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# God & Moral Obligation

C. STEPHEN EVANS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

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First edition published in 2013

Impression: 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-969668-0

Printed by the MPG Printgroup, UK

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## *Preface and Acknowledgements*

It is common to refer to our moral obligations collectively as constituting the moral law. Is this simply a way of speaking or does this language capture a deep truth? Many morally earnest people would affirm that there is indeed something about our moral obligations that gives them the status of law. But what kind of law? Must there be a law-giver? If so, who is that law-giver?

A traditional answer is that morality is grounded in God. Modern and contemporary philosophers have tended to find this view simplistic and naïve. In this book I defend the claim that there is truth and wisdom in this traditional view, and that the philosophers who have dismissed the claim have been much too hasty. Our moral obligations either are identical to divine commands or are grounded in such commands. However, I argue that God communicates his requirements in many ways, including through conscience, and this makes it possible for people who do not believe in God nonetheless to have an awareness of their moral obligations.

In defending what is usually called a “divine command” account of moral obligations I rely on the work of several contemporary philosophers, particularly Robert Adams, Philip Quinn, and John Hare. I have tried to write in a clear and straightforward style, avoiding needless technicalities, because the issues are ones that many thoughtful people who are not professional philosophers will find interesting and important. I have tried not only to present arguments for the view that moral obligations should be understood as divine requirements, but also to present and respond to the most common objections made to such a view. I have also tried to show the strengths of the view that moral obligations are divine commands by comparing it with other popular views about the foundations of morality, and showing that when such views give no significant role to God they weaken or undermine their accounts. I have also tried to include a plausible account of how God communicates his requirements to his human creatures.

It is not merely secular thinkers who have tended to dismiss the idea that moral obligations are God’s laws and therefore require

God as a ground. Many religious people have thought that a “divine command” account of moral obligation is a rival to some other popular approaches, particularly “natural law ethics” and “virtue ethics.” An important part of this work is an argument that it is a mistake to think of these approaches as rivals. A religiously grounded ethic needs all three types of accounts to do full justice to all of morality.

This book is primarily a work in the foundations of morality, or metaethics, and not philosophy of religion or theology. However, I hope it is clear that the conclusions reached have profound implications for those fields. In particular, if moral obligations are divine requirements, then humans who are aware of moral duties have a kind of direct awareness of God, and those who do not realize that moral obligations are God’s requirements may nonetheless be brought to see this through reflection on the nature of moral duties. A divine command account of moral obligations also explains why many theologians have held that every sin is a sin against God, even if most sins are also sins against our human neighbors.

I owe a large debt to many people for helping make this book a reality. My students in my graduate seminar on the Foundations of Morality read and discussed several chapters. Greg Mellema and Dan Baras read through the whole manuscript and gave me many excellent criticisms and suggestions. A number of others read parts of the book in draft form. Robert Roberts provided some penetrating suggestions dealing with Chapter 3. Mark Nelson provided a host of stimulating comments and criticisms of Chapter 5. Terence Cuneo gave me some excellent advice about Chapter 6, and gave me invaluable help in understanding Thomas Reid’s approach to morality. I also owe a big debt to Ryan West, who put together the Bibliography and helped me avoid numerous mistakes. I must also thank Mark Mitchell, who prepared the Index, and Karl Aho, who made some important last-minute corrections. I deeply appreciate the generous help all these people provided.

I also want to thank Robert Adams and Mark Murphy. Neither read this beforehand, but Adams’ work provided the major inspiration for the book. Mark Murphy will doubtless disagree with many of the claims and arguments found in it, but it will be evident throughout how much I have learned from his work. Both are models of how Christian scholars should do philosophy.

Finally, I must say some words about some of those I love. My parents, Charles and Pearline Evans, now deceased, taught me right from wrong, and they taught me how important it is to love God and to love the good. I owe more to my wife Jan Evans than I can ever repay. My life with her has demonstrated to me that moral obligations and joy can walk hand in hand.

C. Stephen Evans

*Baylor University, 2012*



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## God and Moral Obligations

Is there a connection between religion and morality? Ivan Karamazov, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, famously declares that if God does not exist, then "everything is permitted." Speaking for the opposition, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has recently argued that the claim that there can be morality without God "should not be controversial" because "there is just plain morality."<sup>1</sup> I shall argue in this book that the truth lies somewhere between these two claims. It is not quite right to say that there would be nothing left of morality if God did not exist. However, Sinnott-Armstrong's view is incorrect as well. Leaving God out of the picture when it comes to morality puts pressure on us to revise our understanding of morality or even lose faith in morality altogether. In particular, the part of morality termed "obligation" threatens to drop out of the picture or be transformed beyond recognition.

