

# The Endless Umbilical Cord: Parental Obligation to Grown Children

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## ABSTRACT

One might think that parental obligation to children ends with the end of childhood. I argue that if we consider why parents are obligated to their children, we will see that this view is false. Creating children exposes them to life's risks. When we expose others to risks, we are often obligated to minimize damages and compensate for harms. Life's risks last a lifetime, therefore parental obligation to one's children does too. Grown children's autonomy, and grown children's independent responsibility for some of their own problems, can sometimes limit what parental responsibility demands of parents but it doesn't do away with the responsibility. I argue that my conclusions are not as counterintuitive as they might initially seem. I also consider the implications that parental obligation to grown children might have on the oft assumed obligation that grown children have to care for their parents.

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## I. WHY NOT FOREVER?

Taking care of children is hard work. When children are born, they can do almost nothing for themselves, they even need help *burping*. As children get older, they usually become more independent and able to care for themselves, freeing up their parents from bathing and burping them. And when they turn 18, or 21, or (increasingly) 31, children often can really take care of themselves, from burping to paying rent. The parents are off the hook then, right?

In a 2015 episode of *This American Life*, a woman in her early twenties, who was in

and out of an abusive relationship since she was a teenager, explained that one reason why she stayed with her abuser for so long was that, without him, she was alone since her mother spent weekends and holidays with her boyfriend. The young woman was even alone on Christmas. I found myself angry with the mother for not being there for her daughter, regardless of her daughter's age. Why leave your young adult daughter alone for the holidays when you know her abusive boyfriend is waiting in the wings? (The mother was aware of her daughter's situation). To me, the fact that, over the course of her years in an abusive relationship, the teenager has grown into a young adult doesn't do away with her mother's obligation to care for her as needed. Am I alone in this intuitive response?

It is not uncommon to think that parental obligation to children ends with the end of childhood. Once children are grown, we might think that they are then able to care for themselves and parental obligation to care for them is therefore concluded. But, if we consider why parents are obligated to their children in the first place, it is unclear that parental obligation to children comes with an expiration date.

In this paper, I argue that parental obligation is lifelong (i.e., for the duration of the child's lifetime). Parental obligation may sometimes require less of parents due to the autonomous capacity and agency of adult children, and it can sometimes be constrained by the parents' own legitimate interests, but it never ends. I will begin, in Section II, by discussing the reasons why parents are obligated to care for their children and argue that it is difficult to find a reasonable account that will include a less than lifelong endpoint to the obligation. In Section III, I will discuss limits to parental obligation to grown children. Section IV will address objections, and Section V will address some further questions and implications of the lifelong parental obligation for which I argue.

## II. SOURCE OF PARENTAL OBLIGATION

Why are parents obligated to care for their children? Before we saddle parents with lifelong obligations to their children, it behooves us to think about the reasons why parents are obligated to care for their children at all. Maybe once we consider why parents have to take care of their children, we will see that they don't have to do so for as long as their children live.

1. *Risk Imposition*: I argue that parental obligation is incurred because, by procreating, parents expose children to life's risks (Weinberg 2015). Children exist because

their parents engaged in procreative acts which exposed their children to life's risks.<sup>1</sup> And when we expose other people to risks, we are often obligated to take care to minimize damages by meeting some standard of care (however it is set) and/or by providing compensation if the risk ripens into a harm. For example, because driving is an activity that exposes others to risk, we're required to learn the rules of the road, drive uninebriated, buy collision insurance (i.e., meet the standard of care for driving), and pay for damages when we fail to meet the standard of care set for driving and damages result.

It is procreators who expose children to life's risks and, I argue, thereby incur parental obligations to care for their children. Therefore, when I speak of parental obligations, I am speaking of the obligations incurred by procreators. I have argued elsewhere regarding which sorts of acts count as procreative and thereby incur parental obligations (Weinberg 2008 and 2015); here, I argue for how long those obligations last. One may disagree regarding whether procreators incur parental obligations, regarding which acts count as procreative, and regarding which sorts of parental obligations are transferrable and what constitutes such transfer. My arguments in this paper are aimed at how long the parental obligation incurred by procreators lasts.

