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“Honour thy father and thy mother” – What do grown children owe their aged parents?

ABSTRACT

What do grown children owe their aged parents? This article describes some visions on filial obligation, current in modern ethical theory, and evaluates them from a theological perspective. Why should children help their parents? Is it out of gratitude, friendship, because they are indebted to them, or is it simply because they are their parents? And what kind of assistance may parents justly expect their children to offer them? The article presents and evaluates four theories of filial obligation. Biblical texts seem to support the so called debt theory which argues that children are in debt to their parents and that they are repaying them with their care what they owe to them. A variant of the debt theory is the model of gratitude. Both theories go astray by supposing that the mutuality in parent-child relationship is marked by reciprocity. The friendship approach argues that there are many things that children ought to do for their parents, but that it is inappropriate and misleading to describe them as things “owed”. Parents’ voluntary sacrifices tend to create love or “friendship”, rather than creating “debts” to be “repaid”. But friendship does not describe sufficiently the filial reality neither: one can end friendships, but not parenthood. And parents can never be the equals of their children, as friends can be. Apparently, the most satisfactory theory is the special goods theory, which underlines the special relationship between parent and child. That means also that the goods of parenting are unique in kind. Accordingly, adult children should provide frail and dependent parents with something that they will not get otherwise. This approach can get theological support and a faith inspired horizon by interpreting filial relationships in an eschatological perspective and considering them as a divine mandate.

Having been raised in the roaring sixties of the previous century, I was left with mixed feelings about the fifth commandment. “Honour thy father and thy mother” (Ex. 20:12) was used in church and at home, in and out of season, to prevent rebellious youngsters from “escaping” their parents’ “authority”. Children should not strive for independence and autonomy, but obey their parents, was the message, in line with the modern history of interpretation of the above Biblical passage. Christian ethicists supported this view. The fifth commandment was considered a legitimisation of the contested authority of educators in the nuclear family.²

Recent exegesis clearly distances itself from such an interpretation. The focus of the fifth commandment is on filial duties towards elderly parents rather than on parental authority:

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² In their exegesis of Exodus 20:12, almost all manuals on Christian ethics concentrated exclusively on the issue of parental authority.

The command (cf. also Lev. 19:3a) is not about the obligation of (young) children to submit to parental authority, but is directed to adult persons, those who in the patriarchal society are family heads. They, the (oldest) sons, when their parents have relinquished authority, and are no longer able to look after themselves, must provide them with food, clothing and shelter and after their death give them an honourable burial (Houtman 2000:51f.).

DIFFICULT CARE

The prominence of regulations regarding the care of the elderly in the Bible indicates that in practice respect for the aged was often lacking (cf. Gen. 27: 18ff. 35:22; 49:3f.). Apparently, abuse of the elderly was such a well-known phenomenon that it could be prevented only by the threat of capital punishment (Ex. 21:15, 17). Even in tradition-oriented societies such as the Hebrew society – as is the case in many other societies today still, where something is found that is reminiscent of an ancestor cult – honouring the elderly was not an obvious duty.³

With the injunction to honour father and mother, the fifth commandment points towards filial duties owed to dependent and frail elderly parents. According to Old Testament scholar Cees Houtman (2000:52), this rupture in the interpretation history of Exodus 20:12 was in particular the result of increased knowledge of *Umwelt* texts on the relationship between parents and children. However, the demographic shifts of the past century probably made the exegetes receptive for this reinterpretation. While from ancient Israelite times until far into the twentieth century parents seldom survived their adult children – the average life span in biblical times was around forty-five for the better off; for the socially weak it was undoubtedly even less (Houtman 2000:53) – the opposite has become quite common nowadays, also in developing countries.⁴

In Biblical times, reaching the age of sixty meant being old (Houtman 2000:53). Until at least one generation ago, at that age people slowly begin preparing themselves for ending their days in a retirement home. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, a sixty year old might be found in institutions of residential care for the aged – but only as visitors of *their* elderly, care-dependent parents. In any case, being sixty today does not mean a person has grown old, although society and institutions such as universities still think that it is an appropriate age to prepare for retirement.

