Filial Morality

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We not only find it hard to say exactly how much a son owes his parents, but we are even reluctant to investigate this.

—HENRY SIDGWICK, THE METHODS OF ETHICS

WHAT RIGHTS DO PARENTS have to the special attentions of their adult children? Before this century there was no question that a filial relationship defined a natural obligation; philosophers might argue about the nature of filial obligation, but not about its reality. Today, not a few moralists dismiss it as an illusion, or give it secondary derivative status. A. John Simmons expresses “doubts . . . concerning the existence of ‘filial’ debts,” and Michael Slote seeks to show that the idea of filial obedience is an illusion whose source is the false idea that one owes obedience to a divine being. Jeffrey Blustein argues that parents who have done no more than their duty may be owed nothing, and Jane English denies outright that there are any filial obligations not grounded in mutual friendship.

The current tendency to deny or reconstruct filial obligation is related to the more general difficulty that contemporary philosophers have when dealing with the special duties. An account of the special obligations to one’s kin, friends, community or country puts considerable strain on moral theories such as Kantianism and utilitarianism, theories that seem better designed for telling us what we should be doing for everyone impartially than for explaining something like filial obligation. The moral philosopher of a utilitarian or Kantian persuasion who is concerned to show that it is permissible to give some biased vent to family feeling may go on to become concerned with the more serious question of accounting for what appears to be a special obligation to care for and respect one’s parents—but only as an afterthought. On the whole, the question of special agent-relative duties has not seemed pressing. In what follows I shall be arguing for a strong notion of filial obligation, and more generally I shall be making a case for the special moral relations. I first present some anecdotal materials that illustrate the thesis that a filial duty to respect one’s parents is not an illusion.

I. The Concrete Dilemmas

I shall be concerned with the filial duties of adult children and more particularly with the duty to honor and respect. I have chosen almost randomly three situations, each illustrating what seems to be censurable failure on the part of adult children to respect their parents or nurturers. It would not be hard to add to these cases, and real life is continually adding to them.

1. An elderly man was interviewed on National Public Radio for a program on old age. This is what he said about his daughter.

I live in a rooming house. I lost my wife about two years ago and I miss her very much . . . . My little pleasure was to go to my daughter’s house in Anaheim and have a Friday night meal . . . . She would make a meal that I would enjoy . . . . So my son-in-law got angry at me one time for a little nothing and ordered me out of the house. That was about eight months ago . . . . I was back once during the day when he was working. That was about two and a half or three months ago. I stayed for about two hours and left before he came home from work. But I did not enjoy the visit very much. That was the last time I was there to see my daughter.

2. An eighty-two-year-old woman (call her Miss Tate) spent thirty years working as a live-in housekeeper and baby-sitter for a judge’s family in Massachusetts. The judge and his wife left her a small pension which inflation rendered inadequate. After her employers died, she lost contact with the children whom she had virtually brought up. One day Miss Tate arranged for a friend of hers to write to the children (by then

middle-aged) telling them that she was sick and would like to see them. They never got around to visiting her or helping her in any way. She died last year without having heard from them.

3. The anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff did a study of an elderly community in Venice, California. She tells about the disappointment of a group of elders whose children failed to show up at their graduation from an adult education program:

The graduates, 26 in all, were arranged in rows flanking the head table. They wore their finest clothing bearing blue and white satin ribbons that crossed the breast from shoulder to waist. Most were solemn and restless with excitement.... No one talked openly about the conspicuous absence of the elders' children.

I believe it may be granted that the father who had dined once a week with his daughter has a legitimate complaint. And although Miss Tate was duly salaried throughout her long service with the judge's family, it seems clear that the children of that family owe her some special attention and regard for having brought them up. The graduation ceremony is yet another example of wrongful disregard and neglect. Some recent criticisms of traditional conceptions of filial duty (e.g., by Jane English and John Simmons) make much of examples involving unworthy parents. One may agree that exceptional parents can forfeit their moral claims on their children. (What, given his behavior, remains of Fyodor Karamazov's right to filial regard?) But I am here concerned with what is owed to the average parent who is neglected or whose wishes are disregarded when they could at some reasonable cost be respected. I assume that such filial disregard is wrong. Although the assumption is dogmatic, it can be defended—though not by any quick maneuver. Filial morality is but one topic in the morality of special relations. The attempt to understand filial morality will lead us to a synoptic look at the moral community as a whole and to an examination of the nature of the rights and obligations that bind its members.

II. Shifting Conceptions

Jeffrey Blustein's Parents and Children contains an excellent historical survey of the moral issues in the child-parent relationship. For Aristotle the obligation to serve and obey one's parents is like an obligation to repay a debt. Aquinas too explains the commandment to honor one's parents as "making a return for benefits received." Both Aristotle and Aquinas count life itself as the first and most important gift that the child is given.

With Locke the topic of filial morality changes: the discussion shifts from a concern with the authority and power of the parent to concern with the less formal, less enforceable, right to respect. Hume was emphatic on the subject of filial ingratitude, saying, "Of all the crimes that human creatures are capable, the most horrid and unnatural is ingratitude, especially when it is committed against parents." By Sidgwick's time the special duties are beginning to be seen as problematic: "The question is on what principles... we are to determine the nature and extent of the special claims of affection and kind services which arise out of... particular relations of human beings." Nevertheless, Sidgwick is still traditional in maintaining that "all are agreed that there are such duties, the nonperformance of which is ground for censure..." and he is himself concerned to show how "our common notion of Justice [is] applicable to these no less than to other duties."

If we look at the writings of a contemporary utilitarian such as Peter Singer, we find no talk of justice or duty or rights, and a fortiori, no talk of special duties or parental rights. Consider how Singer, applying a version of R. M. Hare's utilitarianism, approaches a case involving filial respect. He imagines himself about to dine with three friends when his father calls saying he is ill and asking him to visit. What shall he do?

To decide impartially I must sum up the preferences for and against going to dinner with my friends, and those for and against visiting my father. Whatever action satisfies more preferences, adjusted according to the strength of the preferences, that is the action I ought to take.

