Within the experience of many people alive today there has occurred in the Western world a remarkable double shift in family planning. For the large families of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, married couples by the middle of our century were increasingly substituting smaller ones of two or three children as improved methods of birth control made this possible. This numerical shift did not fundamentally challenge the traditional reasons for rearing children, reasons that have been clearly and succinctly analysed by Bernard Berelson as biological, cultural, political, economic, familial and personal. But in the last two decades many couples have provided that challenge. They have asked the virtually unthought and unthinkable: should all people capable of producing children necessarily do so? What are the pros and cons of ‘parenting’? In 1971, this iconoclastic movement sought form and acceptance in the establishment of the National Organization for Non-Parents (NON). By the late 1970s, the number of couples opting to remain childless by choice in Canada and the United States was estimated to be about 5 to 7 percent, and the prediction was made that ‘in the near future, it would not be surprising if one couple in ten were to reject parenthood and decide to remain childless.’ To judge by a recent study of ‘pronatalist views’ in U.S. current high school family-studies texts, the treatment of voluntary childlessness is becoming a moral issue in education.

This trend first gained public attention in the popular press, in articles written by journalists describing, sometimes satirically, their own

2. Jean E. Veevers, Childless by Choice (Toronto: Butterworths, 1980) 2; this work is a standard scholarly study of the phenomenon in modern Western society and has a good beginning bibliography.
3. Lou Ann Patterson and John Defrain in ‘Pronatalism in High School Family Studies Texts’, Family Relations 30.2 (April 1981) 211-217, declare ‘By taking a biased, pronatalist stance, some believe that textbook authors are in violation of young people’s rights to freedom of choice. Urging parenthood on the unsuspecting readers as if it were the only possible way of life is to limit the reader’s freedom. Clearly, a more ethical stance for a textbook writer is to catalogue as objectively as possible the pros and cons of parenthood, maintaining the student’s right to independent choice.’
experiences. The sociological studies that followed reversed the standard direction in the huge literature on the family: for once they stressed the influence of children on parents. In this social science literature, there are occasionally sweeping references to historical, including Graeco-Roman, attitudes and arguments toward children and voluntary childlessness, but these tend to reveal a deceptive paucity of historical knowledge and point up the need for publication of research in this aspect of the intellectual history of the family. As a case in point, consider this statement offered by Bernard Berelson in his article already cited: 'In the classical literature of Greece and Rome there appears to be little serious reference to children and childbearing except for the continuation of royal lines.' There are at least two problems with this jejune assessment. First, there is in classical literature more 'serious reference to children and childbearing' than Berelson seems to think, and much (perhaps most) of it touches exactly on the question we are considering, the advisability of children from the parents' perspective. It is true that very often the parents in question are aristocrats and noblemen (not necessarily 'royal'), because most surviving ancient literature was produced by an upper class about its own concerns, but much of what can be said about the influence of children on parents is universal: no class can corner the market on children. The second problem with Berelson's assessment lies in what it leaves unsaid: the Christian Fathers living within the Roman empire often discussed children and childbearing and meant their analysis and advice to have universal application.


6. On the other hand, the relationship of children to literature was much more limited in the ancient world than in the modern. The ancients virtually did not write literature about children. We do not have a work from antiquity in which a child is the central character, as in Oliver Twist; despite the title of Euripides' play, it is debatable whether Ion is the central character, and in any case he is scarcely a child. Peter Coveney's statement (Poor Monkey, The Child in Literature [London: Salisbury Square, 1957] ix) that 'childhood as a major theme came with the generation of Blake and Wordsworth' would find no challenge in ancient literature. For that matter, with certain minor exceptions (short moral fables used in ethical training; perhaps satyr plays, as well as the Battle of Frogs and Mice attributed both to Homer and a certain Pigres, and improbably the collection of fables associated with Aesop) creative
In ancient literature, from Homer at the beginning to Boethius at the end (a period of some 1,300 years), points are often made about the advisability of having children—and marrying, for (unlike our present situation) the two were considered virtually inseparable. These points (reasons for and against), essentially commonplaces in themselves, become literary *topoi* of philosophical, theological and sociological interest, for their treatment by different ancient writers reveals roles and concepts of children that changed as the centuries progressed, not least as the early Christian Fathers adapted these classical *topoi* in their development of a rationalization for monasticism.

