

SELF-INTEREST AND MORAL OBLIGATION

The question I propose to consider in this article is whether there is any rational justification of moral duty or moral obligation. When an individual is asked to do his duty even though it is against his enlightened self-interest, can he meaningfully ask, "why ought I to do my duty which requires me to sacrifice my own interest?" This, indeed, is an old question raised by many ancient Greek thinkers. It was, for instance, asked by Thrasymachus and was also put to Socrates by Adeimantus and Glaucon in the first two books of Plato's *Republic*. This question can be and is often put briefly in the following manner? "Why should I be moral?" or, "Why should I do my duty at the cost of my self-interest?" In fact, the question is as important today as it was in ancient time, and for this reason it has been widely discussed by many great thinkers including some contemporary moral philosophers. But before we endeavour to answer this question, it must be clearly distinguished from such factual questions as: "how does a man come to have the concept of duty?" and "why does he perform his moral obligations?" It is quite obvious that these factual questions require only explanatory answers in terms of causes or motives, while the question, "why should I be moral?", must be answered by adducing certain justificatory reasons in support of it. This article is an attempt to consider the nature and validity of such justificatory reasons for answering the above crucial question of moral philosophy.

Now, first of all, it is worth pointing out here that some philosophers have denied even the meaningfulness of this question, for, on their view, moral obligation being self-evident requires no further proof or justification. In his classic paper, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?", (published in "Mind", 1912), H. A. Prichard has vehemently argued for this view. He contends that to give additional proof or justification for our moral obligation is neither possible nor necessary, because the apprehension

of what we morally ought to do is immediate, direct and self-evident; and in this respect the knowledge of moral obligation is similar to that of mathematical truths. Earlier, Kant also held that no justification could be given for moral obligation, since we ought to do our duty simply for the sake of duty and not for any other consideration whatsoever. So, for Kant, the question, "why ought I to do my duty?", is quite unnecessary and illegitimate. Similarly, in his "Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics", S. E. Toulmin also argues that the question, "why ought I to do my duty?", is logically meaningless and vacuous, because it turns out to be asking, "why ought I to do what I ought to do?". Thus, according to some philosophers, the necessity to perform one's duty is self-evident and therefore admits of no additional justification.

This view, however, is based on the assumption that morality is an end in itself, and for this reason moral obligation cannot be justified on any ground other than that of its self-evidence. Now, this deontological approach to morality is not acceptable to many philosophers who argue that moral rules or principles are meaningful and significant only in so far as they are conducive to the happiness or well-being of man. All moral philosophers, who advocate some or the other version of the teleological theory of morality, necessarily subscribe to this view. So, for these philosophers, the question regarding the justification of moral obligation is quite meaningful and legitimate. They, however, considerably disagree as to what ultimately justifies moral obligation. Those who advocate ethical egoism hold that the agent's enlightened self-interest alone ought to determine his course of action in all situations. This means that the individual ought to perform his duty when, and only when, doing so is in his long-term self-interest. Thus, on this view, no ground other than that of the agent's enlightened self-interest can be regarded as a valid justification for doing his duty. It is this egoistic point of view which Thomas Hobbes considered to be the only and ultimate justification for an individual's observing moral rules or principles. He points out that all of us want

to have peace, security and freedom from fear; and we also want to satisfy our desires to the maximum extent. Now, this is not possible in a community where each individual is totally indifferent to the welfare of other people and always endeavours to promote his own interest even at the cost of their interests. In such a community each individual would constantly struggle to gain the good things of life for himself and would even resort to violence in order to achieve his ends. This shows that the universal acceptance of the rule of self-interest would ultimately lead to an extremely harsh world which Hobbes calls "the state of nature" where everybody's life would be "nasty, brutish and short". If, on the other hand, each individual follows certain moral rules which override the dictates of self-interest, everyone's interest would be promoted in the long run. In other words, if everyone acts morally, all of us will be able to attain more of what we want; and so, on the whole, more good will be realized in a moral community than in a non-moral one where each person always seeks exclusively his own interest. Thus, according to Hobbes, it is each individual's enlightened self-interest which alone justifies ultimately his observing moral rules and discharging moral obligations. Similarly, in our own century, Moritz Schlick, in his "Problems of Ethics", also has advocated this egoistic standpoint as the sole justifying ground for an individual's acting on moral rules or principles. In short, according to enlightened egoists, an individual ought to discharge his moral duties or obligations because, and only because, doing this is in his ultimate and long-term self-interest.

The question now to be considered here is whether the above egoistic point of view can be regarded as a valid justification for moral obligation. Many philosophers have answered this question in the negative. In this connection the names of Kurt Baier and Kai Nielsen are specially worth mentioning. In his well-known book, *The Moral Point of View: a Rational Basis of Ethics*, Baier has strongly argued against the contention that the egoistic point of view is identical with the point of view of morality.