Note that the idea of a special obligation does not enter here. Nor is any weight given to the history of the filial relationship which typically includes some two decades of parental care and nurture. According to Singer, "adding and subtracting preferences in this manner" is the only rational way of reaching ethical judgment.

Utilitarian theory is not very accommodating to the special relations. And it would appear that Bernard Williams is right in finding the same true of Kantianism. According to Williams, Kant's "moral point of view is specially characterized by its impartiality and its indifference to any particular relations to particular persons." In my opinion, giving no special consideration to one's kin commits what might be called the jellyby fallacy. Mrs. Jellyby, a character in

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Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*, devotes all of her considerable energies to the foreign poor to the complete neglect of her family. She is described as a “pretty diminutive woman with handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if they could see nothing nearer than Africa.” Dickens clearly intends her as someone whose moral priorities are ludicrously disordered. Yet by some modern lights Mrs. Jellyby could be viewed as a paragon of impartial rectitude. In the next two sections I will try to show what is wrong with an impartialist point of view and suggest a way to repair it.

**III. The Moral Domain**

By a moral domain I mean a domain consisting of what G. J. Warnock calls “moral patients.” Equivalently, it consists of beings that have what Robert Nozick calls “ethical pull.” A being has ethical pull if it is ethically “considerable”; minimally, it is a being that should not be ill treated by a moral agent and whose ill treatment directly wrongs it. The extent of the moral domain is one area of contention (Mill includes animals; Kant does not). The nature of the moral domain is another. But here we find more uniformity. Utilitarians and deontologists are in agreement in conceiving of the moral domain as constituted by beings whose ethical pull is equal on all moral agents. To simplify matters, let us consider a domain consisting only of moral patients that are also moral agents. (For Kant, this is no special stipulation.) Then it is as if we have a gravitational field in which the force of gravitation is not affected by distance and all pairs of objects have the same attraction to one another. Or, if this sort of gravitational field is odd, consider a mutual admiration society no member of which is, intrinsically, more attractive than any other member. In this group, the pull of all is the same. Suppose that Buridan's ass was not standing in the exact middle of the bridge but was closer to one of the bags of feed at either end. We should still say that he was equally attracted to both bags, but also that he naturally would choose the closer one. So too does the utilitarian or Kantian say that the ethical pull of a needy East African and that of a needy relative are the same, but we can more easily act to help the relative. This theory of equal pull but unequal response saves the appearances for impartiality while acknowledging that, in practice, charity often begins and sometimes ends at home.

This is how the principle of impartiality appears in the moral theories of Kant and Mill. Of course their conceptions of ethical pull differ. For the Kantian any being in the kingdom of ends is an embodiment of moral law whose force is uniform and unconditional. For the utilitarian, any being’s desires are morally considerable, exerting equal attraction on all moral agents. Thus Kant and Mill, in their different ways, have a common view of the moral domain as a domain of moral patients exerting uniform pull on all moral agents. I shall refer to this as the equal-pull (EP) thesis. It is worth commenting on the underlying assumptions that led Kant and Mill to adopt this view of the moral domain.

It is a commonplace that Kant was concerned to free moral agency from its psychological or “anthropological” determinations. In doing so he offered us a conception of moral agents as rational beings which abstracts considerably from human and animal nature. It is less of a commonplace that utilitarian theory, in its modern development, tends also to be antithetical to important empirical aspects of human nature. For the Kantian, the empirical demon to be combated and exercised lies within the individual. For the utilitarian it is located within society and its customs, including practices that are the sociobiological inheritance of the species. According to an act utilitarian like Singer, reason frees ethical thought from the earlier moralities of kin and reciprocal altruism and opens it to the wider morality of disinterestedness and universal concern: “The principle of impartial consideration of interests . . . alone remains a rational basis for ethics.” The equal-pull thesis is thus seen to be entailed by a principle of impartiality, common to Kantian and utilitarian ethics, which is seen as liberating us from the biased dictates of our psychological, biological, and socially conventional natures.

**IV. Differential Pull**

The doctrine of equal ethical pull is a modern development in the history of ethics. It is certainly not attributable to Aristotle or Aquinas, nor, arguably, to Locke. Kant’s authority gave it common currency and made it, so to speak, foundational. It is, therefore, important to state that EP is a dogma. Why should it be assumed that ethical pull is constant regardless of circumstance, familiarity, kinship and other special relations? The accepted answer is that EP makes sense of impartiality. The proponent of the special duties must accept this as a challenge: alternative suggestions for moral ontology must show how impartiality can be consistent with differential ethical forces.

I will refer to the rival thesis as the thesis of differential pull (DP). According to the DP thesis, the ethical pull of a moral patient will always partly depend on
how the moral patient is related to the moral agent on whom the pull is exerted. Moreover, the "how" of relatedness will be determined in part by the social practices and institutions in which the agent and patient play their roles. This does not mean that every moral agent will be differently affected, since it may be that different moral agents stand in the same relation to different moral patients. But where the relations differ in certain relevant ways, there the pull will differ. The relevant factors that determine ethical pull are in a broad sense circumstantial, including the particular social arrangements that determine what is expected from the moral agent. How particular circumstances and conventions shape the special duties is a complex question to which we cannot here do justice. We shall, however, approach it from a foundational standpoint which rejects EP and recognizes the crucial role of conventional practice, relationships, and roles in determining the nature and force of moral obligation. The gravitational metaphor may again be suggestive. In DP morality the community of agents and patients is analogous to a gravitational field, where distance counts and forces vary in accordance with local conditions.

V. Filial Duty

Filial duty, unlike the duty to keep a promise, is not self-imposed. But keeping the particular promise one has made is also a special duty, and the interplay of impartiality and specific obligation is more clearly seen in the case of a promise. We do well, therefore, to look at the way special circumstances shape obligations by examining more carefully the case of promise making.

