



# Person-Creating and Filial Piety

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## 1 Introduction

Imagine that people were not creations, not procreated and reared into mature personhood by other people. Imagine that people grew wild like Lambs of Tartary or sprang into being as adults. In imagining this, hold everything else as constant as possible – that people still exist, that people still marry and have sex, that there is a social custom of younger adults enjoying relationships similar to the parent-child relationship with older adults, that the economy is no different, etc. Imagining this helps to identify the goods of person-creating, and the virtue that responds to them; piety, the virtue of a created person, a child. How would life be different axiologically (good, value, worth, excellence) and normatively (prescription, ought, obligation) if persons were not the creations of other persons? I discuss “filial piety,” that piety which responds to those within the ordinary extension of “parent” – roughly, natural human persons who procreate and rear children. Yet, all piety is filial. Religious piety responds to God under the aspect of our creator, as our parent. Patriotism responds to one’s country considered as one’s creator, one’s parent (*patria*, motherland).

In the contemporary philosophical literature on filial piety we find the practices of filial piety modeled on, reduced to, the paradigm of debtor and creditor, benefactor and grateful beneficiary, friendship, a mutualistic duty to provide special

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goods, a rational social contract, or a normatively weighty convention.<sup>1</sup> We find little discussion of piety in the broader contemporary philosophical literature.<sup>2</sup>

The goal of this paper is two-fold. I sketch an account of parenting on which parents are those who engage in the action of person-creating. I then use that account to illuminate filial piety, as the virtue that responds to this action. So, this paper links together the topic of what a parent is<sup>3</sup> and the topic of filial piety. My rationale for approaching these topics in tandem is that to understand filial piety it is helpful to consider that to which it responds, and likewise that we can better understand parenting by considering the virtue that responds to it. The philosophical literature on filial piety generally centers the perspective of an adult child – “What must I do for my aged parents?” – but my account centers the perspective of a parent – “What am I up to in being a parent? What response should I hope for from my child?”

A plan of the essay. I identify the action of a parent as the action of person-creating. I then delineate this action, and briefly characterize virtue. I outline how parent and child share in being as relatives, a metaphysical category discussed by Aristotle in his *Categories*. Responding to their shared being, the pious child advances their parent’s well-being by advancing their own, and enjoys a prerogative to hold their parent morally accountable. Aristotle further specifies that parent-child are relatives

<sup>1</sup> Brynn Welch, “Filial Obligation,” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015, iep.utm.edu/fil-obli; Mark Wicclair, “Caring for Frail Elderly Parents: Past Parental Sacrifices and the Obligations of Adult Children,” *Social Theory and Practice* 16, no. 2 (1990): 163–89; Jane English, “What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents,” in *Having Children: Philosophical and Legal Reflections on Parenthood*, ed. Onora O’Neill and William Ruddick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 351–56; Simon Keller, “Four Theories of Filial Duty,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 56, no. 223 (2006): 254–74; William Sin, “Adult Children’s Obligations Towards Their Parents: A Contractualist Explanation,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 53, no. 1 (2019): 19–32; Christina Hoff Sommers, “Filial Morality,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 8 (1986): 439–56; Michael Collingridge and Seumas Miller, “Filial Responsibility and the Care of the Aged,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (1997): 119–28.

<sup>2</sup> The exceptions are: Robert C. Roberts, “The Virtue of Piety,” in *Spirituality and the Good Life: Philosophical Approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 47–62; Jeremy Schwartz and David Hayes, “Piety as a Virtue,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 55 (2021): 109–26.

For Roberts, piety “sees the parent as progenitor, as antecedent and condition of one’s existence” and its response is one of reverence (52, 57). I agree with much of what Roberts says, though on my account piety’s response is to the parent’s action as a progenitor rather than their status as a progenitor, and its response is not primarily a parent-focused attitude, or an attitude at all, but to continue the parent’s action by being a good person.

For Schwartz and Hayes, piety responds to “those agents thanks to whose efforts we gained a sense that some activities are worthwhile. The appropriate reaction to them is gratitude” (110). Schwartz and Hayes acknowledge that their purpose is not so much to give an account of piety, but to give an account of an as-yet nameless virtue, a species of gratitude, which they dub piety “somewhat reluctantly... for want of a better term” (110). On my view, a parent, as one who seeks to perfect their creation, will surely want to imbue their child with a sense that some activities are worthwhile, but this is one small aspect of their work. Whereas gratitude responds to benefaction, piety responds to something that encompasses and surpasses benefaction; Aquinas calls it the “principle of our being and government,” the “principle of our getting and upbringing” (ST II-II Q101 A3 co.; ST II-II Q106 A1 co.)

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Brake and Joseph Millum, “Parenthood and Procreation,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2021.

as creator (maker, producer, crafter) and created (thing-made, product, artefact). A pious child is one who completes the person-creating action of their parent by being a good person. Agreeing with Aristotle but going further, I specify that parent and child are creator-created in the mode of paradigm (prototype, model, pattern) and image (icon, appearance, copy). A pious child images their paradigms well, receiving and uniting the lives of their parents. I then argue for my piety theory of filial piety on the grounds that it better explains some common intuitive judgments about filial piety than (what I take to be) the two most plausible competitor theories in the literature; the gratitude theory and the special goods theory.

Although I assume some Aristotelian metaphysics, my purpose is not to excavate Aristotle's own accounts of parenthood or filial piety.<sup>4</sup> The discussion does not depend on any religious commitments.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 The Action of a Parent as the Action of Creating a Person

I offer two reasons for accepting the claim that the goal of a parent is to create a person.

This claim coheres with many commonsense axiological and normative claims about parenting. Parents should not set out to make a concert pianist, or a taxpayer, or a source of social esteem, or a helper for their old age, but a being that will flourish in the ways characteristic of a human being. Parents should want their child "to

<sup>4</sup> So far as I am aware, all of the literature on the Aristotle's category of "relatives" is of a scholarly rather than critical character – nobody has specifically attacked relatives as a metaphysical category.

Matthew Duncombe, "Aristotle's Two Accounts of Relatives in Categories 7," *Phronesis* 60, no. 4 (2015): 436–61; Orna Harari, "The Unity of Aristotle's Category of Relatives," *Classical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2011): 521–37; Pamela M. Hood, *Aristotle on the Category of Relation* (Lanham, MD: United Press of America, 2004); David Sedley, "Aristotelian Relativities," in *Le Style de La Pensée*, ed. M. Canto Sperber and P Pellegrin (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2002), 324–52; Fabio Morales, "Relational Attributes in Aristotle," *Phronesis* 39, no. 3 (1994): 255–74; Mario Mignucci, "Aristotle's Definitions of Relatives in Cat. 7," *Phronesis* 31, no. 2 (1986): 101–27.

Aristotle's remarks bearing on parenthood and filial piety have not received much contemporary attention. Vernon L Provencal, "The Family In Aristotle," *Animus* 6 (2001): 3–31; Aristotle and Michael Pakaluk, *Nicomachean Ethics Book VIII and IX*, ed. Michael Pakaluk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> I have the motive of exploring the biblical idea that children are images of their parents. "[Adam] fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image [tselem]" (Genesis 5:3). *Tselem* is used of God-man (Genesis 1:26) and demon-idol (Numbers 33:52, 2 Chronicles 23:17). The Septuagint translates *tselem* as *eikon* (icon). In the New Testament, Christ is icon of the Father (Colossians 1:15), the righteous are icons of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:48-9). Parallel to my discussion, this means that God is present in and through the human person and that demon is present in and through the idol, our actions toward the image passing to the paradigm (Matthew 25:40, 1 Corinthians 10:20). Neo-Platonic and Hermetic philosophers gave accounts of how gods are drawn down into cultic statues. God breathing life into Adam (Genesis 2:7) references such practices, making us 'idols' (*eidolon*) of God.