He maintains that self-interest, whether short-term or enlightened, can never constitute the justifying ground of moral obligation which often requires us to do what self-interest forbids or refrain from doing what it recommends. He admits that the egoistic point of view can be universally adopted without self-contradiction, but, according to him, this point of view is not the point of view of morality. Explaining the reason for not regarding the egoistic standpoint as the moral point of view, he says that a consistent egoist always acts on the principle and can be justified only in the conditions of chaos when the moral order completely breaks down. If everyone accepts and acts on this principle of egoism, it will ultimately lead us to the law of jungle or to what Hobbes called "the state of nature". This is because each individual would then care only for his own interest and would do nothing for the interests of others unless acting in their interests is in the long run conducive to his self-interest. Thus, the standpoint of enlightened self-interest advocated by egoists is a purely prudential point of view, therefore, it completely rules out the possibility of a genuine self-sacrifice which is an essential condition for moral obligation. Baier is therefore right in holding that the point of view of self-interest is not the point of view of morality.

As a matter of fact, a consistent egoist cannot recognize any act to be his moral obligation unless it serves his own interest in the long run. This means that he cannot adopt a genuine moral point of view, since it requires each individual to act only on those principles which are for the good of everyone alike. The principles, which we generally recognize to be moral, fulfil this condition — that is, their adoption ultimately promotes the interests of everyone alike. "Thou shalt not kill", "thou shalt not lie", "thou shalt not be cruel", "thou shalt not steal", etc. are some of the examples of moral rules which ultimately aim at promoting the well-being of all and not of any particular individual or group alone. This is why all of us are required to accept and act on these moral rules or principles. But such principles cannot be adopted by a consistent egoist whose basic

tenet is only the promotion of an agent's self-interest. He can recognize the agent's duty to act on these principles only in so far as doing this in the long run promotes his self-interest. It is obvious that this purely prudential approach on the part of an egoist completely rules out the very possibility of an individual's acting on moral principles impartially and disinterestedly. He will not at all hesitate to transgress any moral principle if doing so ultimately promotes his self-interest. Thus, for an egoist, discharging duty or moral obligation is a mere means to the realization of an agent's own good in the long run, therefore his standpoint is only a prudential rather than a moral one. Now, it is not hard to understand that such a parochial point of view can never constitute a valid and justifying ground of moral obligation.

What, then, is the basis of moral obligation or duty? It would hardly be disputed that the demands of moral obligation, unlike those of self-interest, require each individual to be fair, just, and willing to make genuine sacrifices. When an individual is convinced that to follow a certain course of action is his duty or moral obligation, he would follow it without regard to his self-interest, provided he is not already committed to the prudential standpoint of egoism. In other words, such an individual is obligated to follow the dictates of duty even though doing so may be detrimental to his self-interest. It is, indeed, the essential demand of morality that, if the need arises, each individual ought to be willing to sacrifice his self-interest for the sake of his duty. This is why the rules of morality are designed to override the dictates of self-interest when following these dictates is detrimental to the interests of others. No one is entitled to violate these rules even though their violation is in one's self-interest. In fact, this alone can be regarded as a genuine moral point of view which is very different from the point of view of self-interest. It is clear that the point of view of morality, unlike the standpoint of self-interest, is essentially "other-regarding", and therefore this point of view alone can be said to constitute the basis of moral obligation.

Here it may be asked why, as a single individual, one should do one's duty instead of following one's long-term self-interest when there is a genuine conflict between them. One answer to this question, which we have so far considered, is that each individual's doing duty, rather than following his long-term self-interest, is ultimately in the interest of everyone alike. But to give this answer is to treat each individual's enlightened self-interest as the ultimate justifying reason for doing his duty. But this, as we have seen, is against the point of view of morality. To say that each individual should do his duty because this alone can ultimately promote everyone's interest including his own is to base moral obligation on the agent's enlightened self-interest; and this is tantamount to advocating the standpoint of rational egoism rather than the point of view of morality. So far as I can see, there seems to be no satisfactory solution to this serious difficulty. It is probably for this reason that some philosophers, like Kant and Prichard, have held that moral obligation is self justifying that is to say, no justification other than that some action is my duty can ever be given to convince me that I ought to do that action. In other words, my acceptance of the fact that a certain action is my duty necessarily obliges me to do that action without asking for further reason for doing it. This means that I ought to do my duty without regard to my own interest or, for the matter, the interest of anyone else.

