MORAL OBLIGATION

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The notion of obligation—of what an agent owes to himself, to others, or to society generally—occupies a central place in morality. But what are the sources of our moral obligations, and what are their limits? To what extent do obligations vary in their stringency and severity, and does it make sense to talk about imperfect obligations, that is, obligations that leave the individual with a broad range of freedom to determine how and when to fulfill them? Moreover, does moral obligation always override individual self-interest, and, if not, how should we handle situations in which an agent's obligations come into conflict with his personal goals and commitments?

The twelve essays in this volume address these questions and explore related issues. Some of them discuss broad theoretical questions: they ask, for example, whether moral obligations can be derived from underlying moral or nonmoral facts; or they seek to determine whether, in some cases, an action might be judged objectively wrong but subjectively right. Some essays look at moral reasons for action, characterizing moral obligation in terms of our reasons for assigning blame, or considering whether the fact that an action is wrong provides an additional reason not to perform it. Other essays discuss specific moral obligations, such as the obligation not to waste scarce resources or the obligation to work toward resolving international conflicts and establishing peace. Still others examine the tensions that may exist between our obligations and our other concerns, including our desires to pursue our own aims and projects and to secure our own interests and the interests of those who are close to us.

The collection opens with four essays that explore theoretical issues regarding moral obligation. In "Reflection and Morality," Charles Larmore examines the role that impersonal reflection plays in our understanding of our obligations to one another. One of our distinctive traits as human beings is our capacity to distance ourselves from our individual concerns—the capacity of each individual to view himself as one person among others. Larmore argues that this capacity is essential to our ability to think in moral terms: it allows us to turn our attention from our own happiness to the happiness of another, and to take the same interest in the other person's good (just because it is his or hers) as we naturally take in our own. Reflection, on Larmore's view, is a practical enterprise: we reflect on what we have reason to do, in order to discover how we should live. In the course of the essay, Larmore touches on a range of subjects, including the nature of reasons for action and the relationship between moral reasons and reasons of prudence. In particular, he rejects the notion that prudential reasons are more basic than moral ones, and he denies the

possibility that morality can be grounded in considerations of prudence or mutual advantage. Larmore contends that moral reasons are *sui generis* and cannot be derived from any other sorts of considerations; they are, moreover, universal (that is, valid for all agents under similar circumstances) and impersonal (binding without regard to our own interests and attachments). He concludes that reflection plays a vital role in our development as moral beings, since it allows us to see another person's good, in and of itself, as making a claim on our moral attention.

Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons look at the category of supererogatory actions, actions that go "beyond the call of duty," in their essay, "Untying a Knot from the Inside Out: Reflections on the 'Paradox' of Supererogation." They take as their starting-point a famous 1958 essay by the philosopher J. O. Urmson entitled "Saints and Heroes." In that essay, Urmson challenged the then-prevailing view that sorted actions into three categories: those that were morally obligatory; those that were morally indifferent, and therefore optional; and those that were morally wrong. To these, Urmson added a fourth category: supererogatory acts, which were morally praiseworthy, but which individuals had no moral obligation to perform. As Horgan and Timmons note, the concept of supererogation seems to be a paradoxical one. On the one hand, supererogatory actions are (by definition) supposed to be morally good, indeed the morally best, actions. But on the other hand, if they are morally best, why aren't they morally required? In short, how can an action that is morally best for a person to perform fail to be what the person is morally required to do? The source of this alleged paradox is the so-called "good-ought tie-up": the idea that the moral goodness of an action tends to entail an obligation to perform it. Horgan and Timmons address the alleged paradox in two stages. First, they examine the moral phenomenology of several purported cases of supererogatory actions, in order to show that they are, indeed, genuine cases of actions that are morally good yet beyond the call of duty. Second, the authors analyze this moral phenomenology in order to explain why there is no real paradox involved in cases of supererogation. Their explanation appeals to the idea that moral reasons can play what they call a "merit-conferring role"; that is, moral reasons that favor supererogatory actions function to confer merit on the actions they favor, but they do this without also *requiring* the actions in question. Hence, supererogatory actions can be good and morally meritorious, yet still be morally optional. Horgan and Timmons conclude that the recognition of a merit-conferring role unties the "good-ought tie-up," and that there are good grounds, independent of helping to resolve the alleged paradox, for recognizing this sort of role that moral reasons can play.

