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Duties to Aging Parents

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"What do grown children owe their parents?" Over two decades ago philosopher Jane English asked this question and came up with the startling answer: nothing (English 1979). English joins many contemporary philosophers in rejecting the once-traditional view that grown children owe their parents some kind of fitting repayment for past services rendered. The problem with the traditional view, as argued by many, is, first, that parents have duties to provide fairly significant services to their growing children, and persons do not owe repayment for others' mere performance of duty; second, even where parents go above and beyond duty in their loving and generous rearing of their children, the benefits are bestowed, at least on young children, without their voluntary acceptance and consent, and so, again, fail to generate any obligation of subsequent repayment on their part (see Blustein 1982: 182-3). Moreover, the entire idiom of obligation and repayment, in English's

words, "tends to obscure, or even to undermine, the love that is the correct ground of filial obligation" (352).

English's alternative, however -- that children strictly "owe" their parents nothing except what flows naturally from whatever love and affection exist between them -- also strikes many as problematic. Christina Hoff Sommers offers examples of what seem to be clearly delinquent adult children, who simply don't "feel" like sharing their lives with their aging parents, or providing any emotional or financial support to them, and so don't (Sommers 1986: 440-41). Sommers points out that we need some talk of obligations in order to fill in the cracks in human relationships where love and affection fail: "The ideal relationship cannot be 'duty-free,' if only because sentimental ties may come unraveled, often leaving one of the parties at a material disadvantage'" (450-51). Sommers proposes as her alternative to English that legitimate duties arise out of special relationships defined by social roles: being a father or mother, a son or a daughter, "is socially as well as biologically prescriptive; it not only defines what one is; it also defines who one is and what one owes" (447). According to Sommers, "The filial duties of adult children include such things as being grateful, loyal, attentive, respectful and deferential to parents (more so than to strangers)" (447).

Sommers's view is not without troubles of its own. The stress on social roles seems to make family relationships overly

conventional and doesn't distinguish family relationships from any of the myriad other social roles we all occupy. Moreover, some of the duties Sommers proposes (gratitude, deference) echo traditional debt-based views of the source of filial obligation that most of us now reject.

In what follows I look at the duties of grown children to parents from a somewhat different angle. I begin with English's claim that the "duties" in question are merely "duties of friendship," duties situated within and made sense of through an ongoing mutual relationship, but then offer an argument that allows us to establish genuine filial obligations in a way that she is unable to do. I argue that family relationships are importantly different both from friendship (English's analogy) and from other social roles (Sommers's analogy) in their uniquely unchosen and unconditional nature. I suggest that we can shed light on what grown children owe their parents by looking first at a category of family relationships less shadowed by traditional encrustations of debt and gratitude: the relationship of siblings. I claim that we have strong reasons to participate in unconditional, unchosen relationships and corresponding obligations not to deny others the good of participating in such relationships with us. I conclude by trying to say something about exactly what grown children owe their parents: grown children owe their parents those things that flow from participating together in an unconditional,

unchosen relationship, and not (generally) material goods that can be otherwise obtained.

The Nature of Family Relationships

Many philosophers in the past few decades have turned their attention away from moral impartiality toward special relationships: friendship, membership in a community, family ties. I want to advance a claim about what makes family ties special even among other "special" relationships.

For a point of contrast, let us look first at non-familial friendship. As English characterizes friendship, certain "obligations" flow from friendship, but these are obligations only in an attenuated sense. What they are is, rather, defining features of friendship itself, features which, were they absent from A's interactions with B, we would say that A and B were not friends at all. So, friends care about each other, take an interest in each other's problems and successes, spend time together, help each other when needed, and so forth. Are these strictly speaking "obligations"? No, but were two people who claimed to be friends not to do any of these things for each other, we would question their claim to be friends in the first place. To be friends simply is to do these kinds of things for each other. We are given, as it were, the following choice: either be friends (and then do these sort of things for each

other), or else don't be friends (and so don't do such things for each other). The imperatives of friendship are at bottom hypothetical. One can escape the so-called obligations of friendship by declining to be a friend.