Procreation exposes children to life's risks, which are numerous, unpredictable, and can result in grave harm.<sup>2</sup> Because life is very risky, children are very vulnerable, and some of the risks and harms of life are unpredictable and/or unavoidable, our standard of parental care for children is very high. We require parents to attend to all of their child's many needs and to raise, nurture, and guide their child to, hopefully, an autonomous adulthood. That is, very roughly speaking, our parental standard of

1. One might wonder about others who might seem to have similarly imposed life's risks on a person, e.g., a doctor who saves an unconscious person's life (without explicit consent) or someone who stops a person's suicide attempt. However, these cases differ in important and relevant respects from the parental case because parents create a new life but the person whose life is being saved in the doctor and suicide cases is already alive and enmeshed in life's risks. Not only are the people saved in these cases already alive and living with life's risks, but also the saviors presumably have reason to believe that the person they are saving really wants to continue living, thus saving is more like acting on behalf of another than imposing risks on another. Thanks to Matthew Smith for raising these kinds of cases.

2. Some might find it odd to speak of imposing life's risks on our children because, unlike other risk imposing cases, our children don't exist prior to our procreating them so there seems no clearly available baseline from which to assess harm. In my view, existence and nonexistence are both neutral states and can serve as a baseline of neutrality from which to assess procreative harms. I argue in much more detail for this view in Weinberg, *The Risk of a Lifetime* (2015). Some may also consider life's benefits to generally offset its harms and thereby relieve parents of much procreative and even parental responsibility. This view is reminiscent of the non-identity problem (see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press, 1984), which I respond to in great detail in Weinberg, *op. cit.*

care. Our parental standard of care is very high but we tend to think of it as fading out with the autonomous adulthood of grown children.

I am arguing here for a parental standard of care that is lifelong. As parents, we try to encourage our children's autonomy, independence, and self-reliance because that's good for them. (I will be using the term 'autonomy' in the broadest sense, to include not only the capacity to make decisions using one's rational capacities, etc., but to be capable of independence and making one's way in the world). People tend to feel good and fare well when they are autonomous. That works well for children, and the adults into which they grow, freeing up parents from the job of caring for their grown children, and allowing grown children to flourish as independent agents. Usually. But very often things don't work out that way.

It can seem reasonable to think of parental responsibility as ending when children are grown because, as children grow, their vulnerability usually decreases and they usually become able to care for themselves and wish to do so. They no longer need or want the care, so it seems reasonable to stop requiring parents to give it to them, especially since autonomy is usually good for people and contributes to the ability to live a life of human flourishing. But I argue that this way of thinking mischaracterizes the situation. In my view, parental care for children is a lifelong obligation but, when grown children do better caring for themselves than parental obligation to care for them is not expired but, instead, is fulfilled by the autonomous adult children. When grown children encounter illness, disability, addiction, or other significant life challenges with which they need emotional, physical, or financial help, and parental help could really help them, it is hard to see why the parents would not be obligated to help. If it's only a child's ability to care for herself, and the fact that people tend to want to care for themselves and fare better when they do, that lets parents step back from their care taking role, when it is not the case that children want to or will be better off without parental help, the obligation seems to remain, unaltered. The procreative act exposes the child to life's risks and life's risks last a lifetime. When it's better for the child to continue receiving parental care, setting parental obligation to care for children to just expire at 'adulthood' seems arbitrary, and unjustified.

The risk imposition source of parental obligation points toward a lifelong obligation. What about alternative sources of parental obligation? Will those sources point to an earlier end point?

2. *Volunteerism*: Some may think that parental responsibility results from whichever act counts as volunteering to be a parent (examples include Hill 1991 and Millum

2008). That seems to make sense because volunteering to do something usually obligates you to do it. But thinking of parental responsibility as the result of volunteering for it will not help us figure out when parental responsibility ends because all it really tells us is that parental responsibility is a voluntary commitment of some sort. It does not tell us what counts as a voluntary commitment of this type, nor does it tell us the limits or endpoint of that commitment. It seems reasonable to presume that volunteering for parental obligation commits one to fulfilling that obligation, leaving it to other theories to explain the nature and extent of the commitment. All volunteerism tells us is that the obligation is incurred voluntarily. In contrast, the risk imposition view tells us how parental obligation is incurred, namely, by imposing a risk, and it can be informative regarding the nature and duration of that obligation by looking to how we treat cases of risk imposition more generally.

