

The Realization and Limitations of “Filial Piety Ethics” in Robotic Caregiving

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ABSTRACT

The three levels of “shallow care,” “deep care,” and “good care” in robotic caregiving largely correspond to the concepts of “supporting parents,” “pleasing parents,” and “respecting parents” in traditional Chinese filial piety ethics, enabling the application of caregiving robots within the context of Chinese filial culture. However, in the practical application of caregiving robots, there are issues such as ambiguity in defining the moral responsibility of the caregiving subject, the illusory nature of the emotional relationship between humans and robots, objectification of the elderly, and challenges faced by traditional Chinese parent-child relationships. Therefore, the role of caregiving robots should be carefully evaluated. They should not be seen as replacements for children but as tools to assist children in fulfilling their filial duties when caring for elderly parents.

KEYWORDS

Robotic Caregiving, Filial Piety Ethics, Good Care, Practical Difficulties, Technology Ethics

INTRODUCTION

In the “Robot+” Application Action Plan issued by the Chinese government in 2023, it was emphasized that China needs to accelerate the application of AI-assisted technologies in the field of elderly care, actively integrate robots into various scenarios of elderly care, and enhance the intelligence level of these services. Evidently, in the context of an increasingly aging society, how to enhance the participation of robots in elderly care has become a pressing question that China must consider and address. Unlike other countries, China has a unique cultural foundation and caregiving ethos, embodied in the concept of *filial piety ethics*. Liang (2018) explicitly stated in *The Essentials of Chinese Culture* that “Chinese culture is a culture of filial piety” (p. 338). It can be said that the concept of filial piety is a core component and a primary moral norm of traditional Chinese culture. Filial piety ethics are also a distinctive feature of China’s caregiving ethics. Therefore, applying caregiving robots in China must align with the value norms of filial piety ethics. Consequently, it is essential to explore the compatibility of filial piety ethics with caregiving robots and to analyze how to use caregiving robots in a more regulated, reasonable, and culturally appropriate manner under the framework of filial piety.

The academic community has achieved significant theoretical results in the study of ethical issues related to caregiving robots (Decker, 2008; Deusdad, 2024; Vallor, 2017). However, research

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on the integration of caregiving robots with filial piety ethics remains relatively underdeveloped. Specifically, current research on filial piety ethics in relation to robots primarily focuses on two aspects. The first aspect concerns the potential impact of caregiving robots on Chinese filial piety ethics. Scholars generally believe that the application of caregiving robots may partially deconstruct traditional filial piety ethics, leading to the weakening of its overall functions (Lu, 2022), the reduction of its ethical norms (Wang & Lin, 2019), and, ultimately, the dilution of children's responsibilities to care for their aging parents (Zhao, 2022). The second aspect is whether robots can adhere to filial piety ethics and which ethical norms they might follow. Scholars such as Muyskens et al. (2024) have argued that robots lack human empathy and genuine emotional responses, making them incapable of independently fulfilling filial duties. However, if robots can strengthen connections between elderly parents and their children and alleviate caregiving burdens, this would align with filial piety ethics. Wheeler (2023) holds a similar view, suggesting from a Confucian ethical perspective that caregiving robots cannot bear individual moral responsibility but can be reasonably utilized as a tool. Elder (2023) specifically examined how the Confucian norm of "reasonably offering advice to parents" (*jianqin*) can provide valuable insights for the design of robots, noting that Confucian ethics can guide caregiving technologies toward new areas of focus. In summary, while these studies have examined the relationship between robots and filial piety ethics to some extent, they lack analyses based on Chinese Confucian texts to determine whether caregiving robots are fundamentally compatible with filial piety ethics. Additionally, the ethical risks associated with the application of caregiving robots have not been explored in sufficient depth.

In view of this, this paper draws on Confucian texts to explain that the core essence of Chinese filial piety ethics is to serve parents well, which manifests specifically in three aspects: first, *supporting parents*, meaning that children provide their parents with material support and take care of their parents' lives; second, *pleasing parents*, meaning that children offer emotional care to make their parents happy; and third, *respecting parents*, meaning that children always maintain respect for their parents. At the same time, using the multiple types distinction theory of robotic caregiving capabilities, this paper analyzes the compatibility between robotic caregiving and the three aspects of Chinese traditional filial piety ethics. It concludes that robotic caregiving and its future development trends can conform to the norms of filial piety ethics, supporting the application of caregiving robots in the context of Chinese filial culture. Furthermore, this paper explores four practical challenges in applying caregiving robots under the framework of filial piety ethics. It argues that, whether from the essence of filial piety (a concept rooted in the blood ties between parents and children) or the characteristics of moral agency, robots cannot replace children as independent moral agents. Instead, they can serve as tools to assist children in fulfilling their filial duties by caring for elderly parents.

THE FUNCTIONAL REALIZATION OF FILIAL PIETY ETHICS THROUGH SHALLOW CARE

According to the different focuses of caregiving content, Coeckelbergh (2010) examined and distinguished three types of robotic caregiving: *shallow care*, *deep care*, and *good care*. Shallow care refers to the robot's care for the basic daily life of the care recipient. In this aspect, robots can approach human caregiving abilities and even surpass human limitations in certain caregiving tasks, thus basically realizing the supporting parents function proposed in filial piety ethics.

Specifically, the ancient Confucian text, *Book of Rites*, indicates that the primary virtue of a filial child is to support their parents (Wang, 2016, p. 632). Traditional filial piety ethics holds that children need to provide a certain level of material support and life care for their elderly parents, which is the most basic form of filial piety. When people grow older, they gradually lose their ability to work, and as their physical function declines, they may also suffer from illnesses that make independent living impossible. Therefore, children need to repay their parents' nurturing kindness through their actions. Currently, due to the development and progress of China's urban and rural

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