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How Remonstration Fails: *Filial Piety and Reprehensible Parents*

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Abstract

Critics of Confucianism have long raised concerns about its focus on filial piety (*xiao* 孝). This concept entails traditional expectations, such as children dutifully serving parents, demonstrating outward respect, and subordinating personal desires to parental wishes. Critics find this problematic not only as an approach toward parents but also as a broader orientation toward authority figures.

In response to such criticism, a common argument asserts that it misunderstands filial piety's true nature. This perspective claims that filial piety requires not only service, respect, and compliance with parents but also the courage to admonish them when they veer from the path of what's right. However, this response is unconvincing. Passages used to support this view suggest admonishment should be light and avoided if it causes bad feelings, which may not be effective with stubborn parents. Other passages within the same texts indicate that admonishment is discouraged, emphasizing parental satisfaction over whether children should remonstrate.

The most robust endorsements for admonishment originate from the relatively less influential Xunzi. In conclusion, concerns raised by critics about unquestioning obedience to authority warrant serious consideration. These concerns invite a thorough examination of the intricate dynamics of filial piety and its implications, advocating a thoughtful approach.

Keywords: Filial piety, remonstration, Confucianism, Confucian ethics, critics of Confucianism, *Mengzi* (Mencius), *Xunzi*

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I. Introduction

Critics of Confucianism have long been concerned with its emphasis on filial piety (*xiao* 孝). Among the many traditional strictures of this concept are demands for children to be vigilant in serving their parents, to do so with the proper outward respect and demeanor, and to yield to parental wishes when personal desires come into conflict with them. Critics have found this last stricture problematic as an orientation not only toward one's parents but also to authority figures more generally. Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942) and Wu Yu 吳虞 (1872–1949), for example, argued that filial piety inculcated an obedient and servile attitude that pervaded all of one's orientations to authority figures, preventing moral progress and the development of a public spirit. These figures were, of course, iconoclasts, yet even a prominent classical scholar such as Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896–1950) found the demands of filial piety problematic in similar ways.[1]

One common response to such criticism is to claim that it misunderstands or misrepresents the true nature of filial piety, which demands not only that one serve, respect, and yield to one's parents, but also take notice when they may be veering off the path of what is right and proper. If this happens, filial piety requires *remonstration*, as noted in a number of passages in classical (and canonical) Confucian texts. Filial children (sons, in most cases) should remonstrate with their parents (fathers, in most cases) if they risk doing something either practically foolish or morally suspect. Therefore, one can accept both that a subservient attitude toward authority figures is problematic while also denying that it has anything to do with filial piety. Put another way, filial piety, *properly* understood, is *anathema* to the worry of blind obedience.

In this article, I argue that such an argumentative strategy is unpersuasive. First, according to most of the passages that are regularly invoked to buttress this argument, remonstrance must be conveyed

[1] As Michael Nylan and Thomas Wilson write, Fu "was persuaded as a student at Peking University to condemn the 'Confucian' family as 'the source of all evil,' insofar as it induced a 'slavish' mentality of 'blind obedience' that constituted the major impediment to rapid modernization of industry and sociopolitical structures" (2010, 202).

with a light touch and only when it will not engender bad feelings or estrangement. For parents who are amenable to changing their ways, this light form of remonstration (the strongest form possible) may be sufficient. However, but for those who are stubborn, quick to temper, or otherwise insensitive to remonstrance it will obviously fall short—precisely where it may be required most. Second, for nearly every passage claiming that children must remonstrate with wayward parents one can find another that either a) presents, as paragons of moral excellence, children who engage in self-censure and recrimination *instead* of remonstration, or b) insists that parents are always right, so remonstrating would be a mistake. So, the tradition is, at best, ambivalent on this topic. Finally, I argue that the strongest passages endorsing remonstration appear in the *Xunzi*, which is a comparatively minor text in terms of his influence on the development of later Confucian thought. I conclude that critics worried about obedience to authority cannot be easily dismissed and should be taken seriously.

II. Filial Piety in the Best of Lights

The family has been central to Chinese culture and religion since classical times. Ancestor veneration, mourning rites, and the perpetuation of the family line were foundational aspects of Chinese civilization, and filial piety is crucial to understanding traditional Chinese ethics.

The Confucian tradition, in particular, contains astute observations on the role of the family in a person's development and socialization. A person's foundational moral experiences occur when they are a child under the guidance of their parents and other immediate family members, who teach them how they ought to feel in, and how they ought to react to, a complex world of roles, rituals, and demands. The family is responsible for forming an individual's basic dispositions and patterns of reflection and response, which will then influence their experiences, interpretations, and reactions to the world around them (Ivanhoe 2007; Sarkissian 2010a, 2010b). Without the concern, devotion, and sacrifice of caring parents, children would have little chance of developing properly as persons.

