



# Arrested Development as Philosophy: Family First? What We Owe Our Parents

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## Abstract

Narrator Ron Howard tells us that *Arrested Development* is the “story of a wealthy family who lost everything, and the one son who had no choice but to

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keep them all together.” The cult-classic follows Michael Bluth – the middle son of an inept, philandering, corrupt real-estate developer, George Bluth Sr., who is arrested for white-collar crimes. Constantly faced with crises created by his eccentric family, Michael does his best to preserve the family business, put out fires, and serve as a role model for his teenage son, George Michael. The Bluths’ misadventures raise the question, what, if anything, do adult children owe their parents? This chapter explores the relationships between the members of the Bluth family and argues that *Arrested Development* makes the case that, insofar as adult children “owe” their parents anything, such an obligation is grounded in a sense of friendship – a voluntarily entered relation that can be terminated at any time. As a result, *Arrested Development* challenges the often-unquestioned assumption that children owe their parents special consideration simply in virtue of the parent-child relationship.

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### Keywords

Arrested Development · Family First · Ethics · Obligation · Filial obligation · Filial duty · Duty · Friendship · Friendship of utility · Friendship of pleasure · Friendship of virtue · Duties of affection · Obligation of debt · Indebtedness · Obligation of gratitude · Gratitude · “Owing Idiom,” Biological children · Adopted children · Autonomy · Personal identity · Role · Intimacy · Mitchell Hurwitz · George Bluth Sr. · Lucille Bluth · Michael Bluth · Aristotle · Aquinas · Raymond A. Belliotti · Jeffrey Blustein · Susan Brison · Jane English · Michael Hardimon · Nancy Jecker · Diane Jeske · Joseph Kupfer · L.A. Paul · Henry Sidgwick · Michael Slote

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## Introduction

Rapidly earning a cult following, Mitchell Hurwitz’s *Arrested Development* offered an incisive satire of west-coast American social, political, and capitalist life. The show debuted in the fall of 2003 on Fox where it ran for 3 years earning significant critical acclaim (including 22 Emmy nominations and 6 wins), but never solidified a mainstream audience. After being canceled in 2006, the show found a second life on Netflix in 2013, and a third in 2018, running for a total of five seasons.

*Arrested Development* follows Michael Bluth, the seemingly level-headed son of a wealthy but wildly corrupt and hilariously incompetent real-estate developer, George Bluth Sr. When George Sr. is arrested at his retirement party for defrauding investors (among other things), Michael has no choice but to drop everything and try to salvage the family business and guide his spoiled, hapless siblings as well as his controlling, manipulative mother Lucille through a series of disasters, each of their own making. As the show progresses, we find out more about George Sr.’s misdeeds, including some “light treason” – selling houses to Saddam Hussein – and how the opulent, Orange County lifestyle has negatively impacted not only Michael, but his older brother, George Oscar Bluth (or “Gob” – pronounced like the biblical figure

Job), his twin sister Lindsay, his younger brother, Buster, and his son, George Michael. Each episode brings to light the perils of unchecked capitalism and consumerism, the impact of “affluenza” on wealthy kids, and just how odd family interactions can be.

*Arrested Development* has tremendous depth, a number of philosophical themes woven throughout the narrative and storylines, and ongoing jokes that reward attentive and repeat viewings. It would be easy to make a case for the idea that *Arrested Development* aims to introduce a host of philosophical topics: Marxist critiques of late-stage capitalism, the development of one’s personal identity (whether intersectional – sex, gender identity, sexuality, class, etc. – or across time), the nature of knowledge and when we could plausibly claim to know something, or the dangers of self-awareness (and conversely a staggering lack thereof). However, there is one philosophical problem that underpins every episode, every interaction, and a number of the jokes: the Bluth family motto, “Family First.”

Taken at face value, we might wonder how putting family first presents a philosophical problem. In, *The Methods of Ethics*, Henry Sidgwick notes, “We not only find it hard to say exactly how much a son owes his parents, but we are even reluctant to investigate this” (Sidgwick 1981, 243). He continues with the recognition that even if we could develop a ground for filial obligation (the obligations children have to their parents), a further challenge arises: when it comes to duties of affection, our obligations will undoubtedly come into conflict not only with one another but with other duties as well. It is prudent to tease out two related questions now under consideration. First, do adult children have special obligations to their parents? Second, if so, what is the *ground* of such an obligation; or in other words, what is the moral basis on which those obligations rest? Throughout history, different philosophers have offered various answers to the second question including indebtedness (Aristotle 1987), gratitude (Jecker 1989), friendship (English 1979, Jeske 1998), and the social role and biological institution of parenthood (Jecker 1989, Kupfer 1990), among others. Still, others outright reject the idea that adult children owe anything to parents at all (Blustein 1982, Slote 1979), thereby eliminating the need to explain *why* adult children owe parents anything.

This chapter explores attempts to identify just what, if anything, adult children owe their parents through a discussion of the familial relations explored in *Arrested Development*. The show makes the case that *if* adult children owe anything to their parents, it’s not out of indebtedness, gratitude, or because of the social/biological institution of parenthood, but out of an ongoing voluntary friendship with one’s parent. That is, *Arrested Development* challenges the often-unquestioned assumption that children owe their parents special consideration simply in virtue of the parent-child relationship by illustrating some of the many ways in which that relationship can go horribly, horribly wrong. In short, this chapter seeks to answer two questions: should we follow the Bluth motto, and put “Family First”? And if so, why?

## The Bluth Family, Parental Archetypes, and Filial Obligations

*Arrested Development* is primarily character driven rather than plot driven. That is, while there is arguably one unifying thread that runs through the show (Michael's attempt to salvage the family business in light of his father's crimes while keeping his family together), there are a wide variety of subplots that emerge because of Bluth family dynamics. As such, it is worth introducing some members of the Bluth family in order to spell out how they relate to and interact with one another. In thinking about parent-child relations, Nancy S. Jecker suggests that it is useful to distinguish,

...very roughly three paradigms of parents:

1. Those who feel resentful or spiteful towards their offspring and never benefit their children for their children's own sake.
2. Those who feel largely indifferent about their children's welfare, yet occasionally benefit their children for their children's own sake.
3. Those who care deeply about their children's welfare and regularly benefit their children for their children's own sake. (Jecker 1989, 76)

Jecker continues by noting that most parents do not neatly fit into any one of these categories; rather, they fall between or fluctuate between them. This framework will prove particularly helpful in understanding the Bluths – some members of the Bluth clan fit these archetypes perfectly, while others represent the messy middle-ground between these parental types. In characterizing each of the Bluths, it should be noted that the extent to which they *believe* themselves to care deeply, or to act for their children's own sake, may not map perfectly onto how they *actually* are (they're not terribly self-aware). So, who are the Bluths?

### **“There's always money in the banana stand” (George Sr.)**

George Bluth Sr. is first and foremost a ruthless capitalist – he stole the idea for the family's first company (a frozen banana stand) from a street vender in the 1960s. He's also the aging CEO of the Bluth Company, a publicly traded development company specializing in “high cost, low quality mini-mansions” (S1 E4), as well as the proprietor of the “Boyfights” video series (a collection of home-videos documenting the fights George would instigate between his children, Gob and Michael). George Sr. is so concerned with making money that he was willing to attach his name to worthless and dangerous products such as “the comballer” – a home fryer dedicated to making deep-fried balls of cornbread. After the design of the product proved insanely dangerous, George Sr. didn't pull them from production, but decided to market them in Mexico, presumably to ensure the profitability of his endeavor. Following his arrest, George Sr. even finds ways both to run the company from prison and to turn his newfound and deeply misguided commitment to Judaism into another money-making venture – creating and marketing another video series: “Caged Wisdom.” In short, George Sr. would do just about anything to make a buck.

