

Why You Should Be Nice To Your Parents:

A Theory of Filial Obligations

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*For Mom and Dad,*

*Without you...*

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## Chapter One: The Project

### 1.1 The Question

“The superior man, going back to his ancient fathers and returning to the authors of his being, does not forget those to whom he owes his life; and therefore he calls forth all his reverence, gives full vent to his feelings, and exhausts his strength in discharging this service – as a tribute of gratitude to his parents he dares not but do his utmost.”<sup>1</sup>

In no uncertain terms, Confucius instructs us to respect and care for our parents. So much priority does he place on filial piety that his disciple Mencius argues that devotion to one’s spouse or children that results in a failure to care for one’s parents is “selfish” and “unfilial.”<sup>2</sup> More moderately, the Bible tells us to honor our mothers and fathers.<sup>3</sup> Common-sense morality tells us that our parents fed, clothed, and sheltered us, and that we owe them *something* in return, but surprisingly little contemporary philosophical work has been done to determine what that something is and why it is owed, even as an increasing number of people face pressing questions about care for their parents. Determining what we owe our parents and why we owe them is the subject of this project.

The question of what one should do for one’s parents is often urgent; a parent needs care in the near future, and the grown child must decide what kind of care to provide, whether and to what extent to finance the provision of care, and to

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<sup>1</sup> Confucius, “Li Ki,” Bk. xxi, sect. ii, 4. (Qtd. In *The Ethics of Confucius; The Sayings of the Master and His Disciples Upon the Conduct of “The Superior Man,”* Miles Menander Dawson, ed. Memphis: General Books (2010), p. 71.)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. iv., pt. ii, c. xxx, v. 2. (Qtd. in *The Ethics of Confucius*, p. 73.)

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 20:12.

what extent the child ought to sacrifice his happiness, wellbeing, financial security, guest bedroom, etc. for the sake of his parent. These questions are made murkier by shifting family structures, variations in the closeness between the parent and child, both past and present, and conflicting obligations, such as obligations to one's own children and/or partner. To make matters worse for those facing these questions, the problem is relatively new.

If Confucius and Moses were concerned with filial obligations, what is new about the problem? Though the family is certainly a well-established institution about which much has been said, the current state of the parent-child relationship is a relatively new phenomenon. First, as I've mentioned, the family structure itself is shifting such that there now exists a wide, often confusing array of family unit types. Social roles have become difficult to determine, as have the social obligations that attach to and/or define those social roles.<sup>4</sup> Second, life expectancy in the United States (and most other first world nations) is considerably longer than it has been in the past, so caring for parents in their old age has only recently become the kind of long-term commitment it often is now. Third, the care required to reach, and possibly enjoy, that longer life expectancy is more expensive, and becoming steadily more so. Fourth, the birth rate has declined, such that each parent has, on average, fewer children to provide the necessary care than in previous times. In short, longer-living parents have fewer children who might share the increasing financial

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<sup>4</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the social roles are – or even can be – defined independently of social obligations. The obligations might themselves be constitutive of the social role. However, as I shall argue, neither the roles nor the obligations are easy to articulate.

burden of caring for the aging parent for longer periods of time, and shifting family structures obscure rather than clarify the role each family member should play.

In what follows, I shall explore three types of problems that arise when determining a grown child's filial obligations: the personal, the practical, and the philosophical. Personal problems are those concerning the relationship itself, such as determining precisely what role a particular family member plays and what that role entails. Practical problems arise when we consider the cost, both financial and emotional, of providing care to ageing family members, especially against a background of rapidly increasing healthcare costs. Finally, the philosophical problems concern the (virtually) unique characteristics of filial obligations: if they exist at all, then they are obligations the grown child – who does not voluntarily enter into the relationship – has toward the parent – who has voluntarily entered into the relationship. Furthermore, filial obligations raise important questions about distributive justice. Let's consider each of these problems in turn.

## **1.2 The Problems**

### **1.2.1. The Personal**

Consider first shifting family structures. One might argue that we should first define the family as an institution, and the social obligations will follow from that definition. Although these social obligations might not themselves be moral obligations, they at least help to define expectations.<sup>5</sup> However, defining the family as an institution or the social roles individuals within the family are to play will not

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Dan Hausman for this suggestion.

be helpful in determining filial obligations for two reasons: first, as I shall show, we have considerable difficulty defining both the family and the social roles individual family members play; second, the relationship between expectations and obligations is dubious. In fact, as I shall argue in Chapter 6, the expectations themselves might undermine obligations. Moreover, using expectations to define obligations risks intensifying rather than alleviating the problem of gender-based distribution of filial care. Let's consider each of these problems carefully.

First, defining the institution of the family, as well as the social roles individual family members play, is surprisingly difficult as we seem to lack both a formal definition and even, in some cases, an intuitive sense of these roles. Consider, as a starting point, George Peter Murdock's definition of the family in his 1949 article, "The Universality of the Nuclear Family": "The family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic co-operation, and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults."<sup>6</sup> Murdock defines the nuclear family as consisting "typically of a married man and woman with their offspring, although in individual cases one or more additional persons may reside with them."<sup>7</sup> Although Murdock concedes many men and women enjoy economic co-operation in the absence of "sexual gratification," he maintains that "marriage exists only when the economic and the

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<sup>6</sup> Murdock, George Peter. "The Universality of the Nuclear Family," in *A Modern Introduction to the Family*, Norman W. Bell and Ezra F. Vogel, Eds. New York: The Free Press (1960), p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

sexual are united into one relationship, and this combination occurs only in marriage. Marriage, thus defined, is found in every known human society. In all of them, moreover, it involves residential cohabitation, and in all of them it forms the basis of the nuclear family.”<sup>8</sup>

Though the problems with this definition of the family – and of marriage – will likely strike the reader as obvious, it is worth articulating them, as the changing family unit is a primary source of confusion regarding social roles. As of 2012, both society and the law recognize that many families do not share a common residence or participate in economic co-operation. A child may have two parents who do not live together, share economic responsibilities, or participate in a sexual relationship with one another. Furthermore, the parents may also be of the same sex. None of the features Murdock associates with the family and marriage is necessary for a family or a marriage to exist. Variations among family structures within a culture, as well as across cultures, are obvious.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> Recognizing this variation, Clyde Kluckhohn considers some variations, but he argues that the variations are in keeping with Murdock’s universal themes. According to Kluckhohn, “All variations in the form and functioning of the human family could, until recently, be seen as variations on a basic theme. No aspect of the universal culture pattern has been more clearly delimited than that of the family. The family was always and everywhere an agency for the protection and training of the child and for the care of the aged and the infirm” (“Variations in the Human Family”, in *A Modern Introduction to the Family*, *op. cit.*, p. 45). What of those “recent” (as of 1949) variations that stray from this universal theme? These, Kluckhohn says, are “threatening” the “traditional philosophy of the family” (p. 46). These threats include but are not limited to: shifting care of the elderly away from the family and to the state; “increased geographical mobility”; “changed patterns in regard to employment of married women”; and other economic developments that make it possible for men and women to “enjoy opportunities (which previously were easily accessible only in family life) without surrendering their independence” (p. 46).

In the face of considerable variation in family structure, within and across cultures, how are we to define the role of the parent? We have three candidate definition-types: biological, functional<sub>1</sub> (in terms of actual performance of certain functions), and functional<sub>2</sub> (in terms of obligations to perform certain functions). The first type of definition relies on pure biology, whereas the second and third depend entirely on social practices in a given culture. Consequently, the first type of definition will not, in fact, allow for variation, either within or across cultures, whereas the second and third types will. I shall consider each of these definition types, and argue that although a functional<sub>2</sub> definition is our best hope for defining the parent's social role, we will still face considerable difficulty in determining precise social roles and their accompanying social obligations.

Consider first a biological definition of parent: the parent is whoever is causally responsible for the child's existence, where causal responsibility entails biological reproduction. Although this definition certainly simplifies matters, it will not serve us well in contemporary United States. Surely, we want to say that a child who is adopted immediately after birth is the adopter's child, though the child is not biologically related to the adopter. The practice of surrogate motherhood in the United States also suggests that we ought to locate the role of parent in something other than biology. Though certainly not unproblematic, this practice suggests that we separate the physical act of carrying the child from the role of parenting the

child.<sup>10</sup> In her discussion of reproductive rights, Onora O'Neill offers a helpful analysis of the problem with a biological definition of parenthood:

“The view that parents are primarily the *rearers* of children is confirmed by the systematic delineation of the parental duties of rearers who are not begetters or bearers in diverse legal codes. There are even societies in which child-rearing duties are usually delegated to someone other than the natural parents; and there are many circumstances in all societies in which one or both natural parents do not rear their child. Begetters and bearers, then, may sometimes not become or not remain parents in the wider sense of the term. Conversely, many persons are parents to children whom they neither begot nor bore. Adoptive parents, foster parents, some stepparents and guardians, as well as other relatives and officials of social agencies, may come to have some or all of the rights and responsibilities of parents.”<sup>11</sup>

We should, then, try to define the role of parent non-biologically, as biology clearly does not determine the social roles of family members.

Consider next a functional<sub>1</sub> definition of parenthood, according to which the parent is the individual that *in fact* cares for the child. David Archard offers an example of a functional<sub>1</sub> definition of parent. He distinguishes between biological parenthood, which is “the existence of a physical causal tie between begetter and offspring,” and moral parenthood, which is “the giving to a child of continuous care, concern and affection with the purpose of helping to secure for her the best possible upbringing.”<sup>12</sup> Although this distinction is an important one, cases arise (all too

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<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, the case of surrogacy in which the surrogate uses her own egg complicates matters. See *In re Baby M*, 537 A.2d 1227, 109 N.J. 396 (N.J. 02/03/1988).

<sup>11</sup> O'Neill, Onora. “Begetting, Bearing, and Rearing,” in *Having Children: Philosophical and Legal Reflections on Parenthood*, Onora O'Neill and William Ruddick, Eds. New York: Oxford University Press (1979), p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Archard, David. *Children: Rights and Childhood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge (2004), p. 152.

frequently) in which the person we would consider a parent satisfies neither definition.<sup>13</sup> Consider, for example, a case in which a child lives at home with the woman society recognizes as his mother; however, she does not interact with the child in a loving way, nor does she give much thought to the child's future well being. We do not conclude from the woman's lack of care that she is simply not the child's mother. In fact, what makes the case so tragic is our recognition that the child's mother is not performing her duties.

We should not, then, define the parent as "the person who *actually* cares for the child." Aside from the problem cases like the aforementioned one, this definition encounters further problems. The person who cares for the child when? The person who provides what kind of care for the child? Though we might judge harshly those parents who delegate all child-rearing responsibilities to a nanny, we do not infer from this that the nanny is, in fact, the parent (though perhaps we should). Although the child might have some obligations to the nanny later in life – perhaps even more so than to her own parents – the nanny is not the parent. The very reason that we judge the parents harshly in cases like this is that they are not, we think, doing what

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<sup>13</sup> Archard later defines the moral parent as "the individual, or individuals, entrusted with the guardianship of the child and devoted to her continuous care during childhood" (p. 165). Again, there are certainly cases in which a child has an adult in his or her life that is entrusted with the guardianship of the child yet not necessarily devoted to her continuous care during childhood. Archard acknowledges, "'Who ought to parent?' is more easily asked once the question 'who is the parent?' admits of no ready answer" (p. 165). Unfortunately, for the examination of filial obligations, we have to say something about the latter question.

parents ought to do. In making this judgment, we are implicitly relying on a functional<sub>2</sub> definition, a normative conception of parenthood.<sup>14</sup>

In developing a functional<sub>2</sub> definition of parenthood, we might consider the role of “parent” as one defined entirely by a certain set of obligations and prerogatives, regardless of whether those obligations are met. In this way, we identify the parent as the person who *ought* to do x (whatever x may be), and we evaluate parents according to whether they in fact do x. Of course, we cannot simply define x as “caring for the child.” In so doing, we run into the same problems we encountered before: the person who cares for the child when, and what type of care are we considering? When a child is at school, for example, the person who ought to care for the child is a teacher, principal, school nurse, guidance counselor, or some other adult in the building. It does not follow from these individuals’ obligations that they are the child’s parents during the hours of 8 AM and 3 PM. Instead, they are temporary caregivers, entrusted by the parents with the task of caring for the child during those hours. Similarly, a nanny is not the parent, but rather the person to whom the parent has temporarily transferred child-care obligations. We must still identify the *parent* in this case.

From these considerations, two things become clear. First, the definition of parent should not preclude the possibility of bad parents. Parents may fail their

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<sup>14</sup> Though much of the literature on parental obligations refers to “child-rearers” rather than to “parents,” I prefer to use the term “parent.” “Child-rearer” strikes me as implying that the person *actually* rears the child, whereas I focus on the person who has primary responsibility for raising the child. It seems to me that the full-time nanny would be the child-rearer, though he/she would *not* be the child’s parent. For more on the distinction between these terms, see Jeffrey Blustein, “Child Rearing and Family Interests” in *Having Children: Philosophical and Legal Reflections on Parenthood*, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-122.

children in any number of ways without the conditions for parenthood – whatever those may be – being defeated. Second, the definition of parent should appeal to a certain type of responsibility, or a responsibility to provide a certain type of care during a certain time-period in an individual's life.

Of course, the assignment of such responsibility is a matter of social practice, and we have no reason to suppose that only one social practice is capable of grounding parental obligations.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the parent is essentially the person society recognizes as the parent. For example, we can imagine a society like the one in the United States today, in which biological parents often have responsibility for the child, but only because our social practice is such that these individuals have “almost exclusive care and control” of the child and are thus in a better position to provide for the child.<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, we can imagine the social practices on a particular kibbutz, where the responsibility for child rearing does not remain with the biological parents but instead shifts to teachers and nurses.<sup>17</sup> On Blustein's view, we can determine who the “parent” is by first determining to whom the predominant social practice has assigned the primary responsibility of child rearing.

However, appeal to legal rights or social recognition is unhelpful here, as these are themselves based on some conception of parenthood. The “parents” are the ones in a position either to transfer parental rights or to have those rights

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<sup>15</sup> Blustein, “Child Rearing and Family Interests,” pp. 118-121.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* For an interesting discussion on the role social practices play in defining the parent-child relationship, see Spiro, Melford E. “Is the Family Universal? – The Israeli Case,” in *A Modern Introduction to The Family*, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-75.

terminated by the state. We have *some* pre-existing concept of “parent”, and that concept is underlying our granting the legal rights associated with parenthood to some particular individual rather than someone else.

Perhaps these discussions overlook a relevant consideration: whom does the child identify as her parent? Self-identification with a particular relationship might help us in identifying the parent-child relationship. Surely, the child of a bad parent will still identify that person as the parent. Consider Andrew Oldenquist’s observations regarding loyalty as a way of pointing toward a more concrete understanding of the relationship in question.<sup>18</sup> According to Oldenquist, loyalty considerations can define the moral community of which an individual considers herself a member: “Our wide and narrow loyalties define moral communities or domains within which we are willing to universalize moral judgments, treat equals equally, protect the common good, and in other ways adopt the familiar machinery of impersonal morality.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, we are all members of several moral communities, and loyalty to one community can and often will conflict with loyalty to another community. In terms of defining the moral community, a helpful consideration is whether an individual has a sense of ownership regarding that community. In the context of this project, then, a valuable question to ask is whom I consider *my* parents.

I suspect that this is, in fact, the most promising approach, but even it faces serious problems. Consider, for instance, Caroline B. Cooney’s *The Face on the Milk*

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<sup>18</sup> Oldenquist, Andrew. “Loyalties,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (Apr., 1982), pp. 173-193.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

*Carton*. In this popular book, Janie Johnson discovers her face on the back of a milk carton and, over time, realizes that the people she considers to be her parents might not be her “real” parents. As the book makes clear, the question “Who are Janie’s real parents?” is not at all a simple one to answer. At the very least, we can imagine that Janie’s emotional struggle stems from her recognition that the people she *considers* her parents are not her “real” parents.

We seem to have returned to where we began: the parent does not necessarily have to be biologically related to the child, nor does she necessarily have to carry out any parental obligations. In fact, the parent can do great harm to the child while remaining the child’s parent, at least in the moral – if not legal – sense. A person who transfers *most* of the child-rearing responsibilities to another individual, as in the case of hiring a full-time nanny, is still a parent, but the person who transfers *all* such responsibilities, as in the case of giving a child up for adoption, is not (at least in the sense that would entail social obligations to the child). Furthermore, we cannot define the parent as the individual who has a particular set of obligations and prerogatives unless we can determine what that set of obligations and prerogatives looks like. We lack, then, a clear definition of the parent.

Of course, one might argue we do not need a clear definition of the parent to understand what individual, if any, satisfies the social role in question. If we can identify the person in a particular social role, then we can determine that person’s social obligations. Unfortunately, as with the Janie Johnson case, we struggle with

determining what individual satisfies a particular social role. Moreover, even in cases where we can easily determine which individual is the parent, I suspect that most of us have a stronger sense of the social obligations that attach to the role of “parent” than we have regarding other social roles within the family. To see why this is so, consider the problem of blended families.

Although our concept of the “traditional family” has changed, blended families raise questions about the social role a particular individual may play in the family and about what obligations those individuals might have to other members of the family. The changing structure of a single family will help to illustrate this point. Consider the following case:

Bob and Nina have been married for many years, and have a teenage daughter, Tessa. After Nina passes away, Bob takes over the role of caring for Nina’s mother, Georgia. Bob remarries after Nina’s death. Sally, Bob’s new wife, enters a family in which Bob clearly plays the role of caretaker for both Georgia and Tessa. Sally and Tessa are not emotionally close, but Sally provides substantial financial support for Tessa’s college education and later travels. Sally also finds herself providing substantial financial support for Georgia. In fact, because Bob has retired, Sally is providing most of the financial support for her husband’s late wife’s aging mother. To complicate matters a bit more, Nina was not an only child; she has siblings who could, but do not, assist Sally in providing financial support to Georgia.

This case is certainly complex, perhaps absurdly so, but it is also a real case, and I suspect cases like this are not at all uncommon.<sup>20</sup> What are we to say about the social roles and accompanying obligations of the individuals in this story? Did Nina have an obligation to care for Georgia? Would Nina’s obligation to care for Georgia

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<sup>20</sup> The names have, of course, been changed.

transfer to Bob when Nina died? What about Sally's role in the family? Would Nina's obligation then transfer to Sally when Sally marries Bob? What about Tessa? Will Tessa have a similar obligation to care for Sally?

This case brings to light the difficulties associated with the strategy of determining social roles and obligations. First, although some social roles might be clear (e.g., mother), others are not. The relationship between Sally and Georgia, for example, would be difficult to define in terms of social roles. Second, the social obligations that either accompany or perhaps even define those roles are also unclear. Even granting that we need not worry about moral obligations yet but focus rather on whether social obligations follow from expectations about certain social roles, what might those social obligations be in this case? What expectations does Georgia have of Sally? What does Sally expect of Tessa?

We would then want some account of whether these expectations were reasonable and so capable of grounding obligations. As I noted earlier, the relationship between expectations and obligations is dubious. I could, for instance, expect all those I encounter to bow down before me. Surely, all those around me do not thereby have a social obligation to do so; they certainly have no *moral* obligation to do so. Articulating social roles and obligations turns out to be quite a difficult (if not impossible) task. However, even once we have identified social roles, we must still find a way to explain the relationship between those roles, expectations, and

obligations.<sup>21</sup> In a report on global ageing, Ariela Lowenstein sums up the confusion stemming from shifting family structures: “In many families, confusion on intergenerational relations exists, after rapid changes in the context of family life, and family members have to re-negotiate new ways of solidarity.”<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps one could argue that the relevant question is not what a particular person expects of individuals in certain social roles, but what society expects of those individuals. However, this approach will not work, for there has never been a clearly defined relationship between filial obligations and social roles. As Norman Daniels points out, we cannot merely appeal to tradition, for two reasons: “There is a mismatch between traditional and current needs for care of the elderly, and there is a mismatch between traditional and current possibilities for care.”<sup>23</sup> When Daniels wrote on the topic in 1988, the United States had seen the population of residents over 60 *double* over 75 years. According to Daniels, “a child’s obligations to care for a frail parent were far less likely to be called upon at the turn of the

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<sup>21</sup> In “Filial Morality,” Christina Hoff Sommers argues that just as the act of making a promise generates a legitimate expectation on the part of the promisee and so an obligation on the part of the promisor, conventional expectations also generate filial obligations on the part of children. However, Sommers fails to distinguish legitimate expectations from illegitimate ones. Moreover, she seems to conflate conventional expectations with the expectations of the parents themselves. In any event, as I shall argue shortly, what “conventional expectations” include is debatable. For more on this, see *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 83, No. 8 (1986), pp. 439-456. For a nice criticism of Sommer’s reliance on expectations, see Li, Chenyang, “Shifting Perspectives: Filial Morality Revisited,” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (1997), pp. 211-232. As Li notes, “By justifying moral obligations on the basis of conventional expectations, Sommer [sic] seems to have confused morality with mores” (p. 216).

<sup>22</sup> Lowenstein, Ariela. “Global Ageing and Challenges to Families,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, Malcolm L. Johnson, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2005), p. 407.

<sup>23</sup> Daniels, Norman. *Am I My Parents’ Keeper? An Essay on Justice Between the Young and the Old*, New York: Oxford University Press (1988), p. 24.

century, since so few people lived to be the frail elderly. These obligations were also likely to be burdensome over a much shorter period of time, since expected lifespan for the elderly was shorter. What burdens were imposed were more likely to be shared by a greater number of children per aged parent.”<sup>24</sup> Regarding the second type of mismatch – that between traditional and current possibilities for care – Daniels cites factors such as an increased number of women in the workforce and the delay of children entering the workforce as reasons to question what level of care is *possible* given the current circumstances. Fewer women are at home to provide care to the elderly; furthermore, their children remain home longer, thereby increasing the amount of time during which the caretaker (traditionally, the woman) would experience a conflict of obligations.<sup>25</sup>

Attempts to determine filial obligations by appeal to social roles rely on a misperception of the history of the family. Daniels criticizes what he calls the Traditionalist picture of filial obligations, according to which historically, grown children have cared for elderly parents.<sup>26</sup> People mistakenly assume that some standard defined the obligations entailed by certain social roles.<sup>27</sup> However, Daniels offers historical evidence that no single model has reliably attached obligations to

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> The Traditionalist account also includes the normative claim that we ought to return to that “Golden Age” of filial care.

<sup>27</sup> “The problem faced by the Traditionalist, who wants to resurrect the Golden Age of family responsibility, is that there is no *one* ‘before.’ There are *many*” (Daniels, p. 27).

social roles, and furthermore, what models did exist cannot be extrapolated to apply to present families. To illustrate this, Daniels offers historical models from pre-industrial England and seventeenth century Estonia, comparing the roles and obligations in these two cases with one another, as well as with current practices. Of pre-industrial England, Daniels writes:

“Less than 10 percent of households had more than two generations in them, and levels of care within families were similar to those found today. There was no recognized social duty to give care or family membership to aged relatives other than the parents of the head of a household (Laslett 1976: 93-94). Though frail fathers and mothers were sometimes brought into the households of married children, it was not a widespread occurrence and by no means a universal pattern. Moreover, where solitary or needy parents or other relatives were brought into the family, it seems to have been because of the benefits brought by the help they could give with childrearing. There is little evidence the patriarch had the sanction necessary to require a child to live with his parents and provide care (Laslett 1976: 95). The old as well as the widowed tended to live in their families or households as before the advent of frailty or widowhood. They were not absorbed into other households as the myth of the ‘before’ would have it.”<sup>28</sup>

In contrast with this sort of structure, in seventeenth century Estonia, grown children did provide extensive care to parents, but this care was in exchange for property. Of this system and others like it, Daniels writes:

“Many more widowers lived in families with married children than in England (Laslett 1976: 114-115). In many cases where we find children undertaking care of their elderly parents, however, the obligation is not what the Traditionalist seemed to have in mind. One child might acquire special obligations to stay with the father and care for him, but the care provided was commonly given in exchange for special property privileges (cf. Goody 1976: 118; Goody 1958). In

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

many cultures, when property was allocated to a son or daughter at the time of marriage, the parent reserved a right of support from the child. Reserving these rights did not always guarantee adequate care. In some pastoral societies, after divestment of flocks by elderly parents, subsistence of the elderly was often quite marginal (see Stenning 1958, cited in Goody 1976: 120). In Scandinavia, an arrangement known as *Flaetfoering* existed. A parent who divided his property among his children was then entitled, by law, to make a circuit of their households, spending time with each of them in proportion to the share each received.”<sup>29</sup>

From these varying practices, Daniels concludes that we cannot appeal to some historical standard to articulate the obligations entailed by specific social roles. Moreover, because families currently face a situation so different from that faced by families in the past, any set of rules which governed past filial relationships would need substantial modification to account for the new circumstances in which filial obligations might arise, such as blended families, increased life expectancy, increased healthcare costs, and declining birth rates. Daniels concludes, “Therefore we cannot justify introducing a social policy that enforces some set of family responsibilities on the grounds that it merely sanctions well-understood, traditionally recognized obligations. Such legislation would not be appealing to *prior* obligations that we all embrace as a result of sharing the same tradition. Rather, it would amount to a *new* definition of these obligations and their limits, one that needs a justification that goes well beyond an appeal to tradition.”<sup>30</sup>

At this point, the personal questions are clear. What social role does a particular individual play? What, if any, expectations attach to such a social role? Do

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

these expectations ground social obligations? Importantly, since the project at hand is to determine whether grown children have *moral* obligations to their parents, could expectations or social obligations ground *moral* obligations? Answers to these questions are not immediately obvious, given both the shifting of social roles and the absence of any well-established sense of social obligations that attach to those roles. Given these problems, we cannot simply identify an individual's social role and infer from that what obligations the individual has. We must look elsewhere to determine what, if any, filial obligations arise.

### **1.2.2. The Practical**

Adding to the confusion about filial obligations, as Daniels notes, is that life expectancy in the United States is increasing, so there are more people living longer and requiring more care. Consequently, even if we had some account of what individuals have traditionally done for their parents, such an account might need fine-tuning in light of the current state of affairs. Currently, the age group 85 and older is the fastest growing population in industrialized countries. This group, referred to as the "oldest-old," makes up 1% of the world's population. In the United States, this group has 4.2 million members, roughly 1.5% of the population. By 2050, the number of oldest-old is projected to increase to five times its current size. As of 2005, roughly 50,000 individuals had reached or exceeded the age of 100; that

number is expected to swell to 214,000 in 2020 and to a staggering 834,000 by 2050.<sup>31</sup>

Though many members of the oldest-old group are independent, others require some form of assistance. Often, the individual's younger family members, such as children, provide this care. Although multigenerational households are in the minority in the United States, children often provide assistance, albeit not hands-on assistance, to their aging parents.<sup>32</sup>

As of 2009, about 65.7 million Americans, or roughly 29% of the population, were caregivers, providing care to older adults or children and younger adults with special needs.<sup>33</sup> (Despite some progress in this area, the burden of care-giving still falls disproportionately on women.) In 2008, 590,000 Wisconsin residents were caregivers for "loved ones." This care was valued at roughly \$6.6 billion. Paying someone else to provide the care would not obviously alleviate the "burden" of care giving. In 2008, the AARP reported that the average nursing home private pay rate in Wisconsin was \$198/day, or just over \$72,000/year. In-home health aides in Wisconsin earn an average of \$20/hour; their Medicare-certified counterparts earn roughly \$30/hour. The average cost of adult daycare in the state was around \$53/day. Consequently, residents of Wisconsin who find themselves bearing the financial burden of care can expect to pay anywhere between \$20,000 (using a

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<sup>31</sup> Poon, Leonard; Jang, Yuri; Reynolds, Sandra G.; McCarthy, Erick. "Profiles of the Oldest-Old," *Cambridge Handbook for Age and Aging*, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 350.

<sup>33</sup> "Caregiving in the U.S.: 2009," produced by the National Alliance for Caregiving in collaboration with AARP.

conservative hourly wage for 20 hours/week, and 50 weeks/year) and \$72,000/year.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, studies suggest that in general, we are not planning well for the expenses that come with living longer.

In 2001, AARP released a study showing that adults in the United States were tragically uninformed about their options for long-term care. In 2006, AARP conducted the study again to determine whether adults were more informed on the subject; they were not. A majority of those surveyed, who were 45 years or older, knew far less about long-term care than they believed they knew. Common misconceptions pertained to the cost of long-term care, what public programs were available to provide such care, and perhaps most striking, whether the individual being surveyed had long-term care insurance.

Further raising the medical costs for the elderly is the simple fact that disability increases with age. To account for and study this phenomenon, researchers study not only life expectancy, but also healthy life expectancy (HLE).<sup>35</sup> This measurement allows statistics to reflect the fact that increased life expectancy can and often does come with decreased functionality. For example, in the UK between 1976 and 1994, *life* expectancy increased by 3-4 years, but HLE did not change; that is to say, the amount of time during which individuals were healthy and self-sufficient remained the same, even though individuals lived longer than they

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<sup>34</sup> "Long-Term Care in Wisconsin," AARP.

<sup>35</sup> Seale, Clive. "The Transformation of Dying in Old Societies," in *The Cambridge Handbook for Age and Ageing*, *op. cit.*, p. 379.

previously had. Of the oldest-old surveyed, 30 percent required assistance climbing stairs, 24 percent with bathing, and 8 percent with dressing.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to long-term care, increasing public attention has been focused on the cost of end-of-life care. In 2009, *60 Minutes* reported that Medicare paid \$55 billion in doctor and hospital bills in the last two months of patients' lives. At the time, that figure exceeded the entire budget for the Department of Education. (It also exceeded the budget for the Department of Homeland Security.) These costs have been rising steadily, and at least at the moment, the costs do not seem likely to level off anytime soon without substantial policy interference. In 2000, the average patient's medical bill during her last six months was \$28,000. As of 2007, the average cost had risen to about \$36,000. Only part of this increase can be explained by rising healthcare costs; patients also spent more time in ICU in 2007 than they did in 2000, which presumably contributed to the rising cost of care.

