

IPP Phenomenology of Being Series

# Family



<b>Abstract</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Preamble</b>	<b>3</b>
1. Complacency	3
2. Myth	4
3. Refuge	4
4. Disenchantment	4
5. Identity	4
6. Fear of individuality	5
7. Resentment	6
8. Tradition	6
9. Utility	6
10. Fear of loneliness	7
11. Safety	7
12. Joy	7
13. Fear of finitude	8
14. Morality	8
15. Xenophobia	8
16. Investment	9
17. Nurturing	9
18. Mirroring	9
19. Necessity	10
20. Gregariousness	10
21. Power	10
22. Image	10
23. Regression	11
24. Normality	11
25. Instinct	11

## Abstract

Family is for many people a source of worry, an important existential and psychological preoccupation. The family we come from, the family we construct, both being a cause of pain and pleasure, since they can at the same time be a source of comfort and a hindrance to a serene life, through drama, resentment or guilt for example. Thinking about the family can easily constitute a primordial purpose guiding our life, sometimes overriding other goals, becoming an obsession or an alibi for our own difficulties. What determines us to do so? Is our motivation biological, cultural, emotional, religious, social, moral or else? We rarely question the legitimacy of familial attachments, except when those relations become really painful. But just like we should evaluate our own existence, our goals and values, should we not investigate critically our “family impulsion”? We examine numerous reasons or motivations that can account for the importance of family in our life.

## Preamble

The idea of obsession with family does not speak to some persons, so let us be concrete. Let's take obsession as "something that somebody thinks about too much, or the characteristic of a person so preoccupied with an issue that he behaves in an unhealthy way". Then, who has not met one of those cases? Someone who alienates himself because he wants too much to please his father, mother, spouse, child or else. Someone who sacrifices his existence or values in order to obtain recognition or love from his family. Someone who privileges his family above humanity or society. Someone who even when his parents are dead still experiences anger toward them. Someone who is quite unfair with other persons because he prefers to defend his relatives rather than being just and truthful. A couple who stays married even though they fight all the time or hardly share anything anymore just because family is "sacred". In all those cases, we probably can claim that the family concept is unduly overbearing.

### 1. Complacency

Family is the safe haven where you are told you are good, nice and smart and most things you do are fine. You are “good” a priori, or “deep down”, if not the “best” as some parents like to qualify their child or their spouse, and one easily develops a taste for flattery. As well, our family is the best, we are good people, unlike many others who are less recommendable than our own. Moreover, it is facile and less threatening to be a hero in the family, unlike in the big world, the illusion of being strong, useful or great is easily encouraged by a microcosm where we naturally feel important and necessary. One can be a hero in his family just because he finished eating his plate or washed the dishes.

## 2. Myth

In movies, announcements and television programs, we are constantly told beautiful family narratives. Happy scenes of harmonious families seem to be the norm. Loners, outsiders, people without family are rarely presented in advertisements for example. So we consider the archetype of the “good family” as normal. Family dramas either are presented as temporary, or they make us realize how lucky we are not to be similar to those lonely or rejected people. It “feels” right to be part of a family, as a reinforced social stereotype. And as for any myth, we will attempt to stage some reenactment of crucial “positive” features as we proceed in life. A sort of regression, a return to the past that is presented as an “eternal” feature, that makes us replay former “great” occurrences as a necessary or blissful ritual. This happens though repetitive narration, or the production of an image, for ourselves and for the outside.

## 3. Refuge

In this world of galloping individualism, the family can appear to be the last institution where a little solidarity still reigns through the emotional and blood ties, where we can feel included. Through this microcosm, we feel we belong and we can forget the turmoil of society and our struggles to survive. Since love is supposed to be unconditional, we always expect to be forgiven for our wrongs or mistakes, which is not the case in social relation. As well, since generosity is supposed to be the rule, we don't have to calculate, in theory the concept of debt and repayment does not exist as such. Although this is what we expect in an ideal family relation, but often it is not the case. Lastly, we feel free in our own family, we can behave in a way that would not be acceptable “outside”, to the extent that some persons indulge in some unhealthy, excessive or outrageous behavior that would be scorned upon if it was made public.