3. *Causation*: Some think that parental obligation to care for children is a result of the fact that parents are a primary or proximate cause of their children's existence. This account is very broad and difficult to parse because causation is multifaceted and can lead one deep into a regress of causal factors. The risk imposition account, in contrast, specifically targets a particular kind of act or set of actions that do a specific kind of thing, i.e. impose a risk, and is consistent with our moral, legal and societal norms regarding risk-imposing activity. Leaving aside the problems we encounter when trying to pinpoint causation (Weinberg 2008), if we accept this account we will still lack an endpoint for parental obligation to children since parents, on this view, are the cause of their child's existence (and neediness) for however long the existence (and neediness) lasts. Arguably, that last a lifetime since children exist for their entire lifetimes and their neediness, while less pressing during autonomous adulthood, can last a lifetime or crop up periodically at any point during a lifetime.

It looks like alternate sources of parental obligation are unlikely to help us find an earlier endpoint to parental obligation. Of course, there may be other sources of parental obligation than those discussed here, and maybe one of those other sources could justify an earlier endpoint for parents' obligation to care for their children. To work, these other sources would have to make more sense than the risk imposition reason and they would also have to explain why and when parental obligation ends. Until then, it looks like we are stuck with a lifelong obligation.

Factors that may limit what parents have to do to meet their parental obligation to their grown children include the good and the fact of adult autonomy, and the legitimate and separate interests of the parents. The obligation remains, but it demands

less of the parents. I will address these limiting factors in Section III. Objections to setting a lifelong parental standard of care include adult children's responsibility for problems of their own making, and the generally counterintuitive nature of a lifelong parental obligation to adult children. I will address these objections in section IV.

### III. LIMITS

When setting the parental standard of care, we can think of some pretty persuasive reasons to limit what the obligation requires of parents in terms of how *much*, i.e., how much care parents have to provide, and how long, i.e., how *long* do they have to provide it for.

1. *Autonomy*: The autonomous nature of adulthood argues in favor of adulthood as limiting what parental responsibility requires of parents. Both the good and the fact of autonomy serve as limiting factors:

a) *The Good of Autonomy*: The good of autonomy argues in favor of adulthood as limiting what parental responsibility demands of parents, for the adult children's own good. We have ample evidence as well as common sense and commonly expressed sentiment telling us that people feel good and seem to fare well when they're running their own lives, being autonomous, being an *adult* (see Sheldon *et al* 1996; Ryan and Deci 2000; and Weinstein 2016, among many others). Children of overprotective parents usually don't fare as well as children whose parents allow for more freedom and responsibility (see LeMoyne and Buchanan 2011). Children who have too much free floating money, with (presumably) the resulting weaker impetus to establish self-sufficiency are at a higher than average risk for drug abuse and addiction (Califano 2003). In short, as most people think and as empirical evidence shows, it's usually good for children to develop and exercise autonomy, in age appropriate ways, culminating in an autonomous adulthood. That seems to argue against continuous parental care with life's challenges. For our children's own good, we should stop taking care of them as they become adults capable of caring for themselves. Great! Problem solved?

Not so fast. Thus far, all that has been shown is that autonomy can limit what parents have to do to meet their parental obligation, and it only does so to the extent that the good of autonomy both applies to the grown child in question (i.e., the child is competent) and outweighs the benefits of parental aid. So maybe it's best for the adult child to pay her own rent, but is it really better in terms of well-being for the



grown child to, say, take out a huge mortgage on her starter home instead of getting some help with the down payment from her parents? If the grown child is generally autonomous and responsible, is this one-time cash infusion going to be worse for her than a hefty mortgage? And the greater the need, the less the good of autonomy outweighs it so you might tell the young adult to wait to buy a house or to buy a smaller one, etc., but what if she needs help to pay for a kidney transplant? Or help putting food on the table while she looks for a new job? If parents can help when their adult children need the help coping with life's challenges, it is only when the good of autonomy is more important or weightier than the need that we can look to autonomy to limit what parents have to do to meet their parental obligation.