Families strike me as importantly different. When it comes to families, there is an imperative not only to fulfill whatever obligations are defined and generated by the underlying relationship, but also to continue to participate in the relationship itself. We no longer have the same kind of choice: be a friend, or walk away. In the case of families, I will argue, walking away is not the same kind of option.

Of course, there are many different kinds of family relationships: that of spouses to each other, of parents to children, of children to parents, and of siblings to siblings. In a liberal, modern society such as ours, which permits initial choice of spouse and subsequent easy, no-fault, non-stigmatizing divorce, people may seem to marry each other, and to stay married to each other, through choice. The ideal, however, remains one of lasting commitment: in the vows that are still typical of most marriages, the partners to it pledge to remain with each other for better or worse, for richer or poorer, through sickness and health, as long as they both shall live. Few marriages begin with vows to stay together only as long as either party fails to find any other partner more eligible or

attractive. Still, there is an undeniable element of choice in the initial mating.

Parents also seem to choose to have children in a way that children do not choose to have parents: I choose to give birth in a way that I did not choose to be born. But this appearance of genuine, extensive parental choice cannot survive closer scrutiny. Certainly the choice that I have of my children is much less than the choice that I have of my spouse, or any of my friends.

First, while one may choose to be a parent, to be the parent of some-child-or-other, in the vast majority of cases, one has little or no choice of the identity of the actual child in question. Except in rare cases of adoption of older children with already revealed and well-established personalities, the choice of a child is the choice of a pig in a poke. Gender, appearance, intelligence, talents, temperament -- all appear to the parents as an unfolding surprise. Parents of two or more children are invariably astonished at the differences between individuals produced by the same parental genes and reared in the same family environment. We are still far away from the prospect of "designer" children, tailor-made to match parental expectations.

Second, even beyond one's initial lack of choice regarding the actual children to parent, the continuation of the relationship itself does not reflect parental choice to any

significant degree, or so I will argue. Now, many philosophers seek to base parental obligations to children on other than bare biological grounds. In their view, I owe this or that to my children not because of the brute biological fact that I begat them (male) or bore them (female), but because I have voluntarily assumed such an obligation (O'Neill 1979, Blustein 1982). I signaled my willingness to assume it by taking my child home with me from the hospital rather than exercising the option of giving him or her up, via adoption, to someone else to raise. And in a society, like ours, that offers safe and legal abortion, the mother at least could have had an abortion and so declined to bring the child into existence in the first place. Thus, by not aborting, she chooses to give birth, and so, unless she surrenders her parental rights and obligations to another, chooses to become a parent. Or so runs one common view.

This grounding of parental obligations in parental choice, however, is vulnerable to challenge on several points (see also Smith 1993: 51-56). What if I give birth and, as it turns out, there happens to be no one else available and willing to adopt my child? Surely I have some extra responsibility for this child, my child, the child to whom I have just given birth, whether I assume it voluntarily or not. And, a more telling point: suppose I do accept responsibility for some child, either by taking my own biological child home with me after its birth, or by agreeing to become an adoptive parent. What exactly have

I committed myself to, in so doing? If we assimilate parenthood to friendship, then the answer would be that I have committed myself to taking care of the child as long as I feel like doing so; that taking care of a child is constitutive of being a parent, and I continue in the parental relationship as long as I feel like doing so. But few would be ready to endorse this view of parenthood. If there is a basic choice involved, I submit, it is to take care of the child forever, come what may, whether I still want to or not. The choice of a biological parent to give up his or her child for adoption at birth is seldom criticized; the choice of a parent, biological or adoptive, to give up his or her child several years later would be almost uniformly criticized, and I would argue, rightly. Now, parents may, and often do, subsequently delegate or transfer certain of the responsibilities of parenthood: they hire nannies, arrange for day-care, send their children off to public or private schools, allow other relatives to establish trust funds in their names. But what (in most cases) they do not delegate or transfer is the relationship itself. They still, through all these other alterations in their performed duties, remain parents, the persons unconditionally and permanently committed to the love and care of this particular child.