In this essay, I shall first identify the *topoi* or commonplaces as the tragedian Euripides conveniently presented them in his plays. Secondly, I shall briefly examine what the two philosophers Plato and Aristotle had to say about children in relation to the desirability of becoming parents. Finally, I shall consider what treatment some leading Fathers of the early Christian church gave to these *topoi* as they argued for the childless state.

* * *

Gilbert Murray said of Euripides: 'About children, and the intense sorrow which they are apt to bring, he writes with peculiar interest.' We might add 'and with remarkable frequency'. Of the many lines Euripides wrote on the subject, two passages in particular perhaps best serve as summaries. In his play *Ion*, Euripides has Creusa’s handmaidens extol the blessings of offspring as they pray that their queen may have a child:

Abundant is the happiness
that springs from an undying source
for mortals in whose ancestral halls
gleams the youthful prime of offspring,
promising fruit of children to come—

7. As for the problem of the use of dramatic literature as evidence, I am assuming that Euripides expresses views that he feels his audience will recognize and which are therefore not idiosyncratic.

children to receive from their fathers
an inheritance of wealth for succeeding sons.
For a strength are children in misfortune
and in prosperity a joy,
while from their spear their native land
gains the bright promise of security.
As for me, let the careful rearing
of cherished children
exceed the worth of wealth and royal halls.
I dread a life without offspring,
and I censure the man who urges it.
Let me have moderate possessions,
and a life rich in children.  

(Euripides, *Ion* 472-491)

On the other hand, the ‘man who urges’ a childless life might stress the bitter-sweet of parenthood, as did the chorus of Corinthian women in the midst of Medea’s maternal struggles:

Those who lack experience of children
and have produced none,
in my opinion
gain a greater share of good fortune
than parents.
Do children turn out for men
sweet or bitter?
The childless through inexperience
hit not upon the answer,
and many are the sorrows
they avoid.
But I see those who have
the sweet bloom of offspring in their homes
ever exhausted with cares.
First, how will they rear them well?
Where get this life’s wealth
to leave their sons?
Again, these efforts past,
will the end for which they toil
be bad or good?
Unclear.
And now I shall speak of the one final evil
that befalls all mortals.

9. All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
For, though men have found store enough of livelihood, and these have become good sons, yet, if fate so wills, off to Hades goes death bearing the bodies of a man’s children. What profit, then, is there in the god’s adding this, the bitterest grief of all, to men’s affliction—all for the sake of children? (Euripides, Medea 1095-1115)

In these lines and many others,10 Euripides expresses the happiness parents felt in their children as the means to continue the household in its dual sense of family and possessions: by preventing the household from being spoiled by ‘strangers’ and by guaranteeing the continuation of name, a child brought to his parents the happiness of anticipated immortality. It was consequently an even greater joy when a child was at last born to older parents ‘eaten away by desire’. In addition, Euripides expresses parental satisfaction in the child as a means to preserving the collection of households known as the state. And the child in his function of comfort for parents, especially in their old age, is frequently portrayed as a source of happiness, both in anticipation and in practice: in such scenes, Euripides reflects the strong ancient sense of reciprocal obligations based on natural relationships. Euripides fortunately expresses as well a parental happiness in the child, not as a means to something else, such as continuation of the household, preservation of the state and later return of an investment, but as a blessing in himself. The very presence of a child in the home can provide those ‘home joys of children’ which the Greek troops missed at Troy; these joys are of such value in and by themselves that Euripides can declare in praise of children that even a child dying young will never leave the home. As every parent knows, especially at certain moments, it is possible to idealize home joys of children. Euripides shows the torment of