Now, I think the most serious objection, which can be urged against this view, is that it fails to relate moral obligation with human happiness or well-being. It only shows that we should do our duty simply for the sake of duty and not for any other consideration whatsoever. But this tells us nothing as to how duty is related to human interest or well-being which alone can make it meaningful and significant for us. Whenever we say that to do a certain action is our duty, we mean that this action would ultimately contribute to the happiness or well-being of some individual or group of individuals. Any action, which is not at all conducive to the welfare of any human being or a sentient being, cannot be regarded as our duty or moral obligation. This

clearly shows that duty or moral obligation is necessarily and inextricably related to human happiness or well-being which alone can be said to constitute its ultimate justifying ground. If this account of the nature of moral obligation is correct, it can hardly be plausible to maintain that duty is an end in itself and that there is no further justification for doing our duty. Thus, the deontological view regarding the nature and justification of moral obligation does not appear to be wholly tenable and satisfactory.

I think that one of the most important distinguishing features of moral obligation is the fact that it obliges each individual to sacrifice even his long-term self-interest for the happiness or well-being of others. It is in this sense that duty is usually said to be "other-regarding". In ordinary circumstances every normal person seeks his own happiness by natural inclination; this is why the pursuit of one's own happiness is not generally considered to be one's moral obligation. This also accounts for the necessity of moral demand imposed on each individual to sacrifice his own happiness when its pursuit conflicts with his duty to promote the happiness or well-being of others. His reluctance to accept this demand of morality amounts to the total rejection of the moral point of view. But here it can still be asked why an individual should adopt the point of view of morality at the cost of his self-interest. Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the necessity of his being a member of human society to which he owes his very existence. It is simply in virtue of his being a member of society that each individual has a definite place or position in relation to others; and it is this social position which eventually gives rise to his various duties or moral obligations. So long as he is a member of society and holds certain positions in relation to other people, he cannot escape his duties or obligations which are unavoidable demands imposed by society upon him. Thus, to adopt the point of view of morality rather than that of self-interest is unavoidable for each individual simply because he is necessarily a "social being".

Moreover, it is the moral point of view, and not the standpoint of rational egoism, which alone can provide us with an impartial and objective standard to adjudicate the conflicting interests of individuals and groups. If each individual's self-interest is regarded as the only justifying reason of his actions, we shall be left with no impersonal and objective standard to resolve the frequently occurring conflicts of interests among different persons or groups. In fact, the point of view of rational self-interest, if adopted universally, is likely to create and increase such conflicts in human society, since in that case none would act for the interests of others unless this ultimately promotes or is likely to promote his own interest. This is why the demand of moral obligation requires each individual to sacrifice his self-interest whenever it conflicts with his duty. The very word, "moral" entails the notion of sacrificing one's own interest. When we speak of a person as a "moral agent", we necessarily mean that he will endeavour to do his duty even at the cost of his own rational self-interest. Thus, we shall be misrepresenting the meaning of the word "moral" if we say that each individual ought to do his duty simply because it would eventually promote his own enlightened self-interest. It is not hard to see that such an individual would not be operating within the bounds of morality if he does his duty with a view to promoting ultimately his own interest. Thus, a consistent egoist cannot be said to function as a true "moral agent", because, as we have seen, to act "morally" presupposes that an individual would be willing to set aside even his long-term self-interest whenever his moral obligation requires him to do so. This willingness to sacrifice one's self-interest is, indeed, entailed by the very concept of "duty" or "moral obligation".

It is true that duty need not always conflict with an individual's self-interest, for on certain occasions he may do his duty and, by doing so, at the same time may promote his own interest. But when duty does conflict with a person's self-interest, it necessarily restricts his freedom to promote his own good or well-being. Then it obliges him to do what he does not want to do by natural inclination,

or compels him to refrain from doing what he likes or enjoys doing. Explaining this element of bindingness necessarily involved in the concept of "moral obligation" or "duty", Nowell-Smith rightly remarks: "Like other forms of obligation, moral obligation limits the range of free choice... A moral obligation is... something which obliges me to act in a way that, but for the obligation, I would not have acted....! In fulfilling a moral obligation a man chooses to do what he does, but does not choose freely. The feature which distinguishes moral obligations from all others is that they are self-imposed."¹ This shows that the need of a moral obligation arises only because we are not always naturally inclined to care for the good of others, and on most occasions we invariably prefer our own good to theirs. In fact, if each individual always acted solely for the happiness or welfare of other persons, there would have been no such concept as "duty" or "moral obligation". This accounts for our great emphasis on the fact that duty or moral obligation is essentially "other-regarding". Although we sometimes do speak of duties towards ourselves, yet, from the moral point of view, these duties are not considered to be as important as our duties towards other people. Thus, the meaning of "duty" can be explained in terms of its other-regarding character and an individual's willingness to impose it upon himself. These two essential characteristics can be regarded as distinguishing marks of "duty" or "moral obligation".

In short, we can conclude that the ultimate justifying ground of moral obligation is the promotion of the happiness or welfare of others rather than the promotion of rational or enlightened self-interest of the agent.

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NOTE

1. P. H. Nowellsmith, "*Ethics*", p. 184.