Morality for Modernity
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Reflections on G. E. M. Anscombes Modern Moral Philosophy

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In her influential paper Modern Moral Philosophy (1958), G. E. M. Anscombe con- 2
tends that the concepts of moral obligation and moral duty should be abandoned in
order for philosophy of modern ethics to progress. Defending Modern Moral Philoso-
phy in No Morality, No Self (2018), James Doyle asserts that Anscombe goes so far
as to declare that the word morality does not express a concept at all. It appears
that the reasons for Anscombes resolute rejection of moral obligation as a coherent
concept, or a concept at all, lie in the incoherency of the foundation for morality
so far proposed by philosophers, especially by those she refers to as consequential-
ists philosophers who evaluate the rightness of an action based on a calculation of
consequences.

As Anscombe reasons, Aristotle uses the term ”moral” to refer to human passions 3
and (nontechnical) actions with human as a moral subject matter. For example,
Aristotle distinguishes moral virtues which include courage and honesty, from in-
tellectual virtues which include scientific knowledge and technical skills. However,
the advent and then centuries of dominance by Christianity, with God being a di-
vine law giver, imbue the term ”moral” with a sense of absolute verdict (like one of
guilty/not guilty on a man) in western philosophy. Meanwhile, ”ought” in the moral
context acquires the special sense of obligation as if bound by law. Incongruity
arises when God is not believed to be a divine law giver and divine command is not
the foundation of morality. The pointed question is: how can one reject God as a law
giver while embracing obligations and duties He requires as law? The incongruity
manifests itself in the discourses of the consequentialists. Gods divine command is
absolute and cannot be subject to a calculation of consequences. Murder and theft
are wrong in Gods command and no amount of good consequences calculated from
the acts of murder and theft can make them right. In short, without believing in God
as a divine legislator, the concept of moral obligation in secular ethics has no root,
and is incongruous and meaningless.

Is it possible to retain the law binding force of moral obligation without God being the 4
divine legislator? Perhaps one can first ascertain the ”norms” of society and then
legislate the necessary moral obligation and moral duty for oneself? Anscombe
rejects such possibility as absurd because it is unlikely that such legislation based
on social norms can lead to notions of justice. Another possibility for the foundation
of moral obligation and moral duty may be contractual ones contract with society.
Anscombe rejects this possibility by pointing out that it wouldnt be reasonable for
someone to enter into a contract without the knowledge of doing so.

The remaining option for Anscombe is to base ethics on the ”norms” of human 5
virtues, as in Aristotelian ethics, with man having a complete set of virtues as the
”norm.” Notably, the sense of ”norm” in the man with the complete set of virtues
is not equivalent to ”law.” In other words, norms of human virtue entail no law
binding sense of obligation and duty. Therefore, Anscombe concludes that, with
Gods divine command being unfeasible as a basis for secular ethics, with obligation
and duty having a contractual basis being an unfeasible theory, and with norms
in human virtue being a feasible basis for ethics, one should study ethics in the
norms of human virtue as in Aristotelian ethics and abandon the notions of ”moral
obligations,” ”moral duty,” and ”moral ought” altogether, because the notions of
moral obligation do not pertain to norms of human virtue.

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Anscombe persuasively exposes the incongruity in the notion of moral obligation for carrying a law binding sense. While I have no objections toward Aristotles ideas of human virtues, I wonder whether moral obligation has to entail a special law binding sense and whether modernity would be well served without a sense of moral obligation. In the modernity of the 21st century, we increasingly encounter actions not by individual human agents, but by abstract entities such as corporations, or machines whose actions are not entirely predictable by their creators. To examine actions by abstract entities or machines in a philosophical moral framework, relying on norms in human virtues seems inadequate. For one, abstract entities and machines do not share the same notion of virtues as human beings. Second, applying moral obligations and moral duties on abstract entities and machines seems to be a more plausible exercise than trying to apply norms of human virtue. Is it possible to repair moral obligations conceptual defects? I make an attempt at arguing that moral obligation can be a viable concept once it disposes of the special law binding sense, by using moral philosophy in ancient China as an example and by examining the ideas of moral community and moral code which give rise to notions of moral obligation. 7

(1) An example of moral obligation without a special law binding sense 8

Moral obligation can operate without a special law binding sense. In ancient China, notions of moral obligation demanding compliance developed without the influence of Christianity or similar religions. Certain principles advocated by Confucius, e.g., one ought to revere the emperor and one ought to be obedient to ones parents, permeated the society with a moral force such that violation of any of these principles would provoke universal condemnation. Confucius was not given the status of a divine law giver and not everything he advocated carried the same moral force. Because Confucius was not a divine law giver, what he advocated was not given the sense of law binding requirement even though society demanded compliance with them. As these principles became part of the moral code for the ancient Chinese society, the fact that it was Confucius who advocated them was not an important consideration. In other words, the principles were accepted as part of the moral code without a sovereign authority figure or consideration of who advocated them. Thus, morality in ancient China shows that it is possible for moral obligation to operate without the law binding sense. Similarly, it is possible for "moral ought" to operate without a sense of absolute verdict of guilty or not guilty. 9

Even Aristotle holds that some things are simply vices "moral ought nots." Such vices include passions, such as ill will, shamelessness, or envy, or actions, such as adultery, theft, or murder. He holds that these vices are intrinsically evil in themselves, not just by reason of some excess or defect. The vices are intrinsically evil in that no one could possess the evil passions or perform the evil actions in a proper way, or at a right time, or in due circumstances, however much pleasure the passions or actions would give someone.[1] Therefore, under Aristotelian ethics, people 10

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[1] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book II.

are under a moral obligation to stay away from these vices, and the moral obligation comes without a special law binding sense.