10. The two choruses of Euripides translated above movingly summarize the main arguments for and against having children, but for the points made in this paragraph (in approximate order of use) see as well the following passages of Euripides: Alcestis 655-657; Iphigeniea in Tauris 695-698; fragment (a) (6) in D. L. Page, Select Papyri III (LCL), p. 135; Medea 797, 817; Erechtheus fragment 360 Nauck2; Troades 701-705; Iphigeniea Aulidensis 1220-1230; Supplices 1098-1103; Bacchae 1316-1322; Phoenissae 834-837; Orestes 459-467; Danae, fragments 316, 323 Nauck2; Troades 370-372, 319-393; Meleager, fragment 518 Nauck2; Hecuba 277-281; Andromache 418-420; Supplices 450-451; Medea 248-251; Orestes 540-543; Electra 367-370; Alcestis 882 ff.; Hypsipyle, fragment 757 Nauck2; Supplices 1084-1091 (cf. 786 ff.); Oenomaus in Stobaeus, Florilegium 76.17 (571 N.2); frag. inc. 908 Nauck2.
childbirth, the financial, physical and psychological problems in rearing children, the seemingly ineluctable twin perils besetting offspring: their sickness and death, or their failure to turn out as the parents expected. A parent’s expectations that children would at least be a worthy duplicate of himself and above all repay the debt of rearing were frequently disappointed. In view of the many possibilities of ‘intense sorrow’ arising from having children, Euripides sometimes urges the shunning of marriage and children, and he regrets that men do not have two lives so as to learn to avoid children in the second. In sum, the ambivalent parental attitudes toward the child revealed in Euripides enable W. H. S. Jones to cite this poet as a man whose works frequently show ‘children regarded as a curse’, and yet contain ‘some of the most beautiful lines ever penned on the subject’ of children as a blessing.11 Only Plutarch in surviving Greek literature can challenge Euripides in this latter respect.12

Before the fifth century B.C., in both the Jewish and Greek traditions, men had been very conscious of these advantages and disadvantages in having legitimate children of their own. As far as extant Greek literature is concerned, the advantages and disadvantages can all be discerned, in varying degrees, as early as Homer,13 but the first note of pessimism, the first suggestion that marriage and children might be avoided, is found in Hesiod.14 Yet it remained for the Greeks of the fifth century, by emotionally juxtaposing these advantages and disadvantages in a kind of love-hate relationship, to argue strongly in literature that there were at least as many sorrows as pleasures in producing and rearing children and that marriage was not necessarily desirable. On the theme of ‘children regarded as a curse’, W. H. S. Jones said of the Greek conclusion that the wise man should think twice about marriage, ‘it is probable that the disturbances and disasters which troubled the Athenians at the close of the 5th cent. B.C. . . . were partly responsible for these outbursts of pessimism; in times of distress children are of course an additional anxiety.’ Jones’ word ‘partly’ should surely be emphasized. That children are an additional anxiety in times of stress, an idea that Tertullian used explicitly in a Christian context (De Monogamia 16), is true of any society at any time; it is true of the societies depicted in Homer and the Old Testament, but the idea of avoiding marriage because of hardships and dangers associated with children is foreign to those societies. The answer to the question why these ‘outbursts of

12. See, for example, Plutarch, Consolatio ad Uxorem 608 C-F, 610 D-E.
pessimism’ are first found in fifth-century Greek literature can probably best be found in the iconoclastic tendencies of the age, which encouraged a statement of points on both sides of every case. Euripides is probably reflecting the sophistic\(^1\) taste for *dissoi logoi* when he shows himself vitally interested in the question (to quote Gilbert Murray again), ‘Is the current conception of a happy life, with its insistence on the possession of wife and children, correct?’\(^1\) The immediate literary successors of Euripides are those writers of New Comedy who within decades of Euripides’ death were writing their own ‘outbursts of pessimism’ for comic effect.\(^1\)

That the formulations of Euripides and his immediate successors regarding the debate concerning the advisability of having legitimate children of one’s own continued to live on right to the end of antiquity is shown by their frequent inclusion under rubrics found in Stobaeus’ fifth-century *Florilegium*: ‘Marriage is excellent’ (67), ‘Marriage is not good’ (68); ‘Having children is good’ (75), ‘Having children is a disadvantage’ (76). In the sixth century, at the very close of antiquity, Boethius can refer to Euripides in order to declare the bitter-sweet quality of children:

