

Moral Obligation

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The idea of obligation, or of oughtness, is an idea of the pure reason. It is a simple, rational conception, and, strictly speaking, does not admit of a definition, since there are no terms more simple by which it may be defined. Obligation is a term by which we express a conception or idea which all men have, as is manifest from the universal language of men. All men have the ideas of right and wrong, and have words by which these ideas are expressed, and, perhaps, no idea among men more frequently reveals itself in words than that of oughtness or obligation. The term cannot be defined, for the simple reason that it is too well and too universally understood to need or even to admit of being expressed in any language more simple and definite than the word obligation itself.

The conditions of moral obligation.

There is a distinction of fundamental importance between the condition and the ground of obligation. The ground of obligation is the consideration which creates or imposes obligation, the fundamental reason of the obligation. Of this I shall inquire in its proper place. At present I am to define the conditions of obligation. But I must in this place observe that there are various forms of obligation. For example, obligation to choose an ultimate end of life as the highest good of the universe; obligation to choose the necessary conditions of this end, as holiness, for example; and obligation to put forth executive efforts to secure this end. The conditions of obligation vary with the form of obligation, as we shall fully perceive in the course of our investigations.

A condition of obligation in any particular form is a sine qua non of obligation in that particular form. It is that, without which, obligation in that form could not exist, and yet is not the fundamental reason of the obligation. For example, the possession of the powers of moral agency is a condition of the obligation to choose the highest good of being in general, as an ultimate end, or for its own sake. But the intrinsic value of this goal is the ground of the obligation. This obligation could not exist without the possession of these powers, but the possession of these powers cannot of itself create the obligation to choose the good in preference to the ill of being. The intrinsic difference between the good and the ill of being is the ground of the obligation to will the one rather than the other. I will first define the conditions upon which all obligation depends, and without which obligation in no form can exist, and afterward proceed to point out the conditions of distinct forms of obligation.

1. Moral agency is universally a condition of moral obligation.

The attributes of moral agency are intellect, sensibility, and free will.

(1.) Intellect includes, among other functions which I need not name, reason, conscience, and self-consciousness. As has been said on a former occasion, reason is the intuitive

faculty or function of the intellect. It gives by direct intuition the following among other truths: the absolute for example, right and wrong; the necessary space exists; the infinite space is infinite; the perfect God is perfect God's law is perfect, etc. In short, it is the faculty that intuits moral relations and affirms moral obligation, to act in conformity with perceived moral relations. It is the faculty that postulates all the a priori truths of science whether mathematical, philosophical, theological, or logical.

Conscience is the faculty or function of the intellect

that recognizes the conformity or disconformity of the heart and life to the moral law as it lies revealed in the reason, and also awards praise to conformity, and blame to disconformity to that law. It also affirms that conformity to the moral law deserves reward, and that disconformity deserves punishment. It also possesses a propelling or impulsive power, by which it urges the conformity, and denounces the nonconformity of will to moral law. It seems, in a certain sense, to possess the power of retribution.

Consciousness is the faculty or function of self-knowledge.

It is the faculty that recognizes our own existence, mental actions, and states, together with the attributes of liberty or necessity, belonging to those actions or states.

"Consciousness is the mind in the act of knowing itself." By consciousness I know that I am that I affirm that space is, that I also affirm that the whole is equal to all its parts that every event must have a cause, and many such like truths. I am conscious not only of these affirmations, but also that necessity is the law of these affirmations, that I cannot affirm otherwise than I do, in respect to this class of truths. I am also conscious of choosing to sit at my desk and write, and I am just as conscious that liberty is the law of this choice.

That is, I am conscious of necessarily regarding myself as entirely free in this choice, and affirming my own ability to have chosen not to sit at my desk, and of being now able to choose not to sit and write. I am just as conscious of affirming the liberty or necessity of my mental states as I am of the states themselves. Consciousness gives us our existence and attributes, our mental acts and states, and all the attributes and phenomena of our being, of which we have any knowledge. In short, all our knowledge is given to us by consciousness. The intellect is a receptivity as distinguished from a voluntary power. All the acts and states of the intellect are under the law of necessity, or physical law. The will can command the attention of the intellect. Its thoughts, perceptions, affirmations, and all its phenomena are involuntary, and under a law of necessity. Of this we are conscious.

