

# *How to conduct ourselves towards our parents*



From the "Ethical Fragments of Hierocles," etc.,<sup>1</sup> in: *Political fragments of Archytas, Charondas, Zaleucus, and other Ancient Pythagoreans, preserved by Strobæus*. Translated from the Greek by Thomas Taylor, 1822; pp. 83-89.

**A**FTER SPEAKING OF THE GODS AND OUR COUNTRY, what person deserves to be mentioned more than, or prior to our parents? Hence it is requisite that we should discourse about them. He, therefore, will not err who says, that they are certain secondary and terrestrial Gods; since on account of their proximity to us, they are, if it be lawful so to speak, more to be honoured by us than the Gods themselves.<sup>2</sup> But it is necessary, previously, to assume, that the only measure of gratitude towards them is a perpetual and unremitting promptitude to repay the benefits we have received from them; since, though we should perform many things for their sake, yet they will be far less than what they deserve. At the same time, also, it may be said, that these our deeds are nearly theirs, because they produced us by whom they are performed. As therefore, if the works of Phidias and of other artists should themselves produce certain other things, we should not hesitate to say that these latter, also, were the works of the artists; thus, likewise, it may be justly said, that our performances are the deeds of our parents; through whom we likewise derived our existence. Hence, in order that we may easily apprehend the duties which we owe them, it will be requisite to have this sentence perpetually at hand, that our parents should be considered by us as the images of the Gods; and by Jupiter, as domestic Gods, our benefactors, kindred, creditors, lords, and most stable friends. For they are most stable images of the Gods, possessing a similitude to them beyond the power of art to effect. For they are the guardian Gods of the house, and live with us; and besides this, they are our greatest benefactors, imparting to us things of the greatest consequence; and, by Jupiter, bestowing on us not only what we possess, but also such things as they wish to give us, and for which they themselves pray. Farther still, they are likewise our nearest kindred, and the causes of our alliance with others. They are, also, creditors of things of the most honourable nature, and only repay themselves by taking what we shall be benefited by returning. For what gain can be so great to a child as piety and gratitude to his parents? They are most justly, too, our lords: for of what can we be in a greater degree the possession, than of those through whom we exist? Moreover, they are perpetual and spontaneous

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<sup>1</sup> 2C Stoic philosopher.

<sup>2</sup> The honours which we pay to divinity can be of no advantage to him, but benefit us; but the honours which we pay to our parents are beneficial to them. And in this sense, and in this only, the latter are to be honoured more than the former.

friends and auxiliaries; at all times, and in every circumstance, affording us assistance. Since, however, the name of parent is the most excellent of all the before mentioned appellations, according to which we also denominate the Gods themselves; something else must also be added to this conception; viz. that children should be persuaded that they dwell in their father's house, as if they were certain ministers and priests in a temple, appointed and consecrated for this purpose by nature herself; who entrusted a reverential attention to their parents to their care. Since of attentive regard, therefore, one kind pertains to the body, but another to the soul, we shall readily perform what each of these requires, if we are willing to do that which reason persuades us to do. But reason persuades us to pay less attention to the body than to the soul; though attention to the former is necessary. We should, therefore, procure for our parents liberal food, and such as is adapted to the imbecility of old age; and besides this, a bed, sleep, unction, a bath, garments; and in short, all the necessaries which the body requires, that they may never at any time experience the want of any of these; in thus acting, imitating their care about our nurture, when we were infants. Hence, we should compel ourselves to employ a certain prophetic attention to them, in order to discover what they particularly desire of things pertaining to the body, though they should not indicate the object of their wish.<sup>1</sup> For they divined many things respecting us, when we frequently signified by inarticulate and mournful sounds, that we were in want of certain things, but were unable to indicate clearly the subjects of our wants. So that our parents, by the benefits which they formerly conferred upon us, become the preceptors to us of what we ought to bestow on them.

