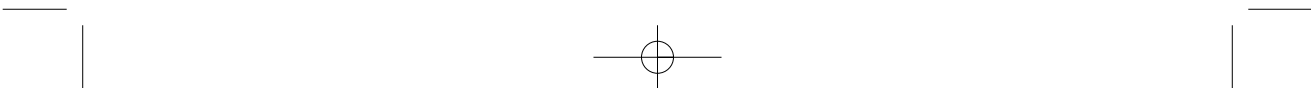
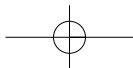
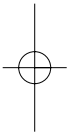


PART I  
L IS FOR LOVE



## 1

# WHAT DO JACK AND LOCKE OWE THEIR FATHERS?

*Michael W. Austin*

“You don’t have what it takes.”

Put yourself in Jack’s shoes. Imagine you’re in junior high school and you try to save a friend as he’s being beaten up by some older kids. Now imagine your father says, “You don’t have what it takes” because he thinks that you should have stayed out of it. You grow up thinking that your father doesn’t believe in you. In response you’re driven to over-achieve; you even finish medical school an entire year sooner than everyone else. This is Jack Shephard’s life before the crash of Oceanic Flight 815.

“You think you’re the first person that ever got conned? You needed a father figure, and I needed a kidney. And that’s what happened. Get over it. And John, don’t come back. You’re not wanted.”

Put yourself in Locke’s shoes. You’ve grown up in various foster homes, never knowing your biological parents. Now, by mere chance, it seems, you’ve found them both. You develop a close bond with your father, and then discover it was all a ruse to get one of your kidneys. After the transplant that saves his life, your father shuts you out of that life. Even worse, he later attacks you, pushing you through a window and paralyzing you (not permanently, thanks to the island, you believe).

Perhaps Jack and Locke don’t owe their fathers anything (especially Locke!). Most of us haven’t been conned out of one of our kidneys, paralyzed, and nearly killed by a biological parent. And even though, like Jack’s father, our parents have said things that have hurt us, we’ve probably benefited in numerous ways from the sacrifices

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that they made on our behalf. In light of these sacrifices, do we owe our parents anything?

### What Do Jack, Locke, and the Rest of Us Owe Our Parents?

According to contemporary philosopher Jane English, we owe our parents *nothing*.<sup>1</sup> This sounds very strange, because it runs strongly against the traditional, commonsense ethical views of western philosophy. On this traditional morality, adult children owe respect to their parents, as well as letters, phone calls, visits, and financial help (if this is needed and possible). Even if our relationship with our parents is not intimate, honest, and trusting, it is traditionally thought that we owe such things to them because of the sacrifices that they have made for us. Many moral philosophers take it upon themselves to criticize our traditional moral views. Sometimes those views withstand philosophical scrutiny, and sometimes they don't. According to English, the traditional idea that adult children owe a debt to their parents doesn't stand up to critical analysis. We'll have to decide for ourselves if she's right about this.

There are good reasons for saying that Locke didn't owe it to his father to give him a kidney. Just consider the level of sacrifice on Locke's part. And certainly after being conned out of a kidney and paralyzed by him, there are reasons for thinking that Locke owes his father very little or perhaps nothing at all. Of course, this doesn't justify Locke having Sawyer kill his father, but many would say that Locke didn't owe Anthony Cooper anything.

Jack's situation is somewhat different. Through a series of flashbacks we have been given a fuller picture of what has happened between Jack and his father, Christian. During one flashback, Jack is in the operating room and loses a patient. As the circumstances surrounding the patient's death are uncovered throughout the show, we learn that Jack's father was initially performing the surgery. A nurse found Jack and asked him to come to the operating room

<sup>1</sup> Jane English, "What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?" in Onora O'Neill and William Ruddick, eds., *Having Children* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 351–356.

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because Christian was drunk while performing surgery. In his impaired state, Christian accidentally cut an artery and the patient died. Later, he calls Jack to his office and asks him to sign off on a report stating that the patient succumbed to the injuries sustained in the car accident. After Jack shows some resistance, Christian says:

I know I've been hard on you, but that is how you make a soft metal into steel. That is why you are the most gifted young surgeon in this city . . . this is a career that is all about the greater good. I've had to sacrifice certain aspects of my relationship with you, so that hundreds and thousands of patients will live, because of your extraordinary skills.

Then, putting his hand on Jack's shoulder, Christian continues: "What happened yesterday I promise you will never happen again . . . this is not just about my career Jack. It's my life." After this, Jack signs the report, and his father says, "Thank you son. Thank you."

Jack later revises his statement and comes clean about his father's mistake in the OR. One reason for Jack's change of heart is that he believes his father was insincere in their earlier conversation. Jack sees his father put his hand on the shoulder of the dead woman's husband in the same insincere manner that he did with Jack. Then, in a meeting with hospital officials, Jack learns that the woman was pregnant, a fact that his father chose to conceal from him. At this point, Jack reveals what actually happened.