A different kind of paradox is the focus of Holly M. Smith's contribution to this volume, "Subjective Rightness." In many cases, an agent's actions are guided by mistaken beliefs about his circumstances, and in such cases we may be tempted to judge that his action is both right and

wrong. That is, an action may seem right in view of the agent's beliefs, but wrong in light of the actual circumstances. As Smith notes, twentieth-century philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, C. D. Broad, and others introduced a distinction between objective and subjective rightness in order to deal with cases of this sort. Yet, historically, the idea of subjective rightness has been understood in at least four different ways: the subjectively right act might be defined as (1) the act that is most likely to be objectively right; (2) the act that has the highest expected value; (3) the act that would be objectively right if the facts were as the agent believed them to be; or (4) the act that is best in light of the agent's beliefs at the time when he performs it. Smith discusses each of these definitions in turn and judges each to be deficient. She goes on to propose a different approach to defining subjective rightness, an approach that centers on defining *principles* of subjective rightness rather than subjectively right *acts*. The crucial point, she argues, is that a normative principle can be characterized as a principle of subjective rightness only relative to a governing principle of objective rightness. For example, a moral theory might include an objective principle stating that an action is wrong if it involves killing an innocent person. But in some cases an agent may be uncertain as to whether the action he is contemplating involves the killing of an innocent, and to handle those cases, a moral theory must include various principles of subjective rightness to guide the agent's actions in situations of uncertainty. Smith sets out her account in detail and concludes that, since we must often make moral decisions without complete knowledge, any comprehensive moral theory must include multiple principles of subjective rightness to address the different degrees of knowledge that moral decision-makers possess.

The question of whether our moral obligations can be justified on the basis of more fundamental, nonmoral facts lies at the center of Thomas Hurka's essay, "Underivative Duty: Prichard on Moral Obligation." Hurka explores the early-twentieth-century philosopher H. A. Prichard's defense of the view that moral duty is underivative, a view reflected in Prichard's argument that it is a mistake to ask, "Why ought I to do what I morally ought?" because the only possible answer is, "Because you morally ought to." Hurka notes that this view was shared by other philosophers of Prichard's time, including Henry Sidgwick and A. C. Ewing, but he believes Prichard stated the view most forcefully and defended it best. The claim that moral obligation is underivative can be understood on three different levels. On the broadest level, it expresses the idea that normative truths are not reducible to or derivable from non-normative truths (such as scientific facts). On the level of moral judgments, the idea is that truths about how we ought to act are also underivative: moral "oughts" cannot be grounded in any more fundamental considerations, either normative or non-normative. Finally, on the level of specific deontological duties (such as the duty to keep promises), the idea is that these duties are not

derived from a more general duty to promote good consequences. Using
these three levels as a framework, Hurka offers a detailed discussion of
Prichard's views, with particular emphasis on Prichard's critique of con-
sequentialism. According to this critique, the attempt to justify moral
duties based on their consequences (whether for the satisfaction of the
agent's interests, or for the good of others) has the tendency to distort
those duties. If a duty is justified instrumentally by the fact that it pro-
motes the agent's advantage, for example, then it is, in effect, reduced to
a duty to promote the agent's advantage. Hurka concludes his essay with
a discussion of Prichard's critique of ancient ethics and, in particular, the
ethics of Aristotle: the fundamental flaw of these ethical systems, Hurka
suggests, is that they are grounded in a picture of the moral agent as
essentially self-concerned.

The collection's next three essays explore the links between our moral
obligations and moral reasons for action. In "'But It Would Be Wrong,'"
Stephen Darwall asks whether the fact that an action would be wrong is
itself a reason not to perform it. If we suppose that an action is morally
wrong because it has certain wrong-making features, and that these fea-
tures provide us with reasons not to perform the action, then it seems
natural to assume that the fact that the action is wrong does not provide
us with an *additional* reason not to perform it. But Darwall argues that this
view is mistaken. The concepts of moral obligation and moral wrong, he
argues, are connected in an important way to our reactive attitudes (e.g.,
indignation or blame), attitudes through which we hold agents respon-
sible for their actions. On his analysis, moral obligation and moral wrong
conceptually involve authoritative demands that we make of one another
as members of a moral community. Moral obligation is conceptually linked
to accountability: an agent who has an obligation is morally answerable
if he fails to fulfill it. To say that an action is morally wrong is to say that
we would be justified in blaming an agent who performed it without an
adequate excuse. Darwall sets out this view and relates it to views of
moral obligation held by John Stuart Mill, P. F. Strawson, Bernard Wil-
liams, and others. In the end, Darwall concludes, the fact that an action is
morally wrong does indeed provide a reason not to perform it (in addi-
tion to whatever features make the act wrong). This additional reason
consists in the fact that a morally wrong action violates a legitimate
demand that we make of one another, and therefore disrespects the author-
ity we have, as members of a moral community, to make such demands.