To compound the problems associated with shifting family structures, increased longevity, and increasing health care costs, most developed countries are experiencing a "sharp decline" in birth rates.<sup>37</sup> Lowenstein explains the effects of increased life expectancy and decreased birth rate on family structures:

"There is a shift from a vertical to a more horizontal structure, with a larger number of living generations (sometimes even five living generations), but with fewer members in each generation – the beanpole or the top-heavy family (Bengtston and Harootyan, 1994; Knipscheer, 1988). Thus, today, adults can have more parents than

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Lowenstein, "Global Ageing and Challenges to Families," p. 403.

children – resulting from increased longevity and decreased fertility, and further exacerbated by divorce and remarriage. This process alters the length of time spent in specific family roles and leads to the emergence of adult children as the generational bridge between grandchildren and grandparents.”<sup>38</sup>

With fewer children than adults in families, the problem of sharing the “burden” of care for ageing parents intensifies. Fewer children are available to share in the substantial financial cost of caring for ageing parents; this is problematic even before factoring in those children who opt out of providing such care.

This particular problem is not unique to the United States. The average age in Japan, China, Taiwan, and Korea is increasing, and with it the population of citizens over 65.<sup>39</sup> Policy-makers have at least two reasons to be concerned: first, the rate of the increase, and second, the resources that will be required to accommodate the increase. The rate of increase of the population of those over 65 is significant in Taiwan and South Korea, where that group is expected to make up 16 percent of the populations by 2025. In Japan, however, the rate of increase is staggering; by 2025, 27% of the population will be 65 or older.<sup>40</sup> Ikels explains the problem for these nations:

“Chinese policymakers already worry about the future unintended consequences of the one child family policy, envisioning an inverted pyramid with eight grandparents at the top, four parents in the middle, and one adult couple at the base responsible for supporting

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404.

<sup>39</sup> Ikels, Charlotte. *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*, Charlotte Ikels, ed. Stanford: Stanford University Press (2004), pp. 7-8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

them all. Japanese policymakers worry more about the shortfall in the labor force that could threaten its economy, already in a recession, and thereby the tax revenue on which support programs for the elderly depend.”<sup>41</sup>

The United States’ aged population is growing, but not at the rate that these nations are experiencing. However, in all of the countries mentioned, the needs of a steadily increasing aged population threaten national economies.<sup>42</sup> Given the far-reaching consequences of these demographic shifts, one might naturally look to social policy to meet the needs of the steadily aging population and thereby make the question of filial obligations less urgent than it currently is.

However, social policies to provide care for the aging population are problematic for two reasons. First, social policy can intensify rather than alleviate the burden placed on family members. Furthermore, if the burden is left with family members, then the elderly are left particularly vulnerable. Second, social policy might depend, at least in part, on a socially accepted model of responsibility that factors in expected family contributions in much the same way that the national college loan system factors in expected parental contributions to the cost of attending college. Consequently, social policy might very well depend on a pre-established conception of filial obligations.

Regarding the first concern with social policy, a look at the trend of healthcare reform reveals a tendency to place more, rather than less, responsibility for caring for ageing parents on grown children. Following “two decades of

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

economic recession together with continually escalating healthcare costs with no stabilization in sight,” Western nations adopted a view of healthcare that replaced its previous focus on institutionalized care with a new focus on community-based care.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, although this model was thought to be more appropriate for an ageing population, it had drastic implications for caregivers. The new focus on community-based care did not distinguish between community care, which implies an underlying infrastructure designed to deliver said care, presumably funded by the state, and family care. Consequently, the state shifted its emphasis to community-based care but did not help build the infrastructure necessary to establish community care. This, of course, left families with much of the responsibility of providing care to the elderly.<sup>44</sup> Chappell and Penning sum up the unfortunate outlook as follows:

“The economic and political changes associated with globalization (including deregulation, fiscal policies that nurture economic opportunities for higher income sectors, structural changes to welfare state policies and programs in the direction of privatization together with reductions in public and social expenditures) promise major implications for the informal care sector. These include increased demands for the provision of long-term care to older adults, accompanied by reduced access to the resources, both private (e.g. economic, social) and public (e.g. supportive services) that might help facilitate such care. As unemployment, poverty, and inequality increase, population health can be expected to decline and needs for care to increase. If, at the same time, access to public resources for

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<sup>43</sup> Chappell, Neena L. and Penning, Margaret J. “Family Caregivers: Increasing Demands in the Context of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Globalization?” in *Cambridge Handbook for Age and Ageing*, *op. cit.*, pp. 456-457.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

meeting these needs declines, an even greater burden of care is placed on individuals themselves and on their informal networks.”<sup>45</sup>

In China, the burden of care for elderly parents is placed *explicitly* on grown children. Filial care is a matter of law, embedded in the Chinese constitution. A 1996 law states: “Elderly support is mainly dependent upon family members who should show concern for and take care of their elders.”<sup>46</sup> Social policy cannot answer questions about filial obligations, since the social policy itself might assert (or perhaps effectively assert) that care for the elderly is best left to the family, thereby intensifying rather than alleviating the burden on individual family members. Since social policy is arguably designed to “protect the public purse rather than to recognize any pre-existing moral obligation,” we have some reason for thinking that social policy will, in fact, intensify rather than alleviate the burden placed on individual family members.<sup>47</sup>

This leads to the second problem with using social policy as a means to care for the elderly: social policy often makes assumptions about what the family’s expected contribution will be. In a society in which children are expected to care for their ageing parents, it might be reasonable for the state to limit its welfare services to the elderly. In a society in which such an expectation is unreasonable, it seems cruel and irresponsible for the state to limit its welfare services, leaving the elderly

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<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>46</sup> Zhang, Hong. “‘Living Alone’ and the Rural Elderly: Strategy and Agency in Post-Mao Rural China,” in *Filial Piety, op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>47</sup> Collingridge, Michael and Miller, Seumas. “Filial Responsibility and the Care of the Aged,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1997), p. 121.

to rely on children whom the state has no good reason to believe will provide the necessary care.<sup>48</sup>

We can see this problem clearly if we consider the city of Baoding in China, where a shift in social policy regarding employment is raising questions about whether a shift in social policy regarding filial care is necessary. During the 1970s and 1980s, Baoding followed a common Maoist practice of job allocation, which usually involved assigning a young person a local job; in fact, a parent could choose to retire early so that his child could be assigned to that same job. Consequently, most elderly parents in Baoding have grown children who still live in the same area.<sup>49</sup> However, this system has since been dismantled, leaving young people in Baoding free to move elsewhere for employment. During the period of job allocation, it might be reasonable for the Chinese government to have only a minimal welfare state, at least for those elderly who have children, and to rely instead on the tradition of filial piety. However, without the assurance that an elderly parent is likely to have a child living nearby who will care for the parent, a minimal welfare state and reliance on filial piety seems less justifiable.

Given the economic impact of an ageing society, coupled with the obvious problem of caring for the childless or those whose children fail to discharge their filial obligations, social policy will need to provide part of the solution to caring for the elderly. However, social policy by itself cannot tell us what our filial obligations

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<sup>48</sup> This view depends on underlying assumptions about what the state ought to provide for its ageing citizens. I do not intend to argue here about what justice demands the state provide its citizens.

<sup>49</sup> Whyte, Martin King. "Filial Obligations in Chinese Families: Paradoxes of Modernization," in *Filial Piety*, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

are. Perhaps we must first establish our filial obligations, and design social policy afterward; alternatively, perhaps we must first design social policy, and then see what is left for the realm of filial obligations. The relationship between social policy and individual moral obligation is beyond the scope of this project. For this reason, I shall focus only on the role of the grown children rather than on the role of the state in caring for the elderly. This is compatible with the possibility that the content of one's filial obligations is contingent upon the society in which the relationship exists; that is to say, what one ought to do for one's parents might very well depend on what a third party has already done. In Chapter 6, I shall argue that one's filial obligations do, in fact, depend on what society has already done for its ageing citizens, but this leaves room for arguments that society ought to do more.

By now, the motivations for this project should be clear. The factors that so radically alter the parent-child relationship – shifting family structures, increased lifespan, increasing healthcare costs, and decreasing birth rates – are unlikely to self-correct any time soon (not that it's clear what “self-correction” would involve). These factors are interrelated, and they certainly complicate our efforts to determine what we ought to do for our parents. Next, I shall consider the philosophical problems regarding filial obligations.

### **1.2.3. The Philosophical**

Having considered the practical circumstances giving rise to confusion about filial obligations, I now turn to the philosophical confusion about them. This

confusion stems from two types of problems: general and specific. General problems with filial obligations stem from an overarching concern about “special” obligations, or obligations we have to others in virtue of our relationships. Specific problems stem from the nature of the parent-child relationship.

The idea that we might have special obligations to someone in virtue of the relationship we have with them is a philosophically problematic one, despite its intuitive appeal. Samuel Scheffler calls the kinds of obligations in question “associative duties,” which are those “additional and often much greater responsibilities that the members of significant social groups and the participants in close personal relationships have to each other.”<sup>50</sup> As Scheffler notes, many people view the significant relationships or associations in their lives as generating special duties. For example, Scheffler cites the common intuition that we have special duties to our parents that “may be seen as arising from the provision of benefits to one party by the other.”<sup>51</sup>

Despite the intuitive appeal of this view, filial obligations are particularly puzzling instances of special duties. If such obligations exist, some of their likely features seem striking. For example, if I have any filial obligations, they are owed to people with whom my relationship is largely non-voluntary. (This is, of course, not without exception.) For much of the relationship, voluntariness is asymmetrical; my parents chose to enter into a parent-child relationship, whereas I did not make a

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<sup>50</sup> Scheffler, Samuel. *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought*, New York: Oxford University Press (2001), p. 49.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

similar choice. The current state of my relationship with my parents might be voluntary; however, if I owe my parents something in response to, say, their tremendous sacrifices made on my behalf, many of which I did not ask for and was blissfully unaware of, then I owe them something in response to benefits that I did not voluntarily seek and in many cases was not free to reject.

One might argue that filial obligations cannot arise unless and until the child voluntarily accepts them. Obligations that arise merely in virtue of membership in some group (e.g., national citizenship) or relationship (e.g., parent-child) would be overly burdensome.<sup>52</sup> If such duties exist, they exist only because the members of the groups or parties to the relationship voluntarily accept them. Thus, the duties do not arise from membership in a group or in the relationship itself, but rather they arise from the individual's voluntarily undertaking them. After all, why should the child have obligations to X and Y that he does not have to Z, when his relationship with X and Y was largely out of his control? Why should X and Y be able to make special claims on him, simply because *they* chose to have a relationship with him?

Furthermore, if we owe our parents something because they fed, clothed, and sheltered us, as I suggested earlier, then it seems as though we have obligations in response to acts which were themselves morally required. Our parents are required to feed, clothe, and shelter us, at least for some time. Why would we owe anything in response? After paying taxes, I do not owe the state a "thank you" for the services it provides, nor does the state owe me a "thank you" for my tax dollars. How could

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54. See also pp. 98-99.

moral obligations arise from benefits the provision of which is morally required of the benefactors and which are not voluntarily sought or accepted by the beneficiary? The strangeness of such obligations might lead us toward the conclusion that any moral theory that generates such obligations would surely be overly burdensome and unacceptable.

Moreover, filial obligations raise questions about distributive justice, both theoretical and practical. Theoretical questions arise because filial obligations seem to confer special advantages on those individuals with children – or at least with children concerned with discharging such obligations – that childless individuals (or individuals with children less concerned with discharging these obligations) do not similarly enjoy. Furthermore, these advantages compound an already existing advantage: the parent-child relationship is itself a benefit, when all goes well.<sup>53</sup>

Practically, questions arise about how filial care ought to be distributed. Filial care falls disproportionately on women, which seems to violate any reasonable demands of justice. For instance, if we consider fair equality of opportunity as a guiding principle of justice, and filial care interferes with women's access to and participation in the workforce, then filial care as it has been traditionally practiced violates important justice demands. Furthermore, insofar as women "perform the majority of housework chores and function as the primary parent for small children," perhaps women are *owed* more; that is to say, perhaps filial obligations to

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<sup>53</sup> For more on this, see Scheffler, pp. 56-59.

one's mother are more extensive than those to one's father would be.<sup>54</sup> Do theories of justice have something to say about our filial obligations? Can *justice* require that sons share in the burden of caring for ageing parents? If something like gratitude grounds filial obligations, can justice then place constraints on those obligations? As filial care often pertains to living assistance, healthcare, etc., we might wonder about the relationship between the justice and filial obligations. Although I do not focus on a justice-based account of either the grounding of or limits on filial obligations, I will construct a theory of filial obligations that goes some way toward accommodating justice-based concerns.

The philosophical problems raised here are serious and, in addition to the personal and practical problems already discussed, seem to complicate an individual's efforts to determine what, if any, filial obligations she has toward her parents. However, in the coming chapters, I aim to show that filial obligations are not as puzzling as they may initially appear. Having examined the sorts of problems that arise when we try to determine what filial obligations an individual may owe, I shall now turn to outline my strategy in answering the question at hand: What ought I to do for my parents?

### 1.3 The Strategy

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<sup>54</sup> For more on justice, gender, and filial obligations, see Jecker, Nancy S. "Taking Care of One's Own: Justice and Family Caregiving," *Theoretical Medicine*, Vol. 23 (2002), pp. 117-133; Okin, Susan Moller. *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, United States: Basic Books (1989); Daniels, *Am I My Parents' Keeper?* *op. cit.*

A common complaint within the literature is that contemporary western philosophers pay far too little attention to the question of filial obligations.<sup>55</sup> In what follows, I hope to correct that deficit, both by offering a contemporary, western account of filial obligations and by situating that theory against a backdrop of contemporary, western problems like those mentioned earlier (increased life-span, rising healthcare costs, etc.). Toward that end, this project has three parts. First, I shall develop and examine possible theories of filial obligations. Second, I shall offer what I take to be the most plausible theory of filial obligations, in light of considerations that emerge from examinations of alternative theories. Third, I will try to offer some insights regarding the content and stringency of filial obligations.

The first task – determining whether grown children have obligations and in virtue of what those obligations might arise – will be the main focus of the project. Several theories of obligation might ground filial obligations, and each faces its own set of challenges. The theories I will present and assess are: 1) Debt Theory, 2) Friendship Theory, 3) Gratitude Theory, and 4) Special Goods Theory. Friendship and Special Goods theories differ from Debt and Gratitude theories in that contemporary, western philosophers have offered them *as theories of filial obligation*; Debt and Gratitude theories, however, represent my own efforts to develop a general account of obligation into a theory of filial obligation, specifically.

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<sup>55</sup> Sommers, "Filial Morality," *op. cit.*; Li, "Shifting Perspectives: Filial Morality Revisited," *op. cit.*; Ivanhoe, Philip J. "Filial Piety as a Virtue," in *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds. Oxford: Oxford Press (2007), pp. 297-312. Ivanhoe notes, "Many Chinese intellectuals find it quite odd that Western ethical philosophers for the most part disregard or dismiss issues like filial piety and instead seem obsessed with the obscure and apparently intractable metaphysical problems associated with topics like abortion" (p. 297).

Ultimately, I shall argue that none of these theories is sufficient to ground and explain filial obligations; however, each theory contributes importantly to a well-developed understanding of what is morally significant about the parent-child relationship. For example, Friendship Theory highlights the voluntary, loving nature of the parent-child relationship, whereas Debt Theories highlight the significant sacrifices parents make on behalf of their children. I suspect that those sacrifices motivate any pre-theoretical intuitions that we do, in fact, have obligations to our parents. Special Goods Theory emphasizes the unique nature of the goods parents provide children, and children provide parents. Gratitude Theory raises questions about the moral conclusions we can draw when parents provide those special goods to their children.

The second task – offering a plausible theory of filial obligations – will rely heavily on the aforementioned contributions that alternative theories make to a discussion of filial obligations. I shall argue for a new, blended theory, which I call Gratitude for Special Goods Theory. This theory will fare well with respect to the adequacy conditions I will set out shortly, but it will have surprising implications for our filial obligations; specifically, our filial obligations are much more extensive and stringent than western philosophers have tended to suppose.

The third task – determining the content and stringency of those obligations – is often overlooked in the literature. Among those who have written on the subject, there is almost unanimous agreement that whatever obligations a child has to her parents, those obligations are constrained by the autonomous decisions the

child has made for herself. For example, most theories imply that my obligations to my parents are constrained by my decision to enter academia. Consequently, a sibling who happens to have chosen a more financially secure path in life might have more demanding obligations than I will have, merely in virtue of our different choices early on. However, this limitation is often assumed without much careful explanation or defense.

As I shall argue in Chapter 6, although filial obligations should not constrain a grown child's *autonomy*, they can certainly constrain *agent-centered prerogatives*, such as the prerogative to move to a particular city or take up a particular hobby. In fact, in some circumstances, having one's own children is exactly the sort of prerogative that filial obligations constrain, and in those circumstances, the claim that a grown child ought not to have her own children is not a demand that she forfeit her autonomy. In the third part of the project, I shall argue for this position, as well as point to some conflict resolution principles that might help us to understand the stringency of filial obligations and the sorts of considerations that override them, particularly given the aforementioned practical problems with caring for ageing parents.

Before proceeding to the first part of this project, in which I articulate and examine competing theories of filial obligation, I should say a bit about the criteria by which I plan to evaluate these theories. I have in mind four adequacy conditions that a theory must satisfy to constitute a plausible theory of filial obligations:

- 1) Content: the theory must specify the content of filial obligations, when they arise.
- 2) Grounding: the theory must explain *why* filial obligations arise, when they do.
- 3) Outcome: the theory must generate intuitive results in specific cases, or justify counter-intuitive results by appeal to other intuitively compelling considerations.
- 4) Explanation: the theory should, when possible, explain why certain outcomes strike us as counter-intuitive.

Although at least some of these are obviously appropriate standards, I will say something about why each is included as an adequacy condition here.

First, a theory of filial obligations ought to tell us what such obligations actually demand of us. This is not to say that the theory must specify a particular action, such as “hug your mother,” but it must give us some guidance regarding what we ought to do. If a theory cannot provide even some guidance in this area, then it does not help us to determine what we ought to do for our parents. Since the project is an effort to answer the question, what ought I to do for my parents, a plausible theory of filial obligations must go some way toward providing an answer.

Second, the theory must explain why such obligations arise, when they do. A theory that simply asserts that we have such obligations will be unsatisfying and likely indefensible in the face of criticism. Thus, a plausible theory of filial obligations must explain what grounds such obligations when they arise.

Third, a plausible theory of filial obligations ought to yield intuitive results in specific cases, or justify counter-intuitive results. This is arguably the most contentious of the adequacy conditions. Of course, to reject a theory of filial obligations *simply* because it generates counter-intuitive results is to beg the

question against the theory. Not only is this theoretically problematic, but it would be problematic for my own view, as the theory I offer in Chapter 6 yields surprising results. However, this condition is indispensable for the task at hand.

Although theories of filial obligation, as well as criticisms of such theories, are based on intuitions regarding those very obligations and thus apparently question begging, this is no more problematic here than in other instances of reflective equilibrium. The project assumes that filial obligations arise at least sometimes; thus, we can evaluate theories of such obligations in part by appealing to our pre-theoretical intuitions about what such obligations entail. Of course, as the condition makes clear, we cannot *simply* reject a theory when it conflicts with these intuitions; instead, we must determine whether the moral considerations to which the theory appeals give us reason to abandon our intuition in the case.

Consequently, a plausible theory must either generate intuitive results in specific cases, or it must justify counter-intuitive results. Naturally, pre-theoretical intuitions regarding filial obligations will vary; thus, in any case in which I appeal to intuitions to justify rejecting a particular theory, I shall offer justification for the intuitions themselves by appeal to other compelling moral considerations.

Finally, a plausible theory of filial obligations ought to explain why certain outcomes seem counter-intuitive. Although this is not essential in the way that the first three conditions are, a theory of filial obligations that can both justify counter-intuitive results and explain why those results strike us as counter-intuitive is preferable to one that cannot offer both kinds of justification. With these adequacy

conditions in mind, I shall now turn to the task of examining theories of filial obligations.

## Chapter Two: Debt Theory

### 2.1. The Theory

**Debt Theory 1:** One owes repayment to one's parent for whatever investment of resources the parent has made on one's behalf, regardless of the parent's needs or child's ability, unless the parent releases the child from the debt.<sup>56</sup>

As stated, Debt Theory is quite simple and – perhaps as a consequence of this simplicity – wildly implausible. This particular theory of filial obligations, however, is noteworthy for at least two reasons: first, as far as I know, no one has advocated for this particular theory of filial obligations, and second, despite the apparent lack of advocacy for the view, philosophers who advance a particular account of filial obligations often begin by rejecting Debt Theory.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, much of the discussion about Debt Theory focuses on problems with an unarticulated and (as far as I know) undefended position.

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<sup>56</sup> Shortly, I will distinguish this version of Debt Theory from what I call Debt Theory 2, which I shall argue is more plausible.

<sup>57</sup> Although Confucius, Aristotle, and Aquinas each discuss filial obligations in the language of debt repayment, in each case, the view is not that children owe repayment of a “loan,” but rather that given what parents do for children (including bringing them into existence), children owe gratitude, respect, or filial piety (which includes gratitude, reverence, and obedience). For more on these views, see Jeffrey Blustein, *Parents and Children: The Ethics of the Family*, New York: Oxford University Press (1982), especially pp. 41-46 and pp. 56-62; Ivanhoe, “Filial Piety,” *op. cit.*; Li, “Shifting Perspectives: Filial Morality Revisited,” *op. cit.* Jan Narveson offers an account of filial morality that resembles Debt Theory, but on his view, the reason children ought to repay their parents is that it is beneficial for us to behave in ways that make parental investments rational and thereby encourage parents to make such investments. See “On Honouring our Parents,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1987), pp. 65-78.

According to Simon Keller, who offers a Special Goods Theory of filial obligations, “throughout much of the history of philosophy, [Debt Theory] has been regarded as unproblematic and transparently true.”<sup>58</sup> Although Keller cites Jeffrey Blustein’s *Parents and Children* and Philip J. Ivanhoe’s “Filial Piety as a Virtue” as evidence of this long-standing assumption, these both offer accounts of Debt Theory where the debt is, in fact, a debt of gratitude or respect rather than something like a straightforward debt of repayment; furthermore, Blustein suggests that those who use the “owing idiom” in fact “confuse gratitude with indebtedness.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, even the historical models to which Keller refers (and objects) are not, in fact, versions of the theory articulated at the beginning of this chapter, but more closely resemble Gratitude Theory, which I will consider in Chapter 4.

One immediate concern is that if no one really advocates for this position, then we ought not to waste our time with it. This concern is magnified given that the theory, as stated, is clearly a non-starter. However, articulating even this implausible version of Debt Theory is important. For one thing, Debt Theory serves as a nice starting point, for it arguably captures our initial intuitions regarding filial obligations: we owe our parents a debt, and the task is to determine what sort of debt that is. Thus, beginning with this bare statement of the theory helps articulate at least the suggested moral grounding of our filial obligations, even if we must modify the theory to have a plausible account of filial obligations. More importantly,

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<sup>58</sup> Keller, Simon. *The Limits of Loyalty*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2007), p. 97.

<sup>59</sup> Blustein, *Parents and Children: The Ethics of the Family*, p. 186.

Debt Theory is helpful as a point of contrast. Contemporary philosophers Jane English and Simon Keller articulate their own theories of filial obligation in large part by contrasting their views with Debt Theory. Again, having a sense of this view as a starting point for discussions of filial obligations will help us to understand and better evaluate alternative theories. Moreover, as I shall suggest shortly, Debt Theory is far more plausible than most of its critics acknowledge, and it should not be cast aside so quickly.

According to Debt Theory, as articulated here, children have specific obligations to their parents: they must repay the “investment” their parents make in child rearing. Parents contribute resources to raising children, including time, money, energy, etc. Each of these resources could have been devoted to something other than raising a child. Consequently, the parent has fewer resources than he or she would otherwise have. The child owes repayment of the debt.

Before examining the problems with this account of Debt Theory, let’s first consider some of the implications of such a view. First, what the child owes is quite specific here. The child owes the parent whatever resources the parent devoted to raising the child, and no more.<sup>60</sup> Debt Theory as stated is straightforward: the child owes a debt to the parent, and this debt is for repayment of whatever investments the parent made on the child’s behalf. After all, if the parent did not have the child, then the parent would have been able to devote those resources elsewhere.

Moreover, the reason for thinking the child owes the parent is quite clear: the child,

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<sup>60</sup> Given inflation, it’s possible that Debt Theory 1 can allow for attaching interest to the repayment, so the child might owe more financial resources than the parent had to invest.

as the reason for the parent's investments – investments that might leave the parent vulnerable later in life – owes the parent repayment. The debt here is repayment of a loan, where the loan is just whatever the parent has invested in childrearing.

For example, consider a case in which a parent needs financial assistance with meeting his or her medical needs. In this case, the child owes repayment of whatever investments the parent has made on the child's behalf. If repayment of those investments would fall short of meeting the parent's needs, the child need not pay more simply because the parent needs more. Alternatively, if the parent does not need financial assistance with meeting his medical needs, the child *still* owes repayment of the parent's past investment because these investments – not the parent's needs – determine the child's filial obligations. Consequently, on this model of filial obligations, the child owes repayment regardless of the parent's need.

Second, on this account, the current state of the relationship is irrelevant; the past investments ground the filial obligations rather than any features of the relationship now. Although the parent could, as the "creditor," forgive the debt, the deterioration of the relationship between the parent and child would not excuse the child from his or her filial obligations. Moreover, as I shall explore more in the next section, the *reason* the relationship has deteriorated is irrelevant. If, for example, the parent has unreasonably disowned the child, the child still owes repayment for those investments the parent has made. Features of the particular parent-child

relationship in question play no role in determining what obligations the grown child may have.

Third, the value realized by the parental investment does not obviously matter in determining whether the child has filial obligations; instead, at least on this account of Debt Theory, the investment alone determines the filial obligations. Consequently, the parent who invests heavily in tutors, music lessons, and an elite private education might very well be owed as much as the parent who invests similarly in training for appearances on *Toddlers & Tiaras*, a reality show about children in beauty pageants. The sacrifices the parents make in each case could be roughly the same, and so the child owes repayment of the investment. As stated, Debt Theory apparently lacks the resources to distinguish between these kinds of investments, even if the child who receives the education benefits more than the child who receives pageant experience (or *vice versa*).

Fourth, the motivation behind the parental investment does not matter in determining whether the child has filial obligations. Returning to the previous point, the parent who invests in training for appearances on *Toddlers & Tiaras* might very well selfishly wish only to reap the benefits of appearing on television without regard for the child's current wishes or long-term development. Debt Theory, as its critics have typically understood it, is committed to the view that this child still owes repayment for the parent's investment. Just as with a creditor-debtor relationship, in which the motivations of the creditor do not determine whether the

debtor owes repayment, the child owes repayment regardless of the parent's motivation for making the investment.

Finally, as some critics have noted, this version of Debt Theory requires that children repay investments even if the parents were morally obligated to make those investments. Consider the parent's investments in food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. The parent was arguably discharging parental obligations in providing these things. Furthermore, since the parent – unlike the child – voluntarily entered into the relationship, the parent is discharging a voluntarily undertaken moral obligation in providing those things to the child. On this version of Debt Theory, since the motivation for the parent's investments is irrelevant, it is similarly irrelevant whether the parent is doing what is morally required. The investment itself grounds the obligation, not the reason for the investment.

Thus, as critics understand the view, Debt Theory requires children to repay their parents for those sacrifices that the parents have made in the process of child rearing, regardless of the nature of those sacrifices or the current state of the relationship. Furthermore, if we are to take the debt analogy seriously, these obligations are not easily avoided. Just as a creditor might release a debtor from debt, the parent might release the child from his filial obligations. Beyond that exceptional case, however, it seems as though filial obligations are only reduced or eliminated by the same sorts of considerations that would reduce or eliminate a debtor's debt.

## 2.2. Revised Debt Theory

**Debt Theory 2:** A grown child owes her parent repayment of whatever investments the parent has made on behalf of the child if and only if the child has voluntarily accepted those investments, which are made with the understanding that the child will repay the parent for them, regardless of the parent's needs or child's ability, unless the parent releases the child from the debt.

As presented, Debt Theory 1 seems to be a non-starter. Consider the case of a musical prodigy. She not only owes her parents for the common investments they made to raise her, such as those investments made to provide food and shelter, but she owes them repayment of the resources they invested in developing her talent. Repayment for the first kind of investment is troubling enough: she did not ask for the benefits she received, and she did not enter into a relationship with these parents voluntarily. The demand for repayment later seems unreasonable when the parents voluntarily entered into the parent-child relationship and *chose* to make these investments, whereas the child neither voluntarily entered into the relationship nor accepted the benefits of those investments. However, we can also imagine that she does not want to take many music lessons or own expensive instruments. Her parents, believing that musical education will be good for her, make investments to ensure that she receives the education. Here, we have a situation in which she not only does not request the investments, but she would reject them if given a choice.

Consider the analogous creditor-debtor relationship: a creditor randomly selects an individual walking down the street, insists that she accept a cash deposit

over her objections, and then, say, sixteen to eighteen years later, the creditor contacts this person and demands repayment. The case is already absurd, and it becomes more so when we consider the possibility that the creditor might demand interest on the loan.

Critics of Debt Theory take this kind of case to show that Debt Theory fails as a plausible account of filial obligations, arguing that on such a view, children owe for benefits they did not request and might very well have rejected if given a choice. Furthermore, many of the benefits the child receives, such as food and shelter, are benefits the parents have a moral obligation to provide. Thus, no obligation of repayment can arise.