Another faculty indispensable to moral agency is:

(2.) Sensibility. This is the faculty or susceptibility of feeling. All sensation, desire, emotion, passion, pain, pleasure, and in short, every kind and degree of feeling, as the term feeling is commonly used, is a phenomenon of this faculty. This faculty supplies the chronological condition of the idea of the valuable, and hence of right and wrong, and of moral obligation. The experience of pleasure or happiness develops the idea of the

valuable, just as the perception of body develops the idea of space. But for this faculty the mind could have no idea of the valuable, and hence of moral obligation to will the valuable, nor of right and wrong, nor of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness.

Self-love is a phenomenon of this department of the mind.

It consists in a constitutional desire of happiness, and implies a corresponding dread of misery. It is doubtless through, or by, this constitutional tendency that the rational idea of the intrinsic value of happiness or enjoyment is at first developed. Animals, doubtless, have enjoyment, but we have no evidence that they possess the faculty of reason in the sense in which I have defined the term. Consequently they have not, as we suppose, the rational conception of the intrinsic worth or value of enjoyment. They seek enjoyment from a mere impulse of their animal nature, without, as we suppose, so much as a conception of moral law, obligation, right or wrong.

But we know that moral agents have these ideas. Self-love is constitutional. Its gratification is the chronological condition of the development of the reason's idea of the intrinsically valuable to being.

This idea develops that of moral law, or in other words, the affirmation that this intrinsic good ought to be universally chosen and sought for its own sake.

The sensibility, like the intellect, is a receptivity or purely a passive, distinguished from a voluntary faculty. All its phenomena are under the law of necessity. I am conscious that I cannot, by any direct effort, feel when and as I will. This faculty is so correlated to the intellect that when the intellect is intensely occupied with certain considerations, the sensibility is affected in a certain manner, and certain feelings exist in the sensibility by a law of necessity. I am conscious that when certain conditions are fulfilled, I necessarily have certain feelings, and that when these conditions are not fulfilled, I cannot be the subject of those feeling. I know by consciousness that my feelings and all the states and phenomena of the sensibility are only indirectly under the control of my will. By willing I can direct my intellect to the consideration of certain subjects, and in this way alone affect my sensibility, and produce a given state of feelings. So on the other hand, if certain feelings exist in the sensibility which I wish to suppress, I know that I cannot annihilate them by directly willing them out of existence, but by diverting my attention from the cause of them, they cease to exist of course and of necessity.

Thus, feeling is only indirectly under the control of the will.

(3.) Moral agency implies the possession of free will.

By free will is intended the power of choosing, or refusing to choose, in every instance, in compliance with moral obligation. Free will implies the power of originating and deciding our own choices, and of exercising our own sovereignty, in every instance of choice upon moral questions of deciding or choosing in conformity with duty or otherwise in all cases of moral obligation. That man cannot be under a moral obligation

to perform an absolute impossibility, is a first truth of reason. But man's causality, his whole power of causality to perform or do anything, lies in his will. If he cannot will, he can do nothing. His whole liberty or freedom must consist in his power to will. His outward actions and his mental states are connected with the actions of his will by a law of necessity. If I will to move my muscles, they must move, unless there be a paralysis of the nerves of voluntary motion, or unless some resistance be opposed that overcomes the power of my volitions. The sequences of choice or volition are always under the law of necessity, and unless the will is free, man has no freedom; and if he has no freedom he is not a moral agent, that is, he is incapable of moral action and also of moral character. Free will then, in the above defined sense, must be a condition of moral agency, and of course, of moral obligation.