Families also have a hierarchical structure, with parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings on top, and children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and younger siblings on the bottom. This natural hierarchy is sharpened and enhanced by a culture that carefully delineates the roles, responsibilities, and spheres of influence that attend to any particular individual (or dyadic pair of individuals) within it. These roles require the cultivation of qualities such as dutifulness, conscientiousness, and benevolence. Family life—in this hierarchical and structured sense—prepares individuals to understand their place in broader social networks outside the family. Hence, family education is also, in effect, socialization.

Apart from their role-specific obligations, parents have a further responsibility to become models of goodness and correct behavior for their children more generally. Good parents should be (and often are) good people. They may exemplify excellences in other roles besides that of parents, such as being good neighbors, good teachers, good friends, perhaps even good public servants. Children may thus also be motivated to cultivate themselves out of respect or admiration for the good examples provided by their parents and other elder relations.

When parental contributions to their children's development are real, sustained, and effective, it results in a bond between parent and child, where a child seeks to reciprocate for the benefits they received through. In the words of Heiner Roetz, "filial piety as respectful care can be interpreted as resulting from a natural feeling of responsibility and as an expression of gratitude which makes good the pains the parents took for their child" (1993, 54). Philip J. Ivanhoe calls this filial piety's "true basis."

> The true basis for filial piety is the sense of gratitude, reverence, and love that children naturally feel when they are nurtured, supported, and cared for by people who do so out of loving concern for the child's well being. . . . I suspect that the sense of gratitude that many people feel toward their parents . . . is really a reflection of their parents' commitment to and subsequent success at loving and caring for the child that they create. In other words, what we recognize and appreciate is the parents' intention to provide a good life and not just life to their child. (Ivanhoe 2007, 299)

In this paradigm, we might say that children will naturally (perhaps even effortlessly) be filial, developing a feeling of love, reverence, and gratitude for their parents. Something like this natural affection is captured in the ode "Thick Tarragon" (Liao e 蓼莪, n. 202) from the *Ode Classic* (*Shijing* 詩經).[2]

Moreover, numerous early texts, such as the *Filial Classic* and the *Analects*, link this state of filial affection and family harmony to greater peace in the world at large. Along these lines, consider the statement by Kongzi (Confucius) in *Sayings from Kongzi's Home* (*Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語) which considers filial piety as one kind of hierarchical dyadic set, where if those above discharge their duties in exemplary fashion, those below will be rectified in turn.

> The more those in higher positions revere their parents, the more those in lower positions will practice filial piety; the more those in higher positions respect their older brothers, the more those in lower positions will practice brotherly love; the more charitable those in higher positions are, the more generous those in lower positions will become; the more those in higher positions maintain a close relationship with worthy people, the more those in lower positions will choose good people as friends; the more those in higher positions love morality, the less likely those in lower positions will hide their moral deficiency; the more those in higher positions dislike greed, the more those in lower positions will feel it shameful to compete for benefit; the more deferential those in higher positions are, the more shame those in low positions will feel for being impolite. These seven teachings are the foundations of governing people. . . . Those in higher positions are exemplars of those in lower positions. When the exemplars are rectified, who else will not be rectified?" (Y. Huang 2012, 157)

In this context, terms such as PARENT and ELDER BROTHER can be seen as thick concepts, both describing the world and providing prescriptions for action (Ng 2024). If these concepts are applied correctly and children are nurtured accordingly, we have reason to believe that children will develop into good people whose parents are worthy of

[2] As cited by Ivanhoe (2007). See Waley and Allen (1996, 184–85) for a full translation.

care. The sense of order captured in these passages is not imposed from above; rather it arises from the effortless assent of all who participate in it.

III. Filial Piety in the Sober Light of Day

However, while love, respect, care, and devoted service might develop naturally in children toward their parents, this cannot be taken for granted. There are two obvious ways that things can (and do) depart from this paradigm. First, children can fail to love, care for, and support their parents *despite* having benefited from them. They may fail to appreciate the effort expended by their parents in their care—the sacrifices made to provide them a good life. As Han Feizi writes in his essay "Wu Du" (Five Vermin), "Among human affections none takes priority over the love of parents for their children. But though all parents may show love for their children, the children are not always well behaved. And though the parents may love them even more, will this prevent the children from becoming unruly?" (Watson 1964, 102). Filial duties can serve to remind such children of the importance of giving parents their due and reciprocating in kind for the care they received. This might rekindle the affection they likely feel for them thereby.

But it is also true that parents can prove to be difficult to love, even unworthy of love. And this seeds the real problem of filial piety. Not all parents are morally good, practically wise, or personally pleasant to be around. Parents can be demanding, oppressive, and heavy-handed in their dealings with children, over whom they exert considerable power. Can children be expected to have love and reverence in their when raised by parents who are impoverished, indifferent, or even abusive? Should they abnegate their beliefs, desires, and goals and hold their parents paramount in their lives under such conditions?

