

CUNY School of Professional Studies

The Virtue of Filial Piety:

Balancing Duty and Self

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2021 CUNY Ethics and Morality Essay Contest

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The Virtue of Filial Piety: Balancing Duty and Self

Filial piety is arguably the most controversial of all Confucius' Five Constant Virtues. In areas of Korea, China, and Japan, "concern over parent care" has generated the enforcement of legal contracts holding children liable for their parents financially and otherwise (Sung par. 1). I have been practicing filial piety for most of my life, and for the last three years, to an extreme. I am a caregiver to my mother, who, in January of 2019, suffered from an aortic dissection, which is a cardiac event that, if left untreated, most do not survive. After a fourteen-hour operation, a stroke of the spinal cord robbed her of her ability to walk. I sprang into action, transforming into "Super Daughter" and passionate advocate. I fought to get her rehabilitation, and eventually moved her in with me and my husband so I could supplement the nursing her insurance wouldn't cover. I sacrificed myself to ensure quality of life - *her* life - as I learned everything imaginable about what she needed with her new, overwhelming list of needs. My actions were admired, but in other cultures they would simply be viewed as what was legally required. In China in the 19th and early 20th centuries, most elderly parents resided in their married children's homes, but after World War II, there was a shift in household dynamics and this custom changed (Bedford and Yeh par. 13). Now, laws are in place in China and other countries securing support from adult children (Serrano et al. 788). I believe that parent care is lacking today, especially in our very

busy digital world, but I also feel that we must seek the delicate balance between the sense of duty to those who raised us and the sense of self-care taught to us by those very same people.

A life-changing event such as paralysis is already hard enough to adjust to. Piling that on top of years of emotional nurturing can crush the spirit of any child caregiver, even Super Daughter. My mother suffered from depression most of her life, leaving me to worry about her at an age far younger than I was ready to. I got used to the heaviness as the weight of her mental struggles became a regular load to carry. My mother would often threaten suicide, and in high school I once received a call that she checked into a mental facility. I provide this backstory because it is integral to how I process current circumstances, having to physically care for her now just as intensely as I emotionally cared for her throughout my childhood. Her mental health issues were my focus for so long and inevitably took time and energy away from my youth that I will never get back. I do not fault her for all of it, but my mom's lifestyle choices did not support her potential healing and therefore made life difficult. This ambivalence of deep love and unresolved resentment could be the crux of problems for other adult children who struggle to attend to their aging parents. I change her diapers, bathe her, prepare meals and clean all while hosting an array of emotions. I have already spent time parenting without an actual child of my own. How do I continue to run on this empty tank? This question raises the issue of balance, because one cannot care for others without caring for oneself.

A parable of parental obligation describes an extreme version of moral code that guides children to look out for their aging parents. In one of the "24 paragons of filial piety," a son and his wife have three sons, and the son's mother, who lives with the married couple, lessens her food portions so that her grandsons have more to eat (Kuniyoshi par. 17). The son turns to his wife and expresses guilt over his mother's sacrifice for his children and makes the extreme

decision to bury one of his sons. As he puts it, he can always have another child, but he cannot give birth to his mother. He is of course rewarded for this fulfillment of duty and finds gold while digging his son's grave. While this is an extreme example of devotion, it does not address all the complexities involved in parental care. It does bring to light the glaring guilt children are faced with when parents are in need, and the sense that, ethically, it is the right thing for an adult child to act on behalf of the person who raised them. China has referenced the 24 paragons in recent attempts to inspire citizens to take a bigger role in filial piety as the elderly population increases (Jacobs and Century par. 3). But this is not a black and white issue; there are shades of gray, shades of which are probably more recognized in American culture. Recent attention to parables like the child-sacrificing son have had the opposite of the intended effect and have kicked up debate about whether government should take more responsibility over the elderly demographic, not their "overextended" children (Jacobs and Century par. 6).

Although China's views may seem extreme in comparison to other cultures, the concept of parent care is important and vital to a "stable society" (Bedford and Yeh par. 1). Foundations in filial piety are rooted in paying homage to ancestors, but the world has evolved much since 450 BCE (Bedford and Yeh par. 6). Modern psychology now plays a more pertinent role in the motivation of care, and the shades of gray in this topic can encompass varying degrees of involvement in a parent's life. For one thing, there are benefits to contributing as much as one can. Virtues such as filial piety provide pillars for morality and order. Filial piety enriches the lives of both parent and child and lessens the financial burden on the government, freeing up resources for schools and infrastructure. It also fosters a sense of pride in the caregiver. But we are busier now more than ever in a world completely different from when our parents grew up, and this undoubtedly affects interaction. Data shows that only 12% of U.S. parents out of those

that have a child at home also provide “unpaid care for an adult as well,” and that when breaking this farther down, the time spent caring for a parent is about one hour every day (Livingston pars. 1-2). In America, care facilities like nursing homes are so popular that they are acquired by investment firms for potential profit gain (Duhigg par. 8). Visiting is now restricted due to various Covid-19 health protocols, making family interaction even less frequent. Considering the challenges associated with care, it makes sense to assess on an individual basis what one can handle in terms of family history, current household situations, and prioritizing family over other business.

Government involvement and public debate prove that filial piety is a relevant virtue with significant consequences if left unchecked. Choosing to have a child is a huge responsibility, and children owe their parents gratitude for accomplishing such a task. However, it is the level of care that must come into question, and whether that care should devolve into self-sacrifice. With my mother, I find myself practicing the same type of care I would for a small child, simultaneously choosing not to have a child of my own for fear I could not handle the load. I also do this carrying our daunting family history heavy in my heart. There will always be a degree of sacrifice in any service to others. But a balance must be struck in order to preserve a sense of self so service can be provided with a spirit of joy and love. Unlike the son in the story, I cannot throw my proverbial baby in the dirt and not hate myself for it. What I can do is increase my self-care so that I can improve my own quality of life. Choosing to go back to school and enrolling in CUNY helped me find this; I experience joy in investing in myself, therefore I am creating more joy to share with my mom. My initial, adrenaline-fueled response after the aortic dissection was, “I must preserve my mom’s quality of life!” Three years later, I am trying to transcend to a different level, a new shade of gray, so I can sustain care in the years to come.

Honoring virtue in our modern world requires more thoughtful intention than ever before.

Children with aging and/or disabled parents should adopt a mindset of nuanced balance as they look inward to discover what can truly be given, helping as much as possible both physically *and* emotionally. In turn, parents must recognize the history of their relationships with their adult children and honor their happiness however they can. We can help each other. And isn't that what virtue is all about?

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