Given his unscrupulousness in business, it is somewhat unsurprising that the vast majority of George's interactions – in both business and family – are carefully orchestrated to ensure that he retains at least the appearance of power and authority. Jeff Ewing highlighted the connection between George's competitive nature in business and how his business focus manifests in an indifference toward his family noting, "George Sr.'s highly competitive and hard-to-please nature shows itself in how little approval he gives his family, especially his sons Gob, Michael, and Buster" (Ewing 2012, 66). Perhaps the perfect exemplification of Ewing's description comes from an interaction between George (in his role as CEO) and Michael (in his role as company employee),

- Narrator:** When George, Sr. was in charge, he had a habit of shooting down any idea Michael came up with.
- Cutaway:* *the Bluth offices*
- CAPTION:* *two years earlier...*
- Michael:** . . .and Sudden Valley just sort of implies that something awful could happen all of a sudden. You know? Plus, it's on a hill.
- George, Sr.:** What, are you taking stupid pills? Come on. Save us some money.
- Narrator:** This was a management tool he used to keep Michael working for his approval.
- George, Sr.:** That was a hard one to say no to. (S2 E7)

While this vignette suggests that George Sr. doesn't really care about or respect Michael, that's not quite right. As the first season unfolds, George Sr. shows that he recognizes Michael's business acumen and does whatever he can to shield Michael from the legal consequences of his own malfeasance. In the first episode, George appoints his wife Lucille as his successor rather than Michael, noting under his breath, "I'm sorry son, it's just not the right time." After his arrest, it comes to light that George had been advised by his hilariously inept attorney that a husband and wife cannot be prosecuted for the same crime (perhaps a misremembering of the law that a spouse cannot be compelled to *testify against* their partner).

George's treatment of the other Bluth children leaves even less to be desired. He repeatedly treats Gob as a disappointment and considers him only useful for dangerous or reckless tasks related to the business. George appreciates Lindsay only for her looks, and, on the rare occasion, he acknowledges Buster, George Sr. seems to openly resent him. Still, George did go out of his way to try to teach his kids lasting life-lessons – though one could make the case that these lessons, too, were self-serving. He would hire his one-armed friend, J. Walter Weatherman, to stage elaborate scenarios which resulted in Weatherman's fake arm being ripped off, often tenuously tied to something the kids did, or were supposed to have done. For example, in order to teach the kids that they should, "always leave a note," George turned around while driving to express his dissatisfaction at the kids for having finished milk and not letting anyone know. With his eyes off the road, he "accidentally" hit a pedestrian, whose arm appeared to get caught in the windshield and was torn off. George Sr. rolled down the back window, and Weatherman

exclaimed to the now traumatized children, “and that’s why you always leave a note” (S1 E 10). Jecker’s example of a parent who fits the second model almost perfectly describes George Sr. She writes, “Imagine, for example, a man who is so preoccupied with his work, or with world politics, or with making money, that the benefits he bestows upon his children are not typically given with much thought,” (Jecker 1989, 77). This may well have been a direct description of George Sr. He is largely indifferent to the welfare of his children, and when he does something to benefit them, it’s often self-serving or accidental.

### **“If that’s a veiled criticism about me, I won’t hear it and I won’t respond to it” (Lucille Bluth)**

In stark contrast to George Sr., we have Lucille Bluth. The matriarch of the Bluth family, Lucille is the mother of the Bluth children. Insofar as she is their mother, she clearly fits into the first archetype: she is spiteful, resentful, and rarely-to-never (intentionally) benefits her children unless it benefits herself as well. Constantly concerned with appearance, status, and power, Lucille is manipulative, calculating, and cold (if not openly hostile) towards her kids – even announcing to nobody in particular at a country club lunch, “I don’t care for Gob” (S1 E1). Lucille’s interactions with those around her are more varied in their scope and motivations than her husband’s, but she’s much better at concealing her motivations. Lucille’s only “friend” is her long-time neighbor Lucille Austero (or “Lucille 2” – as the Bluths call her). The Lucilles’ “friendship” is predicated on competition, one-upsmanship, vitriol, and cruelty – at least on Lucille’s part. That Lucille would treat someone who is supposed to be a friend this way will prove instructive when considering whether friendship is the proper ground of filial obligation.

Lucille’s approach to friendship is a significant departure from how philosophers understand friendship – namely, as some kind of care or love of another person for their own sake. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguished three types of friendship: friendships of pleasure, friendships of utility, and friendships of virtue (Aristotle 1987, Book VIII). Bennett Helm summarizes Aristotle’s distinction as roughly, “I may love my friend because of the pleasure I get out of her, or because of the ways in which she is useful to me, or because I find her to have a virtuous character. Given the involvement of love in each case, all three kinds of friendship seem to involve a concern for your friend for his sake and not for your own” (Helm 2021). It is probably true of most friendships that they don’t fit neatly into any one of these types at all (or even very many) times – interpersonal relationships are complicated and tend to evolve over time. Still, Aristotle’s distinction between the three types of friendship is helpful in considering whether friendship should serve as the ground for filial obligations. After all, if friendship is supposed to explain why an adult child owes their parent something, it is important to be clear on what that friendship ought to look like. If the Lucilles’ relationship is properly understood as a friendship, then whatever kind of friendship it is does not seem a promising option for anyone looking to ground filial obligation in friendship.

So, what kind of friendship do the Lucilles have? It seems clear that they would not be promising candidates for a friendship of virtue; Lucille Bluth seems incapable of recognizing genuine virtue in others and, even if she did, it's hard to imagine that she would appreciate it. So they must have a friendship of either pleasure or utility. While we could make a case for their friendship as one of utility, a friendship of pleasure seems more likely – yet even this description doesn't quite fit. Lucille takes pleasure in mocking Lucille 2, in cheating her, in their socialite rivalry, and so on. “[S]uch quarreling hardly ever arises in a friendship in which pleasure is the motive; for both parties get what they long for if it is their great pleasure to live together” (Aristotle 1987, 283). There is therefore something unsettling about calling this sort of relationship a friendship at all. Lucille doesn't take pleasure in anything resembling a *loving* relationship for Lucille 2.

Everything Lucille does is for herself, even when she says it's for the sake of others. That Lucille's relationship with her only “friend” is defined this way is instructive when considering her relationship with her children. Lucille is certainly not friends with her children (save for maybe Buster) in any way, at one point even prompting Michael to remark on their dynamic: “I deceived you mom. ‘Trick’ makes it sound like we have a playful relationship” (S1 E12). Her prickly relationship with Michael is not the only strained relationship she has with her children. Lucille openly dislikes Gob and constantly criticizes Lindsay for being lazy and for her weight (despite Lindsay being about as thin as one could be). She's so vindictive, in fact, that when Michael and Lindsay begin getting along after years spent apart, Lucille finds herself threatened by their friendship and works to drive a wedge between them, if only to ensure that she can retain power over the family.

Where Lucille's treatment of Gob and Lindsay was openly hostile, her treatment of Michael tended to be manipulative. Perhaps because he was the most competent Bluth, she tended to try to *use* Michael to further her own ends. For example, in an attempt to outdo Lucille 2, Lucille pressured Michael to throw her (Lucille Bluth) a lavish party. After Michael reminded her that the family business was still in trouble and that they should not be spending money, Lucille explained to Michael that he was her “third least-favorite child.” By itself, this is comparatively tame. However, after guiltting Michael into throwing her a “surprise party” (a party which none of the other Bluths attended), Lucille convinced Michael to let her drive home despite having a suspended license. On the drive home, Lucille spotted someone resembling Gob and, wanting to “give him a good scare,” swerved into him, not only crashed the car – knocking Michael unconscious, but proceeded to drag him into the driver's seat and stage the scene to make it appear as if Michael had crashed. Every time it seemed as if Michael might begin to remember what happened, Lucille orchestrated a way for Michael to re-injure his head, re-clouding his memory. Finally, she allows Michael to come to the (false) conclusion that it was *he* who had wanted to scare Gob.

