theorist Robert Filmer (1588–1653), which Hobbes, as well as the father of liberalism John Locke (1632–1704), had to confront. It held that God entrusted the world to Adam for governance, passing this authority down through the generations. It is therefore essentially a theory of the divine right of kings and hereditary monarchy, and in no sense elevates the political status of the family itself.

This being the case, once the individualist premises of political philosophy are in place, it should come as no surprise that the family is marginalized in politics, or even that it disappears entirely from political philosophy. The modern sovereign state emphasizes individualized, equal subjection, and individualization means dissolving all traditional forms of natural rule and natural authority, with the family being the first to be targeted. Thus, beyond Hobbes's denaturalization and de-ethicization of paternal authority, Locke, as well as Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), likewise directed political critiques at patriarchal power. Similarly, the sweeping family revolution in modern China was rooted partly in the impact of the rising idea of the state, for the construction of a modern nation-state founded on universal and equal subjection required that individuals be emancipated from the bonds of the family – a process that might be called “breaking up the family for the sake of the state” (*wei guo po jia* 為國破家).⁵

4 Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, 1241b27–31.

5 For an interpretation of the modern Chinese family revolution from the perspective of “breaking up the family for the sake of the state,” see Zhao Yanjie 趙妍杰, *Jiating geming: Qingmo Minchu dushuren de chongjing* 家庭革命：清末民初讀書人的憧憬 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2020), 21–26.

Political philosophy premised on individualism focuses on the question of legitimating political authority, and the basis of political legitimacy is the consent of individuals. For the contractarians, provided one understands human beings qua individuals in a certain way, especially with respect to their motivational dispositions, one can understand the necessity and rationality of their entering political society through a contract. Political justification is therefore not a historical process. On the contrary, Hobbes and Rousseau preferred to use expressions like “in an instant” or “in a moment” to convey the moment of contracting at which the sovereign or political community comes into being. German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was even more explicit in acknowledging that the social contract is merely a rational idea. By the same token, political justification is a process of transforming human beings from natural individuals into subjects or citizens, though it is not a process of social moral cultivation. It has been astutely observed that, surveying the contractarian tradition from Hobbes to Rawls, political justification and ethical transformation are, and have always been, two constitutive dimensions of social contract theory.⁶ The process of individualization allows the problem of political legitimacy to shed its dependence on history and moral cultivation, which goes some way toward explaining the marginalization, or even the disappearance, of the family from political philosophy.

Of course, in modern society the family remains an agency of socialization. Even in this sense, however, schools and prisons seem to be far more important bearers of state discipline and social cultivation. Against this backdrop, we cannot expect the natural affections of the family and its particular relations of submission to extend naturally to the political domain. In modern society, the story may well be precisely the reverse. The contemporary German philosopher Axel Honneth, who has much to say in favor of the role of the family, offers a perceptive judgment on this point, arguing that a child’s sense of “father” or “mother” is shaped by society’s expectations of parental roles, and that feelings toward one’s parents depend, first of all, on whether one’s parents have fulfilled the normative demands placed on them, that is, whether, during one’s upbringing they have met what social norms require of them.⁷ This shows that, although there is an obvious difference between antiquity and modernity with respect to political ideas themselves, one fundamental point regarding the relationship between family and polity remains unchanged: it is

6 Mark E. Button, *Contract, Culture, and Citizenship: Transformative Liberalism from Hobbes to Rawls* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 24.

7 Akesaier Huonaite 阿克塞爾·霍耐特 [Axel Honneth], *Zìyóu de quánlì* 自由的權利, trans. Wang Xu 王旭 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013), 262.

political imagination that shapes people's understanding of familial relations, and not the reverse.

To sum up, in the Western political tradition, the family never played the role of a philosophical cornerstone for politics or the state, and there was never a natural extension from family to state. In this respect, Western political theory has always lacked familial foundations, and this should not be understood as a purely modern phenomenon. At the functional level, however, whether the family was expected to play a role in political moral cultivation, that is, whether the political tradition had a family available and chose to use it or not, is a question on which antiquity and modernity genuinely differ.

