

OBJECTION SUSTAINED: ANSCOMBE'S CHALLENGE TO MODERN MORAL
PHILOSOPHY'S USE OF THE CONCEPT OF OBLIGATION

by

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(Under the Direction of Melissa Seymour Fahmy)

ABSTRACT

In this project, I clarify and expand on G. E. M. Anscombe's claim that it's logically incoherence for philosophers to employ the concept of obligation in their moral theories without acknowledging the existence of a lawgiving God. I refer to this critique of contemporary moral philosophy as "Anscombe's Challenge", designating it as "AC" for short. I argue that for AC to be successful, it needs to be shown both that a lawgiving agent is necessary to make sense of the concept of obligation and that human beings, individually or collectively, do not fully suffice as the appropriate lawgiving agents.

In the bulk of the project, I examine three responses to AC. The first is the Divine Command Theory (DCT) which endorses AC and argues that AC is not a problem to philosophy since moral obligations are really God's commands, whether or not human beings recognize them as such. The second is the Social Command Theory (SCT) which acknowledges that moral obligation is agent-relative but argues that no supernatural agent is needed to account for it since obligations arise from within human societies. The final one is a form of naturalism that casts obligation in an agent-neutral way: moral obligations exist necessarily and they therefore don't need an agent to account for them.

I argue that SCT must deny the objectivity of moral obligation, thus making obligations relative to society. By denying that moral obligation is agent-relative, naturalists concede Anscombe's point that obligation should not be understood in terms of the commanded. DCT defenders argue that, by giving up on objectivity (SCT) and the agency behind obligation (naturalists), both SCT and naturalism fail to account adequately for the law-like force of obligation and for the intrinsic worth of humanity. DCT claims to be able to account for both features of morality since God is seen as the source of the commands behind human obligations who also maintains a unique relationship with human beings as their Creator, thus conferring them intrinsic worth. I conclude each section with an examination of what I take to be the best arguments against each view.

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DEDICATION

For my dear wife, Leah Njoroge, and our boys, Jonathan and Benjamin, who have sacrificed much to ensure that this work sees the light of day. Thank you for your patience and encouragement.

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CHAPTER 1: ANSCOMBE ON MORAL OBLIGATION

1.1 General Introduction

In an article that has been described as “the most important paper in ethics written in the last half of the 20th century, if not the most important paper written in the entire century,”¹ G. E. M. Anscombe argues, among other things, that the concept of moral obligation in western philosophy ought to be discarded since it has its roots in Christianity, which conceives of ethics in terms of laws given by God. Since most philosophers in the western world who continue to employ the concept of obligation in their moral theories have abandoned theism in favor of naturalism, the concept can no longer serve the purpose they assume it does.² With the rejection of theism, it has lost its metaphysical foundation and talk of obligation has become incoherent. But Anscombe also maintains that not only can ethics be done successfully without the concept in our day, the concept is conspicuously absent from classical moral philosophy. She argues that thinking of moral obligation or duty in law-like terms (as does Christianity) was foreign to philosophers such as Aristotle. Here is how she summarizes her thesis,

¹ David Solomon, “Elizabeth Anscombe’s ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’: Fifty Years Later,” in *Christian Bioethics*, 14(2), 109 – 122, 2008.

² G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” in *Philosophy*, 33, no. 124, January 1958, p. 1. [Emphasis in the original source].

...the concepts of obligation, and duty – *moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say – and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of “ought,” ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it.³

In this project, I will clarify and expand on Anscombe’s thesis, specifically her claim that it is inconsistent for philosophers to employ the concept of obligation in their moral theories without acknowledging the existence of a lawgiving God.⁴ I will refer to this critique of contemporary moral philosophy as “Anscombe’s Challenge”, designating it as “AC” for short. I will argue that for AC to be successful, it needs to be shown both that a lawgiving agent is necessary to make sense of the concept of obligation and that human beings, individually or collectively, do not fully suffice as the appropriate lawgiving agents.⁵

Among philosophers who maintain that a lawgiving agent is required for obligation, there are those who insist that human beings are the appropriate agents. Susan Wolf and Stephen Darwall are examples of contemporary philosophers who argue that obligation can be grounded in individuals and societies based on the types of needs relationships engender and the standing human beings have to make demands on one another.⁶ They defend a

³ Ibid. [Emphasis in the original.]