While Lucille openly tries to manipulate and control Michael, there is a sense in which we might consider her relationship with Buster as a *kind* of friendship, a “friendship” of utility. Treating her adult son as a servant (making him help dress her or inhale her secondhand smoke and run it out to the balcony), Lucille infantilized

and demeaned Buster at every opportunity. She would often remind Buster that he was not allowed to have sugar because of the affect it had on him, “No sugar for you, you just get more awful” (S1 E19). Through her manipulation and infantilization of Buster, Lucille effectively developed an unwittingly creepy, co-dependent relationship in which Buster shirks all the traditional expectations of an adult child: “Adult children no longer obtain food, clothing and shelter from their parents; once they receive an ‘education in life’ children no longer require parental guidance in quite the same way,” (Jecker 1989, 77). Buster receives all of these from Lucille and she seems to prefer it that way, even if she doesn’t show it. For example, despite relying on Buster for companionship, support, and safety, in one episode Lucille suspected that her mood swings were the result of withdrawal from her postpartum depression medication. A confused Michael pointed out that Buster was then 32 years old, prompting Lucille to respond, “That’s how long I’ve been depressed about him” (S3 E1).

Perhaps needless to say, Lucille is not a good mother. Despite this, she feels entitled to the ongoing love, respect, gratitude, and support of her adult children. Whether Lucille actually is entitled, owed, or deserving of anything from her children is one of the central questions the show addresses. However, before turning to that argument, it is worth discussing some of the other parent-child relationships in the show.

### **“Why am I the only one who seems to get how much trouble this family is in?” (Michael Bluth)**

Michael Bluth is an especially interesting character for the purpose of this chapter in that he is both the adult child of George Sr. and Lucille and the widowed parent of his own teenage son, George Michael (the frozen-banana salesman, not the singer-songwriter). As such, Michael fulfills two important roles. First, he’s the adult child of two awful parents; in this role, he is the put-upon son who feels a special obligation to hold his eccentric family together. Second, as a parent himself, we see his relationship with his son develop through George Michael’s teen years and into early adulthood. Since George Sr. and Lucille so clearly fit into Jecker’s second and first archetypes for parents respectively, it wouldn’t be surprising to find Michael representing a blend of the two. Michael, however, does his best to be everything his parents were not; as such, he represents the third archetype: the parent who cares deeply for their child’s welfare and regularly acts out of a sense of what is best for the child (or in Michael’s case, believes he does).

Michael understands himself first and foremost as the duty-bound son whose every act is entirely selfless. Our introduction to Michael finds him living in the attic of the Bluth Company’s latest model home in order to ensure it continues to function as a selling-tool. Throughout the series, he takes pride in doing everything he can to keep the family together and their business afloat. That pride often manifests in empty threats to leave the family behind to fend for themselves, but he always comes back, often acting as if he is doing the family a favor. With such awful parents, one



might wonder why Michael finds family so important. There is some dispute among philosophers regarding whether it is out of a sense of love or a sense of duty (or some blend of the two) that children – especially adult children – express gratitude, loyalty, respect, or deference to their parents. It is clear in Michael’s case that he displays such traits out of a sense of duty rather than anything else.

If anything, Michael’s relationship with his parents seems primarily transactional. In exchange for his years of service, Michael thought he would be awarded a partnership share of the company when his father retired. In exchange for sticking with the family when he had an offer from a rival development company, he requested control over the corporate checkbook and a de facto CEO position. Given Lucille’s manipulative and controlling nature, Michael and Lucille often end up negotiating deals more frequently than interacting like family. But this transactional approach to family doesn’t end with Lucille; it permeates the whole Bluth clan – prompting Michael to note, “I need a favor” ought to be “put on the family crest” (S1 E10). Outside of the context of the Bluths, familial interactions – perhaps especially those with siblings – may sometimes appear transactional. However, friendships and familial relationships “ought to be characterized by *mutuality* rather than reciprocity: friends [and family] offer what they can give and accept what they need, without regard for the total amounts of benefits exchanged. And friends [and family] are motivated by love rather than the prospect of repayment” (English 1979, 353). Thus, there is a sense in which Michael’s peculiar sense of duty to his parents is instructive for understanding whether he is right to act out of this sense of obligation.

A distinction might be made between the social role one holds as a parent and the particular person who fills that role. Even a lousy parent like George Sr. is still a father in the social sense of the term. That he fulfills the role of father may create certain obligations for his children, but the fact that George Sr. (the man) is pretty awful seems to diminish the pull of any such obligations. “If [he] insists that [he] owes [his] father gratitude simply because he is [his] *father*, [he] is failing to distinguish between fathering in the abstract, and the individual man who fathered [him]” (Jecker 1989, 76). Michael either ignores or denies the distinction both in approaching his parents and in his own parenting style. For Michael, being a father is inextricably bound to a man’s identity once he’s had children – in other words, regardless of how vicious a person is, insofar as they are a father, they are owed certain considerations.

If Michael’s relationship with his siblings and parents is largely predicated on favors, transactions, and a sense of superiority stemming from what he perceives as constantly going beyond his filial duty, then his relationship with his son, George Michael, is grounded in a profound sense of love paired with a robust understanding of what it means to fill the role of a father. Michael seems to believe that being a father carries with it certain burdens (e.g., constant self-sacrifice) and, in virtue of having taken on those burdens, he deserves his son’s time and attention (and, at one point, living space). Despite genuinely caring for his son, Michael often misconstrues what George Michael wants and needs. Resulting from a sense of deference to what he believes is best for his son, paired with an almost pathological inability to

listen, Michael self-sabotages, denies himself romantic relationships, and ultimately feels wildly betrayed when his son tries to distance himself in order to become his own person (a theme which recurs throughout the series).

While Michael's sense of betrayal may seem natural – perhaps especially given his identification with his role as loving father – George Michael's desire to pull away seems equally sensible. In season four, George Michael has gone off to college, studied abroad (and had an affair with a Spanish housewife), and found a sense of confidence he'd never before experienced. As Diane Jeske remarks, "even in less than abusive situations, parents are often unable to let go of their roles of authority, thereby precluding any intimacy between them and their adult children. Thus, in order to live their own lives, such adult children begin to distance themselves from their parents" (Jeske 1998, 543). It is therefore unsurprising that George Michael was nonplussed when, following the housing crash, Michael (having gone bankrupt) insisted on moving in with George Michael in the dorms. Michael's inability to let go of his authoritative role further alienates the two. Needless to say, that Michael instantiates Jecker's third archetype of parent becomes increasingly less likely as the show progresses. While he starts out representing the third archetype, it is clear he fluctuates between all three as his relationship with his son evolves.

### **"Oh, come on! I'm a parent! I care about my daughter every bit as much as Michael cares about his son. . ." (Lindsay Bluth Fünke)**

Lindsay Bluth Fünke was raised to believe she was Michael's fraternal twin sister, though it turns out that George Sr. and Lucille adopted Lindsay when she was three. They adopted Lindsay in a misguided attempt to "stick it to a competitor," Stan Sitwell, the proprietor of a rival development company. Always the subject of Lucille's ridicule, Lindsay dropped out of college and moved to Boston where she married Tobias Fünke – at the time a mental health professional with impressive credentials (certifications in both psychoanalysis and psychotherapy). Tobias subsequently lost his medical license and turned out to be a man with an ambiguous sexual orientation, who is severely lacking in common sense, self-awareness, and who suffers from a bizarre affliction which precludes him from ever being fully naked (a "never-nude"). Lindsay married Tobias "as an act of rebellion," knowing that her parents would never approve of him.

Although she would never admit it, Lindsay has a surprising amount in common with her adoptive parents – she's vain, deeply concerned with her image and appearance, finds herself in a wildly unsatisfying and intimacy-free marriage, and is a terrible parent to her daughter, Maeby. Lindsay sees herself primarily as a socialite and an activist, though her causes are often poorly thought out, conflict with one another, and the extent to which she is committed to them diminishes quickly. It is not only fundraisers and causes that fail to keep Lindsay's attention, however; perhaps because of his ambiguous sexuality or maybe because she married Tobias out of rebellion, Lindsay does not care much for her husband. Early on, in an attempt to salvage their marriage, Tobias recommends an open relationship – an

opportunity which Lindsay jumps to pursue. Over the course of the series, she pursues a number of different men, including her daughter's high-school crush (and Gob's illegitimate child), Steve Holt. Her open relationship with Tobias serves as a microcosm of her personality generally – she is self-involved, has a short attention span, little follow-through, and little-to-no regard for (or awareness of) others.