Proclus, "On the Priestly Art," in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Brian Copenhaver, Ingrid Merkel, and Allen G. Debus (London: Associated University Presses, 1998); Hermes Trismegistus, "Asclepius," in *Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*, ed. Brian Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24, 37–38; Stephen L. Herring, *Divine Substitution: Humanity as the Manifestation of Deity in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 115–21, 199.

be happy,” “to have a good life,” “to be a good person.” If a child turns out to be a very bad person, then there is a sense in which their parents didn’t succeed *qua* parents, even if they are not to blame for this. Parents should and do try to perfect the capacities of personhood in their child, conceptualized as such or not, and take pleasure in their child’s development. Being orphaned or being raised in an institution, or having neglectful or abusive parents, are associated with a range of outcomes that seriously impede human flourishing.<sup>6</sup> How a parent ought to treat their child is responsive to the child’s gradual development of the capacities of personhood – e.g., giving greater freedom and responsibility to a 15-year-old than a 5-year-old. Once a child has developed the capacities of personhood then, given the parental goal, the parent ought to allow the child to exercise them. Accordingly, the parents of adult children have a less distinctive role – offering advice, admonishing and encouraging, celebrating achievements, helping in emergencies, sharing a relationship of equality and mutual accountability. Plausibly, the love and friendship of parent for child is the deepest that we find among human beings.<sup>7</sup> This is made sense of by the claim that parents aim to create a person. In making the child as such the object of their creative activity, the parent wills the totality of the child’s good, and so is their superlative lover and friend.<sup>8</sup>

This claim also explains the high value commonly assigned to parenthood. Since our cognitive and conative powers aim at the true and the good, it’s better for us to aim them at more valuable goals. It is human flourishing to master astronomy, human languishing to count blades of grass. Persons are very valuable. So, if parenting aims to create a person, then we would expect people to find tremendous value in it. This expectation is borne out. Parents rank spending time with their children as among the most rewarding and meaningful of their daily activities.<sup>9</sup> “81% of mothers said mothering is the most important thing they do.”<sup>10</sup> “94% of parents say that having children is worth it despite the costs, and parents report that having children is *the most positive event in their lives*.”<sup>11</sup> Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs featured self-actualization, fulfilling one’s creative potential, as the peak need.

<sup>6</sup> Katja Coneus, Andrea M. Mühlenweg, and Holger Stichnoth, “Orphans at Risk in Sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence on Educational and Health Outcomes,” *Review of Economics of the Household* 12, no. 4 (2014): 641–62; Rebecca T. Leeb, Terri Lewis, and Adam J. Zolotor, “A Review of Physical and Mental Health Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect and Implications for Practice,” *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 5, no. 5 (2011): 454–68.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1166a 1–10.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, “Rhetoric,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 1380b 35; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156b 10.

<sup>9</sup> Mathew P. White and Paul Dolan, “Accounting for the Richness of Daily Activities,” *Psychological Science* 20, no. 8 (2009): 1000–1008; S. Katherine Nelson et al., “In Defense of Parenthood: Children Are Associated With More Joy Than Misery,” *Psychological Science* 24, no. 1 (2013): 3–10.

<sup>10</sup> Martha F. Erickson and Enola G. Aird, “The Motherhood Study: Fresh Insights on Mothers’ Attitudes and Concerns” (New York, 2005), 6.

<sup>11</sup> S. Katherine Nelson, Kostadin Kushlev, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, “The Pains and Pleasures of Parenting: When, Why, and How Is Parenthood Associated with More or Less Well-Being?,” *Psychological Bulletin* 140, no. 3 (2014): 8. My italics.

Recent evolutionary psychology finesses this to “parenting.”<sup>12</sup> That is, parenting is the highest form of creative self-actualization, and as such is highly valued.

### 3 Action and the Action of a Parent

I use some points from the philosophy of action to delineate the action which creates a person, and so delineate that to which filial piety responds.

(i) Actions are teleological;<sup>13</sup> an action aims toward a goal (*telos*, end). Absent a goal, there cannot be action but only behavior.

Mere behavior that is the efficient cause of a person’s existence is not person-creating action. As a putative example, apocryphally Yeshua Ben Sirach came to be because the prophet Jeremiah emitted his seed in a bath in which his daughter later unwittingly bathed.<sup>14</sup>

(ii) Actions are defined by their goals. Pruning is the action that has the goal of removing the dead or diseased parts of plants. My pruning my crabapple tree is a token of this action-type. When this is the goal of my action I am pruning, even if my behavior looks very different in different tokens of the action or in different temporal parts of the action; I prune whether I prune with secateurs, or my teeth, or a garotte.

Philosophical discussions of parenthood often distinguish between biological parenthood and social parenthood – between “bearing and rearing.”<sup>15</sup> This distinction should not obscure or dissociate the underlying unity of the parental goal and action. The action of creating a person is one that can be participated in in many ways. A parent participates in it by bringing a new human organism into existence – contributing gametes, gestating – and by ensuring that the child continues to exist – feeding, keeping warm – and by perfecting the child’s existence – smiling, playing, teaching. Child-rearing continues and perfects what procreation initiates. Each of these sub-actions has a corresponding sub-goal of its own. Yet, for a parent, they share an architectonic goal, they are engaged in because of their relation to that goal, and so are parts of the same action.

(iii) Actions are differentiated by their goals. Chasing a dog and running in an 800-metre race are different actions because they have different goals, even if the behaviors that they involve are identical, and even if their causal effects are the same.

An agent’s action is not that of a parent just because they behave in the same way as a parent or achieve the same effects. The formula salesman who feeds baby a

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Kenrick et al., “Renovating the Pyramid of Needs,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no. 3 (2011): 292–314.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a; George Wilson and Samuel Shpall, “Action,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Joel R. Soza, *Lucifer, Leviathan, Lilith, and Other Mysterious Creatures of the Bible* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 92.

<sup>15</sup> David Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood*, Second Edition (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 137.

bottle as part of a product demonstration is not doing the action of a parent because their goal is not to create a person but to sell formula, even though these two actions happen to share a sub-action and sub-goal. As political and economic agents there are myriad ways of being an efficient cause of the existence of new people. Yet, for instance, buying rice does not make one a parent of the farmer's children who are indirectly caused to be by this action, since the goal of buying rice is to get rice rather than to create people.

(iv) We can distinguish the motivation (desire, inclination, incentive) that leads an agent to engage in an action from the action itself. The motivation that a car mechanic has for fixing a car might be to earn money, but this is not the goal of fixing a car. If the mechanic fixes the car and the customer drives away without paying, the mechanic completed his action, though his motive was frustrated.

That the motive for someone's action is to create a person does not mean that they are engaging in person-creating action. Saving up money is not a part of being a parent, even if one's motive for saving up money is that one wants to be a parent. Again, politicians who pass child-benefit policies are not parents, even if their motive is that more new people be created. People have all sorts of motives for being parents. Parents surely ought to have motives appropriate to their action – e.g., pursuing their child's flourishing out of love, rather than out of grim duty or social conformity. Yet, one with inappropriate motives parents badly rather than failing to parent at all.

(v) How an agent can come to engage in a given action-type, how they can take up the goal that defines a given action, varies. The intentions of the agent, biological kinds, artefactual kinds, and social kinds may all play a role. Putatively: the action of swearing an oath requires the considered intention of a mature rational agent, the heart's action is physiologically determined, the knife's action is set by the type of artefact that it is, that someone does the action of a prankster depends on a complicated set of social facts.

