Shifting Perspectives: Filial Morality Revisited

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Does morality require the filial obligation of grown children toward their aged parents? If the answer is negative, why is this so? If the answer is affirmative, then on what basis is this obligation founded? People of different cultures have different views on this issue. Perhaps the justification for filial morality, or the lack of it, is deeply rooted in the culture. Perhaps something that is easily justified in one culture may be hard to justify in another. If this is true, the only way to resolve the matter is to look into the culture itself. In this essay, I will first examine some problems with five accounts of filial morality that have been put forth in recent years, and then turn to Confucianism and show how it provides a sensible alternative perspective.

Critiques of Some Recent Theories

It appears that today's American culture generally does not favor the notion of filial obligation, or at least not a strong notion of it. Arguments pro and con have been put forth on both sides, but none of them seems to have been successful in either undermining or establishing filial morality.

_English's Friendship Model_. Jane English is probably the most representative of those Westerners who deny or doubt the existence of filial obligation.¹ In her article "What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?" she proposes a theory based on the concept of friendship.² According to English, grown children have no more filial obligation toward their parents than the kind of obligation one has toward friends or other people whom one loves. Accordingly, if parents' earlier sacrifices for their children have resulted in friendship and love in their children, parents may have the good fortune to be honored and served by their children when the latter have grown; if parents' earlier sacrifices have failed to produce friendship and love in their children, then the children have no filial obligation to serve and honor their parents. "After a friendship ends, the duties of friendship end," she writes.³

English distinguishes between two kinds of relationships: indebtedness and friendship. Here "indebtedness" is not limited to literal debts, but is understood broadly to include all situations where a favor has been done. "Favors create debts," English writes.⁴ If person B has done a favor for person A, then A is indebted to B. A ought to do something to reciprocate the favor. She maintains that friendship, unlike indebtedness, is characterized by mutuality rather than reciprocity; in friendship, a person can benefit from what her friend has done for her out of friend-
ship, but she is not thereby indebted to him. She does not "owe" him anything.

Then why is the typical relationship between children and parents not characterized as "indebtedness"? Because, English argues, parents' earlier voluntary sacrifices for their children are not favors to their children, and therefore these sacrifices do not render their children "indebted" to the parents. When the children grow up and the parents need help, the children may lend a helping hand out of friendship and love—if the parents' earlier sacrifices have resulted in friendship and love. There is no filial obligation beyond that.

But why are parents' earlier sacrifices for their children not favors, which should be reciprocated? English argues that parents' earlier sacrifices are not favors because their children did not request them. Obviously, the children were too young to request favors from anyone, including their parents. Therefore the children are not obliged to repay them when the parents are in need.

It may be debatable whether small children make requests. It can be argued that requests do not have to be verbal ones, which infants are certainly incapable of, and that requests can be made through gestures, eye contact, and so forth. Many pet owners think their pets do make requests in many ways. Therefore, in a broad sense of the word, from the mother's point of view, a crying baby is making a request for help. For the sake of argument, however, let us grant English that small children cannot and do not make requests for their needs. Now, does it follow from this that parental care is not a favor to their children?

A favor results, according to English, when person A, at person B's request, bears some burden for B and, consequently, B incurs an obligation to reciprocate. If Max asks Nina, his new neighbor whom he barely knows, whether she will take in his mail while he is gone for a month's vacation, Nina agrees and does it. If, subsequently, Nina asks Max to do the same for her, then Max has a moral obligation to agree. This is so because, English maintains, Nina has done a favor for Max, and therefore Max owes a favor to Nina. But, consider what happens when "Max simply goes on vacation and, to his surprise, finds upon his return that his neighbor has mowed his grass twice weekly in his absence. This is a voluntary sacrifice rather than a favor, and Max has no duty to reciprocate.5" In the latter case, no favor has been done because, as English indicates, Max did not request the service from his neighbor.

But is a request necessary for a favor to take place? I do not think so. Whether a favor is done has more to do with whether the person being benefited would like the thing done for him or her. In English's case, imagine that, due to unusual weather, Max's grass grew much faster than normal during his absence and without his neighbor's voluntary help
Max would have received a substantial fine for breaking a city ordinance. Shouldn’t Max consider his neighbor’s voluntary help a favor?

Suppose that Nina’s house is accidentally on fire, and Max happens to pass by and see it. He manages to put out the fire and thereby suffers a financial loss due to missing a business appointment at the time of the fire. Even though she did not request his help, it would be outrageous if Nina does not consider Max’s sacrifice a great favor. It would be indecent if Nina does not think she has a moral obligation to lend a hand when Max later needs help from her. Under these circumstances, whether a request has been made is irrelevant to whether a favor has been done.

Since English does not deny that a person is morally obligated to return a favor, her entire friendship model depends on the argument that parents’ earlier sacrifices are not favors to their children. And her argument in turn relies on the claim that a request is a necessary condition for a favor to occur. This claim is unwarranted, and therefore so is her conclusion that parents’ earlier sacrifices are not favors to their children.6

Belliotti’s Contribution to Self Principle. Against English, Raymond Belliotti argues for filial obligation. He proposes an argument based on personal identity that he characterizes as the “Contribution to Self Principle.” According to this view, “we have moral requirements of a special sort to those who contribute to and help nurture our identities, and those whose attachment is essential for our self-understanding.”7 Belliotti believes that in addition to her failure to recognize unrequested favors, English has assumed an atomistic notion of self. He criticizes English’s position for ignoring “the way our parents affect directly our very identities, how we have moral requirements to them and in fulfilling these requirements we are, in a literal way, being true to our ‘selves’.”8

Belliotti’s identity thesis bears some similarities to Confucianism, which I will discuss in the second part of this essay. But it is also different from Confucianism in an essential way. In brief, while Confucianism is both backward- and forward-looking—that is, it looks both at what one has become and at what one will or ought to become to determine one’s moral duty—Belliotti’s thesis appears solely backward-looking; it relies solely on what parents have done to shape a person’s identity. Therefore it is not unfair when Jan Narveson summarizes Belliotti’s principle as follows:

Premise: Person A contributed factor X to the “identity” of another person, B.

Conclusion: B morally owes something to A.9

One problem with this thesis concerns the negative contribution. In a person’s life there are countless factors that have directly or indirectly contributed to her identity. If Belliotti’s thesis is to be taken as a general

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one, as it appears to be, it would follow that a person has moral obligations to those who have made whatever contributions, both positive and negative, to her identity. One should love her father for having taught her to be a good fisherwoman and hate him for the scar he has caused to be left on her arm during a fishing accident. However, the notion of negative contribution to self and hence negative moral obligation seems inappropriate here because Belliotti is discussing what moral duties grown children have toward their parents, by which he evidently means what good grown children ought to do for their parents. It is unclear what Belliotti would say on this problem.

Perhaps Belliotti’s thesis can be modified to state that we have moral obligations only to those who have contributed something positive to our identities. But then there is the question of what counts as a positive contribution. Suppose someone’s father contributed a great deal to her being a fine fisherwoman, but she hates her profession; should she be grateful for his contribution? Also, positive contributions may come from different directions. We need not be grateful to all whose actions have resulted in positive contributions to us. Suppose someone grew up in an orphanage, and a vicious man in the orphanage caused her all kinds of hardship, but as a result she has developed a strong character, which has enabled her to endure future hardships on the way to a highly successful future. Should she be grateful for the man’s positive contribution to her identity? Probably not. So, contributions to our identities alone, even if limited to positive contributions, cannot serve as a foundation for filial morality.

Narveson’s Prudent Investor Thesis. Jan Narveson favors filial obligations on the part of grown children by arguing that “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 benefited in turn to at least the degree that renders it non-irrational for the parents to have done this.” Belliotti calls this the “prudent investor thesis.” Narveson believes that one rational motive for people to do good to others is that it is an investment. According to this conception, people tend to do good to one another “because they see the potential benefits of having everyone so disposed, and if we are to secure such a general disposition, we must instantiate it ourselves.”

One difficulty with Narveson’s thesis lies in the clause “if the children in question agree that the effects of those [parental] efforts really have been beneficial.” Belliotti remarks that this clause “holds the existence of the moral requirements hostage to the child’s judgment that she has been benefited by her parents’ efforts.” Under this condition, a child can easily let herself off the ethical hook by simply denying that...
her parents’ past efforts were beneficial. “Given human proclivities for rationalization and good faith errors of judgment, this is dangerous.”

Although a grown child should feel love and friendship toward her parents, and acknowledge that she has benefited from her parents’ earlier sacrifices, even if she does not acknowledge this, she is not thereby exempt from her filial obligation (if there is one). A person may not feel grateful for her parents giving her a life and bringing her up. But that only shows that she is ungrateful. The lack of love and friendship on her part does not exempt her from her filial obligation to serve her aged parents. Morality demands that one fulfill one’s obligation regardless of whether or not one acknowledges it.

However, the requirement that the child agrees that her parents’ sacrifices have been beneficial to her does not seem indispensable to Narveson’s thesis. For he could simply delete the phrase “the children in question agree that” and let the clause read, “if the effects of those efforts really have been beneficial, then....” By doing so, Narveson could easily get himself off Belliotti’s hook.

There is another problem, however, which in my view is more serious than the first one. It is the question of whether parents need a rational motivation for having children. Perhaps we can provide a rational justification for having children, but it seems to me that parents do not have to have one. The desire to have offspring, whether conscious or not, is deeply rooted in every species; otherwise species would cease to exist. In this regard, humans are not different from animals. Regardless of whether we have any rational justification, humans will continue to have offspring. It is a law of nature, and a law of nature does not need a rational justification. Therefore, Narveson’s notion that a child has a filial obligation toward her parents because she should see that it is not irrational for parents to have children is itself unjustified and perhaps unjustifiable.

Sommers’ Conventional Expectation Thesis. Christina Sommers proposes a theory of ethical duties that she calls “the thesis of differential pull.” It is the thesis that “the ethical pull of a moral patient will always partly depend on how the moral patient is related to the moral agent on whom the pull is exerted.” Based on this thesis, Sommers argues that children have special moral obligations toward their parents because of their special relationship with their parents. She attempts to justify this special relationship as follows:

The presumption of a special positive obligation arises for a moral agent when two conditions obtain: (1) In a given social arrangement (or practice), there is a specific interaction or transaction between moral agent and patient such as promising and being promised, nurturing and being nurtured, befriending and being befriended. (2) The interaction in that context gives rise to certain con-
Sommers argues that because of the existence of this parental conventional expectation of the children, the children’s failure to perform their expected behavior will cause unwarranted interference with the rights of the parents. I will call this the “Conventional Expectation Thesis.” Much of Sommers’ argument for filial morality is dependent on it. Although I agree with Sommers on her thesis of “differential pull,” which is similar to the Confucian notion of graded love, I do not think Sommers’ Conventional Expectation Thesis is valid.

By justifying moral obligations on the basis of conventional expectations, Sommer seems to have confused morality with mores. Simply put, the conventional is not tantamount to the moral. Good performance of conventionally expected behavior is not necessarily moral; and failure to perform such behavior is not necessarily immoral. Much conventionally expected behavior is actually immoral and should be avoided. At times in some parts of the world it has been conventionally expected that if a man could not repay his debts, he should give away his wife or daughter to his creditor, or offer himself as a slave to the creditor. Yet this is not a moral practice. If I cannot repay my debts and refuse to offer my wife or myself to my creditor, he may feel that his right has been violated. But the fact of the matter may be that he has never had such a right, even though it may be a conventional practice. Under these circumstances, a breach of conventional expectations would be a morally justifiable behavior and should be encouraged and praised. Therefore, one cannot successfully argue for what ought to be the case merely from what is conventionally expected.

Sommers’ thesis also relies on the concept of rights, which, as I will show next, has an even deeper problem in connection to the notion of filial obligation, and this may undermine her thesis.

Blustein’s Gratitude Theory. Jeffrey Blustein’s thesis is that grown children owe their parents many things and yet are not indebted to them. He distinguishes between two kinds of duties: duties of gratitude and duties of indebtedness.

Duties of gratitude are owed only to those who have helped or benefited us freely, without thought of personal gain, simply out of a desire to protect or promote our well-being. . . . Duties of indebtedness, in contrast, can be owed to those who were motivated primarily by self-interest or by the desire to help only insofar as this was believed to involve no risk or loss to themselves.

A person with duties of indebtedness is subject to claims for repayment, while a person with duties of gratitude is not. Grown children’s duties to
their parents are typically duties of gratitude. With such duties, grown children ought “to express their gratitude in words or deeds or both,”\textsuperscript{21} but the parents do not have claims for repayment from their children.

Blustein suggests that the occurrence of duties of indebtedness requires two conditions. First, the giver does not have a duty to benefit the receiver; second, the receiver not only receives, but also accepts, the benefit.\textsuperscript{22} In order for claims to repayment to have any moral force, Blustein writes, “it must first be established that what parents claim repayment for is something that they were morally at liberty to give to or withhold from their children.”\textsuperscript{23} But a lot of things that parents do for their children are things required by their parental duty and demanded by the children’s rights. “Children’s claim rights,” says Blustein, “correlate with the obligations of their parents.”\textsuperscript{24} Mere fulfillment of duties does not create indebtedness. When person A owes person B money, B has a claim right to get the money back. If A pays B the money, A only fulfills his obligation, and B is not thereby indebted to A.

Moreover, Blustein maintains that one cannot become indebted if one does not accept the benefit that one receives. If you, under no obligation, offer to maintain my lawn while I go on vacation and I accept your offer and benefit from the service, then I am indebted to you. But if I refuse your offer, then you cannot make me indebted to you by maintaining my lawn. In the latter case, I only receive, but do not accept, the benefit.

Blustein argues that, within the family, the parents do have a duty to provide care for their young children, and the children, while young, “cannot exercise genuine choice with respect to the benefits of early care.”\textsuperscript{25} Therefore, unless the parents have done something good for their children that is not required by parental duty, and the children accept it (or would have accepted if they could exercise genuine choice), the children will not have duties of indebtedness to their parents.

One objection to Blustein might be that parental duty cannot be clearly defined. For example, is it a parental duty that the parents should get up in the middle of a cold night to check and see if their child is sleeping well when they hear some small, unidentifiable noise? Would it be supererogatory if the parents feed their children expensive fish instead of chicken on weekends? Would it be a supererogatory act if the parents spend two hours playing with their kids instead of one hour? If a couple does more for their children than average parents, and if their children appreciate it, would that entitle the parents to some claims over the children for repayment? Social conventions cannot help much to resolve these issues. As soon as one starts drawing the line between what belongs and what does not belong to parental duty, one is treating the family as a group of self-interested strangers. Family members are not strangers.

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However, this objection may be trivial. For Blustein can say that the main issue here concerns the large portion of parental sacrifices clearly required by parental duty: if parents cannot claim repayment for these services required by parental duty, then there is no basis for demanding that the children reciprocate for these services. One cannot deny that parents do have a duty to care for their children. If fulfillment of duties does not create indebtedness, then it follows that children are not indebted by benefiting from the parents’ service, which is required by parental duty. If this is the case, Blustein’s goal is achieved. I agree with Blustein that what parents do for their children should not be considered merely and literally as a loan to be repaid later. I also agree with him that children owe duties of gratitude to their parents for their earlier sacrifices. But I am convinced that grown children “owe” their parents many things in a much stronger sense. The sense is so strong that grown children can be said to be “indebted” to their parents, and that from their grown children parents are entitled to and can, with full moral force, claim “repayment” in terms of financial assistance, physical attendance, personal care, and so on.

I think Blustein, within his theoretical framework of rights, has presented a strong negative case that cannot easily be dismissed. And his argument may be used against some of the above-mentioned authors, who are in favor of a stronger notion of filial obligation. Perhaps Blustein is right that, from the rights perspective, a strong notion of filial morality cannot be justified. Perhaps this partly explains why so many people in this culture of individual rights do not accept filial morality. I will, instead of arguing against Blustein within his framework of rights, turn to an alternative framework, Confucianism, and see what light it can shed on this important issue.

The Confucian Alternative

The August 25, 1993, issue of the Chinese newspaper People’s Daily reported that in Shandong Province a ninety-year-old woman sued her two sons for failing in their filial duty. The woman’s husband died young and left her with two sons, one and three years old, respectively. Through countless hardships she brought them both up. Now she had become old and could not work. Neither of her two sons wanted to take care of her. The court intervened in her favor, and the sons agreed to take full responsibility for her living and medical expenses. In China, the law states that parents have a legal obligation to rear their young, and grown children have a duty to support their aged parents. This reflects a Chinese social value that is deeply rooted in a mainly Confucian culture.

Unlike in the West, where filial morality is rarely a philosophical topic, in China it has long been at the center of philosophical discourse.
Renowned scholars like Chien Mu and Hsieh Yu-wei have described Chinese culture as “the culture of filial morality” (xiao de wenhua). They argue that one cannot understand traditional Chinese culture without understanding the role of filial morality.29

**What Confucian Filial Piety Means.** The Chinese word xiao is usually rendered in English as “filial piety” or “filiality.” It can also be translated as “filial ethics” or “filial morality.” It is one of the most important concepts in Confucian ethics and a cardinal virtue in Confucian tradition. This can be seen in the fact that the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiao jing*) and the *Analects* of Confucius were the two most widely read among the Confucian Classics.30 The *Classic of Filial Piety* makes filial piety a cardinal virtue by stating that “filial piety is the unchanging truth of Heaven, the unfailing equity of Earth, the [universal] practice of man” (chap. 7).31

Filial morality is one of the areas that deeply divide traditional China from the contemporary West. Many Westerners have found this Confucian value hard to accept. For example, Bertrand Russell commented: “Filial piety, and the strength of the family generally, are perhaps the weakest point in Confucian ethics, the only point where the system departs seriously from common sense.”32 Undoubtedly, in this regard, Russell, Jane English, and many others in the West will find themselves on the same side in opposition to the Confucians.

But what does filial piety mean in Confucianism? The Chinese character xiao consists of two components, one standing for “child” and the other meaning “the old.” The character has the part symbolizing the old above the part symbolizing child, meaning that the child supports and/or succeeds the parent. A dictionary of ancient Chinese, the *Shuo wen jie zi*, defines xiao as “one being good at serving one’s parents” (shan shi fu mu zhe).

In ancient China, filial piety included five types of behavior.33 First, one must support one’s parents. The *Classic of Filial Piety* states that “supporting one’s parents is the filial piety (xiao) in common people” (chap. 6). Second, one must honor, revere, and obey one’s parents. Confucius said, “Filial piety nowadays means to be able to support one’s parents. But we support even dogs and horses. If there is no feeling of reverence, wherein lies the difference?” (Analects 2:7). Mencius said, “[T]he greatest thing a filial son can do is to honor his parents” (Mencius 5A:4). The *Book of Rites* (*Li ji*) lists honoring one’s parents at a higher order of filiality than merely supporting them (chap. 6). The third type of filial behavior is producing heirs. Mencius said, “There are three ways of being unfilial. The worst is to have no heir” (Mencius 4A:26). The fourth is to bring honor and glory to one’s ancestors. The *Classic of Filial Piety* states that “to establish oneself, to enhance the Way, and to leave a good

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reputation behind, in order to make one’s parents illustrious, are the ultimate goal of filiality” (chap. 1). Finally, after the deaths of one’s parents, one must be able to mourn and offer a memorial service and sacrifice to them. The *Classic of Filial Piety* has ample discussion of this, particularly in chapters 10 and 18.

Among these five types of ancient filial behavior, the one that appears most incomprehensible to many Westerners is the third. What does producing heirs have to do with filial piety? After all, filial piety is concerned with treating one’s parents well; one can certainly do this without producing heirs. People who think along this line, however, have overlooked the religious dimension of Confucianism. It should be noted that in Confucianism there is no Heaven to ensure an eternal life as is the case in Christianity. The Confucians have to look elsewhere for the meaning of life, and to satisfy the almost universal human desire for immortality. The place to find it, for the Confucians, is human-relatedness, which has many dimensions. One primary dimension involves continuing the family line. Through reproduction, one can pass along not only one’s family name but also one’s blood, and hence life, to later generations. Also, the meaning of life is realized when one is loved by the members of one’s family and, after death, remembered by family members later to come. Therefore, one of the most important things to avoid is to “discontinue the sacrificial burning of incense” (duan le xiang huo) by not providing for later generations. The continuation of the family line is the necessary way to achieve this purpose. Not having heirs means cutting off the family line that has been passed down by the earlier generations, and it is therefore unfilial.

This line of thinking also explains the fourth and fifth types of filial behaviors listed above. One would feel that life is (more) meaningful if one believes that one will be remembered and honored and even glorified by later generations.