In terms of her own parenting, she is best characterized as a blend of Jecker's three archetypes. She wants to be *seen* as a caring, loving parent and, while she goes out of her way to avoid being spiteful towards, or resentful of, Maebly, she rarely-to-never does anything for Maebly. Probably because of the way Lucille treated (and continues to treat) her, Lindsay takes a hands-off approach to parenting. In fact, Lindsay is *so* hands off that she often forgets Maebly even exists. That she forgets so frequently is itself quite a feat; Maebly constantly acts out in increasingly profound ways in an attempt to garner attention from her mother (on several occasions Tobias tries unsuccessfully to bond with Maebly). Whether it's buying, printing, and intentionally leaving airline tickets to Portugal out on the counter for her mom to see, going out of her way to buy an outfit made entirely of leather after Lindsay decided to protest the harming of animals, or dropping out of high school and faking her way into a job as a movie producer, nothing Maebly does seems to be able to shift Lindsay's attention away from herself, even for a moment.

Lindsay's reaction to finding out that she was adopted provides further insight into who Lindsay is and how she understands family. Upon learning that she is not *biologically* a Bluth, Lindsay immediately turns her romantic attention to Michael. Thinking back to all the times Michael had come to her defense as children when Lucille was criticizing her, Lindsay reinterpreted those memories as representing Michael's attraction to her and decided that he would be interested in pursuing a romantic relationship. After all, they're not blood-related! Michael, however, has a more inclusive – and probably more appropriate – sense of family. Having just explained to George Michael (who had been nursing a crush on his cousin Maebly for years – a crush Maebly eventually reciprocated) that despite not being blood-related, George Michael and Maebly were still family, Michael turned down Lindsey's advances.

Michael and Lindsay's disagreement about the metaphysics of family likely underpins their different views of familial obligations. Michael understands family as a function of social-roles. As such, it is unsurprising that he sees his role as a brother unaffected by biological connection; he's Lindsay's brother because that's the role he has played and it's partially definitive of who he is. That Lindsay sees biological relations as wholly constitutive of family suggests that any understanding she might have of familial obligation is the result of biology alone. This might help to explain her absentee parenting-style; Lindsay is not particularly concerned with what she owes Maebly perhaps because she understands her position as Maebly's biological mother to be enough by itself to warrant certain considerations (e.g., of gratitude, support, love, etc.). In the next section, this chapter will show that Michael and Lindsay function as compelling counterexamples to attempts to ground filial obligation in social roles and biological connections, respectively.

## **“I’ve made a huge mistake” (George Oscar Bluth Jr. (Gob))**

Gob is the oldest of the Bluth children and in many ways takes after his father, George Sr. A self-absorbed womanizer, a serial cheater, an ambitious but inept businessman and entrepreneur, Gob is somehow the least respected and least useful member of the family. What Gob has going for him is his charisma – a trait he uses not only to bed women, but also to build his career as a magician. Like Michael, Gob has a peculiar sense of obligation to his parents, but unlike Michael, Gob’s contributions to the family business are relegated to dangerous or reckless tasks. Desperate for attention from George Sr., Gob does everything he can to make his father proud.

In the second season, Gob is made chairman of the Bluth Company in order to appease investors and while he is clearly not cut out for any actual kind of authority or responsibility, he does everything he can to fill his father’s shoes. Gob takes to wearing his father’s expensive suits – which he reminds everyone of at every opportunity (usually noting their extravagant cost). Perhaps because he never received much (if any) positive reinforcement from his father, Gob is neither self-assured nor particularly self-aware. As a result, he doesn’t really have any friends, seems to flit about between jobs (stripping, ironically waiting tables, pretending to run the family business, various magic gigs, and an ill-fated attempt to open a coffee shop with Tobias), and seems to cling to any strong masculine figure he can find.

In the fourth season, Gob finally fulfills his wish to bond with his father. After running into a depressed, suicidal George Sr. (struggling with his impending divorce from Lucille and the loss of his libido), Gob – also in something of a tailspin – comes up with a plan for the two men to bounce back; they will wing-man one another in an attempt to sleep their way across Mexico. A somewhat radical departure from traditional father-son relationships, this plan results in an unlikely bond as both men struggle to find the desire to follow through with any women they meet. What is striking about this is not so much the story (though it is bizarre), but the way in which Gob and George Sr. bond. This marks a radical departure from how Gob previously conceived of his father’s sexuality. In early seasons, Gob would recoil and wretch at the very mention of intimacy between George Sr. and Lucille. This earlier response falls in line with how Joseph Kupfer challenges the viability of parent-adult child friendships; though he understands a child to be the embodiment of the parental union, Kupfer suggests that when thinking of a parent engaging in sexual activity (specifically *outside* of the bounds of marriage), “simply knowing of this behavior might disturb the grown child” (Kupfer 1990, 19). That Gob had such a visceral reaction to his father’s sexuality, when paired with his desperate desire for approval from George *as a father*, might lead to the conclusion that friendship is off the table for these two men.

Yet a seemingly genuine friendship is exactly what develops between them as this story unfolds. Jeffrey Blustein offers some insights into how this might be possible. He notes that part of what makes it possible for parents and adult children to be friends is a willingness on the part of a parent to see their adult children as equal. In this case, it is only possible because of how far George Sr. has fallen; having lost his family, his spouse, and his libido, George Sr. might believe he no longer has any

plausible claim to authority over his eldest son. Paired with, “very similar styles of mind or ways of thinking. . . this can make for a high degree of empathy” (Blustein 1982, 192). And that is just what we see; out of any relationship in *Arrested Development*, this is the closest to a friendship of virtue. Gob, lacking all utility to his father and sharing virtually all of his vices, becomes a genuine friend at a moment when the Bluth patriarch needs him most.

**“You lied to me! You said my father was my father, but my uncle is my father. My father is my uncle!” (Byron “Buster” Bluth)**

Rounding out the Bluth children is Buster. Byron “Buster” Bluth is the youngest Bluth, though he is actually the biological son of George’s twin brother Oscar. Buster is the infantilized son George Sr. neither wanted nor really raised, claiming he was “too burnt out on raising” the other Bluth children. Buster is the self-described “scholar” of the family, having studied – among other things – Native American tribal ceremonies, sleep deprivation, cartography, archaeology, and eighteenth-century agrarian business – all paid for by the Bluth Company. Despite his extensive schooling, Buster is a deeply awkward, wildly unimpressive, and often childish member of the family. In addition to suffering from frequent panic attacks that prevent him from doing much of anything, he seems not to have retained much from his many studies, at one point explaining that “the blue part on the map is land” (S1 E1).

As previously mentioned, Buster and Lucille have a troublingly co-dependent relationship despite Lucille’s nearly constant desire to appear put-upon by his presence. Buster is so deeply enmeshed with Lucille that he problematically blurs the lines between filial and romantic love. Early on, Buster accidentally flirts with Lucille 2 while not wearing his glasses (thereby failing to recognize Lucille 2 as anything more than a “brownish area, with points”). He ends up dating Lucille 2 off and on, even explaining to Lucille 2 that it’s not that he confuses her with his mother, “It’s exactly the opposite. I’m leaving my mother for you. You’re replacing my mother” (S1 E12). Such a dynamic permeates all of Buster’s relationships – both familial and romantic. In one instance, Lindsay very briefly acts like a mother toward Buster, and not only does he explain to Lucille that his sister is his “new mother,” but that Lindsay is starting to “look hotter too.”