However, rather than indicating a failure of the theory, this kind of objection indicates a failure to take the theory seriously. Consider the critic's challenge: Debt Theory 1 suggests we owe repayment for benefits that we did not request, many of which the parent was morally (if not legally) obligated to provide, and this is clearly absurd.<sup>61</sup> This is not, however, as absurd as it might initially appear. Although such instances might be rare, we can certainly incur debts of repayment for unrequested benefits. If, for instance, I collapse at work and am rushed to the hospital, the

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<sup>61</sup> Blustein, for example, says that "grown children are not indebted (in the narrow sense) to their parents for having seen to it that they received an adequate education, adequate relative to the children's capabilities and to society's needs, for this was something that the parents, as parents, had a duty to do" (*Parents and Children*, p. 182). More forcefully, Daniels claims that a theory of filial obligations "is not plausible if it rests on the principle that, whenever good things are done for us out of duty, we are obliged to reciprocate. . . In general, if someone has a duty or obligation to provide me with some good, I do not thereby incur an obligation to return the good or its equivalent" (*Am I My Parents' Keeper?*, p. 30).

hospital will justifiably expect payment for services rendered.<sup>62</sup> In this case, I can consistently maintain that a) the hospital had an obligation to provide benefits to me, b) I did not request those benefits, and c) I owe payment for those benefits. The simple fact that I do not request certain benefits does not automatically excuse me from paying for them, nor does the fact that the provider of such benefits was obligated to provide them.

Even if the critic maintains that this is a problematic feature of the view, the Debt Theorist need not be committed to the view that children owe repayment for *all* of their parents' investments. As with the creditor-debtor relationship, the child might owe only for those investments that he or she voluntarily accepts. If the parent-child relationship is analogous to the creditor-debtor relationship, this seems like a natural and reasonable move for the Debt Theorist to make. Just as unwilling debtors do not owe repayment, children who are unwilling recipients of their parents' investments do not owe repayment for those investments. The move from Debt Theory 1 to Debt Theory 2 is a reasonable one if we take seriously the creditor-debtor analogy, and Debt Theory 2 avoids at least some of the critics' objections.

Returning to the earlier case of the child prodigy, if the child genuinely does not wish to take music lessons or own expensive instruments, and she would reject such "benefits" if given a choice, then she might not owe her parents for the investments they have made on her behalf. Of course, she might come to voluntarily

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<sup>62</sup> Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty*, p. 98.

accept these (or other) benefits. The same child who at age eight has no desire to take music lessons might be glad to accept a music scholarship to a prestigious school later in life, in which case she voluntarily benefits from her parents' investments.

One might worry that if Debt Theory 2 generates obligations of repayment *merely* in response to voluntary acceptance of benefits, the sort of case just considered collapses Debt Theory 2 into Debt Theory 1: if the child owes repayment for investments in her musical talent because she later benefits from those investments, then it seems that a child owes repayment for investments in, say, nutritious meals because she later is healthier than she might otherwise be. To make the case stronger, we can imagine that the child later accepts an athletic scholarship to a prestigious university, and she would not have been in such great shape if not for the nutritious meals and otherwise healthy environment her parents provided to her when she was younger. Thus, she seems to owe now for unrequested benefits, at least some of which the parents were arguably obligated to provide. Thus, what looked like a new version of the theory is really just the old version, masked to hide its warts.

Two responses are available at this point. First, as I said earlier, the Debt Theorist can argue that such obligations are not, in fact, strange, for we can imagine other circumstances in which we owe payment for unrequested benefits, even if the person to whom we owe payment was morally required to provide those benefits. Second, and perhaps more effectively, the Debt Theorist can say that voluntary

acceptance is not sufficient to generate a debt of repayment. Instead, the investment must be made with an understanding by both the parent and the child that the child will repay the investment; thus, the loan agreement itself grounds an obligation of repayment, rather than the investment alone. (Of course, what the child asks for will likely be influenced by what the parent has done in the past.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, although the child may not owe repayment for unrequested investments, what she requests and thus owes repayment for may to some extent be determined by those past investments.)

Debt Theory 2, then, is more plausible than Debt Theory 1, at least with respect to critics' concerns. On this view, a child owes repayment for those parental investments made with an understanding that the child would be expected to repay. Thus, although the child does not owe for food and shelter during her early years, the child who later returns home during a time of financial hardship and requests assistance from her parents, with the understanding that she will repay her parents for the assistance, does owe repayment. Similarly, though the child might not owe repayment for an elite private elementary school, the child who requests her parent's payment for an elite private university owes repayment so long as the investment was made with an understanding that the child would repay the parent. If the child does not voluntarily accept the investments, even where the investment benefits her, then she is like the debtor who is unwilling to accept a loan; if the

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<sup>63</sup> I am grateful to Harry Brighouse for this suggestion.

parent or creditor “forces” the benefit on the unwilling child or debtor, the child or debtor owes nothing in return.

Debt Theory 2, although different from Debt Theory 1, inherits some of the features of its predecessor. The current state of the parent-child relationship is irrelevant in determining filial obligations; however, this is not obviously a problem with the view. Consider again the case of the parent who pays for an elite private education for her child. After spending \$200,000 on the child’s education, the parent’s relationship with the child deteriorates. Why think that the parent is no longer entitled to repayment for her financial sacrifice? On both Debt Theory 1 and Debt Theory 2, not only is the deterioration of the relationship irrelevant in determining what the child owes the parent, but the *reason* the relationship deteriorates is also irrelevant.

Imagine a similar case between friends: Bobby needs his car repaired in order to travel to and from work, but he cannot afford the necessary repair. His friend Sammy can pay for the repair, and Bobby asks Sammy to do so. Sammy pays for the repairs, and Bobby enjoys the benefits of having a functioning car. However, after this exchange, their friendship deteriorates. Does Bobby owe Sammy repayment for Sammy’s financial assistance?<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Of course, one might respond to this question affirmatively without thereby committing to the view that Bobby owes repayment of the exact amount Sammy has paid. One might think that Bobby should take Sammy to dinner or return the favor in some similar fashion. In Chapter 4, I will consider whether a mere expression of gratitude would constitute sufficient repayment. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I will join Debt Theory’s critics in thinking that “repayment” is literal in this context. If one thinks that Bobby owes repayment in a non-literal sense, then Friendship, Gratitude, Special Goods, or Gratitude for Special Goods Theory is likely to be more intuitively appealing than either version of Debt Theory.

Three features of this case are worth noting. First, I intentionally omitted any confirmation from Bobby that the arrangement is a loan and not a gift. This is to make the case more closely resemble what I imagine most parent-child financial exchanges are like. Second, I have intentionally avoided calling Sammy's payment a "sacrifice," the *sacrifice* involved is not relevant in determining Bobby's obligations to Sammy. Third, the question is what Bobby owes Sammy rather than what Sammy can demand of Bobby. This distinction is particularly important when discussing filial obligations, as we might conclude that although a child ought to do X for her parent, the parent has no right to demand it of the child.<sup>65</sup> Whether the parent or a third party acting on the parent's behalf can demand repayment is a further question.

How might we justify the conclusion that Bobby does not owe Sammy repayment in this case? One might think that since Bobby never agreed to repay Sammy, Bobby does not owe repayment. However, this seems to support only the claim that Sammy cannot demand repayment. It does not obviously support the conclusion that Bobby has no obligation to repay Sammy. If Bobby asks for the money and enjoys the benefits that the money brings, then it seems that he owes Sammy repayment. If this is right, then children who ask for their parents' assistance in paying for their education may owe repayment even if they have not *explicitly* agreed to repay the investments.

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<sup>65</sup> In Chapter 6, I will endorse a theory of filial obligations that generates obligations on the part of the child without generating rights on the part of the parent.

However, if debt is owed only when a formal agreement is reached, then the Debt Theorist might say that the child owes the parent repayment only if the child has agreed to the terms of the loan. If Bobby does not owe Sammy anything because the exchange is more like a gift than a loan, then the Debt Theorist can say the same thing in the case of the child receiving the expensive education. If the child has not agreed to repay the parent for the expenses associated with the elite education, then the child does not owe repayment, and the parent has no legitimate expectation of repayment. This move does not clearly render the theory implausible. It does, however, render the theory far more conservative than its critics assume.

Rather than generating extensive obligations, Debt Theory 2 generates filial obligations only when the child agrees to such obligations; that is to say, Debt Theory 2 generates obligations only when the child believes himself to have such obligations. Consequently, Debt Theory does not highlight the tremendous investments that parents make on behalf of their children, as I have previously claimed that it does. Instead, it renders the parent-child relationship no different than any other creditor-debtor relationship. As I shall argue in the next section, that is the most serious problem with Debt Theory as a candidate theory of filial obligations.

Returning to the case of Bobby and Sammy, one might also argue that Sammy's willingness to help Bobby was an act of friendship, and once the friendship has ended, obligations that arise within it dissolve. On this view, even though Bobby owes repayment to his friend, he does not owe repayment to his former friend. This

is certainly odd. If Bobby owes repayment (in the literal sense) to his friend, this is presumably because of Sammy's payment to Bobby. Sammy's payment to Bobby remains unchanged, regardless of the status of their friendship. Even Sammy's motive at the time he offers financial assistance remains unchanged, regardless of the status of their friendship. Furthermore, once the friendship dissolves, Sammy does not enjoy some of the intangible benefits of having helped his friend, such as seeing Bobby benefit from Sammy's assistance. If Bobby owes Sammy repayment, this obligation is not contingent on the state of their friendship.

Similarly, if a child owes a parent repayment for an elite private education, that obligation is not contingent on the state of their relationship. As I have suggested, the child might not owe the parent anything because of the nature of the financial exchange. *If* the child owes repayment (in the literal sense), the grounding for that repayment is the exchange itself, and that exchange remains constant, even if the relationship changes over time.

Although Debt Theory 2 has similar features to Debt Theory 1, those features are not as problematic as critics have suggested. Rather than requiring that children repay their parents for everything the parents have done on their children's behalf, the Debt Theorist can claim that children owe nothing for investments they neither request nor voluntarily accept. The suggestion that children owe for investments they request and/or voluntarily accept is not subject to the criticism that children incur debts of repayment for things the parents were required to provide. Debt Theory 2 generates far less extensive obligations than its critics suppose. The Debt

Theorist can claim that just as the debtor must agree to accept a loan, and this agreement obligates her to repay the loan unless the creditor forgives the debt, the child must voluntarily accept a loan and agree to repay it before she is obligated to do so. Consequently, a child might not owe repayment for an expensive education, even on Debt Theory 2, if the child has not agreed to repay the loan.

### 2.3. Problems

At this point, two insurmountable problems remain for the Debt Theorist. First, neither version of the theory is a genuine theory of filial obligations; second, insofar as it is such a theory, it yields counter-intuitive results in specific cases. Debt Theory 2 is a theory of when one ought to repay a loan; specifically, one ought to repay a loan when one agrees to repay a loan. Consequently, Debt Theory 2 is more properly a theory of promises rather than a theory of filial obligations. The nature and history of the relationship are entirely irrelevant to the theory. Although I shall argue later that any plausible theory of filial obligations is likely to extend to other familial relationships or even friendships, Debt Theory 2 offers a theory of obligation that makes no room for relationships at all. Rather than answering questions about what we owe our parents *because they are our parents*, this theory answers questions about what we owe our parents in their capacity as creditors.

Both versions of Debt Theory disregard what is special about certain personal relationships. On these views, one has filial obligations because one's parents have invested resources in the child's development. According to Debt

Theory 1, one has obligations to a teacher for investing in classroom resources, or to the stranger in the airport that offers one a tissue. According to Debt Theory 2, one has obligations to repay those loans that one agrees to repay. Not only is the state of the relationship irrelevant in determining what obligations of repayment one has, but the nature of the relationship in which such benefits arise is also irrelevant in generating obligations.

I do not intend to reject Debt Theory 2 as a theory of obligation; indeed, even Debt Theory 1 strikes me as more plausible than its critics assume. Instead, I wish to reject it as a candidate theory of *filial* obligations. The project at hand is to determine whether something about the parent-child relationship generates obligations on the part of the child which are directed toward the parent *qua* parent; that is to ask, is there something special about being a child's parent, or about the parent-child relationship, in virtue of which the child has special obligations to his parent that he does not have to strangers?

If either version of Debt Theory is correct, then we might very well have obligations to our parents. If Debt Theory 1 is correct, these obligations are extensive and are grounded in the resources our parents have invested in raising us. If Debt Theory 2 is correct, then we have obligations to repay loans we have taken from our parents. On either view, the obligations are not grounded in the relationship, and we do not owe our parents *because they are our parents*. Instead, we owe our parents as we would owe anyone who invests resources on our behalf (Debt Theory 1) or makes loans to us (Debt Theory 2); that is to say, we have

obligations to our parents *qua* creditors. The relationship neither grounds the obligations nor shapes their content.

Moreover, if we consider Debt Theory 2 as a theory of filial obligations, it generates counter-intuitive results *precisely because* it treats the parent-child relationship, past and present, as irrelevant in determining what filial obligations one has. To say that I owe my parents repayment for my college education regardless of what our current relationship is like is perfectly reasonable as a theory of debt repayment; that is, if my parents have loaned me money for college, and I have agreed to repay it, then I may very well owe repayment regardless of whether we currently enjoy a caring, healthy relationship. However, if my parents disowned me upon learning that I planned to study philosophy, do I still have extensive filial obligations to them? At the very least, as a theory of filial obligations, the outcome that I owe my parents even if they have unreasonably disowned me is certainly counter-intuitive.

Not only is the *current* state of my relationship with my parents irrelevant in determining my filial obligations, but the history of our relationship is also irrelevant. If my parents invested heavily in activities for me, but they correctly believed that those investments would not benefit me (but might benefit themselves or others), do I still owe repayment? I would think not. Cases in which parents attempt to benefit their children but fail are more difficult to navigate, but we can still ask whether children owe repayment for investments that do not benefit them.

The Debt Theorist might be tempted to modify yet again: children owe repayment for *benefits*.<sup>66</sup> Either earlier version can accommodate this modification. On Debt Theory 1, children would owe repayment for *whatever* benefits they receive. On Debt Theory 2, children would owe repayment only for those benefits they requested with an expectation that they would repay those benefits. This move avoids one counter-intuitive outcome: children would not owe for investments that do not benefit them.

However, restricting the theory in this way sacrifices much of the motivation for the theory. The theory is motivated by a desire to recognize all that parents do for their children. If children owe repayment for *benefits*, then it seems that they owe repayment even for accidental benefits. Thus, the parental investment is no longer grounding the obligation. At least, to the extent that the parental investment does ground the benefit, it does so contingently; that is to say, the child would owe repayment for the benefit, regardless of how much parental investment was involved in producing it. Furthermore, it is to a large extent a matter of luck whether investments will, in fact, produce benefits. Thus, modifying Debt Theory by requiring that the child *benefit* from the investment produces a theory according to

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<sup>66</sup> How we evaluate whether something constitutes a benefit for the child is debatable. Narveson, for instance, requires that the children acknowledge benefits as such: “parents do put themselves to much trouble to benefit their children, and if the children in question agree that the effects of those efforts really have been beneficial, then they should see to it that they are benefitted in turn to at least the degree that renders it non-irrational for the parents to have done this” (“On Honouring our Parents,” p. 74). Chenyang Li and Raymond A. Belliotti both criticize Narveson’s account on the grounds that filial morality should not depend on a child’s assessment, which might very well be the product of rationalization or judgment errors. For more on this, see Li, “Shifting Perspectives,” pp. 214-215, and Belliotti, “Parents and Children: A Reply to Narveson,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1988), pp. 285-292.

which filial obligations are grounded in luck: if, as luck would have it, the child is benefitted, then the child owes repayment; if, as luck would have it, the parental investments do not generate benefits for the child, then the child does not owe repayment. Debt Theory focuses on what parents do for children rather than on how things turn out (as a matter of luck) for the child.

Debt Theory, then, is not properly a theory of filial obligations, but rather a theory of debt repayment, and insofar as we treat it as a theory of filial obligations, it generates counter-intuitive results. The remaining four theories under consideration – Friendship, Gratitude, Special Goods, and Gratitude for Special Goods – focus on the moral relationship between the parties in question. Thus, these theories are more appropriate candidates for theories of filial obligation, as they seek to determine whether something about the parent-child relationship grounds obligations. This is not to say that the relationship *only* arises between parents and children. In fact, each of the remaining theories is compatible with such obligations arising between friends. Friendship Theory, for instance, explicitly states that filial obligations just are obligations of friendship. However, on each of the remaining theories I shall consider, the nature of the relationship both grounds the obligations and determines their content. Rather than concluding that parents sometimes act as creditors and children as debtors, and so children owe their parents as they would owe creditors, the remaining theories suggest that special features of the parent-child relationship give rise to filial obligations. Consequently, the remaining theories are more plausible accounts of filial obligations.



## Chapter Three: Friendship Theory

### 3.1 The Theory

**Friendship Theory 1:** Children ought to do for their parents what they would do for friends with whom they share a voluntary, caring relationship. These obligations depend upon both the child's and the parent's needs and abilities, as well as the current state of the relationship. If the parent and child do not share a voluntary, loving relationship, then the child has no filial obligations.

In response to the problems that arise with a Debt Theory of filial obligations, Jane English offers a new model: the Friendship Theory.<sup>67</sup> According to English, the entire language of the Debt Theory is problematic, as children do not, strictly speaking, *owe* their parents anything.<sup>68</sup> The parent-child relationship is unlike the creditor-debtor relationship in that it is characterized by feelings of love and voluntary friendship. Consequently, English argues, "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."<sup>69</sup>

Although circumstances arise such that one friend finds herself in debt to another friend, this is not usually the source of obligation between friends. If, for

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<sup>67</sup> English, Jane. "What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?" in *Having Children: Philosophical and Legal Reflections on Parenthood*, *op. cit.*, pp. 351-356.

<sup>68</sup> "What do grown children owe their parents? I will contend that the answer is 'nothing'" (English, p. 351).

<sup>69</sup> English, p. 351. Keller notes that this theory also explains parents' duties toward their grown children: "The friendship theory says that parents have duties to act out of regard for their grown children as they would for any friend – to do their bit in maintaining the relationship, to show friendly concern and respect for their children and their choices, not to make unreasonable demands, and so on" (Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty*, p. 116).

example, one friend does a favor for the other, then the beneficiary of the favor owes repayment. Favors, English argues, generate debts, but favors are fundamentally different from what friends generally do for one another; similarly, favors are fundamentally different from most of what parents do for their children. English explains the favor and accompanying debt as follows: “when A, at B’s request, bears some burden for B, then B incurs an obligation to reciprocate.”<sup>70</sup>

This account of favors is similar to Debt Theory 2: on both views, children owe their parents something in exchange for requesting and voluntarily accepting some particular benefit, and an expectation of repayment is reasonable. Returning to the example from the discussion of Debt Theory 2, when the parent pays for an expensive education *at the child’s request*, the child owes a debt, or a repayment of the favor. Given that English’s theory serves as a response to Debt Theory of filial obligations, it should come as no surprise that she finds this unsatisfying as a theory of filial obligations.

To see why a “returning favors” model of filial obligations is problematic, compare two cases:

**Favor case:** Max asks his neighbor Nina to take in his mail while he is away on vacation. In collecting Max’s mail, Nina does Max a favor. Nina later asks Max to take in her mail while she is gone.

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<sup>70</sup> English, p. 352. For a criticism of this view of favors, see Li, “Shifting Perspectives,” pp. 212-213. Li argues that favors can occur even if one person has not requested something of another. Consequently, says Li, much of what parents do for their children can be described as favors, and so children owe repayment.

**Friendship case:** while Max is on vacation, Nina mows his grass. Max did not ask her to do this, but she voluntarily does so. Nina then asks Max to mow her grass while she is gone.<sup>71</sup>

In the favor case, Max *owes* Nina repayment because favors are a matter of reciprocity: at Max's request, Nina does x for Max, and Max owes Nina repayment.<sup>72</sup>

In the friendship case, however, no "debt" arises. Although Max ought to mow Nina's grass for her while she is gone, he does not *owe* her anything because friendship "ought to be characterized by *mutuality* rather than reciprocity: friends offer what they can give and accept what they need, without regard for the total amounts of benefits exchanged."<sup>73</sup>

At this point, the distinction between Debt Theory 2 and Friendship Theory should be clear: on Debt Theory 2, children owe their parents repayment for "loans," whereas on Friendship Theory, children would do well to do something for their parents, who have invested resources in child rearing, but children are not indebted to their parents for those investments. To see this distinction, compare two more cases:

**Favor case:** during a difficult financial period, a child asks a parent for some money to help pay for living expenses. Later, the parent asks for some money to help pay for her own living expenses.

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<sup>71</sup> English, p. 352.

<sup>72</sup> English allows for exceptions to this general rule, such as in cases where reciprocation involves an unreasonable burden.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353. Keller explains this point, as well: "Within a friendship, it is not important that each person contribute an equal amount, but rather than each person contribute what he reasonably can" (Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty*, p. 115).

**Friendship case:** a parent offers financial assistance to her child during a difficult financial period. Later, the parent asks for some money to help pay for her own living expenses.

Again, in the favor case, the child *owes* the parent, for the parent has done the child a favor. When the child repays the parent, she has discharged her debt. In the friendship case, however, the child does not owe the parent anything, even though the child ought to assist the parent if she can. As parental investments arise in loving relationships and are acts of love, it would be nice for children to help their parents later in life, but that help is not repaying a loan or returning a favor. Instead, just as the parents acted appropriately given a loving relationship, the children's actions later in life should be those actions we would expect to see in a loving relationship rather than the simple repayment of debt.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, Friendship Theory – unlike either version of Debt Theory – takes the parent's motivation into account when determining what sorts of obligations a grown child has to her parent. Unlike creditors, friends are (or ought to be) “motivated by love rather than by the prospect of repayment.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, we would be troubled to discover that our friends were keeping track of what nice things they had done for us and what nice things we had done for them, keeping a watchful eye out for any imbalances that might arise. Consider again the previous example: a parent pays for an expensive university education for her child.

According to Debt Theory 2, the child owes repayment only if the parent and child

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<sup>74</sup> Naturally, this description of the parent-child relationship assumes that all goes well in the relationship. I shall consider what Friendship Theory has to say about troubled relationships shortly.

<sup>75</sup> English, p. 353.

treat the investment as a loan. According to Debt Theory 1, the child owes repayment in virtue of the parent's investment. On Friendship Theory, neither of these responses captures either the parent's investment or the child's resulting obligations.

According to Friendship Theory, we ought to focus not solely on the cost to the parent *or* on the benefit to the child, but also on the relationship in which the benefit arises. A parent invests in her child's education. If the child has asked for this payment, then the investment is a favor, and the child owes repayment.<sup>76</sup> If, however, the parent simply wants a good education for her child and offers to pay, then the child does not incur a debt of repayment by accepting the parent's offer. The parent's investment is made out of care for the child, and although the child would do well to help her parent later, the child does not *owe* the parent anything. Furthermore, just as we would question the friend who does nice things for us with the expectation of repayment, we might question the parent who invests in her child with an eye on repayment later. Unlike the creditor-debtor relationship, in which balance sheets are expected and appropriate, friendships are relationships in which balance sheets that keep track of kind acts would indicate a failure of the

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<sup>76</sup> English might dispute this point. Unlike in a friendship, the parent has control and, perhaps more importantly, should act as a paternalistic surrogate for the child. I am grateful to Harry Brighthouse for suggesting this possible difference between a favor within a friendship and an act that seems to satisfy the description of a favor within the parent-child relationship. However, if debts can arise within friendships, surely they can also arise within the parent-child relationship.

relationship. In this regard, the parent-child relationship is (or ought to be) more like friendships than like creditor-debtor relationships.<sup>77</sup>

With respect to filial obligations, Friendship Theory clearly views the parent-child relationship differently than Debt Theory does. According to Friendship Theory, children do not *owe* their parents anything because the parents' sacrifices for the children were – or should have been – undertaken voluntarily, without expectation of repayment. Unlike Debt Theory, which focuses solely on the exchange between the two parties, Friendship Theory focuses on the relationship between the two and the motivations of each. On both versions of Debt Theory, the content of filial obligations is clear: the child owes repayment for the parent's investment (Debt Theory 1) or loans received (Debt Theory 2).

On Friendship Theory, however, the child has obligations of friendship toward her parent. According to English, a grown child's obligations to her parent depend on "(1) their respective needs, abilities, and resources and (2) the extent to which there is an ongoing friendship between them."<sup>78</sup> Though the parents might have undertaken great sacrifice to raise the child, the sacrifice itself is not the source of filial obligations; a voluntary, loving relationship is.<sup>79</sup> I shall consider each of these factors in turn.

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<sup>77</sup> Historically, as I noted in Chapter 1, parents have granted benefits to their children with the expectation of repayment. Thus, English's account of parents as providing for their children without expectations of repayment seems ahistorical. I am grateful to Claudia Card for this suggestion.

<sup>78</sup> English, p. 354.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* Again, although *perhaps* a loving relationship is now the source of obligations, the parents' willingness to undertake such sacrifice might not be acts within a loving relationship but rather a means of discharging their religious obligations to have children. For more on this, see Ivanhoe,

First, unlike Debt Theory, on this account filial obligations depend on both the parent's and child's "needs, abilities, and resources." Returning to the case of the parent who pays for her child's elite education, we can see the difference between the theories clearly. According to both versions of Debt Theory, the child owes repayment regardless of the parent's financial situation. Just as a debtor owes a creditor regardless of the creditor's financial situation, the child owes repayment for the expensive education, even if the parent's financial investment did not constitute any significant sacrifice. On Debt Theory, if Warren Buffett pays \$200,000 for his child's education, that child owes repayment, despite Warren Buffett's staggering wealth. To put this in English's own terms, if Buffett does a "favor" for his child by paying \$200,000, then the child *owes* repayment of the favor. Whether the favor constitutes a sacrifice is irrelevant in determining whether obligations arise in response to the favor.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, on either version of Debt Theory, the grown child's abilities are irrelevant. If the child is unable to repay the parent, the child has simply defaulted on her favor repayment obligations.

According to Friendship Theory, however, Warren Buffett's child ought to be kind to him, express concern for him, and generally continue a caring relationship with him, but the child need not contribute financial resources to Warren Buffett.<sup>81</sup>

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"Filial Piety as a Virtue," *op. cit.*, pp. 300-301. Interestingly, Ivanhoe notes that the obligation to have and rear children was, for many early Confucians, a *filial* obligation; that is to say, as a means of honoring one's parents, one ought to produce children. I am grateful to Claudia Card for noting that English's account overlooks historical reasons for child rearing.

<sup>80</sup> The degree of sacrifice might be relevant in determining the *content* of the obligations, though.

<sup>81</sup> Here, I've made many assumptions about Warren Buffet's relationship with his children. If these turn out to be false, then Friendship Theory will produce different outcomes.

Perhaps, for example, the child ought to call or visit Warren Buffett on his birthday, or ensure that the relationship continues in some way. However, since Buffett is presumably financially capable of providing for his own care in his old age, Friendship Theory tells us that Buffett's children do not have an obligation to provide such care. On this view, both parties' needs, abilities, and resources shape the content of filial obligations.<sup>82</sup>

Second, unlike Debt Theory, Friendship Theory allows for the termination of filial obligations in the event that the relationship either ceases to exist altogether or ceases to be a voluntary one. According to both versions of Debt Theory, the grown child has filial obligations because of certain investments the parent has made on the child's behalf; these obligations do not diminish or disappear if the parent-child relationship is terminated. In fact, the obligation of repayment might become stronger since the parent no longer enjoys other benefits, such as participating in the relationship, that she might have enjoyed if the relationship had continued. According to Friendship Theory, however, since the source of the obligations is *not* the investment but rather the relationship itself, filial obligations diminish or disappear if the relationship diminishes or disappears. To maintain that filial obligations exist in the absence of a voluntary, loving relationship between the parent and the child would amount to ignoring morally relevant differences

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<sup>82</sup> According to Keller, this gives Friendship Theory at least two advantages over Debt Theory. First, Friendship Theory can explain why the degree of the parent's sacrifice does not determine whether filial obligations arise. Second, it can justify restricting filial obligations to that which the child can reasonably be expected to do (Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty*, pp. 115-116).

between what the parent does for her child and what the creditor does for the debtor. The creditor acts – and should act - *with the expectation of repayment*. The parent does not, or at least should not, act with this expectation.

The first consideration – the resources, needs, and abilities of the parties – shapes the content of filial obligations. The second – the current state of the relationship – tells us when filial obligations arise. Because the parents are not usually doing favors for their children or offering loans, their investments are generally motivated by care, at least ideally.<sup>83</sup> The caring, loving relationship grounds the parent’s obligations toward the child. Similarly, the child’s obligations to the parent are grounded in the relationship, *not* in the investments the parent has made in the past. Since Debt Theory grounds filial obligations in the investment, changes in the relationship have no bearing on filial obligations. Since Friendship Theory grounds filial obligations in the relationship, then the state of the relationship is crucial in determining whether a child has filial obligations. Since the loving relationship gives rise to filial obligations, the absence of such a relationship prevents any such obligations from arising.

Two types of criticisms arise in response to Friendship Theory, which I argue give us reason to modify rather than reject the theory. First, the focus on the current state of the relationship in determining whether filial obligations arise makes filial obligations too easily avoidable and thus licenses filial ingratitude. Second, as with Debt Theory, the analogy between relationship-types fails. Whereas Debt Theory

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<sup>83</sup> Of course, the parent’s motivations are likely to be mixed, simply because motivations are usually complex.

compares the parent-child relationship to a creditor-debtor relationship, Friendship theory compares the parent-child relationship to a friendship. Just as the parent-child relationship is different from the creditor-debtor relationship in morally significant ways, it also differs from friendships in morally significant ways. I shall consider each type of objection in turn and then offer a modified version of Friendship Theory that aims to avoid these problems.