Of course the claim that morality depends on God is ambiguous and can be interpreted in a number of different ways. One way it might be understood is as a claim that a person must believe in God to act morally or have a moral character. Religious belief is necessary to be a moral person. This seems implausible, since there seem to be many non-religious people of high moral character, and I have no reason to argue otherwise.

A second way the claim might be understood is as an epistemological claim: God is the basis of our knowledge of morality. If there is a God, this second claim will doubtless be true in some sense, because if humans are created by God, all of their knowledge must be derived from cognitive capacities God has given them. (And if theism is false, the claim will just as obviously be false.) However, assuming the truth

<sup>1</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality Without God?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. xi.

of theism, this epistemological claim is relatively uninteresting. A more interesting epistemological claim would be to assert that moral knowledge (or justified belief) depends on religious knowledge (or justified belief). One might suppose, for example, that a person must believe in God in order rationally to believe that there are objective moral obligations. I shall reject this claim, and also reject the view that moral knowledge must be derived from a special revelation from God. Though I reject these claims, I do acknowledge that belief in morality without a religious foundation can be problematic, and I certainly wish to affirm that special revelation is an important source of moral knowledge.

For my purposes, the relevant interpretation of the “morality depends on God” claim is *ontological*. I am interested in the claim that some features of morality, particularly features of moral obligations, exist because of God. God is the ground of moral obligations and a crucial part of the explanation of such obligations.

## MORAL OBLIGATIONS: A FIRST LOOK

What is a moral obligation? In a sense this whole book is intended to answer that question, and, as we shall see, there are a large variety of possible answers. Nevertheless, some kind of preliminary view is necessary in order to get started. First, to what do obligations pertain? Most commonly, it is actions (or act-types) that are regarded as morally obligatory, though it is not necessary to limit our obligations to actions. We might have obligations to do what we can to bring about certain ends. In this case we fulfill our obligations through actions but the obligation might not be to perform any specific action. It is also perfectly intelligible to believe we have moral obligations to develop or acquire virtues or character traits. I believe, for example, that humans have obligations to have (or acquire) such traits as mercifulness, compassion, generosity, and courage. However, even in this case, the story about how one goes about acquiring (or maintaining) such qualities will very likely include actions and choices about actions, since most accounts of the virtues stress the role that practice plays if they are to be developed and/or retained.

So let us say that obligations apply primarily, though not exclusively, to actions. Moral philosophers disagree about whether some

moral obligations are “absolute” and hold unconditionally or whether all obligations are “*prima facie*,” liable to being overridden in special circumstances, but it is not hard to give examples of acts that most people would consider to be morally obligatory in at least the *prima facie* sense: refraining from killing an innocent person, telling the truth, refraining from stealing another person’s possessions, keeping a promise.

The concept of an obligation is one of a “deontic” family of concepts, which include “being forbidden,” and “being permitted,” as well as “being obligatory.” Given one of these concepts the others can be defined as well. An act that is forbidden is one that it is obligatory to refrain from doing. An act that is obligatory is one that it is forbidden to refrain from doing. And a permissible act is simply one that is not forbidden. (This obviously assumes that what is obligatory is also permissible. One might also conceive of what is permissible as “merely permissible,” meaning that it is neither obligatory nor forbidden.) It is difficult to define any one member of the family by itself. There are of course terms that are roughly synonymous in English. An act that is forbidden is one that “must not” be done; an act that is obligatory is one that “must” be done. An act that is permissible is one that “may” be done, and so on. However, it is not likely that anyone who fails to grasp the concepts of being obligatory and forbidden will understand the relevant senses of “must” and “may.”

It is helpful here to remember that terms in the obligation family also have a use outside of morality. We humans recognize legal obligations of various kinds, familial obligations, and obligations of etiquette, as well as more specialized forms of obligation that we incur when we participate in specific forms of social interchange. (For example, the obligation an umpire in baseball has to call balls and strikes consistently with the rules that define the strike zone.) Many of these obligations coincide or at least overlap with moral obligations, but this is by no means always the case. Imagine, for example, a racist society with unjust laws that require citizens to practice invidious forms of racial discrimination. In such a situation, a person’s legal obligations might conflict with the individual’s moral obligations. Moral obligations seem to be a particular species of obligation, as different from legal obligations, for example, as legal obligations are from obligations of etiquette.