Despite the blurring of lines between romantic and familial love, Buster’s relationship with Lucille complicates, but ultimately does not undermine, the argument *Arrested Development* makes regarding what adult children owe their parents and why. There seems to be something of a consensus among philosophers that adult children *may* have some obligation of gratitude to their parents (though they differ regarding when and how to understand the grounding of such an obligation). In cases where a parent acts in a way that exceeds what is required by the role of parent, when what is provided requires a significant sacrifice on the parent’s behalf, or when a parent provides a uniquely valuable benefit to the child (Jecker 1989, 75), the child may in some sense “owe” gratitude to their parent. Providing access to expensive

education or “help that seems to be an extension of their role as nurturer and provider, such as nursing the adult child through an illness. . .” (Kupfer 1990, 22) are two examples wherein, all things being equal, an adult child may well have an obligation of gratitude to their parents. While it is certainly a stretch to describe Lucille as “nurturing” in any sense of the term, when it comes to Buster she does seem to be more open to moments of compassion – and there can be little doubt that she (or rather, the company) has offered substantial amounts of money to support Buster’s “scholarly pursuits.”

The circumstances in which Lucille has the opportunity to demonstrate her loving and “nurturing” nature for Buster, however, are largely of her own making and typically suit her own ends. After signing Buster up for the army, Buster finds himself about to be deployed to Iraq. While awaiting his deployment, Buster decided to rebel against Lucille and go swimming in the ocean – an act which Lucille had forbidden. While swimming, a “loose-seal” attacks Buster, biting off his hand. Lucille springs to Buster’s aid and does everything she can to support him, including getting him juice – another significant departure from her previous prohibitions. While preparing for George Sr.’s trial, it becomes clear that Lucille had been sharing all of the family’s secrets and crimes with Buster every night as he tried to sleep. This places Buster in a difficult situation – feeling an obligation of loyalty to his family, Buster does not want to testify. Such an obligation clearly conflicts, however, with his sense of justice, fidelity, and the oath he would no doubt have to swear to the court. As a result, Buster slips into a “light-to-no-coma” (S3 E10) in order to avoid having to violate one of his duties. During this time, we find Lucille fluctuate between attempts to *appear* nurturing and falling back into their friendship of utility (for example, by “renting” his “comatose” body out to aspiring beauticians, dentists, and doctors).

Buster’s relationship with Lucille, while strange and off-putting, rounds out the ways in which the Bluth clan is dysfunctional and provides a jumping-off point for the central argument in the show – that, if anything, any obligation adult children have to their parents is ultimately grounded in a sense of friendship; i.e., a voluntary relationship based on the recognition of mutual and equal goodness (Aristotle 1987, 283).

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## Should the Bluths Put “Family First”?

Having now surveyed the peculiar familial relationships between the Bluths, it is time to address the two questions posed at the outset: Should the Bluth children really put “family first”? If so, why? To address these questions, the argument will proceed in two steps. First is the negative thesis: several of the Bluths provide compelling counter-examples to attempts to ground filial obligation in something other than friendship. The second step is the positive thesis: in addition to offering compelling evidence against common responses, some of the dynamics illustrate the force of friendship as a *possible* ground for special obligations between adult parents and children. *Arrested Development* doesn’t make a case for the claim that adult

children *should* be friends with their parents (the Bluths probably should not); rather, the show argues that *if* adult children have special obligations to their parents, it's because they have developed a genuine friendship with their parents.

## The Negative Thesis (Part 1): Why Adult Children Don't "Owe" Their Parents Gratitude

Jane English and Jeffrey Blustein have criticized accounts of filial obligation for characterizing the sort of relationship between a child and parent as one of indebtedness. English argues that understanding filial obligation as something a child "owes" to a parent or as a debt to be repaid "tends to obscure or to even undermine, the love that is the correct ground of filial obligation" (English 1979, 352). Blustein takes a different tack to reach the same conclusion. He argues that while it may well be the case that adult children have some sort of obligation of gratitude to their parents, there are significant constraints regarding the sorts of actions that could plausibly generate such an obligation: "If parents have any right to repayment from their children, it can only be for that which was either above and beyond the call of parental duty, or not required by parental duty at all" (Blustein 1982, 182). Furthermore, he continues, such benefits must be given for the right reasons (Blustein 1982, 183) and it must be accepted willingly by the child (see also (Jeske 1998, 544)). Part of what makes the "owing idiom" misleading, Blustein suggests, is that young children are not in a position to willingly accept any benefits, regardless of whether the benefits are required of a parent or whether the parent goes beyond the call of duty. Infants and young children are not in a position to exercise any real choice with regard to the benefits conferred upon them; young children lack the understanding and rational capacity to exercise the sort of autonomy necessary to take on a debt. In cases where grown children benefited, or even continue to benefit from, parental choices made in the past, "the freedom to decide when, and to whom, one shall become indebted cannot be abridged in advance by unilateral parental decisions" (Blustein 1982, 184). So even if adult children have some sort of special obligation to parents, it's not that children "owe" their parents a debt, it must be an obligation of a different type. Through the examples of Lucille, George Sr., and Michael, *Arrested Development* makes the case that many parents' actions don't rise to the level of generating a duty of gratitude.

There can be little doubt that the Bluth children received substantial benefits from Lucille and George Sr., whether access to education, career opportunities, wealth, status, or the freedom to pursue whatever ends they please. It is not clear that either George Sr. or Lucille meet any of the conditions that would warrant gratitude. Jecker offers four conditions under which it would be appropriate to offer gratitude to a parent: if the parents perform acts not *required* of them, if a parent performs a required act in an exemplary way, if the fulfillment of a parental duty is especially burdensome or risky, or if the fulfilling of a parental duty produces an especially valuable benefit (Jecker 1989, 75). Given George Sr.'s and Lucille's parenting styles, it's difficult to make a case for either of the first two conditions; they're not apt to do

more than duty requires of a parent. Since they are hard-pressed to do even the minimum, it's obvious that neither parent fulfills their duties in an exemplary way.

It might seem that a case could be made for third and fourth conditions, however. After all, their shady business practices are risky in innumerable ways and they do result in substantial benefits to the Bluth children. Still, both George Sr. and Lucille provide clear examples of parents who fail the motivation test. Jecker agrees with Blustein that the right sort of motivation is a *requirement* for generating a duty of gratitude. Their motivations are always self-serving. They don't act out of love, benevolence, or care for their children, but in the interest of keeping up appearances. After being advised by the family attorney to show up to George Sr.'s arraignment hearing "looking like a loving family," Lucille asks how long they have to keep up the appearance. Even if we set aside the important requirements set forth above, it is especially inappropriate to suggest the Bluth children need to "repay" anything to their parents. "For example, a daughter who directs gratitude for the benefits of child rearing to a [mother] who compulsively abuses and torments her underestimates her own self worth" (Jecker 1989, 76).

If any parent in the show could be interpreted as satisfying the requirements for creating a debt of gratitude for their child, it'd be Michael. Michael at least starts out representing Jecker's third archetype of a parent: the loving, self-sacrificing father who always puts his child first. In contrast with his parents, Michael's motivations are in the right place and he does genuinely love George Michael. This means that the real question to consider is whether Michael meets any of the additional conditions sufficient for the generation of a debt of gratitude. While Michael acts out of the sort of benevolence and love characteristic of a good parent, it is not clear that anything he does successfully meets any of Jecker's four conditions for warranting gratitude. While Michael believes he makes substantial sacrifices on George Michael's behalf (including refraining from dating, finding special boarding schools for George Michael, and investing in George Michael's tech start-up company, among others), many of the sacrifices are the result of a misguided sense of believing he knows what George Michael wants or needs without actually speaking with him. In season three, George Michael echoes Blustein's claim that when children have matured, they may make the rational choice that they would have preferred to forgo certain benefits rather than be indebted to their parents (Blustein 1982, 183). "You never listen to me. You didn't ask me if I wanted to go to the school, you didn't ask me about what I said. You threatened my teacher. You don't respect me. How can I respect you, man?" (S3 E9). Even a well-meaning parent whose motivations are (or appear to be) selfless and who appears to parent in a way that ought to generate obligations or debts can fall short.