As consciousness gives the rational affirmation that necessity is an attribute of the affirmation of the reason, and of the states of sensibility, so it just as unequivocally gives the reason's affirmation that liberty is an attribute of the actions of the will. I am as conscious of the affirmation that I could will differently from what I do in every instance of moral obligation, as I am of the affirmation that I cannot affirm, in regard to truths of intuition, otherwise than I do. I am as conscious of affirming that I am free in willing, as I am of affirming that I am not free or voluntary in my feelings and intuitions.

Consciousness of affirming the freedom of the will, that is, of power to will in accordance with moral obligation, or to refuse thus to will, is a necessary condition of the affirmation of obligation.

For example, no man affirms, or can affirm, his obligation to undo all the acts of his past life, and to live his life over again. He cannot affirm himself to be under this obligation, simply because he cannot but affirm the impossibility of it. He cannot but affirm his obligation to repent and obey God in future, because he is conscious of affirming his ability to do this. Consciousness of the affirmation of ability to comply with any requisition, is a necessary condition of the affirmation of obligation to comply with that requisition. Then no moral agent can affirm himself to be under obligation to perform an impossibility.

2. A second condition of moral obligation is light, or so much knowledge of our moral relations as to develop the idea of oughtness.

This implies:

(1.) The perception or idea of the intrinsically valuable.

(2.) The affirmation of obligation to will the valuable for its own sake. Before I can affirm my obligation to will, I must perceive something in that which I am required to will as an ultimate end, that renders it worthy of being chosen. I must have an object of choice. That object must possess, in itself, that which commends itself to my intelligence as worthy of being chosen.

All choice must respect means or ends. That is, everything must be willed either as an end or a means. I cannot be under obligation to will the means until I know the end. I cannot know an end, or that which can possibly be chosen as an ultimate end, until I know that something is intrinsically valuable. I cannot know that is right or wrong to choose or refuse a certain end, until I know whether the proposed object of choice is intrinsically valuable or not. It is impossible for me to choose it, as an ultimate end, unless I perceive it to be intrinsically valuable.

This is self-evident; for choosing it as an end is nothing else than choosing it for its intrinsic value. Moral obligation, therefore, always and necessarily implies the knowledge that the well-being of God and of the universe is valuable in itself, and the affirmation that it ought to be chosen for its own sake, that is, impartially and on account of its intrinsic value.

It is impossible that the ideas of right and wrong should be developed until the idea of the valuable is developed. Right and wrong respect intentions, and strictly nothing else, as we shall see. Intention implies an end intended. Now that which is chosen as an ultimate end, is and must be chosen for its own sake or for its intrinsic value. Until the end is apprehended, no idea or affirmation of obligation can exist respecting it. Consequently, no idea of right or wrong in respect to that end can exist. The end must first be perceived. The idea of the intrinsically valuable must be developed.

Simultaneously with the development of the idea of the valuable the intelligence affirms, and must affirm, obligation to will it, or, which is, strictly speaking, the same thing, that it is right to will it, and wrong not to will it.

It is impossible that the idea of moral obligation, or of right and wrong, should be developed upon any other conditions than those just specified. Suppose, for instance, it should be said that the idea of the intrinsically valuable is not necessary to the development of the idea of moral obligation, and of right and wrong. Let us look at it. It is agreed that moral obligation, and the ideas of right and wrong respect, directly, intentions only. It is also admitted that all intentions must respect either means or ends. It is also admitted that obligation to will means, cannot exist until the end is known. It is also admitted that the choice of an ultimate end implies the choice of a thing for its own sake, or because it is intrinsically valuable. Now, from these admissions, it follows that the idea of the intrinsically valuable is the condition of moral obligation, and also of the idea of moral obligation. It must follow also that the idea of the valuable must be the condition of the idea that it would be right to choose, or wrong not to choose, the valuable. It is, then, nonsense to affirm that the ideas of right and wrong are developed antecedently to the idea of the valuable. It is the same as to say that I affirm it to be right to will an end, before I have the idea of an end; or wrong not to will an end when as yet I have no idea or knowledge of any reason why it should be willed, or, in other words, while I have no idea of an ultimate end.