Another often neglected implication of having children is that, without raising children of one’s own, one cannot fully appreciate the efforts of one’s parents in raising their children. There is a Chinese saying that “we do not really know our parents’ kindness until we raise our own children” (*yang er fang zhi fumu en*). Having one’s own children gives one the necessary experience to appreciate fully one’s parents’ love and care, and is therefore instrumental in helping to make a person filial toward one’s parents.

The most fundamental among the five behaviors have been the first two—and this is increasingly so today, with the contemporary trend of fading religious convictions and the felt need by society for a strong family structure. Of these first two, many Westerners probably have more difficulty with the second: honoring, revering, and obeying one’s parents. Many people are under the impression that Confucianism demands
a son’s absolute obedience, but this notion may have been exaggerated. Tu Wei-ming has argued that Confucianism does not demand a son’s absolute obedience. According to the *Classic of Filial Piety*, Confucius explicitly said: “When [the father] is not right, the son cannot not contend with (zheng) the father…. Hence, if the son follows the father without contending with him when the father is not right, how can this be filial?” (chap. 15).

Mencius also defended Zhang Zi, who offended his father by asking his father to do the right thing (*Mencius* 4B: 30). Xun Zi even went so far as to say that following one’s father is merely a small virtue, compared with the great virtue of following righteousness, which sometimes may require one not to follow one’s father, and he gave specific examples of occasions when the son must not follow the wish of his parents (*Xun Zi*, chap. 29). Fung Yu-lan was right in summarizing Confucian filial piety as follows:

On the spiritual side, filial piety consists, during the lifetime of our parents, in conforming ourselves to their wishes, and giving them not only physical care and nourishment, but also nourishing their wills; while should they fall into error, it consists in reproving them and leading them back to what is right. After the death of our parents, furthermore, one aspect of it consists in offering sacrifices to them and thinking about them, so as to keep their memory fresh in our minds.

For our purpose in this essay we follow this mainstream view on filial piety, and particularly focus on filiality as the supporting and honoring of one’s parents.

It should be noted without further delay that the Confucians would agree with Raymond Belliotti that parental care and nurture are reasons for filial obligation by the child, and they would agree with Jan Narveson and Christina Sommers that the child should not let his parents down after they have devoted (“invested”) so much effort in nurturing him. As a matter of fact, the concept of reciprocity is of extreme importance in Confucian culture, and in Chinese culture in general. But, for the Confucians, there is a lot more to it.

What kind of justification do the Confucians give for filial piety? Although filial piety is a cardinal virtue in Confucianism and there is plentiful discussion of it by the writers of the Confucian Classics, one can hardly find a well-formed, systematic statement of justification among them. This is so, perhaps, because in the old days there was such overwhelming support for filial piety that it did not need philosophical argument to support it. The Chinese did not distinguish reason from feeling; Mencius, for example, appealed directly to human feelings to justify moral virtues. When there was already a strong feeling for something, there was hardly any need for philosophical justification to convince
people of its value. For our purpose, however, an appeal to feelings is not enough.

On the subject of justification, I agree with John Rawls:

What justifies a conception of justice is not its being true to an order antecedent to and given to us, but its congruence with our deeper understanding of ourselves and our aspirations, and our realization that, given our history and the traditions embedded in our public life, it is the most reasonable doctrine.36

The issue of filial piety may be seen as part of the larger issue of justice. To see how the Confucians justify the doctrine of filial piety, we need to see how this doctrine is congruent with their deeper understanding of themselves, and we need to understand this doctrine as one deeply embedded in their tradition. Specifically, we need to look into the central concept of Confucianism, the concept of Jen, and its place in Confucian ethics. In what follows I will look into Jen in general, then examine this concept in the light of two important aspects of Confucianism, self-realization and duty ethics.

Filial Piety as a Requirement for Jen. The concept of Jen occupies a central place in Confucian philosophy. Confucius said, “Jen is (the distinguishing characteristic of) man.”37 The concept of Jen defines humanity and the destiny of a person. In the English-speaking world, Jen has been rendered as benevolence, love, altruism, kindness, charity, compassion, human-heartedness, humanity, and so on. These words, though individually inadequate in rendering the meaning of Jen, collectively offer a good clue to understanding this concept.

Ideally or theoretically, a person of Jen must love all people (Analects 1:6; Mencius 7A:46). But Confucius and Mencius believed that persons practicing Jen should start with their parents and siblings and then extend it to others. Confucius said that “the greatest application of Jen is in being affectionate toward relatives,”38 and “filial piety and brotherly respect are the root of Jen” (Analects 1:2). A person of Jen must love first his father and elder brothers and then, by extension, other people. Mencius said, “Treat with respect the elders in my family, and then by extension, also the elders in other families” (Mencius 1A:7). He believed that a person of Jen should be Jen to all people but attached affectionately only to his parents (Mencius 7A:45). This means that one’s parents exert a greater ethical pull on him or her. Therefore, filial piety is one’s primary duty.

Why must a person of Jen start with loving his parents? The Confucians observe the following line of reasoning. From childhood one must begin moral self-cultivation. The first social environment in which one finds oneself is the family. The first people with whom one is acquainted are, naturally, one’s parents. Therefore, in order for one to be-
come Jen, one must first learn to be Jen with one’s parents; and Jen in that aspect is filial piety.

The Doctrine of the Mean states that the way to becoming a virtuous person may be compared to what takes place during travel, when, to go a distance, we must first traverse the space that is near, and to ascend a height, we must start from the lower ground (chap. 15). Confucius stated the “way” of the good person in the following order: filial when at home, respectful to elders when away from home, becoming earnest and faithful, loving all extensively, and being close to people of Jen (Analects 1:6). Similarly, Mencius believed that if one loves one’s parents, one will, by extension, be Jen to people in general; and if one is Jen to people in general, one will be caring to everything in the world (Mencius 7A:45). If one fails to learn to be Jen at home, namely to be filial to one’s parents while young, it would be difficult to be Jen to others after one grows up. Therefore, filial piety is the fountainhead of Jen, and the morality of Jen first of all demands filial piety.

The Classic of Filial Piety states that filial piety forms the root of all virtues, and with it, enlightened learning comes into existence (chap. 1). The Book of Rites states, “As the people are taught filial piety and brotherly love at home, with reverence toward elders and diligent care for the aged in the community, they constitute the way of a great king; and it is along this line that states as well as families will become peaceful” (10:45). The great king is a moral role model for the people. The way of the great king is also the way of a morally superior person. In order to be a moral person, one must fulfill one’s filial duty.

Filial Piety as a Requirement for Self-Realization. The Confucian self has a spatial as well as a temporal existence. Diachronically speaking, the self is a process of realization and transformation. Synchronically, the self extends beyond the individual point in space that we ordinarily think a person occupies. One important way to understand the Confucian notion of filial piety is through understanding this diachronic dimension of the Confucian self.

Confucians do not regard the self as a ready-made soul or entity. The self is a process of realizing one’s Heaven-endowed potential. All of us were born with the potential to be fully human, but realizing it takes lifelong effort. For the Confucian, the realization of this potential is one’s Heaven-imposed duty and one’s ultimate goal. In this view, the life process is not merely a biological growing up and becoming older; it is, most importantly, a process of moral improvement and development. It is a process of the unfolding of our Heaven-endowed nature. Our ultimate destiny is to become Jen, or to achieve full humanity. We can only reach this goal through self-cultivation and self-transformation. We cultivate ourselves through reinforcing and expanding our human-related-

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ness, and our human-relatedness starts with our relationship with our parents. Therefore, becoming a filial son or daughter is a necessary part of the process of achieving humanity.

In this sense, one endeavors to develop both physically and morally for the sake of one’s own self (wei ji). In urging their children to study, Chinese parents often remind them of this notion by asking: “Are you learning for someone else?” The answer, of course, is “no.” One learns and grows for the sake of oneself. This also extends to filial piety.

Mencius maintained that it is human nature that we love our parents (Mencius 3A: 5). Since the Mencian school of Confucianism believes that original human nature is good, it follows that we ought to retain our original nature. Mencius believed that it belongs to our original heart to love our parents and that developing this original heart will directly lead to filial piety. Whether human nature is good, bad, or neutral is as subject to dispute today as it was in Mencius’ time. But Confucians in general hold a person-making, not rule-following, ethics. In order to become a good person, one must develop good character. It is hard to imagine someone who treats his or her parents badly to be a good person (of good character). If self-realization is the way to develop into a good person, as the Confucians believe, then filial piety is a requirement for our self-realization. Since filial piety is a step in our self-realization, being filial is not only for the sake of our parents; it is also for our own sake.

Speaking of our relationship with our fathers, Tu Wei-ming writes: “For their own sake as well as ours, we must appeal to our Heaven-endowed nature, our conscience, for guidance. After all, it is for the ultimate purpose of self-realization that we honor our fathers as the source of the meaningful life that we have been pursuing.” According to Tu, in Confucianism we can never realize ourselves as isolated individuals. We must recognize our personal locus as a starting point of self-realization, with reference to our fathers among other relationships. Therefore, we must honor and respect our fathers (and mothers, it should perhaps be added), not because they dominate us or because we dare not disobey them; in a strong sense, we honor and respect them for our own sake, namely for our self-cultivation and self-realization.

Lin Yutang writes: “The greatest regret a Chinese gentleman could have was the eternally lost opportunity of serving his old parents with medicine and soup on their deathbed, or not to be present when they died.” In a person’s life there are many things that one must be able to do in order to live a fulfilled life. Serving one’s aged parents is one of them. Without such an experience there is an irremediable lacking in one’s life, which is a cause for lifelong regret. This is so because, for the Confucians, filial piety is a main road to becoming Jen and a requirement for self-realization. The loss of the opportunity to be a filial son or daughter is at the same time a loss of opportunity to live a wholesome life, to make.
progress in achieving the goal of Jen and in developing into a fully cultivated human being.

For the Confucians, therefore, filial morality is an essential element for our self-realization and self-transformation in becoming fully human. From this perspective, one's filial duty is by no means supererogatory. And it is not merely a duty for the benefit of other people (i.e., one's parents). It is, in a deeper sense, a duty one owes to oneself for the sake of oneself. Becoming fully human is one's ultimate destiny, and therefore the development of one's own morality is in one's highest self-interest.

*Filial Piety as a Requirement for Confucian Duty Ethics.* Those who believe in the existence of filial obligations usually draw (partly) on the fact that parents do make a significant sacrifice in raising children. Confucians share this view. Thus, can they counter Blustein's argument that parental non-supererogatory sacrifices are merely the discharging of their duties and therefore do not generate indebtedness? The answer lies in another dimension of the Confucian understanding of the self.