In "Moral Obligation, Blame, and Self-Governance," John Skorupski
argues that our judgments about moral obligations are rooted in the
rationality of our feelings. He begins with a discussion of evaluative
reasons—the reasons we have for feeling sentiments such as admiration,
gratitude, anger, or fear—reasons which are not reducible to epistemic
ones (reasons to believe something) or practical ones (reasons to do some-
thing). The key to understanding our moral obligations, on Skorupski's

view, is the sentiment of blame: an action is understood to be morally
wrong if it is blameworthy. Blame, in turn, can be understood in terms of
the objects that typically give rise to it (for example, stealing, acting
cruelly) and in terms of the actions it prompts toward the person who is
blamed (the withdrawal of recognition or the cutting off of relations,
either temporarily or permanently). The proper object of the sentiment of
blame is some action that the agent had warranted reason not to do and
could have refrained from doing. Skorupski goes on to contend that the
categorical nature of moral obligation is consistent with, and indeed fol-
lows from, his analysis of moral concepts in terms of reasons for blame.
In the remainder of his essay, he draws out the implications of his analysis
for moral agency. Given that moral agency essentially involves suscepti-
bility to blame, it follows that moral agency is a species of self-governing
agency. Self-governing agents must, at the very least, be able to think
about what reasons they have, in order to assess what they have sufficient
reason to believe, feel, or do, and this notion of self-governance implies
that an agent's moral obligations are always relative to the agent's war-
ranted beliefs. Skorupski concludes by considering whether moral agents,
in addition to being self-governing, must also be autonomous in the
strong sense intended by Immanuel Kant: that is, whether they must be
capable of knowing their moral obligations by means of their own per-
sonal insight.

The relationship between practical reasons and imperfect moral duties
or obligations is the subject of Patricia Greenspan's contribution to this
volume, "Making Room for Options: Moral Reasons, Imperfect Duties,
and Choice." Drawing on a distinction made by Kant, contemporary
philosophers understand imperfect duties as those that leave some room
for choice as to the time, place, and manner of their fulfillment (as opposed
to perfect duties, which specify precisely what we must do, given partic-
ular circumstances). The classic example of an imperfect duty, as Greenspan
notes, is the duty to aid those in need, which leaves individuals with
some leeway regarding whom to aid, when, and how much. Yet the
notion of an imperfect duty seems to stand in tension with the contem-
porary understanding of practical reasons for action: practical reasons are
taken to be prima facie requirements of action, which may be overridden
by other reasons, but are otherwise taken to constrain an agent's choices.
On this view, it would be irrational for an individual to recognize a
particular reason as the strongest reason for action he has, and yet make
no attempt to act on it. If one has a strong reason to aid a particular victim
of a natural disaster, for example, then one is morally required to aid him,
unless one has an equally strong (or stronger) reason to perform some
other action. This view seems to undermine the very idea of imperfect
duties—duties that leave the agent with the freedom to choose how to
fulfill them—and Greenspan defends an alternative conception of prac-
tical reasons that is designed to preserve this freedom. She distinguishes

between *critical reasons,* which count against a potential action, and *favoring reasons,* which highlight valuable features of a potential action (or answer criticisms against it). She goes on to argue that only reasons that offer criticism of alternatives can yield binding moral requirements, and that reasons for particular ways of satisfying imperfect duties merely count in favor of the acts in question. If we conceive of practical reasons in this way, Greenspan concludes, we can understand imperfect duties as having genuine moral force, and yet preserve the freedom of individuals to determine precisely how and when to fulfill them.