The first type of objection challenges English's claim that filial obligations diminish or disappear entirely when the relationship dissolves. Applied to the parent-child relationship, Friendship Theory suggests that filial obligations end when the parent-child relationship ends. Consequently, critics argue that filial obligations are too easily avoidable, and cases of filial ingratitude appear unproblematic. In his criticism of Friendship Theory, Keller offers a nice presentation of this objection: "You cannot explain your failure to look after your parents by saying, 'Look, they're great people, and I'll always value the times when we were close, but over the years we've taken different paths. I went my way, they went theirs, it seemed like the relationship wasn't taking us where we wanted to go . . . things just aren't the way they were.' You are stuck with your filial duties, in a way that you are not stuck with your duties of friendship."<sup>84</sup> Although English embraces this conclusion – and in fact argues that repayment after the relationship ends might indicate a lack of respect for the relationship – her critics take it to be a compelling reason to reject the entire model. The objection takes the following form:

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<sup>84</sup> Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty*, p. 118.

1. No reasonable theory of filial obligations can license filial ingratitude.
2. Friendship Theory of filial obligations licenses filial ingratitude.
3. Therefore, Friendship Theory is not a reasonable theory of filial obligations.<sup>85</sup>

This argument fails to present a serious objection to Friendship Theory for two reasons: premise (1) and premise (2).

The first problem is that premise (1) seems question begging. Friendship Theory offers an account of when and what filial obligations arise; surprising implications are not sufficient to reject the theory, at least without further argument.<sup>86</sup> According to Friendship Theory, we do not have filial obligations if no relationship exists. This is surprising, and it might very well license filial ingratitude. That fact, however, is problematic *only if* we have obligations of filial gratitude. Thus, in the absence of an argument that we have such obligations, the fact that Friendship Theory licenses filial ingratitude is not sufficient reason to reject the theory. Of course, since all theories considered here – my own included – attempt to reconcile moral principles with intuitions about filial obligations, I do not wish to rest too much on this particular response. The challenge is question begging, but most appeals to intuitions about filial obligations will be.

The second problem with the above argument is far more serious. Premise (2) is true only if we adopt an uncharitable interpretation of Friendship Theory.

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<sup>85</sup> For an example of this kind of criticism, see Collingridge and Miller, “Filial Responsibility and the Care of the Aged,” pp. 126-127.

<sup>86</sup> In the next chapter, I shall offer an argument for thinking that children do, in fact, have obligations of gratitude.

Critics claim that on this account of filial obligations, the child who wishes to avoid such obligations can simply terminate the relationship with her parent. The obligations exist only so long as the relationship exists, so in the absence of the relationship, the child has no filial obligations. According to critics, this is an unreasonable consequence of English's theory of filial obligations. Filial obligations should not be quite so easily avoidable. Furthermore, the ungrateful child shouldn't be rewarded for her ingratitude with escape from these obligations. According to this type of objection, English's view licenses (and perhaps rewards) filial ingratitude and is, therefore, implausible as a theory of filial obligations.

However, in her articulation of the view, English never discusses the circumstances surrounding the termination of a friendship (or a parent-child relationship). Surely, any account of such relationships can make some room for distinctions between types of reasons for the end of a relationship. If, for instance, a person ends a friendship because the friendship is abusive or otherwise unhealthy, then we might think that terminating the relationship is appropriate. Alternatively, if I end a relationship with my best friend because I suspect that she is about to go through a divorce – or an otherwise emotionally draining experience – and I simply do not wish to have to offer any support, then my termination of the friendship seems to be a moral failure on my part.

Similarly, compare the child whose relationship with her parents is abusive or otherwise unhealthy with the child who has a good relationship with her parents, but she knows that although her parents are now healthy and active, they will soon

require a good deal of physical assistance, and she wants to avoid any responsibility for her parents' wellbeing. In the former case, we would find the child's termination of the relationship is appropriate (or at least reasonable). In the latter case, however, the child has acted wrongly in terminating the relationship. This sort of case – in which the child terminates the relationship simply to avoid filial obligations – seems to be exactly the kind of case that concerns critics when they suggest that the view licenses filial ingratitude. However, on a reasonable understanding of Friendship Theory, the child's termination of the relationship is itself a failure to discharge her obligations of friendship.

Consider again English's claim about filial obligations: "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."<sup>87</sup> In response to the suggestion that Friendship Theory licenses filial ingratitude, the Friendship Theorist has a ready reply: the theory implies that the child in the earlier example has no filial obligations only if friends have no obligation to continue the relationship *and* no residual obligations remain after the dissolution of the friendship. Of course, in a genuine friendship, the parties likely have *at a minimum* an obligation to avoid unjustified emotional abandonment. If I terminate a friendship – particularly one that has lasted a few decades – because I do not wish to feel obligated to provide help to a friend in the future, then I am already failing to be a good friend. The Friendship Theorist can plausibly claim that this failure just *is* a

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<sup>87</sup> English, "What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?" p. 351.

failure to discharge my obligations of friendship. Similarly, if I terminate my relationship with my parents because I do not wish to feel obligated to provide help to them in the future, I have already failed with respect to my obligations of friendship. The caring relationship between friends grounds obligations of friendship; the Friendship Theorist can respond to filial ingratitude worries by noting that the ungrateful child in question has already failed morally. She has not, as critics claim, *escaped* her filial obligations. She has instead failed to discharge them.<sup>88</sup>

Of course, critics might worry that even if the child has done something wrong in terminating the relationship, this account of filial obligations still suggests that she has fewer, if any, filial obligations remaining than she would have had if the relationship had continued. After all, if the relationship grounds the obligations and the relationship dissolves, then the obligations seem to dissolve, as well. Nicholas Dixon, a defender of Friendship Theory, claims that rather than relieving the ungrateful child of her filial obligations, Friendship Theory suggests that she has residual obligations because of the depth and significance of the relationship. Not only has the ungrateful child acted wrongly in terminating the relationship simply to avoid filial obligations, but she has failed to avoid future obligations: even in the

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<sup>88</sup> Nicholas Dixon, a defender of Friendship Theory, joins English's critics in claiming that any view that licenses filial ingratitude is implausible. For more on this, see "The Friendship Model of Filial Obligations," *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 1: pp. 77-87. Dixon says, "English has failed to realize that duties of friendship can in general outlive friendships, whether between peers or between children and parents" (p. 79). However, he argues that the Friendship Theorist need not concede that obligations cease to exist once the relationship is terminated.

absence of a parent-child relationship, the child might very well have residual filial obligations.

Residual obligations of friendship are a matter of respect for both the friend and the friendship.<sup>89</sup> Even if the friendship no longer exists, we ought to have respect for it that is proportional to the nature of the friendship itself. If my concern for a past friend ceased as soon as the friendship ended, others would have reason to question the extent of my concern to begin with.<sup>90</sup> Thus, even if the friendship ends, residual duties of friendship might remain. If, for example, a friendship has deteriorated because the individuals have simply grown – and perhaps physically moved – apart, but one finds herself in need of counsel from someone who has known her for a long time, then the other arguably has an obligation to assist. Similarly, even if the parent-child relationship ends, residual duties might remain. For example, if the parent-child relationship has deteriorated because the individuals involved have profoundly different worldviews and find that they do not enjoy one another's company, the child may very well still have an obligation to assist the parent in her old age if the child is able to do so. The ungrateful child who terminates the friendship in order to avoid filial obligations has already failed morally because she fails to respect the extent and the depth of the prior relationship. Furthermore, she has failed practically, for she has not avoided filial

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<sup>89</sup> "Surely he should keep a remembrance of their former intimacy, and as we think we ought to oblige friends rather than strangers, so to those who have been our friends we ought to make some allowance for our former friendship, when the breach has not been due to excess of wickedness" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 9, Part 3). I am grateful to Claudia Card for drawing my attention to this passage.

<sup>90</sup> Dixon, "The Friendship Model of Filial Obligations," pp. 79-80.

obligations; the extent and depth of the prior relationship generate residual obligations.

If the child in question has terminated the relationship because her parents are emotionally or physically abusive, then Friendship Theory suggests that the child has very few – if any – filial obligations. Obligations of friendship that are themselves grounded in a caring relationship would not, it seems, require us to remain in abusive relationships. If the relationship itself is not a good one, then the Friendship Theorist can claim that it is not the sort of relationship that grounds obligations of friendship. Thus, terminating the relationship does not violate obligations of friendship. The circumstances in which someone terminates the relationship are also relevant in determining whether any residual obligations remain. If, for example, “the reason for the end of our friendship was unforgivable behaviour on the part of our former friend, our residual duties may diminish to zero.”<sup>91</sup>

On a more charitable interpretation of Friendship Theory than critics generally offer, the theory can accommodate our intuition that there are good and bad reasons for terminating a relationship and that these reasons play some role in determining what filial obligations we have. The person whose friend betrays her might have good reason to abandon the friendship, and any residual obligations of friendship might diminish or disappear entirely. The child who terminates the relationship with her parent simply to avoid filial obligations unreasonably ends the

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

friendship. This child acts contrary to her obligations of friendship in terminating the relationship; furthermore, provided the relationship was a good one, the child fails to avoid residual filial obligations.<sup>92</sup> Thus, the first type of objection to Friendship Theory fails. Contrary to critics' claim in premise (2) – that Friendship Theory licenses filial ingratitude – the theory can in fact help to explain why filial ingratitude strikes us as wrong.

Let's now turn to the second kind of objection to Friendship Theory: the parent-child relationship is different from a friendship in morally significant ways, and thus a theory of obligations between friends cannot serve as a theory of filial obligations. According to this line of reasoning, not only is it unlikely that parents and children can be friends, it is *undesirable* for parents and children to be friends.<sup>93</sup> Given that ideal friendship is different in important ways from the parent-child relationship, a theory of obligations of friendship cannot serve as a theory of filial obligations, as well.

According to Joseph Kupfer, a critic of Friendship Theory, parents and children cannot be friends because "Their relationship lacks the equality friendship

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<sup>92</sup> What constitutes a good reason for terminating a friendship is certainly debatable, and a discussion on this topic points to deeper worries about ethical reasoning. For more on the nature of friendship and the justifications (or lack thereof) for entering into and/or terminating such relationships, see: Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 73, No. 14 (1976), pp. 453-466; Elinor Mason, "Can an Indirect Consequentialist be a Real Friend?" *Ethics*, Vol. 108, No. 2 (1998), pp. 386-393; Matthew Tedesco, "Indirect Consequentialism, Suboptimality, and Friendship," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (2006), pp. 567-577; Robert F. Card, "Consequentialism, Teleology, and the New Friendship Critique," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (2004), pp. 253-265.

<sup>93</sup> Kupfer, Joseph. "Can Parents and Children Be Friends?" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1990), pp. 15-26.

requires, and they are not sufficiently independent or separate from one another.”<sup>94</sup> This lack of equality and sufficient independence from one another is not, however, a problematic feature of the parent-child relationship; rather, it is *constitutive* of a healthy parent-child relationship. I shall consider each of these issues – lack of equality and sufficient independence – in turn.

The lack of equality between the parent and child is an inequality in autonomy *with respect to the relationship*.<sup>95</sup> Equality of autonomy in a relationship is important for a true friendship because “Without it, there will be unequal influence and power.”<sup>96</sup> One friend will make more of the decisions, one friend will increasingly come to depend on the other, and the friendship is left in such a state that the more autonomous partner receives less from the relationship; this partner receives less advice, less criticism, generally less in terms of consideration of alternatives than she would receive in a more equal friendship.<sup>97</sup> Thus, rather than a friendship, the parent-child relationship is a relationship between unequal partners.

Within the parent-child relationship, the child is less autonomous than the parent. Explaining the source of this inequality, Kupfer says,

“The parent helps *shape* who and what the young child is. Where the parent developed into an adult independently of the child, the young child grows up under the parent’s influence and care . . . While the

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>95</sup> Kupfer defines autonomy as “the ability to be self-determining: to choose for oneself on the basis of one’s own values and beliefs” (p. 16).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

parent may be changed dramatically *as a result* of rearing a child, the parent is not shaped *by* the child. The parent authors change in the young child, exerting control, both intentional and unwitting, over her development.”<sup>98</sup>

The parent’s shaping role in the child’s life is a desirable feature of the parent-child relationship.<sup>99</sup> However, it has the consequence that the child is not as autonomous as the parent *with respect to the relationship*. Just as two friends can be equally autonomous in other areas of life and unequally autonomous in a particular relationship, so the parent and child can be equally autonomous as adults, but within the parent-child relationship, the child has less autonomy than the parent has.

Moreover, this history of unequal autonomy effectively eliminates any possibility that equality will be restored later in the relationship; that is to say, inequality in autonomy begets inequality in autonomy. This is accomplished in two ways. First, the child’s self-concept is shaped by her history, and this history is one of unequal autonomy. Thus, the child’s self-concept is likely to include diminished autonomy with respect to the parent-child relationship.<sup>100</sup> Second, the child’s history with her parent “fosters enduring habits and attitudes towards the parents which persist into the child’s adulthood . . . Such attitudes as respect and loyalty, as

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> This is not to suggest that parents cannot act wrongly in shaping their children, only that the nature of the relationship demands that parents play this role.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

well as habits of deference and accommodation engendered in youth.”<sup>101</sup> Just as the friend who has less autonomy in the context of the friendship, the grown child is less likely to make decisions, offer opinions, or resist the conclusions of the more autonomous partner in the relationship. In the case of the unequal friendship, this inequality can have any number of sources. In the case of the parent-child relationship, a history of unequal autonomy renders the grown child less autonomous with respect to the relationship than her parent. Given the history of unequal autonomy, and the likely effect this history has on the prospects for equal autonomy in the future, Kupfer concludes that parents and children cannot – and should not – be friends.

To see why this might be a serious problem for Friendship Theory, consider the comparable unequal friendship: one friend makes most of the decisions – both for herself and for the other person and thus plays a crucial role in shaping how the other friend’s life will go. Furthermore, the more autonomous friend can often make these important decisions without consulting the less autonomous friend. Although Kupfer’s worry is that the more autonomous person receives less from the relationship than the less autonomous person, this description of the friendship highlights a power imbalance that we would likely find seriously problematic in a friendship because of the effect the inequality has on the less autonomous friend. In fact, the Friendship Theorist might find nothing problematic with the less

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

autonomous friend terminating this relationship. Thus, what looks like a healthy parent-child relationship is analogous to an apparently unhealthy friendship.

The second barrier to friendship in the parent-child relationship is a lack of sufficient independence from one another. According to Kupfer, “The union which characterizes true friendship presupposes separateness.”<sup>102</sup> Friendship is, ideally, the coming together of two completely independent individuals, each with their own history and set of experiences. In the case of two unrelated adults, or even two unrelated children, this necessary separateness is present. In the case of the child and her parent, however, it *cannot* be present: “The parent and grown child cannot *enter into* the relationship as equally developed people, bringing to the relationship the independent histories that fuel and provide a healthy tautness to friendship . . . The intimacy we ought to enjoy with our parents keeps us too close.”<sup>103</sup>

Far from being a problematic feature of the relationship, the lack of sufficient independence for friendship is part of what makes the parent-child relationship special. The shared history, the parent’s intimate knowledge of the child’s personality, and the parent’s role in shaping the child can all contribute to rather than detract from a healthy parent-child relationship. Indeed, these features make the parent-child relationship virtually unique among moral relationships.<sup>104</sup> The

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Interestingly, the same features that Kupfer points to in the parent-child relationship might also be present in relationships between younger and older siblings. The older siblings shape younger siblings in a way that younger siblings do not necessarily shape older ones, and siblings arguably lack the separateness that friends enjoy, as well. Thus, if parents and children cannot and should not be

absence of separateness, “which [stands] in the way of complete friendship . . . also [enables] the parent-adult child relationship to be uniquely fulfilling.”<sup>105</sup>

However, these features make Friendship Theory an inappropriate approach to filial obligations. Parents and children *cannot* and *should not* be friends. Since the relationship between the parent and child is not analogous to a friendship, the obligations are not analogous, either; after all, the source of the obligations is the relationship itself, and the parent-child relationship is (and should be) fundamentally different from a friendship.

### 3.2 Revised Friendship Theory

**Friendship Theory 2:** Children ought to do for their parents what they would do for friends with whom they share a voluntary, caring but not necessarily ideal relationship. These obligations depend upon both the child’s and the parent’s needs and abilities, as well as the current state of the relationship. Residual obligations of friendship can, but need not, remain after the friendship ends.

The objections just considered reject Friendship Theory because parent-child relationships are not like ideal friendships. Thus, the argument goes, obligations of friendship do not arise because the parent-child relationship is different from a friendship in important ways. However, that the parent-child relationship is not analogous to an ideal friendship is not a reason to conclude that the relationship cannot be like a friendship in important ways. Perhaps, then, the parent-child

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friends, as Kupfer says, then perhaps siblings of different ages ought not to be friends, either. I am grateful to Claudia Card for this suggestion.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

relationship is like a non-ideal friendship, in which obligations of friendship still arise.

Non-ideal friendships are not necessarily the sort of relationships from which we may always justifiably walk away. At least, as non-ideal friends, we should certainly hope that deviations from the ideal do not necessarily destroy the friendship. The fact that parents and children cannot satisfy the *ideal* of friendship does not eliminate the possibility of genuine friendship between them, just as obligations of friendship may arise in other non-ideal friendships.<sup>106</sup> In many cases, we would consider the friends who experience unequal autonomy with respect to the relationship still friends, even if the friendship isn't a perfectly healthy one. Similarly, there is no principled reason that the parent and child could not be friends, despite the inequality of autonomy with respect to the relationship. Many friendships display the sorts of features that apparently disqualify the parent-child relationship from the realm of friendships. Perhaps a slightly modified version of Friendship Theory, one that would "recognize a multiplicity of types of friendship," could accommodate critics' concerns here.<sup>107</sup>

Consider the inequality in the parent-child relationship that precludes the possibility of friendship between the parent and the child. Inequality in this case is perfectly natural, even desirable. However, such inequality should not mean that the parent and child couldn't be friends, particularly when the inequality is the natural

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<sup>106</sup> Dixon, "The Friendship Model of Filial Obligations," pp. 81-82.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

result of the parents' ability to provide extensive assistance to the child. The parent-child relationship, at least in its early years, might be similar to a close friendship between an individual in a wheelchair and her able-bodied friend.<sup>108</sup> Like parents in the parent-child relationship, the able-bodied friend is in a position to provide more physical assistance to her friend than her friend can provide. There is, then, a natural inequality in the relationship. Should we say that the two couldn't be genuine friends? Surely not. It seems equally bizarre to conclude that the able-bodied friend is always justified in terminating the relationship and walking away with no residual obligations because of a natural inequality in the relationship. Dixon notes that in cases of inequality between friends, the friend who provides the majority of the assistance "may gain at least as much in terms of emotional satisfaction and intellectual stimulation as she gives in physical assistance."<sup>109</sup> We shouldn't conclude that the two couldn't be friends; we should instead conclude that friendships take many forms, and they sometimes involve different kinds and varying degrees of inequality.

This is not to assume that parents and children can be genuine friends, even non-ideally. Unlike the friendship between an able-bodied person and a disabled person, the parent has authority *over* the child, at least for much of the child's life. This authority over the child is not merely an inequality, like the inequality with respect to physical abilities in the earlier example, but rather a difference in power

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

that constitutes an obstacle to genuine friendship.<sup>110</sup> Whether the parent's authority over the child during the child's younger years makes impossible a friendship in later years depends on whether the parent *continues* to have authority over the child, even when the child is grown. As Blustein notes, "Whether or not genuine friendship is possible between parents and their grown children depends in large measure on the parents' sensitivity to their children's developing capacity for friendship, and on the parents' willingness to deal with their children less and less as superiors and more and more as equals."<sup>111</sup> It seems that it is at least possible for parents to relinquish authority as their children grow, and thus it seems possible that parents and children can be genuine (if non-ideal) friends later in life.

Friendship Theory 2, then, would look something like this: non-ideal friendships are generally caring relationships in which the parties respect one another, and these sorts of relationships ground obligations of friendship. When all goes well, the parent-child relationship is analogous to a non-ideal friendship insofar as it is a caring relationship in which the parties respect one another. Because the relationship is a caring one and involves respect for the other party, obligations arise. If the relationship is generally caring and respectful, then both parties have a *prima facie* obligation to refrain from terminating the relationship. Unjustifiable termination is itself a failure with respect to the obligations of friendship that arise, and residual obligations may remain despite the dissolution of the relationship.

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<sup>110</sup> I am grateful to Claudia Card for suggesting this response.

<sup>111</sup> Blustein, *Parents and Children*, pp. 190-191.

Friendship Theory 2 escapes many of the problems with earlier accounts of filial obligation. Unlike Debt Theory, Friendship Theory 2 is a plausible account of filial obligations, for the source of the obligations is a special kind of relationship. Furthermore, since the special relationship grounds the obligations, obligations can diminish or disappear entirely if the relationship itself diminishes or disappears entirely. However, despite critics' claims, Friendship Theory 2 need not license filial ingratitude; if the child has an obligation to continue the relationship and/or be grateful to the parent, Friendship Theory 2 can explain the child's wrongdoing. The content of filial obligations is determined, at least in part, by reference to the needs of the parties. Whereas Debt Theory requires repayment of a benefit or loan, Friendship Theory 2 might generate far more extensive obligations if the parent needs more than she has provided in the past. Of course, it might also generate far less extensive obligations if the parent is easily able to provide for her own needs.<sup>112</sup> Finally, according to Friendship Theory 2, obligations of friendship would arise even in relationships that differ from ideal friendship in morally significant ways.

Friendship Theory 2 appears to satisfy at least some of our criteria for an adequate theory of filial obligations: the theory tells us when filial obligations arise, it explains why we have the obligations we do in a particular instance, it generates intuitive results in specific cases, and it can explain why certain responses seem counter-intuitive. According to this view of filial obligations, we have obligations to our parents because we share with them a voluntary, caring relationship, and these

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<sup>112</sup> I shall focus more on emotional needs in Chapters 5 and 6.

relationships ground certain obligations; specifically, we have obligations of friendship because our relationship with our parents is, in important ways, analogous to a friendship. Whereas Friendship Theory 1 generates the counter-intuitive result that a child can escape filial obligations simply by terminating the relationship, Friendship Theory 2 avoids those results. According to Friendship Theory 2, the grown child who terminates her relationship simply to avoid foreseeable filial obligations acts wrongly, in part because she has an obligation not to unreasonably terminate the relationship, and in part because even after the relationship ends, residual obligations remain. Finally, Friendship Theory 2 can explain why the conclusion from Friendship Theory 1 seems counter-intuitive. We cannot escape obligations of friendship simply by exiting the friendship; instead, whether we have obligations of friendship after the end of the friendship depends, at least in part, on the reason the friendship has ended. Similarly, whether we have filial obligations when we do not have a voluntary, caring relationship with our parents depends on the *reason* we do not have that sort of relationship with our parents.

### **3.3 Problems**

Two problems remain with Friendship Theory 2: first, we do not yet know the content of our filial obligations, and second, another theory might better explain the filial obligations the Friendship Theorist thinks we have. The first problem – that we do not yet know the content of our filial obligations – is reasonably easy to deal

with: the Friendship Theorist can claim that we have a range of obligations regarding our friends, and these can include anything from occasional phone calls to emotional, physical, or even financial support during times of hardship. Although Friendship Theory 2 does not generate a list of specific obligations, it still provides considerable guidance. We know, for instance, that if the relationship has gone fairly well, we ought not to terminate it unreasonably, and that if we do, we have residual obligations. Just as we have some sense of the range of things we ought to do for our friends, and that our specific obligations depend in large part on the history and depth of the friendship, we also have some sense of the range of things we ought to do for our parents. As in the case of friendship, our specific obligations to our parents will depend on the history and depth of our relationship with them. Even if Friendship Theory 2 does not *specify* the content of our obligations, it certainly helps guide us in deciding what we ought to do in any given case.

The second problem – that another theory might offer a better explanation of the filial obligations the Friendship Theorist thinks that we have – is more serious. To see why the project of finding a plausible theory of filial obligations is not yet complete despite the apparent advantages of adopting Friendship Theory 2, let's return to the case that initially troubled critics about the theory: the child who terminates the relationship with her parents simply to avoid filial obligations. Critics worry that Friendship Theory 1 licenses filial ingratitude. Indeed, English concedes that in this case, the child has no filial obligations. In his defense of something like Friendship Theory 2, Dixon rejects this conclusion, arguing instead that we have

grounds for criticizing the child. However, these grounds for criticism are entirely independent of (though compatible with) Friendship Theory 2. According to Dixon, “whatever fault [the child] has can be explained without reference to filial morality *per se*.”<sup>113</sup> He explains the child’s moral failure as one of ingratitude; that is to say, she fails to respond appropriately to her parents’ acts of benevolence. Dixon says, “the obligations of the cold child to her loving parents are based on the general duty to be grateful after a series of generous acts by an acquaintance or even a stranger.”<sup>114</sup> Even my own defense of Friendship Theory against this kind of objection suggests that in certain relationships, we owe gratitude.<sup>115</sup>

These responses appear to collapse Friendship Theory into Gratitude Theory, which I shall discuss in more depth in the next chapter. Dixon rejects this collapse, however, claiming that Gratitude Theory merely supplements Friendship Theory in problem cases such as the one under consideration:

“[The] fact that the cold child’s filial duties are not grounded in friendship reflects her impoverished relationship with her parents, and not any inadequacy in the friendship model. The friendship model is an account of the moral basis of filial duties in the vast majority of cases, where adult children either currently enjoy or have enjoyed some degree of friendship with their parents. It is not refuted by the logical possibility of unlikely deviant cases in which filial obligations are based on the weaker general duty of gratitude that we owe to *anyone* who is extremely generous.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Dixon, “The Friendship Model of Filial Obligations,” p. 84.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> I shall discuss the meaning of “owing” gratitude in the next chapter.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus, Dixon maintains that Friendship Theory 2 is the correct account of filial duties, but Friendship Theorists still have the resources to criticize the ungrateful child. Friendship Theorists need not tolerate filial ingratitude, for ingratitude is itself a moral failure.

However, the objection is not that there are no moral grounds on which to criticize the child; the objection is that *Friendship Theory* cannot explain why that child owes her parent anything, since no friendship exists. Certainly, we can talk about what the child ought to do, or how she ought to feel toward her parents, but the challenge to the Friendship Theorist is that if filial obligations just are obligations of friendship, as English maintains, then *on this theory*, the child has only those obligations that a former friend might have, such as an obligation not to betray confidences, for example.<sup>117</sup> This consequence is troubling, and appealing to a theory that is entirely independent of Friendship Theory will not satisfy the critics of Friendship Theory. Instead, such an appeal supports the critics' claim that Friendship Theory itself does not have the resources to criticize the child's behavior toward her parents.

My own attempt to defend Friendship Theory does not fare any better than Dixon's here. I argued that the child has already failed with respect to obligations of friendship because these obligations presumably include obligations of gratitude and obligations to avoid unreasonably terminating the relationship. Both Dixon's and my responses criticize the child for failing to discharge obligations of gratitude,

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<sup>117</sup> I am grateful to Claudia Card for suggesting that individuals may have obligations of *former* friends.

which we both suggest can arise within certain relationships.

Alternatively, one might say that the obligations are not properly obligations of gratitude but rather of respect; that is to say, the child who terminates her relationship with her parents to avoid foreseeable obligations to them fails to express appropriate respect for both her parents and her past relationship with them. Surely whatever else obligations of friendship demand of us, they must require us to be respectful of our friends and our friendships when such respect is appropriate. Thus, the ungrateful child acts wrongly because she fails to respect the relationship she has had with her parents, as well as her parents themselves. If this is so, Friendship Theory *can* explain what goes wrong in the case of the ungrateful child without appealing to an additional theory, like Gratitude Theory.

This move will not satisfy the critics of Friendship Theory for two reasons. First, as I shall show in the next chapter, Gratitude Theory of filial obligations requires that children respect their parents, when such respect is appropriate. Thus, even if Friendship Theory can explain our intuitions regarding the ungrateful child by appealing to our obligations of respect, Gratitude Theory can offer a similar explanation. Second, that critics accuse the child in the example of filial ingratitude suggests something about our intuitions regarding filial obligations; specifically, the objection suggests that we think grown children generally owe their parents gratitude.

We have good reason for thinking that obligations of gratitude are *not* simply obligations of friendship. First, though one friend might have an obligation of

gratitude toward another friend, obligations of gratitude can arise in relationships other than friendships.<sup>118</sup> Second, obligations of friendship arise because of a relationship of mutual affection, whereas obligations of gratitude arise within relationships of mutual respect.<sup>119</sup> Thus, the source of the obligations is different. Certainly, obligations of gratitude likely arise during friendships; however, obligations of gratitude are distinct from obligations of friendship.

A Gratitude Theory of filial obligations, then, would differ from a Friendship Theory in crucial ways. If what's gone wrong in the case of the ungrateful child is the ingratitude, then a Gratitude Theory might better capture this child's filial obligations than a Friendship Theory. If Friendship Theory can explain a majority of cases, but we must appeal to another theory in problem cases, then we would do well to consider carefully the merits of that theory to determine whether it is more than a resolution principle in tough cases. For this reason, I now turn to consider Gratitude Theory.

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<sup>118</sup> "The principle of gratitude regulates relations between individuals whether or not there is any intimate personal relationship between them" (Blustein, *Parents and Children*, p. 187).

<sup>119</sup> I shall discuss this more in the next chapter. Blustein captures this distinction nicely: "Gratitude is not properly friendliness toward benefactors, but rather respect for them, and the relationship of mutual respect between benefactor and grateful recipient is different from the relationship of mutual affection between one friend and another" (Blustein, *Parents and Children*, p. 187).

## Chapter Four: Gratitude Theory

### 4.1 The Theory

**Gratitude Theory:** one owes gratitude to one's parent in response to the parent's benevolence toward the child, so long as this gratitude serves to support rather than undermine relationships of mutual respect.