Synchronically, the Confucian self is not an atomic individual that happens to exist in a nexus of relationships. To use Roger Ames' metaphor, the Confucian self is a "focus-field." In Ames' focus-field model, the self is a center or focus that fades off into a ritually ordered society. The focus exists, of course, only in the field and only so long as the field exists. In other words, the existence and identity of the focus depends on the field. It is from this focus, this center, that one gradually reaches out to form one's identity.

In the eyes of the Confucians, each of us performs certain social roles, and our being is realized in these roles, as son or daughter, brother or sister, father or mother, and so on. The relationships in which one finds oneself constitute the field in which the self is located as the focus. In this view, these roles are not something into which we as atomistic individuals have accidentally fallen. They constitute our identity. They define who we are and what we are, what duties we have, and consequently what behaviors we ought to express.

Based on this Confucian view of self, we are in a better position to understand the Confucian ethics as a duty ethics, in contrast to the rights ethics of the contemporary West; this is another key perspective from which to understand Confucian filial morality. Whereas in the rights ethics individual rights receive primary importance, in a duty ethics the primary concern is one's individual duties and responsibilities.

Unlike the Contractarian, for whom society is formed on the premise of a contract among rational, self-interested individuals, the Confucians view society as an extended family, which has always been at the center of traditional Chinese life. Within the family, members see each other as part of their own selves, and they nurture and care for each other without
negotiating reciprocity as a precondition. The Confucian ideal is to build a society after the model of the family. To view society as an extended family is to view it as, in Tu Wei-ming's words, "not an adversary system consisting of pressure groups but a fiduciary community based on mutual trust."43 In such a human community the primary relationship between its members is that of benefactor and beneficiary—a relationship that is not maintained on a contractual basis. According to this view, as descendants from the same ancestors living together under Heaven, all of us are, some of the time and in some way, benefactors and beneficiaries.

In Confucian duty ethics, the morality of Jen demands that, within such a fiduciary community, those who have resources, spiritual as well as material, ought to be the benefactors, and those who are in need are entitled to be beneficiaries. In this view, from the fact that one has received benefits because he was entitled to them it does not follow that he will not be obligated to benefit his former benefactors when later they are in need and he in turn has the resources to be a benefactor. The Chinese phrase "being rich but failing to be Jen" (wei fu bu ren) condemns those with resources who fail to help those in need. In a sense, possessing resources implies social responsibilities.

In Chinese culture, people in need are usually unwilling to ask favors; it is up to those who are capable of offering favors to come forward to do so, if they have a good sense of Jen. In other words, it is the moral requirement of Jen that compels the capable to offer benefits or favors to those in need. The person being offered a favor would show reluctance to accept it and decline out of modesty by saying things like, "I would not want to burden you with that . . ."; unless he is sure that the offering party is sincere, he would not accept the offer. Hence, for the Chinese, request has little to do with the generation of favors. If Jane English were right in holding that a request is a necessary condition for a favor, she would have to rule as non-favors a great proportion of the favors given out in the Chinese cultural context.

An often cited Chinese proverb says, "An earlier generation plants trees under whose shade later generations rest." This short sentence has a rather profound significance. Traditionally, Chinese peasants would take a rest under a shade tree while they worked in the fields under the burning midsummer sun. When people doing things of benefit to late-comers cite this proverb, they mean that if nobody had planted the trees, late-comers would not be able to rest under their shade; therefore, in order for their descendants to enjoy some sort of benefit, the benefactors feel a need to do something even though they themselves may not benefit from it. When late-comers received the benefit "planted" by their forefathers, they would cite this proverb, meaning that they appreciated their forefathers' effort in "planting the seed" for later beneficiaries. There is also the proverb, "When you drink the water you must not forget . . ."
those who dug the well for you.” In this kind of culture, the relationship of benefactors and beneficiaries is expressed in terms not of rights but of duties and benefits that we owe each other.

Based on this duty ethics, there is a mutual obligation between parents and children. When children are little, their parents have a duty to take care of them; in turn, when children have grown and their parents are in need, the children have a duty to take care of their parents. In this duty ethics, from the premise that parental care is a discharge of parental duty it does not follow that the child does not owe his or her parents anything when they grow old and are in need.

Confucius’ teachings can be summarized in two words: zhong and shu (Analects 4:15). Zhong implies conscientiousness. One should be conscientious in developing one’s virtuous character. Shu means extending one’s own mind to others. This is the golden rule that you should not do to others what you do not wish others to do to you (Analects 5:11); by extension, you should do to others what you wish others to do to you (Analects 6:28). The idea of shu enforces the duty ethics on filial piety. Confucius himself specifically applied the concept of shu to filial piety by including the following in the Way of the morally superior man: “to serve my father as I would expect my son to serve me” (Doctrine of the Mean, chap. 13). Would not every one of us wish that our children accompany us when we are old and lonely, or serve us at our bedside when we are sick and infirm? The Confucians would say, then, that we ourselves must start serving our own parents.

A Confucian Response. So, what can be learned from this Confucian filial morality? Confucianism states that humans are not atomistic, self-serving, rights-laden individuals aiming to construct a society out of self-interest. We are defined by the social roles that we are given, and these social roles define our humanity. Humanity or Jen morality demands filial piety. In such a human society, each of us is benefited some of the time and in some way, and we should feel and show our gratitude for the benefits that we receive, including our relationship with our parents.