2 Existing through the Generations: the Family-State Relationship from an Ontological Perspective and Its Ethical Difficulties

Although the absence of the family does not affect the theoretical self-consistency of modern political philosophy, this seems to come at the cost of ignoring another important political problem. The social contract founded on individualism can be concluded "in an instant," and the standard of political legitimacy it thereby proposes, especially the contractual procedure by which that standard is established, is available for deployment at any time. Rawls states this most clearly, arguing that the original position is nothing more than a means of shaping a certain point of view from which people regard themselves and society, and that one may at any time look at the social world from this required point of view.⁸ This is because social contract theory is primarily concerned with the question of the ideational and moral "production" of a legitimate political order. The question of whether and how a political order that withstands scrutiny can continuously reproduce itself, however, is one that is almost entirely absent from social contract theory. Given that the world in which people live is a world of overlapping generations, of births and deaths, a world that at any particular moment cannot be entirely composed of rationally mature individual contractors, the reproduction of political order constitutes a challenge that arises at every time and in every place.

Within the social contract tradition, the contracting parties engage in calculations of long-term individual interest, yet they lack a supra-individual, trans-generational, long-range, dynamic vision, and the corresponding capacity for practical reason. To be sure, Rawls's contractualism represents a marked

8 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971), 587.

improvement in this respect, as it is founded on the explicit premise that political society is a fair system of cooperation among generations. This means that the theory does directly confront the problem of the reproduction of political order. For Rawls, however, this is first and foremost a strong, though possibly also reasonable, theoretical presupposition. Since it makes considerably more demanding ethical requirements of the contracting parties, it thereby implies a very different understanding of persons or citizens, and we are therefore compelled to ask what its justification and grounds might be. Most importantly, this presupposition implies that it does not understand persons from an atomist standpoint. On the contrary, it has already raised the ontological problem of persons “existing through the generations.”

It is precisely here that *jia* as a philosophical category reveals its necessity. The family is the originary space of individual existence, and a part of each person's most fundamental existential experience. This existential experience is, in the first instance, the experience of “existing through the generations” as mentioned above, as from the moment of birth the individual is already situated within intergenerational relations. In this sense, the family constitutes a relational structure that transcends individual will, and cannot be reduced to any one of the parties within it. From the very beginning, it is a constitutive element of a person's self, and thus carries undeniable ontological implications. Zhang Xianglong therefore endorses what he understands as the Confucian thesis that “the ultimate existence of human beings lies not in the individual but in primordial and authentic interpersonal relations, that is, familial relations, and especially the parent-child relation.”⁹ On this basis, he even advances the concept of “generational time” (*shidai shijian* 世代時間) or “intergenerational time” (*daiji shijian* 代際時間).

One might doubt the universal explanatory power of this family-based ontology on the grounds that there are no small number of unmarried and indeed resolutely unmarried persons. This doubt rests on a misunderstanding, however, as it first reduces the family to the establishment of marriage, and thereby ignores the intergenerational dimension of the family. Being unmarried or choosing not to marry is not equivalent to existing outside the family, and above all is not equivalent to existing outside generational structures. Being unmarried or not marrying may affect the establishment of new generational relations, depending on whether one has children, yet it cannot negate the already-existing structure of generational relations within which every person is situated. In other words, the universality of generational relations is

9 Zhang Xianglong, *Jia yu xiao*, 39.

retrospective rather than prospective. When certain Chinese scholars emphasize the ontological status of the family, their focus is also on the vertical dimension of intergenerational relations, the dimension of the “love of kin” (*qinqin*), rather than on the horizontal dimension of the conjugal relation. This is precisely where the phenomenological acuity of the Chinese philosophy of *jia* resides.

By emphasizing existence through the generations, *jia* philosophy furnishes the ontological conditions for transcending the political thinking of the early modern Western individualist contractarian tradition, and in particular for incorporating the trans-generational political society into political-philosophical reflection. Naturally, these are necessary rather than sufficient conditions. Since the ontology of existing through the generations is retrospective, it cannot in principle deny the individual’s freedom to refrain from perpetuating any new generational relations. And when we conceive of political society as a trans-generational system and make corresponding demands on individuals, this is unambiguously prospective. At this point, the challenge confronting *jia* philosophy is less ontological than ethical; should one, heedless of an individual’s free choice in matters of generational continuation, arbitrarily situate that individual within a framework of trans-generational political society? It is worth noting that Sun Xiangchen, an advocate of *jia* philosophy, on the one hand argues that the individual and *qinqin* constitute a dual ontology, while on the other hand emphasizing the priority of the individual over *qinqin*. How, then, is this priority to be explained? At its root, it should derive from the foundational status of personal rights and freedom implied by the individual as an ontological category. At this point, the positing of the family as another ontological category amounts to nothing more than a remedial supplement to modernity.

