

## **‘Honour thy father and thy mother’. What do Grown Children Owe their Aged Parents?**

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Being raised in the roaring sixties of the last century, the fifth commandment has left me with mixed feelings. ‘Honour thy father and thy mother’ (Ex. 20:12) was used in church and at home, in and out of season, to prevent rebellious youngsters to emerge from their parents authority. Children should not strive for independence and autonomy, but obey their parents, was the message, in line with the modern history of interpretation of the biblical passage. Christian ethicists supported this lecture. The fifth commandment considered as a legitimization of the contested authority of educators in the nuclear family.<sup>2</sup>

Recent exegesis clearly distances itself from this interpretation. The focus of the fifth commandment is not on parental authority but on filial duties for elderly parents. ‘The command (cf. also Lev. 19: 3a) is not about the obligation of (young) children to submit to parental authority, but is directed to adult persons, those who in the patriarchal society are family heads. They, the (oldest) sons, when their parents have relinquished authority, and are no longer able to look after themselves, must provide them with food, clothing and shelter (...) and after their death give them an honourable burial’. (Houtman 2000: 51f.)

### **Difficult care**

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<sup>2</sup> Almost all manuals of Christian ethics concentrated in their exegesis of Ex. 20: 12 exclusively on parental authority.

The prominence of care for the elderly in the Bible indicates that in practice respect for the aged was often lacking (cf. Gen. 27:18ff.; 35: 22; 49:3f.). Apparently, elderly abuse was such a well known phenomenon, that it only could be sanctioned with capital punishment (Ex. 21:15,17). Even within tradition oriented societies as the Hebrew, as many others still today reminiscing an ancestor cult, honouring the elderly is not an obvious daily practice.<sup>3</sup>

With the father and mother to be honoured, the fifth commandment points to the filial duties towards dependent and frail elder parents. This rupture within the interpretation history was in particular induced by increased knowledge of Umwelt texts on the relationships between parents and children, the Old Testament scholar Cees Houtman writes (2000: 52). But probably also the demographic shifts of the last century will have made the exegetes receptive for this reinterpretation. While from old Israelitic times until far into the twentieth century parents hardly survived their adult children – the average life span in biblical times was around forty-five for the better off; for the social weak it was undoubtedly even less (Houtman 2000: 53) – nowadays it has become quite common, also within developing countries.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 'Oswald Loretz has argued that the commandment to 'honor thy father and thy mother' is an offshoot and an echo of the ancestor cult, since it links the care for the elderly with the promise of the possession of the land.' (Van der Toorn 1996: 378)

<sup>4</sup> Developments in demography show that the world population is rapidly getting older. This 'demographic transition' is driven by two factors: increased life expectancy and declining fertility rates. While the global population will increase from around six billion in the year 2000 to nine billion by the year 2050 - an increase of fifty percent - the world's elderly will experience a three hundred percent increase in numbers. In developing countries where mortality rates are rising and contraception is available the increase may be as high as four hundred percent; in fact, already over sixty percent of the world's aged population lives in developing countries, and this will increase to seventy-five percent by 2025 and eighty-five percent by 2050, according to the United Nations Population Division. The 80-plus age

Reaching the age of sixty, in biblical Israel it meant being old (Houtman 2000, 53). On that age, until at least one generation ago, one slowly prepared oneself for ending one's days in a retirement home ('aftreehuis'). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the sixty year old might be present in institutions of residential care, but only as ... visitors of their elder, on care dependent parents. In any case, being sixty today does not mean one has grown old, though society and institutions as universities still think that on that age one has to prepare for retirement.