Thus, the good of autonomy for grown children, as a limiting factor on the demands of parental obligation to grown children, seems limited to when and to the extent that autonomy is actually better for the grown children. In assessing which cases meet this limit, we may note that Western culture in general, and American culture in particular, go a little crazy in our value of autonomy, self-determination, and making it on our own. So a bit of caution in our application of autonomy as a limit to the demands of parental obligation to adult children is in order. Maybe we fetishize autonomy and overvalue it. Maybe being cared for is pretty great! Yes, common sense, common sentiment, and empirical evidence do point to autonomy as a significant contributor to human well-being, but that contribution is subject to limits, caveats, cultural bias, and other contributors to well-being such as health, emotional support, shelter and food, etc.

Autonomy is probably usually good and, therefore, parents can withdraw some parental care in support of children's developing autonomy, and as respect for their grown children's actual autonomy. But, still, the good of autonomy will not limit the demands of parental obligation to care for their adult children when the care would still be good for the adult children in their struggle with life's risks and challenges, despite its potential incursion on adult children's autonomy.

b) *The Fact of Autonomy*: The *good* of autonomy won't relieve the parental obligation to grown children when the parental care would still mitigate life's risks and be good for the adult-children. But the *fact* of autonomy just might. When children in fact grow into autonomous adults, the need for parental care diminishes or ends and one might think that the obligation to care should then diminish or end as well. Why should parents be obligated to care for adult children who can care for themselves? This is a persuasive point and might serve as a reason to significantly

limit parental obligation to care for adult children, or to set the parental standard of care to zero, once grown children are able to care for themselves, but it will only limit the obligation to the extent that adult children actually are able to care for themselves. When adult children face illness, disability, job loss, or other serious life problems that they cannot handle well on their own, the fact of autonomy will no longer be present to serve to limit parental obligation. Therefore, to whatever extent the fact of autonomy might set parental obligation to grown children at nothing, it would make a difference only to the subset of cases where the good of autonomy doesn't already limit parental obligation anyway and the fact of autonomy remains in place. But even then, the fact of autonomy does not clearly free parents from their obligation to their grown children.

Because even if adult children *can* care for themselves, why must they? They didn't ask for any of this. In the immortal words (okay, tweet) of Ricky Montgomery: "I am upset with my parents for making me exist. u just decided to make a person one day? who's gonna pay my bills? me? I didn't ask for this."<sup>3</sup> Parents decide to create children, to impose life's risk on them, thereby obligating parents to care for their children. When it is good for children to care for themselves, then we have reason for parents to cede the care of their adult children to their adult children, as argued earlier. But, when it would be good for adult children to have parental care with life's risks and harms, the good of autonomy notwithstanding, the fact that adult children have the ability to care for themselves doesn't cleanly or completely get parents off the hook because taking care of oneself is a lot of un-volunteered for work. Why should adult children have to do all of this work all by themselves when the only reason the work needs to be done is because their parents decided to create a needing-lots-of-work human? The parents created the problem. Why should the adult children have to work to solve it, just because they might be capable of doing so? (This reasoning also applies to causal accounts of parental obligation since generally, on those views, parents are responsible to meet the needs or remedy the problems that they caused).

In other risk imposition cases, we usually don't require compensation if the stan-

3. The view that parents may be obligated to help adult children with life's risks and harms because parents imposed those risks on their children does not entail that we are all free of all moral responsibility because all moral responsibility was thrust upon us involuntarily. Just because we didn't volunteer for existence that does not mean we can, say, steal from or assault another person. Those sorts of involuntary moral obligations can derive from sources that are unaffected by the involuntary nature of existence, e.g., Kantian respect, contractualist respect, contractarian prudence, or Aristotelian enlightened self-interest in living well. It is only some forms of consequentialist obligation that are vulnerable to the involuntary nature of existence challenge and, in my view, that counts against it as a moral theory. (See Rivka Weinberg, "It 'Ain't My World," *Utilitas* 2009 21: 144-162).