The collection continues with three essays that focus on particular moral obligations. The general obligation to be virtuous is the subject of Paul Guyer's essay, "The Obligation to Be Virtuous: Kant's Conception of the *Tugendverpflichtung*." Guyer asks whether it makes sense to distinguish, as Kant does, between specific duties (such as the duty of beneficence toward others) and a general obligation to be virtuous. We might suppose that this general obligation is entirely reducible to the obligation to fulfill one's specific duties, and thus has no content of its own. But Guyer argues that Kant understands the obligation to be virtuous as calling on agents to strengthen their commitment to fulfilling their particular duties. On Kant's view, we have a natural disposition to be moral, as well as a natural disposition toward self-love, and the obligation to be virtuous calls on us to strive to strengthen the former and control the latter. We strengthen our disposition to be moral in two ways: by cultivating moral feeling, which makes it possible for us to be moved to act by the thought of our moral duties; and by cultivating our individual conscience, the internal judge that prompts us to recognize our duties in particular situations. Guyer contends that Kant's general obligation to be virtuous amounts to an obligation to develop one's moral character so as to be ready to conduct oneself virtuously when one is presented with moral choices. With the identification of this general obligation, Guyer concludes, Kant has captured an important element of the genuinely moral life: living such a life does not merely require fulfilling a series of particular duties; rather, it requires preparing oneself to be moral by developing the resources of character that enable one to act virtuously.

In "A Conceptual and (Preliminary) Normative Exploration of Waste," Andrew Jason Cohen asks whether we have an obligation to refrain from wasting resources. He begins by defending a definition of waste as a process wherein something useful becomes less useful, and less benefit is produced than is lost. Employing this definition, Cohen goes on to consider various arguments designed to show that waste is immoral. One line of argument holds that waste is immoral because it harms the person who wastes: an agent who wastes his resources will be less able to preserve himself and pursue his goals. The problem with this argument, Cohen notes, is that some agents (e.g., the super-rich) will be able to engage in wasteful behavior without seriously impairing their chances of

surviving and achieving their goals. A second line of argument is one that Cohen calls the "disgust argument": when confronted with instances of waste, we typically react with disgust, and this visceral (and widely shared) reaction gives us reason to believe that waste is immoral. Cohen rejects this second argument as well, on the grounds that, historically, people have found many perfectly moral activities disgusting; not long ago, for example, people used their disgust with the idea of interracial marriage to justify making the practice illegal. A far more promising line of argument, Cohen maintains, is one that frames the issue of waste in terms of toleration: When should we tolerate waste, and when should we not? That is, when should it be permissible to interfere with wasteful behavior, and when should it be impermissible? Cohen argues that interference should be permissible when wasteful behavior causes genuine harm to others, understood as the wrongful setting back of their interests. He fills in the details of this argument in the remainder of his essay, and he concludes that we do indeed have an obligation not to waste, at least in certain circumstances: for example, if an agent is wasting a resource that a second agent needs for his preservation, then the former has an obligation to give up the resource and allow the latter to make better use of it.

In "The Duty to Seek Peace," Bernard R. Boxill examines Kant's claim that we have an obligation to seek to establish peace between nations. Kant's view stands in contrast to the views of other theorists such as Thomas Hobbes, whose work casts doubt on the very possibility of achieving peace and seems to suggest that the best we can hope for is an uneasy truce between countries that refrain from attacking one another out of fear of retaliation. As Boxill notes, however, Kant's conception of peace involves more than the absence of open war: it requires the establishment of conditions that would foster the full development of human talents. In his essay *Perpetual Peace* (1795), Kant sets out a plan for securing peace which requires the establishment of three important institutions: a republican constitution for every state in the world; a federation of all states; and a cosmopolitan right that entitles individuals to visit foreign countries and establish relations (including economic relations) with their inhabitants on mutually agreeable terms. The prospects for securing these three institutions may seem remote, yet Kant believed their establishment was possible, and even likely, given historical trends. In the course of his essay, Boxill looks at each of these institutions and argues that Kant failed to show that they would be sufficient to secure peace. For example, Kant believed that republican states would remain at peace with one another because their citizens would be reluctant to authorize war, knowing that they would bear the costs. But this argument fails, Boxill points out, if we recognize that a majority within a republic can shift the costs of war onto a minority. He goes on to argue that the prospects for peace in today's world seem bleaker than they were even in Kant's time, since the con-

temporary trend toward globalization tends to increase international con-
flicts over the control of natural resources. Nonetheless, Boxill suggests
that it may be possible to devise a plan for securing peace in a world of
globalization. As we attempt to do so, he concludes, we should draw on
our fear of war and our compassion for the victims of war in order to
strengthen our resolve to seek peace.