> The pleasure a man gains from wife and children should be honourable, but it is a dictum only too truly in harmony with nature that some unknown torturer invented children. As for the condition of children, I need not warn you how biting it can be, no matter what it is, for you are not without experience of this, and are not even now free from care. On this point, I approve the opinion of my Euripides, who said that the man who lacked children was lucky in his misfortune.\(^1\)

\(^*\) * * * \(^*\)

15. Democritus, while not a sophist himself, probably had an influence on the sophists and on Euripides which is now difficult to determine. His puzzling about the advisability of rearing children is evident in fragments 275-280, and is summarized by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis* 2.22) in the words: ‘Democritus rejects marriage and the production of children, because of the many annoyances involved in them and their distraction from more necessary things.’

16. Gilbert Murray, op. cit., 590. Karl Hartmann’s suggestion that Euripides’ pessimism may in part be a result of his ‘not always sunny family life’ seems to carry less weight (*Der Grieche und Das Kind* [Augsburg, 1905] 44).

17. For example, Menander, fragments 335, 350, 575 and 576 Koerte-Thierfelder.

18. *De Philosophiae Consolatione* 3.7. The reference in Euripides is to the words of Andromache as she agrees to surrender herself to save the life of Astyanax (*Andromache* 418-420; translation A. S. Way):

> To all mankind, I wot,  
> Children are life. Who scoffs at joys unproved,  
> Though less his grief, a void is in his bliss.
The ideas articulated so memorably by Euripides and woven into the lives of ordinary people in New Comedy are really the common and natural thoughts of the majority of men through the centuries. But Plato and Aristotle, not content to restate the points of this debate, theorized and analysed in depth reasons for having children and the nature of the parent-child relationship. In this process, they appear to subordinate human instincts to a cold intellectualism unparalleled in earlier Greek literature and unlikely to represent the feelings of most men.

Yet the impression they give of unnatural intellectualism does not derive from ‘outbursts of pessimism’ regarding children, for Plato and Aristotle give the disadvantages of children relatively little attention. Plato’s recognition that young children involve hardships for parents can be seen in his statement that ‘of all wild animals the child is the most difficult to handle’ and in his recommendation that the women of his guardian class should have nurses to relieve them of the burden of child rearing. Plato stresses that the financial burden involved in rearing children and in building the inheritance could result in ethical deterioration in the children (Leges 729A-B). Both philosophers recognize that sons frequently disappoint their fathers by failing to return their ‘debt of rearing’; Plato would see offensive sons as a characteristic of democratic societies (Republic 562E). In advising parental moderation of grief in the face of children’s deaths, Plato anticipated Aristotle’s metriopatheia and probably influenced the celebrated, and long influential (in the genre of consolation), exposition of this idea by the Academic Crantor. However, in such relatively short references to the disadvantages of children, there is no recommendation that men should not marry and rear legitimate offspring. Aristotle makes it clear that in his opinion a man must have children to be happy despite the risk of unhappiness resulting from the twin perils of death and worthlessness.

Plato’s theorizing about children and their advantages to parents leads him into intellectual flights. He has Diotima in the Symposium present the matter-of-fact statement that men expect from having children eternal ‘immortality, memorial and happiness’. Far from disagreeing with this typically Greek viewpoint, Plato in effect strengthens it by soaring rationalization. He viewed children as the means not only of achieving continuity of household and name, but of enabling the parent to live on, somewhat