If the ontological vision of the family in *jia* philosophy is attractive, its ethical implications may nonetheless be politically problematic. In this regard, the most typical illustration is the debate over the right to silence in the West versus the traditional Chinese practice of “kinship concealment” (*qinqin xiang yin* 親親相隱).¹⁰ Sun Xiangchen proposes that concealment is a universal mechanism for resolving the conflict between ethical order and legal order, yet the order of values underlying “concealment” differs between the modern West and the Chinese tradition.¹¹ In other words, even if one can articulate an

10 For further elaboration of this discussion, readers may consult the essays featured in the special issue “A New Direction in the Dialogue between Chinese and Western Philosophy” of the *Journal of Chinese Humanities*.

11 Sun Xiangchen, *Lun jia*, 287.

ontology of universal significance with respect to the family, one will nonetheless be confronted with different political ethics. Unlike the “right” to silence, in the Chinese tradition kinship concealment was advanced as an ethical obligation, an expression of family ethics seeking to circumvent or override the external political and legal order, and the result of an attempt to extend *qinqin* directly into the political domain. Here one can observe that there is a tension between the ontological desirability of *qinqin* itself and its ethical justifiability. The universal individual rights emphasized by modern politics have a distinctly impartial character, and thus enter into direct conflict with the naturally partial orientation implied by *qinqin*. Moreover, if the modern state also pursues a richer, more egalitarian ideal of fairness and justice, this conflict becomes all the more intense.

Against this background, the reproduction of familial human relations seems instead to constitute a constraint on, and even a disruption of, the reproduction of political society. Why, then, does modern politics not simply abolish the family in its reproductive sense? This brings us once again to the question of the family’s political function discussed in the first section of this article. The emphasis here on “reproduction” is meant to highlight the implications for ethics and moral cultivation, rather than to refer to the formation of conjugal relations and the “production” of economy and population. Taking Rawls as an example, if political society is to be conceived as a trans-generational fair system of cooperation, then would it not be more advantageous for the cultivation and nurturing of citizens, citizens who are willing to comply with the requirements of public reason and to act in accordance with the two principles of justice, to be carried out directly by state-led institutions, thereby bypassing the ethical and emotional obstacles erected by *qinqin*? Yet Rawls neither advocates the abolition of the family nor entirely denies the distance between family and polity. While maintaining both of these positions, he nonetheless goes some way beyond the traditional rut of treating the family straightforwardly as a private sphere, for he explicitly regards the family as part of the basic structure of society, which is itself the primary subject of political justice.¹² Does this imply that *jia* still harbors important political-ethical potential yet to be elicited, potential that might further enrich our understanding of the relationship between family and state?

12 See John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3 (1997): 788.

3 From Generation to Conjuality: the Family as Artifact and the State as Community

As a thinker deeply influenced by the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), Honneth has much to say about the ethical value of the family and its political function, and from his writings we can discern one ground for affirming familial values within modern politics. He proposes that the political-moral significance of the family becomes undeniable once one recognizes that a democratic community depends upon its members' capacity for mutually cooperative individualism, and that this capacity has its psychological foundations in the experience of a harmonious, trust-filled, and egalitarian family life.¹³ What is distinctive about this observation is that it presupposes a political framework, individualism, mutual cooperation, and democracy, as well as specific assumptions about the character of familial relations, harmony, trust, and equality, and moreover that these two sets of presuppositions are mutually congruent. The family envisioned here is no longer the traditional relationship of natural authority and submission, and there is no trace of paternalism. What it ultimately comes to is this: first the family must be shaped by the ethics of modern politics, and only then is there space for the family to exercise a political function. If democracy does not first reshape equal familial relations according to its own model, no philosophy of the family can establish the significance of the family for the reproduction of such a political society. Similarly, in Rawls, whether the well-ordered society he envisions can ensure that children's moral development reaches a sufficient level to sustain a just society over time is a question to which, it has been noted, we may be unable to give a definitive answer prior to living in a Rawlsian well-ordered society.¹⁴ All of this once again confirms the judgment this article has repeatedly emphasized: in the Western theoretical tradition concerning the relationship between family and state, it is always politics that shapes the family, and not the family that naturally extends itself to the political domain.