A. I. Melden has gone into the morality of promise keeping rather thoroughly, and I believe that some features of his analysis apply to the more general description of the way particular circumstances determine the degree of ethical pull on a moral agent. Following Locke, Melden assumes the natural right of noninterference with one's liberty to pursue one's interests (including one's interest in the well-being of others) where such pursuit does not interfere with a like liberty for others. Let an interest be called invasive if it is an interest in interfering with the pursuit of someone else's interests. Then the right that every moral patient possesses is the right not to be interfered with in the pursuit of his or her noninvasive interests. (In what follows "interest" will mean noninvasive interest.)

According to Melden, a promisor "gives the promise the action as his own." The promise-breaking failure to perform is then "tantamount to interfering with or subverting endeavors he [the promisee] has a right to pursue." The promisee is "as entitled to [the action] as he is, as a responsible agent, to conduct his own affairs." What is special about this analysis is the formal grounding of the special positive duty of promise keeping in the minimalist negative obligation of noninterference. The negative, general, and indiscriminate obligation not to interfere is determined by the practice of promise making as a positive, specific, and discriminate obligation to act. Note how context here shapes and directs the initial obligation of noninterference and enhances its force. Given the conventions of the practice of promise making, the moral patient has novel and legitimate expectations of performances caused by the explicit assurances given by the promiser, who, in effect, has made over these performances to the promisee. And given these legitimate expectations, the agent's nonperformance of the promised act is invasive and tantamount to active interference with the patient's rights to its performance.

It is in the spirit of this approach to make the attempt to analyze other special obligations in the same manner. We assume a DP framework and a minimal universe deontological principle (the duty to refrain from interfering in the lives of others). This negative duty is refracted by the parochial situation as a special duty which may be positive in character, calling on the moral agent to act or refrain from acting in specific ways toward specific moral patients. This view of the special obligations needs to be justified. But for the present I merely seek to state it more fully.

The presumption of a special positive obligation arises for a moral agent when two conditions obtain: (1) In a given social arrangement (or practice) there is a specific interaction or transaction between moral agent and patient, such as promising and being promised, nurturing and being nurtured, befriending and being befriended. (2) The interaction in that context gives rise to certain conventional expectations (e.g., that a promise will be kept, that a marital partner will be faithful, that a child will respect the parent). In promising, the content of the obligation is verbally explicit. But this feature is not essential to the formation of other specific duties. In the filial situation, the basic relationship is that of nurtured to nurturer, a type of relationship which is very concrete, intimate, and long-lasting and which is considered to be more morally determining than any other in shaping a variety of rights and obligations.

Here is one of Alasclair MacIntyre's descriptions of the denizens of the moral domain:

I am brother, cousin; this household, thy home; not characteristic of accident, to be covered by a real instance, defining wholly my obligations.

MacIntyre's description that man is a social being. A social animal has rights and obligations of person. Being well as biologically what one is; it also owes.

Because it does breach is more serious the promise the being as it were, exist as "his." In the havior is implicit, a the parent in a direct entitlements diminu contains with exam Lear is perhaps the comes aware of companion: "Who am shadow." Causing filial neglect is tan. One's sense of dignity itself—is objective status and role in the family.

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I am brother, cousin, and grandson, member of this household, that village, this tribe. These are not characteristics that belong to human beings accidentally, to be stripped away in order to discover "the real me." They are part of my substance, defining partially at least and sometimes wholly my obligations and my duties.

Michel's description takes Aristotle's dictum that man is a social animal in a sociological direction. A social animal has a specific social role whose prerogatives and obligations characterize a particular kind of person. Being a father or mother is socially as well as biologically descriptive: it not only defines what one is; it also defines who one is and what one owes.

Because it does violence to a social role, a filial breach is more serious than a breach of promise. In the promise the performance is legitimately expected, being, as it were, explicitly made over to the promisee as "his." In the filial situation the expected behavior is implicit, and the failure to perform affects the parent in a direct and personal way. To lose one's entitlements diminishes one as a person. Literature abounds with examples of such diminishment; King Lear is perhaps the paradigm. When Lear first becomes aware of Goneril's defection, he asks his companion: "Who am I?" to which the reply is "A shadow." Causing humiliation is a prime reason why filial neglect is tantamount to active interference. One's sense of dignity varies with temperament. But dignity itself—in the context of an institution like the family—is objective, being inseparable from one's status and role in that context.

The filial duties of adult children include such things as being grateful, loyal, attentive, respectful and deferential to parents (more so than to strangers). Many adult children, of course, are respectful and attentive to their parents out of love, not duty. But, as Melden says: "The fact that, normally, there is love and affection that unites the members of the family ... in no way undercuts the fact that there is a characteristic distribution of rights and obligations within the family.c"

The mutual understanding created by a promise is simplicity itself when compared with the range of expected behavior that filial respect comprises. What is expected in the case of a promise is clearly specified by the moral agent, but with respect to most other special duties there is little that is verbally explicit. Filial obligation is thus essentially underdetermined, although there are clear cases of what counts as disrespect—as we have seen in our three cases. The complexity and nonspecificity of expected behavior which is written into the domestic arrangements do not affect what the promissory and the filial situation have in common: both may be viewed as particular contexts in which the moral agent must refrain from behavior that interferes with the normal prerogatives of the moral patient.

By taking promising as a starting point in a discussion of special duties, one runs the risk of giving the impression that DP is generally to be understood as a form of social-contract theory. But a more balanced perspective considers the acts required by any of the special duties as naturally and implicitly "made over" within the practices and institutions that define the moral agent in his particular role as a "social animal." Within this perspective promising and other forms of contracting are themselves special cases and not paradigmatic. Indeed, the binding force of the obligation to fulfill an explicit contract is itself to be explained by the general account to be given to special duties in a DP theory.