19. Plato, Leges 808D. Plato and Aristotle both constantly lumped together animals and young children.
21. Plato, Symposium 208E. The words of Diotima were to remain alive in both pagan and Christian minds at least until the fourth century A.D.: see Themistius, Oratio 32 (Moderating One’s Passions or Loving One’s Children 355D), and Basil, De Virginitate 55.
modified (*Symposium* 207A-208B). In this way, the child enables his parents to participate in the sameness, immortality and divinity of god, and to fulfil the duty imposed by god that men produce children in order to perpetuate the ‘whole’ by leaving behind duplicates of themselves (*Leges* 721C, 773E, 903B). Plato’s enormously strong feeling for the continuity of life through children is well caught in his vivid image which was probably taken from a torch race in honour of a goddess and which was due to attract men’s attention for centuries: married couples are exhorted to beget and rear children in order to hand on life like a torch from one generation to the next. Consonant with his emphasis on the ‘whole’ is Plato’s remarkably unfeeling suggestion in the *Republic* that there should be a communism of wives and children that involved complete anonymity of offspring; his later rejection of such anonymity in the *Laws* was part of a social system that he considered second best. Such an anonymity of offspring represents the ultimate subordination of parental rights and feeling to the supposed good of the state, and is therefore a perversion of the common Greek feeling that one reason for having children is to help preserve the state. Plato further emphasizes the importance of this Greek parental obligation by graphically likening the state to a goddess mother, who is a kind of overriding parent for all citizens and who is imitated by natural mothers. The portrayal in the *Crito* of Socrates’ decision not to escape and thereby care for his children suggests the view that obedience to the state or goddess mother is of more importance than the welfare of one’s own children (*Leges* 740A; *Menexenus* 238A). When Plato likens an aged parent to a cult statue, and in effect makes offspring servants or attendants of the parent, he again turns to a comparison with deity, this time in order to stress the great debt owed by children to parents (*Leges* 930E-931A, 717B-718A). To liken a parent to a god is not out of keeping with Plato’s concept of children as the product of that procreation which enables mankind to participate in divinity.

Plato’s most enduring intellectual flight regarding offspring, his children of the soul, has indirect relevance to real children. Such spiritual children are the words of wisdom associated with the pregnant term *logos*, either in spoken or written form, or else deeds of moral greatness exemplifying *logos*. The production of such children of the soul can achieve for a man immortality of name among mankind, or, through philosophic converse and contemplation of beauty, an ascent to the Form of Beauty and an immortality that transcends the world of sense (*Symposium* 209A-212A): this is the higher, philosophic education of the *Republic*. Despite an asceticism

that prompted him to write that every man would welcome having such children of the soul in preference to human ones (Symposium 209C), Plato did not recommend that men should substitute spiritual children for real children of their own. It remained for later intellectuals to take this step.

The concept of the child that emerges from Plato’s soaring intellectualism regarding children does not impress a modern reader favourably. Though he urges the advantages of children, missing is any obvious feeling for that warm, instinctive relationship between parents and children which Euripides and Plutarch express so movingly. In Plato’s writings, the child seems to be almost exclusively a means of benefiting the parent and the state.

Much the same must be said for Aristotle. He shows himself a typical Greek when he says that two components of happiness are many children and good children, both male and female (Rhetoric 1.5.4, 6). He follows Plato in seeing children as the means to enable parents to participate in the eternal and the divine (De Anima 2.4.2). While he objects to Plato’s anonymity of children, he does so on grounds of impracticality rather than unnaturalness; one point in this impracticality relates to Aristotle’s strong sense of the ‘debt of rearing’: he objects that in Plato’s system of anonymous children the responsibility for returning this debt would not be extended, as Plato had urged, but dissipated (Politics 1261a5-1262b25).

Aristotle’s choice of the verb leitourgein (Politics 1335b29), used in his day to describe compulsory, unpaid public service, summarizes a belief as strong as Plato’s that parents owe children to the state. And without sounding so ascetic about it as Plato, Aristotle in effect imitates his teacher’s concept of spiritual children when he recommends an immortalizing contemplation (theoria) (Ethica Nicomachea 1077b30-35).