The primary consequence of the shaping of the family by individualism and rights-based politics is the shifting of the family's center of gravity from the vertical dimension of intergenerational relations to the horizontal dimension of the conjugal relation, a shift that carries numerous social and theoretical ramifications. As noted above, the reason intergenerational relations possess an originary ontological status is precisely that they constitute a structure into which the individual is born, and which is therefore fundamentally beyond the

13 Axel Honneth, *Ziyou de quanli*, 275.

14 S. A. Lloyd, "Family Justice and Social Justice," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 75 (1994): 370.

scope of individual will. Individualism's emphasis on individual will, however, means that the primary questions regarding the family become: whether to enter into conjugal relations with another person, whether to establish a family at all, whom to choose as one's spouse, and how to conduct the conjugal relationship. In other words, the primary meaning of the family is transformed from an existential determinant into a matter of volitional choice and ethical reflection.

The conjugal relation, founded on voluntary individual choice and tending thereby toward greater equality, naturally influences the intergenerational relations within the family through its qualities of trust and equality and its practical workings in child-rearing and the management of generational bonds, and can thereby contribute to the reproduction of an individualist and democratic political society. This is a scenario we can reasonably expect in modern society, and it embodies the constructive role of the family in relation to politics, a role premised on the family's having been shaped by politics. Does this, however, exhaust the significance of the modern family for modern politics? Is the modern family merely a microcosmic condensation of the individualism of modern politics?

At this point, it is worth recalling the observation made in the first section of this article: purely contractarian modern politics could, in principle, entirely leave the family out of account. Therefore, when we re-emphasize the significance of the family in the context of modern politics, and even regard it as part of the basic structure of society, our very understanding of politics and the state must itself undergo a certain transformation. This transformation consists, first and foremost, in transcending the instrumentalist conception of the state founded on private contracts among individuals, and allowing the state to bear a richer range of non-instrumental values, thereby providing theoretical space for the family to play a positive role in politics. Unlike classical liberal contractualism, Rawlsian contractualism, while retaining a distinctive individualist character, understands political society as a trans-generational fair system of cooperation, thereby investing the state with a more substantial ethical character. Indeed, throughout his work Rawls consistently holds that a political society can itself be a good in an intrinsic sense,¹⁵ and that just institutions are an ultimate end shared by all members of society.¹⁶ These formulations bear a striking resemblance to the typical expressions of communitarianism.

15 John Rawls, "The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 470.

16 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 527.

In what sense, however, can a manifestly artificially constructed, large-scale political society be understood as a community? Generally speaking, a community implies not only that its members share a common set of values and way of life, but also that the community itself is the source or constitutive content of the individuals' self-identity, and therefore seems impossible to artificially construct. The family has long been regarded as the paradigmatic instance of a community. Yet when the family's center shifts toward the horizontal conjugal relation, the family itself first becomes an artifact. At this point, is the family still a community? If we cannot even confirm the community character of the family, it seems all the more inexplicable how political society can be a community. Conversely, since both are artificially constructed products, if the community character of the family can be established, this may open a new theoretical window for our understanding of the state as a political community.

This is the point at which the significance of Hegel for the philosophy of the family becomes apparent. On the one hand, he holds that the conjugal relation and the establishment of the family are based on individual consent; on the other hand, he insists on the ethical nature of the family. The tension between these two claims was itself an important basis for his critique of social contract theory. In Hegel, the establishment of a family means that the two parties consent to relinquish their own natural and particular personalities and together constitute a single person. Natural impulse is thereby demoted, while the spiritual bond is elevated to something indissoluble, transcending passion and particular contingency.¹⁷ The formation of a "single person" indicates that the family is an ethical whole that transcends either of the two spouses. Since the conjugal relation itself is founded on individual consent, however, why should this new ethical whole's spiritual bond be "indissoluble"? Does this mean that spouses cannot divorce? This sounds logically equivalent to voluntarily selling oneself into slavery once and for all.