VI. Grateful Duty

One group of contemporary moral philosophers, whom I shall tendentiously dub sentimentalists, has been vocal in pointing out the shortcomings of the mainstream theories in accounting for the morality of the special relations. But they would find my formal and traditional approach equally inadequate. The sentimentalists oppose deontological approaches to the morality of the parent-child relationship, arguing that duties of gratitude are paradoxical, that the "owing idiom" distorts the moral ideal of the parent-child relationship, which should be characterized by love and mutual respect. For them, each family relationship is unique, its moral character determined by the idiosyncratic ties of its members. Carol Gilligan has recently distinguished between an "ethic of care" and an "ethic of rights." The philosophers I have in mind are objecting to the aridity of the "rights perspective" and are urging moral philosophers to attend to the morality of special relations from a "care perspective." The distinction is suggestive, but the two perspectives are not necessarily exclusive. One may recognize one's duty in what one does spontaneously and generously. And just as a Kantian caricature holds one in greater esteem when one does what is right against one's inclination, so the idea of care, responsibility and personal commitment, without formal obligation, is an equally dangerous caricature.

Approaches that oppose care and friendship to rights and obligations can be shown to be sadly
inadequate when applied to real-life cases. The following situation described in this letter to Ann Landers is not atypical:

Dear Ann Landers:

We have five children, all overachievers who have studied hard and done well. Two are medical doctors and one a banker. . . . We are broke from paying off debts for their wedding and their education. . . . We rarely hear from our children. . . . Last week my husband asked our eldest son for some financial help. He was told “File bankruptcy and move into a small apartment.”

Ann, personal feelings are no longer a factor: it is a matter of survival. Is there any law that says our children must help out?

There are laws in some states that would require that these children provide some minimal support for their indigent parents. But not a few contemporary philosophers could be aptly cited by those who would advocate their repeal. A. John Simmons, Jeffrey Blustein, and Michael Slote, for example, doubt that filial duty is to be understood in terms of special moral duties owed to parents. Simmons offers “reasons to believe that [the] particular duty meeting conduct [of parents to children] does not generate an obligation of gratitude on the child.” And Blustein opposes what he and Jane English call the “owing idiom” for services parents were obligated to perform. “If parents have any right to repayment from their children, it can only be for that which was either above and beyond the call of parental duty, or not required by parental duty at all.” (The “overachievers” could not agree more.) Slote finds it “difficult to believe that one has a duty to show gratitude for benefits one has not requested.” Jane English characterizes filial duty in terms of the duties one good friend owes another. “[A]fter a friendship ends, the duties of friendship end.”

Taking a sentimental view of gratitude, these philosophers are concerned to remove the taint of onerous duty from what should be a spontaneous and free desire to be considerate of one’s parents. One may agree with the sentimentalists that there is something morally unsatisfactory in being considerate of one’s parents merely out of duty. The mistake lies in thinking that duty and inclination are necessarily at odds. Moreover, the having of certain feelings and attitudes may be necessary for carrying out one’s duty. Persons who lack feeling for their parents may be morally culpable for that very lack. The sentimentalist objection that this amounts to a paradoxical duty to feel (grateful, loyal, etc.) ignores the extent to which people are responsible for their characters; to have failed to develop in oneself the capacity to be considerate of others is to have failed morally, if only because many duties simply cannot be carried out by a cold and unfree moral agent. Kant himself speaks of the universal duty which devolves upon man of so ordering his life as to be fit for the performance of all moral duties.” And MacIntyre, who is no Kantian, makes the same point when he says, “Moral education is an ‘education sentimental.’”

Sentimentalism is not harmless false. Its moral perspective on family relationships as spontaneous, voluntary, and duty-free is simply unrealistic. Anthropological observations provide a sounder perspective on filial obligation. Thus Corinne Nydegger warns of the dangers of weakening the formal constraints that ensure that obligations are met: “No society, including our own, relies solely on . . . affection, good will and enlightened self-interest.” She notes that the aged in particular “have a vested interest in the social control of obligations.”

It should be noted that the sentimentalist is arguing for a morality that is sensitive to special relations and personal commitment: this is in its own way a critique of EP morality. But sentimentalism ignores the extent to which the “care perspective” is itself dependent on a formal sense of what is fitting and morally proper. The ideal relationship cannot be “duty-free,” if only because sentimental ties may come unraveled, often leaving one of the parties at a material disadvantage. Sentimentalism then places in a precarious position those who are not (or no longer) the fortunate beneficiaries of sincere personal commitments. If the EP moralist tends to be implausibly abstract and therefore inattentive to the morality of the special relations, the sentimentalist tends to err on the side of excessive narrowness by neglecting the impersonal “institutional” expectations and norms that qualify all special relations.

VII. DP Morality: Some Qualifications

It might be thought that the difference between EP and DP tends to disappear when either theory is applied to concrete cases, since one must in any case look at the circumstances to determine the practical response. But this is to underestimate how what one initially takes to be the responsibility of moral agents to patients affects the procedure one uses in making practical decisions in particular circumstances. Recall again how Peter Singer’s EP procedure pits the preferences of the three friends against the preferences of the father, and contrast this with a differential-pull approach that diligations to the the graduating Tate gave no planning their there are, t between a DP The EP moralises as an auto the person as a serve. Moreov the minimal p to the distinct lence. Behavin the whole of sense) and bem right, the A ful. But it wou Jellyby she w her father by i dine in his stee I am arguin the special rel and others crit implausible cc their objection symptomatic character of th revi the thee consequences. in this directio leaves them q is DP. My com plausibly acco ments concern variety of real edge that the p and others ar available until val foundation mainstream th porary DP mo thi direction. zant that a “pa The DP account for th to specific sc course not all quirements th includes the r harming one”. circ unstanc toated to do so.
approach that assumes discriminate and focused obligations to the father. Similarly, the adult children of the graduating elders and the children raised by Miss Tate gave no special weight to filial obligation in planning their day's activities.

There are, then, significant practical differences between a DP and an EP approach to concrete cases. The EP moralist is a respecter of the person whom he sees as an autonomous individual but no respecter of the person as a social animal within its parochial preserve. Moreover, a DP theory that grounds duty in the minimal principle of noninterference is sensitive to the distinction between strict duty and benevolence. Behaving as one is duty bound to behave is not the whole of moral life. But duty (in the narrow sense) and benevolence are not commensurate. If I am right, the Anaheim woman is culpably disrespectful. But it would be absurd if (in the manner of Mrs. Jellyby) she were to try to compensate for excluding her father by inviting several indigent gentlemen to dine in his stead.