Given the concern about filial ingratitude as a consequence of Friendship Theory, one natural thought is that we owe our parents an obligation of gratitude. Although no one (as far as I know) has developed this intuition into a theory of filial obligation, some gratitude theorists suggest that it is the natural grounds of such an obligation.<sup>120</sup> Fred Berger, for instance, develops an account of gratitude, and briefly considers how it applies to the case of grown children:

“The sort of continual sacrifice and caring involved in a decent upbringing is not reciprocated to parents by a warm handshake at the legal age of independence. While the notion of gratitude to one's parents can easily be overdone, it is clear enough that an adequate showing of gratitude to them cannot be made with mere verbal expressions...It is very hard to say just what is appropriate, and it may be that there can be no answer in the abstract...It is clear, however, that a handshake or kiss on the cheek normally will not do.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> In “Shifting Perspectives: Filial Morality Revisited,” Li attributes Gratitude Theory to Jeffrey Blustein (pp. 216-218). However, Blustein's discussion of filial gratitude considers various accounts of gratitude (Aquinas' and Kant's, for example), and he explores what objections might arise to such views as the grounds for filial gratitude. Although he offers an explanation of what gratitude would *not* require (especially as compared with Debt and Friendship theories), and suggests, as other authors do, that children ought to be grateful to their parents, he does not develop a positive theory. For Blustein's discussion of filial gratitude, see *Parents and Children*, pp. 175-185. See also “On the Duties of Parents and Children,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (1977), pp. 427-441.

<sup>121</sup> Berger, Fred. “Gratitude” *Ethics*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (Jul., 1975), p. 303.

In what follows, I shall follow the literature and focus primarily on Fred Berger's work "Gratitude," and Claudia Card's article, "Gratitude and Obligation."<sup>122</sup> I shall begin by sketching a theory of gratitude based on Berger's and Card's works, and then consider what, if anything, such a theory tells us about filial obligations.

Although I shall argue ultimately that the result is inadequate as a theory of filial obligations, exploring the role of gratitude in the parent-child relationship will lay important groundwork for my own theory, which I present in Chapter 6.

The Gratitude Theory of obligation provides five considerations that aim to determine when obligations of gratitude arise and what an obligation of gratitude entails. The five considerations are as follows:

1. Gratitude is a three-part relation: X is grateful *to* Y *for* Z.
2. Gratitude is generally warranted in response to another's benevolence.
3. Gratitude is not something a benefactor has a right to, even though the beneficiary may owe it.
4. The beneficiary's debt of gratitude is a relatively informal obligation.
5. Obligations associated with gratitude might be impossible to discharge fully once and for all, though that does not imply that the obligation is itself overly demanding.

Before extending this theory to filial obligations, let us look briefly at each component.

First, on this view gratitude is a three-part relation. Genuine gratitude is directed toward someone, and it is for something. I might be very glad to enjoy certain benefits, even when no one is responsible for providing them to me. For

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<sup>122</sup> See Berger, "Gratitude," pp. 298-309 and Claudia Card, "Gratitude and Obligation" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Apr., 1988), pp. 115-127.

example, I might be glad that the Wisconsin winter is only seven months long rather than eight, but it would be misleading to say that I am *grateful* for the “shorter” winter, unless I believe that there is someone or something responsible for this benefit.<sup>123</sup> Genuine gratitude, then, requires someone to whom I can be grateful.<sup>124</sup>

Second, gratitude is in response to the *motivations* of another person, not only to the benefits or perceived benefits that person might provide.<sup>125</sup> Berger articulates this consideration as follows: “Gratitude, then, does not consist in the requital of benefits but in a response to *benevolence*; it is a response to a grant of benefits (or the attempt to benefit us) which was motivated by a desire to help us.”<sup>126</sup> To see why one might think that obligations of gratitude arise only in response to certain motivations, consider a case in which someone undertakes some

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<sup>123</sup> Card argues that one can experience gratitude, even if one is not grateful *to* someone or something. However, she restricts her discussion of *obligations* of gratitude to those cases in which one owes gratitude *to* someone. See Card, “Gratitude and Obligation,” p. 117.

<sup>124</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, I will only consider cases in which a person might be grateful *to someone*. I do not intend, however, to rule out the possibility that gratitude might be owed to institutions, such as the state. For more on this, see: George Klosko, “Political Obligation and Gratitude,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (Autumn, 1989), pp. 352-358; A.D.M. Walker, “Political Obligation and the Argument from Gratitude,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 3, (Summer, 1988), pp. 191-211; A.D.M. Walker, “Obligations of Gratitude and Political Obligation,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (Autumn, 1989), pp. 359-364.

<sup>125</sup> This leaves open the possibility that gratitude is warranted, even if the intended beneficiary is not, in fact, benefitted, and perhaps even if the intended beneficiary is harmed. This is certainly a questionable implication. Imagine an incompetent doctor who attempts to help me with some physical ailment and – due to his incompetence – he inadvertently and unnecessarily amputates my leg, but he does so with the very best of intentions. The suggestion that I owe gratitude in response will certainly strike some as bizarre. (I am grateful to Dan Hausman for raising this objection.) In offering an alternative theory of filial obligations based on obligations of gratitude, I hope to avoid this consequence by arguing that gratitude is owed in response to a particular kind of benefit rather than a particular kind of motive.

<sup>126</sup> Berger, “Gratitude,” p. 299.

action that benefits me, but this person does not foresee the benefit to me, and might have acted differently if he had foreseen this result. I do not owe gratitude if a benefit to me is accidental; if the person intended *not* to benefit me, gratitude seems inappropriate. Alternatively, if someone tries to benefit me but fails, I can be grateful for the effort, even though the effort yields no actual benefits.

However, even if the benefactor intends to benefit me, this is not sufficient to generate obligations of gratitude. A friend who offers to run some errand for me is benefiting me, perhaps even intentionally so. If, however, my friend makes this offer because he knows that he will need someone to run errands for him in the future, and he hopes his offer will place me in his debt, I do not owe him gratitude for his assistance. I might, in fact, feel grateful to him for his help, but I have no *obligation* of gratitude in this case. Gratitude is a response to benevolence; that is to say, when someone undertakes an action that aims to benefit me *because* it aims to benefit me, I have obligations of gratitude toward this person.<sup>127</sup> This understanding of gratitude ought to make clear the distinction between gratitude and reciprocity: reciprocity might be owed regardless of the intentions of the actor, whereas whether gratitude is owed depends almost entirely upon those intentions.<sup>128</sup>

Third, the benefactor has no right to gratitude, even if gratitude is owed. If I am drowning and a passerby risks his life to save me, I certainly ought to be grateful to him. If I am not, he may rightfully feel that he has been mistreated, and third

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<sup>127</sup> I shall consider what those obligations are shortly.

<sup>128</sup> This point will become particularly important when contrasting Gratitude Theories of filial obligation with Special Goods Theory of filial obligation.

parties may rightfully judge me to be reprehensibly selfish. Even so, this Good Samaritan has no right to my gratitude such that he or third parties could require that I experience and/or express it. As Card says, "Being obligated does not imply that others are free to pull strings."<sup>129</sup>

Fourth, obligations of gratitude are relatively informal. Unlike debt repayment, the terms of these obligations are imprecise and flexible. In some cases, appropriate gratitude might be expressed with a "thank you," whereas in others, gratitude might require greater sacrifice. Furthermore, obligations of gratitude may change over time if the relationship between the benefactor and beneficiary changes.

Fifth, the obligations might be ongoing and impossible to discharge fully, but this does not mean that they are overly demanding. Consider again the case in which a passerby risks his own safety to rescue me. A mere "thank you" might not serve as a sufficient expression of my gratitude. Indeed, this is the sort of case in which it seems appropriate for me to say, "I can't ever thank you enough." Even if this is true, it does not mean that I owe the passerby lavish gifts, constant praise, or a first-born child. It means only that my gratitude ought to be ongoing. This is not necessarily a demanding obligation, however. Gratitude might require only that I thank him and continue to behave kindly toward him in the future. On Berger's view, expressions of

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<sup>129</sup> Card, "Gratitude and Obligation," p. 122. Card distinguishes between obligation and duty. Card explains an obligation as a bond and the basis for duties, whereas duties themselves are responsibilities (p. 121). Duties can correlate with the rights of others, whereas we can have obligations that do not correspond to the rights of anyone else. One might think of the distinction as follows: if X has an obligation to Y, then X owes Y something, but it remains an open question whether Y is justified in demanding anything of X. As Card says, "It is one question whether I have an obligation and another whether someone else is justified in holding me to it" (p. 121).

gratitude need not be proportional to the benefits bestowed, for the motivation of the benefactor rather than the benefits themselves ground the obligation.

Of course, questions remain about what, specifically, obligations of gratitude require of us in various circumstances. One helpful strategy for answering these questions is to ask what role expressions of gratitude play in our moral relationships. If we determine what role gratitude plays in these relationships, then we will have some idea of what gratitude ought to accomplish. Berger offers the following description of what an expression of gratitude, when appropriate, accomplishes:

- (a) “The recipient shows he recognizes the value of the donor’s act – that is, that it was an act benefiting him and done *in order to* benefit him.
- (b) the recipient shows that he does not regard the *actor* as having value only as an instrument of his own welfare; and
- (c) a relationship of moral community is established, maintained, or recognized, consisting of mutual respect and regard.”<sup>130</sup>

An individual who recognizes that she has benefitted from the benevolence of someone else, but views that other person as there merely to provide such benefits does not – perhaps *cannot* – demonstrate genuine gratitude. Gratitude thus plays an essential role in our moral relationships as a way of manifesting our respect for others as ends in themselves, or as having value independently of the benefits they may provide to us. Paying close attention to the role gratitude plays in our relationships will help point us toward a Gratitude Theory of filial obligations.

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<sup>130</sup> Berger, “Gratitude,” p. 302.

According to Gratitude Theory, the obligations one has to one's parents are based on gratitude, and discharging those obligations serves as an expression of one's gratitude.<sup>131</sup> As in other moral relationships, gratitude in the parent-child relationship is not always appropriate. Parents who invest heavily in their child's education might bestow substantial benefits on the child. However, the child may have no obligations of gratitude toward his parents if they sought to bestow such benefits exclusively for self-serving reasons. Berger cites fictional cases in which parents aim to keep their own family in good social status and, driven by this aim, they try to secure as many benefits as possible for their child.<sup>132</sup> Here, the child may feel grateful to his parents for these benefits; nonetheless, the child does not *owe* gratitude. Because gratitude is a response to benevolence, the child owes gratitude only if the parents attempt to bestow these benefits on the child *because they benefit the child*.<sup>133</sup>

Recall, a concern about the original version of Debt Theory was that children incur debts for benefits that they do not voluntarily accept and might reject if given the choice. Gratitude Theory of filial obligations, however, embraces this outcome, for it does not distinguish between those benefits the child voluntarily accepts and those the child does not. Jeffrey Blustein explains this feature of gratitude as follows:

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<sup>131</sup> Talk of "discharging" obligations of gratitude is slightly misleading, for such obligations might be the sort of obligation we do not fully discharge. For more on this, see Card, "Gratitude and Obligation," especially p. 121. I shall discuss the issue of discharging obligations of gratitude shortly.

<sup>132</sup> Berger, "Gratitude," p. 300.

<sup>133</sup> Of course, identifying which motivations determined the parent's actions would be quite difficult, since motivations will, in reality, often be mixed.

“That we did not request those services does not itself entail that we have no duty to show gratitude for them. Indeed, since gratitude is essentially a response to benevolence, it seems that we may have a duty to show gratitude (at some point) for benefits that we did not voluntarily accept but only received, and for benefits which, at the time they were provided, were judged to be benefits by the grantor alone, and not by the recipient.”<sup>134</sup>

Gratitude Theory does, however, distinguish between the lack of voluntary acceptance and a preference to *not* be the recipient of another’s generosity. In her discussion of Gratitude Theory, Card notes that gratitude may not be owed if the benefactor has disregarded the beneficiary’s wishes and cautions against confusing generosity with benevolence. Generosity, Card explains, “can be accompanied by insensitivity to others’ wishes with regard to becoming obligated” whereas “[g]enuine benevolence is incompatible with disregarding others’ willingness to become obligated. Those who lack such regard thereby lack respect.”<sup>135</sup>

Furthermore, on the version of Gratitude Theory of filial obligations presented here, children may owe gratitude even for those benefits the parent was morally obligated to provide, such as food and shelter. After all, the parents need not provide food and shelter from a motive of duty; instead, the parents may meet the child’s needs precisely because the parents have concern for the child’s wellbeing and want to benefit the child.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Blustein, *Parents and Children*, p. 180.

<sup>135</sup> Card, “Gratitude and Obligation,” p. 124. I am grateful to Claudia Card for drawing my attention to this distinction.

<sup>136</sup> “It is not necessary for parents to go beyond their duty, or to do things for their children that they have no duty to do, before it is appropriate to ask what the children must do to show their gratitude

Appropriate expressions of gratitude are those that support rather than undermine the mutual respect necessary for moral relationships. This condition requires “the mutual demonstration of respect and regard – the indication that neither treats the other, or the sacrifices of the other, as a mere means to his own welfare.”<sup>137</sup> This condition is, unfortunately, vague; however, Berger and Card offer examples that go some way toward developing a fuller explanation of it.

For example, if one devotes one’s life to satisfying the whims of one’s benefactor, one fails to recognize oneself as an end, independent of the benefactor; instead, one views oneself or one’s sacrifices as entirely instrumental. Berger refers to this level of gratitude as “pathological.”<sup>138</sup> Similarly, if a benefactor demands or relies on expressions of gratitude, the benefactor indicates that he views the beneficiary as merely a means to an end; consequently, the beneficiary does not owe gratitude to the benefactor in this case. Of this sort of case, Berger says, “The constant expectation of concessions as a sign of gratitude can be an oppression...To use the fact of one’s past aid in order to control another’s life is to deny him the independence befitting a moral agent.”<sup>139</sup> Thus, on Berger’s view, expressions of

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to the parents” (Blustein, *Parents and Children*, p. 183). However, Blustein suggests that at least part of the explanation for this is the value of the benefits, particularly benefits such as food, shelter, and education, to the child. He suggests that if parents merely act according to duty and doing so requires no great sacrifice and/or fails to produce valuable benefits, then gratitude is not owed. This does not fit well with his earlier emphasis – following Berger and Card – on the motivation of the parent in offering those benefits.

<sup>137</sup> Berger, “Gratitude,” p. 305.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 304-305.

gratitude should not indicate a lack of self-respect or respect for others; where they do, they undermine rather than help maintain moral relationships.

Card also focuses on the role gratitude plays in the moral relationships between individuals. She argues that gratitude is not owed – and may even be inappropriate – if the benefactor indicates a lack of respect or regard for the beneficiary. Card says, “willingness to become obligated to others despite their lack of respect raises the question, at least, whether one lacks self-respect.”<sup>140</sup> Again, if expressions of gratitude indicate a lack of self-respect, then they are not playing the crucial role such expressions are supposed to play in our moral relationships.<sup>141</sup> In such cases, not only is gratitude not obligatory, but it may be entirely inappropriate.<sup>142</sup>

Berger places an upper limit on the demands of such an obligation: whatever an obligation of gratitude requires of us, it cannot require that we forfeit our autonomy. Autonomy, according to Berger, entails broad control over the shape of

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<sup>140</sup> Card, “Gratitude and Obligation,” p. 124.

<sup>141</sup> This condition remains largely undefined in the literature. I shall develop this condition more thoroughly in my positive account of filial duties in Chapter 6; in doing so, I will use the condition in a way that is consistent with the literature on gratitude, but which allows for considerable flexibility in the specific interpretation of the condition (and consequently the implications it generates).

<sup>142</sup> In “Gratitude and Justice,” Patrick Fitzgerald argues that we have moral reasons for cultivating gratitude toward those who harm us. According to Fitzgerald, we have moral reasons for overcoming anger, and “cultivating gratitude will be the most effective way to overcome anger or hatred” (*Ethics*, Vol. 109, No. 1, (Oct., 1998), p. 132). Here, the obligation is an obligation to oneself. Certainly, we might have any number of reasons to cultivate an attitude of gratefulness, its correlation to happiness with one’s life being one among many. However, the question at hand is when gratitude is *owed* to someone else; surely, a victim of abuse does not *owe* gratitude to his/her abuser. For a criticism of the view that gratitude is owed even for intentional harm, see Li, “Shifting Perspectives,” p. 214.

our own lives. Berger offers the following justification for such a limit: "To treat someone as a person in his own right entails granting him the right to work out the plan of his life as he sees fit."<sup>143</sup> Berger reasons that even if I ought to express gratitude to a particular benefactor, that fact does not obviously grant the benefactor the right to *demand* anything from me.

Recall, Dixon cites something like a theory of gratitude as an explanation for what goes wrong in the case of filial ingratitude, but he maintains that Friendship Theory offers the most plausible explanation of our filial obligations. As I have suggested, however, the two theories – Friendship and Gratitude – are different. Although friends will surely have reasons for gratitude toward one another, the obligations are different in important ways. Likewise, although Gratitude Theory grounds obligations in the parents' past actions, the theory is distinct from a straightforward Debt Theory in important ways. Contrasting Gratitude Theory of filial obligations with those theories previously considered will help to develop a fuller picture of the theory. I shall consider the difference between Gratitude and Debt Theory first.

Given the picture I have offered here, either version of Debt Theory will yield quite different filial obligations than Gratitude Theory will yield. According to Debt Theory 1, which demands repayment for a parent's investment of resources, the motivation of the parent is irrelevant. Consequently, a child can owe repayment to a parent who views the child as a mere means to the parent's end. According to

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<sup>143</sup> Berger, "Gratitude," p. 304.

Gratitude Theory, however, the parent's motivations determine whether the child has any filial obligations. Debt Theory 2 also differs from Gratitude Theory. According to Debt Theory 2, the child only owes repayment for those benefits that she has voluntarily accepted, and perhaps only those investments the child has agreed to repay. On Debt Theory 2, the child owes repayment of a loan when a loan is made. Of course, this is precisely the sort of contractual arrangement where gratitude might not be required. As in the case of Debt Theory 1, the motivations of the parent in offering the loan are irrelevant. According to Gratitude Theory, however, the motivations behind the offer of the loan determine whether the child has an obligation of gratitude. If the parent offers a loan for purely selfish reasons, the child might nonetheless feel grateful; however, gratitude is not obligatory. The theories are distinct, despite the similar terminology.

In order to distinguish owing *gratitude* from owing *a debt*, Card considers and rejects Kant's definition of gratitude as "honoring a person because of a kindness he has done us".<sup>144</sup> On Kant's view, gratitude amounts to some form of praise for the benefactor. The beneficiary, however, is in quite a different and apparently less desirable position. Kant regards accepting a favor as placing oneself in debt; thus, a Kantian interpretation of gratitude is analogous to the debtor-creditor relationship.<sup>145</sup> The benefactor has effectively issued a loan to the

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<sup>144</sup> Kant, *Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Harper, 1964), p. 123.

<sup>145</sup> Again, English's Friendship Theory is quite similar; rather than acts of friendship, favors are essentially loans for which repayment ought to be made.

beneficiary, and the beneficiary must now repay that loan. Furthermore, the debtor must honor, or praise, the creditor for the loan. On this view, we have reason to avoid accepting the kindness of our friends. Interestingly, on Kant's view, the debt of gratitude *cannot* be repaid. Consequently, "a thing of joy [becomes] a burden forever."<sup>146</sup>

In rejecting Kant's view, Card suggests the following understanding of debts of gratitude: "Owing gratitude is more like having accepted a deposit, than like having taken out a loan."<sup>147</sup> Understanding a debt of gratitude in this way, as different from formal debts, allows for the possibility of genuine gratitude, even between genuine friends, while still explaining why debts of gratitude might be impossible to repay fully. Card explains the contrast between her proposed paradigm and the creditor-debtor paradigm:

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<sup>146</sup> Card, "Gratitude and Obligation," p. 117. As Card points out, there are serious problems with Kant's analysis of gratitude, as well as the relationships in which gratitude is appropriate. First, the reason the benefactor deserves praise is that he was "first in benevolence" (Kant, *Doctrine of Virtue*, p. 123). The praise constitutes an objective evaluation of the benefactor's character; the benefactor acted as one ought to act, and deserves praise for having done so. Of course, this type of praise need not come from the beneficiary; praise for the benefactor's benevolence can come from anyone. Thus, on a Kantian account, gratitude does not appear to be something unique to the benefactor-beneficiary relationship. Card rejects this conclusion. Rather than being something that any third party can feel toward the benefactor, gratitude is something only the beneficiary can genuinely feel. This is good reason to think of gratitude as something other than an objective moral evaluation. In fact, objectively, the benefactor's character may be questionable, at best, and the beneficiary may know this to be true. In rejecting Kant's explanation of gratitude, Card says, "Those who deserve our gratitude are better prized than praised. The credit we give acknowledges that their good will was of value *to us*, that they pleased us, for example. It is not an entirely objective assessment of their character" ("Gratitude and Obligation," p. 119). Explained in this way, it is clear why gratitude is something only the beneficiary can feel: third parties are not in a position to experience the beneficiary's good will or deed as valuable *to them*.

<sup>147</sup> Card, p. 121.

“In taking out a loan, I am extended credit. My position is inferior to that of my creditor, in that I am subject to non-reciprocal constraints – at least sensible creditors so arrange matters. By contrast, in receiving a deposit, I already have credit. I do not have to prove myself; my judgment is relied upon. Deposits are a source of pride. As a beneficiary, I can regard myself as the “trustee” of another’s good will or concern. I cannot literally return another’s good will, but I can reciprocate it.”<sup>148</sup>

I cannot simply discharge my debt of gratitude by reciprocating my benefactor’s good will once on some particular occasion. Rather, the obligation to “return” the good will might always be present. In keeping with the trustee paradigm, Card says, “If someone has deposited something with me for safekeeping, I carry out my responsibility so long as I keep the thing safely, and who knows when or whether the other will return for it?”<sup>149</sup>

From Card’s discussion of debts of gratitude, we can identify two further differences between Debt Theory and Gratitude Theory of filial obligations. First, whereas a debtor can repay his debt, at least in principle, a beneficiary might never fully discharge her debt of gratitude. As I noted earlier, however, the fact that an obligation cannot be discharged does not imply that the obligation is particularly demanding or oppressive.

Second, rather than creating an imbalance in the relationship that a reasonable person would want to avoid, appropriate gratitude strengthens

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* Blustein offers a similar criticism of Kant’s view of gratitude: “it is only when we mistakenly suppose that the aim of gratitude is to rectify some moral imbalance, to restore something that rightfully belongs to another, that we feel the need to protect ourselves against others’ claims to repayment (namely, by stipulating that merely receiving benefits of others never creates a duty of gratitude to them)” (Blustein, *Parents and Children*, p. 181).

<sup>149</sup> Card, “Gratitude and Obligation,” p. 121.

relationships. Card explains this contrast as follows: "In paying a debt, I discharge that obligation. I am no longer bound to my former creditor; that special relationship is concluded. By contrast, living up to informal obligations tends to confirm, or reaffirm, the special relationship involved rather than to bring it to a close. As I live up to my obligations to friends and associates, we become closer friends and associates."<sup>150</sup> Thus, viewing debts of gratitude as informal obligations and evaluating them using a trustee paradigm rather than a creditor-debtor paradigm better explains why gratitude seems appropriate between genuine friends rather than something that threatens to cripple the relationship.

Gratitude Theory is also distinct from Friendship Theory, though many of the demands might overlap. As the filial ingratitude objection and reply suggest, obligations of gratitude can extend beyond friendship; even after a friendship dissolves, obligations of gratitude for past benevolence may persist. The basis for obligations of friendship is the friendship itself, whereas the basis for obligations of gratitude is, at least on this view, benevolence. Although parents may behave benevolently toward their children because of a relationship that resembles a friendship, the friendship itself does not ground obligations of gratitude.

Returning to the example of those benefits the parent is required to provide, such as food and shelter, we can easily see the difference between the two theories. At the time that parents are morally obligated to provide such things – when the child is very young – a friendship might be forming such that in later years, the two

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

will have a relationship that is analogous to a friendship. However, at the moment, the child might be too young for the parent-child relationship to be comparable to even a non-ideal friendship. Although a friendship might form later, and obligations of friendship would then arise, the grounds for an obligation of gratitude might already be present. If a friendship does not emerge between the two later, the obligation of gratitude remains.<sup>151</sup> If a friendship emerges, the parent and child have obligations of friendship; the child's obligation of gratitude does not, however, dissolve.<sup>152</sup> Because the grounds for the obligations are distinct, the theories themselves are similarly distinct.

## 4.2 Problems

Simon Keller questions the plausibility of the Gratitude Theory of filial obligations. According to Keller, Gratitude Theory generates obligations that are fundamentally different from the sorts of obligations a grown child has to her parents. As I will argue, Keller's arguments rest on serious misunderstandings or mischaracterizations of Gratitude Theory.

To begin, Keller offers the following example:

“Suppose that you go out of your way to make sure that you are with your mother while she goes through a difficult medical procedure. What (conceivably) makes your act obligatory is the fact that your

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<sup>151</sup> Indeed, this intuition motivates both my own and Dixon's response to the filial ingratitude objection.

<sup>152</sup> For further discussion of this, see Blustein, *Parents and Children*, pp. 193-195.

mother needs or wants you there, that things will be better for her in certain respects if you are around – not the fact (if it is a fact) that your presence will be understood by your mother as showing that you are grateful for the sacrifices that she has made for you in the past . . . Suppose that your mother is losing her mental powers, and will not be able to link your care for her in the present with her care for you in the past. Then your act will not make clear to her your gratitude, but that does not show that you have no duty to perform it.”<sup>153</sup>

On this reading of Gratitude Theory, we are not only required to demonstrate gratitude to our parents, but our actions must be understood by our parents as demonstrations of gratitude.

However, nothing in Gratitude Theory requires “uptake.” Such a requirement would be clearly problematic, for surely there is no conceptual problem with being grateful to someone who is no longer alive; similarly, we can easily imagine demonstrations of gratitude for gifts from anonymous benefactors. Imagine a case in which a wealthy alum funds a scholarship for the advancement of women in the field of philosophy, and I benefit from this gift. Nothing in Gratitude Theory renders it conceptually impossible for me to a) be grateful, or b) demonstrate my gratitude. I might go on to establish a similar fund for women in the field, or I might work to ensure that the money spent on my professional development does not go to waste. According to Gratitude Theory, gratitude serves to demonstrate respect; surely, we can express respect even if the subject of our respect is unable to appreciate it as such. Indeed, we might consider visiting a sick parent to be a demonstration of gratitude precisely because we believe that our parent wants or needs us to visit, and things will be better for the parent if we do so.

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<sup>153</sup> Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty*, p. 106.

Keller also objects to Gratitude Theory on the grounds that it makes filial obligations contingent on the degree to which the parent has sacrificed in the past. According to Keller's reading of Gratitude Theory, "the appropriateness of feelings of gratitude and the extent of duties to demonstrate them depend upon how much discomfort, exertion and genuine sacrifice have been involved in providing the relevant benefit, and this makes duties to demonstrate gratitude different in a further respect from filial duties."<sup>154</sup> Consider the following example: two friends help a mutual friend move into a new house, but one finds moving enjoyable while the other finds it onerous. On this reading of Gratitude Theory, the beneficiary incurs a stronger or more extensive obligation of gratitude toward the friend who finds the process onerous. Analogously, a child owes more to a parent who sacrificed a great deal than she would owe to a parent whose sacrifice was less substantial. Keller finds this an unacceptable consequence of Gratitude Theory. He says, "It would be odd to think that your duty to look after your father in his old age is mitigated by his having found parenting so trouble-free."<sup>155</sup>

Again, this objection to Gratitude Theory rests on mischaracterization. According to Card and Berger, demonstrations of gratitude are meant to indicate respect for the benefactor as an end in herself. On this theory, the person who moves into the new house ought to demonstrate recognition that her friends are ends in themselves. Thus, when the beneficiary demonstrates gratitude, she is

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<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

showing that a) an action was undertaken that benefitted her, b) this benefit to her was the reason the action was undertaken, and c) the benefactor is an end in herself and not merely a means to acquiring this benefit. The satisfaction of these criteria is not a matter of degree. Consequently, Gratitude Theory need not say that the friend who sacrificed much is owed more than the friend who did not.<sup>156</sup>

Similarly, the child of the parent who sacrificed a great deal need not owe her parent more than the child of the parent who found parenting easy and enjoyable. Just as in the moving case, Gratitude Theory requires that the child value the parent as someone who undertook certain actions to benefit the child, and as someone who is not merely a means to acquiring this benefit. Perhaps, the content of one's obligations of gratitude would be different if, say, making a comparable sacrifice were required to demonstrate genuine gratitude; however, Gratitude Theory need not conclude that the difficult child owes more gratitude than the easy child. Again, Keller's criticism rests on a misrepresentation of the theory.

Finally, Keller objects, "the kinds of things that children might have to do to fulfill filial duties are very different from the kinds of things that can legitimately be expected in fulfillment of duties to demonstrate gratitude. Filial duties, but not duties to show gratitude, are ongoing and open-ended, and can be very demanding."<sup>157</sup> Keller concludes this from the fact that there is nothing in our "current repertoire of gestures of gratitude" that would demonstrate gratitude for

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<sup>156</sup> It's possible that the greater sacrifice offers further *evidence* of benevolence on the part of the friend.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

incredible sacrifice, such as the sacrifice undertaken to rear a child.<sup>158</sup> Sending a card or flowers seems laughably insufficient as a demonstration of gratitude in such cases. Expression of such gratitude is made more difficult by the fact that we generally think that for most acts of benevolence, a card or flowers discharges our duty of gratitude; we have shown our appreciation for the benefactor's benevolence, and nothing more is required of us.