Jane English would say that certainly Jack and Locke owe nothing to their fathers. But apart from these special types of circumstances, it seems to most people that those of us who have had decent parents at least owe them respect and things like letters, phone calls, visits, and financial support. But English argues that we do not owe such things to our parents, even if they haven't failed us in the ways that Anthony Cooper and Christian Shephard failed Locke and Jack. Why would she make such a claim?

Philosophers are often very picky about language, with the result that much, though not all, of the writing in academic philosophy these days is notoriously dry and emotionally uninspiring. There is, however, a reason for this. A desire for clarity and precision helps uncover the real issue in any philosophical discussion. And when we finally get at the real issue, the hope is that a deeper level of understanding is achieved. Setting aside whether or not her view is true, it

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is this search for understanding and clarity that leads English to the conclusion that we owe our parents nothing.

According to English, the sacrifices that our parents make for us do not create debts. Instead, those sacrifices tend to create a friendship relationship between parents and their adult children. For this reason, English thinks that using the term “owe” in the context of the parent-child relationship is out of place, and in fact has the consequence of obscuring or even undermining the love that should ideally be the basis for the friendship between parents and their adult children.

### What Sawyer and Kate Can Teach Us About the Ethics of Friendship

When we do a favor for someone, we often expect that they will someday do the same for us if we call in that favor. If I help out an acquaintance, I expect that someday he’ll return the favor, if need be. He owes it to me, given my previous act of assistance. English notes, however, that friendship doesn’t work this way. True friends don’t keep track of the sacrifices they’ve made for one another. Their motive is not to be repaid someday, but rather to give what they can to one another. Friends don’t keep track of favors owed; they help each other simply because they are friends.

As relationships develop on the island, the survivors of Oceanic Flight 815 who become friends don’t keep track of the ways that they help one another. For example, at one point Locke and Claire develop a friendship, and Locke builds a crib for Claire’s newborn baby. In the context of a friendship like this, such actions aren’t done in order to get something in return. Rather, they are done out of affection and care. Similarly, over the first three seasons of the show, Sawyer and Kate have developed some sort of friendship. In the first episode of the third season, they end up in cages about 20 feet from each other, put there by the Others. Sawyer is concerned for Kate, and throws her some food that he was able to get. And later in the third season, their relationship becomes romantic. Given that they are friends, Sawyer and Kate don’t keep track of the ways in which they’ve helped each other. The motive for helping out a friend is affection and in some cases even love.

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## Jack and Christian as Friends?

After Jack reports his father's misconduct to the hospital, Christian flees to Sydney. Jack and his mother talk, and she urges Jack to go to Sydney and bring back his father. Jack tells her that "He doesn't want me to bring him back, I'm not one of his friends." His mother responds that Christian doesn't have any friends, and because of what Jack did, he has to go bring his father back. Jack ends up finding his father in a morgue, dead from an alcohol-induced heart attack. He then pleads his way onto Flight 815 so that he can bury his father back in Los Angeles.

Given that no friendship exists between Jack and his father, it follows for English that Jack doesn't have any obligations to his father. The same applies to all other relationships between adult children and their parents. But it doesn't follow from this that an adult child can treat her parents however she wants to treat them, nor that the sacrifices parents make are entirely irrelevant to the relationship. Ideally, the sacrifices that parents make on behalf of their children will ultimately help create a friendship between parents and their adult children. Friendships can and do begin in this manner.

The idea that English rejects is that the sacrifices made by parents on behalf of their children *create obligations* that those children must fulfill as adults. The amount of parental sacrifice is irrelevant to the adult child's obligations to her parents, because this type of debt is not appropriate to friendship relationships. And the relationship between adult children and their parents should ideally be a friendship relationship. Not only does this mean that the amount and kind of sacrifices made by parents on behalf of their children are irrelevant to the adult child's obligations, but it also means that the biological relationship between parents and children is irrelevant, according to English. So, if the survivors of Oceanic 815 are one day rescued, and Claire asks her son Aaron for some financial help to pay her medical bills, he would not have the obligation to do so simply because of the time, physical labor, and emotional effort that Claire gave to raise him. But if they have an ongoing friendship, a relationship in which there is mutual care, concern, and affection, then Aaron should and will help her out if he can. For English, whether or not there is an ongoing friendship will determine the obligations that Aaron has to Claire.

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## The Others

No, not *those* others, but rather the other possible sources of obligation in the parent-child relationship that are worth thinking about. Consider the following from philosopher Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900):

It would be agreed that children owe to their parents respect and kindness generally and assistance in case of infirmity or any special need; but it seems doubtful how far this is held by Common Sense to be due on account of the relationship alone, or on account of services rendered during infancy, and how far it is due to cruel or neglectful parents. Most perhaps would say, here and in other cases, that mere nearness of blood constituted a certain claim: but they would find it hard to agree upon its exact force.<sup>2</sup>

Sidgwick offers a view that contrasts with that of English. His words reflect the traditional view that children do owe respect, kindness, and special assistance to their parents. He is more tentative regarding the sources of these obligations, however, though he notes several possibilities: (1) the quality of the relationship; (2) the biological connection; and (3) as a debt of gratitude for parental services rendered during childhood.

