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The evolution of understanding of fatherhood. Attempt at synthesis

Ewolucja rozumienia ojcostwa. Próba syntezy

Introduction

The behavioural models and social roles of the father that were created throughout history were based on the innate predispositions of the father, on one hand, and they are a result from the necessity for him to take on specific roles, on the other hand. Over time, attempts were made to provide a compelling theoretical justification by including philosophical reflection in the topic, naturally according to the assumptions of a given philosophy. This was necessary not only because the reason “it is a gift of God”, should always be used, but also because the practice used in everyday life itself requires reflection. We know perfectly well how thoughtless action ends. Creative reason was necessary even more so in relation to such an important issue as

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the evolution of the understanding of fatherhood. Since pedagogy is a science whose main subjects of research are the processes of upbringing, education, and broadly understood care for a person, it is appropriate to look at this problem also from this perspective, i.e., the father in this role. The father, who can be called “paidagogos” (originally - “a guardian and guide of boys”) i.e., the one who is a teacher, leads and takes care of the child. The article also aims at attempting to outline a historical approach, recall various thinkers with their often completely different views, as well as to recall the voice of Catholic theology (Benedict XVI, Francis), and call for further exploration of this issue for the sake of our Christian fathers.

Historical Outline

Historically, it was a man's task to be the leader of a tribe (king), a defender (warrior), a sage whose duty was to interpret life phenomena (magician), and the head of the family responsible for its needs. Over time, these roles and functions have gained philosophical justification. A political treatise “*Patriarcha*” by a Protestant writer Robert Filmer might be an example. Written around 1640, this work was published posthumously in 1680. The author derives royal authority directly from the authority of the father. According to him, biblical Adam had, at least potentially, royal authority. The royal and paternal authority derive from and complement each other, for they have the same meaning, except that the king is the father of many families, and the father, who is his subject, is the father of one. Filmer used historical, biblical, and social arguments to demonstrate that royal power has attributes of paternal power. By the will of God, the natural state of man is a social state. Man comes into the world as a helpless being that depends on others and is thus a subject. The natural subordination of children to their father gives him the power over their offspring, and their independence may be gained as an act of the father's grace. This applies especially to the decision to get married. Filmer was inspired by the writings of Jean Bodin, who saw a renewal of morality and public order in the restoration of social significance fatherhood formerly had. He wrote:

In any rightly ordered commonwealth, that power of life and death over their children which belongs to them under the law of God and of nature, should be restored to parents. This most primitive of customs was observed in ancient times by the Persians, and people of Asia generally, by the Romans and the

Celts; it was also recognized throughout the New World till the time of the Spanish conquests. If this power is not restored, there is no hope of any restoration of good morals, honour, virtue, or the ancient splendour of commonwealths. [...] Yet paternal power was gradually undermined in the time of the decline of the Roman Empire. [...] The affection of parents for their children is so strong, that the law has always rightly presumed that they will only do those things which are of benefit and honour to their children (Bodin, 2024).

John Locke represented the theory of limited anti-paternalism. He tried to show that Christian fatherhood is not of a monarchical nature because political power is a human creation. Therefore, the commandment to honour one's parents did not apply to every authority, especially state authority. He opposed natural law to the human law of convention, on which political society was based. He accused Filmer of misinterpreting the Bible, especially regarding Eve's subordination to Adam, woman's subordination to man, and especially wife's subordination to husband. He believed that the father's paternal authority over children is not a political authority of life and death. It is mainly connected with the obligation to care for the child until the child develops the ability to think rationally, which enables the recognition of human rights. Without this level of consciousness, there can be no freedom for a human being. Locke then proposed almost identical forms and scope of education for girls and boys.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a supporter of traditional ideals of men and women and of sharp contrasts in social roles based on gender. In his opinion, a man should be physically strong and spiritually independent – a producer of goods and defender of his country, while an ideal woman ought to be a tender and caring priestess of the home hearth – a practical, modest and patient housewife, fully devoted to her children and husband. In everyday life, both sexes should be significantly separated. Masculinity was to be part of a social arrangement which resulted from unanimous consent – a social contract whose aim was the common good. While a strong man was to be a defender of the country, assuming a military role by a woman would conflict with her role as a mother. Education should primarily develop natural predispositions in children, and in the process, prepare them for social life. Both reasons prompted different education for boys and girls. In the upbringing of boys, Rousseau recommended taking care of unhampered physical development, and only secondarily of shaping mental abilities through familiarization with the world of things, and finally of introduction to coexistence with other people. He also claimed that successful functioning of men in the family guarantees