This is clearly not what Hegel means, however. His view can be explained at least by reference to two interrelated characteristics of the conjugal relation: its irreducibility, and its intrinsic value. The conjugal relation is artificially established by two independent individuals, yet once established, it cannot be decomposed into or reduced to a simple aggregation of two fully independent entities. In this respect, it closely resembles friendship as a recognition that there is something that belongs not to either of the two subjects but is

17 Heige'er 黑格爾 [G. W. F. Hegel], *Fa zhexue yuanli* 法哲學原理, trans. Fan Yang 范揚 and Zhang Qitai 張企泰 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1961), 177–79.

shared by both.¹⁸ The conjugal relation is the same: it cannot be reduced to its constitutive parties, for it is something that transcends individuality and implies the common sharing of both.¹⁹ Some have characterized this type of relation using the concept of “internal relations.” At the same time, its irreducibility indicates that it possesses a standing independent of purely personal instrumental considerations. This means that when each spouse deliberates upon his or her choices of action, what is of fundamental importance is the relation itself, rather than the two parties involved.²⁰ Here, the relation itself becomes a constitutive part of each spouse’s self-identity, and at the same time partly determines how each imagines his or her own interests. Accordingly, the maintenance of the conjugal relation itself can serve as an independent reason influencing or even determining the respective choices of husband and wife, a situation different from either party considering only themselves or only the other. Such a relation, shared by both parties and possessing intrinsic value, can truly be said to transcend the separate wills and passions of the individuals, even though it remains formally and legally dissoluble.

Therefore, even if the family centered on the conjugal relation is in the first instance an artificially constructed thing, it does not thereby lose its ethical character, and it remains a community that one can observe and experience at close range. This provides a new perspective from which to reflect on the ethical nature of political society. The modern liberal tradition is deeply resistant to regarding the state or political society as a community, because “community” always seems to evoke an external entity that suppresses the individual. The foundations and characteristics of the modern conjugal relation show us, however, that a community can be a construction based on individual will while remaining irreducible to a simple aggregate of individuals. Moreover, just like the family, the most fundamental thing about the state as a community lies in the artificially constructed relation itself, the relation within which individuals are situated, rather than in some entity that is prior to, external to, or superior to individuals. To maintain the community is to maintain this relation itself.

In fact, this concept of political community, whose essence consists in constructive relations, has already begun to take shape in Rawls. He says that

18 Piye'erbaoluo Duonadi 皮耶爾保羅·多納蒂 [Pierpaolo Donati], *Guanxi shehuixue: shehui kexue yanjiu de xin fanshi* 關係社會學：社會科學研究的新範式, trans. Liu Jun 劉軍 and Zhu Xiaowen 朱曉文 (Shanghai: Gezhi chubanshe, 2018), 78.

19 Ibid., 79.

20 Andrew Levine, *The General Will: Rousseau, Marx, Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 30.

only when free persons share a set of mutually acknowledged principles of cooperation does a genuine community between persons become possible in their common practices; without this, their relationships would, for the most part, be built on force.²¹ It is worth noting that, on this understanding, political community exists between persons, and whether the community is genuine depends crucially on what foundation their relationships rest upon. This is precisely what is meant here by the constructive political community, one that is not external to individuals, and whose substantive content consists in relations.

Constitutiveness for self-identity, however, is not equivalent to ontological primordality, for such constitutiveness is the result of individual construction. Accordingly, even if the family centered on the conjugal relation can help us understand the possibility of a constructive political community, it is equally incapable of furnishing us with a sufficient image of a trans-generational political community. This is precisely the point at which Hegel's thought on the family cannot support the ontological vision of the Chinese philosophy of *jia*, for both Hegel and Honneth place their primary emphasis on the individual foundations and distinctively modern character of marriage. This means that, against the background of individualization, the ontological foundations required for a trans-generational political community cannot be provided by the philosophy of the family. This is a distance between family and state in modern society that is difficult to overcome. Whether this implies an ontological and intergenerational rootlessness on the part of modern politics is something we cannot yet say with certainty. One thing, however, seems clear: if we are to seek such a foundation, the family is no longer a promising direction. This may portend a bleak future for *jia* philosophy understood as a comprehensive doctrine.

Translated by Carl Gene Fordham

21 John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness," *The Philosophical Review* 67, no. 2 (1958): 179.