3 “Oswald Loretz has argued that the commandment to “honour thy father and thy mother” is an offshoot and an echo of the ancestor cult, since it links the care for the elderly with the promise of the possession of the land” (Van der Toorn 1996:378).

4 Demographical statistics show that the world population is ageing rapidly. This “demographic transition” is driven by two factors: increased life expectancy and declining fertility rates. While the global population will increase by almost fifty per cent, from around six billion in the year 2000 to nine billion by 2050, the numbers of the elderly will experience a three hundred per cent increase. In developing countries where mortality rates among the younger segments of societies are rising and contraceptive use is more and more readily available, the increase. In developing countries where mortality rates among the younger segments of societies are rising and contraceptive use is more and more readily available, the increase may be as high as four hundred per cent. In fact, according to the United Nations Population Division, over sixty per cent of the world’s aged is already found in developing countries, and this will increase to seventy-five per cent by 2025 and eighty-five per cent by 2050 respectively. The eighty-plus age group constitutes the fastest growing segment of the population; the over-sixty segment will increase from twelve per cent to nineteen per cent of the total by 2050 (cf. De Lange 2009: 201).

Alongwith the increase in life expectancy the number of extended three (or four) generation families also increases. While in previous centuries taking care of dependent parents was rare and occurred seldom for an extended period, a gerontologist already remarked twenty-five years ago that “nowadays adult children provide more care and more difficult care to more parents over much longer periods of time than they did in the good old days” (Brody 1985:23).

This means that many adult children are confronted with the question why and how they should care for and about their frail and dependent parents, and how far their help should go. In developed countries, it seemed for a long time that the “welfare state” could take away adult children’s worries by providing sufficient state care. But only a small minority (in the Netherlands, about 6%) of the elderly ever lived in residential institutions. Neo-liberalism and the global risk society increase state pressure on the elderly’s own social network to provide them with the support they need. However, the frightening question remains: Will there be enough caring hands available in the near future? Due to the on-going decline in the birth rate, having children around in one’s old age seems to be the only guarantee (even in so-called individualised societies) – a secure pension, as it was in Biblical times and still may be in non-Western cultures. Needless to say, in countries without a state pension scheme but with a traditional family culture, the pressure on children to assist their parents is much higher. Research among immigrant families in the Netherlands showed that parents consider it self-evident that their children should take them in once they have grown old – a conviction with which they were brought up in their countries of origin. Their children, however, born and raised in an individualised culture, cannot meet this expectation and feel caught in a double bind (De Valk and Schans 2008: 54, 62). This feeling is probably shared by adult children in many rapidly urbanising and modernising countries in the developing world.

What, then, do grown children owe their aged parents? In the rest of this contribution I want to focus on some current views on filial obligation in modern ethical theory and evaluate them from a theological perspective. *Why* should children assist their parents? Is it out of gratitude, love or indebtedness to them? Is it, perhaps, simply because they are their parents? *What kind* of assistance may parents legitimately expect their children to offer them? Are children also obliged to feed, clothe and nurture their parents and to take them into their homes, as in Biblical times (cf. Jn. 19:27), or is material or financial support something the broader community or government should provide? Can children limit themselves to social and emotional support? And how far should filial care reach? Should children allow themselves to be overburdened? Taking care of a parent suffering of dementia may, for example, ask too much of children, both physically and emotionally. May children be obligated to sacrifice themselves (their time, their futures) for the sake of their parents, because the parents sacrificed themselves for the *children* in *their* childhood?

A QUESTION OF DEBT?

The Hebrew Bible motivates filial obligation with the argument that your father is your procreator (Prov.23:22) and that your mother carried you and gave birth to you (Sir. 7: 27f; Tob. 4:4). “The thought behind [this] is that one should return some of the care and nourishment provided by the parents. Love is not mentioned as a motive” (Houtman 2000:55). The Bible seems to support the so-called debt theory, the first model of filial obligation I want to present here. This theory argues that children are indebted to their parents and that they

are repaying them with the care they give them. Your parents showered benefits on you when you were young and dependent on them, and now it is “payback time”.

Throughout history and quasi-universally, the debt theory has been propagated as transparent and self-evident. My own parents too, having been poor in my early youth, in their old age implicitly expected something “back” from their two grown-up children. They had sacrificed themselves to let us attend the best schools possible. It went without saying that their sons, highly educated and relatively well-to-do, should do something in return.

The debt theory, balancing benefits and favours, has a long and popular history. The justification for it, however, is less convincing than it seems. Harry Moody retells a story of a mother bird and her chick. The chick rides on its mother’s back while the mother forages for food. One day the mother bird says to the chick, “When you’re a big bird and I’m old and frail, will you take me on your back just as I’m doing for you now?” The chick then replies, “No, Mother, but when I’m a big bird, I’ll carry my chick on my back just as you’re doing for me now” (cf. Moody 1992:229).

The story shows that reciprocity is not at the heart of the filial relationship. Parents and children do not relate in terms of *do ut des*. They do not enter their relationship in order to obtain mutual advantage: “If I push your pram now, will you later push my wheelchair?” A child can reply in all fairness that it did not ask to be born. There is an insurmountable and fundamental asymmetry in a parental relationship. From the perspective of children, families are communities of fate, not voluntary associations. Between parents and children there exists mutuality, not reciprocity.

The debt theory also cannot account for the open-endedness and on-going character of filial duties. A child will never be able to say (and sometimes may suffer because of it!), “Well, now that’s enough – I have repaid my debt.” While some might call an adult son, a good businessman, visiting his mother once a month and demanding petrol money for his trip on her doorstep (a true story), most of us would rather call him a bad son.

The debt theory has other flaws too. It presupposes that it is the children who owe something to their parents and not the other way around. Even if we continue to think of intergenerational relationships within the framework of the balance of justice (as the contextual therapy of Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy does), we have to admit that in transgenerational book-keeping of merits children come first:

Reciprocal equity, the traditional framework for assessing justice among adults, fails as a guideline when it comes to the balance of the parent-child relationship. Every parent finds himself [sic] in an asymmetrically obliged position toward his new-born. The child has a source of unearned rights. Society does not expect him to repay the parent in equivalent benefits (Boszormenyi-Nagy 1973:55).

Not all parents are ready to redeem *their* debt towards their children in promoting the human flourishing of their children. Children are abandoned, neglected, exploited, abused. Some parents might have been heroes during “their times of the struggle”, but others were simply opportunists under or collaborators with a wrong regime. What, then, are children supposed to pay back? According to the debt theory they would simply have to turn their backs on their parents, let alone care for them in their frailty. In such a framework of justice, there can only be talk of forgiveness and hope of reconciliation, not of retribution.

Furthermore, not all children grew up more privileged than their parents did. What can rich, well-off parents then expect of their poor, highly-burdened children? Within the debt paradigm parents who do not “deserve” it, cannot demand any assistance from their children. And what about “effortless” parents, who simply enjoyed their parenthood, for whom it was only a matter of having fun? What are their “merits” that should be repaid?

Thus, despite its long tradition and apparent justification, the debt theory creates a number of problems. The parent-child relationship is richer and more complex than can be expressed in a juridical and economic language game of “give and take”. Filial obligations cannot be reduced to keeping book of benefits and compensations.

A CASE OF GRATITUDE?

Ethicists looking for an alternative theory that is more compatible with a thicker description of the parent-child relationship came up with a variation of the debt theory, namely the model of gratitude. The warm language of intimacy, care and love probably better expresses what really exist between two generations within one family. Children do not “owe” their parents anything. As Boszormenyi-Nagy rightly puts it, intergenerational debts go in one direction from parents to children: The latter’s care for the former is only an expression of their gratitude towards their parents. Debts are not “paid back”, but “paid forward”, in favouring the next generation – as illustrated by the young bird in the story told by Moody above.

Good parents surround their children with love and care. They do this out of benevolence, not in order to receive something in return. Though their children do not owe them anything, they have a moral obligation to show them their gratitude and appreciation with gestures that make this clear. Imagine someone who has risked their life for you. No price can be put on such an act; however, one will at least have a moral duty to show an appropriate level of gratitude, by keeping in touch with, for example, or sending that person flowers or a postcard on his or her birthday. If you go too far and want to “pay back” too much, that person will surely be embarrassed: that is not why he or she saved your life!