a strong state, because all social feelings are shaped in the family. He wrote: "Is it not the good son, the good husband, the good father, who makes the good citizen?" (Rousseau, 1762).

The purpose of marriage was obvious to Rousseau: living together and raising children. Spouses had very different roles in the family: the man was to set strategic goals, make decisions about the family's relationship with the outside world, and be the decision-making authority while the woman could devote herself entirely to household matters. The husband should have control over his wife's conduct to make sure that the children he must acknowledge and feed do not belong to someone else. An adulterous wife pretends to love her husband and deceives him and, moreover, deceives the entire society (she bribes the servants, sets a bad example for children, robs her husband). Respecting each other's natural abilities, the husband and wife should complement each other, creating a perfect moral organism, in which

woman is the eye and man the hand, but the two are so dependent on one another that the man teaches the woman what to see, while she teaches him what to do (ibidem).

J. J. Rousseau (1962) did not believe in equality of the sexes: *T*

these resemblances and differences must have an influence on the moral nature; this inference is obvious, and it is confirmed by experience; it shows the vanity of the disputes as to the superiority or the equality of the sexes.

A significant breakthrough in the contemporary view of the social role of gender occurred in the 1960s with the emergence of sociobiology, the science of the biological foundations of social behaviour. Researchers W. D. Hamilton, R. L. Trivers, G. C. Williams and others created its theoretical foundations, while Edward O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins were its propagators. Sociobiologists assumed that during evolution, natural selection refers not so much to individuals as their genotype. Hence, genes, which are carriers of hereditary traits, are the most important decision-maker in the process of evolution, and they strive for multiplication. To ensure success for his genotype, a man should impregnate young and healthy women (whose offspring will likely be strong) as often as possible. Therefore, it is advantageous for a male in most animal species, including humans, to be domineering, emotionally unstable, impulsive, and even aggressive. In sociobiology, Steven Goldberg put forward a theory of perpetual patriarchy based on the existence of a physiological factor that prevents the formation of a non-patriarchal society. The high position of

a man in society and his status in the family were based on a physiological factor and, therefore, did not depend on the rights granted to women. A woman could take up almost any social and professional role, because most of them are not physiologically determined. Nevertheless, professions and roles played by men were usually regarded as more prestigious. Ultimately, dominance was related to innate male aggression, which was caused by testosterone. Others, like Geoff Dench, argued that patriarchy has serious economic advantages that determined the dominance of men in most societies.

Contemporary Attempts to Define Sexuality

Analyses of the situation of the family often include currently challenging problems and tasks. The analyses are not usually focused on individual components of families such as fatherhood. However, the crisis of fatherhood seems to influence the functioning of the contemporary Catholic family. It is difficult not to notice that, along with the rapidly growing process of the disappearance of patriarchal relations, there has been an increased discussion about the appearance of a *civilization without fathers*. The reluctance to build new models of fatherhood, at least the ones which aspire to be universal, is accompanied by a tendency to look at fatherhood from a negative perspective, define what it should not be and omit its positive aspects. The biggest influence on mounting difficulties in identifying a man with his parental role are undoubtedly new models of masculinity, strongly promoted yet ambiguous. Inappropriate paternal attitudes are shown in the public sphere much more often in relation to the father than to the mother. The critical assessment of paternal attitudes is often justified. The number of *fatherless families* is growing, while a significant number of children might be called *orphans with living fathers* – the fathers who have problems understanding the essence of fatherhood, the infantile *Peter Pans*, who never fully grew up.