## **Negative Thesis (Part 2): The One Where They Adopt Lindsay – Why Biology Isn't a Ground for Obligation**

Accounts that seek to ground filial obligation in a sense of indebtedness often appeal to some sort of inequity in terms of benefits bestowed by the parent. In order to



receive any benefits at all, a child must exist. Some philosophers take the begetting of a child itself to be an act of benevolence, and therefore something which grounds special obligations. In response Jecker argues,

[I]t is a mistake to think of begetting as an act of benevolence. To begin with, prospective parents cannot possibly intend conception as an expression of respect, care, and value *to their future child*. After all, had conception been postponed a month or more, the resultant child would have been a different child. This makes clear that even if prospective parents conceive in order to benefit a future child, they do not intend to benefit any *particular* future child. Since the extant offspring were not the objects of benevolence when their parents chose to conceive them, they do not owe their parents gratitude for conceiving them.

What's more, individuals contemplating parenthood often choose to have children for no other reason than that they anticipate children will enrich *their* lives. Consequently, when children come into existence they do not usually owe parents gratitude for their existence; for their parents decision to bring them into existence is not ordinarily an expression of *benevolence*. This explains why we do not think that children owe gratitude to those who *merely* begat them. (Jecker 1989, 74)

If voluntary acceptance of a benefit is a constraint on the generation of a debt or duty of gratitude, then it is obvious that a not-yet-conceived child cannot voluntarily accept the putative benefit of conception; after all, not only does the yet-conceived-being lack the capacity to understand what they are getting into, but they lack all capacities and properties alike – they don't exist!

Another approach to generating a moral obligation to a biological parent might be to say that genetic makeup contributes to our identity. On this line of argument, anyone who contributes to the formation of our identity, regardless of their commitment to the child's upbringing, deserves certain considerations for having made the child who they are (Bellotti 1986, 152–154). But does merely creating a person *determine* a person's identity? It certainly *contributes*; Susan Brison has persuasively argued that one's physical body is an ineliminable aspect of self (Brison 2002), though it is not the whole story. One's identification with a particular sex or with a particular racial or ethnic group certainly impacts their experiences of the world – and biology is part of this. Yet, Lindsay (in the role of mother) makes a case against Raymond Bellotti's claim that "a person can be metaphysically closer to another, or contribute to another's identity without necessarily sacrificing anything significant. And under my view, no sacrifice *per se* is required" to generate special obligations (Bellotti 1986, 154).

Lindsay's lack of interaction with her daughter makes it difficult to believe that Maebly owes Lindsay anything. Inhabiting a particular body does *contribute* to one's identity, but it does not tell the whole story. In developing a sense of self, understanding who one's biological parents are can be instructive, but it is not definitive of who a person is. Neither Lindsay nor Tobias have even the foggiest idea who Maebly is in any meaningful way and while their contributions to her identity likely extend beyond those of a biological parent who gave their child up for adoption, it's not by much. By looking at Lindsay as an absentee parent and thinking that Maebly doesn't really owe Lindsay anything, we get the idea that biological ties don't contribute as much to one's identity as Bellotti suggests. As Brison argues, the self is a complex

mixture of one's body, those with whom one surrounds herself, one's life experiences and memories (which she describes as a "narrative self"), and one's exercise of autonomy. Lindsay's parenting style provides Maeby with unlimited autonomy, virtually no guidance with regard to interpreting her experiences or how to navigate the world, and few defining memories as a child of Lindsay. *Arrested Development* suggests that while biology contributes to Maeby's identity, that connection is only a small fraction of her *self*. As such, biological connection alone is overruled by other factors which really shape Maeby's identity. This, of course, undercuts the biological connection angle and supports Jecker's concluding thought above – that children do not owe anything to parents who merely "begat" them.

The other side of the story is that Lindsay, herself, is adopted. While George Sr. and Lucille are not by any stretch of the imagination ideal parents, Lindsay was raised as their biological child. There are two aspects to the argument on this side worth mentioning. First, even though the benefits Lindsay received as having been raised by the Bluths are arguably negligible, she was raised for nearly 40 years by the Bluths, believing herself to be their biological child. As Diane Jeske argues, it seems wrong to conclude that, simply because she has no biological connection to them, the (in this case, relative) intimacy that she developed over the course of her life with the Bluths is significantly diminished "because they contributed nothing to her genetic make-up" (Jeske 1998, 548). It doesn't sit right when we think that a life-time's worth of influence, upbringing, memories, and contributions to one's identity should be diminished or downplayed because there is another person (or other people) out there with whom one might share a closer *biological* connection. Especially considering that the self is a complex mix of experiences, memories, goals, expectations, and body – all of which are directly impacted by those with whom one spends their time, biology alone seems ill-suited to explain the generation of special obligations.

Second, if biological connection is *the* decisive factor in the generation of moral obligation, then Lindsay's advances on her "brother" Michael should not seem as problematic as they do. After all, Lindsay and Michael are not *really* brother and sister – and for that matter, George Michael and Maeby are not *really* cousins. So what's the big deal? Arguably the big deal is that the sort of intimacy one develops with their adult siblings is of a unique sort: "special features of familial roles make intimacy and shared concern achievable in unique and peculiarly valuable forms. With no one but our siblings can we achieve the sort of understanding based on sharing the same upbringing" (Jeske 1998, 543). This is a unique bond that results from a lifetime of shared experiences – thus one may think that biological connection is neither enough by itself to generate special obligations, nor is it even required in order to generate special obligations (such as refraining from sexual advances – for a discussion of moral objections to incest in *Arrested Development*, see Barnbaum (2012)). Thus, Michael's comment to George Michael, "I mean, she might not be a blood relative, but she is still family, and that's a bond that lasts forever," (S3 E13), summarizes the position. Family is more than biology.

### Negative Thesis (Part 3): Why the Institution or Role of Family Member Is Not Enough

Lindsay offers a compelling counterexample to the idea that biology alone creates special obligations between parents and children (and siblings!). In exploring that argument, it became clear that her brother Michael sees family as something more along the lines of a sort of social role one might fulfill. While Lindsay offers good reasons to think that biology is irrelevant to filial obligation, Michael proves a case study in why the appeal to social roles won't work either. Despite initial plausibility – the appeal to family as a social institution does seem to explain why Lindsay's advances, or Buster's weird relationship with Lucille strikes viewers as problematic – attempting to ground filial obligation in social roles also misses the mark. Michael is illustrative in both being a son and in being a father. In both cases, Michael almost perfectly illustrates what happens when children of less-than-ideal parents find themselves feeling obliged simply because they are their parents' child.

Consider first Michael as the faithful, dedicated son. Michael acts out of a sense of duty rather than love. In trying to find where such a duty might come from, the available options seem to have been drastically limited by the discussion so far. If *Arrested Development* is right, it's neither a function of biology alone nor have George Sr. and Lucille done enough to warrant gratitude (Jecker 1989, 75). Even in the cases where it might seem as if Michael's parents have gone above and beyond for him, they have not done so out of the right motivations (Blustein 1982, 177) – they've only acted for themselves and helped Michael by accident. Thus, even if Michael has some sort of debt to his parents, it's not a function of friendship, gratitude, or indebtedness. There must be another explanation for why Michael seems so committed to a sense of filial duty. The best explanation is that Michael is deeply committed to the *concept* of being a son – understood as a social role.

Diane Jeske raises a powerful objection to the idea that the role or institution of “son” grounds filial obligation, which Michael seems to exemplify perfectly. Just as very young children are not in a position to voluntarily choose whether to accept certain benefits from parents, at no point is a child able to choose who their parents are. It's difficult to imagine wanting to be a Bluth and with as often as Michael threatens to leave, we might suggest that Michael would not have chosen to be born into this particular family. Even if it's plausible that being born into a particular *role* – taken in the abstract – could generate special obligations, Michael wouldn't fit the bill. After all, as Michael Hardimon argues, certain roles only generate obligations on the condition that they are “reflectively acceptable” – that is, if one were to reflect on the role, they would come to the conclusion that it is the sort of role they ought to accept *and* that it generates the sorts of obligations they ought to fulfill (Hardimon 1994, 348). There can be little doubt that Michael Bluth thinks one should see the role of son both as valuable and as requiring certain special obligations of those who fill that role (perhaps especially when thinking of his interactions with *his* son). “But, more importantly, any such abstract structure is an idealization, and any given individual's particular instantiation of the role is likely to be very different from the idealization” (Jeske 1998, 553). There is an important difference between being

a son and being the son of George Sr. and Lucille; in the latter case, it's not clear that Michael *would* reflectively accept the role if given the choice. So it seems that Michael's commitment to his family is grounded in an abstraction rather than having to do with his parents. On most accounts, George Sr. and Lucille barely fulfill the minimal obligations *they* have to their children and, more often than not, they shirk their duties, outright fail in their obligations, and act out of indifference or spite. In such cases, there is little reason to believe that their children owe them anything, even if there is a generalized societal expectation that says otherwise.

