

Beneficence: The Extent of Filial Duty

From the biblical tradition to Confucius' doctrine of the *Xiào*, respect towards one's parents has long been considered a natural duty. It is commonly believed that, raised by your parents, you owe them something in return. This is deeply problematic. Under the pretext of duty, children have been treated as either free labour or an asset to be utilized. It is unfair to expect children to take on a host of obligations when they did not choose to be born. Instead, filial duty must be grounded in the universal approach of beneficence. Parents should be treated in a manner that complies with moral law, irrespective of emotion or attachment.

Why is there such emphasis on duty to parents specifically? Inculcated from a young age, many children grow up under the impression that they have a duty to repay their parents for what has been invested in them. Repayment can assume many forms such as love, obedience, or support in old age. In other words, they are special obligations. Since children are the product of their parents, they have a special connection to them and therefore a special obligation. Yet there are many cases where these same obligations would not be expected. For example, a child who is abused and mistreated by their parents would not be expected to love their parents or take care of them. If duty truly stems from the nature of the relationship itself, how can that obligation be severed so easily? That is because emotions, not principles, are what back popular understanding of filial duty. Establishing filial duty on an emotional foundation has perpetuated the belief that filial duty is an unconditional debt.

Since the development of agricultural societies, children have been viewed as valuable assets. Daughters could be married into wealthier families and sons could be employed in manual labour. In order to ensure their children's compliance, parents based their authority on societal norms. "Honour thy father and thy mother", the fifth commandment spoken on Mount Sinai, sanctified filial obedience for millennia (*The Bible*, Exod. 20:12). In a similar way, thinkers in the East attributed societal dysfunction to a lack of

filial piety. Confucius established the ethical doctrine of the *Xiào*, which prized respecting one's parents as an antidote to the social upheaval afflicting his world. At the same time, children have always understood the unsure footing that filial duty is predicated on. In Greek myth, the universe emerges out of patrilineal conflict, while even now, punk culture calls to fight against authority. It is the foundation of filial duty, the parent-child relationship, that spurs rebellion. Children feel obligated by the relationship itself.

Basing duty on an arbitrary special relationship is not solid footing for grounding what is owed to parents. Rather, when considering filial duty, any type of relationship must be cast from the approach; universal duty must be considered instead. A universal duty, as opposed to a special duty, is one that is applicable to all people regardless of one's connection to them. The Golden Rule, as referred to by Christian theologians, is especially prominent. It is present in Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Egyptian and other belief systems as a universal duty. The New Testament phrases it as, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (*The Bible*, Luke 6:31). When considering filial duty, that may seem too broad a principle. However, in limiting filial duty to the Golden Rule, children free themselves of relational morality. They no longer have an obligation to their parents from emotional attachment but from the same moral standards as one would approach any other person. The philosopher Immanuel Kant explicated this in his formulation of the Golden Rule into a moral doctrine he called the duty of beneficence (*Kant 11*).

To understand why it is a duty to be beneficent, fully grasping Kant's definition of duty itself is imperative. Duty is to commit an action out of respect for moral law, not from emotion. In practice, this means that one is to commit an action not out of any desire for a particular result but solely because it complies with moral law. Crucially, moral law is not subjective. It adheres to the strict criterion of, "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law" (*Kant 15*). Suppose someone

is walking in the park and hears a voice calling for help. Said person may consider simply ignoring the voice and walking away. Before leaving, they consider the consequences if they willed the maxim “Do not pay attention to those in need.” If this were to become a universal law, society would fall into a state of mutual indifference and anarchy. Thus, that person has a duty to help the person in need not out of any desire to do so, but to comply with moral law.

The duty of beneficence is part of a larger moral framework, where one must treat all people not as means to an end, but as ends in themselves. A child has a duty to their parents, not simply because they were born, but to comply with the moral law required of everyone. Unconscious of this, it is easy for a child to think that they are free to exploit their parents. They may simply view their parents as a source of financial stability and shelter, advancing in life without owing their parents any repayment. But to do that would be to view one’s parents as vehicles to an objective, which breaks filial duty based on moral law. The duty of beneficence is to act out of a larger sense of what is right.

In contemporary life, the expectation of children is less one of manual labour and more so of long-term care. While life expectancy rises globally, children are in turn expected to care for their parents as they grow older. As others have noted, that is not an unfair assumption (*Miller 191*). When parents lose their capacity to function, they become reliant on their children for their welfare. Consequently, children become obliged to ensure their parents' health.

Filial duty is not an obligation to repay one’s parents. To owe your parents simply for having been born is not legitimate grounds for duty. Duty comes from rational morality. It consists of actions that comply with moral law and can be applied universally, regardless of the relationship. By removing the belief in repayment and turning to universal duty, the expectation that children must fulfil some pragmatic use is rejected and compliance with

moral law is promoted. What one owes their parents is what one owes all people in the world—beneficence.

Works Cited

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