I shall defend the claim that each type of obligation embodies a particular kind of social institution and is part of a particular system

of social interaction. In the chapters that follow I shall repeatedly appeal to the analogies between moral obligations and the other forms of obligation, particularly legal obligations, in order better to understand moral obligations. For now it is enough to notice that all forms of obligation involve notions of what people “may” do, or “must” do, or “must not” do, though the thrust of these “modal” terms will reflect the specific social institutions these forms of obligation are linked to.

## THE TASK OF METAETHICS

Virtually all human persons recognize the importance moral obligations play in human life. Even those who are skeptics about the reality or validity of such obligations acknowledge that most people do believe that morality is important, and even moral skeptics admit that human societies would likely be fundamentally different if people generally ceased to believe that they were subject to moral obligations. Despite this consensus about the importance of morality, there is little agreement as to the nature of moral obligations. Are there facts about what are our moral obligations? If there are such facts, how do they arise? How can they be explained? If there are no such facts, then how should we understand obligations? Answering such questions is the task of that branch of philosophy called metaethics, usually defined as the attempt to understand the foundations of ethics, carried out at least partly by reflection on the meanings of ethical terms.

Actually, metaethics covers far more than this, because ethics itself deals with far more than questions about moral obligations. For example, ethical or moral philosophy (I shall use “ethics” and “morality” interchangeably) also asks questions about the good. What is goodness? Are there different forms of goodness? What is good for humans? These questions are connected to many others. Since many think the good for humans is, or at least includes, happiness, how should happiness for humans be understood and how can it be achieved? Moral philosophers also ask about justice and about the implications of morality for social institutions. Questions about specific forms of human excellence also arise. Are there forms of excellence (“virtues”) a human life should strive to actualize, such as wisdom, compassion, and courage? If so, what do these qualities

consist in, and how can they be achieved? For all these first-order ethical questions, sometimes called questions of “normative ethics,” there are corresponding metaethical questions about the foundations or origins of whatever ethical truths (or claims, or prescriptions, or expressions) there may be.

This book will focus mainly on metaethical questions that arise in connection with moral obligations. However, it will not be possible or even desirable to answer those questions in isolation from other metaethical questions, or from various first-order questions in ethics, since obligations themselves are related in complex way to goods and virtues of various kinds. Because of the complexity of ethics, I believe we should resist reductive theories that try to explain the whole of ethics in terms of one fundamental principle or concept, but this recognition is fully compatible with the need to understand the various ways the different parts of ethics are connected.

## ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNTS OF MORAL OBLIGATIONS

There are a variety of ways of categorizing the different possible ways one might understand moral obligations. One important divide is the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive theories. Cognitive theories, which come in many varieties, see moral obligations as facts or realities, the sorts of things that people can have true or mistaken beliefs about, and hence are sometimes described as forms of “moral realism.” To claim that “Jim is morally obligated to report the income he received from the lecture” is to affirm something that could be true or false, and thus can be an object of knowledge. Non-cognitive theories such as emotivism and prescriptivism, in contrast, deny that moral utterances express propositions with objective truth values. Emotivism, for example, sees propositions about moral obligations that appear to express facts as disguised expressions of emotions. “Jim is morally obligated to report the income he received from the lecture” does not express a proposition that could be true or false, but rather is an expression of the approving emotion possessed by the person who utters the sentence. (Or, perhaps the sentence expresses a positive emotional response to Jim that would be present if Jim did report the income.) Obviously the accounts given of exactly what attitudes or emotions moral statements express can vary greatly and



can be much more sophisticated than these fairly crude examples, but the general thrust of the view is clear enough.

A prescriptivist account differs from an emotivist account in viewing moral utterances as attempts to prescribe how others should behave. On such a view a moral utterance expresses not just an emotion (though it could do this as well) but a conviction of the speaker about how people should act. I shall call all views of this general type expressivist accounts of morality. Expressivist views are by definition non-cognitivist; they imply that moral claims are neither true nor false.<sup>2</sup>

There are many problems with expressivist views, but the most serious issue concerns the implications of such views for normative ethical claims. Suppose that a claim that a certain act is obligatory is just an expression of the speaker's emotions and/or a conviction of the speaker about how people should behave. To say "you must answer honestly" is just to say something like "I strongly approve of your answering honestly" or "I will that you and everyone should answer honestly." In such a case what authority does the moral claim have? The fact that some individual (or even most people) would approve or disapprove of some act would not appear to have the kind of weight or significance we think attaches to morality. One can well imagine someone who accepts expressivism replying to someone who has given a moral injunction as follows: "Why should I care that you disapprove of my action or about what you think about how I should behave?" As one might expect, there are moves the expressivist can make to try to salvage some kind of authoritativeness for moral expressions, but a central problem of metaethics has here come clearly into view: What is the source of the authority of morality, and in particular the authority of moral obligations?