The collection concludes with two essays that focus, in different ways,
on tensions between moral obligations and other values. In "Goals, Luck,
and Moral Obligation," R. G. Frey draws on the work of the philosopher
Bernard Williams in order to explore situations in which our individual
goals and projects conflict with our moral obligations. As Frey notes,
Williams rejected a particular view that he held to be central to much of
modern moral philosophy: namely, the view that obligation lies at the
core of ethics and that the only thing that can override a moral obligation
is another, stronger moral obligation. According to Williams, this view
tends to impoverish our moral experience and fails to take into account
things that are obviously important to our lives. Taking Williams as his
inspiration, Frey sets out to discuss a number of cases in which an indi-
vidual's personal goals and commitments come into conflict with his
obligations. Suppose, for example, that a son makes a promise to his
dying father that he will pursue a particular career; later, the son discov-
ers that he is unsuited to that career, and that his pursuit of it has made
a mess of his life, leaving him miserable. Frey maintains that the son's
unhappiness, in this case, is a factor that weighs against his obligation to
keep his promise, and indeed may justify his breaking it. Drawing on this
case and a number of others, Frey argues that our desire to pursue goals
and live lives of our own choosing may sometimes outweigh particular
moral obligations. In the course of his essay, he considers the role that
luck plays in our lives and the relationship between luck and moral
responsibility. He concludes that any account of morality that omits or
trivializes personal projects and goals is insufficient for understanding
the complexity of our moral lives.

H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. explores the tension between morality and
prudence in the collection's final essay, "Moral Obligation after the Death
of God: Critical Reflections on Concerns from Immanuel Kant, G. W. F.
Hegel, and Elizabeth Anscombe." In particular, Engelhardt focuses on the
character of moral obligations in contemporary secular societies, in which
God is no longer recognized as the source and enforcer of morality. Since
the Enlightenment, Western nations have moved away from a theocentric
moral culture toward a culture which views the universe as ultimately
without meaning and which recognizes a diversity of moral opinions and
practices. Without a unifying theological perspective, Engelhardt argues,
it becomes impossible to get beyond moral diversity and discover moral
truth. Moreover, without a God who punishes wrongdoing and rewards
virtue, it becomes impossible to show that moral concerns should always

trump concerns of prudence (that is, concerns for one's own nonmoral interests and the interests of those to whom one is close). Engelhardt looks at how the problem of anchoring morality in the absence of God has been treated in the work of a number of theorists. He offers a lengthy analysis of Kant's attempt to establish the absolute force of moral obligation by making the idea of God central to morality, while at the same time rejecting the possibility that we can know whether a God exists. Engelhardt goes on to discuss Hegel's account of morality, which emphasizes the importance of moral customs and holds that moral obligations are contingent and sociohistorically situated within particular communities and nations (with the implication that moral truth is subject to change over time). Engelhardt concludes that the "death of God" in modern secular societies comes with a significant cost: without an appeal to God, there is no clear basis for claiming that morality should take precedence over self-interest.

Questions about what we owe to one another—about the extent and limits of the demands that morality places on us—are of perennial concern in moral theory. The essays in this volume, written from a variety of perspectives, offer important insights concerning the nature, sources, and implications of our moral obligations.

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Charles Larmore is W. Duncan MacMillan Family Professor in the Humanities, and Professor of Philosophy, at Brown University. Previously, he taught at Columbia University and at the University of Chicago. His work is centered in the areas of moral and political philosophy, though he has also written on the nature of the self and on various topics in metaphysics and epistemology. Among his recent books are *Les pratiques du moi* (2004), for which he received the Grand Prix de Philosophie from the Académie Française; *The Autonomy of Morality* (2008); and *Dernières nouvelles du moi* (with Vincent Descombes, 2009).

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Moral Philosophers from Sidgwick to Ewing. His contribution to this volume grows out of his research for the latter book.

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Paul Guyer is Professor of Philosophy and Florence R.C. Murray Professor in the Humanities at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author, editor, and translator of numerous works about and by Immanuel Kant, including most recently *Kant* (2006), *Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Reader's Guide* (2007), and *Knowledge, Reason, and Taste: Kant's Response to Hume* (2008). He is currently completing a history of modern aesthetics and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a Research Prize Winner of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

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