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PREVIEW

ETHICAL PARTIALISM AND FILIAL OBLIGATIONS:

An Analysis of Human Relationships within the Family

By

Sung Dong Han

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Philosophy

Under the Supervision of Professor Nelson Potter

Lincoln, Nebraska

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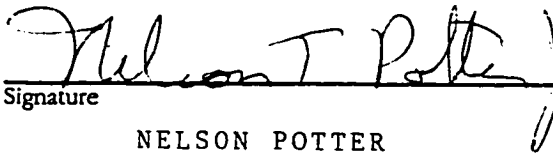
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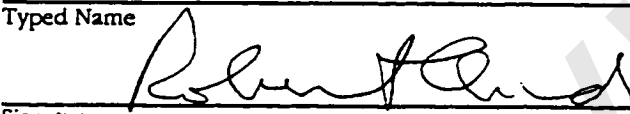
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DATE


Signature
NELSON POTTER

5 August 96


Signature
ROBERT AUDI

5 August 96


Signature
JOSEPH MENDOLA

5 August 96


Signature
PARKS M. COBLE

5 August 96

Signature

Typed Name

Signature

Typed Name



ETHICAL PARTIALISM AND FILIAL OBLIGATIONS:

An Analysis of Human Relationships within the Family

Sung Dong Han, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1996

Adviser: Nelson Potter

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a philosophical analysis of personal human relationships and filial obligations. This dissertation is accordingly divided into two parts. Part One provides some theoretical groundwork for the moral requirements of personal human relationships. I focus on the question of how personal human relationships fare in two traditional ethical theories: utilitarianism and Kantianism. I first discuss Bernard Williams's criticism of utilitarianism and then Lawrence Blum's criticism of Kantianism. According to Williams and Blum, these two ethical theories cannot provide an adequate account of reasons justifying and guiding the special demands required in personal human relationships. They argue that the moral demands of personal human relationships are crucial features of our moral judgment and evaluation. In providing an adequate theoretical foundation for this assertion, second, I distinguish the extreme and moderate impartialist views of the moral demands of personal human relationships from the extreme and moderate partialist views. I argue that both moderate impartialist and moderate partialist views can provide a plausible theoretical groundwork for regarding human relationships based on partiality. In Part Two, I provide a philosophical analysis of the foundation of filial obligations. First, I specify the obligations of parents to their children and the obligations of adult children to their parents in child-parent relationships, define the

terms "filial relationship" and "filial morality", and then discuss some theoretical issues concerning filial morality. Second, I provide the perspectives of filial obligations as understood by Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and John Locke. These four philosophers say that the filial obligations required by filial relationships are more compelling than the parental obligations required by parental relationships. Finally, I analyze and investigate three possible arguments for filial obligations: reciprocity, friendship, and gratitude. Among the three possible arguments for filial obligations, I advocate the argument for filial obligations based on gratitude because it most explicitly justifies why adult children ought to have filial obligations to their parents. I believe that this dissertation can contribute to a remedy for the current destruction of family ethics in our social life.

PREVIEW

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Dedicated to the Memory of My Deceased Father

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INTRODUCTION

For the last several centuries, traditional moral philosophers have endeavored to provide more reasonable and justified moral theories for the progress and development of our moral life. Nevertheless, our global society, without distinction between Western and Eastern, is presently faced with a gross crisis of morality. The destruction of family ethics is particularly evident. There are increases in defunct family, domestic violence, killing of lineal ascendants, and so forth. In order to overcome this sort of moral crisis, we, as human beings, should turn our eyes to family ethics; according to their place in the family, family members ought to have their own special moral obligations to one another. I believe that the reconstruction of family ethics is the most urgent and crucial matter for remedying the moral crisis that plagues our society. In the domain of family ethics, the reconstruction of filial morality should be a primary concern.

Filial morality is a certain moral norm by which (adult) children, who have benefitted from responsible and conscientious parents, are obligated to show gratitude, respect, and care for their parents. With the rise of new generations, concerns regarding filial morality have been decreasing. For example, sixty-seven percent of Americans today believe that adult children do not have special moral obligations to their parents, regardless of what their parents have done for them.¹ Also, most contemporary American philosophers have expressed disinterest in and have neglected research concerning issues of filial morality. As a result, people who

¹. See Daniel Callahan, Setting Limits, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, and Tokyo: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1987, P. 86.

want to advocate filial morality cannot find a philosophical analysis of and research on filial morality that the new generations will accept. We, as moral philosophers, have to provide a revised philosophical foundation for filial morality. Such a foundation can contribute to a remedy for the destruction of family ethics in our social life.

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a new philosophical analysis of personal human relationships and filial obligations. For this purpose, the dissertation is divided into two parts. In Part I, I would like to provide some theoretical groundwork for personal human relationships such as filial relationships. The filial relationship is a personal (or special) human relationship between adult children and their parents, and creates a moral norm. A moral norm created by the moral requirements or considerations of filial relationships is filial morality. To accomplish the purpose of this part, in Chapter One, I will focus on the question of whether traditional ethical theories provide an adequate account of personal human relationships. I will primarily discuss some criticisms of two traditional ethical theories, utilitarianism and Kantianism. My purpose in this chapter is to give a sense of how the moral demands of personal human relationships fare in these traditional ethical theories. In Chapter Two, I will provide an adequate theoretical grounding for why the moral demands of personal human relationships such as filial relationships should be considered to be crucial features of our moral evaluation and judgement. I will first make the distinction between extreme impartialist and moderate impartialist views about the moral demands of personal human relationships and extreme partialist and moderate partialist views, and then I will discuss recent controversies pitting the moral demands of impartialism against those of partialism. Finally, I will

consider a possible alternative that suggests a way to resolve the conflict between the impartial perspective and the partial perspective.

In Part II, I would like to present a philosophical analysis of the ground and nature of filial obligations. I will primarily consider these fundamental questions: Does filial morality rely on a particular theoretical groundwork that is secured by the moral demands of a personal human relationship? If so, what is this groundwork, why does it have moral worth, and what kind of moral obligation does it entail? If this groundwork is filial obligation, how can filial obligation be justified? In order to provide valid answers to the above questions, in Chapter Three, I will first specify the obligations of parents to their children and the obligations of adult children to their parents in child-parent relationships, and then define the terms "filial relationship" and "filial morality." Second, I will look at some theoretical issues concerning filial morality. Finally, I will discuss the worth of filial relationships and morality. In Chapter Four, I will investigate a historical view of filial morality in Western philosophy. I will thus present a historical survey of the issues of family and filial obligations in Western philosophical literature. This survey will be a limited overview of the views on filial obligations held by four major Western philosophers: Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Locke. In Chapter Five, I will provide an explicit philosophical argument for the filial obligations in family ethics. For this purpose, I will investigate three possible arguments for filial obligation: the reciprocity argument, the friendship argument, and the gratitude argument. First, I will analyze reciprocity and friendship, arguments which are not sufficient justifications for filial obligations although they can be considered possible candidates. Then, I will elaborate on the gratitude argument and propound it as the best justification for filial

obligations. Finally, in conclusion, I will provide a closing statement.

PREVIEW

Part I. Ethical Theory and Personal Human Relationships

I.1. Introduction

Life as a human being in the practical world entails inevitable human relationships with other persons. It can be assumed that there are two sorts of human relationships: personal (special, intimate, close, or private) and public (non-personal, institutional, professional, or impersonal). The personal human relationship is mainly created by natural or special means; examples include relationships between children and parents and relationships between friends or intimates. On the other hand, the public human relationship is created by artificial or institutional means; examples include relationships between students and teachers in the classroom and relationships between government employees and citizens.

Ethics, in general, is a discipline which examines the moral evaluation of human actions and characters involved in both personal and public human relationships. This study of moral value and the importance of personal human relationships has been largely neglected by modern contemporary philosophers.² Until very recently, especially, the moral value of personal human relationships was largely ignored by modern Anglo-American moral philosophers.³ Most of them tacitly accept the traditional ethical theories, utilitarianism and Kantianism, that have dominated moral

². See John Hardwig, "In Search of an Ethics of Personal Relationships," in Person to Person, eds. George Graham and Hugh LaFollette, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989, P. 63-81.

³. See Marilyn Friedman, What Are Friends For?, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993, P. 1.

philosophy for the past several centuries; theories which have upheld impartiality as a core feature of morality. They favor traditional theories because they think that the moral demands of personal human relationships have taken partiality as a core feature of morality.

Morality, according to utilitarianism and Kantianism, requires impartiality, universality, or objectivity. Furthermore, no distinction is made between personal and public human relationships. In their view, the terms of impartiality, universality, or objectivity imply that one should treat similar cases alike and act and judge without bias or prejudice. All human beings are in an important sense equal, and correspondingly all are equally entitled to the fundamental conditions of well-being and respect. In other words, we must treat all human beings alike unless there is some generally and morally relevant difference which justifies a difference in treatment. For example, a professor should give equal grades to students who perform equally; unequal grades are justified only if there is some general and relevant reason which justifies that difference. It is reasonable to give a better grade to a student who does excellent work in class, but it is unreasonable to give the student a better grade because he or she is a foreigner and he or she has good manners. The moral demands for impartiality, universality, or objectivity seem to be more suitable for public human relationships.