Cognitivists also need to explain the authoritativeness of moral obligations, if they believe, as most objectivists about morality do, that it indeed has authority. Suppose that there are objective moral facts. How exactly do such facts gain authority over us? The existence of such obligations can seem puzzling. If moral obligations are objective in this way, then people can be right or wrong in their beliefs about

<sup>2</sup> This definition is stipulative. Terence Hogan and Mark Timmons have a view they call "Cognitivist Expressivism," in which they say that moral assertions can be beliefs, but beliefs of a distinctive kind, in that they are not primarily to be understood as representing moral facts. A view of this sort just will not count as expressivist in my sense. See Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, "Nondescriptivist Cognitivism: Framework for a New Metaethic," *Philosophical Papers* 29 (2000), pp. 121–53.

their obligations. Similarly, feelings of obligation can be appropriate or inappropriate; I might feel obligated to do what I am not in fact obligated to do, or fail to feel obligated to do what I should do. Many find the existence of such things as moral obligations that are distinct from our feelings and beliefs odd or strange. How do they arise? How do we account for such obligations?

Explaining objective moral obligations turns out to be difficult indeed. There are a large variety of proposed answers but many of them are mutually exclusive, and none are without difficulties. The difficulties are great enough that some moral philosophers simply conclude that there are no such obligations. J. L. Mackie, for example, developed a classic “error theory” account of moral obligations.<sup>3</sup> Mackie concedes that our ordinary moral language is committed to objective moral obligations, affirming that “objectivism about values” is something that has “a firm basis in ordinary thought, and even in the meanings of moral terms.”<sup>4</sup> Most people believe there are such things as objective moral obligations; Mackie just thinks that such beliefs are false. One of his primary arguments for what he calls “moral subjectivism” is the fact that it is very difficult to give a good explanation of how there could be moral obligations.<sup>5</sup> At least if one assumes a naturalistic universe, the existence of such obligations would be “queer” (in the sense of being odd and inexplicable), and in such a situation Mackie thinks it more reasonable just to give up belief in objective moral obligations altogether.

Not surprisingly, Mackie’s claims here, along with just about every other view in the neighborhood, turn out to be controversial. Some of his fellow naturalists, such as the “Cornell realists,” vehemently deny that moral obligations do not fit into a naturalistic world.<sup>6</sup> There is therefore a kind of three-party dispute about moral obligations. Most theistic moral philosophers, as well as the majority of ordinary religious believers (at least in the case of the Abrahamic faiths) affirm the existence of objective moral obligations, and also think that such obligations in some way depend on God, though there is quite a bit of disagreement among religious thinkers as to just how God helps to

<sup>3</sup> J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Mackie, pp. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Mackie, pp. 38–42.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Richard Boyd, “How to Be a Moral Realist,” in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 181–228.

make sense of morality. Making sense of how God could be the basis of moral obligations is the primary task of this book. I shall try to show that *divine authority* has an important role to play in making sense of the deontological dimension of ethics.

Many naturalists agree with religious thinkers that there are objective moral obligations, but hold that God is not necessary to make sense of such obligations; moral obligations can be given a naturalistic explanation. Other naturalists agree with Mackie (and Nietzsche) that objective moral obligations do not make sense in a naturalistic universe. This three-party argument means that theistic moral philosophers who think morality does require God must fight a “two-front war.” They must defend the reality of objective moral obligations against moral skeptics, while at the same time trying to show that such obligations are difficult to explain without God. However, the same three-party situation makes possible some unusual alliances for theists, since it allows them to make common cause with some naturalists in defending objective moral obligations, and common cause with other naturalists in defending the claim that such obligations are hard to make sense of in a naturalistic universe. At the very least the fact that some of the arguments for these claims are defended by naturalists helps alleviate the suspicion that the theistic arguments beg the question by assuming a theistic worldview at the outset.