## 4. Disenchantment

When all ideals fail, when society is disappointing, when no great future is awaiting for us, the family can represent the last resort of our desire for something better where we are not abandoned to our miserable existence. The diverse obligations, the sense of utility and necessity we derive from it, the sense of comforting, seem to fulfill one's life. The family is the perfect excuse for not engaging in anything worthwhile, for giving up any interesting challenge. We can claim to be busy, to be preoccupied, to take care of our own, in order to avoid facing our own personal issues. A great alibi when we feel life has failed us, when it is disappointing and meaningless, when any real goal is absent. It allows us to protect our irrationality, it allows us to avoid confronting the emptiness of our being.

## 5. Identity

We see our family as similar to ourselves, as an extension of our own self. We recognize ourselves in the existence of our relatives, since we share many common

characteristics, a common narration. Through our family, we feel that we know who we are, since we know our origins; the family story extends and perpetuates our primary identity. We feel understood, we don't have to define ourselves as a singular being in the process of becoming, with the struggle and anguish this implies: we already have our own spot, the others already know who we are, we have an established identity. In society we vanish in the totality, in the family atmosphere our identity is stronger since we feel unique and important. But this collective identity can be formal, it can suffocate our individual identity or make us very heteronomous. Family bonds roots us deeper into life, giving value to our existence and protecting us from our own destructive tendencies. The family makes us part of something, it gives us the impression that we are important and necessary, providing a purpose to our existence and value to ourselves. It grants an otherwise rather insignificant or boring group of individuals a quality of uniqueness by emphasizing their sameness and identity: "ours". Such unity of thought, feeling, belief, aim, etc. enables us to gain a strong feeling of closeness, affinity and union, building up our sense of identity. To the extent that the family can even constitute the exclusive meaning of one's life.

## 6. Fear of individuality

Facing oneself is commonly painful, anguishing or boring. Often, our original family is since childhood a protective place, where we felt gladly surrounded. We are supposed to escape at some point in order to be alone or create our own new family. But for some people this is a very difficult step to take, including the fact that diverse parents put pressure in order to inhibit this process of autonomization. Those people feel they are too weak in order to survive on their own. So they sacrifice their autonomy for the sake of maintaining some "safe" heteronomy. They fear themselves too much, they cling to the other for self-comfort at the expenses of the self, forgotten. Due to wishful thinking and self-indulgence, they fall in the delusion that only the family is something that can make their life meaningful. The shadow of nothingness provokes a strong appetite for unity with others. We then experience a fear of growing up, of taking responsibility for our own choices and existence, dreading our own singularity. In spite of the psychological support provided in this matter, a group always implies some type of pressure to comply, in terms of behavior, beliefs and belonging, thus in order to overcome this group pressure one needs to be personally ready to struggle. The paradox of the family is that it both constitutes our identity and suffocates it. As well, we use the family as a scapegoat, as a means to shirk personal responsibility and justify features about us that shame us, such as bad habits, recurrent difficulties, failures, etc. "I am like this because of my education", "I inherited this problem from my mother", "I was not loved and appreciated as a child".

## 7. Resentment

Family, because of the strong emotional attachments, engenders disappointments, a sense of betrayal, a feeling of psychological shortcomings. Love can therefore easily turn into anger, and through time to resentment.

Jealousy and envy are common features of family, since one tends to compare himself with others, in terms of desire for love and recognition. As well, we often blame family members for bad things that happened to us when we lived with them and afterwards, since it is easier than to take responsibility for our own existence. A crucial aspect of the negative feeling toward family is that we encounter each other daily and our own wishes or expectations often clash with other members. We would always need to find some creative or rational ways to get by and harmonize with them, a rather difficult endeavor. And when this harmonization is not really possible, we accumulate rancor and spite toward them, a feeling that can become quite painful and obsessive.