With the increase in life expectancy also the number of extended three (or four)-generation families increases. While in earlier centuries the care for dependent parents was rare and seldom lasted for long, a gerontologist foresaw already twenty five years ago, that 'nowadays adult children provide more care and more difficult care to more parents over much longer periods of time than they did in the good old days.' (Brody1985: 23)

That means that many adult children are confronted with the question why and how they should care for and about their frail and dependent parents, and how far their help should go. In developing countries, it seemed for a long time that the 'providential state' could take away the adult children's worries, by providing sufficient state care. But only a minority (in the Netherlands about 6%) of the elderly ever lived in residential institutions. Neo-liberalism and the global risk society increases the states' pressure on the elderly's own social network to provide them with the support they need. But – is the fearful question – in the near future, will there be caring hands enough available? Due to the ongoing decline in birth rate, only having children around in one's old age seems to guarantee – even in so called individualized societies – a secure pension, as it was in the biblical times and still may be in non-western cultures. Needless to say, that in countries without a state pension and with a traditional family culture, the pressure on

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group makes up the fastest growing segment of the population; its share of the over-60 population will increase from twelve percent to nineteen percent by 2050. (Cf. De Lange 2009)

children to assist their parents is much higher. Research among immigrant families in the Netherlands showed that parents consider it to be self evident that their children take them, once grown old, to live with them in their homes. A thought with which they were socialized in their country of birth. Their children however, born and raised in an individualized culture, cannot meet that expectation and feel caught in a double bind. (De Valk & Schans 2008) A feeling that probably is shared by adult children in many rapidly urbanizing and modernizing countries in the developing world.

What do grown children owe their aged parents? In the remainder of this contribution I want to describe some visions on filial obligation, current in modern ethical theory, and evaluate them from a theological perspective. *Why* children should help their parents? Is it out of gratitude, love, or because they are indebted to them? Or is it simply because they are their parents? *What kind of* assistance parents may justly expect their children to offer them? Are children also obliged to feed, clothe, nurture their parents and to take them in home, as in biblical times (cf. also John 19: 27), or is material or financial support something the broader community or government should provide? Can children restrict themselves to social and emotional support? And how far filial care should reach? Should children allow themselves to be over burdened? In particular, the care for a parent suffering of dementia may ask much, too much from them, physically and emotionally. May children be obligated to sacrifice themselves (their time, their future) for the sake of their parents, even if these parents sacrificed themselves for these children in their childhood?

## **Debt**

The Hebrew Bible motivates filial obligation with the argument that your father is your procreator (Prov. 23:22) and that your mother carried you and gave birth to you (Sir.7:27f.; Tob. 4:4) 'The thought behind is that one should return some of the care and nourishment provided by the parents. Love is not mentioned as a motive.' (Houtman 2000:55) The Bible seems to support the so called debt theory, the first model of filial obligation I want to

present here. Debt theory argues that children are in debt with their parents and that they are repaying them with their care what they owe to them. Your parents covered you with benefits when you were young and dependent on them. Now it is 'pay back time'.

Throughout history and quasi universally, the debt theory is adhered as transparent and self evident. My own parents too, being poor in my early youth, implicitly expected at high age something 'back' from their two grown up children. They sacrificed themselves to let us attend the best schools available. It went without saying that the sons, highly educated and relatively well to do, did something in return for that.

The debt theory, balancing benefits and favours, has a long and popular history. Its evidence, however, is less convincing than it seems. Harry Moody retells a story about a mother bird and her little baby bird, who rides on her mother's back while the mother forages for food. One day the mother bird says to the baby bird, "Baby bird, when you're a big bird and I'm old and frail will you take me on your back just as I'm doing for you now?" And the baby replies, "No, mother, but when I'm a big bird, I'll carry my little baby bird on my back just as you're doing for me now." (Moody 1992: 229)

The story indicates that reciprocity is not at the heart of the filial relationship. Parents and children do not relate in terms of *do ut des*. They do not enter their relationship in order to obtain mutual advantage: 'if I push your pram now, you will later push my wheelchair'. A child can justly reply that it did not ask for being born. There is an insurmountable and fundamental asymmetry in a parental relationship. From the perspective of children, families are communities of fate, not voluntary associations. Between parents and children there is mutuality, no reciprocity.

