

## The Myth of Inherent Filial Obligation

It has been established within society that familial relations, particularly those between parents and their children, are distinct from any other types of relationships in that they are expected to be honored. As such, the view that children have a special moral duty to their parents is widely held. However, it is unclear whether this assumed duty is truly justified. On one hand, it may seem reasonable that children return the favor of having been brought into this world and raised by their parents; on the other hand, it is questionable if being born automatically creates a moral obligation of children to their parents at all. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term “parent” to refer to anyone who has intentionally become and stayed a parent to a child, regardless of biological relations. I argue herein that children do not inherently have a moral duty to their parents solely by virtue of that biological or social relation.

To better understand the perspectives in this debate, we must first dissect this problem: how are moral duties formed at all? I contend that humans are not born with inherent moral obligations to others. However, upholding a functioning society where we need to coexist requires each of us to take responsibility for the consequences of our actions. In this sense, moral duties are not innate but arise naturally through social interaction, where relationships and exchanges create expectations of accountability.

This then raises the concept of reciprocity: in order for a relationship to be initiated and sustained, efforts must be mutual, even in familial contexts. Therefore, the label of 'parent' and 'child' should not, on its own, determine moral duty; rather, it depends on the nature of their relationship. For instance, when parents fail to care for their children, whether through neglect, abuse, or abandonment, it would be unreasonable to impose a moral obligation onto these children to care for them. To believe otherwise would assume that the child owes a moral debt to

their parents for their very existence within this family. In the case where the child and parents are biologically related, the child has no say in whether or not to be born, and as a result, should take no responsibility for the event. Just as we would not hold someone morally accountable for entering a contract they never agreed to, we should not expect children to bear duties simply because they exist within a construct they never chose. If the child was adopted, the same argument applies: in many cases, the child has no role in initiating the relationship and thus cannot be expected to bear moral obligations as a result. Some may argue, though: what if the child does have a say? If a child willingly enters into a parent-child relationship, then a moral obligation may arise, but only as it would in any human relationship.

Another view is that parents being expected to raise and nurture the children creates an asymmetry. However, biological parents directly caused the creation of the child, they are responsible for the consequences of it, and thus have a duty of raising them. The same goes for an adopted relationship: the parent made a conscious choice to bring the child into their family, which comes with a moral responsibility to care for them.

Furthermore, one might contend that framing moral duty with the concept of reciprocity reduces meaningful relationships to mere transactions. However, reciprocity, in the context of relationships, is about mutual commitment and effort rather than cold, calculated exchange; to think otherwise would be to undermine the nuance of reciprocity in the first place. Some may argue that care which persists even when one party cannot reciprocate—for example, they are comatose—is proof that not all relationships are necessarily reciprocal. I contend that this care, which is in fact fulfillment of a moral duty, is rooted in a history of reciprocity deep enough that this duty persists even when it becomes necessarily single-sided. This explains why people often feel an increasing moral duty proportional to the history and depth of their relationship. For

example, a happily married couple typically feel more moral duty for each other if the one falls into a coma than two strangers that had just met. Overall, the principle of reciprocity, when applied to relationships, including parent-child ones, is not necessarily a one-to-one, clear exchange, but a deep, shared, historical commitment that duty and love then arise from.

It may also be argued that parents are expected to provide their children with unconditional love, so why should children not be expected to provide the same for their parents? However, parents have a moral responsibility to raise their children as a consequence of causing their existence or choosing to bring them into their family. The act of raising a child is therefore less like a form of unconditional love and more like fulfilling a responsibility. In addition, the “unconditional love” also arises from a biological response to being a parent, which we cannot simply assume onto children as well. As such, children have no reason to be expected to provide their parents with “unconditional” love, but they do have a moral duty to commit to what mutual relationship exists between them. Love is not something that can be morally demanded in the first place; it is an emotion that naturally arises from connection, and to oblige a child to love their parents therefore undermines the responsive nature of love itself. In fact, love often develops precisely because of mutual care and shared emotional investment, not out of obligation.

This raises the question: if love really is “unconditionally” given to an individual by another, are they therefore obligated to reciprocate? I argue that unless both parties choose to enter a relationship, then the recipient does not have such a duty. This love is a gift; by definition, one does not expect another to give back when giving a gift. This is not to downplay the emotional significance of love, but moral duty cannot be argued solely by emotion or biology. As such, the common belief that children have a moral duty to their parents, therefore, is

not built on philosophical validity, but a social expectation that was drilled into us over time. Many cultures emphasize filial gratitude and the importance of respecting and caring for your elders. It stems from the perspective that parents give unconditionally and therefore impose moral obligations onto children as the recipients of that love.

In conclusion, children do not inherently have a moral obligation to their parents. Rather, this relationship is rooted in mutual choice of commitment and as a result, love. The only difference is that the parents have a responsibility to care for their children, thus creating a significant opportunity for a mutual relationship to develop. Ultimately, rethinking filial duty through the lens of reciprocity allows us to value authentic relationships over performative obligation. Moral duty is grounded in mutual connection rather than imposed by birthright, and to believe otherwise would be to mistake relational proximity for moral necessity.