From our own critical perspective, and that of the past critics noted above, the answer to all these questions seems to be a firm "*no*." Filial piety as a core value is most compelling when we have in mind good (or at least average) parents—those who try and (at least somewhat)

succeed in being good caregivers and role models. As Ivanhoe writes, "Parents who are consistently and uniformly bad do not perform the kinds of acts and manifest the love that are the true basis of filial piety, and so their children are under no obligation to cultivate reciprocal feelings and undertake the care of such parents" (2007, 310).[3] Similarly, Sungwoo Um argues that it "seems unreasonable to claim that a child should have love, gratitude, and respect, no matter how terrible her parents are" (2020, 105).

This much seems right. And yet, these sentiments would be in tension with much of the classical Confucian tradition. When Ivanhoe writes of the "true basis" of filial piety, he is not making an interpretive claim about the tradition. Rather, he is making a very sensible evaluative claim from his own perspective, arguing that the only justified or compelling ground for filial duties is the prior love and care given by one's parents. Similarly, when Um argues that "a child's being filial should be understood as an appropriate response to her parent's being virtuous as a parent," this is again a sensible evaluative claim. However, this does not align with how the concept was traditionally understood. The idea, for example, that parents need to be virtuous in order to demand filial piety from children is simply false. Filial piety places children under obligation to undertake the care of *all* parents—to love, respect, and serve them—no matter how reprehensible they are. Or so I will argue. And this seeds the problem of filial piety noted at the outset of this paper.

IV. A Short Statement of the Argument

Indeed, three assumptions, together with the interpretive claim just mentioned, are important for the rest of this paper, so they are best stated here as premises.

[3] Ivanhoe goes on to claim that children may still elect to cultivate some filial piety for bad parents, perhaps out of respect for the institution of parenting and a desire to set a positive example for others. But if such love is unwarranted and the parents are truly bad, it's not clear why one would want to set such an example. He also thinks that poor (not bad) parents might change for the better if treated with filial piety.

1. Some people are reprehensible (e.g. practically foolish or personally vicious) and difficult to love.
2. Some such people are parents of children.
3. Some such people will demand fealty and servitude from their children.
4. Plausibly, the Confucian tradition maintains that children should, at the end of the day, love, respect, and yield to such parental demands, even though they are reprehensible.

The first three premises may be considered simple assumptions or observations. The fourth is, I will argue, a sensible interpretive claim derived from canonical Confucian texts. If so, then we may derive the following conclusion:

C. Plausibly, Confucianism demands unjust and objectionable forms of obedience from children of reprehensible parents.

This argument does not require that the entirety of the Confucian tradition speak in a uniform voice concerning the topic of yielding to reprehensible parents. Expecting such consistency from a variegated and protracted tradition would be unreasonable. Instead, it only requires the presence of a sufficient number of passages in prominent texts that support this viewpoint, making it a plausible one. This much, I will argue, is plainly true.

V. Remonstration and Its Limits

First, we should note that demands for filial service do not mention the parental qualities that may merit it. In other words, filial service is not contingent on parents exemplifying goodness in their roles as parents. It is sufficient that a child exists and that a parent exists for the service to be owed. The basic imperative of filial piety is to serve one's parents, period. *Approaching Elegance* (*Erya* 爾雅) (ca. third century BCE), an early book of glosses of Zhou dynasty terms, says "to do good (things) to/for one's parents is called filial piety" (善父母為孝), and the etymological dictionary *Analyzing Graphs and Explaining Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字) (ca. first-second centuries CE) says, similarly, filial piety is "to

serve one's parents well" (善事父母). Neither of these canonical definitions mention parental merit. Consider, too, *Mengzi* 孟子 4A.19:

> Mengzi said, "Of all forms of service, which is the greatest? It is serving one's parents. Of all kinds of vigilance, which is the greatest? It is vigilance over one's own person. I have heard of those who, not losing control of themselves, have been able to serve their parents, but I have never heard of those who, having lost control of themselves, have been able to serve their parents. There are many services one must perform, but the serving of one's parents is the root of all of them. (Bloom 2009, 82-83)[4]

The absence of any mention of parental merit or worth is, I argue, a feature and not a bug. In other words, it is simply not true that parents *need* to be good to demand that children be filial. The natural reading of such passages is that all parents merit such service *regardless* of their qualities. It is of course possible that the authors of these passages had in mind not all actual parents but only *typical* or *normal* parents, whom they assumed were good enough to warrant such service. Regardless, the imperatives appear in rather naked form. Passages that specifically invoke *good* parents—that is, those that live up to the roles—as grounding filial duties are comparatively rare (e.g., *Lunyu* 論語 17.21, *Mengzi* 7A.15).

Is remonstration an aspect of filial service? The answer varies depending on which source one is reading. Some passages make it clear, for example, that while remonstration is appropriate in some hierarchical relationships, it is *not* in the father/son or parent/child one. The "Tan gong shang" 檀弓上 chapter of the *Ritual Record* (*Liji* 禮記) distinguishes service to rulers on the one hand, which requires that one hold one's line, push back, and not cover up for their wrongdoings, to service to one's father on the other, which *forbids* these. Instead, a son must serve his father, conceal his faults, and not provide pushback.[5] The

[4] All translations follow Bloom (2009), often without modification or with only slight modification. For example, "Mencius" has been changed to "Mengzi" in all cases.

[5] 事親有隱而無犯，左右就養無方，服勤至死，致喪三年。事君有犯而無隱，左右就養有方，服勤至死，方喪三年。

"Internal Regulations" ("Nei ze" 內則) chapter of the same text says, by way of contrast, that remonstration is possible, but clarifies that it must be done very gently; if one's parents become angry one must redouble one's commitments to them—even in the face of bloody beatings.

> If the parents have a fault, one should with bated breath, bland aspect, and gentle voice admonish them. If the admonition does not take effect, one should be the more respectful and filial. When the parents are pleased, one should repeat the admonition. If the parents are displeased, rather than allow them to make themselves guilty of an offense against neighbors and fellow citizens, one should admonish them in a well thought-out manner. If the parents get angry then and are displeased, and beat one till the blood flows, one should not dare to complain and be resentful, but be still respectful and filial. (Roetz 1993, 60)

In the *Elder Dai's Ritual Record* (*Da dai liji* 大戴禮記) (early Han dynasty), we find Kongzi's student Zengzi saying the following, essentially echoing the point from the previous passage:

> If what parents do conforms to the Way, one ought to follow; if what they do does not conform to the Way, one ought to remonstrate. If one's remonstration is not taken, one ought just to do what parents do as if it is one's own idea. It is not filial to obey parents without remonstration, nor is it filial to remonstrate without obeying parents [if they don't listen]. A filial son's remonstration aims at goodness and therefore should be done without quarrels with parents, as quarrels are the source of disorder. (Y. Huang 2012, 159)

The *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) contains a parallel passage, 4.18, with most understanding it as also maintaining that filial piety demands compliance when remonstration fails.[6]

[6] The *Analects* (Lunyu 論語) contains a parallel passage, 4.18, with most scholars understanding it as also maintaining that filial piety demands compliance when remonstration fails, including Ames and Rosemont (2010), Brooks and Brooks (1998), Goldin (2011), C. Huang (1997), Radice (2017), and Slingerland (2003). Some interpret this passage differently, as the ambiguous referent of a key grammatical term allows for the different

Of course, sympathizers will point to other passages that do not specify that compliance is required when remonstration fails. For example, consider these lines from the "Remonstrating and Expostulating" ("Jian zheng" 諫諍) chapter of the *Filial Classic* (*Xiaojing* 孝經), where Zengzi asks Kongzi whether a son may be deemed filial for following what his father decrees. Kongzi rejects this idea:

> The Master said, "What kind of talk is this? What kind of talk is this? In the past, the Son of Heaven had seven ministers to expostulate with him so that he would not lose the world even if he [were about to act] without the Way. The feudal lords had five ministers to expostulate with them so that they would not lose their states even if they [were about to act] without the Way. The grand masters had three ministers to expostulate with them so that they would not lose their families even if they [intended to act] without the Way. If a *shi* has friends to expostulate with him, he will not depart from his illustrious virtue; if a father has a son to expostulate with him, he will not fall into unrighteousness. Thus whenever there is unrighteousness, a son cannot but expostulate with his father and a minister cannot but expostulate with his lord. Thus whenever there is unrighteousness, one expostulates about it. To follow one's father's decrees—how can that be filial piety?" (Goldin 2005, 110–11)

Commenting on this passage, Goldin argues that, "Surely there is no better evidence that the practice of filial piety was not intended 'to turn China into a big factory for the manufacturing of obedient subjects,' 把中國弄成一個「製造順民的大工廠」as the critic Wu Yu 吳虞 (1871–1949) alleged" (Goldin 2011, 36). Of course, no single passage could possibly warrant the inference Goldin makes here. That is, no single passage in isolation from the rest of the corpus could establish what filial piety was intended to bring about (or not bring about, as it were). No single use of

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reading. On this alternative reading, one may remain committed to one's remonstrance and seek other avenues for it, though without resentment (Y. Huang 2012; Ni 2017). This might not amount to much in practice but does acknowledge the importance of personal integrity. As Roetz (1993) remarks, "although one might be skeptical about the possible success, it remains important that the moral imperative [according to this interpretation] is not revoked in favor of the final priority of [filial] role" (70).

the concept can determine what it constrains and affords. (One might just as well point to a passage like those just noted that unambiguously demand that sons refrain from remonstration to show that such obedience *was*, in fact, the intended effect. That would be similarly unpersuasive.)