⁴ I will not explore her second claim, i.e., that it is possible to do ethics without the concept of obligation.

⁵ Anscombe’s claim that classical philosophy, especially Aristotelian ethics, does not make use of a law-like concept of obligation has been disputed. See, for example, C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). But examining the success of ethical theories that do not depend on the concept of obligation is beyond the scope of my project.

⁶ Susan Wolf, “Moral Obligations and Social Commands,” in *Metaphysics and the Good: Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Merrihew Adams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 343-368, and Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

similar version of the Social Command Theory (hereafter “SCT”), which holds that moral obligation is grounded in the moral (human) community to which individuals are members.

In the spirit of AC, other philosophers argue that we cannot make sense of obligation without an appeal to God. Examples of such philosophers include C. Stephen Evans and Robert Merrihew Adams who maintain that obligation is a feature of morality that transcends individual or social attitudes and it cannot therefore be fully grounded in humanity.⁷ They thus defend similar versions of the Divine Command Theory (hereafter “DCT”), arguing that moral obligation is to be identified with laws issued by God.

Consequently, one of the key tasks of this project is to assess whether SCT can offer an adequate response to AC in response to the thesis that some version of DCT is required for the concept of obligation to make sense in moral philosophy. For the former task, I will concentrate on the work of Wolf and Darwall. Obviously, if a version of SCT that adequately accounts for obligation can be offered, as Wolf and Darwall, among others, maintain, then AC fails as a critique of modern moral philosophy. There is no inconsistency between believing in agent-centered obligations without acknowledging the existence of God if obligations are, in some sense, grounded in humanity: human beings themselves are the requisite agents. But if obligation really does require a law-giver, and if it transcends the ability of human beings either individually or collectively to ground it, i.e., if obligation can only be accounted for by a supernatural agent, then obviously AC succeeds against theories of moral philosophy that employ the concept of obligation without affirming a supernatural basis for it. I will argue that such theories would include those that espouse

⁷ C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), and Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

naturalism as a metaphysical position as well as those that are agnostic with regard to the existence of a lawgiving God. In the process, I will also clarify the nature of inconsistency Anscombe had in mind.

In defense of AC, I will assess the arguments offered by philosophers like Evans and Adams. Candidates for such arguments include the claim that obligation is an objective feature of morality. Since the objectivity of obligation plays such a prominent role in the success of AC, I will devote some time in the next section to clarifying the type of objectivity of obligation that Anscombe would have to rely on in her critique of modern moral philosophy.

1.2 Objectivity of Moral Obligation

Before addressing the question of the objectivity of moral value directly, it is important to get clear on some related terms. One often finds concepts such as “universality”, “absoluteness” and “objectivity” used with regard to moral value. Though my main concern in this section, and throughout this project, is the objectivity of moral obligation, clarifying the meaning and usage of these terms will bring the objectivity of moral value into sharper focus.

I agree with Russ Shafer-Landau’s understanding of these terms. He writes,

There are two main senses of universality. The first says that a universal ethic is one that is *endorsed by* everyone. The second says that a universal ethic is one that *applies to* everyone (even if they don’t endorse it). Ethical objectivism denies that

moral rules must be universal in the first sense, but agrees...that they must be universal in the second.⁸

As we will see, DCT defenders hold to ethical objectivism – they hold that moral truths are objective even though not everyone accepts them as such. In other words, moral truths are universal in the sense that they *apply to everyone* even though they may not be *endorsed by everyone*. As Shafer-Landau notes, it is possible for an ethic to be universal in this sense (and hence objective) without being endorsed by everyone. He illustrates; there have been times when some people have been assumed to be inferior to others just because of the color of their skin, but the moral rule that the color of one's skin does not determine one's moral worth has always been true – even when some denied it.