It is assumed here that a normal person appreciates the fact that he or she is alive, and that his or her parents have endured hardship and sacrifice to bring up their children. It is also assumed that given the choice between having been born and not having been born, the normal person would strongly prefer the former, and between being well cared for and not well cared for as a child, the normal person would strongly prefer the former. Then this person “owes” his parents a great favor for giving him life and bringing him up, even though he did not request either. And this person is under a moral obligation to reciprocate the favor he has received; when his parents are old and in need of assistance, he is obliged to help. Although how much help he can offer depends on...
the circumstances (just as how much benefit his parents were able to
offer depended on the circumstances), his moral obligation to help his
aged parents is greater than his general duty to help other people in
need. This, then, is a Confucian response to a position like the one
offered by Jane English.

Gratitude, however, is not the sole grounds for filial morality. The
morality of jen demands that, within a community, those who have re-
sources, spiritual as well as material, should be benefactors, and those
who are in need are entitled to be beneficiaries. In this view, when per-
son B does good to person A, A should be grateful to B even if B is simply
discharging his or her duty; and from the fact that A has received benefits
from B because B had a duty to be beneficial it does not follow that A
will not be obligated to benefit his former benefactor when B is in need
and A in turn has the resources to be a benefactor.

When one is a child, her parents have the duty to benefit her. From
that it does not follow that when her parents grow old and are in need
she would not have a duty to be a benefactor to them. Therefore, even
though Jeffrey Blustein is right that parents do have a duty to care for
their children, it does not follow that this would not result in the child-
ren’s obligation, when they are grown, to care for their aged and infirm
parents. This, then, is a Confucian response to philosophers with Blus-
stein’s view.

Why Shift Perspectives?
The primary purpose of this essay is to provide a Confucian per-
spective on filial morality as an alternative to the mainstream Western
perspective, namely to show that the Confucian perspective is plausible
on its own account. I, however, do not pretend to have found an over-
arching framework in which one can demonstrate that one tradition on
the whole is superior to the other. I agree with Alasdair MacIntyre that
the moral good can only be vindicated within a tradition. I submit,
again without an overarching framework, that the attempt to demonstrate
that one tradition is superior to another would be futile. For example,
there are people who reject outright the Confucian ontology of humanity.
Some are convinced that we humans are indeed atomistic individuals
who enter society with a contract. For them, the question of filial
morality is linked to the concept of personhood; to debate this topic is
beyond the scope of this essay.

Nevertheless, one may be able to compare aspects of two traditions
to see how each deals with some problems of shared interest. Through
comparison one may be able to show that one tradition has a stronger
and more plausible view in some particular areas. I hope I have shown
that the Confucian tradition does make a stronger case for filial morality
than a rights-centered tradition does. Therefore, proponents of filial
morality may have good reasons to shift to the Confucian perspective. As a matter of fact, it appears that some authors whom I have cited in this essay have, wittingly or unwittingly, thought along Confucian lines. We need to make this alternative explicitly available and clear to all. For people who do not believe in filial morality, by shifting to a new perspective, I hope I have shown them that there is a sensible way to vindicate filial morality. It would appear that, to the extent that developing one's humanity is important, the world would be a better place if something like Confucian filial morality were widely practiced.

NOTES

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3 – Ibid., p. 353.

4 – Ibid., p. 352.

5 – Ibid.

6 – Part of this argument against Jane English has been used in my “Grown Children’s Filial Obligation,” in Reason and Insight, ed. Timothy Shanahan and Robin Wang (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996), pp. 442–447.

8 – Ibid.
10 – Ibid., p. 74.
13 – Ibid., p. 73.
15 – Ibid., p. 289.
17 – Ibid., p. 74.
18 – Ibid., p. 75.
20 – Ibid., p. 177.
21 – Ibid., p. 176.
22 – Ibid., p. 183.
23 – Ibid., p. 182.
24 – Ibid., p. 164.
25 – Ibid., p. 183.
27 – Marriage Law, art. 15, sec. 3. Senior Citizen Protection Act (1996), art. 2, sec. 11.
29 – For the relation of filial piety to Chinese society as a whole, see Hsieh Yu-wei, “Filial Piety and Chinese Society,” in *The Chinese

30 – See Huang Junlang, “Sketching on the Classic of Filial Piety,” in Lai Yanyuan and Huang Junlang, Reading the Classic of Filial Piety: New Interpretation (Taipei: Sanmin Books, 1992), p. 10. Some think the Classic of Filial Piety was compiled by Han Confucians. But Huang argues that the fact that it was quoted in the Spring and Autumn Annuals of Master Lü (compiled in the third century B.C.) indicates that it predates the Han dynasty; see Huang, “Sketching,” pp. 4–5.

31 – Translations of Confucian Classics are either my own or from Arthur Waley’s Analects of Confucius (Vintage Books, 1989), and D. C. Lau’s Mencius (Penguin Books, 1970), with my own revisions where it is appropriate.


37 – Doctrine of the Mean, chap. 20.

38 – Ibid.

39 – This leads to the “synchronic” dimension of the Confucian Self, which we will discuss in the following section.


42 – Roger Ames, “The Focus-Field Self in Classical Confucianism,” Chenyang Li