Still, Michael starts out as a pretty good dad; consider his relationship with his son, George Michael. As the show progresses, not only does their relationship become strained, but Michael becomes increasingly entitled to his then-adult son's time, space, and even romantic partners. Michael identifies so strongly with the *role* of father that he cannot let go of the authority he believes should be afforded to him by inhabiting that role. A theme throughout the show, Michael is frequently overbearing, dismissive, and inattentive toward George Michael – perhaps because he believes that in virtue of being George Michael's father, his behavior is irrelevant to the duties his son has to him. Michael expresses this sentiment when complaining to George Sr. about George Michael's behavior, "Yeah, I don't know what's going on with him. You know, he's-he's on Bethlehem time. He's spending every moment of the day with this girl. It's, like, I'm his father. He should be spending most of his time with me" (S2 E6).

Michael's relationships with his parents and his son make clear that the role of parent itself is not enough to justify any particular special obligations. After all, "The individual's particular instantiation in the role is, in effect, the relationship she has with her family member" (Jeske 1998, 553). In Michael's case, as in that of his father's, deeply imperfect men fill the role of "father" and, as a result, their sons do not owe them anything simply in virtue of fulfilling that role.

### Positive Thesis: "Friendship First"

While *Arrested Development* offers compelling objections to indebtedness, gratitude, biology, and social roles as a ground for filial obligations, the show does not merely offer an argument from the elimination of alternatives – that is, it does not merely argue that some answers are wrong; it also makes a case *for* a particular kind of friendship as the appropriate ground of obligations between adult parents and their children. It should be clear by now that the Bluths don't have much going for them in the friendship department. At least within the family, there are only two cases where a parent-child relationship even *resembles* a friendship: between Buster and Lucille and between Gob and George Sr. (late in the series). Both cases are illustrative of an important caveat regarding the idea of grounding filial obligation in friendship – if friendship grounds obligation, then it has to be the *right kind* of friendship.

Recall that Aristotle distinguished three types of friendship: pleasure, utility, and virtue. If Buster and Lucille's relationship can be understood as friendship (as a kind of intimacy involving mutual caring and some sort of a shared goal), it's clear that

their friendship is one of utility. Buster does not see his mother as a virtuous person (she's not), and it's not at all obvious he gets any pleasure from being around her. What he does get is a place to live, access to perpetual education, food, money, and a strange form of companionship – one which he frequently conflates with romantic love. Lucille equally gains a number of benefits from Buster's presence. He keeps her company, competes in the mother-son competition Motherboy, and affords her the opportunity to *appear* as if she is a loving, supportive mother – something Lucille values deeply. In this case, Lucille and Buster have a relationship of convenience and utility; they each get various things they value, but it's not obvious they care for *one another* at all. *Arrested Development* cautions viewers against thinking that just any old friendship will do when it comes to making sense of how, why, and when adult children have special obligations to their parents. The few times Buster exercises his autonomy and leaves his mother's side, she becomes characteristically abusive, manipulative, and tries to pull him back – not out of love, but out of frustration because nobody is around to do the things Buster did. As an adult child in his 30s, it's quite a stretch to suggest – despite *somewhat* voluntarily accepting those benefits from Lucille (she does manipulate and use him) – that he has any sort of obligation to Lucille.

Thinking of the other Bluth children's relationships with their parents as one of utility is instructive. Treating their kids as a means to an end seems to be the family M.O. Michael is competent and, as a result, is useful in business dealings. Lindsay is useful in the sense that she's classically beautiful and draws attention to the Bluth name through her performative advocacy. Gob is useful in that he's so desperate for fatherly approval that he'll happily do dangerous or illegal things if he's asked. Given the way George Sr. and Lucille operate, it's unsurprising that they would value their children – not as people – but as tools they can manipulate to fulfill their own ends. It is only when George Sr. has hit rock bottom – when Gob no longer serves any purpose at all – that Gob and his father bond. This moment is the closest to a healthy father-son relationship we see in the show (save for the brief period during which Gob and his illegitimate son, Steve Holt, become friends by bonding over not knowing who or where their fathers are).

Once Gob no longer has any use, the two men are able to see one another as *people*, rather than as the abstract role of father and tool-for-illegal-activities (respectively). While the specifics of their interaction (trolling a foreign country for casual sex) are a little beyond what we might think of as appropriate for a father-son duo, it makes sense for Gob and George Sr. when considering their personalities. While it may be difficult to call many of the ways Gob takes after George Sr. “virtues,” that they have as much in common as they do leads them to a common purpose and to recognize in one another the traits they admire in themselves. In this way, we see Gob and George Sr. enter into something resembling a friendship of virtue.

It is difficult to think of friendships of utility (or friendships of pleasure) as real friendships that generate genuine obligations for those involved. After all, “those whose mutual love is based upon utility do not love each other for their own sakes, but only insofar as they derive some benefit from one another. It is the same with those whose love is based upon pleasure” (Aristotle 1987, 258). Friendships of

virtue, however, are based on an intimacy or love founded upon the recognition that those involved are alike in virtue (Aristotle 1987, 260). What George Sr. and Gob's budding relationship reveals is the proper ground for generating special obligations between adult children and parents; their relationship is a voluntary friendship founded on mutual aims and shared experiences rather than utility, pleasure, or external expectations. As a result, Gob and George Sr.'s friendship is a candidate for the ground of special obligations because it meets the conditions outlined above: there is a sort of intimacy that has been cultivated over time, the relationship was the result of autonomous and willing choices, and those involved have what Diane Jeske calls a "mutual project." The nature of this project, however, is not a quid pro quo or anything of that kind; the project is the friendship itself – to share experiences and develop a sense of intimacy based on the mutual recognition of one another as possessing complementary virtues (or vices, in their case).

It's ironic that arguably the healthiest adult child-parent relationship in *Arrested Development* is the result of two men who simultaneously hit rock-bottom, a real friendship which develops in virtue of Gob's uselessness. However, given the wildly vicious character of so many of the figures in the show, it's only when they have no use to one another that they are able to move past their own selfish aims and recognize how much they have in common. *Arrested Development* makes a compelling case for the idea that if adult children have any special obligations to their parents, it must be because they've become friends – and not just any kind of friend, but *true* friends.

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## **Evaluating *Arrested Development's* Argument: Can Parents and Children Really be Friends?**

*Arrested Development* offers an argument against the idea that adult children owe their parents anything simply because they are parents; instead making the case that if adult children have any special obligations to their parents, it is out of a sense of friendship – a type of intimacy one can choose to enter into, which can be terminated if necessary. But how compelling is this argument? In order to decide, it is worth considering two questions. First, isn't there something importantly different between the sort of intimacy one shares with their friends and the one they share with their parents? And second, isn't there something special about *becoming* a parent that changes a person? That is, it seems parenthood is not merely a role one might step into, but rather is an essential part of who that parent is.

### **First Objection: The Uniqueness of Parent-Child Intimacy**

There is little room for doubt that in parent-child relationships where familial intimacy exists, it's of a different sort than what one might develop with a friend one meets as an adult or even with a childhood friend. After all, the sheer history of shared experiences, combined with the unconditional love parents and children often

feel for one another, and the impact of a parent on the development (whether emotionally, intellectually, or otherwise) are importantly different from one's peers. "Often such facts naturally lead persons to develop [intimate] relationships, so familial roles are often correlated with the types of relationships that generate special obligations" (Jeske 1998, 542).