dard of care has been met, which is what we do in a no-fault car accident, for example. But that's because we all benefit from allowing people to drive and so we have set our standard of care for driving at driving responsibly and we don't require compensation when that standard is met. That's a standard that works for all of us, generally, or at least it's supposed to. Similarly, the fact of autonomy can argue in favor of setting the parental standard of care at a grown child's ability to care for themselves—maybe that's the standard that's most fair to all of us. And once that standard is met, parents would not be required to provide further care for their children. But the fact that children, unlike a society of drivers, didn't agree to participate in the risk activity of life and, unlike a society of drivers who would likely be inconvenienced by a driving ban, stand to lose nothing by not being born, argues against setting the parental standard of care to end at the fact of autonomy: that standard might work well for parents but it doesn't seem equally fair to children because the children don't gain as much by having that standard as the parents do.

For those who think that life is some sort of lovely gift bestowed on children (as opposed to my view of life as a set of risks imposed on children), it may be reasonable to conclude that once children are able to care for themselves, they should. They've been given a gift, they are competent to use the gift and operate within its constraints, now go off and enjoy. No need for further babysitting. Parental obligation to care for grown children, on this view, would be limited to cases where the fact of autonomy is not present. But I don't think that view is reasonable. It is far too rosy to count as realistic and it neglects the fact that children did not ask for this hard to manage 'gift' that was thrust upon them. It's not as if the 'gift' can be safely ignored—life takes a lot of work just to avoid severe suffering. I therefore think it is more realistic to view life as a mixed bag of uncertain benefits and burdens—as a set of risks imposed on children by the parents who created them—than as a gift. Thus, Montgomery's point retains some force, and serves to leave parental obligation to adult children in place even when the fact of autonomy is present.

2. *Parental Interests*: Another possible limitation to what parental obligation to grown children demands is the legitimate interests of the parents. Parents, presumably, are entitled to pursue their own good to some extent, even at times at the expense of their children's good. We normally do not fault parents for spending some discretionary money on themselves, even if that money could have benefited their children. Parenthood doesn't strip people of legitimate interests and the reasonable permission to pursue those interests, even, at least to some extent, when parents' in-

terests conflict with their children's interests. So you can sometimes have your latte instead of buying your child a toy, and you can get a pair of work boots instead of getting your six-year-old summer sandals, but if she needs specialized treatment for, say, Attention-Deficit Disorder, probably not.

I will not attempt here to figure out exactly when parents cross the line into unacceptable selfishness or exactly how much parents are required to sacrifice for the sake of their children. But there's a vague, somewhat flexible line out there, and that can limit how much parents are required to do for or give to their children, in order to mitigate life's risks. I assume that limit line applies to adult children as well. But does it apply differently to adult children than it does to toddlers? Does that fuzzy line of permissible pursuit of parental interest even at the expense of children's interests gradually allow for parental interests to prevail more often or to a greater degree as children grow into adults? Does that line *move* to give parents more moral leeway to prioritize themselves and/or to provide their children with less care once their children are grown? It is not clear why it would, aside from the fact that children need less, can care for themselves more, and can perhaps be held responsible for their needs more (more on that in Section IV) as they grow into autonomous adulthood. When thinking about whether parental interests can give parents greater leeway to favor themselves over their children as their children grow, aside from the leeway gained due to grown children's autonomy and agency, it is unclear why or how parental interests should count for more, *vis a vis* children's interests, once children are grown than they count for when children are younger.

One might argue that since parents generally yield more to their children's interests when their children are younger, it is only fair to let parental interest prevail and have greater weight when children are older, after parents have often already made many sacrifices for their children. However, this 'fair play' principle only holds if parents and children have equal priority claims, i.e., if parents' and children's interests are on equal footing. If parents' and children's interests have equal weight, then it may make sense to give greater weight to parental interests when children are grown since greater weight is usually given to children's interests while they are growing up. The problem with this tempting way of thinking about parent-child interests is that we don't have equal claim to priority in the procreative case: Because having children is the parents' choice, but being born is not the child's choice, the claim to having one's interests curtailed by the other's are not on equal footing. The responsibility to tend to the other's interests is only incurred by the parents. It therefore seems unwar-

ranted for the parents to say to their grown children, “Well, my child, it’s your turn to yield your interests in favor of mine now.”