## 8. Tradition

Family is constructed upon ancestral examples, more or less modified through time, depending on the cultural matrix. Since we have the habit to live in a family since childhood, it is somewhat taken as a norm in our grown age, and we consciously or not follow in some ways the path of elders. For example, the ritual of holidays, birthdays, burial and other celebrations, that we traditionally celebrate with the family. It seems obvious or even obligatory that one should include family in those circumstances. With the anxiety that accompanies those celebrations, since those relations are rarely just healthy and joyful. Family is an archaic tradition which we perceive as a necessity for a normal life. To have a family makes one look good in society, in order to be really included and recognized, while being lonely might make one appear as a misfit. Of course, we can rethink or criticize the principle of the family and doubt its legitimacy and obligations, a reaction which will happen according to persons and environment. But often we rather do what we are used to do and follow the predetermined process. Numerous festive rituals constitute a good example of this "obligation". Of course, tradition can also be seen positively from the perspective of transmitting a spiritual or cultural heritage, and one can decide to keep and develop the "legacy" of his ancestors. But the alienation is brought about through the compulsive dimension. We may experience anxiety about not fulfilling traditions we grew up with, considering them as "the way". If we disagree with them, or deviate from them, we are isolated and thus easily prone to doubt ourselves rather than doubting those established principles.

## 9. Utility

Families are likely or supposed to support each other if some financial or other practical problem needs to be dealt with. They represent the most immediate people to turn to when in need or distress. The family is there to satisfy certain basic needs: material, emotional, sexual, social, existential. This utilitarian dimension is easily neglected or denied, for sentimental reasons, but it is undeniably a crucial motivation for the pursuit

of family life in spite of many drawbacks. But there again, those expectations can easily be disappointed, or engender a form of excessive dependency. This sense of utility can go both ways: utility for ourselves and utility for others. In the latter case, someone might even want to impose his usefulness upon others, even when they clearly indicated their lack of interest or even rejection for this “help”. A common phenomenon is the pretension to “save” the other, in spite of his refusal, a power struggle that engenders many conflicts.

## 10. Fear of loneliness

The family protects from the feeling of solitude. It can protect us from facing oneself through presence of close ones, through interaction and mutual preoccupation. We don't have to face our own boring and limited self, since we are interesting for other persons and they keep us company: they distract us from ourselves. This fear of loneliness can be very acute, accompanied with worries about being abandoned by someone or others, and engender pain, misunderstanding and dissension, even aggressivity. Because of this, some relations engage as well in a form of co-dependency, where one misses another, and the latter plays with this need, since himself needs to be missed in order to give value to his own self.

## 11. Safety

In family we find people we can in theory trust unconditionally, who provide us with something certain, through a form of mutual preservation, in opposition to uncertainty of the outer world - and our own self - which is violent, unfair and ignores our little being. We experience a sense of survival through this solidarity. By sharing property, tasks, challenges and expenses, a household feels stronger and better protected against hardships of economic and social difficulties. Split obligations seem to build a steady ground of well-being for all sides. Thus one is willing to sacrifice his individual freedom for the sake of a stronger commonwealth. We can even feel protected from ourselves and our existential anguishes. Crave for love, company and consolation is strong, in children but as well in adults. Although we tend to forget that this ideal representation of the family always encounters its limits, a realization that might come as a strong psychological shock for the naïve or romantic individual. But even when there is tension or conflict, it seems safer to suffer the drama, trying to survive the consequences, than to abandon the refuge. Unless it becomes really unbearable.

## 12. Joy

Family is the nest of biological and psychological development, the place of a growing life, which provides us with pleasant sensations, relational warmth, a sense of humanity. It is a “feeling” value, a deep union that touches the foundations of life, our first positive experience of existence. Within the family, one is in theory welcome and not challenged, we are supported, there is no necessity to struggle with oneself and others. It is supposed to be cozy, since everyone knows each other, relations have already been

established and everyone knows his place. Nothing is unexpected, there is no need for worry. Although reality often contradicts this idealized scheme, for the apparent peaceful surface is always threatened by underground currents.

### 13. Fear of finitude

Faced with limits of our own self and the perspective of death, the family can extend our immediate self and provide us with a sense of immortality, in particular through engendering children. One of the reasons why children are considered a precious and sacred value in many societies. As well, it compensates our own personal limits, since we share their successes, providing our self with a sense of augmented power and existence. This happens in particular when children satisfy parental ambitions, giving them pride through accomplishments they could not achieve themselves. The fear of mortality often takes the form of fear of oblivion. We want to live forever, thus we construct a family in order to continue biologically our own existence and be remembered. The idea of becoming obsolete and forgotten is too troublesome for our unconscious and insistent desire to be immortal.