Let it be distinctly understood then, that the conditions of moral obligation, in the universal form of obligation to will the highest well-being of God and of the universe, for

its own sake, are the possession of the powers, or faculties, and susceptibilities of a moral agent, and light or the development of the ideas of the valuable, of moral obligation, of right and wrong.

I have defined the conditions of obligation in its universal form, i.e., obligation to be benevolent, to love God and our neighbor, or to will the universal good of being for its intrinsic value. Obligation in this form is universal and always a unit, and has always the same conditions. But there are myriads of specific forms of obligation which relate to the conditions and means of securing this ultimate end. We shall have occasion hereafter fully to show that obligation respects three classes of the will's actions, viz. the choice of an ultimate end the choice of the conditions and means of securing that end and executive volitions or efforts put forth to secure the end. I have already shown that moral agency, with all that is implied in it, has the universal conditions of obligation to choose the highest good of being, as an ultimate end. This must be self-evident. Obligation to choose the conditions of this end, the holiness of God and of all moral agents, for example, must be conditioned upon the perception that these are the conditions. In other words, the perception of the relation of these means to the end must be a condition of the obligation to will their existence. The perception of the relation is not the ground but simply the condition of obligation in this form. The relation of holiness to happiness as a condition of its existence, could not impose obligation to will the existence of holiness without reference to the intrinsic value of happiness, as the fundamental reason for willing it as a necessary condition and means. The ground of the obligation to will the existence of holiness, as a means of happiness, is the intrinsic value of happiness, but the perceived relation of holiness to happiness is a condition of the obligation. But for this perceived relation the obligation could not exist, yet the perceived relation could not create the obligation. Suppose that holiness is the means of happiness, yet no obligation to will holiness on account of this relation could exist but for the intrinsic value of happiness.

Conditions of obligation to put forth executive acts.

Having now defined the conditions of obligation in its universal form, and also in the form of obligation to choose the existence of holiness as a necessary means of happiness, I now proceed to point out the conditions of obligation to put forth executive volitions or efforts to secure holiness, and secure the highest good of being. Our busy lives are made up in efforts to secure some ultimate end, upon which the heart is set. The sense in which obligation extends to these executive volitions or acts I shall soon consider; at present I am concerned only to define the conditions of these forms of obligation. These forms of obligation, be it understood, respect volitions and consequent outward acts. Volitions, designed as executive acts, always suppose an existing choice of the end designed to be secured by them. Obligation to put forth executive effort to secure an end must be conditioned upon the possibility, supposed necessity, and utility of such effort. If the end chosen does not need to be promoted by any efforts of ours, or if such efforts are impossible to us, or if they are seen to be of no use, there can be no obligation to make them. It is important, however, to observe that the utility of ultimate choice, or the choice of an object for its own sake, is not a condition of obligation in that form. Ultimate choice, or the choice of an object for its own sake, or for its intrinsic value, is not an

effort designed to secure or obtain that object; that is, is not put forth with any such design. When the object which the mind perceives to be intrinsically valuable (as the good of being, for example), is perceived by the mind, it cannot but choose or refuse it. Indifference in this case is naturally impossible. The mind, in such circumstances, is under a necessity of choosing one way or the other. The will must embrace or reject it. The reason affirms the obligation to choose the intrinsically valuable for its own sake, and not because choosing it will secure it. Nor does the real choice of it imply a purpose or an obligation to put forth executive acts to secure it, except upon condition that such acts are seen to be necessary, and possible, and calculated to secure it.

Ultimate choice is not put forth with design to secure its object. It is only the will's embracing the object or willing it for its own sake. In regard to ultimate choice the will must choose or refuse the object entirely irrespectively of the tendency of the choice to secure the object. Assuming this necessity, the reason affirms that it is right, fit, suitable, or, which is the same thing, that the will ought, or is under obligation to choose, the good or valuable, and not refuse it, because of its intrinsic nature, and without regard to whether the choosing will secure the object chosen.

But executive acts, be it remember, are, and must be put forth with design to secure their object, and of course, cannot exist unless the design exist, and the design cannot exist unless the mind assumes the possibility, necessity, and utility of such efforts.