

## What children owe their parents

Ottawa *Citizen*, Wednesday 19 December 2013

<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/opinion/What+children+their+parents/9306444/story.html>

Mark Mercer  
Department of Philosophy  
Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3  
(514) 725-0488  
[mark.mercer@smu.ca](mailto:mark.mercer@smu.ca)

Do children have duties toward their parents?

For instance, are minor children duty bound to obey their parents? Are adult children under a moral obligation to look after their aged parents?

I suppose I'm in the minority, but it seems to me that children have no particular duties to their parents. It seems to me that the only duties they have are the general duties we all have to treat each other well.

Parents, on the other hand, have specific and strong duties toward their children (toward their own children and no one else's). Parents have these serious duties right up to their child's sixteenth birthday, at least.

This is because it was through the parents' choice that their child came into the world. That makes them directly responsible for their child's wellbeing, as no one else is.

A child would have duties to her parents had she entered into a contract with them. She would be duty bound to practice piano twenty minutes three times a week had she agreed in the contract to follow her parents' dictates regarding developing her talents or acquiring familiarity with art and culture. She would be duty bound to bathe on the schedule they set had she agreed to follow their lead on hygiene or grooming.

Of course, children do not enter into explicit contracts with their parents. As minors, they are too young to know either their interests well or, at least, how to pursue their interests effectively. Thus, any contract a child might make would be morally invalid on grounds of incompetence or duress.

Well, isn't the contract merely implicit, then? Children don't sign anything, certainly, but if they accept the benefits they receive from their parents, wouldn't their parents be entitled to their respect and obedience? Maybe they enter into a contract only if their parents actually have their interests at heart and do provide them with adequate shelter, food, and care. Yet surely if the parents are good parents, and the child takes advantage of their goodness, the child has implicitly entered into a deal with her parents and is obliged to keep her end of it.

Whether the idea of an implicit contract makes sense in any context, it certainly doesn't make sense in this one. Again, minor children cannot fairly judge either their interests or the means by which to serve their interests, and so are unable to enter into valid contracts, period, explicit or implicit.

But contract is only one source of obligation. Perhaps children have duties that stem from reciprocity, or just from the fact of their status as children in a family.

Perhaps the claim that children have obligations of reciprocity to their parents is most plausible in the case of adult children of aged parents. The parents looked after the child when the child was weak in body and mind, and because of their care the child is now strong; for that reason, it's only fair that the child cares for the parents when they become weak.

Fairness, though, doesn't enter into it, for the child never accepted to reciprocate. Suppose the busker you regularly pass on the street asks for something in return for the music he has long brought you. It's true you've enjoyed his music, and maybe he's widened or improved your tastes, but you didn't agree to accept these benefits on condition you would eventually pay.

Remember, as well, that the busker is not busking out of obligation to you. The parents, though, must care for the child whether they want to or not, and whether the child is obedient or not. They were responsible for the child's being born. The child is theirs, and they owe her whatever it takes to make her fit, healthy, and knowledgeable. They owe her whatever it takes to create an adult able to fend for herself in the world.

Perhaps children have duties to their parents through natural law. The role of child is one that we are born into, without our consent, but it is a role we have been assigned all the same. It comes by nature, then, with duties and responsibilities, as well as with rights and prerogatives. It's only natural that minor children follow their parents' commands just because they are their parents' commands. It's only natural that adult children take good care of their parents just because they are their parents.

This argument, though, presupposes a role-giver, either God or nature, to whom we then owe allegiance. And so we must ask the same question regarding this role-giver that we've been asking regarding parents. What reason do we have for thinking that we have any duties toward the role-giver? We have no more contracted with God or nature than we have with our parents.

I think that if parents, and people generally, really took to heart the idea that children have no duties toward parents, both children and parents would be better off. The thought that children have a duty to obey lies behind parental demands to be obeyed, and these demands introduce fear and hostility into children's lives. As well, parents who recognize that their children have no duties toward them wouldn't relate to their children as lords or masters, and for that reason their children's maturation would not have to involve overcoming the sense of being under someone's command.

Of course, children should follow their parents' advice. But they should do so out of the recognition that their parents have their best interests at heart and know a whole lot more about the world than they do.