### 14. Morality

We feel we have to be concerned with our family and take care of them, otherwise we are a bad person and might be ostracized in some societies when we neglect our family or even when we don't have a family. We feel guilty if we do not take up this responsibility, even when the expectations, personal or social, are clearly beyond our capacities. Through taking care of the family, we can enjoy a feeling of good conscience, the idea that we are a good person, even though the rest of our existence is quite corrupted. In this sense, "taking care of family" is the best alibi for any decision we make, for any action we undertake: it seems to constitute the moral finality par excellence, even before the well-being of humanity. We tend to forget that family is just an extended self, thus family preoccupation is nothing but an extended egocentrism protected with a moral varnish. And if we fail in our familial endeavor, for example through divorce or rupture, we are threatened with guilt, shame or a sense of inadequacy.

### 15. Xenophobia

Human beings tend to be xenophobic, fearing the outside, being anxious about otherness. Like the animal, what is "other" is often dangerous, direct threat or competition. Therefore, we prefer to be with "our own", with people we know, that we can trust, since they are like us and we grew with them: we share common interest. Family is part of our self, and extension of our self, unlike outsiders. That is why we avoid strangers, except when we need them, and prefer our family to humanity or society. Lastly, we do not want outsiders to see our "dirt", therefore, as the proverb "we should wash our dirty laundry at home", hiding our "reality" from the outside view, since "others" could judge us or take advantage of our weaknesses.



## 16. Investment

Often, we think of family as an investment, particularly in marriage and producing offspring, in a possessive way. The profit should be guaranteed, for financial reasons, success, reputation or existential needs. We give, love, attention or material goods, with the idea that there should be some kind of “payback”, we are supposed to requite the equivalent and even more. Faithfulness, respect, gratitude, kindness or else, we are “owed” something and feel betrayed and angry if it does not occur. Just the same, because we were fed and brought up by our parents, we are told and we often think that we owe them respect and gratitude, with the feeling of guilt this might imply. People easily fall in the trap of the “sunk cost fallacy”, since they calculate their interactions in terms of has been given and cannot be recovered, in spite of contrary evidence. In such family relations, one easily tells the other “I have given you everything”, a hyperbolic expression that shows the greed of the expectation. For children rearing, this can be called as well “racehorse education”, where a heavy emotional and material investment is supposed to produce a guaranteed social success, independently of the capacity and the desire of the child to fulfill those expectations, a behavior that often engenders disappointment on one side, anguish, guilt or shame on the other side, sometimes in a dramatic way.

## 17. Nurturing

Family is the place where we grew, the environment where we became who we are. We have been nourished and educated. It is the pedagogical arena where we learned to live in society, where we learned principles of life, the initiation to the “good and bad” in a moral and practical sense, where we formed ideals. Our parents were the authority on these matters, thus we either kept their standards or developed new ones, our “own”, often as a mere reaction to theirs.

## 18. Mirroring

We recognize ourselves in our family members, since we share a history in common, with the mimetic consequences of such promiscuity. We are under influence, even though this influence can on the long run be reflexive. But family members represent the closest and most ancient reflection of our own personality. Therefore, we naturally feel involved with them and we compare what we are and what we do to what they are and what they do, a comparison that can easily turn to envy, jealousy or competition. In this sense family can as well represent a challenge, a strong motivation for success, a pressure to overcome our own limits. As well, we want to understand, help or criticize our relatives, partially in order to solve our own existential problems, and we hope sometimes desperately that they understand and accept us.

## 19. Necessity

We do not choose the family where we came to be, where we grew, received our education and developed ourselves, thus no matter how hard we try, willy-nilly, we are marked forever, we cannot get rid of them; they are part of us, they largely constitute our personality, as a direct effect or as a reaction to them. Thus, through love or hate, even in indifference, we have no choice but to relate to them. They will always be part of our inner reality, if not as well constitute our most immediate environment. As for the family we created ourselves, our existential involvement, even though limited in time, will never be forgotten or negated. The emotional, moral or psychological bonding, generally intense, leaves indelible marks on our self, often producing an inner sense of obligation or need.