(2) Moral community and moral code   11

Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt recognizes that one of humanitys most important   12
characteristics is shared intentionality - the ability and motivation to engage with others in collaborative, co-operative activities with joint goals and intentions.[2] He argues that a moral community is formed with rules and principles governing the conduct of the members when individuals work together and cooperate.[3] Shared intentionality is a human intuition. As a result, many, if not most, of the rules and principles surrounding shared intentionality are initially intuitive and implicit. As a community develops, more and more rules and principles become explicit, e.g., ancient Chinese society adopting teachings of Confucius. Collectively, the implicit and explicit rules and principles form the moral code of the moral community.

As we have seen since antiquity, a communitys moral code can evolve and can be   13
superseded. For example, Confucius taught that women must be submissive to male family members, which was the moral code in ancient China, but is no longer the moral code now. The moral code permitting slavery and denying women the right to vote is in the past. The Greek tragedy Antigone provides an example of one moral code superseding another. In Antigone, King Creon decreed that the rebel brothers Eteocles and Polyneices dead bodies be left unburied. Under the moral code at the time, a kings decree must be obeyed absolutely. When the dead brothers sister Antigone disobeyed King Creons decree and buried the brothers anyway, Antigone was punished to be buried alive. However, under the moral code of the gods who had supremacy over King Creon, it was wrong not to bury the dead. King Creon was punished by the gods he lost his wife and son.

Yet another example of moral code evolved within a moral community is from the   14
1962 western movie "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance."[4] Run by cowboys, the community at first had a moral code of resolving conflict using cowboy style open violence. A young attorney tried to introduce a moral code of justice under the rule of law. Consequently, he was challenged to a gun shooting duel with the lead cowboy character. The cowboy character ended up dead, thought to have been shot by the young attorney according to the old moral code. The young attorney was able to introduce the new moral code of justice under the rule of law which replaced the old moral code of open violence. Ironically, the cowboy character was not shot by the young attorney in the duel, but by someone hiding in an alley way, an act that violated both the new moral code and the old moral code.

Because a moral code is an attribute of a moral community, moral obligations are   15
what a moral community demands of its members implicitly or explicitly. Therefore, it can be said that the foundation of moral obligations is the intuitive, implicit and explicit demand of a moral community. Normally, the "moral ought" and "moral obligation" carry only the ordinary sense of what one ought to do and does not

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[2]Tomasello et al. 2005
[3]Jonathan Haidt lecture, How Human Beings Got Morality, Religion, Civilization, and Humanity, 2013
[4]Example analyzed by Alasdair MacIntyre.

contain the special law binding sense. The law binding sense of the moral obligation arising out of Christianity, Islam or similar religion where God is a divine law giver is specific to such cultures. It is not entirely unreasonable to say that what has been acquired can be subsequently disposed of. Therefore, there shouldnt be difficulty in disposing of the special law binding sense in moral obligation and restoring the concept of moral obligation to its normal sense.

Aristotles sense of moral obligation develops without the special law binding sense. To Aristotle, the virtue of justice occupies the center of ethics. In Book V of Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle discusses the various types of justice, and good and bad in terms of what is permissible, what is obligatory, and what is forbidden. He makes a distinction of justice in the sense of what is lawful, as opposed to what is fair and equitable natural justice. A moral code for a moral community building on the human intuition of shared intentionality necessarily has to have some sense of justice for the moral community to become sustainable. That is my answer in case Anscombe wonders how moral obligation born out of a moral code for a moral community arrives at justice. However, as we have seen from discussions thus far, absolute justice is not guaranteed in any given moral code. We must develop and apply our sense of natural justice and subject moral obligations and moral code to reason so that we might progress from a society accepting slavery, racial discrimination, and gender inequality to a society intolerant of bondage and oppression.

Conclusion

I accept Anscombes superb reasoning in concluding the concept of moral obligation to be incongruous. I also do not have objections to the Aristotelian ethics concerning human virtues. My concern for abandoning the concept of moral obligation or moral responsibility is pragmatic, in that modernity brings about actions by abstract entities such as corporations, and machines with undecipherable algorithms. Actions by abstract entities and machines may not easily be examined under human virtue ethics. Abstract entities and machines should be subject to moral obligations and moral responsibilities. To repair the incongruity in the concept of moral obligation, the special law binding sense should be disposed of. It is not unreasonable to dispose of the special law binding sense in moral obligation while maintaining a coherent concept of moral obligation because (1) other societies such as that of ancient China had notions of moral obligation without the need for a special law binding sense, (2) a moral code born out of human intuition of shared intentionality gives rise to moral obligations without the special law binding sense, and (3) Aristotles notions of justice contain elements of moral obligation without the special law binding sense.

As for James Doyles assertion that Anscombe goes so far as to declare that moral obligation is only a word and never a concept, even if Anscombe indeed makes such a declaration in Modern Moral Philosophy, I do not find good reasons by Anscombe supporting it. In any case, moral obligation or moral responsibility conjures the idea of ethical demands of ones conduct and is capable of being a concept. Denying it to ever be a concept lacks reason. Anscombe rightly pointed out the incongruity in the concept of moral obligation, but such incongruity can be repaired by disposing of the special law binding sense arising out of Christianity.

Endnotes

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