Regarding moral absoluteness, Shafer-Landau says, “Ethical absolutism is the view that there is at least one moral rule that is absolute, that is, never permissibly broken.”⁹ Candidates for such rules include torturing babies for fun, murdering innocent people, etc. I think these are good examples of absolute moral rules. There are some who hold that even such rules could be permissibly broken in extreme circumstances, but I will not enter in that debate here. For my purposes, to say that a moral rule is objective does not automatically imply that it allows for no exceptions. A moral rule can be objective without being absolute (though perhaps not vice versa).

Evans identifies the possibility of moral error regarding our obligations as one of the key features of the objectivity of moral obligation. Since we can all be mistaken about

⁸ Russ Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 62. [Emphasis in the original.]

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

what our obligations are, Evans argues that obligation must obtain independently of us. He writes,

One important feature of moral obligations is that they are objective, in the sense that they are the kind of thing that people can be mistaken about. The mistakes can be of various kinds. Sometimes I am obligated to do something, but fail to realize that I have the obligation. Sometimes people with “overactive consciences” believe that they are obligated to do things that they have no obligation to do. And sometimes people correctly see that they have an obligation in a certain situation but are mistaken about the content of that obligation. So an adequate account of moral obligation should be able to explain how people can have true and false beliefs about their moral obligations.¹⁰

What Evans is saying is that there is a fact of the matter as to what our obligations are. If we have the moral obligation to carry out a certain act, then the obligation remains in place whether or not we realize that we have it. It remains in place even if our society instructs us to do the opposite. If some act is wrong to do, all things being equal, then it is wrong even if every human being on earth came to believe that it is right. If moral obligations obtain independently of human beings, i.e., if they are objective in this sense, then it makes sense to ask where they come from. How are they to be grounded?

According to Anscombe, obligation is standardly conceived of in law-like terms. What is obligatory is what we are required to do. It is this feature of obligation, which I will call the “commandedness” of moral obligation, that Anscombe found troubling in its current usage. For if obligation obtains independently of us and it requires agency, then

¹⁰ C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, p. 29.

human beings cannot be the source obligation. Atheist philosopher, Russ Shafer-Landau, links together the threads of this reasoning succinctly;

In my own experience, people tie objectivity to God because of a very specific line of thought. The basic idea is that all laws (rules, principles, standards, etc.) require a lawmaker. So if there are any moral laws, then these, too, require a lawmaker. But if these moral laws are objective, then the lawmaker can't be any of us. That's just true by definition. Objectivity implies an independence from human opinion. Well, if objective moral rules aren't authored by any of us, then who did make them up?¹¹

For the DCT defender, the answer to Shafer-Landau's question is that God is the source of moral obligation. William Lane Craig, a DCT defender, writes,

To say that there are objective moral values is to say that something is right or wrong independently of whether anybody believes it to be so. It is to say, for example, that Nazi anti-Semitism was morally wrong, even though the Nazis who carried out the Holocaust thought that it was good; and it would still be wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in exterminating or brainwashing everybody who disagreed with them.¹²

Craig goes on to say that theism accounts for the objectivity of moral obligation (and moral values) better than any alternative since "God's own holy and perfectly good nature supplies the absolute standard against which all actions and decisions are measured." He identifies the perfect moral nature of God with what Plato called the 'Good'.

¹¹ Russ Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*, pp. 75-76.

¹² William Lane Craig, "The Indispensability of Theological Meta-ethical Foundations for Morality," in *Foundations*, 5 (1997), p. 10.