From a Reformed theological perspective, the model of gratitude sounds appealing: those who honour their parents are doing a good job according to the *tertius usus legis*, the “rule of gratitude”. The parental relationship resembles the biblical covenant with God: although the initiative for it is one-sided in origin, the relationship it establishes creates a bond with mutual expectations. Speaking of “duties of gratitude” is, however, paradoxical. It is love, not the contract that forms the foundation.

An analogy between the God-human relationship and the one between parents and children seems obvious. In the history of interpretation of the fifth commandment the parents’ authority often has been legitimated by the argument that parents are God’s representatives (Houtman 2000:56). For does this commandment not follow immediately after the first table of the Law, the one dealing with the relationship with YHWH? In procreating offspring, parents are participating in the divine work of creation. As God “deserves” our gratitude, the same goes for our parents (Houtman 2000:57).

However, despite its theological attractiveness, the gratitude model has flaws, similar to the debt model. First, this model presupposes that parents really “earned” their children’s gratitude, though this is often not the case. Many women cannot worship God the Father

because of traumatic memories of their own abusive fathers. The analogy between God and parents is problematic as well because of its connotations with power and authority. Many parents do not resemble the good God, but rather the contrary. Resentment on the children's part often seems more justifiable than gratitude.

Second, the emphasis on *feelings* of gratitude may rightly remove the filial relationship from a juridical and economic framework, but at the same time it disregards an essential element in the phenomenology of the parent-child relationship: filial duties are experienced as direct acts, not as *expressions* of sentiment. Helping an elderly, sick parent to dress or eat is not analogous to sending a postcard or a bunch of flowers. It is done because the child feels obligated to do so, even without any feelings of gratitude. Caring for our parents is not an instrumental illustration of an emotion, but an inevitable responsibility.

A QUESTION OF FRIENDSHIP?

The debt model being too juridical and the gratitude model too authoritarian, the *friendship model* was developed in order to escape the shortcomings of both. "What do grown children owe their parents?" is the question with which Jane English, the *auctor intellectualis* of this model, opens her seminal article with the same title. "I will contend that the answer is 'nothing'", is her response (English 1991:147). She argues that, although there are many things that children ought to do for their parents, it is inappropriate and misleading to describe them as something "owed" to the parents. The voluntary sacrifices made by parents tend to create love or "friendship", rather than "debts" to "repay".

The duties of grown children are those of friends, and result from love between them and their parents, rather than being things owed in repayment for their early sacrifices (English 1991:147).

The friendship model radically breaks with pre-modern tradition and its patriarchal and hierarchical ethics. This appears unimaginable without an egalitarian society where parents and children share households on an equal basis and daughters can say of their mothers that they are their best friends. However, despite its contemporary appearance, it does offer an alternative to the shortcomings of the two models discussed above. It acknowledges that a parent-child relationship is not typified by a reciprocal give-and-take, but by mutuality.

Friends offer what they can give and accept what they need, without regard for the total amounts of benefits exchanged, and friends are motivated by love rather than by the prospect of repayment. Hence, talking of "owing" is singularly out of place in friendship (English 1991:149).

Therefore, the friendship idiom seems to offer a better vocabulary than the juridical jargon of favours and debts. It accounts better for the uniqueness of the parent-child relationship than the impartial language of bookkeepers and lawyers. Just like friendship, caring for children requires an ethic of intimacy instead of an ethic of strangers. Parents and children enter into a particular history with these specific parents, these specific children, just as friends enter into a unique relationship. Of course, English knows that not all parents and children are indeed friends. To her, however, friendship within the household is an ideal to which parents should strive in order to with their children, benefit from it throughout their lives. Only then, receiving and raising a child means entering into a lifelong friendship. "The relationship between

children and their parents *should* be one of friendship characterized by mutuality rather than one of reciprocal favours” (English 1991:151) [my italics – FDL]. English does not consider friendship to be an analogy of the parent-child relationship but a description of its utmost reality. In the ideal case, bestowing care on dependent parents is bestowing the obvious care on friends through thick and thin. The friendship has been more rewarding in earlier times, to be sure, but we do not let our friends down when circumstances change. Friends can count on each other.

The parental argument, “You ought to do x because we did y for you,” should be replaced by, “We love you, and you will be happier if you do x,” or “We believe you love us, and anyone who loved us would do x” (English 1991:153).

The strength of the friendship model lies in the fact that it neither gives way to any pre-emptive rights of parents, nor puts unlimited and unconditional pressure on children. Children cannot and should not provide in all of their parents’ needs. Love’s knowledge develops a subtle balance between the needs of the one and the abilities and resources of the other. And, what a stranger can do (cleaning the house, medical care, shopping), a friend does not need to do. Children who are friends with their parents will offer socio-emotional rather than material and/or financial support.⁵

On second thought the friendship model presents more than a superficial image of modern, non-authoritarian family life. Many adult children do experience in the final years of their parents’ lives that they grow close to each other, as equals. The friendship model does not want to make small children in young families adults who they obviously are not, but rather the other way round, it warns adult children against a paternalistic treatment of their mentally and physically weakened parents. Though a process of “parentification” of adult children might become inevitable in the final stage of their parents’ lives and they exchange roles, children should resist the temptation to treat their parents like children, but ought to respect their autonomy. The friendship model emphasises the equality of parents (“coming of age”) and children (coming of age as well) – even difficult decisions (placement in a nursing home, for example) are to be taken with persuasion rather than with free “advice” (cf. Moody 1992:100f.). Psychogerontologists describe how adult children, after a *filial crisis* in which they have to learn to accept their parents’ dependency and to meet their needs, eventually succeed in fulfilling their *filial tasks*, and reaching *filial maturity*.

Filial maturity means to be willing to provide help voluntary to one’s elderly parents and to actually help them, motivated by feelings of love and a sense of duty, without losing one’s autonomy in a reciprocal relationship and in the context of a well-functioning family network (Marcoen 1995:126).

⁵ Because of the unique relationship between children and their parents, Goodin (1985) proposes an alternative need model: children are in the unique position to grasp and meet their parents’ needs, as no-one else is. Their obligations are comparable to the one of the Good Samaritan towards the victim on the roadside. There are no alternatives. Families are communities of fate. Not the question “should I help here?” is at stake here, but, “how could I ever refuse to help?” “If one party is in a position of particular vulnerability to or dependency on another, the other has strong responsibilities to protect the dependent party” (Goodin 1985:39). However, this model is also counter-intuitive. Parents are something special, while the biblical narrative proposes an ethic between strangers. (cf. De Lange 2010: 97-113).

Filial maturity requires of both parents and children respect for their mutual autonomy: parents should not be over-demanding towards their children, and children in turn should support their parents voluntary and not because they feel they are forced to.

However, despite its merits, the friendship model has clear limitations as well. What does it mean for parents and children (is this perhaps so in the majority of cases?) who, for whatever reason, cannot be friends (anymore)? Jane English's answer is far from reassuring. Just as in the case of a genuine friendships, "what children ought to do for their parents (and parents for their children) depends on the extent to which there is an on-going friendship between them" (English 1991:151). This restrictive condition is not only threatening for parents who are too dependent on their children, but it is also counter-intuitive.

It also does not help to reinterpret the friendship model – as Dixon (1995: 77-87) proposes – by saying that parents and children do not need to be real friends, but should only consider each other as friends. Even when the parent-child relationship functions as an *analogy* to friendship, this also means that when a friendship ends so do the duties of friendship. However, there is a fundamental difference between parenthood and friendship: friends are chosen (and some- times left behind) voluntarily, while who one's parents are is part one's lifelong destiny, even if one feels condemned to having them. In this respect, the parent-child relationship is incomparable and irreducible.

A second flaw in the friendship model is the flipside of its strong attraction. It rightly abandons traditional patriarchy, but suggests too much equality between parents and children. Parents come first; they precede their children. As generations they follow each other in time. "The heteronomous character of his [sic] relationship to them has now ceased", wrote Karl Barth – one of the few Reformed ethicists who have considered the relationship between adult children and their parents within the framework of an exegesis of the fifth commandment. "But they remain the fellow-human beings who in their way are irreplaceably nearest to him [sic] and are given precedence over him" ("sie bleiben die ihm *vorgeordneten* Mitmenschen") (Barth 1961:254; German edition, 1951:285) The sequence of generations reflects an ontological inequality in time that should be expressed in their mutual relationship. It does not necessarily result in the natural leadership of parents and the docility of children. However, the parents remain older, preceding their children in time.

An ethic of "equal regard" for families – as proposed by Don Browning – ignores the uniqueness of this inequality between parents and children. It introduces a formal, impartial and "timeless" moral principle as the moral core of a special and unique relationship (cf. Browning 1997:274). Equal regard may be a necessary condition for a mature parent-child relationship, but it is not sufficient on its own. Parents will never be siblings of their children, even when the latter are close to them in age.

A CASE OF SPECIAL GOODS

The ethics of the parent-child relationship requires a thick description that takes into account its unique character. This ethics will not be convincing as long as it is deduced from other relationships' moral implications. We assist our parents, not as a result of us having certain general obligations towards them, but in direct response to the particular persons they are to us – our parents. An equal regard construction, as Bernard Williams once put it in defending the moral uniqueness of personal relationships, "provides the agent with one thought too

many" (Williams 1981:18). Guilt, gratitude, friendship – these remain analogies. Being the child of our parents is something special. That means, as Simon Keller writes, that

...the goods of parenting are unique in kind, meaning that there are no other sources, or not many easily accessible other sources, from which they can be gained. For the child, as well as the parent, there are distinctive special goods that come from the parent-child relationship (Keller 2006:265f).

In order to give a full account of this uniqueness, Keller then proposes a "special goods theory" of filial obligation. Fundamental to this approach is a distinction between generic goods, which could just as well be provided by others, and special goods, which parents can receive from no-one (or almost no-one) but their children, or which children can receive from no-one (or almost no-one) but their parents. Medical care, housekeeping, a ride to the shops, financial advice – these are generic goods that need not be provided by an adult child if they can be delivered by others. To the special goods in the parent-child relationship, however, belong: keeping in touch, visiting, spending time together, listening, being present, recalling memories, seeking advice, making plans, opening up our family life to the other – not in the role of, for example, a pastoral caregiver, but precisely as a *child* of this parent. We provide our parents with something that they will not get otherwise, by making them part of our adulthood. They may:

...experience a sense of continuity and transcendence, a feeling that they will, in some respect, persist beyond their own deaths. There is also a kind of joy, and a kind of wisdom, that comes from a close involvement with the development of a person from birth to childhood and beyond (Keller 2006:267).

These "family values" are indeed *special goods*. On the other hand, Keller observes, there is a special value in having a parent from whom we can seek advice (as a parent) and who shares with us the history of our whole lifespan. An on-going healthy relationship with a parent can create a link between our life's different stages, helping to see that they all belong to us.

The special goods of this relationship correspond to special duties. Good care for our parents implies that we make sure that generic goods are well provided, though this needs not necessarily be done by the children themselves. Others can do this as well.

In my opinion, the special goods theory offers a better phenomenology of the parent-child relationship than the other approaches mentioned above. Consequently, it represents a more convincing view of filial obligations. On the one hand, it frees children from the burden of unjustified expectations to do *everything* for their parents, since some generic needs may also be met (and are often met much better) by others. Children's care for their parents is primarily a caring about, not a care for their parents, so to speak (Stuifbergen and Van Delden 2011, 71). On the other hand, it leaves the parents without the liberty to make unreasonable demands on their children. They are not justified in asking of their children whatever they want to; certainly not when it exceeds their children's resources. "What you should do for your parents depends upon what goods you are able to generate" (Keller 2006:270). The special goods approach also acknowledges differences among children about themselves taking care of their parents – often a source of friction among siblings. Children who are unable to provide special goods to their parents are morally justified to do less than those who are better able to do so. Filial maturity develops as both parents and children learn to see and acknowledge the delicate requirements of their unique relationship.

