

The increasingly critical perception of the costs and quality of elderly care within the twenty-first century has led to awareness of the poor quality of life offered by retirement homes. Consequently, a growing population of seniors now refuse to live in retirement homes to preserve their quality of life (Seifert, & Schelling, 2018). A natural solution for independent seniors seeking care outside retirement homes would be to rely on their children, but it remains questionable whether children have a moral obligation to attend to their parents in old age. I will argue that while it is morally impermissible to assume that children have an intrinsic duty, or a duty from birth, to care for their parents in old age, children should reciprocate their parents if they develop a proper familial bond with them.

There are various philosophies which mandate filial piety. Notably, the Confucian philosophy of Xiao postulates that in order to achieve familial and societal harmony, children have three intrinsic duties to their parents: to support their parents when necessary; never disobey their parents; and to accompany their parents until burial, even if their parents are flawed and are mistreating (Ji, 2020). However, concepts of filial piety contradict accepted moral principles. Firstly, filial piety restricts a child's freedom. It is important to establish that children do have the capability to exercise free will as they possess autonomy and consciousness. However, by the tenets of filial piety, a child must obey the ultimate decisions, unfair or not, of their parents which indicates that children would have their free will limited by their subservience to their parents. Therefore, although the aim of concepts of filial piety may be to achieve familial and societal harmony, it inevitably sacrifices the free will of children to do so. This type of obstruction of a child's free will can be situationally immoral. While sometimes the free will of a child is restrained for the greater benefit of the child, the flaw of restricting a child's free will is that it permits parents expect their children to accompany them and obey them even if they

exploit their children with morally impermissible acts such as child abuse or child labour. It is not immoral for a child to avoid abuse or labour and desire to be free of such trauma in their lives.

Furthermore, filial piety assumes that children owe their parents a debt by birth, however assuming such a debt is morally incorrect. In order for a debt to be morally permissible, it must be considered and agreed on by all parties involved; it is unfair for parents to one-sidedly define the debt that their children owe them for their parenting as their children were never able to choose to be born and undertake such a debt. Under a framework that accepts subjectively defined debt, slavery—a one-sided labour debt—would be considered a moral practice. Therefore, it is immoral to conclude the necessity of intrinsic filial piety as it fails to meet the moral standards by restricting a child's free will to an unreasonable degree.

Although it is now established that children do not have an intrinsic duty to care for their parents in old age, some may argue that a child encroaches on their parent's fundamental freedoms and needs in old age by neglecting filial piety. However, this argument is flawed in the manner that it assumes that children must inherit the duty to care for their parents in old age. Philosophers such as Locke have proposed that it is in fact the duty of the state to assure these basic protections of wellbeing and safety to the members of society. The first implication of this is that a child should not be forced to provide for their parents in old age in conditions when a child has been abused or neglected in childhood. In such cases, seniors should receive their basic safety and physiological needs from the state, and it is the duty of the state to provide these essential human rights. The second implication is that there should be no societal expectation that a child should have to care for their parents. This is because the state should protect the basic

freedoms and security of the child, especially in cases when a child would feel endangered by returning to care for their parents.

A question that can be posited now is whether or not it is possible for a child to develop a moral duty to care for their parents. I argue that this moral duty can develop under the conditions of a healthy child-parent relationship. In order to discuss this, it is important to first consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs and approach this topic with a need-based framework. The main focus of this hierarchy is that the lower levels of basic and psychological needs must be met in order for an individual to begin pursuing the best versions of themselves, or self actualize. There are two notable implications of this theory. Firstly, it is immoral for any individual to refuse or undermine their ability to self-actualize. If an individual refuses to self-actualize, they are sabotaging their ability to become the best versions of themselves, and consequently their ability to bring the most benefit to society. It can therefore be argued that it is immoral to refuse to self actualize, as by doing so, individuals will take away from their full potential to benefit society. Secondly, if a child develops a healthy emotional bond with their parents, caring for their parents in old age will become a matter of necessity to satisfy their psychological needs so that they can achieve self actualization. Within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, there is a level dedicated to fulfilling a sense of love and belongingness through family, friendly, and romantic relationships with the rationale that humans require social connection (McLeod, 2025). This implies if a familial bond has already been established through good parenting, failing to maintain it would lead to the loss of emotional satisfaction, and thus hinder self actualization. Therefore, because it is immoral to neglect one's duty to self actualize, children with existing familial bonds should strive to care for their parents in any way such that they feel emotionally fulfilled.

Ultimately, there is no intrinsic duty for a child to care for their parents, as such philosophies of child piety neglect the essential freedoms of a child. While there exist convincing perspectives that justify filial debt, following such frameworks of thought which establish this debt would justify the immoral act of slavery as well. However, it is possible for a child to develop such a duty under the conditions that they establish a strong familial attachment with their parents and thus need to care for them in their old age to properly self-actualize. It can therefore be concluded that while there is no intrinsic duty of a child to care for their parents in old age, the creation of an emotional bond between a child and a parent would necessitate such a duty.

[1167]

## References

- Ji, R. (2020). "Filial Piety" in The Analects of Confucius and "Filial Piety" in Today's Society. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, 4(10), 15–18.  
<https://doi.org/10.26689/jcer.v4i10.1556>
- McLeod, S. (2025, March 14). *Maslow's hierarchy of needs*. Simply Psychology.  
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>
- Seifert, A., & Schelling, H. R. (2018). Attitudes Toward Aging and Retirement Homes Before and After Entry Into a Retirement Home. *Journal of Housing for the Elderly*, 32(1), 12–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02763893.2017.1393484>