And since God is necessarily “loving, generous, just, faithful, kind, and so forth” he is the “locus and source of moral value”.¹³

Like other naturalists whose views I will evaluate briefly below, Shafer-Landau accepts the claim that moral obligation is indeed objective but rejects the view that it is agent-relative. I will have more to say about the objectivity of obligation throughout this project, and most specifically in chapter three where I will also consider an alternative account of obligation offered by Christine Korsgaard. For now, it will suffice to note that by “objective”, I mean, roughly, independent of individual or collective human will, decisions, attitudes, etc., and hence the possibility that human beings (individually or collectively) can be mistaken about what their moral obligations actually are. In other words, if obligation is objective, then human beings, again, individually or collectively, have the responsibility to conform their behavior to it, a task at which they can (and do) fail. But as we will see, the objectivity of obligation is not enough to allow AC to do what Anscombe wants it to do. It must also be the case that it is also agent-relative. The SCT advocates that I will consider here defend the claim that obligation is agent-relative but maintain that human beings themselves are the relevant agents. DCT defenders also defend the claim that obligation is agent-relative, but they also take it to be objective and so they deny that human beings can adequately ground it. AC succeeds as a critique of modern moral philosophy if obligation is both agent-relative and it cannot be grounded in humanity, individually or collectively.

There are many naturalists who agree with DCT advocates on this understanding of the objectivity of moral obligation. They agree with the view that what is obligatory to

¹³ Ibid.

humanity is predetermined by the nature of morality regardless of the attitudes and choices of individuals or societies. Atheist philosopher Louise Antony summarizes moral objectivity as follows, “I take it that theists and atheists will agree about what it means to say that morality is objective: first, whether something is right or wrong does not depend on any human being’s attitudes toward it, and second, moral facts are independent of human will.”¹⁴ On the flipside, Michael Huemer defines subjectivity as follows: “F-ness is subjective = Whether something is *F* constitutively depends at least in part on the psychological attitude or response that observers have or would have towards that thing.” He goes on to say, “I define an ‘objective’ feature as one that is not subjective.”¹⁵ Both Huemer and Antony emphasize independence from human psychological attitude or response as the distinguishing feature of objectivity, and Antony adds independence from the will with regard to moral facts. The end result of these claims is the same – objectivity is being understood to obtain independently of anything human beings might do. Huemer would agree that moral facts are independent of human will – they are what they are regardless of what we would want them to be.

Similarly, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong – writing from an atheistic perspective, states,

Morality is like physics and mathematics in this respect (though not in many other respects, of course). What evolves are only moral *beliefs* and *attitudes*, not moral *facts* or *truths*. When T Rex ruled, there were no free agents to rape or be raped, but it was still true that free agents ought not to rape other free agents. This moral principle can be true even at times when it does not apply to anyone because nobody

¹⁴ Louise Antony, “The Failure of Moral Arguments,” in *Debating Christian Theism*, edited by JP Moreland, et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 110-111.

¹⁵ Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave-McMillan, 2005), p. 2.

could break it. After all, rape is wrong even for people who are alone on inescapable islands or who are quadriplegics so they could not rape anyone.¹⁶

Thus, many naturalists agree with DCT defenders on the claim that there exist “mind-independent evaluative facts or truths”¹⁷. Moral obligation is one such fact. But DCT defenders argue that such moral truths or facts are only independent from human minds and attitudes. For reasons we will see below, they believe these evaluative moral facts are grounded in God. In short, naturalists and DCT defenders agree on the objectivity of moral obligation; they differ on whether it is also agent-relative. Naturalists argue that it is not, while DCT defenders (and Anscombe) believe that it is both objective and agent-relative. Writing from the naturalistic perspective, Erik J. Wielenberg concludes his book as follows:

If there is a moral to the story I have told, it is that the old-fangled ideas that reality includes objective, *sui generis* moral features that exist independently of God and that ordinary human beings can possess knowledge of such features of reality still have something to be said for them. As our understanding of human moral cognition grows, we should not be too quick to abandon these old-fashioned notions. My final hope for this book is that it will contribute to caution in that regard.¹⁸

¹⁶ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality Without God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 92-93. [Emphasis in the original.]

¹⁷ Sharon Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” in *Philosophical Studies*, (2006) 127:109 – 166, p. 156, note 1.

¹⁸ Eric J. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 176.

While DCT defenders argue that certain moral features, including moral obligation, exist independently of human beings and are ultimately grounded in God, naturalists argue that these features of morality exist independently of both humans and God. In both cases, they are objective in the sense explained here. But if they are also agent-relative (in addition to being objective), then DCT is right – they must be grounded in God. SCT holds that these features of morality can be fully explained in social terms. That, as we will see shortly, means that – if SCT is right – these moral features are not objective in the sense that they can be understood without reference to humanity.