But how do we distinguish between generic and special goods? Keller concedes that the dividing line may shift, depending on historical and cultural context. Growing old in an extended family in a poor society differs from aging in an individualised welfare state. Cultural traditions may view and value the relationship between community and autonomy quite differently. Aged parents surrounded by a strong social network, a state pension system and well-functioning institutions of care for the elderly will be much less justified in appealing to their children for assistance than parents in less privileged contexts. If children are the *only* ones able to provide their parents with food, safety and shelter, it will be difficult to justify a refusal of parents' request to provide them with generic goods as well. In such a case, and only then, children are required to take on the role of Good Samaritan towards their parents. Voluntarily, as an act of charity – not because of the special relationship they have with their parents, but because of the unique position they are in.⁶

In times when the pressure increases on families to take over the entire responsibility for their elder members, which may even happen in developing countries, it is important to retain the distinction between special and generic goods – and, correspondingly, between filial and communal duties. “It takes a whole village to raise a child”, the African saying goes. That it takes the whole community to care for its elderly is true as well. Such a comprehensive approach lessens the burden on the conscience of adult children in caring for their parents; they cannot do *everything* and neither should they. A comprehensive approach also points out the social responsibilities of local communities and state governments. Care of the elderly should not be left to families alone. The special goods theory offers a balanced ethical framework for both filial and communal obligations.

A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE – A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Theological ethics should wholeheartedly support the distinction between filial and communal obligations. The recognition of the fact that the family cannot be reduced to other social structures has made it one of the orders of creation in the tradition of Christian ethics. In fact, I prefer Dietrich Bonhoeffer's formulation (2005:68f, 388-408), calling the family one of the “divine mandates”⁷.

Luther emphasised that it is necessary to keep each of the different creation orders within its own boundaries. “Confusion here is not healthy” (*mixtura hic non valet*). Bonhoeffer continued in the same spirit:

Only in their being with-one-another [*Miteinander*], for-one-another [*Für-einander*] and over-against-one-another [*Gegeneinander*] do the divine mandates of church, marriage and family, culture and government communicate the commandment of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. None of these mandates exists self-sufficiently, nor can one of them claim to replace all others. The mandates are with-one-another or they are not divine mandates. However, in being *with-one-another* they are not isolated and separated from one another, but oriented they are directed toward one another (Bonhoeffer 2005:393).

6 Cf. above, note 5. Here Goodin's “needs theory” (Goodin 2005) comes in.

7 Luther distinguished three ordines, Bonhoeffer four mandates; the latter separated the *oeconomia* from of the *ordo parentum* as a distinctive mandate because of their separation in modernity. For a fuller account, cf. De Lange 1997.

Therefore, adult children cannot be held fully responsible for the complete care of their elderly parents. It is also a task for the broader community. The Bible reflects this very well. Even if children should neglect their duty to honour their fathers and their mothers, the Old Testament community is called upon again and again to look after the “widows” – a term mostly concerning older women. However, the care of the aged was not seen as a special and separate task; it was included among the general societal regulations (cf. Houtman 2000:56, 220ff).

When the family is considered as a divine mandate it obtains an institutional character. Family is a social *structure* among others, which embodies the triune God’s care for a sustainable society.⁸ Children do have their own responsibility in this institution and they have to fulfil their specific “role”. Even if the mutual relationship between parents and children is motivated by feelings of love and affection, its moral requirements obtain their compelling character only because families represent one of the divine institutions that keeps the fabric of society together, preparing – as Bonhoeffer would say, “in the penultimate” (2005:146ff.) – the way for God’s kingdom.

An eschatological perspective, oriented towards a sustainable future, makes clear that the relationship between aged parents and their children must not be considered retrospectively, as the repayment of a personal indebtedness. On the contrary, it should be seen in a broader context, prospectively, within a framework of the on-going struggle for a humane society. By caring for their aged parents, children contribute to a society that will one day, when they have grown old, treat them with dignity in turn. Moody (1992:229) recounts of an old story where a farmer decided he has no more room at the table for his old father, who lived with the family. So he banished the old man to the barn, where the father had to eat from a wooden bowl. One day the farmer came across his own little son playing in the barnyard with some pieces of wood, and he asked the little boy what he was doing. “Oh, Father,” replied the boy, “I’m making a bowl for you to eat from when you get old.” After that, the old man was invited back to his place at the family table.

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⁸ The belief that one of the marks of high moral conduct included respect for aged parents was something Israel shared with its surrounding world. Its background is the ideal of a stable society. In the OT, the requirement to take care of parents is presented as arising from special (in the laws) and general revelation (in the Wisdom books)” (Houtman 2000:55).

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KEY WORDS

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