Debt theory also cannot account for the open endedness and ongoing character of filial duties. A child never will be able to say (and may suffer sometimes from that...): 'Well, now it's enough – I paid off my debt.' Some may call the adult son, visiting once a month his mother and claiming

money for his petrol on the doorstep (a true story) a good merchant; we all will find him a bad son.

The debt theory has other flaws too. It presupposes that it is the children that owe something to their parents, and not the other way around. Even if one continues to think intergenerational relationships within the framework of the balance of justice – as the contextual therapy of Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy does – , one has to admit that in the transgenerational bookkeeping of merits children come first: ‘Reciprocal equity, the traditional framework for assessing justice among adults, fails as a guideline when it comes to the balance of the parent-child relationship. Every parent finds himself in an asymmetrically obliged position toward his newborn. The child has a source of unearned rights. Society does not expect him to repay the parent in equivalent benefits.’ (Boszormenyi-Nagy 1973: 55) Not all parents are ready to redeem their debt towards their children in promoting their human flourishing. Children are abandoned, neglected, exploited, abused. Otherwise, some parents might have been heroes in ‘their time’ of the struggle, but others were simply opportunists under, or collaborators with a wrong regime. What, then, are children supposed to pay back? According to the debt theory they would simply have to turn their back on their parents, let alone caring for them in their frail days. Within such a justice framework, there can only be talk of forgiveness and hope on reconciliation, not of retribution.

Additionally, not all children did grow up more privileged than their parents. What can rich, well to do parents then expect from their poor, highly charged children? Within the debt paradigm parents who did not ‘deserve’ it, cannot require any assistance from their children. And how about ‘effortless’ parents, who simply enjoyed their parenthood and made only fun out of it? What are their ‘merits’ that should be paid back now?

Despite its long tradition and apparent evidence, the debt theory meets a lot of problems. The parent-child relationship is richer and more complex than within an juridical and economic language game of ‘give and take’ can be

expressed. Filial obligations cannot be reduced to a bookkeeping of benefits and compensations.

## Gratitude

Ethicists looking for an alternative, more compatible with a thicker description of the parent-child relationship, came up with a variance of the debt theory, the model of *gratitude*. The warm language of intimacy, care and love probably offers a better expression of what really goes on between two generations within one family. Children do not 'owe' their parents anything. As Nagy rightly put it, intergenerational debts go in one direction, from the parent to the child. The latter's care for the former is only an expression of their feeling of gratitude towards their own parents. The debts – cf. the young bird in the story – are not 'paid back', but 'paid forward' in favouring the next generation.

Good parents surround their children with love and care. They did this out of benevolence, not in order to receive something in return. Though their children do not owe them anything, they have a moral obligation to show them with gestures their feelings of gratitude and appreciation. Imagine someone who has risked his life for you. The act is beyond price, but at least it is your moral duty to demonstrate an appropriate level of gratitude, by keeping in touch with him for example, or sending him flowers or a postcard at his birthday. If you exaggerate and want to pay 'back' too much, he certainly will be embarrassed: that not why he saved your life!

From a Reformed theological perspective, the model of gratitude must be appealing: who honours his parents, is doing a good job according the *tertius usus legis*, the Rule of Gratitude. The parental relationship looks like the biblical covenant with God: its initiative is one sided in origin, but the enacted relationships create a bond with mutual expectations. Speaking of 'duties of gratitude' is a paradox: it is love, not contract that is foundational.

An analogy between the God-human relationship and the one between parent and child seems obvious. In the fifth commandment's history of

interpretation the parent's authority often is legitimated by the argument that parents are the representatives of God. (Houtman 2000: 56) For does the commandment not follow immediately after the first table of the Law, dealing with the relationship to JHWH? In procreating offspring, parents are participating in the divine work of creation. As God 'deserves' our gratitude, the same for our parents. (Houtman 2000: 57)

However, the gratitude model has its flaws as well, despite its theological seductiveness, comparable to the debt model. First, the model presupposes that parents really 'earned' gratitude, though often this is not the case. Many women cannot worship God the Father, because of traumatic memories to their own father. The analogy between God and parents works out problematically because of its connotations with power and authority. Many parents do not resemble the good God, at the contrary. Resentment often seems more justifiable than gratitude.