One view is that the action of a parent is adopted only by agential intention. This yields the result that in the case of Ben Sirach his 'mother' became his mother when (e.g.) she decided not to have an abortion, or decided to not put him up for adoption, or began trying to keep him alive. Another view is that this action can be assumed biologically (as well as by intention – a biology-only view is implausible since adoptive parents are parents). On this view, Ben Sirach's mother had the goal of his development into personhood even absent her awareness that she was pregnant. Analogously, you might discover, rather than decide, that consuming enough iodine is a goal of yours. My account faces no need to decide between these two types of view because both are compatible with the claim that the goal of a parent is to create a person. These views disagree on how the goal of a parent is taken on, not what it is.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> I mention this divide, prominent in ethical discussions of the family and sexuality, to show that my theory is compatible with both views. I lean toward the view that mere biological procreators (deliberate or accidental) are parents, but that they are owed little or no filial piety because they cease to participate in person-creating action, waiving what they would be owed. Supporting the biology-inclusive view is the widespread sentiment among gamete donors of wanting to know that their progeny will go to a good home. Donor-conceived children have both positive and negative ethically-laden sentiments toward their donors, not total indifference.

I note three intuitive necessary conditions on taking up the action of a parent, each of which make sense in light of the claim that the action of a parent is to create a person. (a) participating in the action of a parent requires temporally extended patterns of behavior. For instance, if you rescue an abandoned child and intend to become their parent but then a week later send them to an orphanage, then you were never their parent. (b) participating in the action of a parent requires many varied types of behavior. Someone who only feeds the child, or only reads stories to them, or only chastises them, is not a parent – to parent requires doing very many sorts of things. (c) the action of a parent cannot be delegated. If a parent hires a tennis coach, or gets their friend to give baby a bottle, neither the coach nor the friend do the action of a parent, whereas for a parent to teach their child tennis, or feed them, are parts of their parenting action. Although a non-parent can be *in loco parentis* (in the place of a parent), there is no such thing as a ‘temporary parent’ or ‘parent for hire.’ This is apparent in various ethical differences – e.g., a daycare worker is free to quit, a tennis coach is not free to take the child for ice-cream instead of teaching them tennis. The action of a parent cannot be participated in quickly, partially, or casually; it implicates the entire agency of the agent.

(vi) the creation that an action takes as its goal can be more or less perfect (*tel-eia*, complete, fulfilled) in two senses. A creation can be a better or worse token of its type, exhibiting more or less of its characteristic value, e.g., one painting is more beautiful than another. Again, a creation can be more or less finished. Consider Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Adoration of the Magi* (1481). This is a painting, an unfinished painting. Importantly, to perfect something in either of these senses is a part of creating it. Once Da Vinci had created a painting in the bare sense that there was now a new thing that met a sufficient condition for being a painting, his continued penciling, brushing, imagining, etc., seamlessly continued his action of painting.

All persons have an unconditional value, often conceptualized as dignity. Nevertheless, persons can be better or worse *qua* person; claims like “he is a bad person” or “*he* is bad” are a part of everyday moral discourse. Boethius gives the traditional definition of the person; “the individual substance of a rational nature.”<sup>17</sup> Modern accounts of the person do not depart much from this view, the main contention being about how proximate to the actual exercise of rationality persons must be; the capacity for it, the capacity to develop the capacity for it, membership in a species for which the capacity is natural, etc.<sup>18</sup> Wherever one places the threshold for the emergence of personhood in normal human development, it is clear that through

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Footnote 16 (continued)

Eric Blyth, Samantha Yee, and A. Ka Tat Tsang, “‘They Were My Eggs; They Were Her Babies’: Known Oocyte Donors’ Conceptualizations of Their Reproductive Material,” *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada* 33, no. 11 (2011): 1134–40; Veerle Provoost, Florence Van Rompuy, and Guido Pennings, “Non-Donors’ Attitudes Towards Sperm Donation and Their Willingness to Donate,” *Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics* 35, no. 1 (2018): 107–18; Vasanti Jadva et al., “Experiences of Offspring Searching for and Contacting Their Donor Siblings and Donor,” *Reproductive BioMedicine Online* 20, no. 4 (2010): 523–32.

<sup>17</sup> Jenny Teichman, “The Definition of Person,” *Philosophy* 60, no. 232 (1985): 175–85.

<sup>18</sup> Agnieszka Jaworska and Julie Tannenbaum, “The Grounds of Moral Status,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/grounds-moral-status/>.

childhood and into adulthood our personhood becomes more perfect, and that the creative action of the parent continues long after conception, birth, infancy, etc.

As creators of their children, parents aim to perfect them as persons in both these senses; improving them and helping them complete their development. This means creating beings with healthy bodies, with some minimum of epistemic rationality and knowledge of the world around them, with basic skills like speech, who sustain worthwhile relationships and projects, who have a sense of what is valuable in life and the inclination to try to achieve it, who have a balanced emotional life and robust sense of self, who are wise. Most especially, to be a good person is to be ethically virtuous. A good person is one whose animal patrimony is well-cultivated by reason, one disposed to realize a flourishing life, one poised to actualize the potentials of their rational nature.

#### 4 Piety as a Virtue

A virtue is an excellence. An ethical virtue is an excellence in one's dispositions to action and passion.<sup>19</sup> Each ethical virtue is oriented toward a type of good, and to have an ethical virtue is to have the dispositions that respond to that good in the way that is best.<sup>20</sup> For example, to be moderate is to be disposed to respond in the way that is best to the good of bodily pleasure – e.g., enjoying food, but not at the expense of health. Piety is the ethical virtue that responds in the way that is best to the person-creating action from which one originates. Piety makes the most, for the parents, of the goodness of being a creator and, for the pious one, of the goodness of being a creation. As only persons can have ethical virtues, we can say that piety is the virtue of a creature *qua* creature.

A virtue involves both passion and action. To be passive to a good is to be receptive to it, to be effected by it in the way that is best, to be the patient of its activity, to allow it to be good for you. For example; laughing at a humorous joke, aesthetically appreciating the beautiful sunset, being elevated by the good moral example someone shows. To be passive toward a good includes cognitively and conatively recognizing it as good, but also absorbing it, incorporating it into one's life. To be active toward a good is to promote it, to do something good “for it.” For example, preserving the good thing in existence, creating other things that are like it, sharing it with others, e.g., telling the humorous joke to your friend, voting for the anti-smog ordinance, imitating the good moral example. The virtuous person, by responding passively and actively to goods in the way that is best, gives everyone and everything what they ought to be given, engages in proper functioning, and rationally orders their soul.<sup>21</sup> The virtuous person is a high-fidelity medium for the self-propagation

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1106b 5-30.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1129b 25-35; Plato, *The Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 432b; Marcus Tullius Cicero, “De Natura Deorum (On the Nature of the Gods),” in *The Complete Works of Cicero* (East Sussex: Delphi Classics, 2014), II.XV.



of the Good.<sup>22</sup> In what follows we will see various ways in which a child can best respond to the person-creating action, how they can make the most of the goodness of their parent's action.

## 5 The Metaphysics of the Parent–Child Relation: Relatives

Parent and child are paradigm and image. As this is a creative relation, they are creator and created, and fall into the more general category of relatives. I discuss each of these, their value, and the response that piety makes to their value.

Relatives (*ta pros ti* – ‘things toward something’) are defined by Aristotle as those things “for which being is the same as being somehow related to something.”<sup>23</sup> Many otherwise heterogenous things fall within this category. An employer is an employer of an employee, an employee an employee of an employer. The double is double of the half, the half is half of the double. “The following, too, and their like, are among relatives: state, condition, perception, knowledge, position”<sup>24</sup> – e.g., the condition of brokenness is the condition of something broken, the broken has the condition of brokenness.

A relative and its correlative are simultaneous in that they come into and go out of existence together.<sup>25</sup> Relatives are cognitively symmetrical in that knowing a relative entails knowing its correlative.<sup>26</sup> “X is an employer of Y” and “Y is an employee of X” express the same proposition. Knowing the former, I learn nothing new upon hearing the latter. Given that knowledge is of being,<sup>27</sup> relative and correlative are one being. Relative and correlative are not two beings, but one being distributed over two subjects, a being that exists “in a relation of one thing to another”;<sup>28</sup> “their being is nothing else than being for each other.”<sup>29</sup>

Aristotle and his commentators use father-son as a stock example of relatives.<sup>30</sup> It seems clear that parent-child are relatives; a parent is a parent of a child, a child is a child of a parent, two persons are parent and child by being the subjects of a certain relation.