A personal human relationship, on the other hand, requires partiality or favoritism to be a core defining feature of morality. The term "partiality" as a requirement for personal human relationships is lately gaining wide philosophical favor. According to the "partial moral" point of view, the moral demands of personal human relationships require the features of partiality that are essential for individual character: identity,

integrity, and a flourishing in a human life. These features demand special concern, treatment, attitude, attentiveness, and/or commitment between or among those who are familiar with one another. The moral demands of personal human relationships are not directed to everyone alike. Personal human relationships depend on individual particularities. For example, we behave toward our children, parents, intimates, and friends in a way that we would never behave toward strangers; we allow our children, parents, intimates, and friends to treat us in a way that would be intolerable from strangers. We give preferential treatment to those who are close to us. We do this in our personal human relationships and we expect it in return.

However, there exists tension between the moral demands of personal human relationships and those of public human relationships. The moral demands of personal human relationships seem to conflict with those of public human relationships. For the latter, impartial or universal treatment is a core feature, while for the former, partial treatment is a core element. Hence, the moral demands of personal and public human relationships may be in opposition. But should we assume that impartial perspectives are always more important than partial perspectives in our real life? Could the moral demands of personal human relationships supersede those of impartiality? Can there be no compromise between the moral demands of impartiality and those of personal human relationships? It seems to me that the conflict may not be as deep as it appears.

We, as human beings, wish to have a morally good life. A morally good life comes from a moral perspective that is balanced between the moral demands of personal human relationships and those of impartiality or universality. I believe that without either of these components of a balanced moral perspective, our moral life is

empty and meaningless.

In Part I, I will primarily focus on the question of whether the traditional ethical theories are adequate to deal with personal human relationships. Can ethical theories designed mainly to explain public human relationships appreciate the interpersonal subtleties and the emotional depth of personal human relationships? To answer this question, in Chapter One I will look at some criticisms of traditional ethical theories, such as utilitarianism and Kantianism. In Chapter Two, I will provide the theoretical groundwork for my argument that moral requirements or considerations of personal human relationships, such as filial relationships, should be considered to be crucial features of our moral evaluation and judgement. To do this, I will first define impartialism and partialism in human relationships. Then I will discuss recent debates over the moral requirements of impartialism versus those of partialism. Finally, I will consider a possible means of resolving the conflict between the impartial and partial perspectives.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE: Criticisms of Traditional Ethical Theories

According to critics,⁴ traditional ethical theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism are not able to provide an adequate argument for the moral value of personal human relationships because they are inadequate in capturing and justifying the particularities of participants in personal (or special) human relationships. Furthermore, they require detachment from personal concerns, projects, identities, integrities, filiality, loyalties, and commitments. Many critics attribute this inadequacy to the impartial and universal features of these two ethical theories. In this chapter, I will discuss some criticisms of traditional ethical theories. My purpose is to give a sense of how personal human relationships fare in the two traditional ethical theories. I will first look at a criticism of utilitarianism, followed by a criticism of Kantianism.

A. Utilitarianism

Bernard Williams criticizes utilitarianism for failing to take sufficient account of the separateness and nature of persons, and, therefore, for giving no special moral

⁴. See Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in his Utilitarianism: For and Against, ed. J.J.C. Smart and B. Williams, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973, and "Persons, Character, and Morality," in his Moral Luck Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. Also Lawrence Blum, Friendship, Altruism and Morality, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, and Moral perception and particularity, Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984; Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," Journal of Philosophy, 73. Aug. 1976, P. 453-66; and Samuel Scheffler, The Rejection of consequentialism, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.

status to personal integrity in relationships and projects which are the agent's own.⁵ Williams argues that utilitarianism seriously threatens personal integrity because it calls for every moral agent to set aside deep commitments and ground projects which are closely related to our existence and which to some significant degree give meaning to our lives. It asks us to do this for the sake of a utilitarian maxim that requires an impartial point of view. Williams believes that this is quite an absurd requirement. He says as follows:

The point is that he[an agent] is identified with his actions as flowing from projects and attitudes which in some cases he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about (or, in some cases, this section of his life - seriousness is not necessarily the same as persistence). It is absurd to demand of such a man, when the sums come in from the utility network which the projects of others have in part determined, that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires. It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions. It is to make him into a channel between the input of everyone's projects, including his own, and an output of optimistic decision; but this is to neglect the extent to which his actions and his decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified. It is thus, in the most literal sense, an attack on his integrity.⁶

A utilitarian moral point of view requires agents to discount their own projects and commitments in a way which ignores the moral value and importance of personal human relationships. It requires everyone to value his projects and commitments impartially. All human beings are required to act on motives of impartial benevolence and to sacrifice frequently their own projects and commitments in order to maximize

⁵. See Bernard Williams, Moral Luck, pp. 1-19.

