

## The Line Between Love and Duty: The Moral Obligation of Children to Their Parents

A notable trend presents itself in all societies, one that transcends geography, culture, and religion: the expectation that children must respect their parents. However, this generates a challenging philosophical question: do we owe moral duties to individuals we never chose as parents, for a life we never chose to enter? For the purposes of this paper, I define a “parent” as a human adult who assumes responsibility for their child’s well-being. I contend that children who fail to meet their parents' physiological and emotional needs in old age are failing to fulfill a definite moral obligation, since parents help their children become persons. I will begin by introducing parents’ primary obligation to their children, then explore the relevance of the lack of choice in being born. Next, I will analyse the concept of ‘personhood,’ its connection to human development, and how this leads to parents extending their initial obligation to sustain life. Subsequently, I will outline the child’s moral obligation and some exceptions that will rightfully render it null.

To begin, one must discuss the primary obligation of parents to their children. Necessities like food, clean water, shelter, and clothing must be provided, as children need them to survive, yet cannot obtain them unassisted. While some may argue that fulfilling these needs warrants a moral obligation, this is incorrect. The parent-child relationship is asymmetrical from the outset, since parents make decisions for their children at an age where they have no say in them, the most significant being bringing them into existence. As such, parents incur a moral debt and are obligated to meet these needs. As for adoptive parents, there is still an onus on the parents to care for the child properly, as they have assumed responsibility for the child’s well-being. Therefore, providing children with basic survival needs is not a favour meriting a moral obligation, but a compensatory measure to lessen the burdens of existence.

Now I will address the problem surrounding choice: since children do not choose whether to be born, some might argue that they do not owe anything to their parents. However, having no choice in existing does not eliminate moral obligations - we do exist, and our actions will indubitably have an impact on the world. Consider how we have duties regarding environmental preservation for future generations with whom we will never interact. Even if the child had chosen to be born, they would inevitably need someone to help them procure basic necessities. Furthermore, they would be unable to accomplish something by themselves that could be considered equally as important - becoming a person. Per Aristotle's beliefs, presented in his treatise *De Anima*, I define the balancing of three components: emotions, the intellect, and the will - the rational part that balances the needs of both - as the 'soul'. This rational soul, which animals do not possess, can thus be attributed to what defines someone as a 'person' (Aristotle). The level at which these three elements are present, developed, and balanced is based on genetic and environmental influences. It follows that a person who does not possess one or more of the three parts of the soul, or does not have it fully developed, cannot live to their fullest potential as a human being.

The development of the soul commences with the fulfillment of basic physical and emotional needs. Once these are met, personhood can emerge through active cultivation of capacities such as reasoning, moral agency, language, social regulation, emotional regulation, and cultural knowledge. If parents do this, then they not only alleviate harm from existing, but create positive goods. The sustained and intimate nature of parental care during infancy and childhood creates a gift that cannot be replicated by other relationships, and is what turns a child from a biological being into an autonomous individual capable of moral action and benefit to society.

As previously established, the necessities of life must come before the soul can be developed. Sometimes old age renders adults incapable of providing themselves with basic needs. The asymmetry present before is reversed, and children can fulfill their obligation in the most equal way possible by providing physiological needs like food, water, shelter, clothing, which can be done through financial assistance, and aiding parents in times of illness or suffering. Additionally, emotional needs should be addressed by conversing with them, visiting them as regularly as possible, and showing care and affection. This obligation becomes active when parents can no longer adequately provide for themselves, which can take two forms: significant health decline or financial incapacity. The extent of this obligation is proportional to the child's ability to provide care, as those with greater resources bear greater responsibility, while those with limited means fulfill their duty through whatever assistance they can provide. When multiple children exist, this obligation is shared among them according to their capacities and circumstances.

The final lens to consider is when exceptions can be made for this moral obligation. Many would argue that children who are born to abusive parents should not have to owe anything to them. On this premise, I argue that the obligation is invalid when parents fail to meet expectations under three categories: basic physiological and emotional needs, abstaining from harm, and helping the child become a person. Basic needs include food, water, shelter, and clothing. Harm can take three forms: physical, mental, and emotional abuse. Physical harm involves causing bodily harm or sexual abuse, mental harm includes verbal abuse, and emotional harm involves not acknowledging the child's feelings or emotional needs. Each of these "kills" the child by devaluing them as a person and facilitating loss of will. The final category, helping a

child become a person, involves teaching reasoning, moral agency, language, social skills, emotional regulation, and cultural knowledge.

If any of these are significantly absent or severe harm is done, the child owes them nothing. Another exception is when the child is intellectually or physically challenged and unable to fulfill this moral obligation; in such cases, the parent must devote themselves to care for them as long as possible or seek others in society who can. A final exception is when the child is in a vegetative state, severely ill, or financially incapable; in these cases, the obligation is naturally nullified. But if their situation improves, as is the case for those financially encumbered, they should help their elderly parents to the best of their abilities.

Overall, children have a moral obligation to provide physiological and emotional needs in old age, as long as their parents meet each of the three aforementioned categories of expectation. This moral obligation arises because parents overextend the responsibility that arises from creating or adopting a child by helping their children become 'persons.' Having no choice in who our parents are or whether we are born does not eliminate this obligation but rather explains its compensatory nature. We owe our parents not because we chose them, but because their unrequested gift to our personhood creates a debt that justice demands we repay. Thus, children who have experienced such great care and love from their parents would be enacting an abnormally cruel punishment should they fail to aid them in old age.

### Work Cited

Aristotle. *De Anima (On the Soul)*. Edited by Hugh Lawson-Tancred, translated by Hugh Lawson-Tancred, London, Penguin Publishing Group, 1986.