<sup>22</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, ed. John O’Meara and Inglis Patrick Sheldon-Williams (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987), 451B.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, “Categories,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 1*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 8a 30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 6b 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 7b 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 8a 37-40; Sedley, “Aristotelian Relativities,” 327.

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, “Metaphysics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 1075a 4-10.; Plato, *The Republic*, 508d.

<sup>28</sup> Porphyry, *On Aristotle Categories*, ed. Steven K. Strange (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 112 1.

<sup>29</sup> Plotinus, “On the Kinds of Being I,” in *Ennead VI* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6.1.7.

<sup>30</sup> Porphyry, *On Aristotle Categories*, 112 7; Plotinus, “On the Kinds of Being I,” 6.1.7 10; Ammonius, *On Aristotle’s Categories*, ed. S. Marc Cohen and Gareth B. Matthews (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 71 15; Aristotle, “Metaphysics,” 1021a 25.

One participates in a relative being with all sorts of people; teacher-student, doctor-patient, tenant-landlord. A unique feature of the parent-child relative is that it is a necessary part of the child's being, one of the identity conditions on who they are, not just *qua* child, but as a primary substance, *qua* human person. The person who stops being a student loses an aspect of their being, undergoes change, but they still exist. Counterfactually, they could have existed without ever being a student. By contrast, we cannot conceive of a person as losing the relative being that they share with their parents, nor as having had different parents. To ask someone "imagine that *you* had been born to Y and Z instead of A and B" is to ask them to imagine a metaphysical impossibility. The child, *qua* primary substance, exists only by sharing a relative being with their parents.<sup>31</sup>

### 5.1 Evaluative and Ethical Import

Those who participate in being participate in perfection and degeneration of being, in joys and sorrows, in well-being.<sup>32</sup> That my friend is sick is bad for me, that I am healthy is good for him. Likewise, the good of the parent or the child partially constitutes the good of the other; that my child is healthy is part of my own good, that I am sick is bad for my child. As the parent-child relative is a necessary part of the child's being, parent and child participate in well-being to a greater degree than most others.

That parent and child share in being inescapably makes their participation in one another's well-being qualitatively unique from an ethical point of view. Consider shame. Shame involves a negative self-evaluation, it concerns what we are.<sup>33</sup> We feel ashamed if our parent, or our friend, is very bad in some way. Yet, when I do something shameful, my friend (employer, landlord, lover, etc.) can largely escape sharing in my shame by deciding to no longer be my friend. By contrast, the shame a parent brings on their child, and *vice versa*, is worse and crueler because the child cannot escape it. Though a child can dissociate from their parent (change their name, stop socializing with them), they cannot stop being their child in the way that they can stop being someone's friend. The shame of having (say) a murderer for a parent is one that cannot be escaped. So, our responsibility to our parents and our children to avoid shameful things is correspondingly stronger than any such responsibility to others.

Actively, a pious child responds to the fact that they participate in being with their parent by seeking their own well-being, as this will impart well-being upon their parent. Eat healthily, if only for your mother's sake. Again, as they share in being inescapably, the pious child will avoid shameful things. Moreover, they will hold their parent

<sup>31</sup> So far as I am aware, no one claims that a token child could have had different token biological parents. We can conceive of someone as having had different 'social parents,' who continue, rather than initiate, the parental action. In the extreme case, if the human animal that developed into the person that I am had been adopted at birth, I am unsure whether the resulting person would be me.

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, "Eudemian Ethics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 1246a 30.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 93; Julien A. Deonna, Raffaele Rodogno, and Fabrice Teroni, *In Defense of Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71–97.

to account for actions that are harmful or shameful for the parent, as being harmful and shameful for the child themselves. Suppose that you (the parent of a young child) are on the cusp of doing something harmful or shameful to yourself (getting into a bar-fight, sneaking off to the shops for the *last ever* pack of cigarettes, speaking unkindly out of jealousy, etc.). In such a moment, it would be apposite to think of your child and for this thought to make you desist. Here, calling your child to mind, viewing your actions from their perspective, substitutes for the kind of account to which they should hold you when they are mature enough to do so. Suppose, reader, that your father or mother does things like this – a harsh stare, a dressing-down, are in order from you. As their child, as one person inextricably tied to another, you have the standing to hold them morally accountable in a way that others do not.<sup>34</sup> We have here, in the shared being of parent-child, a root of moral accountability between persons. Again, if you are on the cusp of doing something vicious, it would be apposite to think of mother or father, and for this thought to make you desist. Passively, a pious child appreciates the well-being of their parent as part of their own – takes pleasure in their parent’s flourishing – and appreciates the unconditionality of this axiologically rich tether, an appropriate antidote to the thrownness of existence.

Not sharing in being with a parent, our imagined uncreated person would not have the ability to affect or be affected by parents in these ways, and so could not have the virtue of a child, even if they behaved in the same way as one.

## 6 The Metaphysics of the Parent–Child Relation: Creator–Created

According to Aristotle, it is because they are relatives of the creator-created type that the child’s being necessarily depends on the parent. For example, although it’s conceivable that I could create a watercolor that is qualitatively identical to your watercolor, it’s not conceivable that I could have created the very watercolor that you did; “that which has made [poieo] is relative to that which has been made and that which will make to that which will be made. For it is in this way that a father is called father of his son.”<sup>35</sup> Why is this?

Every action has an immanent aspect, that is, it actualizes the agent who engages in it in some way. Because of the agent’s action, their thoughts, desires, emotions, and physical body, are actualized in the configuration that they are and not otherwise. The agent is a potentiality in which the goal of the action is expressed. This is not incidental or instrumental to the action’s goal, but a part of it. Actions such as parenting or watercolor-painting also have a transient aspect that “goes across” from the agent and actualizes something outside of them.<sup>36</sup> Creations are relative to

<sup>34</sup> The claim that children have a kind of authority over their parents may sound like an inversion of the authority that parents have over their children, but in fact points to its fulfillment. The authority of parent over child is temporary, since perfect persons are autonomous. Yet, the parent-child relationship is not self-abolishing; the parent does not call the child to be an isolated rational agent. The parent calls the child to a shared life of mutual love and accountability. The teleological end-state of the parent-child relationship is something akin to the relationship between co-parents.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, “Metaphysics,” 1021a 22.

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1050 30a.

their creators because “the handiwork manifests in activity what the man who made it is potentially.”<sup>37</sup> Creations are not just (as we might think of them) a causal trace or record of their creator’s activity, but a receptacle for it; *they are* that activity concretized, *they are* that activity showing-forth in matter; “his handiwork is, in a sense, the man who made it.”<sup>38</sup> As we said, the action of a parent is to create a person and (as elaborated in the next section) parents do this action in a personal way; using their own person to create another. For this reason, “Parents love their children as being some part of themselves,”<sup>39</sup> as an appearance not merely of some skill or craft of theirs, but of themselves.

Beings are defined by the goal toward which they are organized (e.g., a brush just is that which is for painting), and creatures exist for the sake of their creators, so a child’s being is defined by their parents. In what sense does the child exist for their parents’ sake; how does the child perfect their parents? A creation has no existence prior to the agent’s act of creating, save an ideal existence in the agent. The agent has ontological priority over their creation as the active to the passive, as the actual to the potential. Nevertheless, a creation, in serving as a goal for an already-existing agent, makes them into a creator; it actualizes the agent’s potential for being a creator. In this respect, the child (creation) calls forth the parent (creator) that lay dormant in potentiality in the agent; it actualizes a new perfection in them, that of being “the cause of goodness in others.”<sup>40</sup>

## 6.1 Evaluative and Ethical Import

The passive response of the pious child, most obvious in the life of an immature child, is to “attach” to their parents – to affectively recognize and respond to the loving attention of their parents – and to accept their authority – to be receptive to their instructions and examples. In these ways, a child best calls forth and best receives their parents’ creative activity.