3. *Autonomy and Parental Interests, Combined*: Maybe the fact that adult children can care for themselves can provide us with a reason why parental interests can be given greater weight once children are grown. Since parents are entitled to pursue their own interests, when their children are grown and able to care for themselves, it seems fair to give parental interests greater weight, thereby allowing the obligation of parents to care for their autonomous, able-to-care-for-themselves adult children to require much less of the parents. This limit, to whatever extent it is sound, only applies when adults can truly care for themselves. In the many cases where adult children really do need care with life’s challenges, regardless of whether they’re usually able to care for themselves more generally, parental obligation to care ratchets right back up. Furthermore, even when adult children *can* care for themselves, the fact that the parents forced the adult children into having to take such care as life requires can serve as reason for parents to have to assist, regardless, so long as that’s in the adult child’s interests (remember the Montgomery!).

#### IV. OBJECTIONS

So far, we seem to have established a strong but possibly somewhat circumscribed obligation for parents to care for their grown children to the extent that their children need or could benefit from help with life’s challenges. But what about cases where adult children need help not because their parents created them but because they themselves created lots of their own problems?

1. *Messes of Their Own Making*: Not everything is your mother’s fault. You did some stupid stuff too. You may have messed up your own life. Why shouldn’t grown children bear the burdens of their own making? I think that this challenge is important and can conceivably, in some cases and under appropriate circumstances, serve to blunt parental obligations to grown children. Exactly when and exactly to what extent, I leave open for further consideration. One might argue that even if some of grown children’s problems are of their own making, they themselves are of their parents’ making, and had their parents not created them, they wouldn’t have any problems or any opportunity to make any so there is a sense in which all of our problems are in some way of our parents’ making. But that way seems too weak to generate parental responsibility to solve the problems. We don’t generally obligate

people to solve all problems to which they have a causal connection. Setting aside questions regarding free will (which could undermine grown children's responsibility for their own problems and parental responsibility for their procreative acts, etc.), when adult children seem to clearly create their own problems, we have at least some reason to think that their parents might not be responsible to solve these problems. (This doesn't mean that society needn't help people who may have caused their own problems. Societal or civic obligations arise for different reasons and serve different purposes than parental obligations).

Before all you parents relax, remember that many, and maybe most, of the situations that put adults in need of parental care are nobody's fault, e.g., disease (mental or physical), job loss, addiction, etc. Many of the life challenges that grown children will need help with are situations beyond their control, such as many cases of illness, heartbreak, disability, or financial insufficiency. When we create children, we know this. We know the risks we are imposing. Why shouldn't we be on the hook for them so long as they are present and we can help? I argue that, for the most part, indeed we are.

2. *Deeply Counter-Intuitive*: So why don't we think we are? I certainly do not think that my parents are obligated to care for me, and you probably don't think that your parents should be taking care of you. Most adults do not think that their parents are obligated to take care of them. But that might be because people value their autonomy and tend to fare better when they live autonomously, without lifelong parental assistance. At first, the idea that parental obligation is lifelong is deeply counterintuitive yet, if you imagine yourself in true need and your parents in a position to help you with a life challenge, the intuition may change. If you were sick and needed help with paying for your medical treatment, and your parents could help you, shouldn't they? Wouldn't you find it disturbing if your parents decided to take a trip to Spain while you become homeless, or dead, because your cancer left you unable to work or afford health care? Consider cases of children who are not capable of autonomy, e.g., children with serious cognitive limitations. Would we think it okay for parents to just walk away from them when they turn 18 or 21 or 41? Probably not (See Desante 2016). So why would it be okay to walk away from a usually autonomous adult child who happens not to be autonomously capable of handling certain aspects of her life challenges, like paying for health insurance or fillings or a roof? Maybe because it is usually best to care for oneself, to figure out ways to be responsible and autonomous. Once again, it seems that it is only when it would be best for the adult child to be left

to fend for themselves that we have a strong intuition telling us it is okay for parents to leave them to fend for themselves (which is pretty consistent with what I've argued here).