Returning to the "Jian zheng" passage at hand, we see that remonstration is required, but nothing is said about what to do when it fails. In practice, if a child remonstrates with a reprehensible parent (or a parent acting reprehensibly) and they refuse to accept, what then? It seems reasonable to assume that such a child has discharged their filial duties, as no more is said on the subject (for example, that they must ensure that their parents accept the remonstration).

VI. Pleasing, Not Remonstrating; Self-Censure, Not Blaming

Indeed, it is important to note that other passages state explicitly that remonstration must end if parents are recalcitrant. The norm is to avoid parental anger and family disharmony at nearly any cost. Consider this peculiar passage in the *Mengzi* (4B.30):

> Master Gongdu said, "Throughout the state, everyone calls Kuang Zhang unfilial, yet you, Master, consort with him and treat him with courtesy. I dare to ask why this is."
>
> Mengzi said, "In the world today, there are five things that are considered unfilial. To be indolent in the use of one's four limbs and not concern oneself with the nurture of one's father and mother—this is the first form of unfiliality. To occupy oneself with chess and to be fond of drinking wine and not concern oneself with the nurture of one's father and mother—this is the second form of unfiliality. To be fond of goods and property and partial to one's wife and children and not concern oneself with the nurture of one's father and mother—this is the third form of unfiliality. To indulge the desires of the ears and eyes so as to disgrace one's father and mother—this is the fourth form of filiality. To be fond of bravery and to be quarrelsome and contentious, so as to endanger one's father and mother—this is the fifth form of unfiliality. Has Master Zhang done any one of these?

> "In Master Zhang's case, the son demanded goodness of the father and they came to be at odds with one another.[7] To demand goodness of one another is the Way of friends. But for father and son to demand goodness of one another entails a great assault on affection. Kuang Zhang of course wanted to have good relations with his wife and children. But because he had offended his father and was not allowed to come near him, he sent away his wife and children and, for the rest of his life, has not had their nurture. He made up his mind that if it was not thus, this would be one of the greatest of crimes. This is Kuang Zhang." (Bloom 2009, 94, modified)

This is a challenging passage. We are not told exactly why everyone called Kuang Zhang unfilial, and the explanation by Mengzi is open to interpretation. One thing is certain: the act of abandoning his wife and child could not be unfilial (even if we consider it morally repugnant) because he does not owe them filial duties. If he is deemed unfilial it must be because of how he treated his parents in general, or how he treated his father in particular.

Given that the "solution" to the strained affect between Kuang Zhang and his father is for the fo rmer to abandon his wife and child, it may seem *they* were the problem. Indeed, this would be an illustration of the third form of unfiliality mentioned in the immediately preceding lines—namely, to be "partial to one's wife and children and not concern oneself with the nurture of one's father and mother." But Mengzi claims, explicitly, that Kuang Zhang did not fail to nurture his parents.

Another possibility is that Kuang Zhang's father did not approve of his choice of wife and yet he married her anyway. So while he remained attentive to his parents' needs he was still unfilial for going against his parents' wishes. When it was time to finally make amends, Kuang Zhang did something he thought would please them—namely, abandoning his wife and child. If this is correct, and if he abandoned them so as to serve his parents, this would explain why Mengzi consorts with him and treats him with courtesy. The problem with this interpretation is that it

[7] I follow Legge (1971) and Eno (1996) in my reading of this line, as it better accords with the rest of the passage.

is mere speculation.[8]

Indeed, there is a more straightforward interpretation: the last part of the passage begins by claiming that Kuang Zhang and his father had a falling out because the son demanded goodness of the father, and so we must focus our attention here. In *Mengzi* 4A.18 we are told that goodness is something fathers and sons must never demand from one another because (and this is important) the demand for goodness might not succeed, leading father and son to be estranged, and nothing could be more unfortunate (or inauspicious) than that.[9] Of course, it is made clear here that when such a clash occurs the child is the one to bear the brunt of the resulting estrangement. A father can throw a child out of the house, ostracize him, refuse contact with him, etc. (as Kuang Zhang's father did in this case), and the child will be the one censured as guilty of the crime of unfiliality. It bears mentioning that if this analysis is correct, then Mengzi is carving out a sixth way to be unfilial in this passage—suggesting to Gongduzi that, in effect, demanding goodness from one's father may be deemed unfilial. Having been guilty of this great crime, Kuang Zhang abandons his wife and child, because doing nothing to make up for his unfilial act would have been worse still.[10] Kuang Zhang serves as an object lesson for what can happen if one demands goodness from one's father.