Otto Weininger, in his book *Sex and Character*, treated masculinity and femininity as opposing elements, without prejudging their metaphysical character (whether they are two components or two aspects of one). One of the main theses was the relativity of human gonochorism. He wrote,

All the peculiarities of the male sex may be present in the female in some form, however weakly developed; and so also the sexual characteristics of the woman persist in the man (Weininger, 2024).

According to Weininger sexuality is ultimately determined by the following factors: primary sexual characteristics (male testicles, female ovaries); primary internal sexual characteristics (spermatic cords, seminal vesicle, urethra, uterus) and external (organs); secondary sexual characteristics (anatomical features and processes that appear during the process of growing up, but do not directly serve reproduction (mutation, facial hair, breasts development); tertiary sexual characteristics (innate features distinguished for practical reasons which are revealed through activity or behaviour: male – stubbornness and strength, female – delicacy); quaternary sexual characteristics, which are accidental and arise from habit, custom, or tradition (smoking and drinking in men, handicrafts in women). According to Weininger, an individual is never one hundred percent male or female but is masculine or feminine to a certain degree. The *ideal you*, i.e. the *100 percent man* or *100 percent woman* does not exist in the real world.

The theme of androgyny is currently clearly present primarily in the practice of social life aimed at unisexuality. The sharp segregation of the sexes in history emphasized their distinctiveness and differences between them. Currently, professional work, cultural life, everyday duties, as well as political and economic life and many other aspects of public and social engagement aim at unifying the places and roles of the sexes. The modern model of upbringing means that the frequency of androgyny is increasing in both men and women. This results, for example, from the strong feminization of teaching professions and the frequent dominance of the mother in the home environment (additionally, single motherhood). In the case of men, this manifests itself in a greater flexibility of behaviour, and search for optimal life strategy. Androgynous women have a more permanent unification of masculine and feminine traits in their own *I*. Researchers claim that in Western countries about 50% of the population reveals traditional traits of masculinity/femininity, and already about 30% of androgynous traits.

Heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality exist in the sphere of sexual and romantic attraction. A form that has recently been noticed, however, is asexuality – weakening of erotic/sexual reactions or their complete disappearance (in a healthy person, it basically does not occur). In a radical biological and psychological form, it can also take the form of transsexuality. It is also associated with contesting the traditional understanding of fatherhood.

This tendency was reinforced by the view that biological dimension of sex should be rejected, differences between women and men erased, and sexual otherness recognized as the norm, even if this meant destroying the family. According to the *gender* theory, there is no reason to distinguish between men and women, and biological sex is not part of a person's identity. Femininity and masculinity are abstractions which are not supported by human nature. Gender is a matter of convention; it is merely a social construction. It is not determined by biology and psychology as the supporters of classical sexuality would have it, but by culture. *Sex* is determined by genes and hormones, but *gender* is shaped by culture, i.e. the influence of family and environment during childhood.

Gender ideology, or the so-called social or cultural gender, which is not identified with biological sex, appeared at the end of the 20th century. The theory began with the signing of the Amsterdam Treaties in 1999, according to which the strategy of implementing equal opportunities for the sexes became binding for all European Union countries. A further step was the ruling by the European Parliament in 2006 that homophobia, which is an irrational fear of homosexuality, and aversion to people with different preferences, i.e. homosexuals, bisexuals, lesbians, transsexuals, is considered an offense equal to racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. A new field called *Gender Studies* appeared. The popularity of the new ideology, which generates a new outlook on fatherhood, is so widespread that contemporary family studies indicate two possible directions of approaching fatherhood: one built on the framework of traditional thinking about masculinity and another one constructed on the concept of *gender*. This mutually exclusive duality indicates a deep division and deconstruction of the concept of the father. The problem is deliberately discussed more broadly from a historical perspective. These data have naturally been available for some time. Simultaneously, one should not underestimate new achievements in this area, and not only in pedagogical, theological or philosophical terms, but also in medical sciences. However, an honest debate in many circles is necessary. The debate on "gender". For a father to be "paidagogos", he must first know who he is. All the more so because the right to change sex and to self-determine gender has been recognized as an element of the right to human freedom. The emphasis on freedom is absolutely right, but it must be remembered that in the light of the Gospel, Love and eternal life, not freedom is the highest virtue. The understanding of sexuality as freely shaped by culture

and society has primarily affected the family, the understanding of the roles of men and women, i.e. father and mother. The definition of fatherhood has become arbitrary because the criteria for determining it have been introduced relatively. Relativism identified with freedom is very dangerous.