Let's consider some additional cases. Should parents take out a second mortgage on their house to pay for their 8-year old's cancer treatment? Intuitively, I think the answer is a very clear yes. Should parents take out a second mortgage on their house to pay for their 38-year old's cancer treatment? Intuitively, the answer may strike us as less clear but I still think it's a yes, though possibly mitigated by the adult child's own ability and responsibility, e.g., can she remortgage her own house? Does she need cancer treatment because she chose to skip her (free and relatively painless) PAP smears? If the answers to these limiting questions are resounding "no's," then I think the parents probably have to remortgage their house. Goodbye condo in Florida! One might argue that we tend to think parents should care for adult children in these cases because they have a current relationship with their adult children. However, we can see that the current relationship is not doing all the work here when we contrast our attitude toward parents with what we might expect of friends, even close friends. We expect parents to sacrifice for their adult children in these cases, even if the current relationship is not especially close, but we tend to expect much less of friends, even close current friends. When the grown child seems to have caused, or volunteered for her own problems, we may not think that her parents are obligated to care for her, and when it seems best for the autonomous adult to handle her own problems, we may think it best for her to do so without parental assistance, but all that is fairly consistent with the findings of this paper. When the adult child's problems are not of her own making and/or when it does not seem best for the adult child to forgo parental help, then thinking that her parents are responsible to care for her (to the extent that they can, of course) probably does not strike us as so terribly counterintuitive after all.

## V: FURTHER QUESTIONS/IMPLICATIONS

1. *Grandparents' Obligations?* Should we visit the sins of the fathers on the grandfathers? If we hold parents responsible to care for their children because they imposed life's risks on them, does this responsibility extend to grandparents? I argue that it does not. From a risk imposition perspective, we hold parents responsible to care for their children because, by choosing to procreate, parents impose life's risks

on their children and when we impose risks or expose others to risks in order to do the things we want to do, we must take care to mitigate damages and compensate for harms, in accordance with the standards of care we set for the risk imposing activity. Grandparents don't impose life's risks on their grandchildren so they are not obligated to care for them at any stage of the child's life.

However, since parents are responsible to care for their children, they can sometimes be responsible to help their children meet the obligations that the children incur. Those obligations may sometimes include rent, sometimes a hospital bill, and sometimes care for children (the children's children, i.e., the grandchildren). When grandparents are responsible to care for their grandchildren, the obligation is derivative from their obligation to their children. These derivative obligations are subject to the same limiting factors that standard parental obligations to grown children are subject to: namely, the good of autonomy and the independent responsibility of the children. Grandchildren may sometimes be a paradigm case of the independent responsibility of grown children, thereby limiting grandparents' obligations.

A causal account of parental obligation to children would also fail to extend that obligation from grandparents to grandchildren because, although no one would exist but for their grandparents' procreativity, the mere causal connection between grandparents and grandchildren is not sufficient to ground parental or pseudo-parental obligations because we generally don't hold people responsible for just any situation to which they have causally contributed. Those who argue for a causation based parental obligation to children usually narrow the kind of causation down to primary or proximate causation and grandparents usually don't play that causal role in the creation of their grandchildren because the parents of the children are usually more causally primary and proximate. Alternatively, one might argue for a straightforward 'genetic relation' obligation to children and maybe that source of parental obligation can extend to grandparents but citing genetic relation as a source or reason for parental obligation invites the question: *Why* does a genetic relationship to a child create an obligation to care for the child? I suspect that any reasonable answer to that question will appeal directly or indirectly to one of the sources of parental obligation discussed here (namely, voluntarism, causation, or risk imposition).