Indeed, the more basic duty is to please one's parents instead, not

[8] Attempts to fill in the details using another person named Zhang in the *Warring States Annals* (*Zhanguoce* 戰國策) are equally speculative and don't help with the interpretation of this passage in particular. See Lau (2003, Appendix I).

[9] Peimin Ni (2008) interprets the injunction for fathers and sons to avoid demanding goodness of one another as simple and commonsense practical advice that should not be elevated to loftier status, without referencing the related case of Kuang Zhang at all.

[10] This seems the most likely explanation of why Kuang Zhang was deemed unfilial. However, his wife and child are left out of this this explanation entirely, leading the reader to wonder why they were abandoned, and how they fit into the story. It seems not simply unjust but more fundamentally arbitrary that Kuang Zhang sought to make amends for his crime of demanding goodness of his father by abandoning his wife and child. One interpretation is that he felt so ashamed of his unfilial behavior that he sent them away so that they would never have to associate with him again. Birdwhistle (2007) suggests that the wife and child were sent away by Huang Zhang as a form of self-punishment (99). Eno (2002) makes similar claims (192). At best, we might say that Mengzi feels pity for Kuang Zhang, and that is why he consorts with him. This is indeed Zhu Xi's verdict.

remonstrate with them. Delighting, ennobling, honoring, and enriching one's parents is a fundamental filial duty. In 2B.7, for example, when someone asks why the casket he prepared for his mother was made of such expensive wood, Mengzi explains that he was following the ancients, for whom lavish burials were the norm:

> This was not simply for the sake of a beautiful appearance but because it allowed, at the last, for the full expression of people's hearts. If people were not permitted to do this, they could not feel satisfaction, and if they did not have the means to do it, they also could not feel satisfaction. The ancients, if they were able to do this, and had the means to do it, all employed this practice. Why should I alone not have done so? Moreover, is it not a comfort to the mind to keep the earth from touching the bodies of those we love who have been transformed in death? I have heard that the noble person would not for anything in the world stint when it came to his parents." (Bloom 2009, 43)

Indeed, in the face of cogent challenges by the Mohists concerning the wastefulness and onerousness of burial rites and practices, which were put forth *from the perspective of the surviving family*, Mengzi doubles down and says *only* such kinds of expenditures, whether toward living or dead family members, can count as truly loving them. Consider 5A.3, where Mengzi explains why it is that Shun ennobled, enriched, and honored his brother Xiang—the most inhumane person in the world—despite meting out severe justice to criminals who did not reach his brother's level of depravity:

> "A humane man does not store up anger against his brother, nor harbor grievances against him. He simply loves him; that is all. Loving him, he desires him to be honored; loving him, he desires him to be wealthy. His enfeoffment at Youbi was to make Xiang wealthy and honored. If, while Shun himself was sovereign his brother had been a common man, could he be said to have loved him?" (Bloom 2009, 101)

Desiring that one's kin are wealthy and honored regardless of whether they are deserving, and regardless of whether they are inhumane, are here described as necessary conditions for being deemed to love

one's family. Lest readers doubt that Shun may have been blind to his brother's depravity, in 5A.2 Shun is described as vividly aware that he and his parents and brother tried to kill him not once but twice—by trying to trap him on the roof of a building and setting fire to it, and by asking that Shun dig a well so that they could bury him alive in it. (In both cases, Shun escaped death.) Indeed, after the well incident, Shun returned to his home to find Xiang there, fully intent on assuming Shun's possessions and claiming his wives as his own! And yet, upon seeing his brother in his home for the very first time, Shun was overcome with delight, since his younger brother was finally paying a visit. Indeed, he immediately asks Xiang to help him in governing the people. Mengzi explains this by saying that "a gentleman can be deceived by what aligns with his side of things"—in this case, Shun being deceived by his brother's appearance of fraternal care, which is what Shun always desired.

This preoccupation for approval and love from reprehensible kin is a consistent theme in the text. In 5A.1 we are told that Shun would weep and cry out to Heaven owing to his inability to get his parents (described consistently as reprehensible human beings) to love him. He toils in the fields and works to fulfill his duties, yet his parents do not love him. Even when Yao, his predecessor on the throne, presented the empire to Shun (instead of his biological children), Shun still felt as though homeless because of the absence of parental affection. Mengzi explains:

> "To have the approval of the men of service of the realm is something everyone desires, yet this was not enough to dispel his sorrow. To have the love of women is something every man desires, and Shun had as wives the two daughters of the sovereign, yet this was not enough to dispel his sorrow. Wealth is something everyone desires, and he had the wealth that comes with possessing the realm, yet this was not enough to dispel his sorrow. Honor is something that everyone desires, and he had the honor of becoming the Son of Heaven, but this was not enough to dispel his sorrow. The reason why the approval of men, the love of women, wealth, and honor were not enough to dispel his sorrow was that it was a sorrow that could be dispelled only by being in harmony with his parents. . . . The person of great filial devotion longs throughout his life for his father and mother. In the great Shun there