I am arguing for a DP approach to the morality of the special relations. Williams, Nozick, MacIntyre, and others criticize utilitarianism and Kantianism for implausible consequences in this area. I believe that their objections to much of contemporary ethics are symptomatic of a growing discontent with the EP character of the current theories. It may be possible to revise the theories to avoid some of the implausible consequences. Rule utilitarianism seems to be a move in this direction. But, as they stand, their EP character leaves them open to criticism. EP is a dogma. But so is DP. My contention is that DP moral theories more plausibly account for our preanalytic moral judgments concerning what is right and wrong in a wide variety of real cases. Having said this, I will acknowledge that the proper antidote to the malaise Williams and others are pointing to will not be effectively available until DP moral theories are given a theoretical foundation as well worked out as those of the mainstream theories. Alasdair MacIntyre is a contemporary DP moralist who has perhaps gone furthest in this direction. Nozick and Williams are at least cognizant that a "particularistic" approach is needed.

The DP moral theory is in any case better able to account for the discriminate duties that correspond to specific social roles and expectations. But of course not all duties are discriminate: there are requirements that devolve on everyone. This not only includes the negative requirement to refrain from harming one's fellowman, but also, in certain circumstances, to help him when one is singularly situated to do so. I am, for example, expected to help a lost child find its parent or to feed a starving stranger at my doorstep. Failure to do so violates an understanding that characterizes the least social ties binding us as fellow human beings. The "solitaryness" that Hobbes speaks of is a myth; we are never in a totally unrelated "state of nature." The DP moralist recognizes degrees of relatedness and graded expectations. The most general types of positive behavior expected of anyone as a moral agent obey some minimal principle of Good Samaritanism applicable to "the stranger in thy midst."

Perhaps the most serious difficulty facing the DP approach is that it appears to leave the door wide open to ethical relativism. We turn now to this problem.

VIII. DP and Ethical Relativism

A theory is nonrelativistic if it has the resources to pass moral judgments on whole societies. My version of DP moral theory avoids ethical relativism by adopting a deontological principle (noninterference) which may be deployed in assessing and criticizing the moral legitimacy of the traditional arrangements within which purportedly moral interactions take place. We distinguish between unjust and merely imperfect arrangements. Arrangements that are essentially invasive are unjust and do not confer moral legitimacy on what is expected of those who are party to them. To correct the abuses of an unjust institution like slavery or a practice like suttee is to destroy the institution or practice. By contrast, an institution like marriage or the family will often contain some unjust features, but these are usually correctible, and the institution itself is legitimate and morally determining in a straightforward sense.

In any case the DP moralist is in a position to hold that not all social arrangements impose moral imperatives. It is not clear to me that DP can avoid relativism without some deontological minimal ground. But conceivably a principle other than noninterference might better serve as universal ground of the special duties. What is essential to any deontologically grounded DP morality is the recognition that the universal deontological principle is differentiated and specified by local arrangements that determine what is legitimately expected of the moral agent.

It may now be clear in what sense I believe DP theories to be plausible. A moral theory is plausible to the extent that it accounts for our pretheoretical moral judgments. Such intuitive judgments are admittedly idiosyncratic and prejudicial, being conditioned by our upbringing and the traditions we live
by. The DP moralist nobly courts implausibility by jet-tisoning prejudice and confronting moral decisions anew. By contrast, the DP moralist jettisons only those prejudices which are exposed as rooted in and conditioned by an unjust social arrangement. But for those institutions which are not unjust, our common-sense judgments of “what is expected” (from parents, from citizens, from adult children) are generally held to be reliable guides to the moral facts of life.

The version of DP that I favor accepts the Enlightenment doctrine of natural rights in the minimal form of a universal right to noninterference and the correlative duty of moral agents to respect that right. MacIntyre’s version of DP is hostile to Enlightenment “modernism,” abjuring all talk of universal rights or deontic principles of a universal character. It is in this sense more classical. An adequate version of DP must nevertheless avoid the kind of ethical relativism that affords the moral philosopher no way to reject some social arrangements as immoral. MacIntyre appears to suggest that this can be achieved by accepting certain teleological constraints on good societies. Pending more detail, I am not convinced that a teleological approach can by itself do the critical job that needs to be done if we are to avoid an unacceptable ethical relativism. But other nondeontic approaches are possible. David Wong has argued for a Confucian condition of adequacy that grades societies as better or worse depending on how well they foster human flourishing. My own deontic approach is not opposed to teleological or Confucianist ways of judging the acceptability of social arrangements. If a given arrangement is degenerate, then that is in itself a good reason to discount its norms as morally binding. But conceivably even a flourishing society could be unjust; nevertheless its civic norms should count as morally vacuous and illegitimate. It seems to me, therefore, that MacIntyre’s version of DP morality probably goes too far in its rejection of all liberal deontic principles.

I have argued that DP best explains what we intuitively accept as our moral obligations to parents and other persons who stand to us in special relations. And though my version of DP allows for criticizing unjust social arrangements, it may still seem unacceptably relativistic. For does it not allow that what is right for a daughter or son in one society is wrong for them in another? And does this not run afoul of the condition that what is right and wrong must be so universally? It should, I think, be acknowledged that the conservatism that is a feature of the doctrine of differential pull is somewhat hospitable to ethical relativism. Put another way: differential pull makes sense of ethical relativism’s large grain of truth, but it does so without losing claim to its ability to evaluate morally the norms of different societies and institutions. Institutions that allow or encourage interference with noninvasive interests are unjust, and we have noted that the adherent of differential pull is in good a position to apply a universal principle in evaluating an institution as anyone of an EP persuasion. But application of DP will rule out some institutions while allowing diverse others to count as legitimate and just. Only a just institution can assign and shape a moral obligation for those who play their roles within it. However, there are many varieties of just institutions, and so, in particular, are there many ways in which filial obligations are determined within different social and cultural contexts. What counts as filial respect in one context may not count as filial respect in another context. It is a virtue of our account that it not only tolerates but shows the way to justify different moral norms.