Why is this? Is the answer simply: this is what you promised in that initial act of assuming parental responsibility -- to care for the child forever? Why should we understand the

promise in such a sweeping and all-encompassing way? Where else in life do we promise such huge things extending over such a long duration of time? Well, as just noted, we promise them in marriage, understood as the foundation of a family, breaking such promises as often as we manage to keep them. But where else? Consent itself is insufficient to establish such deep and enduring duties. For who could ever consent, in an informed way, to such a thing? Whoever could do it?

My answer, to the question of how parents end up in long-term committed relationships with their children, instead is this. It is a great good to participate in a relationship that is enduring and unconditional. And because it is a great good for a child to be in that kind of relationship, and a great harm to the child to be deprived of that kind of relationship, parents acquire an obligation to stick with the relationship, which means to fulfil the tasks that flow from it, through thick and thin. Indeed, as I will explain, it is a great good precisely to participate in a relationship that is importantly unchosen. Thus, far from grounding the obligations of parenthood in a recognition of the importance of choice, my argument grounds these obligations in the recognition of the importance of that which is unchosen.

Now, is the great good here to participate in an unconditional and unchosen relationship, or to be the recipient of the unconditional love which usually -- but not invariably --

accompanies it? Some parents -- only a few, I would speculate -- don't love their children, or more properly, for some sad reason of their own history and constitution, can't. But most of us do love our children in this way. It is very odd that we do, that we love them before they were born, with no knowledge of a single fact about them except that in some sense they are ours. Biological parents love their children in this way; adoptive parents, waiting for the arrival of a child they have never seen from half the world away, love their children in this way. It is a love based on nothing distinctive about the individual in question, nothing at all. One might wonder why we should even value love like this in the first place. I have heard some people devalue God's love in this way: God loves me? Yeah, well, big deal, God loves everybody. But parents do not love everybody. They love this child, these (small number of) children. But why should I care about being loved if the love isn't based on any trait or quality of mine, any distinctive feature, any uniqueness, anything that has to do with me? Well, love based on my distinctive uniqueness will come; parents do come to dwell lovingly, and sometimes despairingly, on all their child's individual characteristics. But the only answer I can come up with here is that it is simply a great good to have some reservoir of love that does not have to be earned and, more important, cannot be forfeited. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in one of her Sonnets from the Portuguese, love based on

any particular trait or feature is vulnerable to altering when that trait or feature alters. So Browning writes, "If thou must love me, let it be for naught/ Except for love's sake only." Love based on a choice can vary with changes in the features of the beloved that motivated and justified that choice. Unchosen love is, in this way, uniquely secure.

If this -- unconditional, unchosen love -- is the great good, however, is there any value to a continuing parental relationship in which such love is not present? I would argue that there is. One certainly can't have love of this sort in the absence of the relationship, so the relationship at the least is the necessary precondition of the love. And the relationship itself can breed love over time -- not love based on appreciation of any set of traits or characteristics, but love based simply on a shared history, of the passage of time in another's company. Martha Minow notes that "duties and feelings interact in complicated ways" and that "feelings themselves can be educated as someone learns about and carries out responsibilities" (Minow 1997: 267). Far from familiarity breeding contempt, I have found that familiarity breeds fondness, comfort in each other's presence, a quiet "growing accustomed" to the other's face. Sheer continuity, steadfastness over time, is itself a great good in one's life. Of course, I am assuming here that the parents are making a

good-faith effort to love the child. I address the question of indifferent, neglectful, or even abusive parents, below.

