

## Moral Obligation and the Structure of Practical Conflicts

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### 1. Introducing the Reasons View

Three examples

CINEMA 1. A has promised B to meet him at the cinema at 8 p.m. There are no additional morally relevant factors.

A is under an obligation to meet B at the cinema at 8 p.m.

STROLL 1. While on a stroll, A encounters C who is in urgent need of help. A is the only one around who can provide the required help, and helping C would not cause any trouble for A.

A is under an obligation to help C.

CINEMA 2. A has promised B to meet him at the cinema at 8 p.m. While A is on his way, he encounters C who is in urgent need of help. A is the only one around who can provide the required help. Helping C would preclude A from keeping his promise, but would not cause any further trouble for A.

A is under an obligation to help C.

Moral reasons and moral obligations

- Conflicting *prima facie*-duties vs. duty *sans phrase* (Ross).
- Conflicting moral reasons vs. moral obligation: in each of these cases, one or two moral reasons are involved. In CINEMA 1 and STROLL 1, only one moral reason is present, and A is under an obligation to perform the action favoured by the respective reason. In CINEMA 2, what A is obliged to do depends on the relative weight of the two moral reasons involved.

Alternative views

- Conditional obligations: ‘The cases involve conditional obligations’ (‘unless one encounters someone in urgent need of help, one is obliged to keep one’s promises’ etc.). – However, then CINEMA 2 is not a case of conflict.
- Moral dilemmas: ‘CINEMA 2 is a moral dilemma involving two incompatible obligations’. – However, this is implausible in this case, if not across the board.

The Reasons View ...

In many situations, different moral reasons morally favour different, mutually incompatible actions. In such cases, what one is obliged to do depends on the relevant moral reasons, and their relative normative weights.

... and some resulting questions regarding moral obligation

- How does what one is obliged to do depend on the relevant moral reasons? How can the relevant moral reasons be distinguished from non-relevant reasons? [Section 4.]
- How can the fact that characteristic obligations are relational be accounted for? [Section 3.]
- (How) can the seemingly specific deliberative relevance of moral obligations be accounted for? [Section 2.]

## 2. The seemingly specific deliberative relevance of moral obligation

### Inappropriate weighing

CINEMA 3. A has promised B to meet him at the cinema at 8 p.m. While on his way, A passes by a shop selling these shoes he always wanted to get a pair of. However, stopping and buying the shoes would result in his being at the cinema significantly later than 8 p.m. It would seem inappropriate for A to weigh his self-interested reason against the moral consideration stemming from his promise.

### The phenomenon of normative exclusion ...

When moral considerations are involved, this excludes certain considerations from the scope of what is deliberatively relevant. – Holism about reasons (Dancy); irrelevant reasons (Scanlon); exclusionary reasons (Raz).

### ... and its place in the Reasons View

- In certain contexts, the presence of a moral reason makes it the case that another reason is excluded from what should be deliberatively considered (as, e.g., in CINEMA 3). Note that this can happen to other *moral* reasons as well:

BURNING HOUSE. In a burning house, the lives of B and C are in danger. A is the only one around who can provide the required help, but he can save only one of the two. He has promised B to pick him up at home to go to the cinema.

It would seem inappropriate for A to consider the promise in deliberating about what to do.

- When one has figured out what one is morally obliged to do, further deliberation (and, in particular, further weighing) is inappropriate in a trivial sense, since everything of deliberative relevance should have been taken into account already at this point.

## 3. The relationality of (characteristic) moral obligations

### Moral obligations and relationality

- Characteristic moral obligations seem to be *relational* in being such that the agent is obliged *to someone*:
  - in CINEMA 1, A is under an obligation *to B* to meet B at the cinema;
  - in STROLL 1, A is under an obligation *to C* to help him;
  - etc.
- When A does not perform an obligation he owes to B, then
  - A wrongs B;
  - B is the one A owes an apology to;
  - B seems to be in a specific position to blame A;
  - etc.

### Relational reasons

- It is plausible to assume that (at least certain) moral reasons are relational:
  - if A has promised B to  $\phi$ , then A has a relational reason given by B to  $\phi$ ;
  - if C is in need of help and A can provide the required help, then B provides A with a relational reason to help B.
- Relational reasons are located on the contributory level and go hand in hand with (*prima facie*-) claims:

A has a relational reason given by B to  $\phi$  iff B has a (*prima facie*-) claim against A that A  $\phi$ s.

#### Relational obligations and relational reasons (I)

A is under an obligation to B to  $\phi$  iff A has a relational reason given by B to  $\phi$  and if there are no relevant equally weighty or weightier reasons against  $\phi$ -ing.

#### 4. Moral vs. non-moral reasons

Moral vs. non-moral reasons, relational vs. non-relational reasons

- What are the reasons relevant for determining what one is morally obliged to do?
- Characteristic moral reasons are relational, characteristic non-moral reasons are not. Examples for the former include:
  - reasons not to harm; reasons to help; reasons to keep promises; reasons to apologize; reasons of gratitude; etc.

#### Relational obligations and relational reasons (II)

A is under an obligation to B to  $\phi$  iff A has a relational reason given by B to  $\phi$  and if there are no equally weighty or weightier relational reasons against  $\phi$ -ing.

The relevance of non-moral reasons

- One might hold that what one is obliged to do cannot solely be a function of (the relative weight of) the relevant moral reasons since non-moral reasons might affect what one is obliged to do (cf. cases of supererogation).

STROLL 2. While on a stroll, A encounters C who is in urgent need of help. A is the only one around who can provide the required help. Helping C would involve facing a high risk of death for A.

Assume that, in STROLL 2, A is not under an obligation to C to help him.

- In STROLL 1, the ground of A's obligation is A's relational reason to help given by C. In STROLL 2, there is no such reason. The fact that helping C would involve A's risking his life would make it the case that, in STROLL 2, C does not have a *prima facie*-claim against A that A helps him, and, consequently, that A has no relational reason to help C given by C.