It is good for an agent that the goal of their action is achieved. The child who lives the life of a good person achieves the goal of their parents’ action. So, the active response of the pious child is to be a good person and to be so, in part, because this will add to their parents’ well-being. A pious child becomes a parent to themselves by co-operating in and completing their parents’ action; by taking accountability for themselves, by shaping themselves toward the fullness of human personhood. So, filial piety informs all of our actions – it is a foundation of all ethical virtues, because being a good person (the best person) involves having every ethical virtue. This matches the Confucian idea that filial piety is a root of all the virtues.<sup>41</sup> Aristotle says that a creator “would be loved by the handiwork if it came alive.”<sup>42</sup> This is

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle on Friendship: Being an Expanded Translation of the Nicomachean Ethics Books VIII & IX*, ed. Geoffrey Percival (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), 1168a 8.

<sup>38</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1161b 20.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. (New York: Bezinger Bros, 1947). ST I Q103, A6, co.

<sup>41</sup> Philip J Ivanhoe, “Filial Piety as a Virtue,” in *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. Rebecca L Walker and Philip J Ivanhoe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 306.

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle on Friendship*, 1167b 35.

what happens in the case of a pious child, in that the child wills their parents' good by willing their own. If Da Vinci's *Adoration of the Magi* were to come alive and finish painting itself, it would be like a pious child.

That the parent's goal is to create and perfect the child as a human person underscores the deep and broad dependence of the parent's well-being upon the child's, that the child achieves an important good for their parent by being a good person, that the child seriously harms their parent by being a bad person. By contrast, I love my students as philosophers, seek their perfection as philosophers – so, it is good for me when they are enthused by philosophy, but whether they are flourishing as human persons in various other respects has little impact on my well-being.

It is good for our imagined uncreated person to be a good person. Yet, such a person cannot achieve the goods that a pious child can, and so would lack the virtue that responds to these goods.

## 7 The Metaphysics of the Parent–Child Relation: Paradigm-Image

Aristotle does not describe parent and child as paradigm and image. One translation from *Politics* has it that “mankind have a natural desire to leave behind them an image of themselves.”<sup>43</sup> The Greek here is *autos heteros* (‘another self’), though the translation seems appropriate. There are a few scattered remarks about images (*eikon*, rather than *eidolon* or *phantasma*) in Aristotle's corpus. *Poetics* places images in the category of creations; the poet or painter is a “maker of likenesses [eikonopoios].”<sup>44</sup> *On Memory* states that images are relatives; “A picture painted on a panel is at once a picture and a likeness [eikon]... when considered as relative to something else, e.g., as its likeness, it is also a reminder.”<sup>45</sup> An image is an image of something. The correlative of an image is its *paradeigma*,<sup>46</sup> one of the terms that Plato uses for the forms.<sup>47</sup> *Topics* says that “an image is something produced by imitation,”<sup>48</sup> as distinct from, say, the accidental resemblance of a cloud to a face.

Without giving an analytic definition, these remarks give us two necessary conditions on the paradigm-image relative (aside from Aristotle's authority, his remarks seem to align with the common use of these terms). (i) the image is copied from the paradigm, it is the result of a creative action that used a paradigm as a model (ii) the image is a reminder of the paradigm; it causes the viewer to think of the paradigm because it presents the paradigm to the viewer. The image presents the paradigm

<sup>43</sup> Aristotle, “Politics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2*, ed. Barnes. Jonathan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 1252a 25.

<sup>44</sup> Aristotle, “Poetics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2*, Barnes, Jo (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 1460b 10.

<sup>45</sup> Aristotle, “On Memory,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 450b 20.

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, “Poetics,” 1461b 14.

<sup>47</sup> Plato, “Timaeus,” in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 28a–c.

<sup>48</sup> Aristotle, “Topics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 1*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 140a 10.

because the paradigm is present in the image by participation, the paradigm shares its being with the image.

To illustrate, one who sits for a portrait and the resulting portrait of them are related as paradigm and image in a visual sense: (i) through the action of the artist, the portrait copies, imitates, the visual appearance of the sitter, and (ii) the portrait visually presents the sitter to the viewer – it invites the viewer to form a mental representation of the sitter by showing them the sitter. If the sitter was Margaret, it would be correct for the viewer to point at the portrait and say “This is Margaret.” Although the portrait is not Margaret’s physical body, nor animate, nor otherwise “spooky,” it is an image of Margaret – it is what it is because it shares in Margaret’s being; the portrait has Margaret as a correlative, as its paradigm. Margaret plays the role of form, the portrait the role of matter – the portrait receives her being, and she is present in her image by participation. Consequently, the portrait presents Margaret to the viewer. That this is the case shows up in various ordinary practices – if I throw darts at the portrait, or spit on it, or kiss it, or put it at my bedside with a floral arrangement, I am expressing my attitudes about and acting toward Margaret; insulting her, honoring her. To show this starkly, imagine that Margaret is your mother – how do you feel about what I do to her image? In presenting Margaret to the viewer, the portrait makes her present in the viewer’s mind – the portrait invites the viewer to form a mental image of her, and so for the viewer to become matter for her as form. Through this, the viewer is able to admire her, desire her, and so forth.<sup>49</sup> I now outline how parent and child fit this characterization of paradigm and image.

## 7.1 Parents as Paradigms

In creating a child, the parent uses themselves as a paradigm. To carry out their action of person-creating, the parent uses themselves as the actual model of personhood from which their child copies. Through all their actions, the parent serves as the model from which the child develops the capacities of personhood. As a child receives their genetic make-up as a copy from their parent, so a child receives their social skills, attitudes, etc., as a copy from their parent. A parent smiles at their child, claps with them, talks to them, emotes before them, behaves virtuously in front of them, demonstrates appropriate social behavior, shows the child their interest in history or nature, etc. Here we have a case in which the creative action that uses the paradigm as a model is itself an action of that paradigm. In this respect, the action of a parent is analogous to a self-portrait, where the reproducer is also the thing reproduced.

In a causal sense, a child copies the capacities of personhood from all sorts of people aside from their parents: playmates, siblings, strangers. Parents will usually make a larger causal contribution than others. This aside, what distinguishes

<sup>49</sup> The portrait does not make Margaret present to us in every sense – we can talk at her, but not expect an answer. Other media may make Margaret present to us, allow us to interact with her, in more ways. For instance, a call presents the two callers with audial images of one another via which they have a conversation. Other media allow people to play games together and might, eventually, allow all the same action-types as physical presence.

the parent is that the goal of their action is to create a person, to do which they use themselves as the paradigm to be copied. When I socialize with you in front of your children they might learn a new word from me, but this is not a goal of my action. When a ballet teacher offers themselves as a paradigm for the student to copy a step, their goal is very circumscribed in comparison to a parent's.

The parent's use of themselves as a paradigm, as the instrument through which they pursue their goal, should be distinguished from the idea of the parent treating all their own particularities as ideal-types, as if their "individuality is such a delightful thing, so splendid, so perfect, and beyond compare—that you can't imagine anything better."<sup>50</sup> Creating a person unavoidably entails creating a person who exists in a particular social-historical context, who has particular preferences and aptitudes, etc. Yet, the goal of a parent is to create a good person, not a "mini-me." That one parent creates a child who loves the same sports as themselves does not make them a better parent than the parent who creates a child with very different preferences and aptitudes than their own. Plausibly, in most cases, it is benign or good for a parent to impress various particularities on their child, but this is not a sufficiently majestic goal through which to understand parenting. As an ideal-type, a parent might use their own parents, or some hero of theirs, or their conception of the ideal person, in trying to perfect their child.

