

AAARI Dr. K. York & M. Noelle Chynn CUNY Ethics and Morality Essay Contest

Essay Topic: Filial Piety

Essay Title: Honor Beyond Obedience

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Honor Beyond Obedience

“Do you need any clothes?” My mother asked me via text message a few weeks ago. “There’s a sale at the outlet mall and I can try to get you something if you’d like.”

It seems like an innocuous, even generous offer. However, as a graduate student in clinical psychology, I am inclined to believe that even the innocuous interactions between parent and child are complicated. To clarify a few things: I’m 30 years old. I have enough clothes. My mother knows it. And yet it is not out of character for my mother to attempt to do things for me that would be more age-appropriate for a small child. Other similar behaviors have included sending me large packages of food unsolicited and constantly asking if I’m tired and need a nap whenever she visits.

I responded to her text message by telling her that if she happened to see a light blue dress shirt on sale, I would be glad for her to send it to me. The truth was, I did not need a light blue dress shirt. I have two that work just fine. But I also know that my mother finds satisfaction in feeling as though she is helping me. This situation leads to a dance in which I must pretend to need my mother’s help in order to let her feel depended upon. The resulting relationship feels anything but honorable. She falsely believes I need her to fulfil my basic needs. I lie to her to keep her feeling like a mother. We rarely experience genuine connection.

Filial piety, a Confucian value that is part of *Li*, is commonly understood as “honoring one’s parents, elders and ancestors.” It is a value that I simultaneously take seriously and find difficult to master because it is not as straightforward as it appears.

In the Jewish tradition in which I was raised, and continue to practice today, honoring one’s parents is one of the Ten Commandments of the Torah, Judaism’s holiest text. The Ten

Commandments are so holy that they are considered to be written with the finger of God (Exodus 31:18) and the honoring of one's parents is taken so seriously that failure to do so can be met with death. A "wayward and defiant son," the Torah says (Deuteronomy 21:18-20), should be stoned by the town elders in the public square. And yet it is one thing to command people to honor their parents and another thing altogether to define what that honor looks like. We know, in other words, that honoring one's parents is vitally important. But how do we actually do it?

In the Talmud, the expansive Jewish commentary on the Torah, a story is told about the venerable Rabbi Tarfon:

Rabbi Tarfon's mother once walked in her garden and her sandal split so that she would have to walk home barefoot. Thereupon Rabbi Tarfon kept stretching his hands under her feet and she walked over them all the way.

One day he was ill and his colleagues came to visit him. His mother then said to them: "Pray for my son Rabbi Tarfon, for he honors me more than is my due."

"What has he done for you?" they asked. She told them what happened.

They replied: "If he had done this to you thousands times more, he would not have done half of the honor commanded in the Torah! (Talmud Yerushalmi Pe'ah 1:1)

The story is provocative for two reasons. First, it complicates the idea of honor as obedience by suggesting that obedience is not sufficient. It is not sufficiently honorable to simply do what our parents tell us. Second, it suggests that our parents, even if they claim to be satisfied, might not be the best judges of what constitutes honoring them. In other words, what they say is honorable to them might not actually be honorable. What, then, does honor look like? And who gets to decide that one has acted with honor?

In the Confucian Analects, a story is related about filial piety:

Tsze-yu asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "The filial piety nowadays means the support of one's parents. But dogs and horses likewise are able to do something in the

way of support; - without reverence, what is there to distinguish the one support given from the other?"

Any animal can be trained to be obedient, but we would not say that a dog who relieves himself in the backyard instead of on the new rug is honoring his master. Many a servant has been obedient while simultaneously resenting, hating, even plotting against their master. This obedience does not constitute honor, so what distinguishes obedience from honor? Confucius here says the difference is "reverence."

The Christian scholar, Dr. Ryan LaMothe writes that the English word "reverence" comes from the Latin, "revereri," meaning "to stand in awe." It is important here to think about the physical implications of that definition. When we stand in front of others, we are on their level. We look them in the eye, the window to their soul. Only when standing are we capable of seeing the other as a subject instead of an object. A subject is a complicated human being with his or her own needs and desires, much like ourselves. An object is a person who is seen only as the service he or she provides to us.

In his seminal philosophical work, "I and Thou," Martin Buber argues that one can only fully be oneself by seeing the other as a subject, which he calls "Thou," and vice-versa. He writes, "through the Thou a person becomes I." How does this relate to honor? To truly honor our parents and practice filial piety, we must come to see them as subjects, even if they want to be treated as objects. In the example of Rabbi Tarfon, who was physically on his knees, hands outstretched beneath his mother's feet, we see someone who has debased himself and, in doing so, debased his relationship with his mother. He has made himself into her shoes. He has made himself into an object. This is why the sages tell him he has not fulfilled the commandment - because he has deprived his mother of the chance to truly be herself.

The best stance for honoring one's parents and elders is not one of subservience, but one of gratitude and recognition. I have come to understand this even more deeply as I am now a parent, with a son, Zusha, who will soon celebrate his first birthday. I have asked myself, what would be the best way for him to honor me and my wife? When he is a young adult, do I want him to obey me and serve me? On his knees? Would that make me feel honored? Perhaps the sense of dominance and power would provide a temporary high but no, I would feel, on a deep level, disappointed and alienated. Instead, when my son is old enough that he no longer depends on me for his basic needs, I hope that he can come to see me as fully human, like him, and conveys his gratitude for my sacrifices and his recognition of my own personhood with my own joys and sorrows, my complications and my messiness.

Which brings me back to my mother. How can I honor her as a subject and not merely perform our relationship as two objects? In the last year I have made an effort to respond to her questions with different ones of my own. When she asks if I need socks, I ask how her day is going. When she asks if my apartment is warm enough, I ask about her latest choir performance. The change in my orientation seems to be working. In our most recent conversation, instead of inquiring about my needs, she asked, "What are you learning in your graduate program?" We talked about my research on the therapist and patient relationship and our respective experiences in therapy. We were real people to each other. When we hung up, I experienced a sense of awe at the intensity and breadth of her life experiences and her thoughtfulness in recounting them to me. I felt honored. I think she did too.

Sources

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