This strikes me as the least convincing objection to Gratitude Theory, for two reasons. First, there may very well be something in our current repertoire of gestures that indicates gratitude for this kind of benevolence: going to great lengths to care for someone who has cared for us in the past, as many grown children do for their parents, seems to be a perfect candidate for a gesture of gratitude that is at least comparable to the benevolence in question. Second, neither Card nor Berger claims that duties of gratitude may be discharged in a single gesture. In fact, they explicitly reject this suggestion.

Keller's criticism of Gratitude Theory as a theory of filial obligations is arguably the most thorough discussion of the matter (at least that I know of). However, many of his concerns about Gratitude Theory arise from a pre-existing set of intuitions about filial obligations. In the coming chapter, I shall challenge some of these pre-existing claims; however, as I said in the previous chapter, the project is to reconcile a theory of filial obligations with our intuitions about those obligations, so the source of Keller's concern is a reasonable one. More importantly, however,

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<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Keller's criticisms of Gratitude Theory rest on a misunderstanding of the theory itself. Keller's extension of the theory to filial obligations carries with it those misunderstandings. A more charitable interpretation of Gratitude Theory will avoid each of the objections raised in this section.

Despite having avoided the objections of the previous section, Gratitude Theory is not unproblematic, by itself or when considered as a view of filial obligations. Though some of the most well-formulated objections to Gratitude Theory rest on fundamental misunderstandings of the view, the theory fails to serve as an adequate account of filial obligations on at least one front: the theory does not offer any action-guiding principles. This is not simply the claim that the theory does not precisely specify the content of filial obligations, but rather that we do not even know the *sort* of action required by the theory. Gratitude might require a certain expression of gratitude, or it might require adopting a particular attitude toward the benefactor. In the former case, we still do not know what sorts of actions would constitute expressions of gratitude, particularly in the case of gratitude for something as extensive as having raised a child well. In the latter case, we must answer questions about whether and how a moral theory can require that someone adopt a particular attitude.

Although it can place constraints on filial obligations, Gratitude Theory does not explain what filial obligations demand. Appropriate expressions of gratitude to a benevolent parent could range anywhere from a "thank you" to the provision of costly long-term care. Gratitude Theory might give some guidance as to what,

specifically, is required, but not much. For example, a “thank you” arguably fails to indicate recognition of the value of the parent’s actions, and devoting one’s entire life to expressing gratitude to one’s parents might indicate a lack of self-respect which would undermine the moral relationship. Beyond this possible guidance away from extremes, however, Gratitude Theory does not specify what filial obligations demand.<sup>159</sup> Berger notes the difficulty with identifying what, exactly, obligations of gratitude require: “it is a debt which differs in important ways from others, and there seem to be no acts which it is our duty to perform in order to discharge the debt, even though a range of acts may be sufficient.”<sup>160</sup>

The defense I offered on behalf of Friendship Theory 2 will not work here. There, I suggested that the Friendship Theorist could simply say that although the theory does not specify the precise obligations we have, it provides some guidance about the range of things we ought to do for our friends and, by extension, our parents. The Gratitude Theorist cannot make this move because the problem here is not simply that Gratitude Theory cannot identify a single act which it is our duty to do to discharge our obligation of gratitude. A theory that offers a range of possible actions that would satisfy our obligations might be preferable to a theory that offers rigid obligations. Indeed, considering the concerns about the rigidity of the Debt Theory, we seem to prefer moral theories that leave *some* room for discretion and spontaneity.

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<sup>159</sup> In Kantian terminology, this is part of what makes the obligation an imperfect one. I am grateful to Claudia Card for drawing my attention to this.

<sup>160</sup> Berger, “Gratitude,” p. 306. Again, we might not be able to discharge the debt fully.

The problem is that Gratitude Theory does not specify the range of actions, or even the *sorts* of actions that would satisfy our obligations. Gratitude Theory might require no actions at all but rather only a certain emotional experience, namely the experience of being grateful to the benefactor. If Gratitude Theory offers a range of possible expressions of gratitude, we will still require some guidance as to the appropriate range of actions; that is to say, we still need to know whether something like a thank-you or flowers would be appropriate, or whether something like paying for expensive medical care is required. If Gratitude Theory requires a particular emotional attitude, then we must answer well-known problems associated with requiring emotional experiences. Thus, unlike Friendship Theory, Gratitude Theory cannot give us *any* guidance about what we ought to do for our parents.<sup>161</sup>

Consequently, Gratitude Theory is an insufficient account of what we ought to do for our parents, for it fails to satisfy the first criterion of an adequate theory of filial obligations; although it tells us *that* we sometimes have filial obligations, and why we have those obligations, it does not tell us what those obligations are. Importantly, it does not even tell us that *actions* are necessary. Not only does the theory not tell us what range of actions might satisfy our obligations, but it does not tell us what *sorts* of actions would satisfy our obligations. Moreover, in making our filial obligations a response to our parents' motivations rather than any benefits we

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<sup>161</sup> One might argue – plausibly, I think – that someone who experiences genuine gratitude will very likely express that gratitude. Nonetheless, the question is about what obligations we have, not what we are likely to do once we meet our obligations.

actually receive, the theory generates results that will strike some as counter-intuitive, for according to this theory, we might have extensive obligations of gratitude, even if our parents' actions caused us serious harm.<sup>162</sup>

Of course, we could alter Gratitude Theory, changing both the grounds of such obligations and the kinds of obligations the theory generates. Ultimately, this is what I hope to do. Before doing this, however, I shall consider a theory of filial obligations that both specifies the content of our obligations *and* says these obligations are owed because of benefits rather than a particular motivation. If successful, Special Goods Theory of filial obligation will avoid the problems that arise with Gratitude Theory. Although I will argue that Special Goods Theory is not itself a plausible theory of filial obligations, it will help shape the new version of Gratitude Theory I will offer in Chapter 6. For this reason, I now turn to Special Goods Theory of filial obligations.

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<sup>162</sup> I am grateful to Dan Hausman for raising this objection.

## Chapter Five: Special Goods Theory

### 5.1 The Theory

If (a) a parent needs some special good, (b) the parent has provided and/or currently provides special goods to the child, and (c) the child is able to provide the special good that the parent needs, then the child ought to provide that special good to the parent.

In contrast to the previous theories, Special Goods Theory of filial obligations focuses on the *benefits* to the child and the *needs* of the parent. Specifically, this theory states that the parent-child relationship is one that makes possible certain special goods. According to Simon Keller, a defender of Special Goods Theory, special goods are those that “contribute to individual welfare, meaning that they are goods that benefit an individual, or that contribute to her well-being, or her best interests” and which “the parent can receive from no one (or almost no one) but the child, or the child can receive from no one (or almost no one) but the parent.”<sup>163</sup> Generic goods, on the other hand, are those that can easily arise from other sources.

When children are younger, they require certain special goods in order to flourish; similarly, ageing parents require certain special goods from their children.<sup>164</sup> For example, a child benefits greatly from having someone who is

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<sup>163</sup> Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty*, pp. 123-124. See also “Four Theories of Filial Duty” in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 223, pp. 254-274. I shall discuss his view at length in this chapter.

<sup>164</sup> In their paper, “Legitimate Parental Partiality,” Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift offer a defense of the family that appeals to the special goods the institution produces. Examples of such goods are:

- 1) “Children enjoy the loving attention of, and bond with, a particular adult, a relationship that is widely regarded as essential for their emotional development.

committed to meeting her particular needs. Later in life, a parent enjoys the security provided by the presence of someone with a special duty of care for her. Furthermore, special goods as defined are unique, or virtually unique, to the parent-child relationship. Keller says:

“If you are like most of us, there will be only a few people who will be prepared to make significant sacrifices in order to make sure that you get what you need. And it is very likely that those people will be your parents or grown children, perhaps along with other family members or a romantic partner; it is certainly likely that they are the ones that you could approach with full confidence that they will do whatever is needed. It is good to have such people around. In having such a special concern for you, they can add a level of protection against some of the worst possibilities that life might present . . . In other relationships, even in very strong friendships, such dedication is hard to find. (And when it is found, it is natural to describe the people in question being like brothers or sisters, or sharing a relationship that is like one between a parent and child.) In light of this fact, there is an important sense in which having someone who is especially prepared to do what is needed to protect your interests is a good that is special to the parent-child relationship.”<sup>165</sup>

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- 2) Children enjoy a sense of continuity with (or belonging or attachment to) the past, mediated by acquaintance with their own family members.
  - 3) Children enjoy the security provided by the presence of someone with a special duty of care for them.
  - 4) Parents enjoy a distinctively valuable relationship with their children; one that is intimate and mutually loving, but in which the parent acts as a fiduciary for her child’s nondevelopmental interests and for her interests in physical, cognitive, emotional, and moral development, which include, usually, the interest in becoming an adult who is independent of her parents, capable of taking over responsibility for her own judgment and for her own welfare” (p. 53).

Even this short list of examples shows that the special goods that the parent-child relationship can help realize are not only good for the child; the parent enjoys special goods in virtue of the relationship, as well. For more on this special goods defense of the family, see *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 1: pp. 43-80.

<sup>165</sup> Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty*, p. 126.

To see more clearly the difference between special and generic goods, consider some goods parents enjoy from their children: assistance with medical care, assistance in times of financial difficulty, assistance with simple errands such as going to the grocery store, etc. Similarly, children benefit from a wide range of goods from their parents: assistance with financing higher education, assistance in acquiring a particular skill, such as cooking, carpentry, sewing, etc.<sup>166</sup> Whether these goods are *special* depends on the social context in which they arise. Elderly individuals who need assistance with medical care can, at least in principle, find assistance with their medical care or help with simple errands. Similarly, children can, at least in principle, find assistance financing higher education or acquiring particular skills. In a society with a robust welfare state, these may be generic goods likely to arise outside of the parent-child relationship. In practice, of course, these may turn out to be special goods.

Other goods require *in principle* a special kind of relationship. Consider a parent's interest in an on-going relationship with her child. Keller says, "You might value your child's keeping in touch, but not because you want to be in touch with someone and your child is someone. The good in question is the good of having your child, the one you raised and the one you love and care about, make an effort to keep in touch. Beyond the good of having people around for Christmas, there is the good of having your children around for Christmas. These are goods that your children

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<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

are uniquely placed to provide.”<sup>167</sup> Since only the child can provide these goods, they are special rather than generic goods. Again, which goods are special and which are generic will depend on the society. Henceforth, I will consider as special any good that contributes to the welfare of an individual and that the individual is unlikely to get outside of the relationship, either because of practical concerns or because of the nature of the good in question.

Having established the sorts of goods that count as special goods, we can develop a Special Goods Theory of filial obligations, according to which your filial obligations just are obligations to provide your parents with the special goods they need, so long as they have provided or currently provide special goods to you. Although I shall offer three distinct formulations of the view, Special Goods theories generally have a clear advantage over both Friendship and Gratitude theories: they offer a precise account of what the child owes the parent, namely whatever special goods the parent needs that the child is able to provide.<sup>168</sup> On this view, filial obligations arise so long as the three conditions are satisfied, and when those conditions are satisfied, the child ought to provide his parent with the special goods the parent needs. Thus, Special Goods Theory fares well with respect to the first criterion for an adequate theory of filial obligations: the theory specifies the content of our filial obligations.

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>168</sup> In what follows, all discussion focuses on obligations to *provide* certain goods. Some special goods are entirely sentimental in nature and are generated by the relationship itself (emotional security, e.g.); consequently, they are not the sorts of goods that can be provided directly. In those cases, to provide the goods is to do whatever is required to *produce* the goods.

The grounds of filial obligations are not immediately obvious. Given the initial statement of the theory, I suggest two candidates: reciprocity and ability. Although I shall argue that either possible justification for filial obligations will produce extremely counter-intuitive results, we should first consider what each theory – Special Goods based on reciprocity and Special Goods based on ability – would look like. Note that the two grounds are not mutually exclusive; that is to say, we can easily construct a Special Goods Theory based on reciprocity *and* ability. Although Keller clearly has something like this in mind when he defends a Special Goods Theory of filial obligations, I shall argue that Keller’s Special Goods Theory is inadequate as a theory of filial obligations. Let’s now consider each of these theories separately.

#### **5.1.1. Special Goods Theory – Reciprocity**

According to Special Goods based on reciprocity (henceforth SGT<sub>R</sub>):

If (a) a parent needs some special good, (b) the parent has provided and/or currently provides special goods to the child, and (c) the child is able to provide the special good that the parent needs, then reciprocity demands that the child provide that special good to the parent.

One feature of this theory is worth noting up front: (b) may be satisfied even if the parent did not provide the child with special goods during her childhood. The condition is not satisfied *only if* the parent met the child’s needs when she was a child. The condition could just as easily be satisfied if the two form a relationship later in life. In this case, then, the three conditions can be satisfied even if the parent was largely absent during the child’s younger years. Similarly, the three conditions

could be satisfied even in the absence of a current relationship. If the parent has provided special goods in the past, but no longer does so, each of the conditions is satisfied, and the child has filial obligations. What one ought to do for one's parent is determined by what the parent needs, what the child can provide, and what the parent has done *or does* for the child.

This theory fares well with respect to our first two criteria for an adequate theory of filial obligations: it specifies the content of our obligations, when they arise, and it tells us *why* those obligations arise. However, the theory generates counter-intuitive results, in large part because it is only a slight modification of Debt Theory.

Whereas Debt Theory says that children owe repayment for parental investments, SGT<sub>R</sub> demands repayment only for *benefits*, specifically benefits in the form of special goods. Thus, whereas Debt Theory generates obligations regardless of whether the child in fact benefits from the parent's investment, SGT<sub>R</sub> makes repayment contingent upon the child having enjoyed certain special goods. Furthermore, whereas Debt Theory demands repayment regardless of whether the parent needs repayment, SGT<sub>R</sub> demands repayment only if the parent needs some special good. Otherwise, however, the two views are remarkably similar.

To see why SGT<sub>R</sub> will yield obligations similar to those we found under Debt Theory, consider a case in which a father unreasonably disowns his son, perhaps in

the wake of having discovered that the son received a B on a recent math test.<sup>169</sup>

Later in life, the father requires some special good. Does the son have an obligation to provide that good in this case? The proponent of SGT<sub>R</sub> cannot offer a principled reason for thinking that he does not.

This is not to say that the son necessarily has filial obligations in this case; however, the explanation for the absence of such obligations could only be that the unreasonable disowning diminished the value of past special goods and/or rendered the son unable to provide the special good the parent currently needs. This line of reasoning suggests that one of the conditions for filial obligations is unsatisfied, and so the son does not have filial obligations. However, this would be an accidental feature of this particular case; we can easily alter the case such that all of the conditions are satisfied. In this case, the son would apparently have filial obligations.

In fact, depending on the social background in which this discussion takes place, the son's obligations could be quite extensive. For example, imagine this case against a social background lacking a robust welfare state, where the provision of both education and healthcare are the responsibility of individuals. If the parent has provided education to the son, and the parent now requires expensive medical care, SGT<sub>R</sub> seems committed to saying that the son has an obligation to provide the care, assuming he is able to do so. Although the son may be financially unable to provide

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<sup>169</sup> I do not intend to offer general conditions for when disowning is reasonable or unreasonable, but I assume this case would be a clear instance of the latter.

the care, the demise of the relationship itself would not relieve him of his filial obligations in this case.

As with Debt Theory, SGT<sub>R</sub> does not make filial obligations contingent upon the current state of the relationship. Of course, the current state of the relationship may render the child unable to provide certain special goods. For example, if the parent in the previous case requires the loving attention of a family member, the son may be genuinely unable to meet his parent's need precisely because the relationship has deteriorated. In principle, however, SGT<sub>R</sub> can yield extensive obligations even toward parents who are virtual strangers to their children.<sup>170</sup> Later in this chapter, I shall consider and reject the possibility that reciprocity demands nothing of the son merely because the relationship is *no longer* reciprocal.

### 5.1.2. Special Goods Theory – Ability

According to Special Goods based on ability (henceforth SGT<sub>A</sub>):

If (a) a parent needs some special good, and (b) the child is positioned (perhaps even uniquely so) to provide the special good that the parent needs, then the child ought to provide that special good to the parent.

Presumably, the justification for this sort of theory would be that child is in a position to meet the parent's needs, and this ability generates an obligation to do so, especially if the parent is unlikely to have her needs met otherwise. On this view,

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<sup>170</sup> For a similar criticism of a reciprocity-based view of filial obligations, see Collingridge and Miller, "Filial Responsibility and the Care of the Aged," pp. 123-124. They argue that additionally, reciprocity cannot serve as a model for obligations where emotional goods are concerned: "If x loves y, it does not follow that y is under an obligation to love x. For y cannot simply choose to love x. Accordingly, any such rendering of affective bonds including filial affection, purely in terms of reciprocal obligations, seems bound to fail" (p. 124).

whether the parent has provided or currently provides special goods to the child is irrelevant.

This theory is unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, SGT<sub>A</sub> is plausible only if the following general moral principle is correct: when one is in a position to meet another's needs, one has an obligation to do so. A thorough defense or rejection of this moral principle is beyond the scope of this project. However, that SGT<sub>A</sub> derives from this general moral principle suggests a reason to reject it as a theory of filial obligations: the theory generates moral obligations for *anyone* toward *anyone*, regardless of whether and to what extent the two share or have shared a relationship. SGT<sub>A</sub> is more properly a general theory of charity than a theory of filial obligations.<sup>171</sup> The theory offers no principled reason for thinking that a *child* ought to meet *his* parent's needs. If someone else is better positioned to meet his parent's needs, then that other person has an obligation to do so; similarly, if the child is better positioned to meet the needs of someone else – perhaps even a stranger – then the child has obligations to that person rather than to his parents.

Second, and relatedly, the same sort of objection I offered in response to SGT<sub>R</sub> will apply here, as well: the current state of the relationship determines filial obligations only to the extent that it affects what special goods the child can provide. If, as in the earlier case, a parent has unreasonably disowned his son, the son would

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<sup>171</sup> In "Filial Responsibility and the Care of the Aged," Collingridge and Miller argue that such an ethical principle demands impartiality in an implausible way, for we certainly have *special* duties to particular individuals, and this theory fails to capture those special duties. As Collingridge and Miller note, following such a principle leaves us susceptible to the *Jellybelly fallacy*, caring more about the needs of distant others than about those of our own family members (pp. 124-126). For a similar criticism, see Sommers, "Filial Morality," pp. 442-443.

still have filial obligations – perhaps even extensive ones – if he found himself in a position to provide his father with the special goods his father needs. The relationship between them does not, at least in principle, determine when obligations arise or what those obligations demand.

We need an account that explains why the child has obligations that strangers might not have *and* why it seems that the current state of the relationship is morally relevant in determining whether a child has filial obligations and what such obligations demand. With these goals in mind, I turn now to Keller’s Special Goods Theory.

## 5.2 The “New” Special Goods Theory

According to Keller’s Special Goods Theory (henceforth SGT<sub>K</sub>):

“[T]he reason why you have special duties to your parents is that you are uniquely placed to provide them with these goods, and find yourself in a relationship in which they have provided (and perhaps continue to provide) special goods to you. And the duties themselves are duties to provide the special goods to your parents, within the context of the reciprocal relationship that you and your parents share.”<sup>172</sup>

On this version of the theory, neither reciprocity nor ability *alone* grounds filial obligations. Instead, both the reciprocal relationship between yourself and your parents *and* the fact that you are uniquely positioned to meet your parent’s needs explains why you ought to provide the special good(s) in question. On this view, the original three conditions remain: (a) the parent needs some special good, (b) the

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<sup>172</sup> Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty*, pp. 127-128.

parent has provided and/or currently provides special good to the child, and (c) the child is able to provide the special good that the parent needs. When satisfied, these conditions generate filial obligations to provide your parents with the special goods they need “within the context of the reciprocal relationship that you and your parents share” because you are uniquely positioned to meet your parent’s needs.<sup>173</sup>

In making his case for SGT<sub>K</sub>, Keller considers a set of intuitions about the nature of filial obligations and argues that SGT<sub>K</sub> best explains those intuitions. These are worth quoting at length, as Keller often appeals to them as justification for his theory of filial obligation:

- 1) “Filial duties are ongoing and open-ended; they are not duties that can be discharged once and for all.”
- 2) “The nature and extent of your filial duties do not vary with the exact nature or quantity of parental sacrifice involved in your upbringing; you do not have lesser filial duties for having been easy to raise.”
- 3) “Filial duties are not easily avoidable; the moral relationship from which they arise is not one that you choose to enter, nor one that you can simply choose to end.”
- 4) “But [filial duties] do vary with certain changes in your ongoing relationship with your parents; if your parents unreasonably disown you, for example, then your filial duties may not be what they were.”
- 5) “The demands made by filial duty do not extend so far that meeting them impedes your ability to exercise a reasonable amount of autonomous choice over the shape of your own life; you do not have filial duties to (for example) pursue a particular career, follow a particular religion, or give more financially than you can reasonably afford.”
- 6) “Filial duties can be, in a different respect, very demanding; if you can afford to pay for your parents’ medical care, for example, then filial duty can require you to do so, even if it is very expensive.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128. I shall consider at length what a reciprocal relationship requires and what such a limitation on filial obligations would mean.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Keller concludes from these intuitions that the parent-child relationship and, consequently, filial obligations, are unique. Whereas Debt and Friendship theories begin with an analogy between the parent-child relationship and some other type of relationship, Keller begins with the assumption that the parent-child relationship is not analogous to any other kind of relationship: “The kind of relationship that you have with your parents, the way you think about them and the place that they have in your life, just does not have much in common with relationships that you are likely to have with anyone else.”<sup>175</sup>

Although an individual might owe an aunt or uncle, grandparent, special teacher, or even the state duties similar to those that individual owes his or her parents, the nature of the parent-child relationship is unlike any other moral relationship. Of course, I might have obligations to my parents that have nothing to do with the fact that they are my parents. For example, if I have an obligation to tell the truth to others, then I have an obligation to tell the truth to my parents, though this obligation is not a product of the parent-child relationship. SGT<sub>K</sub> is a theory of obligations I might have in virtue of a particular kind of relationship with my parents.

We can now begin to see why Keller thinks that SGT<sub>K</sub> best explains the six initial intuitions regarding filial obligations. First, consider his intuition that filial obligations cannot be discharged once and for all. The satisfaction of the three conditions has no theoretical limit; consequently, the obligation can be ongoing. To

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

determine a child's filial obligations, we consider only whether the circumstances satisfy these three conditions; we do not consider whether these three conditions have been satisfied already. Discharging obligations in a particular instance does not preclude the continuous satisfaction of the conditions. Any time these conditions are satisfied, filial obligations arise, and the conditions can remain satisfied for as long as the parent is alive.<sup>176</sup>

Second, SGT<sub>K</sub> explains why you do not have fewer or less extensive filial obligations for having been easy to raise. The nature and extent of your filial obligations depend entirely on the three aforementioned conditions being satisfied, *not* on the nature and extent to which the third condition – that your parent has provided you with special goods – is satisfied. One child does not owe less than another simply because the former was easier to rear than the latter. If filial obligations exist at all, then differences in the nature and extent of those obligations must result in differences between individuals' abilities to provide the goods in question; that is to say, provided that a parent requires some special good and has in the past provided special goods to his or her children, and that the children enjoy reciprocal relationships with their parent, then any differences between what the children owe will result from differences in their abilities to provide for the parent. For example, if the parent of a starving artist and the artist's brother, a business executive, requires expensive medical care, then the business executive clearly

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<sup>176</sup> Note that these conditions cannot be satisfied once the parent has died, for the parent no longer needs any special goods which, by definition, contribute to the individual's welfare. According to Gratitude Theory, however, since gratitude is a way of indicating respect for the benefactor, obligations can exist after the benefactor (or parent, in this case) has died.

bears financial responsibility in virtue of being better able to offer such assistance.<sup>177</sup> He cannot escape these obligations simply by pointing out that his brother, the starving artist, was a far more difficult child. Keller explains this feature of the view as follows:

“There is no direct connection . . . between the size of that [parental] sacrifice and the nature of the goods to which your relationship with your parents can potentially give rise. What matters is the existence of a parent-child relationship within which the special goods can be manifested, not the exact story about where that relationship originates. That is why the content and extent of filial duties are not determined in any straightforward way by what the parents have done for the child during her upbringing. There is indeed no reason, according to the special goods theory, why a parent need have made any sacrifices for the sake of his child in order to be the object of filial duties.”<sup>178</sup>

On this theory, the extent of the parent’s past provision of special goods does not determine the extent of the grown child’s obligation to provide special goods to the parent. Consequently, a parent who has provided very few special goods in the past but now finds himself in need of numerous, expensive special goods might very well be owed those goods.

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<sup>177</sup> This arguably assumes an overly narrow interpretation of the ability condition (condition (c)). Specifically, it assumes that we evaluate the child’s ability only at a certain time and under certain circumstances. Even in the case of the starving artist, (c) is satisfied so long as the child is able to provide the good required. If the child has other career options that would provide the means to pay for the required care, then the child *is* able to provide the care and so would be required to do so, even if satisfying that requirement meant abandoning the current career path. Although this seems to imply that all of our life choices must be made so as to maximize our ability to provide care for our parents, from our choice to study rather than play with the neighborhood kids, our college applications, our career choices, to our decision to have children of our own, I shall consider shortly Keller’s attempt to offer a theoretical limit to one’s filial obligations.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

Third, SGT<sub>K</sub> explains why we cannot easily escape filial obligations.

Whether the conditions for filial obligations are satisfied is, to a large extent, out of our control. We cannot alter our parents' needs, nor can we make it the case that they have not provided us with special goods. We cannot escape filial obligation simply by terminating the relationship, for on this view, unjustifiably terminating the relationship will not affect whether the conditions for filial obligations are satisfied. As I shall discuss shortly, the termination of the relationship might affect whether you and your parents enjoy the sort of reciprocal relationship Keller discusses. For now, this much is clear: the absence of an ongoing relationship does not *necessarily* entail the absence of filial obligations.

Fourth, the nature of your relationship with your parents can shape the content of your filial obligations. At first glance, this might seem to contradict what has just been said. However, notice the important difference between the following two claims:

- (A): The current state of a particular parent-child relationship does not necessarily determine whether filial obligations exist.
- (B): The current state of a particular parent-child relationship shapes filial obligations.

There is no contradiction in asserting both (A) and (B). I can consistently maintain that the state of the relationship does not necessarily determine whether the conditions for filial obligations are satisfied *and* that the state of the relationship shapes the content of any obligations that might arise. Keller's third intuition is that one cannot avoid filial obligations simply by terminating the relationship; his fourth

is that filial obligations vary depending on the current state of the relationship.

Although I will argue that these claims are difficult to justify on this view, they are not obviously inconsistent.

Consider a case in which a mother has terminated her relationship with her child. Regardless of whether the termination of the relationship was justified, we can now reasonably make certain claims regarding her child's filial obligations. For example, if the mother has an interest in staying in touch with someone she wishes to speak with, but she does not wish to speak to her child, then her child is no longer positioned to provide the good in question to her mother. This is not to say that the child has no filial obligations, though that might be true for other reasons. However, according to SGT<sub>K</sub>, the child in this case has no obligation to stay in touch with her mother. If filial obligations exist, their content is shaped by the current nature of the relationship.

Fifth, Keller claims that filial obligations are not so extensive as to impede your ability to exercise autonomy. The second condition for the existence of filial obligations is that you are uniquely positioned to provide certain goods. SGT<sub>K</sub> includes no further requirement that you position yourself such that you are able to provide such goods. Recall the earlier example of two siblings, one of whom is a starving artist, the other of whom is a wealthy executive. One sibling is positioned to provide financial assistance to a parent in need, though the other is not. According to SGT<sub>K</sub>, the starving artist has no further obligation to alter her situation so that she becomes able to provide financial assistance to a parent in need. She is not well

situated to provide such assistance; consequently, she does not have an obligation to provide such assistance.

Sixth, SGT<sub>K</sub> can explain why filial obligations can be very demanding. Again, in the example in which one child is a wealthy executive and the other is a starving artist, SGT<sub>K</sub> might generate extensive obligations for the wealthy executive. If a parent requires very expensive long-term care, so long as the child who is a wealthy executive is in a position to provide it, and so long as the parent has provided special goods to the child in the past or provides them now, then the wealthy executive has an obligation to provide the expensive long-term care for the parent “within the context of a reciprocal relationship.”<sup>179</sup> According to the conditions of SGT<sub>K</sub>, the extent of the obligation depends on the extent of the need and the extent to which the child is in a position to provide the required special goods.

SGT<sub>K</sub> has the potential to generate a wide range of filial obligations, from virtually costless to oppressively demanding, for the three conditions could continue to be satisfied so long as the parent and child are both alive. Nothing about discharging the obligation in a particular instance precludes the conditions from being satisfied again, thereby generating new obligations. Moreover, in societies that do not provide care for their ageing members, long-term care *is* a special good, for it is unlikely to be provided by a source outside of the relationship; thus, in such a society, the child’s obligations might be extensive simply in virtue of the parent’s needs. Importantly, though, SGT<sub>K</sub> clearly tells us what our filial obligations are: we

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

ought to provide our parents with the special goods they need, provided the other conditions for filial obligations are satisfied.

SGT<sub>K</sub>, then, seems to be faring well with respect our criteria for an adequate theory of filial obligations. First, it specifies the content of our filial obligations, when such obligations arise. Second, it explains why those obligations arise; specifically, obligations arise because you find yourself in a position to provide special goods to a parent who has provided and/or now provides those goods to you. Third, if Keller is right, then far from generating counter-intuitive obligations, SGT<sub>K</sub> explains our intuitions about filial obligations. Finally, if Keller's argument succeeds, then SGT<sub>K</sub> can explain why certain outcomes strike us as counter-intuitive; for example, SGT<sub>K</sub> can explain why we find problematic earlier theories according to which the unreasonably disowned son could have extensive filial obligations.

In what follows, I shall examine closely Keller's claim that these obligations arise "within the context of the reciprocal relationship that you and your parents share."<sup>180</sup> (I shall refer to this as the "reciprocal relationship" limitation on filial obligations.) Any reasonable interpretation of this limitation on one's filial obligations will yield results that conflict with those intuitions Keller seeks to justify. Furthermore, the theory will collapse into SGT<sub>R</sub> and consequently, inherit the problems that such a view faces.

