

No rational basis for filial piety?



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A PUBLIC consultation was recently held on amending the Maintenance of Parents Act to give it more teeth. The law enables indigent parents aged 60 and over to claim support from their unwilling children.

Meanwhile, the National Family Council is running a campaign on filial piety (*xiao*). Its advertisement on television centres on a cantankerous old lady whose son caters to her unreasonable behaviour, which irks her grandson to no end. Viewers may quibble about the video's message, but no one seems to question the legislating of filial piety.

In Chinese Family and Commercial Law, sinologist George Jamieson notes that *xiao* is "the respectful submission to the will of the father, which is assumed to arise naturally out of the relationship". In fact, the Chinese character for *xiao* consists of "child" below supporting "the old" above.

Five necessary aspects of *xiao* behaviour are listed in The Classic Of Filial Piety, namely, supporting one's parents; respecting, obeying and honouring them; mourning their deaths with a memorial service; bringing honour to one's ancestors; and, having offspring.

Religion is the reason why having offspring should be linked with *xiao*. There is no Confucianist paradise where one may attain immortality. Hence, descendants are needed so as not to *duan le xiang huo* or "discontinue the sacrificial incense burning". The continuous offering of incense down the ages ensures that one lives on in the memories of those to come, a measure of immortality.

Indeed, when Buddhism was first introduced into China, it was rejected precisely because it was seen as not *xiao*, according to Kenneth Ch'en in The Chinese Transformation Of Buddhism. A son who became a monk would not only cut off all familial ties but would also have no issue, and thus no *xiao*.

But the Confucian classics offer no systematised justification for filial piety. Very few Western works have delved into it either. Such works as have generally find no rational grounds for filiality, or the ethics of filial piety.

After all, it is a parent's duty to provide for his or her offspring. Fulfilling one's duties in ways that benefit the recipient should create no sense of indebtedness in the latter. Adult children should be grateful for these benefits and express that gratitude as well, but parents have no claims to repayment in cash or kind.

Perhaps, parents do make a special moral contribution - to the child's identity. Perhaps anyone whose self is formed, in part, by another person owes that person morally. But if I were abused by my foster parents, a fact that made me the resilient person I am today, do I thereby owe my abusers a moral debt?

Maybe it is simply irrational for me to have offspring unless they are implicitly an investment. If so, my adult children owe me the returns on that investment. Yet every species instinctually has offspring. Thus, it is very unlikely that parents see children as a form of investment.

At best, perhaps, if my parenting engenders a real friendship with my offspring, then they have the kind of obligation towards me that real friends have towards one another. If my parenting fails by this standard, then my children owe me nothing, just as all duty towards a friend ends when that friendship ends.

Clearly, from a rights perspective, there is little rational basis for filiality. But this is because rights talk assumes everyone to be self-interested, atomistic individuals with no emotional ties. However, a family is not comprised of strangers. Instead, it is a species of special moral relations.

But most contemporary philosophers cannot deal with special ties as they dedicate their efforts to striving for impartiality in all forms. In A Theory Of Justice, for example, John Rawls argues that "the family will lead to unequal chances between individuals". This leads him to wonder if the family is ethically justifiable as an institution!

Such philosophers miss how social practices shape and institutionalise moral obligations.

A retiree is still somewhat deferential towards his ex-employer because their old relationship was of some existential significance. Being brusque would be to say it had none. In the same way, though our parents and grandparents no longer have genuine authority over us, we obey them as adults because it used to be that way and we honour those old ties.

We enjoy sitting down to hear them talk about days gone by, because this gives us context and history. It is context and history that colour our special moral relationships with them, which thus come with special filial obligations.

To attend to these special contexts and histories is not Confucianist per se. It is plain common sense.

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