1.3 SCT, DCT and Naturalism

My interest then is with cognitive theories of morality that assign truth value to moral statements.¹⁹ In addition to DCT and SCT advocates, my other key dialogue partners will include those who insist that the normativity of morality requires no agency behind it – human or divine. Since the specific philosophers I will interact with on the latter view happen to be naturalists, I will refer to them as such. These naturalists would acknowledge that Anscombe is right to insist that an agent-dependent account of objective moral obligation is incompatible with naturalism (both metaphysical and moral), but they deny that normativity requires agency.²⁰

¹⁹ Error theory, moral relativism, emotivism, etc., may be referenced when necessary, but they are not the main focus of this project.

²⁰ Such a position – one that denies that agency is required to account for objective moral obligation – is in principle compatible with theism. One could consistently hold both that morality is normative in the sense accepted by some naturalists and believe that God exists. But for my purposes, I will refer to my dialogue partners who espouse this position as “naturalists” since they all happen to be naturalists. Moreover, theists do not entirely divorce morality from God. A key argument of Evans’ book is that other theistic ways of understanding morality, other than DCT, are compatible with DCT. See C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

In this project, I will follow Shafer-Landau's definition of the natural. He writes,

The natural is whatever is the object of study by the natural sciences. ...[S]omething is natural just in case it figures ineliminably in true propositions that emerge from (on some accounts, the perfected versions of) physics, chemistry, molecular biology, astronomy, etc.²¹

And for my purposes, James Lenman's definition of naturalism as it relates to morality will suffice. He writes,

There is a broad sense of "moral naturalism" whereby a moral naturalist is someone who believes an adequate philosophical account of morality can be given in terms entirely consistent with a naturalistic position in philosophical inquiry more generally. According to such broad metaphysical naturalism, all facts are natural facts. Natural facts are understood to be facts about the natural world, facts of the sort in which the natural sciences trade.²²

If moral naturalism is true, i.e., if the correct philosophical account of morality must be given in terms of the natural facts studied by the sciences, then Anscombe seems right to insist that moral obligation should not be conceived of in terms of the commanded. According to Anscombe, as we will see in a moment, such language presupposes the existence of a divine lawgiver with the authority to issue commands and compel

²¹ Russ Shafer-Landau, "Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism," in *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 211.

²² James Lenman, "Moral Naturalism", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/naturalism-moral/>>.

compliance. It is a relic of a Christian era and it is incoherent in the current philosophical environment that has largely repudiated the supernatural in favor of the natural.

Naturally, naturalists, like Shafer-Landau and Sinnott-Armstrong who also accept the objectivity of moral obligation, disagree. Shafer-Landau, for example, argues that moral obligation is similar to other laws of nature. He writes,

Who makes up the moral rules? No one. Then where do they come from? Well, where do the laws of chemistry, or physics, or mathematics come from? It may sound lame to say that such laws come from the way the physical, or chemical, or mathematical world is ordered. It's not that illuminating an answer. But it does have the virtue of being true.²³

According to Shafer-Landau, the normativity of morality is the same as the normativity of the laws of logic or mathematics. Just as logic tells us what conclusions we ought to draw given a certain set of premises, morality tells us what action we ought to take in certain circumstances.

Shafer-Landau seems to be committed to the view that moral laws just exist – in the same way that the laws of logic exist. They do not need to be grounded in anything. Wielenberg, who, again, is a naturalist, is even more explicit in his claim that moral obligations exist as brute facts. To the question, where do moral obligations come from? he writes,

I propose the following answer: any being that can reason, suffer, experience happiness, tell the difference between right and wrong, choose between right and

²³ Russ Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* pp. 89-90.

wrong, and set goals for itself has certain rights, including the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and certain obligations, including the duty to refrain from rape (in typical circumstances). *Having such cognitive capacities makes one have such rights and duties.*²⁴