IX. Common Sense

The sociologist Edward Shils warns about the consequences of the modern hostility to tradition in ways reminiscent of ecologists warning us about tampering with delicate natural systems that have taken millennia to evolve. The DP character of much of modern philosophy encourages a style of playing fast and loose with practices and institutions that define the traditional ties binding the members of a family or community. And a duty-free sentimentalism is no kinder to traditional mores.

The appeal to common sense is often a way of paying proper attention to the way that particular circumstances and social practice enter into the shaping of obligations. This, to my mind, is Sidgwick’s peculiar and saving grace. But many a moral philosopher lacks Sidgwick’s firm appreciation of the role of accepted practice or common sense. I shall illustrate this by way of a final example.

Richard Wasserstrom in “Is Adultery Immoral?” raises the question of whether the (alleged) obligation not to commit adultery might be explained by reasons that would apply to any two persons generally. It is, for example, wrong for any person to deceive another. And he discusses the destructive effects adultery has on the love that the marital partners bear to one another. What is missing from Wasserstrom’s account is any hint that the obligations are shaped by the institution as it exists and that traditional expectat-

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exists and that being “faithful” is a legitimate institutional expectation informing the way that the partners may treat each other. Wasserstrom does say that “we ought to have reasons for believing that marriage is a morally desirable and just social institution.” But what follows if it is? Wasserstrom does not say. What we want here is an account of how and why a married person who commits adultery may be wronging the partner. How, in particular, might an act of adultery be construed as unwarranted interference? The shift from the examination of an obligation that has its locus and form within a given institution to evaluating the institution itself is legitimate; but it is all too often a way of avoiding the more concrete and immediate investigation which is the bread and butter of normative ethics.

EP is ethics without ethos. So too is sentimentalism. Both have a disintegrative effect on tradition. Where EP and sentimentalism sit in judgment on ethos, DP respects it and seeks to rationalize it. The EP moralist is reformist in spirit, tending to look upon traditional arrangements as obstacles to social justice. John Rawls, for example, is led to wonder whether the family is ethically justifiable:

It seems that even when fair opportunity (as it has been defined) is satisfied, the family will lead to unequal chances between individuals. Is the family to be abolished then? Taken by itself and given a certain primacy, the idea of equal opportunity inclines in this direction. But within the context of the theory of justice as a whole, there is less urgency to take this course.

Not urgent perhaps, but not unreasonable either. A defender of filial morality cannot with equanimity entertain the idea of abolishing the family. Here Sidgwick is the welcome antidote. For him the suggestion that ethical principles might require the elimination of something so central to “established morality” betrays a misconception of the job of ethics. Instead, Sidgwick demands of philosophers that they “repudiate altogether that temper of rebellion . . . into which the reflective mind is always apt to fall when it is first convinced that the established rules are not intrinsically reasonable.”

Reporting on how he arrived at his way of doing moral philosophy, Sidgwick tells of his rereading of Aristotle:

[A] light seemed to dawn upon me as to the meaning and drift of [Aristotle’s] procedure . . . . What he gave us there was the Common Sense Morality of Greece, reduced to consistency by careful comparison: given not as something external to him but as what “we”—he and others—think, ascertained by reflection . . . . Might I not imitate this: do the same for our morality here and now, in the same manner of impartial reflection on current opinion?

Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. In the first three examples Sommers gives, she does not indicate the current state of affection or friendship between the grown children and the parents or caretaker in question. Would it make any difference to your moral assessment of these examples to learn that in each case the parent or caretaker was not especially lovable or deserving of consideration? In other words, are filial obligations related in any way to the current level of friendship between parents and children?

2. How does the existence of what Sommers calls “special duties” conflict with the moral principles defended by Kant and Mill? When faced with this sort of conflict, which should take precedence: our moral intuitions or our considered moral theories? Is there some way to reach a balance between the two?

3. Does Sommers think that the existence of special duties requires a new moral theory, or are such duties best addressed within a broadly duty-based ethical theory?

4. Sommers discusses Kantian, utilitarian, and “sentimentalist” approaches to the issue of filial morality. How would a Confucian perspective on this issue fare? Would Sommers be likely to accept a Confucian perspective? What is your own view of the obligations of children to their parents?
Chenyang Li, Grown Children’s Filial Obligation

In “Grown Children’s Filial Obligation,” Chenyang Li defends a view of filial moral obligation associated with the Confucian moral tradition. He cites Confucius and Mencius as setting the historical foundation for his view. Although he puts forth several arguments for the claim that grown children should care for their aged parents, his central argument for this claim takes the position of Jane English as its point of departure. English argues that giving birth to and raising children is not a favor from parents to children, because children did not ask to be born. Li examines this claim more closely and argues that not all favors need be benefits resulting from an explicit request for assistance. Parental sacrifice for their children does, he argues, create an obligation on the part of children to care for their parents. Throughout the essay Li appeals to the Chinese, and especially Confucian, view of the natural and ideal relation between parents and children, according to which filial obligation is perhaps the strongest moral obligation a person can have in life.

Reading Questions

1. Li retells a story about a government official and his mother. What is the point of this story? What lesson does Li draw from it?
2. Li cites a recent case in which a ninety-year-old Chinese woman sued her two grown sons for failing in their filial duty to her. How, according to Li, is filial duty supported by Chinese social values?
3. Li claims that “filial obligation exists even if the grown children do not have love or friendship to their parents,” and that parental sacrifices “do create a situation in which the children are obliged to reciprocate service or financial assistance when the aged parents are in need.” Explain carefully his argument for this claim.
4. Li tells a story about Al lending a hand to Barbara in her time of need. What is the point of this example? How is it supposed to provide an objection to the claims made by Jane English in the article included above? In particular, what is Li’s argument for the claim that obligation-incurring favors need not be the result of asking another person for assistance?