The Voice of the Pope and Theologian – Benedict XVI and Francis

This concept of sexuality has met with strong polemics from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Pope Benedict XVI, referring to the treatise and teaching of the French Rabbi Gilles Bernheim, pointed out a significant error of gender ideology:

According to this philosophy, sex is no longer a given element of nature, that man has to accept and personally make sense of: it is a social role that we choose for ourselves, while in the past it was chosen for us by society. The profound falsehood of this theory and of the anthropological revolution contained within it is obvious. People dispute the idea that they have a nature, given by their bodily identity, that serves as a defining element of the human being. They deny their nature and decide that it is not something previously given to them, but that they make it for themselves. According to the biblical creation account, being created by God as male and female pertains to the essence of the human creature. This duality is an essential aspect of what being human is all about, as ordained by God. This very duality as something previously given is what is now disputed. The words of the creation account: “male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27) no longer apply. No, what applies now is this: it was not God who created them male and female – hitherto society did this, now we decide for ourselves. Man and woman as created realities, as the nature of the human being, no longer exist. Man calls his nature into question. From now on he is merely spirit and will. The manipulation of nature, which we deplore today where our environment is concerned, now becomes man’s fundamental choice where he himself is concerned. From now on there is only the abstract human being, who chooses for himself what his nature is to be. Man and woman in their created state as complementary versions of what it means to be human are disputed. But if there is no pre-ordained duality of man and woman in creation, then neither is the family any longer a reality established by creation. Likewise, the child has lost the place he had occupied hitherto and the dignity pertaining to him (Hall, 2012).

The above, extensively quoted statement by Benedict XVI precisely indicates the reflection on the subject of gender from the point of view of

Catholic theology. This is one of the elements of our exploration of the subject of the evolution of fatherhood. However, it is currently extremely important because it touches on the very essence of being a human being, a man, a husband and finally a father.

Continuing this line of reasoning and argumentation, in an interview with the Argentinean daily “La Nacion” on March 11, 2023, Pope Francis talked about a futuristic experience that he had many years ago when he read a book *Lord of the World* written by Robert Hugh Benson in 1907. The Pope said that the book presents the idea of “a future in which differences are disappearing and everything is the same, everything is uniform, a single leader of the whole world” (Catholic News Agency, 2024). The Pope then said that it was there that he began to feel a tendency to reduce differences, while he believes that the richness of humanity lies in its differences. The Pope said that he talks about gender

ideology because some people are a bit naive and believe that it is the way to progress. He said that they do not distinguish what is respect for sexual diversity or diverse sexual preferences from what is already an anthropology of gender, which is extremely dangerous because it eliminates differences, and that erases humanity, the richness of humanity, both personal, cultural, and social, the diversities and the tensions between differences (ibidem).

The Pope very aptly pointed out the difference between respect for sexual diversity and the fact that gender anthropology “erases humanity”, that is, something fundamental for every human being.

Society has again started a discussion on the topic of family and parenthood, also including fatherhood. Political correctness promotes gender ideology and issues related to it such as same sex marriage, bisexual people (who are attracted toward both men and women) and promotes freedom in selecting gender for oneself.