Now this argument, appealing to the great good of unconditional and unchosen relationships, as I have stated it, is symmetrical between parents and children. While there may be some asymmetry in the choice involved on the part of parents and of children to enter into the relationship (though I have argued that the asymmetry is easily overstated, through overstating the presence of genuine parental choice), the good of being in the relationship itself is a good for all parties to it. As it is a great good for children to participate in such a relationship, so it is a great good for parents to participate in it as well. It may be a greater good for children, simply in that they are developing and forming their sense of their own identity and of their own self-worth, but for all persons, I submit, it is a great good to have at least some relationships in one's life that are unchosen and unconditional. This will lead me to make some speculations about what grown children owe their parents, but first I want to make a detour to look at the relationship of siblings to each other, for this is also an unchosen relationship. We do not choose our brothers and sisters, as we choose our friends. And herein lies the distinctive good offered to us by this relationship, which will shape our expectations of what siblings owe to each other.

Brothers and Sisters

What, if anything, do grown brothers and sisters owe each other? Do they owe each other more or less than what they owe friends? How are we to understand their relationship and what flows from it? I would approach an answer to this question by saying that there is no way we can even begin to itemize duties of siblings to each other without first looking at the nature of the relationship they share. And, again, the distinctive feature of this relationship, in contrast to most friendships, is that it is unchosen and in some important sense uncontingent on the merits, affinities, characters, virtues, and accomplishments of the parties to it. Brothers and sisters are simply born, or adopted, into the same family; they do not select each other; they may not even like each other all that well; it may be that if they were not siblings they would have little or nothing to do with each other. But they are siblings. They are stuck with each other. Each one is a "given" in the other's life.

Now, if we were to follow English's model, we would say that siblings have only such "obligations" to each other as flow from their ongoing feeling of affection toward each other; insofar as they are friends, they should treat each other in the ways constitutive and definitive of friendship -- and if they no longer want to be friends, so be it. And if we were to follow Sommers's model, we would say that we would need to look at what

flows from the social role of "brother" or "sister." But I maintain that there is a great good in continuing the relationship, and engaging in the activities characteristic of it, even in the absence of the appropriate underlying feelings. And I would maintain that the social role of "brother" or "sister" is crucially undefined and largely beside the point. My sister is not special to me because we occupy a certain social role vis-a-vis each other.

So what do brothers and sisters owe each other? My claim is that they owe each other simply this: to continue in an ongoing relationship as brothers and sisters. This means sharing each others' lives to some extent -- at the minimum, talking occasionally on the telephone or by e-mail, seeing each other sometimes at family gatherings, keeping each other somehow present in each other's lives. How often is often enough? I'm not arrogant enough to prescribe that here; it can certainly vary from family to family. Siblings may be more or less "close," and I do not want to argue that closer is always better. But, all things equal, estrangement is always worse.

If this is what brothers and sisters owe each other, it follows that there are two things brothers and sisters do not owe each other. The first is, to put it in its most general terms, anything they can in principle get from somebody else, whether or not they can actually get it from them in the current state of affairs of their life. They owe each other only what

they can get from nobody else: that is, the experience of being in an unchosen, unconditional relationship with a brother or sister. In particular, here I mean to exclude financial support. Money one can get from anywhere. In my view, one should get it from one's own efforts; failing that, one should get it from communally provided support for the indigent. What if the latter fails as well? Do I have any special responsibility to help an indigent brother or sister, more than I have to help an indigent stranger? Or an indigent friend? Is blood thicker than water here? My answer on this point is a bit uncertain. Usually, loving brothers and sisters will want to help each other, when they can; at the same time, financial entanglements can deform even the most loving relationships. I have known more siblings estranged from each other for financial reasons than for any others. Thus, from my own admittedly anecdotal evidence, I think it is better if brothers and sisters do not depend on each other financially. Here, too, different families may have different expectations for what it means to participate in an ongoing family relationship. But for the most part, I would continue to say: siblings do not owe each other what they can get from somebody else.

To put this same point another way, Thomas Donaldson distinguishes between what he calls "value-intrinsic" and "value-extrinsic" institutions, where an institution is "value-intrinsic" to the "extent to which an institution's ends are

logically unobtainable without the existence of the institution itself" and an institution is "value-extrinsic" to "the extent to which an institution's ends conceivably could be achieved by other means" (Donaldson 1993: 36). Recasting his point in the language of relationships rather than institutions, we can say that it is important that siblings give each other goods that are value-intrinsic to their relationship, goods which simply cannot be acquired in any other way, and far less important that they give each other goods that are value-extrinsic, even if conventional expectations, in a given society, may tie these goods in some way to the relationship. It is the value-intrinsic goods which are at the heart of family relationships. They are what brothers and sisters most fundamentally owe one another: the goods of being in the relationship itself.

The second, related thing that is not owed by siblings to each other, in my view, is sheer preference for one's siblings in giving out some benefit not directly tied to the relationship itself. Such preference has often been taken to be paradigmatic of "special" relationships and in direct challenge to the "impartiality" required by universal morality: to be in a special relationship just is to favor certain others in this way (see, e.g., Houlgate 1993). But I do not see that special relationships, such as family relationships, require this at all, in any mechanical way, except for the goods that are value-intrinsic to that relationship, as discussed above. Siblings do

not owe each other preference in hiring, for example. In fact, such preference is often (rightly) frowned on as nepotism. I owe my siblings some measure of preference only in how I spend my time, how I invest my affections, how I structure my days, but that is all. Philosophers at this point will want to introduce a range of hypothetical cases: if a trolley runs off the track and strikes both my sister and a stranger, whom do I help first? How serious of an injury to a stranger outweighs my duty to help my sister first? And so on. I am one who believes that in situations of dire emergency, philosophical argumentation runs out, and real human emotion appropriately claims us. As Bernard Williams famously argues, in such cases "we just act, as a possibly confused result of the situation we are in. That, I suspect, is very often an exceedingly good thing" (Williams 1973: 118). When the trolley strikes, I will run to my sister's side. What I will do next will depend on the details of the situation in which I find myself. More than this I cannot specify in advance.

Parents and Children

Let us now draw closer to the case at hand -- the duties of grown children to their parents -- by asking what parents owe their grown children. My answer here is the same as it was in the case of siblings. Parents don't owe their children what they could, and should, get from anyone else: a job, a place to

live, money -- either during their lives, or in an inheritance after their death. In my view, children have no claim whatsoever on any inheritance of their parents' wealth; to the contrary, we would make great strides toward social justice by eliminating the practice of inheritance altogether (Haslett 1986, Blustein 1982: Appendix). Instead, our parents owe us only what we can get from parents alone (to the extent that they can provide it): unconditional love, abiding interest in our activities, pride in our accomplishments, worry over our problems, advice based on knowing us longer and better than anyone else, time, companionship -- the continuation of the relationship itself.

What, then do grown children owe their parents? The very same thing. Grown children do not owe their parents a home to live in, or money to live on, or day-to-day health care; nor, contrary to Sommers, do they owe their parents deference and gratitude. They owe them simply continuation in the relationship as their children, sharing their lives, caring about their lives, building an ongoing life together. Nothing more, nothing less.

Now, if we follow English, grown children may want to provide their parents with many other additional goods; they may want to offer them a home, pay their bills, care for them physically when they are no longer able to care for themselves. And if we follow Sommers, there may (or may not be) certain

social expectations to do such things. But this, in my view, goes beyond what is entailed simply by the continuation of the relationship itself. I do not see that such additional services are owed to parents by their grown children any more than they are owed to grown children by their parents, or to grown siblings by each other. All that is owed is the relationship itself. Thus my view is more demanding than English's and less demanding than Sommers's. English seems to require essentially nothing, except what is defined by participation in a relationship of a certain kind, whereas I require participation in the relationship itself. Sommers requires whatever is specified by our social understandings of certain roles, whereas I want to reject certain common (though certainly not universally shared) understandings of what grown children owe their parents as unnecessarily burdensome. We do not owe our parents services that can easily be provided by others, such as basic physical care or financial support. I think it is a strength of my view that it identifies a plausible and liveable middle ground between two untenable extremes.

Objections and Replies

Let me now clarify and further defend my view by considering a range of questions and objections that can be raised regarding it.

1) Can we really require people, morally, to be in a relationship when they don't want to? In part, this objection

may be a restatement of the earlier question whether the relationship itself has any real value in the absence of the unconditional love which is the real good in question. And my answer is the same as it was before: that there is some good in the relationship itself, especially if the parties to it make some real effort to cultivate the feelings that should accompany it. Of course, no one is out there enforcing this obligation. There can be laws mandating financial support of parents by children, laws which I would oppose, but no laws requiring children to visit their parents, or call them on their birthdays, let alone laws mandating love. But I would say there is an obligation here nonetheless: the obligation not to deny another a great good that one can supply at relatively modest cost to oneself. And this obligation is supported by both prudential as well as moral reasons, for in providing this great good to another, I also provide it to myself.

2) What about dysfunctional, toxic families? What, if anything, do grown children owe parents, or parents owe grown children, or grown siblings owe each other, when the underlying relationship is seriously damaging to at least one of the individuals participating in it? Here I would say two things. First, mutuality is an important part of the good of family relationships; it is what makes them relationships at all. It is hard, if not impossible, for me to have a relationship of a certain kind with you, if you do not have a relationship of that

kind with me. If a relationship is proving toxic, or too painful, it is fine to sever it; one is not required to sacrifice one's own personhood -- one's identity, one's happiness, one's sanity -- to provide some good for others, if one even can provide this good in such a setting. That said, second, it is worthwhile to try to mend and heal family relationships when possible, as much for one's own sake as for the sake of one's parents or siblings. Reconciliation and forgiveness are great goods in their own right, though, again, they can be purchased at too high a price. But most people who reach out to parents, children, and siblings who have wronged them, I suspect, are not sorry for having done so.

3) Does my view give undue weight to biological ties? Does it just mask a fetish for the biological? Where, after all, do truly unchosen relationships come from, if not from our biological links to one another? While I intend for my view to give equal consideration to adoptive and biological families, to families formed in both conventional and unconventional ways, we may have a clearer case of unchosen relationships in the standard, biological case. It is interesting that in one much-discussed surrogacy case, when parties were disputing the custody of a child born with a serious disability, biological ties won out over contractual agreements: "when it was proved that the child was certainly biologically theirs, [the Stivers] accepted the child, named him Christopher Ray, and sought help

for him" (Alpern 1992: 336). There may be some primacy given to the biological on my view, but I don't think it is excessive, or disturbing. It simply acknowledges, as Patricia Smith writes, that, "in setting the boundaries of the composition of families, ... in all times and places biology is central" (47).

4) Along the same lines, does my view ignore or wrongly deny the extent to which families, at bottom, are chosen? As Martha Minow argues, "family" as defined by law is hardly "natural or obvious" but reveals "the political, religious, and social choices embedded in that institution" (Minow 1997: 250). Minow is of course correct that current family law reflects a long and sometimes confused series of societal choices regarding what should and should not be recognized as a family. But I think that there is more disagreement at the margins than there is at the core. Moreover, even as Minow argues for an expansive definition of family membership, she argues for a stringent attitude toward family obligation. I read this as saying that while we may have some (fairly small degree of) choice regarding who counts as a family member, to recognize another as a family member is to recognize that one stands to another in a relationship where the concept of "choice" now ceases to apply.

5) This leads me to another, closely related question. Are family relationships indeed as "special" as I have said? Don't many of us have friends who are as close to us as our siblings, who become, in essence, "families of choice"? My answer here is

yes, of course we can, but to treat friends as family is precisely to discard the idiom of "choice" in our interactions with them. A family by choice, I submit, is not a family at all. To have a friend who becomes a "sister" or a "brother" is to have a friend to whom one recognizes that one is irrevocably committed, committed come what may, from whom it would be inconceivable to walk away.

6) What if one has several brothers and sisters? Can one opt out of a continuing relationship with one's siblings then, or with one's parents, on the grounds that the great good of participating in an unchosen, unconditional relationships is available to them elsewhere? They don't need to be in such a relationship with me; they can enjoy it with them. In a very large family, family ties may be somewhat attenuated -- this was Aristotle's objection to Plato's model of family relationships in The Republic -- but generally, it is a great good to have more than one such relationship in one's life. It is too much to expect any one relationship to provide the entire good available here. (And, again, the good in question that I provide to another is equally, on my view, a good for me.) On a similar note, does my view establish obligations to participate in a continuing relationship not only with parents, children, and siblings, but with grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins twice removed? My answer here would be that this may well be so, depending on the particular configuration of the

family. Some large, far-flung families have little interaction beyond the nuclear family, but in others such relationships may be an important part of one's participation in family life.

7) What does this view imply for relationships with aged parents who have become senile, who can no longer participate in an ongoing mutual relationship? One implication of my view, which some will view as welcome, some as unwelcome, is that the obligation to participate in an ongoing relationship continues only when the relationship itself remains possible. I do not have -- cannot have -- an obligation to be in a relationship with someone who cannot be in a relationship with me. It is one of the tragedies of senility that genuine relationships with other human beings are no longer possible. But can't I continue to love, unconditionally, someone who is senile and manifest this love to him or her in various ways, even if he or she isn't able to recognize it? Yes. Ideally familial love continues through all alterations; but again, the relationship that is in many ways the foundation of the love cannot. Heartless as it may seem to say this, I see little point in spending extensive time with someone who does not know me for who I am. To do so is to engage in a pretense that a relationship still continues which, tragically, is gone forever.

8) Do we generally have an obligation to provide others with a great good that they can get nowhere else? Can we generalize beyond the familial case to establish other

obligations to provide others with goods of this sort -- for example, to donate blood or bone marrow, if I have the only matching type? My answer here is: maybe. But such cases will be very rare. My principle is not that I have an obligation to provide others with a great good that no one else will provide, but only with a great good that no one else can provide -- if I can provide it at a relatively modest cost to myself, and especially if I can provide it in a way that benefits me as well. In the family-relationship case, I benefit from benefitting you; we both gain equally from continuing in a mutual relationship with each other. In the bone marrow case, the benefit is almost completely one-sided, which makes a difference to our assessment of the two cases.

9) This leads me to my final question. How far should we go in maintaining family relationships in our lives? How much do these relationships demand of us? This echoes our earlier discussion: how "close" a relationship is close enough? Here we need to remember that while family relationships are a great good, on the view proposed here, they are not the only good that life offers to us, not by a long shot. The good of participating in an unchosen, unconditionally loving relationship needs to be balanced against the many other goods that make up a flourishing life: satisfying and meaningful work, spiritual growth, health and fitness, creative expression, and sheer fun. No mechanical guidelines can be offered here.

I have a friend who has done nothing of significance with her life for the past ten years but take care of her completely senile and demented mother, including a daily battle over flossing her mother's few remaining teeth. I am fairly confident that this is too much -- both because my friend has neglected every other good in her life, and because her mother is no longer capable of engaging in a real relationship with her. She flosses her mother's teeth every day not as a daughter who has shared a long, complex, and enduring life with her mother, but as a total stranger. Most of us can also come up with cases where it seems that the relationship is valued and nurtured far too little -- where months and years go by, without any effort at achieving a genuine connection. But, again, there is no simple algorithm that can give us all our answers here.

Conclusions

I have argued that family relationships are special in that they are, for the most part, unchosen and unconditional. Because it is a great good to participate in such relationships, one has prudential reasons to do so for the sake of oneself and moral reasons to do so for the sake of others. That is, one has some actual obligation to continue in family relationships. However, what one owes adult family members is only continuation in the relationship itself, and provision of the goods internal

to that relationship, not any of a wide range of external goods that can be procured in other ways. Grown children, in my view, do not owe their parents financial support, or a home, or nursing services; they do owe them continuation in the relationship itself, insofar as the (non-senile) parents are capable of participating in it, too. And the great good they provide to their parents through doing this is a good that they equally provide to themselves.

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