Sidgwick is in agreement with English that the quality of the parent-child relationship itself plays a role in the existence and extent of the obligations that the adult child has to the parent. From this source, it looks like neither Jack nor Locke are obligated in any way to their fathers. A disagreement arises between Sidgwick and English insofar as Sidgwick grants that the biological relationship and the services rendered by parents in the care of their children both play a role in dictating the existence and extent of these obligations. Do Jack or Locke owe their fathers anything based on these considerations?

Many people think that the biological connection that exists between parents and children is also a moral connection. If you are related “by blood,” then you have some obligations to each other because of that kinship relationship. On this view, one need not think that Locke owes his biological father a kidney, nor that Jack owes it

<sup>2</sup> Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 248.



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to his father to keep silent about his medical malpractice. But it seems that on this approach to the parent-child relationship, Jack and Locke both do owe their fathers at least some respect, kindness, and care. Moreover, on the grounds that they are related by blood, on this approach Jack does owe it to his father to bring him back home from Sydney, as his mother told him to do. On the biological approach, those of us who have had decent parents do owe them phone calls, visits, and financial support (if they need it and we're able to provide it). In opposition to the biological approach, it seems initially plausible that even when a biological relationship exists, if one's parents have seriously failed in their parental role then this relieves an adult child of at least some of his obligations, as the case of Jack and his dad makes plain. And if biology is relevant to the obligations that parents and children have to one another, factors such as the quality of the relationship play a large role in the extent of those obligations. The significance of the quality of the relationship over against the biological ties can be clearly seen when no such biological connection exists, as in the case of adopted children.

The other approach alluded to by Sidgwick emphasizes the debt adult children owe their parents due to the sacrifices made by the parents in raising the children. David Mellow has recently developed an argument for the conclusion that adult children do owe their parents a debt based on gratitude.<sup>3</sup> Most parents have benefited their children in many ways that have required major sacrifices on the part of the parents. Moreover, most parents have the right intentions and motives when making sacrifices on behalf of their children, such as the desire that their children have good and happy lives. With these thoughts in mind, it is again clear that Locke would owe nothing to Anthony Cooper based on a debt of gratitude. As Locke puts it, his father "pretended to love me just long enough to steal my kidney and dropped me back in the world like a piece of trash . . . just like he did on the day I was born!" Locke's biological father has made no sacrifices on Locke's behalf, ever. But on this understanding of family obligations, Jack does owe his father something. Still, how much Jack owes Christian is unclear. We know Christian is Claire's biological father, though he has kept this to himself. We also know from a conversation that Christian had in Sydney with Ana Lucia that he loves

<sup>3</sup> David Mellow, "Sources of Filial Obligation," unpublished paper.

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and respects Jack, but is unable to tell him. So it seems likely that during Jack's childhood Christian did make some sacrifices with Jack's best interests in mind. If so, we can say that Jack does owe it to his father to go to Sydney and bring him back to Los Angeles.

### What Locke Needs, and What We Owe

After the transplant surgery, Locke wakes up in the hospital room he shared with his father, and his dad is gone, having checked out and returned home under private care. After learning what has occurred, that his own father has selfishly manipulated the entire situation and conned him out of one of his kidneys, Locke leaves the hospital and goes to his father's house. Bleeding from the spot where his kidney was removed, Locke is turned away by the security guard. Locke drives away, and in anger and despair he pulls over on the side of the road and weeps. The scene fades into Locke weeping in the same way at the hatch, which he has tried unsuccessfully to open. Locke cries out that "I've done everything you wanted me to do. So why did you do this?" It seems like the island at this point in the show's second season has become a surrogate father for Locke. Given that his own father not only manipulated him but also tried to kill him, it makes sense that Locke would look elsewhere! Just as he did all that he could do to obtain his father's love, he has tried to do all that the island has asked of him to learn why it brought him to itself. This observation might sound like it belongs in a book entitled *Lost and Psychology*, but this scene does have philosophical significance.

Locke's desire for his father's love, while perhaps too extreme, illustrates a need we have as human beings. For some reason, human nature is such that we long to have loving parental figures in our lives. If we don't have them, we deeply miss them, even as adults.<sup>4</sup> Children need their parents, especially early in life. And parents need their children and long for a close relationship with them, sometimes especially later in life. Given these facts, perhaps what parents owe their children and what children owe their parents rests not just on the quality of the relationship they share, the sacrifices that they make

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussion of this and other issues related to family ethics, see my *Conceptions of Parenthood: Ethics and the Family* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

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for each other, or the biological relationship that exists. Instead, what parents and children owe one another depends on the needs they have that parents and children are uniquely situated to meet for one another. Clearly, Jack and Locke both need more from their fathers than they received. Their fathers have, in fact, failed to fulfill their parental obligations to their sons. It's also clear that the parents of adult children have a very human need that only their adult children can meet, the need for respect and love from one's children. Perhaps the recognition and true appreciation of this need can go a long way in telling us what Jack, Locke, and the rest of us owe our parents.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Cameron Griffith, Brett Patterson, Jonathan Boyd, and Bill Irwin for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter.