

Moral Reasoning and Obligations to the Elderly

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A popular view

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- A widely accepted view in most cultures:
- The young people of society have moral obligations to care for the old, both those in their own families and those who are strangers to them.
- Adult children have more moral obligation to care for their elderly parents than other persons in the society.

Confucianism

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- Mencius stated, “Treat your elderly with the care appropriate for the elderly, and then apply it to the elderly of others.”
(Mencius 1A:7)

- But why do we think that we have such obligations?
- By what sort of reasoning can we arrive at such a conclusion?

Obligation to care for our elderly parents

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- Do we have more moral obligation to care for our elderly parents than any other person does in the society?
- Some philosophers (e.g. Norman Daniels):
We don't.

Objection to filial obligation

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- Their argument is something like this:

Children do not give their consent to be brought into this world or to be adopted. They do not choose to enter into the parent-child relationship. So the so-called children's obligation of caring for their aged parents is "non-self-imposed" and thus cannot be morally required.

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Objection to filial obligation

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- Assumption: only “self-imposed” obligations are morally required.
- Is it true that only “self-imposed” obligations are morally required?

Criticism

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- Example:

Suppose I see a child fall into a pond, and I can save it just by wading in, and no one else is about.

- Do I have the obligation to save the child?

Criticism

- Obviously, I do because I am the only one on the scene and we have a general obligation to help those in distress.
- The assumption that only “self-imposed” obligations are morally required is unwarranted.

∴ My obligation to save the child is not “self-imposed”.

I happen to be the only one on the scene. I did not choose that.

Criticism

- This shows that non-consenting relationship such as my being the only one who can save the child can impose moral responsibilities.
- Thus, to infer that children's filial obligation cannot be morally required from the fact that it is "non-self-imposed" is just a non-sequitur.

Theories of filial obligations

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- Now let us turn to some theories of filial obligations which attempt to justify filial obligations by using models analogous to parent-child relationship:
- the promise model theory
- the debt model theory
- the friendship model theory
- the gratitude model theory

Reasoning style of the theories

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- Each of them models the parent-child relationship on some other kind of relationship such as the promisee-promisor relationship, the creditor-debtor relationship, the friend relationship and the favor provider-receiver relationship.
- To each of these other kind of relationships, there corresponds a special obligation assumed by one party towards the other.
- These theories then relate the filial obligation to the corresponding obligations.

Reasoning style of the theories

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- The reasoning that these theories employ is analogical reasoning.
- It has the following logical structure.
- It has two basic premises: (1) each of these theories presupposes a certain x - y form relation which creates a certain moral obligation M for y towards x ; (2) the parent-child relation resembles that x - y form relation; and the conclusion that the child has a moral obligation towards their parents similar to M .

Reasoning style of the theories

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- One major problem with this analogical reasoning is that (2) is questionable.
- That is, the resemblance between the parent-child relationship and those other kinds of relationships presupposed by the theories is insufficient.
- This insufficiency will make the analogical reasoning a faulty one.

Contractualist theory of filial obligations

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- The main idea of the Contractualist theory of filial obligation is to apply Thomas Scanlon's Contractualist principle to filial obligations.

Contractualist theory of filial obligations

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- Suppose my mother develops some age-related disease, say, Alzheimer's disease. I am her only child. She needs me to take care of her and provide support for her. Obviously, to take care of my mother and provide support for her will have some impact on me.
- Suppose also that the impact is not huge. I am still able to maintain my life style.

- Do I have the moral obligation to care for my mother?
- If I do nothing to help her, has my mother wronged by me?

Scanlon's contractualist principle

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- An act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behaviour that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement.

Scanlon's contractualist principle

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- The Contractualist principle does not directly tell us whether my non-action is wrong or not.
- It specifies a condition for when my non-action is wrong.
- The condition is: I cannot justify my non-action.
- In other words, if I cannot justify my non-action to my mother, then my non-action is wrong.

Apply Scanlon's contractualist principle

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- Now can I justify my non-action to my mother?
- Let us consider the following Contractualist reasoning.
- Taking care of my mother requires me to make some sacrifice. By hypothesis, my sacrifice is a moderate one. But If I do nothing to help my mother, she will have great suffering which is a very bad thing.

Apply Scanlon's contractualist principle

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- Then, from the Contractualist point of view, it is hard to see how I can justify my non-action.
- ∴ Whatever principle I use to justify my non-action, my mother could have a reasonable objection to the principle.
- On the other hand, I could have no reasonable objection to the principle which just requires me make a moderate sacrifice to prevent my mother's great suffering.

The Confucian argument

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- For Confucians, a virtuous life itself is the highest good.
- In the *Analects*, Confucius makes the following comment: “One who loves the virtue of humaneness [*ren*] will esteem nothing above it. One who hates what is inhumane will practice the virtue of humaneness in such a way that he will not allow anything that is inhumane to approach his person.”

The Confucian argument

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- If the highest good and a virtuous life, being a humane person, are identical, then living well and being virtuous are also identical.
- For the Confucian, there is a deeper reason for being virtuous—to live well. Being virtuous is a means to the end of living well.

The Confucian argument

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- “The exemplary person devotes his efforts to the fundamental, for once the fundamental is established, the Way will grow therefrom. Filial piety and fraternal respect – are they not the fundamental of a person?” (*The Analects* 1:2)

The Confucian argument

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- “A young man, when at home, should be filial, and when out in the world should be respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow with love, and cultivate the friendship of the good.” (*The Analects* 1:6)

The Confucian argument

- “Don't do unto others what you don't want others to do unto you.” (The Analects 15:15)
- “Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others. To be able to judge of others by what is nigh in ourselves;— this may be called the art of virtue.” (The Analects 6:30)

The Confucian argument

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- ∴ Humaneness requires us to be filial.

Thank you !