## 7.2 Children as Images

A child is not a visual-image of their parents but an action-image; they present their parent, invite thoughts of their parent, not by the way that they look, but by what they do, by the way that they live.<sup>51</sup> In the same way that the portrait is matter to Margaret as form, making Margaret present in the portrait, the child's actions are the matter that receive the parent's form. The child receives the creative activity of their parent as a paradigm of personhood. As the activity of a person as a person, the parent comes to be present in the child, the child receives their parent's life into their own. The child is an image of their parent in a superlative sense. Whereas the portrait can capture only the visual appearance of Margaret, the child is something of the same type as their parent – a person with thoughts, desires, imaginings, aspirations, etc. They are a matter that is fully equal to their parent's form, and so present them to a greater extent than any other image that the parent could make of themselves. For example, the child has the ability to speak because the parent cooed and spoke with them for many months and years, the child has the ability to be empathetic because empathy was modeled for them over many years; the child's speech and empathy show forth their parent.

Children participate in the action of person-creating that their parents initiate. Though to be sure some do this action better than others, we all engage in

<sup>50</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, "Immortality: A Dialogue," in *Studies in Pessimism*, ed. Thomas Bailey Saunders (London: George Allen & Company, 1913), 51–58.

<sup>51</sup> For the notion that many things can be imaged, and in many media; "a man impresses an image of his judgment upon the stream of speech, like reflections upon water" Plato, "Theatetus," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 206c-d.

person-creating action toward ourselves by seeking our own perfection as persons – e.g., getting an education, finding meaningful work, forming important relationships, sloughing off our bad habits. As a child does this, they co-operate in and complete the token action initiated by their parents. Suppose that an acapella singing group shows up to your class on Valentine’s Day and sings a song that is special to you and your lover. When this happens, you would recognize that, in a sense, your lover has sung a song for you, in that the group participates in the action of your lover, fulfills their goal for them. In the same way, when, say, we see a 7-year-old managing to hold a polite and sensible conversation with great-aunt Mable, we can recognize that they are co-operating with their parents’ action, that they are achieving a goal the pursuit of which was first initiated by their parents. Seeing this, you would appropriately think about what a good job the 7-year-olds parents have done.

Participating in the person-creating action of their parent makes the child an image of them because that action uses the parent as a paradigm, receives the parent as such as form. Aside from the parent’s use of themselves as a model, children use their parents as a model. Infants copy the facial expressions, movements, and emotional states of their caregivers,<sup>52</sup> and there is an obvious evolutionary function to children copying the attitudes, skills, etc., of their parents.<sup>53</sup> Children become images of their parents in the fullest sense when this mimetic process reaches its mature phase – when the child copies not just the behaviors of their parent, but their person-creating action (at first, toward themselves, eventually, toward their own children), and copies not just by instinct, nor habit, but by rational choice.

Sometimes children try to avoid following the example set by their ‘parents,’ and this is sometimes the right thing to do. To the degree that a ‘parent’ fails to model the capacities of personhood – if they spend their days trying to obliterate those capacities with alcohol, vegetating on social media, etc. – to that degree they are not being a parent, are not creating and perfecting a person by using themselves as a paradigm. The child who rightly avoids following the example set by their ‘parent’ nevertheless uses the ‘parent’ as a paradigm in an adjacent sense; as an example from which the child actually learns how to live, even though this takes the negative form of being shown how not to live.

Not everyone who sees the portrait of Margaret knows that they are looking at someone called Margaret, or attends to the portrait *qua* image of Margaret. Likewise, when we interact with someone, we are usually not attending to them *qua* image of their parents. Yet, we sometimes do attend to people as images of their parents. For instance, when we see someone do something shockingly immoral it is appropriate to confront them with some variation on “Is this how your mother raised you? Is your father proud of you? I’m glad you’re not my child. Thank God your father didn’t live to see this.” In saying things like this we draw the child’s attention

<sup>52</sup> Ingersoll Brooke, “The Social Role of Imitation in Autism,” *Infants & Young Children* 21, no. 2 (2008): 107–19.

<sup>53</sup> Vivian L. Gadsden and Marcia Hall, “Intergenerational Learning: A Review of the Literature” (Philadelphia, 1996).



to the fact that they are an image of their parents, that they present their parents in a poor light. Most importantly, the parent and the child can be the viewers who attend to the child as an image, which is for both an encouragement to ethical virtue – for the parent to model well, for the child to copy well.

### 7.3 Ethical Import for the Parent

Since a parent is the paradigm of personhood from which another learns, they owe it to that other to be a sufficiently good model of personhood – not screeching at bad drivers, not neglecting their health, etc. By using themselves as a model, the parent actualizes themselves toward personhood, becomes a better person. I emphasize that parents owe it to their child to act well, not just to behave well in front of their child. Partly this is for motivational and epistemic reasons – if you don't want your child to know that you are (say) a gambler, you will achieve this more easily and reliably by not gambling at all, rather than relying on your fallible estimates of when you can gamble but evade detection. More importantly, to merely do a good job at pretending to be virtuous is to fail to do the action of a parent, even if by luck you always evade detection and have the same causal effects as the parent. Since actions are defined by their goals, the goal of appearing to be a good person corresponds to a different action than the goal of being a good person. Just as we want romantic relationships with people who actually love us, rather than with excellent performers, children are owed worthy paradigms, not simulacra.

The perfection of the child's personhood is a goal that is achieved through intensely intimate behaviors, over long periods of time, implicating practically every aspect of the agent's behavior and attitudes. For the parent to offer themselves as a paradigm for their child is for a person to person a person. It is this transformative actualization of the parent that underwrites the cross-cultural sentiment that "parenthood is often valued as the key to adulthood; that is, the birth of a child makes the parent not only a mother or a father but simultaneously an adult."<sup>54</sup> Aside from the value of what it creates (an additional good person in the world), this action is valuable for the parent because of how it actualizes them – calling forth a variety of virtues, actualizing them toward the good of another.

Whilst it would be good for our imagined uncreating people to be good people, the goods and virtues of a parent are unavailable to them because they do not act as paradigms. Whereas "it belongs to the essence of goodness to communicate itself to others"<sup>55</sup> such persons could not communicate what is best, that is, themselves. I

<sup>54</sup> Toni C. Antonucci and Karen Mikus, "The Power of Parenthood: Personality and Attitudinal Changes During the Transition to Parenthood," in *The Transition To Parenthood*, ed. Gerald Y. Michael and Wendy A. Goldberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 64.

<sup>55</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ST III, Q1, A1, co.

claim that due to these goods and virtues, being a parent is better than being a non-parent, *ceteris paribus*, but not that parents are better than non-parents.<sup>56</sup>

#### 7.4 Ethical Import for the Child

As image, the active and passive responses of virtue coincide; to be a good image is to copy the paradigm, which is to receive the paradigm. It is good for the child to image their parents in that this provides them with a personal ground of being; an intimate belonging, an inner communion, with other human beings. Likewise, it is good for the child to image their parents in that this provides them with a practico-ethical ground; answers are provided to fundamental questions like “what should I do, what should I grow towards?” A person who was not a child, not an image of another, not carrying others along in themselves, would be an existentialist in the pejorative sense; unmoored, adrift, without anchor, rudder, compass. I now outline how, in imaging their parents, a child provides them with (at least) four good things.

Since an image shares in the being of its paradigm, a parent partially satisfies their desire for immortality by creating a living human image of themselves.<sup>57</sup> When we create images of ourselves in portraits and similar works, we do extend our existence, since these things share a relative being with us. Yet, the kind of immortality that we can gain through these sorts of artefacts is not very valuable; they are a matter inadequate to our form, they can only make our visual appearance immortal, or some thought of ours. The child that one procreates and rears is a matter of the same kind as oneself; a being that emotes, wills, imagines, etc. To be present in such an image is for one’s life, the sum of one’s actions,<sup>58</sup> to continue in a different person; “They are, then, in a sense the same thing, though in different individuals.”<sup>59</sup> Since to live well is to be more alive, whereas to live badly is to be less alive,<sup>60</sup> a pious child extends their parent’s life more than an impious child. In turn, to most fully

<sup>56</sup> There is some evidence that parents feel a heightened moral responsibility to live well, whether they live up to it or not. The transition to parenthood is accompanied by a greater intention to eat healthily and to stop smoking. Parents display greater sensitivity to violations of moral norms. Making the idea of children more psychologically salient increases prosocial motivations. In one survey, 92% of mothers agreed with the statement “After becoming a mother, I found myself caring more about the well-being of all children, not just my own.” To quote a character from *Peep Show*: “Oh, my God. There he is. I’ve got a baby. Maybe I might be a good person from now on. That might be a good idea. Yeah, lead a wholesome life and be a decent citizen and make the whole world okay. Yeah, this is a biggy! This is definitely a biggy!”