### 5.3 Problems

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<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

The immediate problem facing Keller's argument is by now a familiar problem with discussions of filial obligations: the approach is question begging. Although I have set aside such concerns generally, since the project is to reconcile a theory of filial obligations with our intuitions about such obligations, I should at least note that some of Keller's intuitions will likely strike some readers as themselves counter-intuitive. For example, one might question whether the extent of one's parent's sacrifice is not relevant in determining the extent of one's filial obligation. In fact, I suspect that many readers would think that the extent of the parent's sacrifice is *exactly* the sort of thing that determines the extent of one's filial obligations. Nonetheless, even granting that each of Keller's intuitions regarding filial obligations is correct (or at least widely held), SGT<sub>K</sub> cannot justify them. The problem lies in the reciprocal relationship limitation on filial obligations.

Let's consider what this limitation might mean. First, and most obviously, this could mean only that parent-child relationships are, when things go well, reciprocal insofar as both the parent and the child benefit from the relationship. At the very least, the child benefits during his early years and the parent stands to benefit during her later years. However, if Keller only means that the relationship is reciprocal in this minimal sense, he cannot justify his fourth intuition, that filial obligations "vary with certain changes in your ongoing relationship with your parents; if your parents unreasonably disown you, for example, then your filial duties may not be what they were."<sup>181</sup> If a reciprocal relationship requires only that

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

the parent-child relationship is or was at some point mutually beneficial, then so long as the parent has provided the benefits to the child in the past, the current state of the relationship is irrelevant except insofar as it affects a child's ability to provide special goods to the parent. The current state of the relationship does not necessarily determine whether the relationship is reciprocal.

Alternatively, "reciprocal relationship" might require ongoing reciprocity; that is to say, the parent and child enjoy a reciprocal relationship so long as each continues to benefit from the relationship. This interpretation would certainly justify the intuition in question, for if the relationship changes and is no longer reciprocal, then the child's filial obligations would change, as well. However, this interpretation suggests that filial obligations no longer exist once the parent cannot contribute to the relationship.

To see why this implication is problematic, consider the following case: in a society in which care for elderly persons is the responsibility of private citizens, an elderly woman suffering from dementia requires medical care, and she has a wealthy daughter who can provide such care for her. However, because the mother is physically and mentally incapable of contributing goods to the relationship, the relationship is no longer reciprocal.<sup>182</sup> The daughter is wondering whether she has

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<sup>182</sup> I do not intend to suggest that children cannot benefit from providing such care for their parents. However, in this case the mother is not *providing* the goods to the child and, moreover, we can easily imagine (if not specifically name) cases in which the daughter in fact finds providing this care to be incredibly tedious and unrewarding. As Jecker says, "The rewards of parent care notwithstanding, parent care can also be overwhelming, infuriating, isolating, and unappreciated. In other words, we can speak of the *burden* of caregiving" ("Taking Care of One's Own: Justice and Family Caregiving," p. 122).

an obligation to provide such care for her mother, since after all, her mother needs the care, has provided care in the past, and the daughter is in a position to provide the care. It would seem remarkably callous of the daughter to think to herself, "I have no obligation to provide the care my mother needs because, despite her care for me in the past, she no longer contributes to a reciprocal relationship." After all, Keller claims that filial obligations can arise even if the parent was unable to provide special goods during the child's youth. Surely, Keller must concede that filial obligations do not disappear simply because the parent is *currently* unable to provide special goods to the child. Thus, although the current state of the relationship would, on this interpretation of "reciprocal relationship", determine the daughter's filial obligations, it would do so in a counter-intuitive way.

Keller's claim that filial obligations arise "within the context of a reciprocal relationship that you and your parents share" cannot offer a reasonable, theoretical limit to filial obligations; at least, it cannot limit filial obligations in the way that Keller suggests. Either the parent-child relationship is reciprocal so long as it is now or was at some point mutually beneficial, or it is reciprocal only when the mutual benefits are ongoing. In the former case, the current state of the relationship would determine filial obligations only insofar as it affects what the child is able to provide; on this view, filial obligations are theoretically unlimited, regardless of the current state of the relationship. In the latter case, filial obligations diminish or disappear if the parent is no longer able to provide special goods to the child, even if this inability is not by choice; on this view, filial obligations are unreasonably limited

because children have obligations to their parents only so long as the children *continue* to benefit from the relationship. Even on Keller's own account, then,  $SGT_K$  generates counter-intuitive results and thus fares poorly with respect to one of our criteria for an adequate theory of filial obligations.

Furthermore, this particular failure gives rise to an additional problem:  $SGT_K$  cannot explain why certain results seem counter-intuitive. Consider again the case of the parent who has unreasonably disowned his son over a B on a math test. A supposed advantage of  $SGT_K$  was that it could explain why we would find extensive filial obligations counter-intuitive in this case. However, far from explaining why this seems counter-intuitive, at least one reading of  $SGT_K$  generates the same result! If the parent-child relationship is reciprocal because it was, at one point, mutually beneficial, then the child's filial obligations are shaped only by what his parent needs and what the child is able to provide. The absence of an ongoing relationship is irrelevant.

If, on the other hand, the relationship is not reciprocal because it is no longer mutually beneficial, the son does not have filial obligations. Although this seems right, a closer look reveals something strange about this case: the son does not have filial obligations because the father is no longer contributing to the relationship, but the reason the father is no longer contributing is entirely irrelevant. Presumably, our intuition that the son has diminished filial obligations, or no filial obligations at all, is a response to the fact that the father has unreasonably disowned his child.

Simply put, we do not think the parent *deserves* as much from his child as the parent who does not unreasonably disown his child.

That  $SGT_K$  yields a strange outcome here becomes even clearer if we compare the two cases of non-reciprocal (i.e., not currently mutually beneficial) relationships. In the first case, the mother's dementia renders her unable to provide special goods to her daughter; in the second case, the father has exited the relationship in response to a disappointing math grade. On this interpretation of reciprocal relationships, neither relationship is reciprocal, for in neither case does the parent contribute to the relationship. Consequently, neither child has filial obligations. Although this version of  $SGT_K$  is sensitive to facts about the current state of the relationship, it is not sensitive to the *relevant* facts about the current state of the relationship. Surely, the mere fact that the father no longer contributes to the relationship is not explaining our intuition that the son owes him less than the daughter owes her mother. Instead, what is explaining our intuition is the fact that the father has unreasonably disowned his son.

Perhaps we can save the "reciprocal relationship" limitation by reminding ourselves that reciprocity might demand not only returning good with good but *also* returning harm with harm. The father who unreasonably disowns his son still has a reciprocal relationship with his son, but reciprocity justifies the son's failure to provide the father with special goods; after all, he is returning neglect with neglect. Thus, we might conclude that the daughter whose mother has dementia has a reciprocal relationship with her and ought to return benefits with benefits, *and* the

son whose father has unreasonably disowned him has a reciprocal relationship with his father and ought to return harm with harm.

This interpretation of the “reciprocal relationship” limitation is implausible, however, for it requires that we concede that the father and son in the above case do, in fact, share a reciprocal relationship, but the relationship is one of reciprocal harm. Clearly, if the father genuinely disowns his son, the two simply do not have a relationship – reciprocal or otherwise – any longer (though they may re-start their relationship later). The limitation ought to serve as a way of explaining why grown children who have a relationship with their parents have filial obligations, while children whose parents have unreasonably disowned them do not. Presumably, those who have a relationship with their parents share a reciprocal relationship, and those who lack such a relationship do not. We would not say that those whose parents unreasonably disown them share a reciprocal relationship, but one that is reciprocally harmful; rather, they simply do not share a reciprocal relationship.

Thus, neither plausible interpretation of “reciprocal relationship” avoids yielding counter-intuitive results. If the relationship between the father and son is reciprocal because it was at some point mutually beneficial, then the son could very well have extensive filial obligations, provided he can meet his father’s needs. If, however, the relationship is not reciprocal and so the son has no filial obligations, we must still accept that the father’s having unreasonably disowned the son does not, by itself, affect what the son owes the father now. Had the father reasonably disowned his son, or even become mentally incapable of contributing to the

relationship, we would arrive at the same conclusion: the relationship is now non-reciprocal and so no filial obligations arise, regardless of what has happened before.

Of course, one could offer a third interpretation of Keller's "reciprocal relationship" limitation on filial obligations. One could say that the parent-child relationship is reciprocal so long as:

- (a): the parent has provided special goods in the past, *and* continues to do so, or
- (b): the parent has not provided special goods in the past, but does so now, or
- (c): the parent has provided special goods in the past, and the *only* reason she does not now provide special goods is because she is unable to do so, through no fault of her own.

Indeed, Keller might have something like this in mind when he offers the limitation.

Keller says:

"The . . . principle which can restrict filial duties has to do with whether or not the parents make a reasonable effort to play their part in the relationship. If your parents choose not to carry out their duties towards you, make unreasonable demands, or are otherwise to blame for the deterioration of the relationship – if they disown you without good reason, for example – then your duties to provide the special goods to them is mitigated or dissolved, even if you are still able to provide these."<sup>183</sup>

This attempt to rescue the "reciprocal relationship" limitation on filial obligations appears *ad hoc*. Why think the relationship is no longer reciprocal only because parents fail to "make a reasonable effort to play their part in the relationship?" If parents fail to play their part – though perhaps not by choice – the relationship is no

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<sup>183</sup> Keller, "Four Theories of Filial Duty," p. 269.

longer reciprocal. Thus, although the *reason* the relationship is no longer reciprocal is certainly relevant in determining what filial obligations a grown child has, the “reciprocal relationship” limitation within SGT<sub>K</sub> cannot explain why. However, we can now see clearly what the theory is missing. As (c) above makes clear, what is missing from SGT<sub>K</sub> is a clear account of what sorts of changes in a relationship affect what filial obligations a child has and why.

SGT<sub>K</sub> ignores morally relevant considerations, such as what the parent *deserves*, when surely, what one’s parent *deserves* is relevant to the determination of what one *owes* one’s parent. Facts about the current state of the relationship shape not only what one *can* do for one’s parent, but also what one’s parent deserves to have done on her behalf. The mother who suffers from dementia does not deserve less from her daughter because dementia renders her unable to contribute to the relationship, whereas the father who has unreasonably disowned his son arguably deserves less from his son as a result of his choice to exit the relationship.

In the next chapter, I shall offer a theory of filial obligations that captures this intuition while avoiding the problems of the theories thus considered. Debt Theory emphasizes the tremendous investments parents make in child rearing, but like Special Goods theories, it ignores morally relevant facts about the current state of the relationship. Friendship Theory highlights the special nature of the parent-child relationship, but avoids counter-intuitive outcomes only by appealing to Gratitude Theory. Gratitude Theory focuses on morally relevant features of the parent-child relationship, such as the parent’s motivations in child rearing and the current state

of the relationship, but it cannot fill out the content of our filial obligations.

Finally, Special Goods theories spell out the content of filial obligations, but they fail to consider facts about the parent-child relationship that even proponents like Keller consider morally relevant. The aim, then, is to offer a theory of filial obligations that specifies the content of our filial obligations, explains why they arise when they do, yields intuitive results, and can explain why some outcomes in earlier cases have seemed counter-intuitive. With this in mind, I now turn to the next chapter, in which I offer what I take to be the most plausible theory of filial obligations: Gratitude for Special Goods Theory.

## Chapter Six: Gratitude for Special Goods Theory

### 6.1 The Theory

Given the strengths and weaknesses of the previous theories, a new path appears promising. I will call this the Gratitude for Special Goods Theory, for it is a blend of Gratitude and Special Goods theories. According to this theory, one has obligations of gratitude to provide special goods to one's parent so long as the following *four* conditions are satisfied:

- (i) the parent needs some special good,
- (ii) the child is able to *position herself* such that she can provide the required special good,
- (iii) the parent has provided and/or currently provides special goods to the child, and
- (iv) expressing gratitude by providing the special good the parent needs would not undermine the mutual respect on which moral relationships are based.

This theory has the advantages of both Gratitude and Special Goods theories, but it avoids the weaknesses of either. Furthermore, it captures much of what Debt and Friendship theories aim to highlight about the parent-child relationship. Examining a few cases will show why this is so.

Consider the following two cases:

**No-Abandonment Case:** A mother provides for her children's physical and emotional needs, even when the relationship is strained. They eventually enjoy a healthy, fulfilling relationship that has never suffered abandonment by any party to the relationship.

**Abandonment Case:** A mother has provided for her children's physical and emotional needs, but when the children are all teenagers, she abandons them without warning or explanation. She knows that this abandonment will be very bad for the children, but she is unmoved by considerations regarding the children's welfare.

Now, let us assume that at present, the mother in both cases requires some special good; that is to say, the need condition is satisfied equally in both cases.

Furthermore, we can assume for the moment that the children in both cases are in a position to meet the mother's needs. Finally, the case descriptions stipulate that both mothers have provided special goods to their children in the past. Let's now consider how each of the previous theories would respond to these cases.

Either version of Debt Theory would yield straightforward results in each of the above cases; furthermore, either theory would yield the *same* results in the above cases. In both the No-Abandonment and the Abandonment cases, the mother has provided for the children during their youth. Consequently, on Debt Theory 1, according to which children incur debts regardless of whether they request or even voluntarily accept the mother's investments, the children owe repayment to the mother, whatever that may be. On Debt Theory 2, the children owe repayment for whatever investments they have both requested and agreed to repay. The abandonment or lack thereof is entirely irrelevant on either version of Debt Theory, for the past investment – rather than the current state of the relationship – grounds the obligations. Importantly, according to either version of Debt Theory, the mother's need for some special good is also irrelevant. The children owe repayment of the mother's investment, and they owe this *regardless* of the mother's needs.

Thus, the children may owe more or less than the special good(s) the mother currently needs.

According to Friendship Theory, the children in the No-Abandonment Case clearly have obligations to their mother. The content of those obligations depends on what obligations of friendship would arise given their relationship. If obligations of friendship require one friend to provide certain special goods that the other friend needs, then the children here have an obligation to provide the special good to their mother. However, as Friendship theorists emphasize, the children do not *owe* their mother this special good. In the Abandonment Case, however, the children have residual obligations *at most*. Since a relationship no longer exists between the mother and her children, the current relationship grounds no obligations. However, respect for their mother and their previous relationship with her might entail residual obligations. The content of those obligations will depend, at least in part, on the depth of the relationship prior to the abandonment, as well as the reason for the abandonment. Given that the mother abandons her children without regard for their wellbeing, Friendship Theory may very well conclude that the children have no residual obligations of friendship in this case.

Depending on how we interpret the “reciprocal relationship” limitation, Special Goods Theory must either allow the conclusion that the children in the Abandonment case owe their mother as much as the children in the No-Abandonment case owe theirs (because the relationship was once reciprocal), or admit that although the children in the Abandonment case do not owe their mother

anything, the explanation is not the abandonment *per se* but rather the mere absence of an ongoing relationship. If we alter the descriptions so that the children in the Abandonment case are better positioned to meet their mother's needs than the children in the No-Abandonment case, Special Goods Theory might arrive at the conclusion that they owe *more* to their mother than the children in the No-Abandonment case, despite the fact that the mother in the Abandonment case has chosen to act in a way that she *knows* will harm her children. Thus, the children could be obligated to make what might turn out to be tremendous sacrifices on behalf of someone who has expressed disregard for their own wellbeing. On one interpretation of Special Goods Theory, so long as the conditions for obligations are satisfied, as they are in this case, the child has an obligation to meet the parent's needs, even if the parent has abandoned her children. Alternatively, although the children do not have obligations to their mother in the Abandonment case, her abandonment itself does not explain the absence of filial obligations; instead, the mere fact that the children and their mother no longer enjoy a reciprocal relationship explains why filial obligations have dissolved. Either result – that the children in the Abandonment case owe their mother *despite* the abandonment or they owe nothing, but not *because* of the abandonment – is certainly counter-intuitive.

According to Gratitude Theory, the children in the Abandonment case need not express gratitude to their mother. The mother's disregard for her children's wellbeing indicates a lack of respect for them. Furthermore, as noted earlier,

“willingness to become obligated to others despite their lack of respect raises the question, at least, whether one lacks self-respect.”<sup>184</sup> Thus, the children’s gratitude to her despite her disregard for their wellbeing might indicate a lack of self-respect. Consequently, gratitude in this case might undermine the mutual respect necessary for maintaining moral relationships and is not required. Though the children in this case might, in fact, be grateful to their mother for the past care and behave accordingly, they do not *owe* her gratitude.

The difference between the theories thus considered should now be clear: in cases like the Abandonment case, Friendship and Gratitude theories yield more intuitive results than Special Goods or Debt theories yield. In cases like the No-Abandonment case, however, Gratitude and Friendship theories can tell us only that we owe *something*, but they do not tell us what, whereas Debt and Special Goods theories specify the content of our obligations.

When considering the cases above, Gratitude and Friendship theories fail to specify the content of our filial obligations, and Debt and Special Goods theories cannot avoid generating counter-intuitive results about both when filial obligations arise and the extent of those obligations. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory avoids both of these problems. In the No-Abandonment case, the children’s expression of gratitude is appropriate, for it would serve to recognize the mother as an end in herself, as well as the value of the mother’s actions. Importantly, in this case, there is no reason to think that gratitude would *undermine* efforts to maintain a moral

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<sup>184</sup> Card, “Gratitude and Obligation,” p. 124.

relationship based on mutual respect. Instead, by recognizing the mother as an end in herself rather than merely the provider of certain goods, gratitude helps *maintain* a relationship based on mutual respect. Additionally, the mother needs some special good, and she has provided special goods to her children in the past. Thus, according to Gratitude for Special Goods Theory, the children in the No-Abandonment case have obligations of gratitude to their mother, so long as they are able to meet her needs without undermining mutual respect and regard. Moreover, this theory specifies the content of those obligations, namely to meet the mother's needs for special goods.

Gratitude for Special Goods Theory also contains a clearer interpretation of the ability condition than Special Goods Theory contains. Recall the earlier example of the child whose career path does not provide the means necessary to pay for expensive, long-term care for the child's parent. In this case, the child might very well become able to meet the parent's needs. If the child has career opportunities that would make him able to meet his parent's needs, then he has an obligation to pursue those (provided all other conditions for filial obligations are satisfied). On Gratitude for Special Goods Theory, in order to "avoid" filial obligations, the children must not only be unable to meet the needs now, but they must further be unable to *position themselves* to meet their parent's needs without thereby undermining the mutual respect necessary for moral relationships. This way of articulating this condition prohibits us from using an overly narrow understanding of ability. However, as I shall argue later, the fourth condition of Gratitude for Special Goods

Theory, which requires that expressions of gratitude not undermine the mutual respect necessary for moral relationships, places a theoretical limit on the extent of filial obligations, and thereby avoids the counter-intuitive result that a child's *every* decision must be made in order to maximize his ability to meet his parent's needs.

Though the view relies on components of Gratitude and Special Goods theories of filial obligations, it also captures those elements that Debt and Friendship theories seek to highlight. Debt Theory highlights the tremendous sacrifice involved in parenting, whereas Friendship Theory emphasizes the special relationship between the parent and child. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory of filial obligation captures both considerations. On this theory, children may have *extensive* obligations to their parents, precisely because they ought to express gratitude for the extensive investments their parents have made on the children's behalf. Furthermore, the nature of the relationship is central to the Gratitude for Special Goods Theory of filial obligations. Unlike Debt Theory, if the relationship deteriorates, the children's filial obligations may diminish or disappear entirely, either because the state of the relationship renders the children unable to provide the special good in question, or because providing the special good would indicate a lack of self-respect that would undermine rather than support the moral relationship between the parent and child. Thus, although the new, blended theory abandons Debt and Friendship theories, it takes seriously those theories' contributions to the discussion about filial obligations.

Returning to the two mothers, in the Abandonment case – where the mother abandons her children without warning or explanation – Special Goods Theory tells us that filial obligations depend only on facts about the past provision of special goods, the mother’s need for special goods, and her children’s ability to meet those needs. If the conditions for Special Goods Theory are satisfied, as they are in this case, then either reciprocity demands that the children provide those special goods that their mother needs, or they have no obligations because the relationship is no longer mutually beneficial (though the fact that the mother abandoned them is not itself morally relevant). In contrast, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory yields the result that the children might have no filial obligations in this case, for the case might not satisfy the fourth condition of the theory: expressing gratitude could, in this case, undermine the mutual respect on which a moral relationship is based. Recall, expressions of gratitude should support relationships based on mutual respect and regard; when expressions of gratitude will not have this result - particularly when expressions of gratitude will *undermine* such respect and regard - gratitude is not obligatory.<sup>185</sup> Although the children may, in fact, be grateful to their mother and express as much through meeting her needs, such gratitude is not morally required if it would undermine rather than support mutual respect and regard. Importantly, the reason the children might not have obligations here is that the mother has abandoned them; that is to say, the mother’s

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<sup>185</sup> The appeal to the mutual respect condition here is consistent with Berger’s own use of the condition. Shortly, I shall offer an account of what sorts of acts would, in fact, indicate a failure of mutual respect.

abandonment – and not merely the absence of an ongoing relationship – is morally relevant.

In both the No-Abandonment and the Abandonment cases, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory has a clear advantage over either of its component theories. Unlike Special Goods Theory, this new, blended theory avoids counter-intuitive results about when filial obligations arise. Unlike Gratitude Theory, this account specifies the content of filial obligations when they do arise. Furthermore, the new theory captures those elements that Debt and Friendship theories highlight as morally relevant: the tremendous investments a parent makes on his child's behalf, and the current state of the relationship. The theoretical advantages of Gratitude for Special Goods Theory are clear: we now have an account of filial obligations that tells us when such obligations arise, why they arise, and what they demand.

To test this new theory, let us consider a third case:

**Partial Abandonment:** A mother has provided for her children's physical and emotional wellbeing, but she becomes severely depressed and decides that she can no longer meet her children's needs. *Believing that it is in her children's best interests*, she waives custody.

Unlike the Abandonment case, here the mother has her children's best interests in mind, even if she is mistaken about what is in her children's best interests.<sup>186</sup> On Gratitude for Special Goods Theory, the mother's decision to waive custody is relevant in determining the children's filial obligations, but it is not the only

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<sup>186</sup> Considering cases in the news of severely depressed mothers harming and even killing their children, we should not assume that she is mistaken about what is in her children's best interests.

consideration; that is to say, her decision to waive custody does not necessarily limit her children's filial obligations.

On Gratitude for Special Goods Theory, gratitude to the mother is appropriate for her past provision of special goods, unless expressing such gratitude undermines the mutual respect required for moral relationships. Of course, the children may be unable to provide the special goods she needs, in which case they would have no obligation to do so. Furthermore, her decision to waive custody might explain their inability to provide certain special goods. As I noted earlier, which goods are special and which are generic depend on the society in which the discussion is taking place. In a society with a robust welfare state, special goods might be almost entirely sentimental in nature, such as holiday visits or occasional phone calls. In such a society, the children in this case might be unable to provide special goods to their mother precisely because of the current state of their relationship. For example, if a parent needs a caring relationship with a loved one, the child may be unable to provide this special good as a result of the abandonment.<sup>187</sup> In a different kind of society, however, these children could very well have extensive filial obligations.

If we consider this case arising in a society in which medical care, physical support, etc. are not provided by the state or other agencies, the children in the Partial Abandonment case could have extensive obligations to their mother, despite

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<sup>187</sup> Of course, this is not to say that the child will necessarily be unable to provide the good. Some children might very well be capable of understanding the mother's decision and overcoming the psychological harm such a decision might cause.

her decision to waive custody. She has provided them with special goods in the past, and she requires special goods now. Gratitude is appropriate so long as it is consistent with mutual respect and regard between her and the children. Thus, if the children are able to position themselves to provide the special goods that she needs without thereby indicating a lack of self-respect, they have an obligation to do so. If either they are unable to position themselves to provide the goods that she needs, or doing so would undermine the mutual respect on which a moral relationship is based, then they have no obligation to provide the special goods she requires.<sup>188</sup> Obligations of gratitude are limited or non-existent if expressions of gratitude would fail to recognize both the mother and the children as ends in themselves and thereby undermine the mutual respect required for moral relationships. However, the theory offers no further theoretical limits. Assuming the children would not indicate a lack of self-respect by meeting their mother's needs, gratitude for past provision of special goods is appropriate.

Although the generation of potentially extensive obligations in the Partial Abandonment case might initially appear counter-intuitive, the result is exactly what we should expect to see here. In the No-Abandonment case, the children had an obligation to meet their mother's needs so long as they were able to do so. In the Abandonment case, the children might not have any obligations to their mother because meeting her needs would likely undermine the mutual respect required for

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<sup>188</sup> This leaves open the possibility that the children still have an obligation to be grateful to their mother, even if they cannot express this gratitude by providing the special goods she needs. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory aims to determine when *expressions* of gratitude are obligatory, and what expressions of gratitude are appropriate.

moral relationships. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory yields the following result in the Partial Abandonment case: the children might have very extensive obligations, or they might have none at all, but we would need to know more about the relationship – specifically, whether expressing gratitude would support or undermine mutual respect – to draw any firm conclusions. Far from being a counter-intuitive result, this is exactly the result we should expect.

At this point, one might wonder why Gratitude for Special Goods Theory of filial obligations is a *new* theory. Why not consider it a modification of Gratitude Theory? Alternatively, why not think that Special Goods Theory could be modified to yield results similar to those that this theory gives? Given that the blended theory might seem to be merely a version of either Gratitude or Special Goods, I should say a bit about what sets this theory apart from its component theories.

Gratitude for Special Goods Theory is distinct from Gratitude Theory in two ways. Unlike Gratitude Theory alone, this blended theory specifies the content of the obligation: *expressions* of gratitude in the form of providing special goods to one's parent. Of course, this theory is compatible with a child having an obligation to be grateful toward her parent, but the theory actually requires – when obligations arise – expressions of gratitude. Expressions of gratitude are themselves compatible with the absence of gratitude. Consider the earlier case of the ungrateful child who attempts to cut ties with her parents and thereby avoid filial obligations. On this view, the child might not feel grateful but she nonetheless ought to act in ways that

express gratitude.<sup>189</sup> Her expression of gratitude would, according to this new theory, take the form of providing special goods to her parent that her parent needs. It is certainly conceivable that the genuinely ungrateful child would be unable to provide certain special goods if they are entirely sentimental in nature; that is to say, some special goods might be the sort of good that a child cannot provide without having already adopted a certain attitude toward her parents. Nonetheless, insofar as she can, the child has an obligation to express gratitude, regardless of whether she feels genuine gratitude. So far, this might seem like a mere variation of the original Gratitude Theory. The second difference between the blended theory and Gratitude Theory, however, is more significant.

Gratitude for Special Goods Theory of filial obligations offers a different *theoretical basis* for obligations of gratitude than the original Gratitude Theory offers. Rather than owing gratitude in response to benevolence, regardless of whether this benevolence produces benefits, the new theory grounds obligations of gratitude in *special goods*. Recall that the original Gratitude Theory might very well yield obligations of gratitude when the child is not helped – and is in fact even harmed – by the parent’s benevolent actions. Here, the provision of special goods grounds the obligations of gratitude; thus, if the child receives no special goods and is even *harmed* by the parent’s actions, the child does not *owe* gratitude. Again, the

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<sup>189</sup> “Express gratitude” is an unfortunately misleading phrase in cases such as these, for she is not expressing a sentiment at all. Instead, by claiming that the child has an obligation to express gratitude, I mean something like “The child has an obligation to do those things that would express gratitude if genuine gratitude were present.” Importantly, on this view, the child has the obligation to do those things regardless of whether genuine gratitude, as an emotional attitude, is present.

child may in fact be grateful and act accordingly, but the child does not owe gratitude in the absence of special goods. Of course, the parent's benevolence toward the child itself might be a special good for which the child ought to express gratitude.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the parent's motivations are entirely irrelevant. Just as the ungrateful child may be genuinely unable to provide certain special goods to her parent if she lacks the appropriate attitude toward them, we can imagine cases in which the special goods are missing – or their value is diminished – if the parent provides them with the wrong sort of motivation.

Although a parent can certainly provide goods such as food, clothing, and shelter from a non-benevolent motivation, it is more difficult to see how a parent could provide certain relationship goods without the right sort of motivation. Although providing relationship goods without a loving or benevolent motivation is probably not impossible, what special goods the parent provides likely depends on the motivation behind the parent's actions. Thus, according to Gratitude for Special Goods Theory of filial obligations, gratitude is owed for special goods – for the benefits themselves – rather than only for the motivation of the parent. However, the parent's motivation is likely a crucial factor in the parent's ability to provide special goods in the first place.

The new theory is also distinct from Special Goods Theory in two ways: the theoretical basis for filial obligations and the theoretical limits on those obligations. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory is properly considered a *gratitude* theory; thus,

filial obligations are grounded in gratitude. Special Goods Theory alone, however, grounds such obligations in reciprocity. On the new, blended theory, the grown child's provision of special goods to her parent is not merely a reciprocal action but rather an expression of gratitude for the parent's past provision of special goods. The difference between the basis of the obligation also explains the second difference between these two theories: the theoretical limits of the obligations.

Reciprocity as grounds for filial obligations yields quite different outcomes than gratitude yields. Aside from the appearance of treating both the parent and child as a means to benefit one another, reciprocity cannot justify the theoretical limits on filial obligations that proponents like Keller want. As I noted in the previous chapter, Keller claims that filial duties "are duties to provide the special goods to your parents, *within the context of the reciprocal relationship that you and your parents share.*"<sup>190</sup> Several problems arise with this limitation that do not arise with the new theory.