> was manifested one who, at the age of fifty, still longed for them." (Bloom 2009, 98)

There is no ambiguity in the message here: Regardless of one's achieve ments, no matter whether one is esteemed or entrusted with the greatest responsibility in the world, none of that is as important as receiving parental affection—even if the parents are reprehensible (indeed, even if they have attempted prolicide, not once but twice). In 4A.28 this message is reinforced:

> Mengzi said, "Greatly contented, the whole world turned to him, yet he regarded the whole world turning to him, greatly contented, as like so much grass. Only Shun was like this. He thought that if he could not win the hearts of his parents, he could not be a human being, and that if he could not reach an accord with his parents, he could not be a son. Through Shun's fulfilling the Way of serving his parents, Gusou [his father, aka the Blind Man][11] came to be pleased, and when Gusou came to be pleased, the world was transformed. When Gusou came to be pleased, all the fathers and sons in the world became secure. This is called 'great filiality.'" (Bloom 2009, 85)

Van Norden's selection of commentary on this passage is striking:

> Zhu Xi comments that, because of Shun, "All the sons in the world will know that there are no parents in the world whom one cannot serve. They will say to themselves, 'The manner in which I serve them is simply not as good as Shun's.' Consequently, all will be encouraged to be filial until their parents are also pleased. Then the fathers of the world will also never fail to be kind." (Van Norden 2008, 102)

This claim that Shun's self-abnegation was successful because it resulted in his depraved father being pleased with him is repeated in 5A.4. It is why Shun is, for Mengzi, a paragon of virtue. As Youngsun Back writes, "people hold his filiality in high esteem because his unremitting love successfully brought his broken family back into the ideal

[11] Both characters in his name—瞽瞍—have the meaning of "blind."

Confucian family: his family members came to care for him as well" (Back 2019, 541).

Regardless of how one thinks of these episodes, the existence of the sage king Shun—or, more precisely, Mengzi's representation of him[12]—effectively condemns future generations of children to bearing all manner of abuse from reprehensible parents, out of a blind hope that their parents too will be moved to delight as the Blind Man (Shun's father) was. As Zhu Xi implies, the problem lies with the *children*, who are guilty of not being as good as Shun was—for not being as dutiful, loving, and obedient in the face of reprehensible behavior. Ivanhoe expresses the worry here clearly.

> The Confucian tradition again seems to require too much, insisting that such children simply grin and bear it, no matter how bad their parents happen to be. One of the clearest examples of this problem is found in the Mengzi. In 5A.2 Mengzi discusses how Emperor Shun endured repeated attempts on his life by his father, stepmother, and half-brother and yet continued to love, support, and take joy in them. In 4A.28 we are told that in the end, Shun's perseverance so moved his father that he abandoned his wicked ways and became a model parent.[13] That makes for a fine story. However, does it describe a reasonable ideal or at least suggest one? (Ivanhoe 2007, 310)

One cannot help but conclude that the import of all of this is to render parents practically *beyond reproach* by their children, which feeds directly into the critics' worry mentioned at the outset.[14] As Roetz poignantly notes, Shun's filial piety

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[12] See Nivison (2002) and Eno (2002) on how Mengzi elaborates and embellishes on the Shun legacy in order to push forward his own philosophy.

[13] I see no reason to think that Gusou became virtuous. We are only told that he was pleased, and agree with Radice that in thinking it better to characterize him as becoming more amicable (2017, 199). See also 5A.4.

[14] Indeed, Zhu Xi was sure to include passages to this effect in his Elementary Learning (Xiaoxue 小學), a primer for the youth, such as one by Luo Congyan 羅從彥 (1072–1135, a student of Cheng Yi) who claimed that "there are no parents in the world who are not right" (Roetz 2008, 43).