Grown Children’s Filial Obligation

CHEN YANG LI

When I was little, my Chinese grandmother told me the following story. A long, long time ago, food was scarce. It was a custom that people over sixty were sent out to the mountains and put inside graves built on the ground. Without food and water they would soon die there. Because it was a common practice, nobody felt there was anything wrong with it. There was a government official who loved his aged mother so much that, although he had to follow the custom to send his mother to the mountain grave, he left a hole in the grave and kept sending food and water to feed his mother, year after year. One day, he brought his mother home and told his mother she could eat her food. “I am the royal palace and the animals. They are the animals. I know what they are. The poor person is dead, and the government has to die. Today I am extremely saddened to see these events look like descriptions of the old woman said, ‘I will subdue them. They were before you, food and destroyed fast and could not subdue them was asked. ‘Because the time, all the cats he there may be some woman drew a picture one and your picture the son finally the rats in the royal joyed and offered to my mother back but had kept his mother in solving the emperor issued a dare to stay home with live, and their child and treat them with on, all old people live.

The story may not that old people deserve and know if people love, care for parents. But many away, not to graves homes. Many people in some states, and cost the state as much as a year. It would grown children too the aid of a part-time stance from the state to be happier if they stood in a nursery in such a way that r

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brought his mother a big basketful of food and water and told his mother that was the last time he could send her food. "I am going to die," said the man. "The royal palace has been invaded by five strange animals. They are destroying everything. Nobody knows what they are and how to deal with them. Tomorrow is my deadline to subdue these animals. If I as a government official fail to perform my duty, I must die. Today I came to say good-bye." The extremely saddened mother said, "Son, tell me what these animals look like." The man gave her as specific descriptions of those animals as he could. Then the old woman said, "I know what they are and how to subdue them. They are huge rats. The last time I saw them was before you were born. They ate all kinds of food and destroyed clothes and furniture. They ran fast and men couldn't catch them. The only thing that subdued them was cats. "What are cats?" the man asked. "Because there have not been rats for a long time, all the cats have disappeared from town. But there may be some in the mountains." The old woman drew a picture of a cat for her son. "Go and find one and your problem is solved." With the picture the son finally found a cat and the cat caught all the rats in the royal palace. The emperor was overjoyed and offered to grant the man a wish. "I want my mother back home." He told the emperor how he had kept his mother alive and how she had helped him in solving the problem. With little hesitation the emperor issued a decree: "From now on old people are to stay home with their children as long as they live, and their children must take good care of them and treat them with respect and dignity." From then on, all old people lived happily with their families.

The story may not be literally true, but it tells us that old people deserve respect because of their experience and knowledge. Today in America many people love, care for, and are attentive to their aged parents. But many people send their aged parents away, not to graves in the mountains, but to nursing homes. Many people do this at the expense of society. In some states, an old person in a nursing home can cost the state as much as fifty to sixty thousand dollars a year. It would cost considerably less if their grown children took care of them at home, even with the aid of a part-time helper and some financial assistance from the state. And these old people are likely to be happier if they live at home with their family instead of in a nursing home. But the system is set up in such a way that many people will not do so.

The question I would like to raise and discuss here is, what responsibility, if any, do grown children have toward their aged parents?

The most natural relation among humans is between children and parents. By nature, parents generally care for their young. Even among animals, parents have a natural inclination to care for their young. But the natural inclination for adult children to care for their aged parents is much weaker. In animals this kind of care almost does not exist. Humans have morality. In many cultures an important function of morality is to nurture people’s sense of filial obligation. For example, the Chinese have a strong tradition of respecting the old. Confucius made it clear that morality starts with respecting one’s parents (Analects, 1:2). Mencius maintained that one criterion of a good society is that there are no people with gray hair (old people) carrying heavy burdens on the street (Mencius, 1A:3). They both believed that a moral person must take care of his or her aged parents and not leave them to hardship whenever it is possible. Tseng Tzu, a disciple of Confucius, was a classic exemplar of this notion of filial morality. When his father grew old and became weak, in order to make sure his father had enough food Tseng Tzu served his father separate meals before the rest of the family ate. He served his father meat and wine every day even though Tseng Tzu himself did not have meat and wine to eat and drink. In the Confucian view, a person’s filial duty is not only to serve his or her aged parents, but also to do the best to serve them well. In order to perform this duty, Confucius believed, a person should not go far from home while his parents are alive; and if he has to go far from home, he should let his parents know his whereabouts in case they need him (Analects, 4:19). Needless to say, a son at home should never send his aged parents away, not to a nursing home, not anywhere. In the People’s Daily (overseas edition) of August 25, 1993, there was a report that in the Shandong province of China a ninety-year-old woman sued her two sons for failing in their filial duty. The woman’s husband died young and left her with two sons one and three years old. Through countless hardships she brought them both up. Now she is old and can do no more work. Neither of her two sons wanted to take care of her. The court took her case and ordered the sons to take full responsibility for her living and medical expenses. Given the Chinese culture this court decision is no surprise. It reflects the social values of the culture.

In the West many people feel the same way. But in some people the feeling does not seem as strong as in some other cultures. Some philosophers are openly opposed to the idea of filial obligation on the ground of biological ties. Jane English, for example, in her article “What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?”
maintains that love and friendship are the sole ground for filial obligation. When the children no longer have love and friendship toward their parents, filial obligation ceases to exist. She argues that parents’ sacrifices for having children are not "favors" that are to be "repaid" by their children later, because the children never asked to be born or to be looked after when they were little. She writes, "I will maintain that parents’ voluntary sacrifices, rather than ‘debts’ to be ‘repaid,’ tend to create love or ‘friendship.’ The duties of grown children are those of friends and result from love between them and their parents, rather than being things owed in repayment for the parents’ earlier sacrifices" [pp. 428-429]. Thus, she believes that if the grown children have no love or friendship toward their parents, there is no filial obligation bonding the children and the parents.

I do not deny that parents’ sacrifices for their children tend to create love and friendship in the children toward the parents. I contend, however, that grown children’s filial obligation to their parents goes beyond obligations between friends or people who love each other. I contend that filial obligation exists even if the grown children do not have love or friendship to their parents. Although parents’ earlier sacrifices for their children are not the sole ground for filial obligation to the children, these sacrifices do create a situation in which the children are obliged to reciprocate services or financial assistance when the aged parents are in need.