2. *Procreative Constraint?* If we consider parental obligation to last a lifetime, we may wonder how this lengthy obligation impacts our views on when procreation is morally permissible. For example, if parental obligation is endless, might that make it unacceptable for people to have children when they are older and thus less able to



provide care for their children for a prolonged period? This question is different from my focus in this paper, which is on whether parents who can mitigate life's risks and harms for their adult children must do so when it would be in their grown children's interests. My answer to that question is, yes, that is part of what parents are generally obligated to do. Whether this obligation impacts procreative permissibility is a question I will not address here except to gesture at a vague, and very qualified 'to some extent.' The fact that parental obligation doesn't have a hard stop at 18 or 21 does mean that the older people are when they have children, the more problematic their procreativity becomes in this respect. Of course, parents usually don't outlive their children so, at some point, they will no longer be available to care for them, but the later that point arrives, generally, the more the parent will be able to fulfill the lifelong aspect of their parental obligation. There are many factors that come together to help determine the moral permissibility of procreation in any given case and, if my conclusions here about a lifelong parental obligation to children are sound, then the ability of a person to provide continued care as needed for their child will count as one such factor, subject of course to being outweighed by many other factors. (Of course, there is a constraint on the other end as well since having children when one is very young poses its own set of problems for all concerned, and often problems far greater than those posed when having children at an older age).

3. *Children's Obligation to Care for Aging Parents?* We may wonder whether thinking of parents as obligated to care for their adult children gets things exactly backward. Isn't it generally assumed that adult children have to care for their parents?<sup>4</sup> Is that not the direction of parent-adult child obligation? Many have argued that adult children are indeed responsible to care for their parents, should parents need the care. This responsibility has been argued for on various grounds, including friendship (English 1979 and Dixon 1995), gratitude or a debt for past parental sacrifices (Wicclair 1990), social contract, or social good, some interpretations of Confucianism (Archard 1986), and involuntary special relationships (Sommers 1986). One might be forgiven for thinking that there are so many different grounds for filial obligation because none are particularly convincing. Most of these theories have obvious problems. I will not discuss the problems in detail here but I will briefly note that friendship does not always exist between parents and children and that friendship usually does not require a highly burdensome level of care for another person. Similarly, we usually don't think that gratitude for a voluntary (and largely unasked for) sacrifice

4. I thank my sons, Rami and Joey Gruman, for (separately) raising this objection.

or gift generates steep and on-going obligation. Basing filial obligation on the duties inherent to the special parent-child relationship sounds more like a claim than an argument and therefore seems question begging. That leaves us with a more societal or social contract based obligation for adult children to care for their parents. This may seem like a more promising basis for filial obligation because it is based more on what might work well on a societal level rather than on specific filial debts or duties that, as argued, are very difficult to justify. But ‘social good,’ ‘overall good,’ and/or ‘societal good,’ are themselves thorny justifications for specific and highly burdensome individual obligations.

It is not all that easy to justify filial obligation. It is easier to explain why we take ourselves to have it. For most of human history, virtually the only care aging people had available to them came from their children. So it is no big shocker that many cultures ingrained this value. Adults needed it. Furthermore, reciprocity is an adaptive trait (Cole and Teboul 2004; Fehr *et al* 2002), and although not necessarily adaptive in this case (because parents will have already provided the good so why help them later, when they can’t help back), the general trait of reciprocity may dispose us to feel the reciprocal pull of parental care as generating a filial duty to care for parents.

It looks like our feelings of filial obligation are easy to explain but much harder to morally justify. It can also be challenging to square our feelings of filial obligation with the proposed obligation of parents to care for adult children. But that is just a case of understandable sentiment meeting a perhaps unexpected argument. At worst, we have what is sometimes known as philosophy. At best, we have mutual obligation of care between parents and adult children (kumbaya!). I prefer philosophy but I offer the happier resolution as well.

## VI: CONCLUSION

It is not uncommon to hear people speaking of parental obligations as clearly concluding when children reach adulthood. This may be a comforting thought for some parents, as it may allow them to feel a burden lifted, an obligation paid in full, and a liberation from the sacrifices that parenting often demands. Yet, as I have shown here, parental obligation is lifelong. We impose life’s risks on our children by creating

them and our responsibility to mitigate those risks and harms lasts for the duration of the risks and harms, i.e., for the duration of our children's lives.

*Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Yuval Avnir, David Boonin, Rami Gruman, Joey Gruman, Claudia Mills, and audience members at the 2017 Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress conference for helpful comments and discussion.*

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