## 20. Gregariousness

Most mammals strive for flocking, for communal life, like apes from which humans derived. Therefore family life is the naturally suitable norm, while solitude is taken as a deviation. Even though society provides us with the basis for another type of clustering, wider, it seems to many that the family is the most reliable, the most intense or most fulfilling type of relation. This instinctive mode of relation can lead us to privilege the interest of family members in a very abusive manner, in opposition to other persons, to society as a whole, to truth, reason or to justice. In this sense, the primitive and emotional value of family takes precedence over any type of more constructed or rational value. Even though healthy family values can or should be sublimated in other less immediate existential values or cultural values.

## 21. Power

Lust for power, dominance and control is a strong urge in human beings, just as exists the reverse, the desire to be dominated. Children experience very early these contradictory impulses. Thus the family is the playground, for power or seduction games, either in a lowkey fashion or in a dramatic, absurd or violent way. Those permanent interactions can engender frustration and anger. But some find in the domestic power a compensation for their social or existential difficulties. This sort of localized feudalism can be quite abusive, and often those who are the victims of the process have little chance to immediately escape, for practical or psychological reasons.

## 22. Image

Everyone wants to look decent, have a good image in the eyes of society. Traditionally, the idea of being a bachelor or a spinster has a negative connotation, and in many cultures a woman should have children when she is still young. In a lesser way, a man has to be the head of a household, although this seems to be changing rapidly in our contemporary world, even in traditional societies. But still, bachelorhood, not having a

“couple” relation is rather viewed as problematic, it is hardly conceived as a really legitimate choice, and as a problem to solve. Parents have to be “good parents”, a social pressure that is even stronger for the mother, easily accused of not being perfect. The pretension of constituting a happy family is quite perceptible on social networks, an almost idyllic image, where everyone smiles, even though this fabrication is often far from reality. My “wonderful children” is for example a common expression, hyperbolic, quite phantasmatic or meaningless. Putting forward our family to impress others, claiming how close, fun, helpful we are together, and how wonderful it is to count on one another, is a way to grant ourselves a superior value. Alone we are puny, but together with the members of the family, nuclear or enlarged, we take part of some augmented reality.

### 23. Regression

The wealth of accumulated shared experience within the family allows one to travel back in time, to the golden years of childhood, even to regress all the way back to a psychological fetal stage, however phantasmatic such memories are. When life is disheartening, we can avoid facing the harshness of the present and the anxiety of the future through nostalgia. Plunging back to the time of innocence, reliving the fusional sense we encountered in some particular moments of the past, glorifying bygone experiences. Of course, remembering this lost paradise can reinforce a sense of helplessness and distress about the present, but just like in any ebriety, we can enjoy the bliss of the moment. Although we dread anyone or any circumstance that would shed some reality on the romantic episode we have been constructing for ourselves.

### 24. Normality

Family is a phenomenon considered as a social standard, it constitutes the norm, both as the usual thing people do and as defining the way they should behave, as a fact and as an obligation. Therefore the choice of establishing a family seems obvious and obligatory, there is no need for any justification in order to do it, it does not require any reason or motivation, it should not be questioned or criticized. If one has a family, there is no need or utility to question oneself about the issue, its nature or its motivation, except when the situation becomes painful or catastrophic. Thus many people find themselves caught up in a family without ever having made a conscious and deliberate decision to establish one. And of course, not to invest considerable time and energy with this family is considered shameful and even scandalous, even though it is periodically the case with people that would rather focus on their career or a passion for example.

### 25. Instinct

Animals, especially evolved species, as well are obsessed with their family, particularly their offspring when they are small, when they need nurturing and protection, probably as a biological phenomenon. We are obsessed with our descendant family, to engender

them, feed them and to protect them, because we are in a way machines built to maintain and reproduce our genes. The mating feature is of course an essential aspect of this process, in spite of its sublimation, cultural, romantic and sentimental. The desire to pair up and reproduce is a very strong feature of human behavior that can easily take an excessive form, contrary to any common sense or rational standard.