The Chinese traditionally believe that the greatest favor a person has ever received is from his parents, their giving him birth and bringing him up. This favor is so great that a person can never completely "repay" it. Thus he is in a lifetime obligation to serve his parents. Even though this is not the only ground for filial obligation, it is a considerable portion of it.

English does not deny that a person has a moral obligation to return or "repay" a favor done to her. But she argues that parents’ earlier sacrifices for their children are not a favor to the children because the children did not ask for it. Therefore the children are not obliged to repay it when the parents are in need. A favor results, according to English, "when A, at B’s request, bears some burden for B, then B incurs an obligation to reciprocate" [p. 429]. English illustrated as follows. "Now to the neighborhood, Max barely knows his neighbor, Nina, but asks her if she will take in his mail while he is gone for a month's vacation. She agrees. If, subsequently Nina asks Max to do the same for her, it seems that Max has a moral obligation to agree (greater than the one he would have had if Nina had not done the same for him), unless for some reason it would be a burden far out of proportion to the one Nina bore for him" [p. 429]. In this case, English maintains, Nina has done a favor to Max. But if "Max simply goes on vacation and, to his surprise, finds upon his return that his neighbor has mowed his grass twice weekly in his absence. This is a voluntary sacrifice rather than a favor, and Max has no duty to reciprocate" [p. 429]. In the latter case, there is no favor done because, English suggests, Max did not request the service from his neighbor.

But is a request necessary for a favor to take place? I do not think so. Whether a favor is done has more to do with whether a person is in need and would like the thing done to or for her. Suppose on her way home to feed her three-year-old child, Barbara’s car broke down, and Al happened to drive by and offered to give her a lift home or to call a tow truck. Even though Barbara did not request it, Al has done a favor for Barbara. If Barbara should see Al’s car break down, she has a moral obligation to help, an obligation greater than if Al had not helped Barbara when her car broke down, as long as no burden much greater would result from helping Al. Perhaps Barbara would feel a stronger obligation if she had requested a lift home from Al. But in many cases favors are done without a request. Suppose Barbara’s three-year-old accidentally falls into a pond. Al happens to pass by the pond and sees it. He jumps into the pond and saves the child’s life. Even though she did not request it, it would be nevertheless outrageous if Barbara did not consider Al’s sacrifice to have done her a great favor. It would be indecent if Barbara does not think she has a moral obligation to lend a hand if Al later needs some help from Barbara. Under these circumstances, whether a request has been made is irrelevant to the fact of a favor’s having been done.

I assume that a normal person appreciates the fact that he has a life. I assume that a normal person appreciates the fact that his parents have endured hardship and sacrifices to bring him up. I assume that between being born and not being born a normal person would strongly prefer the former, and between being taken good care of and not when he was little, a normal person would strongly prefer the former. Then the person "owes" his parents a great favor for giving him life and bringing him up, even though he did not request either. And such a person is under moral obligation to reciprocate the favor he has received. When his parents are old and need assistance, he is obliged to help. Although how much help he can offer depends on circumstances, his

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moral obligation to help his aged parents is greater than his general duty to help other people in need.

A moral obligation is a moral obligation, regardless of whether a person likes it or not. If Barbara’s life is in great danger and Al saves her life without being requested to, Al does Barbara a great favor. If Barbara does not appreciate the favor and does not feel grateful, we say that she has a very poor sense of appreciation or that she lacks a moral conscience. Even if she does not feel she “owes” Al a great favor, it does not change the fact that she is under moral obligation to reciprocate the favor in some appropriate way. Al, on the other hand, may gracefully “waive” any moral obligation Barbara has to him and not expect anything in return. But that is entirely Al’s noble gesture. In the same way, parents have done a great favor to their children without being requested to, by giving them life and bringing them up. Grown children are under obligation to return the favor. Usually the best way to do so is to take care of their parents when they grow old and need care from their grown children. Although a grown child should have love and friendship for his parents, even if he does not, he is not exempt from his filial obligation. Similar to the case of Al’s saving the life of Barbara’s child without being appreciated, a person may not feel grateful for his parents’ giving him life and bringing him up. But that only shows that he has a weak moral conscience. The lack of love and friendship on his part does not exempt him from his filial obligation to serve his aged parents. Morality demands that a person fulfill this obligation.

So, to the question, What responsibility do grown children have toward their aged parents? My answer is: when their aged parents become feeble or sick and need care, grown children have a responsibility to take care of their parents in the best way possible. At this point one may want to ask, What if grown children do not have a house large enough for their aged parents to live in? What if grown children do not make enough money to support their aged parents? I think the issue is first of all a matter of attitude. Have not people found themselves with fewer rooms in their house than children in the family? Have not people found their budget is tight because they have more children than their money can adequately support? Yes, of course they have. But they do not send their children away for these reasons, because they believe that it is their inescapable responsibility to take care of their own children. They may have to ask for financial assistance from the state or other sources. They may have to hire a house-helper. But they do manage it. Once people realize that they also have an inescapable obligation to take care of their aged parents, they will find ways to manage to take care of them. With the resources that society has been, and is still, spending on old people, by accepting their filial responsibility grown children will make their aged parents happier and the world will be a much better place for everyone.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Li interprets the story of the government official and his aged mother to show that old people deserve respect because of their experience and knowledge. In the story the old woman possessed valuable information. But what would this principle suggest about old persons who do not possess such information? In other words, is there a danger in connecting respect for older persons with their knowledge or, more generally, their social utility?

2. Li cites a case from China in which a ninety-year-old woman sued her two sons for failing to care for her in her old age. Should American society require, perhaps under threat of legal sanctions, that grown children care for their elderly parents? What sorts of arguments could be given in support of such an idea?

3. Li claims that “the greatest favor a person ever received is from his parents, their giving him birth and bringing him up. This favor so great that a person can never completely ‘repay’ it. Thus he is in a lifetime obligation to serve his parents.” Do you agree?

4. What connection does Li draw between the example of Barbara and Al and the obligations grown children have toward their parents? Are the cases similar? Is being born