> may be moving, but an ethic which suppresses anger in the face of injustice and instead relies on self-accusation or passive readiness to suffer hardly imparts the competence for postconventional action. Those Confucians, it seems, who praised these attitudes as exemplary, evaded a moral decision in favor of a moral exaction" (Roetz 1993, 60)[15]

"In view of these restrictions," he continues, "'moral vigilance' [i.e. remonstration] does not seem to have been worth much in practice" (Roetz 1993, 60).[16]

VII. Xunzi and the Way to Be a Son

Before concluding, we ought to note that we can indeed find an unambiguous statement in the classical corpus claiming that filiality demands doing what is *right*, defined *independently* of parental desires or commands. It is found in the *Xunzi*, a text that exerted comparatively minor influence on the later tradition. The "Way to be a Son" ("Zidao" 子道) chapter opens with the following lines:

> To be filial upon entering and to be a good younger brother upon going out is lesser conduct. To be compliant to one's superiors and devoted to one's inferiors is middle conduct. To follow the Way and not one's lord, to follow *yi* and not one's father is the greatest conduct. If one's intentions are at ease in ritual, and one's words are put forth in accordance with the proper classes of things, then the Way of the *ru* is complete. Even Shun could not improve on this by so much as a hair's breadth. (Hutton 2014, 325)

[15] In the terminology of Roetz's book, "post conventional" means going beyond accepted norms, mores, and conventions and developing a capacity to see how any of these might come into conflict with what is truly right.

[16] This dimension of filial piety is alive and well in Confucian heritage societies, and is known as "authoritarian filial piety" (AFP) in the empirical literature. AFP is characterized by two underlying factors: a willingness to set aside one's personal wishes and desires in order to comply with the will of one's parents, and a sense of obligation to exalt one's parents, maintain their status and prestige, and continue the family legacy. For a recent study showing how this mindset predicts passivity in the face of corruption, see Sarkissian and Buchtel (2023).

According to these lines, a filial son's obligations ultimately lie not with his father but with what is right (*yi* 義). The passage goes on to address some of the normal stumbling blocks that a son might face in making good on this commitment.

> There are three cases in which the filial son does not follow orders. When following orders will endanger one's parents/loved ones, but not following orders will make them safe, then the filial son will not follow orders, and this is having scruples. When following orders will disgrace one's parents, but not following orders will bring them honor, then the filial son will not follow orders being *yi* [right]. When following orders requires a beastly act, but not following orders requires cultivation and decorum, then the filial son will not follow orders, and this is being respectful. And so, not following orders when it is permissible to do so is to behave as though one is not a son. Following orders when it is not permissible to do so is to lack any scruples. If one understands the proper purposes of following and not following orders, and if one can be reverent, respectful, loyal, trustworthy, scrupulous, and honest so as to carry these out vigilantly, then this can be called the greatest filial piety. A proverb states, "Follow the Way, not your lord. Follow *yi*, not your father." This expresses my meaning. (Hutton 2014, 325)

Note the difference here when compared to everything that preceded. We are not told that a filial son simply remonstrates in the hope that the father will change his ways. Nor are we told that remonstration must end when a father does not yield. Instead, Xunzi makes it clear that a filial son will simply *disobey bad orders*, regardless of who issues them. As Radice writes, "the highest form of conduct is achieved when one ceases to follow the arbitrary will of one's superiors in favor of a more independent standard" (Radice 2017, 199). This kind of moral clarity is desperately needed in order to afford space for a son, otherwise burdened by obligations of servility, to refuse to indulge parents who cannot see the error of their ways. Alas, Xunzi is a comparatively minor and heterodox voice from the perspective of influential systematizers such as Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200 CE).[17]

[17] Though see Justin Tiwald's helpful survey on how Xunzi was received among the Neo-Confucians (Tiwald 2016).

VIII. Conclusion

In later times, filial duties become ever more stringent, demanding absolute compliance and being codified in law (with brutal punishments for violators) starting in the *Tang Dynastic Code* (650 CE)[18] And non-canonical (yet influential) texts such as *Twenty-Four Filial Ones* (*Ershisi Xiao* 二十四孝, Yuan dynasty) contain disturbing examples of extreme filiality that would put even Shun to shame, all presented as paragons worthy of admiration.

However, as I have contended, canonical texts from the classical era already contain passages that license a straightforward and unqualified obedient attitude toward one's parents. At best, remonstration must be conveyed gently, and the point at which a filial child should stop coincides with when parents might get upset and the relationship strained. For reprehensible parents this point will come quickly. (In fact, if a child can foresee this resistance, why engage in remonstration at all? Why take the risk?) At worst, demanding goodness from one's own father is itself tantamount to an unfilial act. It thus seems unrealistic and irresponsible to expect that children will have the strength and moral wherewithal to stand up to reprehensible parents, as that would be counter-normative in a culture that venerates these texts.

Of course, there were historical reasons (having to do with the succession of power and international intrigue among rival families) that may have lead to such stringent emphasis on filial abnegation in the classical period. Ivanhoe, crediting Jack Kline, points out that "the children of rulers and ministers were well situated to betray their kingdoms to neighboring states. Strongly advocating perpetual patience and an attitude of deference would have worked to prevent the children of politically powerful people from causing considerable mischief" (Ivanhoe 2007, 310n31). But he is quick to add that "these kinds of arguments no longer offer contemporary people good reasons for such an attitude or practice."

The current author is in agreement.

[18] See Knapp (2006).

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