But it is in Aristotle’s analysis of the child-parent relationship that we detect most clearly an intellectual remoteness and coolness toward offspring, especially in regard to paternal feelings. This is evident in his three analogies employed to describe this relationship: producer to product; king or ruler to subject; creditor to debtor. On the basis of the producer to product analogy, Aristotle makes it quite clear that mothers love their children more than fathers do, for at least three reasons: the mother’s greater work and pain in producing the child, the physical origin of the child from the mother at birth, and the mother’s greater sureness of the child’s paternity (Ethica Eudemia 1241b7-9; Ethica Nicomachea 1161b19-27; cf. 1168a24-26). A lack of intimacy between child and father is suggested in the king or ruler to subject analogy, which Aristotle applies specifically to the father: in this relationship between unequals the father is beneficent, but scarcely returns his son’s affections, ‘for it is the part of a ruler to be loved, not to love, or else to love in another way’ (Ethica Nicomachea 1161a10-20;
Yet, in what seems a contradiction, Aristotle declares that the affection of parents viewed as producers and creditors will inevitably be greater than their children’s: it is a law of nature that producers love products more than they are loved by them; and creditors love debtors out of a desire to protect their economic investment. Though children should love their creditor-fathers more than they are loved by them owing to the debt of rearing, which is never completely repayable, yet, says Aristotle, it commonly fails to work out that way, because men dislike repaying debts (Ethica Eudemia 1241a35-39; Ethica Nicomachea 1163b15-28).

Aristotle, like Plato, said that parental love was natural (Ethica Nicomachea 1155a16-21), but the total impression of coldness gained from this close calculation of the child-parent relationship appears to have demeaned that instinctive, unselfish love described so warmly in Euripides and Plutarch. Paternal pleasure in the child as heir and debtor seems to have thrust aside ‘home joys of children’. It is, of course, unclear to what extent this impression of coldness is false and merely reflects a difference of genre between the lyric of Euripides and the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato.

In any case, we have in Plato and Aristotle overt expressions of that intellectualism which can result in a lack of actively expressed love and sympathy toward children, even one’s own. It is that quality in some philosophical intellectuals (Plutarch well represents the many exceptions) which caused Themistius in the fourth century of our era to feel the need to argue that contrary to common belief philosophers love their children more, not less than the rest of men do (Oratio 32, 361B-362B). It is worth observing that Zeno and Epicurus, who founded the two remaining great schools of pagan philosophy at the end of the century of Plato and Aristotle, gained reputations in antiquity for their own varieties of intellectual hostility toward children. It seems that the Stoic Zeno in his Republic followed Plato in advocating anonymity of children through communism and urged the completely unrealistic conclusion that if parents and children lacked ‘wisdom’ they must be enemies of one another (Diogenes Laertius 7.32-33). Epicurus, on the other hand, evidently urged avoidance of marriage and children, and therefore W. W. Tarn spoke with some cogency when he said that those in the spiritual quietude of Epicureanism might be called ‘the first monks’.23

23. Primary evidence for Epicurus’ attitude toward marriage and children is found in Diogenes Laertius, Vita Epicuri 118, 119; Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis 2.23; cf.
An even more remarkable intellectual deviation from the natural and instinctive attitudes of parents for their children is found in the higher life of Christianity in the fourth century. In their concern for instinctive family relationships, the great majority of Christians continued to live according to a kind of Christianized Stoicism that was based on nature, and was of course very different from Zeno’s early recommendations; and they were encouraged to do so in Ambrose’s fourth-century *De Officiis Ministerorum*, which recognized that the higher life of Christianity, involving the rejection of many worldly things, including the advantages of children, was not going to be generally accepted. The virginity and celibacy of the higher life came to be considered a divine commandment, and the marriage and children of the lower life a concession, and therefore much inferior.

The higher life of Christianity, which culminated in monasticism in the fourth century, involved the complete substitution of spiritual for physical children, since for the Fathers, unlike Plato and Aristotle, the two were incompatible. Augustine accepts the conclusion that if all men rejected physical children, the world would come to an end; he does not, however, find this prospect disturbing, because he views it as part of God’s plan (*De Bono Coniugali* 10). In their often rhetorically coloured encouragement for the substitution of spiritual children for real children, the Fathers displayed the disadvantages of children. The physical and psychological torments of childbirth, considered a punishment for all women resulting from Eve’s sin; the danger to the life of the mother; the many hardships in rearing and educating children with the moral risks involved for both child and parents; the child’s twin perils of sickness and death, and worthlessness—all these and more are frequently shown vividly and in detail. Again unlike Plato and Aristotle, the Fathers now downgrade or despise the classical advantages of having children. Perpetuity of household and race by means of children becomes at best a consolation, through temporary immortality, for the death that came to man with original sin. Out of a desire for continuity and immortality, parents should no longer name children after forefathers, but after martyrs, bishops and apostles. The new social structure of the monastic communities removed the need to rear children for the temporal state or to look upon offspring as an investment for one’s later years. Home joys of children must give way to a man’s concern for his own salvation: children are a hindrance, not a help, to this end.