There is an ongoing debate on the legal consequences of such solutions, and it also concerns practical understanding of paternity by law, the right to adopt a child by same sex couples, or the limits of state interference in parental authority. Regardless of the momentary conclusions of these debates and discussions, the understanding of fatherhood is becoming increasingly blurred. The family as a group and social institution is changing along with this process. It is subject to constant changes: structural and social, cultural, ideological as well as technological and economic. An example of it is the position of the

child, who is increasingly becoming an emotionally important value, as well as a burden. The confusion around the concept of the father influences in turn an increasingly destructive image of the wife – mother, and the child.

Contemporary Proposals for the Definition of Fatherhood

Fatherhood is no longer an unambiguous concept. It defines reality which is both lost and unknown. To describe new social relationships about marriage and family additional descriptive words or expressions are used (*adjectival fatherhood*) to describe its nature. This is intended to illustrate the specific situation of a specific *father*. And so, among the many definitions of modern fatherhood, we can list the following:

- desired fatherhood – impossible to achieve, for example, due to disability;
- long-term fatherhood – of adult children who get married; also, for example, of a daughter-in-law;
- presumed paternity – used in connection with a legal determination of biological paternity;
- denied paternity – court-determined because not accepted by the alleged father;
- absent fatherhood – forced by, for example, difficult economic situation and the need to earn money abroad;
- limited paternity – by a court decision or as a result of unfavourable or unfortunate circumstances, for example, illness;
- unfortunate fatherhood – when a father abandons a severely disabled child;
- adoptive paternity – arising as a result of legal adoption of a child;
- helpless fatherhood – related to difficult life situations, for example, job loss, homelessness;
- anonymous paternity – resulting from conception with sperm from an unknown donor, stored in so-called sperm bank;
- embarrassing fatherhood – including extramarital fatherhood, may sometimes be desired
- bisexual fatherhood - when the father is also homosexual, although strongly attached to the child;

- discriminated paternity – when, for example, mother prevents contact with the child following divorce;
- fighting paternity – organized in associations fighting for their parental rights;
- diasporic fatherhood – raising a child, e.g. after a divorce, but not living in the same household as the child;
- single fatherhood – mainly as a result of the mother's death, or after divorce, when the court assigned parental rights to the father;
- toxic fatherhood – a negative type, when the father's influence on the child is toxic because the father is an alcoholic, troublemaker or a drug addict;
- pathological paternity – in its extreme form – incestuous, related to molesting the child;
- atypical paternity – for example, resulting from in vitro fertilization or another medical technique;
- unemployed fatherhood – economically or socially disadvantaged due to job loss;
- fatherhood, step fatherhood – when a man who is not related to the child takes on the role of a stepfather;
- incomplete paternity – mainly concerns infertility of the male, the female partner or both;
- forced fatherhood – when a man does not want a child, and the mother wants it or even forces it;
- maintenance paternity – related to enforcing maintenance for one's own child;
- disputed paternity – established by the court at the request of authorized persons: the child, mother or prosecutor;
- prenatal paternity – for example, in a situation of a dislike of the partner, who is usually forced to terminate pregnancy;
- conscious fatherhood – planned, an optimal situation, responsible;
- biological paternity – the most common type of paternity, related to reproductive health;
- symbolic fatherhood – linking fatherhood with the concept of God and His Divine Fatherhood, also related to great national ancestors or social heroes (Wesoły, 2013).

Such a comparison is naturally only intended to indicate the diversity of approach towards this topic today. The difficulty of defining fatherhood does not, however, exempt us from the need to analyse and understand new social situations that many contemporary fathers encounter. Each challenge awaits a solution and an answer to the basic duties that are associated with fatherhood. Absent fathers continue to be fathers. The crisis of the family, also associated with changes of a model of the father, cannot become the source of a *civilization without fathers*.

The world and history are trying to deeply root themselves in the family, interfering with the understanding of the role of the father and questioning his place in the development of all who create the community together with him. The Church places great hope in returning to the original – biblical and Christian – analysis of fatherhood. A more direct relationship of the family with God can contribute to a new, vital development of fatherhood. It would be based on deep spirituality, stemming from the teaching about God the Father, as well as from the basic assumptions of personalism, the teaching about the dignity of each person and their rights. The absence – especially among young people – of experiencing sacrificial love which emphasizes dignity of the person raises concern. Fathers' engagement in daily work, which drains a lot of their energy and the cult of economic success and professional career place work at the forefront of the lives of fathers and lead to neglecting family ties. Negative intergenerational patterns bring with them the image of the father as an insensitive or emotionally dry parent.