Secondly, the emphasis on the *feeling* of gratitude may rightly take the filial relationship out of a juridical and economic framework, but neglects at the same time an essential element in the phenomenology of the parent-child relationship. Filial duties are experienced as direct acts, not as the *expression* of a sentiment. Who helps a sick mother with dressing or eating, is not dealing with an analogy of sending a post card or a flowers: she helps her mother because she feels obligated, even without any sentiment of gratitude. Caring for one's parents is not an instrumental illustration of an emotion, but an inevitable responsibility.

## Friendship

The debt model being too juridical, the gratitude model too authoritarian – in order to escape the shortcomings of both the *friendship model* was developed. 'What do grown children owe their parents?' is the question with which Jane English, the *auctor intellectualis* of this model, opens her seminal article with the same title. 'I will contend that the answer is "nothing"', is her response. (English 1991: 147) She argues that although



there are many things that children ought to do for their parents, that it is inappropriate and misleading to describe them as things 'owed'. Parents' voluntary sacrifices tend to create love or 'friendship', rather than creating 'debts' to be 'repaid'. 'The duties of grown children are those of friends, and result from love between them and their parents, rather than being things owed in repayment for their early sacrifices.'(English 1991: 147)

The friendship model radically breaks with the pre-modern tradition and its patriarchal and hierarchical ethics, and it seems unthinkable without an egalitarian society where parents and children share households on an equal basis and daughters can say from their mother that she is her best friend. However, despite its trendy appearance, it offers an alternative for the shortcomings of the formerly presented models. It acknowledges that a parent-child relationship is not typified by a reciprocal give-and-take, but by mutuality. 'Friends offer what they can give and accept what they need, without regard for the total amounts of benefits exchanged, and friends are motivated by love rather than by the prospect of repayment. Hence, talking of "owing" is singularly out of place in friendship.' (English 1991: 149)

The friendship idiom therefore seems to offer a better discourse than the juridical jargon of favours and debts. It accounts better for the uniqueness of the parent-child relationship than the impartial language of bookkeepers and lawyers. Just as friendship, the care for children requires an ethic of intimacy, instead of an ethic of strangers. Parents and children enter into a particular history with these specific parents, these specific children, just as friends enter a unique relationship. Of course, English knows that not all parents and children *are* friends. To her, however, friendship within the household is an ideal for which parents should strive in order to take, together with their children, advantage of, all along their life course. Then and only then, receiving and raising a child means entering into a lifelong friendship. 'The relationship between children and their parents *should* be one of friendship characterized by mutuality rather than one of reciprocal favors.' (English 1991: 151, italics mine) Jane English does not consider friendship as an analogy of the parent-child relationship but as a description

of her utmost reality. In the ideal case, care for dependent parents is the obvious care for friends through thick and thin. The friendship has been more rewarding in earlier times, sure, but you don't let the other down now. Friends can count on each other. 'The parental argument, "You ought to do x because we did y for you," should be replaced by, "We love you, and you will be happier if you do x," or "We believe you love us, and anyone who loved us would do x."' (English 1991: 153) The friendship model's strength is that it neither gives way to any pre-emptive rights of parents, nor puts unlimited and unconditional pressures on their children. Children can, nor should provide in all of their parents needs. Love's knowledge develops a subtle balance for the needs of the one, compared to the abilities and resources of the other. And what a stranger can do (cleaning the house, medical care, shopping/ groceries) a friend does not need to do. Children who are befriended with their parents will rather offer socio-emotional, than material and/or financial support.<sup>5</sup>

On second thought, the friendship model presents more than a superficial image of modern, non-authoritarian family life. Many adult children do experience in the final years of their parent's lives that they become close to each other, as equals. The friendship model does not want to declare small children in young families to the adults who they obviously are not, but