Of course, as is usually the case in philosophy, matters are not as simple as this three-party argument model might suggest. There are theists who agree with some of the claims of the naturalists who defend moral objectivity. There are also “ethical non-naturalists” who agree with theists that ethical truths cannot be explained naturalistically, but don’t necessarily think God plays an essential role in ethics. In addition, a place in the narrative must be found for “constructivists,” a strand in contemporary ethics inspired by Kant. Constructivists do not fit neatly into the “three-party argument schema,” since they think (with moral objectivists) that moral obligations have a kind of authoritativeness and objectivity, but reject (with moral subjectivists) the view that moral obligations are constituted by objective facts. I shall give a fuller treatment of constructivism, as well as a fuller account of expressivism and some other metaethical views, in Chapter 5. At this point I need to say more about why one might think that divine authority and divine commands have an important role to play in making sense of moral obligations. To make sense of such a claim I need to say more about the special character of such obligations.

THE UNIQUE CHARACTER OF MORAL OBLIGATION:  
THE ANSCOMBE INTUITION

To be morally obligated to perform an action is to have a powerful reason to perform that action, a reason many would describe as a decisive or overriding one. It is thus understandable that many attempts to explain moral obligations take the form of trying to show that we have a powerful reason to perform whatever action the obligation covers. Kant's attempt to ground morality in practical reason is perhaps the paradigm case of this strategy, but consequentialist moral philosophies, such as utilitarianism, can be seen as a variation of this move as well.<sup>7</sup> If we think an obligation is simply something one has a good reason to do, and also assume that people have good reasons to seek maximal good results, then to show that some action A that some person is considering will achieve better results than any alternative action might seem to be a demonstration that the person has a moral duty to perform A.

However, although it is certainly true that a moral obligation gives an individual a reason for acting in a certain way, it does not follow that an explanation of a reason for action is *eo ipso* an explanation of a moral obligation. People frequently have reasons to perform actions, even powerful and decisive reasons, which they have no moral obligation to do. Suppose I am offered \$5,000 to give a lecture this afternoon. The lecture is one I have given before and will require little work for me. I have the time to give the lecture and no pressing responsibilities that would conflict. In this situation I would have very powerful reasons indeed to accept the invitation, but it does not follow that I am morally obligated to do so. If I decide to spend the afternoon meditating, or reading a novel, or playing golf, instead of giving the lecture, some might judge me unwise or frivolous, but few people would say that I have thereby done something immoral. To have a moral obligation to perform an act is to have a reason of a

<sup>7</sup> Of course Kantianism and utilitarianism can be interpreted as first-order normative ethical theories, rather than metaethical theories. However, it is not that easy to disentangle what is normative and what is metanormative in thinkers such as Kant and Mill, and reading the distinction back into their work can be anachronistic. The move I want to highlight in both is an attempt to understand obligatory actions as actions one has a reason to perform. In this chapter I try to show that there are features of moral obligations that resist this reduction. This is not so much metaethics as providing some of the data which metaethics should account for.

special type to perform the act, and an explanation of moral obligations must illuminate this special character that obligations possess.

An analogy with legal obligations may make this point clearer. To have a legal obligation to perform an act is surely to have a reason to perform that act, but no one would think that merely having a reason to perform the act is thereby to have a legal obligation to perform the act. Most of the autobahn highways in Germany have no speed limits. Since I am not experienced at driving an automobile at high speeds, I have very good reasons not to drive my car in excess of 100 miles per hour (or 150 kilometers per hour) when driving on an autobahn in Germany. However, I have no legal obligation to drive slower than 100 miles per hour when on the autobahn. Obviously, the fact that I have a decisive reason to drive slower than 100 miles per hour would still not constitute a legal obligation. There are situations in which I would have a decisive reason to violate my legal obligations. Obvious examples would include the racist laws passed by Nazi Germany, or the segregationist laws in the pre-civil rights era American south. Or, to stick with my highway speed thought experiment, imagine that Porsche, in an attempt to sell more high-powered sports cars, has bribed the German legislature to pass a law that cars on the autobahn must drive faster than 100 miles per hour.

Another way of making this point is to remind ourselves that there are different types of “ought-statements.” If I am driving on the autobahn, I ought not to drive in excess of 100 miles per hour, but this “ought” is not a legal obligation. In a similar way, to go back to my earlier example, there may be a sense in which I ought to accept the invitation to give the lecture and thereby earn \$5,000, but this “ought” is not an expression of a moral duty.

The special character of the moral “ought” is a major theme in one of the most influential articles in ethics published in the twentieth century, G. E. M. Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy.”<sup>8</sup> Anscombe begins with a striking observation about the differences between Aristotle and modern moral philosophy:

Anyone who has read Aristotle’s *Ethics* and has read modern moral philosophy must have been struck by the great contrasts between them.

<sup>8</sup> Reprinted in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe, Volume 3: Ethics, Religion, and Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), pp. 26–42. Originally published in *Philosophy* 33 (January, 1958), 124.