Conclusion

Contemporary reflection on the role of the father often comes down to not removing him from the family, to making everyone aware of the necessity of his presence in the process of raising and developing the family. Pedagogy, which examines the process of education – indicating specific means, goals, and content – is vital for such reflection. The conclusions of its scientific research become a specific guideline in the everyday upbringing of children. Despite differences between the sexes and the fact that men and women experience and interpret reality differently, both complement each other and together create the right conditions for the growth of their children. An analysis of the historical approach to fatherhood leads one to ask the questions which

two scholars – J. Delumeau and D. Roche – had: whether the father still has a future in the West, whether we are not complicit or indifferent witnesses of disintegration of fatherhood, and whether all this means the death of the father, or possibly the birth of a “*new father*”. Despite many publications about family, the father very often remains an “*unknown being*”. His needs and expectations are not often discussed. Likewise, postulates to support future fathers in their pro-family formation are seldom formulated. Directions and paths for the further evolution of the father’s role in the family are rarely set. The vocation to fatherhood still awaits a clear and thorough understanding. Such conclusions may be surprising, because the figure of the father has been with us practically forever. And yet it turns out that an attempt to show the evolution and synthesis of the concept of *father* is current and needed, especially when we think about the future of our Christian families. It is relevant in contemporary scientific, interdisciplinary considerations, among which pedagogy, let us emphasize this once again, has its special place. As a society, we cannot leave fathers alone. Every wise and pragmatic idea to support them is worth its weight in gold today.

Abstract: The word “evolution” comes from Latin “*evolvere*” – “to develop” – that is, to reveal or demonstrate hidden possibilities. The aim is to capture the process of changes which occur over time. The modern term “evolution” simply means change. This article attempts to synthesize the evolution of the concept of “fatherhood”. It considers the historical context, mentions selected thinkers who have dealt with this subject and outlines the position of the Catholic Church expressed by the last two popes. The article refers to the traditional approach to gender and indicates contemporary attempts to define fatherhood. It calls for substantial support for fathers in their educational activities, also in the pedagogical aspect, which is extremely important. Fathers need support and encouragement to actively participate in the raising their children. Both theoretical (scientific) and pragmatic (practical) guidelines, which consider contemporary scientific achievements and the cultural context, need to be considered.

Keywords: fatherhood, family, pedagogy, philosophy, evolution, history, upbringing

Streszczenie: Słowo „ewolucja” pochodzi od łacińskiego „evolvere” – „rozwijać się” – czyli, ujawniać bądź demonstrować ukryte możliwości. Chodzi o uchwycenie procesu zmian zachodzących w czasie. Współczesny termin „ewolucja” oznacza po prostu zmianę. Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje próbę syntezy ewolucji pojęcia „ojcostwo”. Uwzględnia rys historyczny; wskazuje na wybranych myślicieli zajmujących się także tym tematem; przypomina również stanowisko Kościoła katolickiego, wyrażone przez ostatnich dwóch papieży. Artykuł nawiązuje do tradycyjnego ujęcia płci, a także wskazuje na współczesne próby definicji ojcostwa. Upomina się o konkretne wsparcie ojców w ich działaniach wychowawczych, ujmowanych również w aspekcie pedagogicznym, co jest niezwykle ważne. Ojcowie potrzebują wsparcia, zachęty do tego, by czynnie uczestniczyć we wzrastaniu swoich dzieci. Potrzebne są zarówno rozważania teoretyczne (naukowe), jak i pragmatyczne, czyli konkretne wskazówki uwzględniające współczesne osiągnięcia nauki oraz kontekst kulturowy.

Słowa kluczowe: ojcostwo, rodzina, pedagogika, filozofia, ewolucja, historia, wychowanie

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