Joseph Kupfer argues that the ideal parent-child relationship has additional features that a friendship will not, such as "identification, love, stability, and aesthetic closure" (Kupfer 1990, 25). Kupfer argues that the nature between parent and child is unique in that the other's well-being not only influences, but is *part of*, the other's well-being. "It makes sense to speak of parents taking pride in their children in a way that it doesn't for friends" (Kupfer 1990, 21). The same goes, Kupfer argues, for suffering – a parent suffers "doubly" when their child suffers; they grieve *with* their children, not merely *for* them. Because of this loving identification, he suggests that (in ideal relationships) parents and children help shape one another's identities; thus, a unique type of gratitude can emerge. This is a gratitude for helping to craft one's sense of self – not merely for friendship or fulfilling parental obligations, and no matter how exceptionally.

While Lindsay provides a substantial challenge to the idea that biology plays an especially important role to the grounding of special obligations, there may be something to the idea that, unlike friendship, there is a permanent tie between parent and child. "Just as the parents and grown children share the history of the young child's life, and know that they do, so do they also see the relationship (whatever its perturbations) as inevitably stretching into the future" (Kupfer 1990, 24). The knowledge of this stability, he continues, provides a sense of security not found in other relationships. As a result, both parents and children can expect comfort in difficult times, such as through aging, the loss of romantic or peer friendships, and so on. These features, he argues, are unique to parent-child relationships and cannot be grounded in friendship.

## **Second Objection: Personal Identity, Transformative Experience, and Parental Identity**

The second question challenges the idea that the role of parent is merely a contingent feature of a person. Rather, being a parent is part of *who someone is*. Consider Brison's relational approach to the self. Since humans are social animals, one's identity may be at least in part *constituted* by those around her. She explains that "the self is viewed as related to and constructed by others in an ongoing way, not only because others continue to shape and define us throughout our lifetimes, but also because our sense of self is couched in descriptions whose meanings are social phenomena" (Brison 2002, 41). In this case, when someone is a parent, recognizing oneself as a parent is essential to their very being. Indeed, there is compelling reason to think the very act of having a child fundamentally changes who a person is. L.A. Paul argues that when it comes to life-changing choices, such as deciding whether to become a parent, there are certain features that are inaccessible unless one has

experienced them and the experience itself changes both one's point-of-view and, importantly, their values (Paul 2014). Becoming a parent, she argues, is transformative – it changes who a person is. While Paul's interest is in how it is possible to make a rational choice in these cases, the recognition of the fundamental change resulting from becoming a parent speaks to how important being a parent *can* be.

Assuming that Brison and Paul are onto something, there are two related challenges brought forth by the nature of parenthood. First, the transformative nature of becoming a parent is explicitly and inextricably tied to the particular child. No other person could have changed the parent in the way their child did. The transformative nature of having a child reinforces Kupfer's uniqueness objection. Perhaps more importantly, however, is that because the role of parent is unlike a hat one can put on or take off at will, any wrong committed against a parent is more severe because it's a wrong committed against the *essence* of a person – not merely a role they fill. If there is uniquely personal harm done to a parent when a child wrongs them (by failing to fulfill some special obligation, for example), then there is reason to think that the nature of the obligations between parents and children must have an origin unique to families.

## Mission Accomplished: Addressing the Objections

The argument *Arrested Development* makes thus faces two core problems. First, the sort of intimacy ideally developed between parents and children is importantly different from that present in friendships. Second, the *role* of parent is more robust than just another social role – it's both transformative and central to a parent's identity. In both cases, there seems to be something special about parenthood that cannot be explained merely by appeal to friendship. While these objections are compelling, *Arrested Development* has the resources to address these problems in relatively short order.

One critical feature of Kupfer's argument for the unique value derived from parent-child relationships is that these putative goods are the result of an *ideal* parent-child relationship. Part of what *Arrested Development* does is show – through less-than-ideal relationships – the limits of filial obligation. While most families are not nearly as problematic as the Bluths, it's safe to say that it's unlikely any are ideal. If appealing to the Bluths shows that the goods Kupfer finds in the ideal family dissolve, then there is good reason to believe those goods are not *essential* to families, but are contingent features of an idealized model that does not necessarily track reality. Thus, the objection carries significantly less force than it might initially appear to.

Even if the Bluths are too far removed from reality to count as a plausible counterexample, there is a further problem with the first objection: it is not obvious that the most important goods derived from the ideal family relations really are unique to parent-child relations. Consider once more the idea of a friendship of virtue. Such a friendship occurs when individuals recognize one another's virtuous character, share goals, and support one another in the pursuit of identified goods. Such a friendship is likely the best kind of friendship and will, as a result, be the most stable. After all, such friends are friends precisely because they identify with one another's virtues. Ideally, one's relationship with their romantic partner would also



involve such a friendship. The way Kupfer describes identification, love, and stability could just as easily apply to a romantic partner when such a relationship involves a friendship of virtue. After all, with a spouse, the relationship has a sense of permanence going forward, some shared history, love, and identification with one another. Of course, there are important differences between the intimacy in a romantic relationship and that of parent-child relations, but the core goods seem to apply to each with only minor adjustments. It may seem bizarre that Buster confuses filial and romantic love, but the blurring of that line serves as the perfect illustration of exactly this point. While Buster and Lucille are not virtue-friends, their codependence highlights the ways in which problematic parent-child relations can mirror friendships – and it is exactly because of such mirroring that Buster confuses the grounds of his obligations to his mother.

Keeping in mind the similarity between the goods found in both a healthy romantic relationship and filial relationships can help to address the second objection as well. Recall that the central point of the second objection is that there is something transformative about becoming a parent; that becoming a parent changes a person's identity. Yet entering into a healthy long-term romantic relationship, for example, will also force fundamental changes to one's conception not only of oneself (being one's partner is as much a relationally constituted aspect of one's identity as any), but of their goals and values as well. At the very least, conceiving of oneself as a partner entails taking on another's goals as if they are one's own. While a decidedly less abrupt transformation than becoming a parent, entering into a long-term romantic relationship will affect profound changes in a person. Put another way, Brison's insight that the self is partially constituted by those around us supports the importance of *both* the role of parent *and* the role of romantic partner. That is, there are few people in life who can have a more profound impact on one's identity than their partner. As a result, the force of the objection is thereby diminished – after all, at least in America today, people largely choose their romantic partners – and a breach in the case of a committed long-term partnership is at least equal to, if not more difficult than, a filial breach.

While not representative of the majority of parents, the Bluths illustrate an important limitation of the appeal to the transformative nature of having children. It is no doubt possible for parents to be somewhat unmoved by having children; indeed, the vast majority of the parents in *Arrested Development* fail to consider themselves as parents at all, let alone allow that role to define who they are. Only Michael takes his role as father to be an important part of who he is. Yet despite identifying as a father to George Michael, he values *appearing* to be a good father over *actually* being a good father. *Arrested Development* shows that one need not be personally transformed by having a child and that, even if one is, it's not always for the better.

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## Conclusion: Friendship First

Philosophers have challenged the assumption that adult children have special obligations to their parents. *Arrested Development* argues that insofar as any special obligations arise between adult parents and children, it's a function of a particular

sort of friendly intimacy between adults. The Bluths, in virtue of their wildly dysfunctional interactions, offer compelling reasons to remember that parents are people like any other; they have diverse interests, fill different social roles, and have different strengths and weaknesses. Simply because one is a parent, this does not entitle them to special treatment. Any sort of relationship adult children have with their parents is not explained by biology, social roles, gratitude, or debt, but by continued familial intimacy grounded in a loving friendship. *Arrested Development* argues by demonstrating the extreme – when parents are as bad as the Bluths, their kids don't owe them anything.

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## Cross-References

- ▶ [Films Harry Potter as Philosophy: Kinds of Friendship](#)
- ▶ [Films The Godfather as Philosophy: Honor, Power, Family, and Evil](#)

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