Rebecca L. Bassett-Gunter et al., “Oh Baby! Motivation for Healthy Eating during Parenthood Transitions: A Longitudinal Examination with a Theory of Planned Behavior Perspective,” *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 10 (2013): 1–11; Katja Görlitz and Marcus Tamm, “Parenthood and Smoking,” *Economics & Human Biology* 38 (2020): 1–13; Nicholas Kerry and Damian R Murray, “Conservative Parenting,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 134, no. May (2018): 90; Erickson and Aird, “The Motherhood Study: Fresh Insights on Mothers’ Attitudes and Concerns,” 7.

<sup>57</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 259; Plato, “Symposium,” in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 207a; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1161b 27.

<sup>58</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a 7.

<sup>59</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle on Friendship*, 1161b 35.

<sup>60</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ST I Q5 A1.

image their paradigms, pious children become paradigms for images of their own. Across the world, parents strongly desire grandchildren,<sup>61</sup> and often regard their provision as an aspect of filial piety.

A child is (typically, though not necessarily) an image of two people who are romantic lovers. According to the predominant type of theory of romantic love, it involves a desire to be united with one's lover.<sup>62</sup> If this is so, then having a child that is an image of both parents partially satisfies this desire. Being created by and copying two paradigms, the child is an image of both, uniting the lives of their parents in their own. The child who lives well images both more fully, uniting both more completely. By flourishing and being virtuous, and especially by reverting upon their cause in piety, a child continues "the analogical ascent above individuality" first intimated by the sexual act.<sup>63</sup>

Since the paradigm is present in the image by participation, various actions done to the image are thereby done to the paradigm. Most obviously, actions that honor or dishonor an image thereby honor or dishonor the paradigm. As St Basil the Great had it, "the honour paid to the image passes on to the prototype."<sup>64</sup> The excellence honored in the case of filial piety is the parent's creation of a person, oneself. Since the child is the parent's image, they honor their parents by honoring themselves, living virtuously. To respect oneself, to hold oneself to moral account, is to witness to the excellence of one's parents. By contrast, to live badly and to treat oneself badly – say, being a liar, damaging yourself by drinking too much, etc. – dishonors one's parents because doing so fails to respond properly to the goodness of one's creators; it treats their action as if it were not important. The good that parents receive here is recognitive; an acknowledgment that what they have done was good. Filial piety also involves honoring one's parents by (say) buying them birthday presents, speaking kindly of them rather than advertising their flaws, visiting their graves, etc. These are the most minor, albeit the most overt, aspects filial piety.

As the pious child recognizes person-creating as a perfection and attempts to imitate it, as a child inherits what is proper to their parents, the pious child will take their own parents as the object of the person-creating action. For a pious child, caring for an aged parent, keeping them socialized and involved in family life, sharing interests or hobbies with them, organizing their finances, keeping them mentally and physically active, and the like, takes the parent's perfection as a person as such as its object. Though, of course, the parent's action cannot be fully reciprocated, adult children can become parents to their parents.

A reason to accept a philosophical theory of X is that it explains common intuitions (judgments, beliefs, evaluations) concerning X. I briefly outline what I take to

<sup>61</sup> Donald Cox and Oded Stark, "On the Demand for Grandchildren: Tied Transfers and the Demonstration Effect," *Journal of Public Economics* 89, no. 9–10 (2005): 1665–97.

<sup>62</sup> Bennett Helm, "Love," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/love/>; Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire* (London: Phoenix Press, 1986), 89; Plato, "Symposium," 192d. One might compare a child to a bistable image.

<sup>63</sup> Julius Evola, *The Metaphysics of Sex* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1983), 37.

<sup>64</sup> Saint Basil the Great, "De Spiritu Sancto," in *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II Volume VIII*, ed. Blomfield Jackson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1893), chap. XVIII, <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf208/npnf208.ii.html>.

be the two most influential and plausible extant theories of filial piety in the literature: the gratitude theory and the special goods theory. I show that these two theories are a worse fit for many intuitions about filial piety than my piety theory.

## 8 The Gratitude Theory

Gratitude is the virtue that responds to a benefactor, one who benefits.<sup>65</sup> Gratitude involves a desire to benefit one's benefactor, a "desire to make a return."<sup>66</sup> Parents are benefactors to their children, so children ought to feel gratitude to them and benefit them in return. A gratitude theory of filial piety is offered by Mark Wicclair.<sup>67</sup> The wider literature on gratitude often simply assumes that filial piety is a form of gratitude.<sup>68</sup>

Undoubtedly, parents do benefit their children, and children ought to be grateful to their parents. Yet, the same might be said of any long-standing relationship in which sundry benefits are exchanged. The response of child to parent as such is not one of gratitude.

### 8.1 Cannot Explain Parental Authority

A commonplace in the philosophical literature on gratitude is that "obligations of gratitude cannot be exacted or demanded."<sup>69</sup> One who demands the return of gratitude betrays that their goal was not simply to benefit, that they were not a benefactor of pure good will. So, if any aspect of the return of filial piety is something that the parent can demand, then that return is not one of gratitude. It seems that some aspects of the return of filial piety can be demanded by the parent. Most obviously, parental authority includes the ability to demand the immature child's obedience – parents do not only offer advice but can compel performance. The piety theory has no problem here in that ensuring that the immature child does or does not engage in various actions is necessary for accomplishing the goal of person-creating – e.g., "you're learning to swim whether you want to or not." Here, a creator outstrips a benefactor.

<sup>65</sup> Christopher Heath Wellman, "Gratitude As A Virtue," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (1999): 284–300; Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *On Benefits*, trans. Miriam Griffin and Brad Inwood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1.6.1; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ST II-II Q106 A1 co.

<sup>66</sup> A. D. M. Walker, "Gratefulness and Gratitude," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81 (1981): 49.

<sup>67</sup> Wicclair, "Caring for Frail Elderly Parents: Past Parental Sacrifices and the Obligations of Adult Children."

<sup>68</sup> Fred Berger, "Gratitude," *Ethics* 85, no. 4 (1975): 304; David Carr, "Varieties of Gratitude," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 47, no. 1 (2013): 27; Liz Gulliford, Blaire Morgan, and Kristján Kristjánsson, "Recent Work on the Concept of Gratitude in Philosophy and Psychology," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 47, no. 3 (2013): 302; Sungwoo Um, "Gratitude for Being," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 98, no. 2 (2020): 222–33.

<sup>69</sup> Tony Manela, "Gratitude," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gratitude/>. Confer: Berger, "Gratitude," 300; Paul Camenisch, "Gift and Gratitude in Ethics," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 9, no. 1 (1981): 11; Walker, "Gratefulness and Gratitude," 52; Wellman, "Gratitude As A Virtue," 289.

This being said, the piety theory does, like the gratitude theory, vindicate the intuition that parents should not grasp at parent-centered returns (e.g., financial support) from their adult child. The desire for such returns is not a central motive for parents, even if they are in order. Rather, “it seems to be enough for mothers if they see their children doing well,” or again “You will not honour god by giving anything to him, but by becoming worthy of accepting his gifts... Pious is he who... offers his own perfection as the best gift of honour to those who are the sources of good things, turning to those naturally constituted to provide them.”<sup>70</sup>

## 8.2 Underdetermines the Response of Filial Piety

Imagine that an adult child gives millions of dollars to their parents but does not make the responses characteristic of filial piety. Such a child seems to fundamentally misunderstand what it is to respond to their parents as their parents. The gratitude theory does not have the resources to explain why the responses characteristic of filial piety are how a child should respond to their parents, rather than benefiting them in any haphazard way. By contrast, my piety theory explains why it is that children make a return to their parents by, for example, living well, giving them grandchildren, and reciprocating their action, etc. In the same vein, though parents plausibly give their child a greater quantity or magnitude of benefits than most others will, it is not clear why, on the gratitude theory, the return that the child makes to their parents should be qualitatively different to the return that they make to (say) a favorite teacher or a generous patron.

## 8.3 Inappropriate Sensitivity to Size of Benefit Given by Parent

It seems that debts of gratitude are sensitive to the size of the benefit given; a greater benefit makes for a greater debt of gratitude.<sup>71</sup> Further, it seems that some parents in fact benefit their children more than others – some have luxury holidays and posh schools, others do not. Yet children owe their respective parents roughly the same things.<sup>72</sup> So, the response of filial piety is not one of gratitude. The piety theory fits with this intuition because piety does not respond to something that varies in magnitude, like benefits, but something that is invariant across socio-economic contexts; that the parent is creator, a category superseding that of benefactor.

## 8.4 Obligations Nullify Gratitude

In cases in which a benefactor was obligated to benefit the beneficiary, the beneficiary does not owe gratitude. For example, the debtor who pays back a loan with interest to their creditor is a benefactor to that creditor, but the creditor owes them

<sup>70</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1159a 30; Hierocles of Alexandria, “The Commentary of Hierocles the Philosopher on the Pythagorean Verses.” In *Hierocles of Alexandria*, ed. Hermann S. Schibli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 183–185.

<sup>71</sup> Keller, “Four Theories of Filial Duty,” 259–61.

<sup>72</sup> Collingridge and Miller, “Filial Responsibility and the Care of the Aged,” 124.

no gratitude.<sup>73</sup> As Aquinas puts it, gratitude responds to “the benefactor [who] of his own free-will gave something he was not bound to give,”<sup>74</sup> rather than every action that benefits. A parent, in benefiting their child by rearing them well, does what they are obligated to do. So, the gratitude theory implies that children owe their parents nothing for being reared well. This is clearly wrong. The piety theory avoids this objection by locating the parental action as the action of a creator. The parent, in raising their child well, is not doing some other and new action, but finishing their person-creating action. This person-creating action as a whole was not an action that they were obligated to initiate, and so it can merit some response.

## 9 The Special Goods Theory

According to Simon Keller, filial piety is the duty of children to provide special goods to their parents. Special goods are goods that parents “can receive from no one (or almost no one) but the child,”<sup>75</sup> as opposed to generic goods which can be received from many people. As examples of special goods, Keller mentions “your child’s keeping in touch... a close involvement with the development of a person from birth through childhood and beyond... [a] sense of continuity and transcendence” whilst examples of generic goods include “medical care, a ride to the shops.”<sup>76</sup> Children have a duty to provide special goods to their parents because “there are things that you can do for your parents that you cannot do for just anyone”<sup>77</sup> and because parents have provided special goods to their children in the past and/or in the present.<sup>78</sup> So, a child’s duty to provide special goods to their parents is grounded by both a general duty of beneficence and “considerations of reciprocity.”<sup>79</sup> Keller’s view is very influential in the literature.<sup>80</sup>

### 9.1 Non-explanatory

Keller’s account of the specialness of special goods appeals to the “ordinary attitudes”<sup>81</sup> of parents. Parents in fact tend to strongly value things that only children

<sup>73</sup> Karen Bardsley, “Mother Nature and the Mother of All Virtues: On the Rationality of Feeling Gratitude toward Nature,” *Environmental Ethics* 35, no. 1 (2013): 30–31.

<sup>74</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ST II-II Q106, A6, ad.3.

<sup>75</sup> Keller, “Four Theories of Filial Duty,” 266.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 266–67.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>80</sup> Brynn Welch, “A Theory of Filial Obligations,” *Social Theory and Practice* 38, no. 4 (2012): 717–37; Anders Schinkel, “Filial Obligations: A Contextual, Pluralist Model,” *Journal of Ethics* 16, no. 4 (2012): 395–420; Hanhui Xu, “What Should Adult Children Do for Their Parents?,” *Nursing Ethics* 28, no. 3 (2020): 1–12; Cameron Fenton, “A Complete Special Goods Theory of Filial Obligations” (University of Western Ontario, 2017), <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/5002/>.

<sup>81</sup> Keller, “Four Theories of Filial Duty,” 265.

can provide. So far, so good. However, Keller gives no account of why parents have these attitudes, or why they ought to have them, just that they do have them “whether as a result of biological or cultural factors.”<sup>82</sup> This lacuna means that Keller has deferred justification of the typical practices of filial piety. The ordinary attitudes of parents that Keller describes are explained by the piety theory: parents take special delight in the perfection of something that images them, seeing the life that is in them continue in their image, seeing their child continue their work by perfecting themselves, and so forth.

## 9.2 Makes No Room for a Child’s Virtue

Keller says that when for some reason a child cannot provide special goods to their parents, or when parents have not and/or do not reciprocally provide special goods to the child, then the child has no filial duties.<sup>83</sup> Consider an adult child who conforms to the typical practices of filial piety, but whose parents find no value in their child’s action and who do not reciprocate – being oblivious to their child’s achievements, deciding to spend time golfing on the family vacation rather than crazy-golfing with their grandchild. Such a situation is tragic. Given the competing demands of life, it is probably appropriate for the child not invest as much effort as they otherwise would in the distinctive actions of filial piety. Nevertheless, such a child recognizably has a child’s virtue, e.g., compared to the child’s sibling who has become entirely estranged from these parents and so also provides no special goods to them. Even though the child cannot realistically hope to provide special goods to their insensitive parents, they have the action-dispositions, affects, and desires, to do so. Their virtue is frustrated by their parents’ vice. Keller’s theory does not have the resources to say that this adult child does what is praiseworthy and noble.

## 9.3 Not All Things Owed are Special Goods

Many of the goods that children should provide to their parents are special, but not all. For instance – depending on innumerable individual circumstances – we might say that some child ought to do DIY for their parent, help them navigate online grocery delivery services, help clean up their house, etc. These are things that, in principle, anyone could do. The acts of a pious child can involve, alongside the magical things (the family Christmas, the self-transcendence), some drudgery that does not provide a special good to the parent but which nevertheless a child should be the one to do. The piety theory facilitates this intuition in that helping debilitated or impoverished parents in such ways responds to them in kind, as person-creating action, which also involves *much* drudgery.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 269–70, 272.

## 10 Conclusion

I have offered a theory of filial piety on which piety is the ethical virtue that responds to the goodness of the person-creating action. A child is pious by completing that action, which amounts to being a good person. By doing this, children image their parents.

“Honor thy mother and father” (Exodus 20:12) translates the Hebrew root *kbd*, meaning heavy or weighty. This root is one of the two terms used for God’s glory, the other being *skn*, meaning dwelling or abiding. God’s *kbd* is his essence, the inaccessible divine darkness,<sup>84</sup> *skn* is his energies, his appearing, the divine light. To be a pious child is to be indwelt by one’s parents and to show them forth. St Irenaeus said *Gloria Dei vivens homo* (“The glory of God is man fully alive”).<sup>85</sup> In precisely the same way, the glory of a parent is their child fully alive.

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<sup>84</sup> Dragoş A. Giulea, “The Divine Essence, That Inaccessible Kabod Enthroned in Heaven: Nazianzen’s Oratio 28,3 and the Tradition of Apophatic Theology from Symbols to Philosophical Concepts,” *Nvmen: International Review for the History of Religions* 57 (2010): 10.

<sup>85</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol 1*, ed. Alexander Roberts et al. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), Bk. 4 Chp. 20.