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<sup>5</sup> Goodin (1985) proposed because of the unique position of children towards their parents an alternative *need* model: they are in the unique position to grasp and meet their parent's needs, as no one else. Their obligations are comparable to the one of the Good Samaritan towards the victim on the road side. There are no alternatives. Families are fate communities. Not the question 'should I help here?' is at stake, but: how could I ever refuse to help? 'if one party is in a position of particular vulnerability to or dependency on another, the other has strong responsibilities to protect the dependent party.' (Goodin 1985: 39) However, also this model is counterintuitive. Parents are something special, while the biblical narrative proposes an ethic between strangers. (cf. De Lange 2010).

warns adult children, the other way around, against a paternalistic treatment of their mentally and physically weakened parents. Though in the final stage of their lives a process of 'parentification' might become inevitable and children and parents inverse their roles, children should resist the temptation to treat their parents as a child, but ought to respect their autonomy. The friendship model emphasizes the equality between the adults that both parents ('coming of age') and children (coming of age as well) are now to each other. Even when hard decisions – a nursing home placement for example – are to be taken with persuasion rather than with a free 'advice'. (cf. Moody 1992:100f.) Psychogerontologists describe how adult children, after a *filial crisis* in which they have to learn to accept their parents' dependency and to meet their needs, eventually succeed in the accomplishment of their *filial tasks*, and reach *filial maturity*. 'Filial maturity means to be willing to provide help voluntary to one's elderly parents and to actually help them, motivated by feelings of love and a sense of duty, without losing one's autonomy in a reciprocal relationship and in the context of a well-functioning family network.' (Marcoen 1995:126) Filial maturity requires from parents and children both respect for their mutual autonomy: parents should not be over demanding towards their children, and children on their turn should support their parent voluntary, and not because they feel forced to it.

However, despite its merits, the friendship model too encounters clear limits. What does it tell about parents and children – are they a majority? – who, for whatever reason, cannot be friends (anymore)? Jane English's answer is by far reassuring. Just as in a genuine friendships is the case, 'what children ought to do for their parents (and parents for their children) depends on (...) the extent to which there is an ongoing friendship between them.' (English 1991:151) This restrictive condition is not only threatening for parents too dependent on their children, but also counterintuitive.

It is not helpful to reinterpret the friendship model – as Dixon (1995) proposes – by saying that parents and children do not need to be real friends, but should only consider each other as friends. Even when the

parent-child relationship functions as an *analogy* of friendship, this also means that after a friendship ends, the duties of friendship ends. However, there is a fundamental difference between parenthood and friendship: friends are chosen (and sometimes left behind) voluntary, while parents are a lifelong destiny, even if one feels condemned to them. In this respect, the parent-child relationship is incomparable and irreducible.

A second flaw in the friendship model is the flipside of its powerful attractiveness. It rightly abandons traditional patriarchy, but suggests too much equality between parents and children. Parents come first, they precede their children. As generations they follow each other in time. 'The heteronomous character of his relationship to them has now ceased', Karl Barth – one of the few Reformed ethicists that takes the relationship of adult children with their parents within the framework of an exegesis of the fifth commandment in consideration – writes. 'But they remain the fellow-men who in their way are irreplaceably nearest to him and are given precedence over him' [sie bleiben die ihm *vorgeordneten* Mitmenschen]'. (Barth 1961: 254 [German edition, 285]) The follow up of generations reflects an ontological inequality in time that should be expressed in their mutual relationship. It not necessarily results in the natural leadership of the parent and the docility of the child. But the elder remains older, preceding the child in time.

An ethic of 'equal regard' for families – as proposed by Don Browning – ignores the uniqueness of this inequality between parents and children. It introduces a formal, impartial and 'timeless' moral principle as the moral core of a special and unique relationship. (Browning 1997:274) Equal regard may be a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for a mature parent-child relationship. Parents will never be siblings for their children, even when they come close to them in age.

## **Special goods**

The ethics of the parent-child relationship requires a thick description that takes into account its unique character. This ethic will not be convincing as long as it is deduced from other relationships' moral implications. I will assist my parent, not as an instance of a type to whom I have certain general obligations, but in direct response to the particular person he or she is for me – as my *parent*. An equal regard construction, as Bernard Williams once put it in defending the moral uniqueness of personal relationships, 'provides the agent with one thought too many'.(Williams 1981:18) Guilt, gratitude, friendship – they remain analogies. Being child of your parents is something special.

That means, as Simon Keller writes, that 'the goods of parenting are unique in kind, meaning that there are no other sources, or not many easily accessible other sources, from which they can be gained. (...) For the child, as well as the parent, there are distinctive special goods that comes from the parent child relationship'.(Keller 2006:265f.) In order to give a full account of this uniqueness, Keller then proposes a 'special goods theory' of filial obligation. Ground laying in this approach is the distinction made between generic goods, which could just as well be provided by others, and special goods, which the parent can receive from no one (or almost no one) but the child, or the child can receive from no one (or almost no one) but the parent. Medical care, house cleaning, a ride to the shops, financial advice – they are generic goods that need not be provided by an adult child, if they can be delivered by others. To the special goods in the parent-child relationship, however, belong: keeping in touch, visiting, sharing time together, listening, being present, recalling memories, seeking advice, making plans, opening up ones family life for the other, – not in the role of, for instance, a pastoral carer but precisely as the *child* of these parents. You provide your parents with something that they will not get otherwise, by making them part of your adulthood. They may 'experience a sense of continuity and transcendence, a feeling that they will, in some respect, persist beyond their own deaths. There is also a kind of joy, and a kind of wisdom, that comes from a close involvement with the development of a

person from birth to childhood and beyond.’ (Keller 2006: 267) These ‘family values’ are irreplaceable. On the other hand, Keller observes, there is a special value in having a parent from which you can seek advice (as a *parent*) and who shares with you the history of your whole life span. An ongoing healthy relationship with a parent can create a link between your life’s different stages, helping to see that they are all yours.

To the special goods of this relationship also special duties correspond. Good care for someone’s parents implies that a child makes sure that generic goods are well provided, though that needs not necessarily be done by the children themselves. Others can do that as well.

In my opinion, the special goods theory offers a better phenomenology of the parent-child relationship than the approaches mentioned earlier, and correspondingly a more convincing vision on filial obligations. At the one hand it unburdens children from the unjustified pressure to do *everything* for their parents, as some generic needs may also being met (and often better) by others. The care of children for their parents is primarily a *caring about*, not a care *for* their parents, as one may put it. (Stuifbergen & Van Delden 2010: Conclusion). On the other hand, it takes along from the parents the liberty of making unreasonable demands on their children. They are not justified to ask them whatever, certainly not when it exceeds their children’s resources. ‘What you should do for your parents depends upon what goods you are able to generate.’ (Keller 2006: 270) The special goods approach also acknowledges the difference between children mutually in their care for their parents – a common source of animosity among siblings. Children who are not well placed to provide the special goods to their parents are morally justified to do less than those who are better situated to do so. Filial maturity develops, as both parents and children learn to see and acknowledge the delicate requirements of their unique relationship.

But how to distinguish generic from special goods? Keller concedes that the border line between them may shift, depending on the historical and cultural context. Growing old in an extended family in a poor society differs from

aging in an individualizing welfare state. Cultural traditions may value quite differently too the relationship between community and autonomy. Aged parents surrounded by a strong social network, a state pension system, and good functioning institutions of elderly care, will much less be justified in their appeal to their children's assistance than parents in less privileged situations. If any support from the environment is lacking, and children are the only ones to provide their parents with food, safety and shelter, it will be difficult to escape their request to provide also the generic goods. In such a case, and only then, children are required to take the role of Good Samaritan to their parents. Voluntary, as an act of charity, but not because of the special relationship they have with their parents, but because of the unique position they are in, to fulfill their parents needs.<sup>6</sup>