⁶. See J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, Utilitarianism: For and Against, pp. 116-7.

common benefit and welfare. The utilitarian perspective cannot recognize the special concern that an agent has for his own projects and commitments, and so cannot recognize the moral value and importance required in personal human relationships.

The idea that morality requires us to be impartial originates in Western philosophy from Jeremy Bentham's formula, "Each to count for one and none for more than one." J. S. Mill's formulation is less memorable but no less emphatic: When weighing the interests of different people, we should be "as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator."⁷ Bentham's formula underlies many varieties of moral theory derived from utilitarianism. Most utilitarians regard Bentham's famous formula, the principle of impartiality, as one of the fundamental principles underlying utilitarian ethical calculation. It prescribes that the interest of each individual should be treated equally when one deliberates about what one ought to do, since the only thing relevant to utilitarian calculation is the overall consequence of utility produced rather than who enjoyed it or produced it.

However, the implausibility of this formula becomes evident when we consider the separateness and identity of persons. The formula of utilitarianism neglects or ignores the particularity and identity of persons in the sense that it is indifferent to any particular circumstances, characteristics of agents, or relations to particular persons. Instead, it requires the agent to act on moral motivations which "involve a rational application of impartial principle and are thus different in kind from the sorts of motivations that he might have for treating some particular persons differently

⁷. John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957, p. 22.

because he happened to have some particular interest towards them."⁸ This utilitarian motivation is a general motivation. It tends to be all-pervasive and includes under its domain all actions. Since utilitarian motivation is intrinsically general, it makes no specific reference to types of actions, types of states of affairs, or types of human relationships. It addresses every situation and every action equally.

Williams's sharpest criticism of utilitarian motivation is that it even requires the agent to abandon ground projects and commitments that are essential to his character, identity, integrity, and the flourishing of his own life. To sacrifice one's ground projects and commitments in the service of impartial moral values derived from utilitarian motivation is to give up something which is sometimes more important than one's existence, something which constitutes particularity or identity. Williams believes that some commitments and projects define one's particularity and embody the meaning of one's life. To act on the utilitarian principle, 'everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one,' or 'treating like cases alike,' is often to be totally alienated from oneself.

To sum up, Williams's version of the claim that utilitarianism cannot accommodate the value and importance of the moral requirements in the realm of personal human relationships is formulated as a claim about personal integrity. He argues that personal integrity is a deep commitment to certain personal projects which gives one's life meaning. Since utilitarianism assesses the rightness of actions by looking at the overall consequences of those actions for everyone's welfare, Williams claims that utilitarianism requires agents to assume an impersonal perspective. This impersonal perspective calls for agents to take an impartial

⁸. Williams, Moral Luck, p. 2.

attitude toward their own interest and welfare; an agent must view his own projects as no more valuable than those of other persons. But this is incompatible with the concern that an agent, as a human being, must have for his own projects and commitments. Utilitarianism, therefore, is seen as inadequate in accommodating and justifying the motivations of agents engaged in personal human relationships.

B. Kantianism

Lawrence Blum criticizes Kantianism for failing to acknowledge and explore the moral perceptions of altruistic emotion and feeling that are essential to personal human relationship and a morally good life. Blum argues that, in addition to a sharpened sense of moral duty and principle, the possession of certain moral perceptions is required for adequately and fully understanding a moral situation. He writes:

Moral philosophy's customary focus on action-guiding rules and principles, on choice and decision, on universality and impartiality, and on obligation and right action have masked the importance of moral perception to a full and adequate account of moral agency. Yet although an agent may reason well in moral situations, uphold the strictest standards of impartiality for testing her maxims and moral principles, and be adept at deliberation, unless she perceives moral situations as moral situations, and unless she perceives their moral character accurately, her moral principles and skill at deliberation may be for naught. In fact, one of the most important moral differences between people is between those who miss and those who see various moral features of situations confronting them.⁹

Blum's argument is directed primarily at the Kantian view that "feelings and emotions are capricious, changeable, transitory, and weak, and are therefore

⁹. Lawrence Blum, Moral perception and particularity, p. 30.