In order to press their arguments home, many Fathers drew on classical literature with a debater's selectivity. Augustine, for example, reinforces his picture of the disadvantages of family life and children by citing from Terence's adaptation of Menander's comedy:

Let them heed one of their own comic players who speaks with everyone's hearty approval:

I have taken a wife. What a load of misery I've seen in that!
Sons born: another care!25

A cri de coeur of New Comedy has been turned from its dramatic use to serious theological argumentation. But Jerome's diatribes against Jovinian, who had refused to acknowledge the superiority of virginity to marriage, probably best illustrates this selective use of classical literature. Jerome seemingly draws arguments from unnamed works on marriage by Aristotle, Plutarch and Seneca, and cites extensively, in Latin translation, from Theophrastus' \textit{Aureolus Liber de Nuptiis}.26 From this second head of the Peripatetic school Jerome quotes arguments that many Fathers used, in order to negate 'household' motivations for rearing children:

Marriage for the sake of children, to prevent our name perishing, or to have help in old age, and to enjoy assurance of heirs—this is sheer stupidity. For, since we are going to leave the world, what does it matter to us whether another is given our name? Consider that a son does not immediately recall his father's name, and multitudes of men answer to the same name. Again, what help for your old age is rearing a son at home who will either perhaps die before you, or prove to be of vicious character, or else, when he reaches maturity, will be sure to look upon you as dying too slowly? Furthermore, friends and connections whom you may choose at your own discretion make better and surer heirs than those whom, willy-nilly, you are forced to accept.27

And in a context of acknowledged indebtedness to Seneca, Jerome continues on to give his own colouring to typical classical arguments from nature in order to destroy the validity of those larger, beyond the 'household', motives for producing children, namely help to the state and preservation of the human race.

The Fathers frequently point out that spiritual children, on the contrary, have none of the disadvantages of physical children, but many advantages which culminate in one's own salvation and immortality. Such spiritual

26. Problems connected with Jerome's borrowings from these pagan authors are summarized with additional bibliography by David S. Wiesen, \textit{St. Jerome as a Satirist} (Ithaca, New York, 1964), 152 ff. It seems that Theophrastus was much more ascetic than his teacher Aristotle.
children are part of a complicated and shifting system of imagery which involves an extensive parallelism of spiritual and physical: 28 Christian virgins, as the spiritual brides of Christ, bring the seed of Christ’s truth to fruition (without the usual pains of childbirth) in the form of spiritual children, that is, new members of the Church or spiritual household. As a result, such virgins may receive from God their spiritual father, the spiritual inheritance of everlasting life. In their efforts to express such ideas, the Fathers sometimes turned to Greek literature and welcomed what Plato had said about ‘children of the soul’. We have said that in the Platonic tradition spiritual children were essentially intellectual: words (logos), whether oral or written wisdom, or even moral deeds. In the Jewish tradition spiritual children were essentially personal: the recipients of this discourse or wisdom, and the wisdom was therefore ‘seed’. In blending these two related ideas, the Fathers emphasized the Jewish personal concept of God, but were influenced also by the Platonizing concept of spiritual children as the means of achieving final immortality by ascending to the Forms, or the One, or God. In the fourth century B.C., there are hints in the philosophers that such metaphorical, spiritual children are not only preferable (so Plato), but sufficient to exclude marriage and physical children; Jerome is delighted to quote against Jovinian what appears to be Theophrastus’ answer to the standard philosophic question, whether the wise man should marry:

A wise man should not take a wife. For marriage hinders philosophic study, and no man can serve equally learning and wife.

(Adversus Jovinianum 1.47.)

By the fourth century A.D., the concept of spiritual children had achieved a firm place in the rationale for monasticism, often to the detriment of marriage and physical children.

The Fathers thus found themselves in a grave contradiction in their attitude to real children. As God’s creation, and indeed as the means of perpetuating the most important part of that creation, children were a good and were to be respected; the Church early followed the humane Jewish tradition of forbidding pederasty, abortion and infanticide, and in calling themselves ‘children of god’, Christians paid a compliment to children. 29 On the other hand, in this function children were directly associated with,

28. A conceptually and historically important work in this regard is Methodius’ Plato-indebted Symposium.
29. Such literary material as the celebrated statement of Jesus in Matthew 18.2-4 gave the impetus for Christian imitation of the child. But ‘the early Christian Fathers and ecclesiastical writers made little use of the New Testament verses which might induce them into an adoration of childhood as such’, according to George Boas, The Cult of Childhood (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1966) 18. This is not surprising in view of the Fathers’ dialectical encouragement to remain childless by choice.
and a means to extending, this corporeal world which monasticism tried to escape through mortification of the flesh. It was an easy step to see in real children, as in all creation, something inferior, if not an outright evil, and there can, in fact, be found in early monastic literature evidence for the neglect and even the abuse of children as a means of approaching God.¹⁰

The origin of this Christian contradiction in attitudes to children is undoubtedly complex. While it is true that many of the first monks were uneducated men, (e.g. Antony of Egypt) and therefore would probably be unfamiliar with Platonic dogma, yet in Platonic dualism and its ambivalent attitude to the world we can see an articulation to which some Fathers, e.g. Augustine, were indebted. In Plato, as A. O. Lovejoy has shown, there are two concepts of God, one this-worldly, needing to create the chain of being for his own self-sufficiency, the other a self-sufficient Absolute, not needing to generate for his own self-sufficiency, but not grudging the existence of the chain of being as a gratuitous emanation from his own Absolute Self. These contradictory concepts of God result in incompatible ethical systems and attitudes to the whole of creation:

With this theological dualism—since the idea of God was taken to be also the definition of the highest good—there ran . . . a dualism of values, the one other-worldly (though often in a half-hearted way), the other this-worldly. If the good for man was the contemplation or the imitation of God, this required, on the one hand, a transcendence and suppression of the merely ‘natural’ interests and desires, a withdrawal of the soul from ‘the world’ the better to prepare it for the beatific vision of the divine perfection; and it required, on the other hand, a piety towards the God of things as they are, an adoring delight in the sensible universe in all its variety, an endeavour on man’s part to know and understand it even more fully, and a conscious participation in the divine activity of creation.³¹

We have observed how Plato can declare that men have a duty to imitate God by generating children in order to perpetuate the household and the ‘whole’ of God’s creation, and yet he can urge escape from the tomb of the body to the Forms: this is indeed being other-worldly ‘in a half-hearted way’. The more radical Christian Fathers who openly scorned marriage and children and urged the substitution of spiritual children were at least being more consistent in their otherworldliness. But fourth-century monastic literature shows that it was an otherworldliness that produced not only the

most remarkable intellectual rejection of offspring in antiquity, but even an unnatural hostility toward children in the name of God.

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Patristic literature, then, skilfully adapted classical *topoi* about offspring, and in doing so showed once again how thoroughly the Fathers responsible for this adaptation, such as Methodius, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome and Augustine, knew their classical poets and philosophers, and how well trained they were in the skills of Greek rhetoric and philosophy. In drawing on this knowledge to justify celibacy in a world far from celibate, they used the classical *topoi* discussed in this paper in the following steps. First, they adopted and rhetorically exaggerated the classical arguments *against* having children. Secondly, they adopted the classical arguments *for* having children, but transferred them from physical to spiritual children. Finally, recognizing that in practice most Christians would continue to apply arguments-*for* to physical children, they recognized this application, but only reluctantly (and somewhat contradictorily) on the grounds of the marked inferiority of physical to spiritual children. This skilful literary use of classical *topoi* about children not only contributed to the golden age of patristic literature and early Christian theological argument, but played some part in effecting fundamental social changes by inducing many people to act upon the conclusion that the arguments against having children were stronger than the arguments for.