At times in which – even in development countries – there is increasing pressure on families to take over the entire responsibility for their elder members, it is important to retain the distinction between special and generic goods, and correspondingly, between filial and communal duties. 'It takes the whole village to raise a child', the African saying goes. It takes the whole community to care for the elderly, is as true as well. This comprehensive approach first of all unburdens the conscience pressure on adult children in their care for their parents. They cannot do *everything* and should not do I neither. But secondly, it points out local communities and state government to their social responsibilities. Elderly care should not be left to families only. The special goods theory offers a balanced ethical framework for both filial and communal obligations.

## **A sustainable future - a theological perspective**

Theological ethics should wholeheartedly support the distinction between filial en communal obligations. The recognition of the irreducibility of the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. above, note 5. Here Goodin's needs theory (Goodin 2005) comes in.

family to other social structures, made it to one of the orders of creation in the tradition of Christian ethics. Or, as it is preferable to say with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the 'divine mandates'.<sup>7</sup> Luther emphasized the necessity that each of the different creation orders will be kept within its own borders. 'Confusion here is not healthy (*mixtura hic non valet*)'. Bonhoeffer continued in the same spirit: 'Only in their being with-one-another [Miteinander], for-one-another [Füreinander] and over-against-one-another [Gegeneinander] do the divine mandates of church, marriage and family, culture and government communicate the commandment of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. None of these mandates exists self-sufficiently, nor can one of them claim to replace all others. The mandates are *with-one-another* or they are not divine mandates. However, in being with-one-another they are not isolated and separated from one another, but oriented they are directed toward one another.' (Bonhoeffer 2005: 393)

Therefore, adult children cannot be held entirely responsible for the full care of their older parents. It is also a task for the broader community. Biblical findings reflect this very well. Even if children neglect their duty of honoring their father and their mother, the Old Testament community is called up again and again to look after the 'widows' – a term mostly standing for the older woman. Though the care for the aged was not viewed as a special and separated task, it should be covered by the general societal regulations. (Cf. Houtman 2000: 56, 220ff.)

By considering the family as a divine mandate it obtains the institutional character. Family is one of the social *structures*, among others, in which the Triune's care for a sustainable society is embodied.<sup>8</sup> Children do have their

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<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005: 68f., 388 - 408. Luther distinguished three ordines, Bonhoeffer four mandates, by taking the *oeconomia* out of the *ordo parentum* as a distinctive mandate, according to their separation in modernity. For a fuller account, see De Lange 1997.

<sup>8</sup> 'The belief that one of the marks of high moral conduct included respect for aged parents was something Israel shared with its surrounding world. Its background is the ideal of a stable society. In the OT, the requirement to



own responsibility in this institution, they have to play their specific 'role'. Even if the mutual relationship between parents and children is motivated by feelings of love and affection, its moral requirements obtains its compelling character only because families represent one of the divine institutions that keeps the fabric of society together, preparing – as Bonhoeffer would say: in the penultimate (2005: 146ff.) – the way for Gods Kingdom.

An eschatological perspective, oriented towards a sustainable future, makes clear that the relationship between aged parents and children must not be considered retrospectively as the repayment of a personal indebtedness. At the contrary, it should be seen in the broader, prospective framework of the ongoing struggle for a humane society. In the care for their aged parents, children contribute to a society that shall treat them with dignity in turn, once they have grown old themselves. In an old story a farmer decides he has no more room at the table for his old father who lives with the family. So he banishes the old man to the barn where the father must eat out of a wooden trough. One day the farmer comes across his own little son playing in the barnyard with some pieces of wood, and he asks the little boy what he's is doing. "Oh, father," replies the boy, "I'm making a trough for you to eat from when you get old." After that day, the old man is returned to his place at the family table. (Moody 1992: 229)

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take care of parents is presented as arising from special (in the laws) and general revelation (in the Wisdom books).' (Houtman 2000: 55)

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