With respect to the souls of our parents, we should, in the first place, procure for them hilarity; which will be especially obtained, if we are conversant with them by night and by day, unless something prevents us, walking, being anointed, and living together with them. For as to those who are undertaking a long journey, the converse of their families and friends is most delightful, after the manner of those that accompany a solemn procession; thus, also, to parents who are now verging to the grave, the sedulous and unremitting attention of their children is most acceptable, and most dear. Moreover, if at any time they should act wrong, which frequently happens to be the case with many, and especially with those who have been educated in a more vulgar manner; they should be corrected indeed, yet not by Jupiter with reprehension, as we are accustomed to do to our inferiors or equals, but as it were, with exhortation; and not as if they had erred through ignorance, but as if they had committed an oversight, through inattention; and that if they had attended, they would by no means have erred. For admonitions, and especially if they are vehement, are grievous to those that are old. Hence, it is necessary, that the remedy of their oversight should be accompanied by mild exhortation, and a certain elegant artifice.

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<sup>1</sup> This reminds me of what Pope, no less piously than pathetically says, respecting his mother, in the following most beautiful lines:

Me let the tender office long engage,  
To rock the cradle of reposing age,  
With lenient arts extend a mother's breath,  
Make languor smile, and smooth the bed of death;  
*Explore the thought, explain the asking eye,*  
And keep awhile one parent from the sky.

See his Seventh Epistle, near the end.

Children, likewise, increase the joy of their parents, by performing for them servile offices, such as washing their feet, making their bed, and waiting on them after the manner of servants. For they are not a little delighted, when they receive necessary servile attentions from the most dear hands of their children, and make use of their ministrant works. But parents will be especially gratified when their children are seen to honour those whom they love and very much esteem. On which account, it is fit that children should affectionately love the kindred of their parents, and pay a proper attention to them, and in a similar manner should love the friends of, and all those that are dear to their parents. And this being admitted, we shall be enabled to collect many other duties of children to their parents, which are neither small nor casual. For since our parents are gratified by the attention which we pay to those whom they love, but we are in a most eminent degree beloved by our parents, it is evident that we shall very much please them, by paying a proper attention to ourselves.

### **From the treatise of Pempelus on parents<sup>1</sup>**

Neither divinity, nor any man who possesses the least wisdom, will ever advise anyone to neglect his parents. Hence we cannot have any statue or temple which will be considered by divinity as more precious than our fathers and grandfathers when grown feeble with age. For God will recompense him with benefits who honours his parents with gifts; since if this is not done, divinity will not pay any attention to the prayers of such parents for their children. The images of our parents, indeed, and progenitors should be esteemed by us as far more venerable and divine than any inanimate images. For these animated images, when they are continually adorned and rendered splendid with honour by us, pray for us, and implore the gods to bestow on us the most excellent gifts: but the contrary when we despise them. Neither of these, however, is effected by inanimate images. Hence he who conducts himself in a becoming manner towards his parents and progenitors, and other relatives of this kind, will possess the most proper of all statues, and the best calculated to render him dear to divinity. Everyone, therefore, endued with intellect should honour and venerate his parents, and should dread their execrations and [unfavourable] prayers, as knowing that many of them frequently take effect. These things, therefore, being thus disposed by nature, men that are prudent and modest will consider their living aged progenitors as a treasure, to the extremity of life; and if they die before they arrive at that period, they will be vehemently desired by them. On the contrary, progenitors will be terrible in the extreme to their depraved and stupid offspring. But he who, being profane, is deaf to these assertions, will be considered by all intelligent persons as odious both to Gods and men.



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<sup>1</sup> From the "Ethical Fragments of Hierocles," etc., in: *Political fragments of Archytas, Charondas, Zaleucus, and other Ancient Pythagoreans, preserved by Strobæus*. Translated from the Greek by Thomas Taylor, 1822; pp. 67-69. The whole of this extract is taken from the eleventh book of Plato's *Laws*, but what is there said is here somewhat amplified.