Limiting filial obligations to the context of the reciprocal relationship that a child and her parent share can limit filial obligations only in a counter-intuitive way. Consider the case in which the relationship is no longer reciprocal because the parent's mental state has deteriorated to the point where the parent no longer provides goods – relationship or otherwise – to the child. Does the child have obligations to provide special goods to the parent? We might claim that the child does not because after all, the relationship is no longer mutually beneficial. It seems

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<sup>190</sup> Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty*, p. 128 (emphasis added).

odd, however, to say that filial obligations disappear entirely once the parent is no longer able – through no fault of her own – to contribute to the relationship. In fact, Keller claims that the parent’s inability to provide special goods does not excuse a child from filial obligations.<sup>191</sup> Thus, the parent’s current inability to contribute to the relationship does not excuse the child from her filial obligations.

To explain how filial obligations exist in the absence of a *currently* reciprocal relationship, the Special Goods theorist might claim that the child still has filial obligations because the relationship *was* beneficial for the child. Even though the relationship is no longer mutually beneficial, it certainly was in the past; consequently, the child has obligations to provide special goods to the parent. Unfortunately, this view of reciprocity has implications that the Special Goods theorist is unlikely to accept. It seems, at this point, that the Special Goods theorist must say that the child owes special goods to the parent as a reciprocal exchange of goods. Of course, this view looks awfully similar to the original version of Debt Theory, the same version that Keller himself finds wildly implausible.

To sum up: if, on the one hand, the Special Goods theorist claims that filial obligations arise only when the relationship *remains* reciprocal, then such obligations disappear once the parent can no longer contribute special goods to the relationship, regardless of the reason. If, on the other hand, the Special Goods theorist claims that filial obligations remain because the parent provided benefits to

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<sup>191</sup> “If the child chooses not to help out the parent when he needs it in his old age, she could not excuse herself by pointing out that the parent did not – *because he could not* – provide her with anything much during her childhood” (Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty*, p. 130. Emphasis added).

the child in the past, and reciprocity demands repayment now, then the theory collapses into the original version of Debt Theory, according to which the child owes repayment for parental investments. Of course, one lingering difference is that the child owes repayment only for those investments that produced benefits for the child, but this is not going to provide the kind of limit on filial obligations that the Special Goods theorist wants. On this view, the current state of the relationship is irrelevant; the child owes special goods to the parent if the parent has provided special goods in the past.

According to the new, blended theory, however, the current state of the relationship explains what limits, if any, there are on filial obligations. In the case in which the parent is unable to contribute to the relationship through no fault of her own, then the child still owes gratitude for special goods. However, in the case in which the parent chooses not to contribute to the relationship, expressions of gratitude might very well undermine rather than strengthen the respect necessary for a moral relationship between the two, and the child would thus not owe gratitude for special goods. According to Gratitude for Special Goods Theory of filial obligations, then, the parent's current ability to contribute to a reciprocal relationship does not itself determine whether the child has filial obligations, but the parent's willingness to do so when she is/was capable of doing so does help to determine whether filial obligations arise.

Although Gratitude for Special Goods Theory of filial obligations relies heavily on both Gratitude and Special Goods Theory, it is a new, distinct theory of

filial obligations. The new theory is a gratitude theory of obligations, but it grounds the obligations of gratitude in special goods themselves rather than solely in the parent's motivations. Furthermore, the new theory generates obligations that are shaped by the current state of the relationship in ways that are more intuitively compelling, even according to Keller, than Special Goods Theory alone. Thus, the theoretical components of Gratitude for Special Goods Theory distinguishes it from either of its component theories: the basis for the obligations is different from that specified by either Gratitude or Special Goods Theory, and the limitations on such obligations are distinct from those offered by Special Goods Theory alone. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory is a genuinely new, independent theory and ought to be evaluated as such.

It is worth pointing out just how far filial obligations go on this new theory. Consider, for instance, a case in which the parent has spent poorly while the grown child has saved wisely. If the parent requires expensive care that is not likely to be provided by a source outside of the relationship, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory might very well generate an obligation for the child to provide this care, even though the parent is responsible for being in the position of need.<sup>192</sup> If providing for

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<sup>192</sup> John Hardwig suggests that far from generating obligations of care on the part of the families, this particular lifestyle might generate or strengthen the parent's duty to die if continued existence will require tremendous sacrifice from the children: "There is a greater duty to die to the extent that you have lived a relatively lavish lifestyle instead of saving for illness or old age. Like most upper middle-class Americans, I could easily have saved more. It is a greater wrong to come to your family for assistance if your need is the result of having chosen leisure or a spendthrift lifestyle. I may eventually have to face the moral consequences of decisions I am now making" ("Is There A Duty to Die?" from *Hastings Center Report* 27, no. 2 (1997), reprinted in *Ethical Issues in Modern Medicine*, Eds. Bonnie Steinbock, John D. Arras, Alex John London, p. 517).

the parent does not undermine mutual respect, then the child ought to do so. If, however, the parent spends poorly *because* the child has saved well, and the parent relies on the child's savings and sense of filial obligation, meeting the parent's needs in this case would not be consistent with mutual respect. As noted earlier, to cite past provision of goods as grounds on which to control important aspects of another's life is to deny the beneficiary "the independence befitting a moral agent."<sup>193</sup> Thus, in cases such as this one, we have reason to think that the fourth condition of Gratitude for Special Goods Theory is not satisfied, and the child does not have an obligation to meet the parent's needs.

If the conditions for filial obligations are satisfied, however, those obligations can become quite extensive. A child might be required to provide emotional comfort, physical support, financial assistance, or any number of other goods to his parents. Furthermore, if he cannot provide such things given his current circumstances, he may well have an obligation to change his circumstances. For example, if a child cannot provide adequate emotional support because he works too far away from his parents, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory might generate an obligation for him to move closer to his parents.

Similarly, a grown child with his own family that requires his resources (time, attention, money, etc.) might not be well positioned to meet his parent's needs if doing so means he cannot provide for his own children. At the time that the grown child decides not to meet his parent's needs and instead focuses his

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<sup>193</sup> Berger, "Gratitude," pp. 304-305.

resources on his own children, that decision might be justified; however, is he equally justified in his decision to take on obligations (i.e., children of his own) *knowing* that doing so will make him less able to meet his parent's foreseeable needs? Though the individual here might be genuinely unable to discharge his obligations, a question remains as to whether his current inability indicates that a moral failure has already occurred. Of course, the implication that a grown child must do everything possible to maximize his ability to satisfy his parent's needs – including refraining from starting his own family – is remarkably counter-intuitive. Is Gratitude for Special Goods Theory committed to the same counter-intuitive conclusion? I think not, and careful consideration of the fourth condition will show why.

The implications of Special Goods Theory are counter-intuitive because individuals have a serious interest in having children, or a career they love, and so on, and any moral theory that requires us to subordinate these serious interests to meet the needs of others seems mistaken. This line of reasoning suggests a way of articulating the fourth condition of Gratitude for Special Goods Theory that is consistent with the literature on gratitude: expressions of gratitude should not limit an individual's ability to satisfy his own serious interests.

In his essay on resolving conflicts of interest between members of different species, Donald VanDeVeer offers an explanation of serious interests and their role

in evaluating competing moral claims.<sup>194</sup> VanDeVeer distinguishes serious interests from basic interests – those which must be met in order for an organism to survive – and peripheral interests – those which need not be met in order for the organism to survive, though their satisfaction may contribute to the organism’s flourishing.<sup>195</sup> Serious interests fall somewhere between basic interests and extremely peripheral interests: “something is in a being’s serious interest if and only if, though it can survive without it, it is difficult or costly (to its well-being) to do so.”<sup>196</sup> These are the sorts of interests that one is likely to cite as justification for not contributing all of one’s disposable income to, say, famine relief; even though one may recognize that famine relief satisfies a more basic interest than does higher education, one may still feel justified in contributing to one’s own higher education, or to the higher education of one’s child, because the satisfaction of the interest is very important to the individual’s well-being. Similarly, one’s serious interests might limit one’s filial obligations.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> VanDeVeer, Donald. “Interspecific Justice,” in *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book: Philosophy, Ecology, Economics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Thomson Wadsworth Publishing (2003), pp. 150-163.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>197</sup> I do not mean to suggest that VanDeVeer’s account of interests is entirely correct. For instance, this account says that the seriousness of an interest depends on its value *to its possessor*, and a more objective account of serious interests might be more plausible. For an example of such an objective account, see Dwyer, James, “Children’s Rights,” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education*, Randall Curren, ed. Blackwell Publishing (2003), pp. 443-445. Dwyer distinguishes between welfare interests, “such as food and education, that one must have in order to carry on in life, that are preconditions for pursuing any higher aims,” and ulterior interests, or “satisfactions of the higher, individualized aims people form for their lives” (pp. 443-444). On this view, we have an objective way of determining whether something is a welfare interest or an ulterior interest, even if we must rely on subjective evaluations to rank ulterior interests.

Other interests, however, are less significant, and so a theory of filial obligations may justifiably require that a grown child refrain from satisfying them in order to meet his parent's needs. Playing poker, having an expensive second home for vacation, or owning an extensive collection of Fabergé eggs usually are not like having children or pursuing an interesting career: these are not the sorts of things people typically have a serious interest in, so requiring that they not play poker but instead discharge their filial obligations is, or appears, unproblematic. At the very least, the requirement that one refrain from purchasing an expensive second home for vacation seems less morally troubling than the requirement that one refrain from starting one's own family. One way of articulating the difference between these sacrifices is to appeal to the seriousness of the individual's interests.

Of course, in this society, individuals have a wide variety of serious interests. If having an interest in starting a family is sufficient to limit filial obligations because the satisfaction of this interest is so important to the individual's wellbeing, then investing in an expensive hobby might similarly limit one's other obligations, provided that the hobby also makes an important contribution to the individual's wellbeing. I suspect that very few people do, in fact, have a serious interest in collecting Fabergé eggs, whereas many people have a serious interest in having and raising children. Nonetheless, *if* one's interest in collecting expensive jeweled eggs is a genuinely serious interest, then it might limit one's other obligations.

Which interests constitute genuinely serious interests remains unclear. As VanDeVeer points out, "It would be less messy if interests did not exhibit degrees of

importance to their possessors; unfortunately, they do.”<sup>198</sup> Despite this lingering epistemological concern, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory has an advantage over Special Goods Theory, for it offers a theoretical limit on filial obligations: expressions of gratitude are not required when they would indicate that either person in the relationship views himself or the other as a mere means to an end, where this involves disregarding the serious interests of free moral agents.<sup>199</sup>

Thus, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory provides a relatively simple way to determine whether a grown child is morally required to put his parent’s future needs ahead of his own present interests: if a grown child has a serious interest in something, such as starting his own family, and abandoning this plan for the sake of someone else would be so costly to his own wellbeing that it would suggest that either he or the other person views him as merely a means to someone else’s ends, then he ought not to abandon his plan.<sup>200</sup> If a grown child has a non-serious interest in something, such as collecting expensive jeweled eggs, and abandoning this plan would *not* be terribly costly to his wellbeing and so would not constitute a lack of

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<sup>198</sup> VanDeVeer, “Interspecific Justice,” p. 154.

<sup>199</sup> Indeed, Berger seems to have something like this condition in mind when he calls excessive gratitude “pathological” and reprimands the parent who does not allow the grown child the freedom to plan his own life as he sees fit.

<sup>200</sup> Jecker offers similar restrictions on filial obligations. In comparing a child’s obligations to her parents with Socrates’ obligations to the state in Plato’s *Apology*, she says: “although Socrates is loyal to Athens and willing to make sacrifices for the state, he refuses to relinquish those things that he esteems most – the things that give him, in effect, a reason for living . . . Whereas the servile person displays an absence of self-respect by acting as if his rights and interest [*sic*] were non-existent or relatively insignificant, Socrates’ loyalty to the state is circumscribed by loyalty to his own ideals and interests” (“Are Filial Duties Unfounded?”, p. 78).

self-respect, then he ought not to purchase the eggs but instead discharge his filial obligations.

From these cases, it is clear why we find counter-intuitive the conclusion that one ought to refrain from having children in order to care for one's parents: making such a choice seems to indicate a failure to respect one's own serious interests and so a failure to respect oneself as an end. Instead, one seems to view one's own serious interests as subordinate to the interests of one's parents. We do not require this sort of self-sacrifice; in fact, we find it morally problematic. It is also now clear why we are inclined to blame the grown child who buys expensive jeweled eggs rather than meeting his parent's needs: it *seems* that the grown child could have acted differently without subordinating to the needs of his parents any of his serious interests. Of course, the grown child who wishes to collect Fabergé eggs might have a serious interest in doing so, such that abandoning this course of action would be extremely costly to his own wellbeing. In such a case, he would *not* be obligated to refrain from purchasing Fabergé eggs so that he can meet his parent's needs in the future. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory can explain our intuitive responses to these cases. In the case of meeting one's parent's needs at the expense of having and caring for one's own children, the conditions for filial obligations do not seem to be satisfied; in the case of meeting one's parent's needs at the expense of one's desire to own expensive collectibles, they do.

Thus, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory satisfies all four criteria for an adequate theory of filial obligations. First, it specifies the content of filial obligations,

when they arise. Second, in grounding obligations in gratitude, it explains why we have the obligations that we do. Third, it generates intuitive results or justifications for counter-intuitive results. Finally, it offers an explanation of why certain results seem counter-intuitive.

## **6.2 Filial Obligations and Justice**

As I said in Chapter 1, my aim is to situate this theory of filial obligations against a contemporary, western background and show what this theory requires given the practical problems with filial care today. Although this theory yields extensive – perhaps surprisingly so – filial obligations, a brief discussion of the current state of affairs will show that this theory in fact relieves many families of tremendous burdens. Moreover, as I said in Chapter 1, this theory can respond to some important justice-based concerns. For instance, this theory can clearly explain why the current gender-based distribution of filial care reflects a serious moral problem.

As it turns out, although Gratitude for Special Goods Theory generates demanding filial obligations, families already provide far more care than they are morally required, at least on this view, to provide. According to a *JAMA* report about the effect of illness on caretakers, family members routinely take on burdens from which Gratitude for Special Goods Theory would likely excuse them. Of the patients studied, all of whom were considered “seriously ill” and discharged from the hospital, one third required care from a family member. 20% of families reported that a family member had to quit work to provide the necessary care, and 31%

reported loss of all or most of the family's savings.<sup>201</sup> In a first-world nation in which life expectancy increases without a corresponding increase in healthy years lived, the fact that older adults require such care is unsurprising. The effect of such care on families, though, is perhaps surprising.

Gratitude for Special Goods Theory cannot determine whether the individuals in this study are behaving in a supererogatory manner without more details about the specific relationships. However, generally speaking, the theory does not generate a moral obligation to quit one's job, forfeit one's income, or deplete one's entire savings. In the case of quitting one's job, the theory will only require this of an individual who does not have a serious interest in continuing the work. Thus, if the work is not particularly stimulating and the income is not necessary for the individual to be able to satisfy other basic or serious interests, then the grown child has an obligation to provide special goods to the parent, assuming the other conditions of the theory are satisfied. If, however, the income is necessary for the satisfaction of other basic or serious interests, or the job itself is one the individual has a serious interest in having, then the fourth condition of the theory is not satisfied, and the grown child does not have an obligation to provide care to the parent when the cost to herself is so high. Of course, if one adopts a general moral theory according to which the satisfaction of basic interests always takes precedence over the satisfaction of non-basic interests, then the child has an

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<sup>201</sup> Covinsky, Kenneth; Goldman, Lee; Cook, Francis E.; Oye, Robert; Desbiens, Norman; Reding, Douglas; Fulkerson, William; Connors Jr., Alfred F.; Lynn, Joanne; Phillips, Russell S. "The Impact of Serious Illness on Patients' Families" in *JAMA*, December 21, 1994, Vol. 272, No. 23, pp. 1839-1844.

obligation to provide the care. This particular theory of filial obligations, however, will not yield such a result.

The *JAMA* report suggests that many caregivers already take on considerable burdens to provide for a family member; children frequently sacrifice their own health, financial security, and general levels of happiness to provide necessary care for an ageing parent. Although the obligations that Gratitude for Special Goods Theory generates are extensive, we have some reason to think that many individuals already take on these sorts of obligations and more. The theory yields more extensive obligations than other theories yield, but perhaps less extensive obligations than many individuals already behave as if they have.<sup>202</sup> In fact, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory might, at least in some cases, explain why the grown child is doing *too much* for the parent. If a willingness to take on such burdens constitutes a lack of self-respect, then not only does the theory not require such actions, but it can provide a reason for thinking that the child ought not to make such sacrifices. Although filial obligations on this view might be surprisingly extensive in theory, in practice they could very well come as relief to those who feel that they ought to do all that they possibly can for their parents.

The restriction Gratitude for Special Goods Theory offers here can respond to at least one justice-based concern. Consider, for instance, Nancy S. Jecker's

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<sup>202</sup> The caregivers in these sorts of studies need not be motivated by a sense of obligation. My point is only that many people are already doing considerably more than this particular theory would demand of them.

application of the veil of ignorance thought experiment to the question of filial obligations. Jecker concludes that justice would not require filial care:

“Assuming that persons under a veil of ignorance would seek to advance their own plans of life as much as possible, they would want to protect their personal projects against outside interferences. However, from behind the veil of ignorance, people would not know what their personal projects are . . . Under these circumstances, hypothetical deliberators would not support policies that pin them down to any particular project or career, including a career of caring for others . . . If a person’s sense of meaning and identity lies elsewhere, it is unfair to require parent care.”<sup>203</sup>

For reasons similar to those Jecker offers, children do not have an obligation to give up their own lives – or those activities that give their lives meaning – to care for their parents. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory preserves for grown children the freedom to live their lives as they see fit; just as other moral obligations do not infringe on autonomy in this regard, filial obligations similarly do not infringe on autonomy in this regard. Thus, although the theory requires that grown children sacrifice certain agent-centered prerogatives, such as expensive hobbies or even particular career options (assuming those career options are not terribly important to the child in question), it leaves open the possibility of pursuing those activities which matter most for an individual’s flourishing. Whereas Jecker’s concern is that justice cannot require that someone forfeit important “personal projects,” Gratitude for Special Goods Theory yields the same limitation, but the limitation is based on the demand that moral relationships consist of mutual respect and regard.

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<sup>203</sup> Jecker, “Taking Care of One’s Own: Justice and Family Caregiving,” p. 127.

Gratitude for Special Goods Theory of filial obligations can also explain what is going wrong in a common and well-documented phenomenon: women are providing a remarkably disproportionate amount of care for ageing parents. We obviously have justice-based reasons for concern here. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory suggests a non-justice-based explanation for what is going wrong. According to Gratitude for Special Goods Theory, differences in filial obligations among siblings can have one of three sources: 1) the past provision of special goods, 2) the current state of the relationship, 3) the child's ability to provide the special good the parent needs. The theory provides no principled reason for thinking daughters would have more extensive obligations to the parents than sons would have. Unfortunately, women are bearing a staggeringly greater share of the burden than men.

According to studies ranging from 1981 to 2001, women – either daughters or daughters-in-law – are providing most of the necessary care to ageing parents. In *Women in the Middle*, Elaine M. Brody reports on several studies regarding caregiving for family members:

“It soon became clear that just as ‘family’ almost invariably means spouses or adult children, adult children most often means adult daughters. It is adult daughters who help elderly parents care for each other and who are the primary caregivers for those among widowed or divorced older persons who need help . . . when the disabled older person has no spouse, a daughter is most likely to become the primary caregiver...[A]mong primary caregivers, daughters outnumber sons in a ratio of more than three to one; among primary caregivers of the extremely disabled elders, the ratio is four to one.”<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Brody, Elaine. *Women in the Middle: Their Parent Care Years*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Springer Publishing Company (2004), p. 40.

Of course, this is not to suggest that sons do not care for their parents. Brody reports that we have seen a slight increase in the number of sons contributing to care for their parents, but this increase is small and still reflects a gender-based difference that many find profoundly troubling, and rightly so:

“Sons love their parents, do not neglect them, provide emotional support, and have feelings of responsibility. In general, however, sons tend to do certain tasks reflecting the cultural assignment of gender-appropriate roles such as money management and home repairs, and they often are major participants in making important decisions. But direct, hands-on or personal care of the elderly is almost invariably a woman’s role. Sons assume the role of primary caregiver when they have no sisters or none close by. When they do so, however, they are helped by their wives (the daughters-in-law). Sons do less than daughters and experience less strain.”<sup>205</sup>

Daughters, or even daughters-in-law, are providing most hands-on care to elderly parents, with sons generally providing such care only if they have no sisters to provide it. In fact, Brody notes that equal sharing of responsibility among siblings occurs rarely, and then usually when the children are two adult daughters.<sup>206</sup>

Aside from some very deep worries about the gender-based distribution of labor reflected in these numbers, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory explains a specific moral failure occurring here. The moral failure is not simply that women are doing most of the work – though that’s certainly troubling – but that sons are failing to discharge their filial obligations. Although we can easily imagine cases in which the current state of the relationship between the daughter and ageing parent is

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<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

fundamentally different from the current state of the relationship between her brother and the ageing parent, this kind of difference is not likely to explain the disparity in caregiving. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory offers at least three reasons for finding the current state of affairs so troubling.

First, as I noted earlier, on this theory, there is no principled reason for thinking that daughters have more extensive filial obligations than sons have. In fact, sons will have more extensive obligations if they find themselves better positioned to provide special goods to the parent. Furthermore, given that many of the goods in question will be relationship goods, the daughter's provision of special goods in no way eliminates the parent's need; that is to say, the parent may still require certain relationship goods from the son. Because of the nature of special goods, a parent may still need them from one child even as another child provides them. Thus, even if a grown daughter is providing special goods to the parent, the parent may still need many special goods from her son. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory generates filial obligations for both daughters and sons, and unless daughters and sons are different with respect to their relationship with their parents or their ability to meet their parents' needs, the sons are failing morally if daughters are providing most of the special goods to the parent.

Second, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory explains what goes wrong when a grown son shifts his filial obligations to his wife. Although she may have formed a special relationship with her in-laws and thus genuinely owes gratitude for the provision of special goods, the daughter-in-law's actions cannot discharge her

*husband's* filial obligations. He owes certain expressions of gratitude (assuming the conditions of the theory are satisfied), and her actions cannot be *his* expressions of gratitude. A grown son's filial obligations are not discharged so long as his parent's needs are met; they are discharged only if *he* meets them. According to Gratitude for Special Goods Theory, then, we can explain why a moral failure occurs even if the parent is provided with the special goods she needs.

Third, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory explains why women taking on a disproportionate amount of caregiving burdens might be inappropriate. Although her brother's failure to discharge his filial obligations does not excuse a grown daughter from her filial obligations, it only increases her obligations to the extent that such an increase is consistent with maintaining mutual respect. A grown daughter cannot simply avoid filial obligations by pointing out that her brothers do not discharge their own filial obligations. However, whether she must take on additional burdens because of their failure depends entirely on the fourth condition of the theory: whether she can take on these burdens without undermining the mutual respect on which moral relationships are based. If attempting to make up for her brother's failure to discharge his filial obligations indicates a lack of mutual respect, then not only does she not have an obligation to do so, but doing so might be inappropriate. Furthermore, we have at least some reason for thinking that taking on such additional burdens does, in fact, undermine mutual respect.

Consider the case in which two grown children – a son and a daughter – have each had roughly similar relationships with their parents, and they are each

similarly able to position themselves to meet their parents' needs. The daughter so positions herself, but the son does not. Can the daughter compensate for the son's inaction without thereby undermining the mutual respect on which moral relationships are based? It seems that she cannot. As I noted in the case of the daughter-in-law, the daughter in this case cannot, strictly speaking, compensate for her brother's inaction. Although she can provide more for her parents than her brother does, she cannot express gratitude *on his behalf*. Thus, he has still acted wrongly, morally speaking. Furthermore, her willingness to take on his responsibilities suggests a lack of mutual respect – not between herself and her parents, but between herself and her brother. Her willingness to take on his responsibilities might very well indicate a lack of self-respect, but his willingness to let her take on his responsibilities certainly indicates a lack of respect for her. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory thus explains our intuition that in cases such as this one, the daughter is doing “too much.”

Gratitude for Special Goods Theory generates extensive – though not oppressive – filial obligations. In grounding the obligations in gratitude, the theory captures our intuition that filial *ingratitude* is usually a moral failure. However, since gratitude is owed in response to the provision of *special goods* rather than benevolence, the theory also captures our intuition that children might not owe gratitude in response to harm, even if the harm is inflicted with the best of intentions. Perhaps most importantly, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory restricts our filial obligations in a way that is consistent with our deeply held intuitions that

we cannot be required to sacrifice everything, particularly those things that give our lives meaning, for our parents. The demand for mutual respect, a crucial component of which is self-respect, helps to explain this intuition while also supporting our justice-based concerns about the gender-based distribution of labor generally and filial care specifically. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory constitutes a contemporary western theory of filial obligations that provides useful guidance regarding filial care against a background of contemporary western problems.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusions

In the preceding chapters, I have outlined the question at hand, as well as the problems with answering such a question. Many people find themselves wondering what they ought to do for their parents, or how much they ought to sacrifice. Given the rapid increase in the number of people who are 85 and older, far more people are likely to be asking themselves these questions in the coming years. Answering questions about filial obligations is both philosophically enlightening and practically useful.

Philosophically, as I mentioned, filial obligations initially seem strange. After all, parents have an obligation to provide for their children. Although parents might provide more for their children than duty demands, children are often unwilling recipients of those parental investments. Furthermore, the parents – *unlike* the children – have voluntarily entered into the relationship, so obligations on the part of the children might initially strike us as odd. As I have argued, however, these obligations are not as strange as they might initially seem.

Practically, the questions about filial obligations are urgent, as are the broader questions of what society in general ought to do for its ageing members. Although I have focused only on the individual question here, I do not mean to suggest that the political question is less important. The subject of care for the elderly requires immediate attention in most first-world nations. Naturally, the content of filial

obligations on the view that I have presented will be shaped by what social policies are in effect. Social policy certainly has the ability to alleviate burdens on individual members of society. Even if, as I have suggested, individuals ought to do quite a bit for their parents, we may have some reason for thinking that society cannot appeal to that as justification for providing less than it might otherwise provide to ageing citizens. Trusting individuals to recognize and discharge moral obligations leaves older citizens vulnerable, and for this reason, perhaps society ought to proceed on the assumption that these citizens will *not* receive care from family members. In any case, the arguments I have offered here are compatible with arguments that society ought to do more for its ageing citizens. Of course, the theory is also compatible with arguments that society ought to do less.

In response to the common complaint that contemporary western philosophers disregard the question of filial obligations, or dismiss filial obligations as relics of ancient society, I have considered four theories of filial obligations and offered a fifth, new theory. Each of these theories would, if successful, constitute a contemporary western theory of filial obligations that does not dismiss such obligations as mere relics but rather seeks to justify those obligations and clarify their content in particular circumstances.

Each of the theories considered here offers valuable contributions to discussions of filial obligations. From a careful consideration of each theory, a blended theory emerges that has the advantages of each of its component theories and the disadvantages of neither. Furthermore, it captures those features of the parent-child

relationship that both Debt and Friendship theories highlight. Gratitude for Special Goods Theory is the most plausible of the theories considered here, and it has clear advantages over either of its component theories. Unlike Gratitude Theory, it specifies the content of our obligations; unlike Special Goods Theory, it assigns these obligations appropriately.

Although the theory does not generate obligations *only* within the parent-child relationship, the nature and history of a particular relationship is crucial in determining what obligations, if any, arise. Thus, if a particular teacher has provided me with special goods in the past, and I find myself able to provide that teacher with special goods he needs later in life without thereby undermining the mutual respect necessary for moral relationships, I ought to provide such goods. Given the constraints here – that I be able to provide the good without thereby undermining mutual respect – I suspect that these sorts of obligations will be rare outside of families and close friendships. However, when the conditions of the theory are satisfied, obligations arise. Thus, although the theory is not *solely* a theory of filial obligations, for it can generate obligations to individuals other than one's parents, it is a genuine theory of filial obligations, for it provides a plausible account of what we owe our parents because of the relationship we have with them.

According to Gratitude for Special Goods Theory, one might even have obligations to one's *biological* parents, even if one has been adopted and raised by other parents. If either existence itself is the sort of special good that can generate obligations of gratitude, or the placement of one's own child into a loving, nurturing

environment is such a good, then the child might have obligations of gratitude.

Again, whether Gratitude for Special Goods Theory generates obligations in this case depends on whether the child can position herself to provide whatever goods the biological parent needs without thereby undermining mutual respect. The theory can thus explain our intuition that perhaps children ought to be grateful to their biological parents for making the decision to give the child up for adoption, but it can also explain our intuition that most of the time, adopted children do not owe their biological parents anything (or at least not as much as those children owe their adoptive parents).

Thus, Gratitude for Special Goods Theory can generate obligations to people other than one's parents. Moreover, as long as one can provide special good to one's parents without undermining mutual respect, then one ought to do so. If, for example, one has only a passing interest in having children, and having children would render the individual unable to provide the special goods his father needs, then one ought to provide for his father rather than have children of his own. As I said in Chapter 6, I suspect that this kind of case will not arise very often, for having children is not the sort of thing one usually has merely a passing interest in doing. However, if one can position oneself to meet one's parent's needs without undermining mutual respect, then the child ought to do so, even if in some cases, this means not having children, taking a particular job, or moving to a particular part of the world.

Its capacity to generate extensive filial obligations might strike some as counter-intuitive. However, two points are worth making here. First, by restricting filial obligations to those that can be satisfied without sacrificing self-respect, this theory avoids generating *overly* demanding obligations. Even in cases in which our filial obligations turn out to be far more extensive than we realized, they are not, on this view, oppressive. In fact, as I have noted, they might in practice require far less than many people in fact do for their parents. Second, the assumption that one need not worry too much about one's parents but instead focus on oneself is relatively new. As the passages with which I began this project suggest, the idea that at least some of us owe our parents almost everything, though perhaps surprising, is certainly not new.

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