It is not clear that Wielenberg is still working within the limits of “the natural” set out earlier – what field of the physical sciences deals with moral facts? Wielenberg accepts the label “atheistic moral realism”²⁵ for his view, which, in my opinion, changes the definition of naturalism offered earlier. In addition to the physical properties studied by the sciences, we now have intrinsic moral properties that are over and above the physical – Wielenberg offers a supervenience account for them. But setting that issue aside, we can now begin to see some distinctions among our three dialogue partners. According to the naturalists considered in this project, moral obligations just exist – they do not need to be grounded in anything. SCT advocates maintain that moral obligations are grounded in the society. DCT defenders hold that moral obligations come from God. DCT defenders will argue that, since on naturalism there is no moral lawgiver behind moral laws, the naturalist gives up a crucial feature of morality, namely, its “commandedness”. At best we can know, through reason, what would be good to do, but the compulsion of obligation, which is the subject of AC, disappears from our moral theory – at least in the sense in which Anscombe meant it. Reason by itself is inadequate to give us such compulsion.

To see that reason is indeed inadequate to do so, we need to note that it is one thing to have good reasons to do something and quite another to be obligated to do it. Having

²⁴ Eric J. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*, p. 56. [Emphasis added]

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

reasons to perform an action does not necessarily imbue one with the kind of obligation morality requires. An illustration given by C. Stephen Evans might be helpful here.²⁶ Suppose someone is offered, say \$5,000, to deliver a lecture he has delivered several times before on an afternoon when he is free and has nothing to lose should he accept the offer. He would have a very good reason to perform that act. But he would not be considered morally blameworthy should he choose to play golf instead. The point, once again, is that having powerfully compelling reasons to do something is not the same thing as being obligated to do it. Alternatively, violating rationality is not the same thing as violating moral obligation. As Adams puts it, “To the extent that I have done something morally wrong, I have something to feel guilty about. To the extent that I have done something irrational, I have merely something to feel silly about – and the latter is much less serious than the former.”²⁷

The only time when failure to heed the demands of reason bears serious consequences is when there is a moral component involved. For example, an error of calculation in designing a bridge is more serious than getting an answer wrong on an engineering examination. Moral obligation has a certain, distinct characteristic that gives it its compulsive force with blameworthiness or guilt attached to them. It has the unique capacity to override any other reasons we may have to do or not to do something. Such a decidedly law-like character of obligation makes sense within a social context where demands or imperatives and accountability are in force. Evans writes,

²⁶ C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, pp. 9-10.

²⁷ Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*, p. 238.

To say that I have a moral obligation to ϕ is not simply to say that I have a reason to ϕ , or even to say that I have a decisive reason to ϕ . Rather, an obligation is a distinctive kind of reason, with several important features. It is the kind of reason that can bring closure to deliberation, since even to deliberate about whether I should do what I am morally obligated to do is usually a sign of moral weakness. To say that I have moral obligation to ϕ is to say that I must ϕ , and it is to say that there is someone who has the right to expect me to ϕ , and who may rightly be disappointed in me and blame me if I fail to ϕ .²⁸

Joel Marks, another naturalist, makes the case that the common tendency to equate the moral with the rational needs to be defended, not just assumed. When we reflect on the connection between the moral and the rational, argues Marks, we find that there are certain intuitions that seem to militate against a strict, necessary identity of the two. He gives three reasons for his thinking. The first reason, he writes, “is pure logic: From if p then q , it does not follow that if q then p .”²⁹ He gives an example – from the fact all colored objects have shapes, it does not follow that all objects that have shape are colored. A colorless piece of square glass proves that this is indeed true. Similarly, just because an action that is moral to do also happens to be rational, it does not follow that what is rational to do is always moral. The second reason Marks gives for doubting that there is a necessary connection between the rational and the moral is the claim that “‘moral’ is ambiguous between ‘morally right’ and ‘morally permissible’”. If an act is moral in the sense of being morally permissible, then doing it would not be wrong. But an act that is morally right is obligatory. The third reason Marks gives is the observation that the “rational” is likewise ambiguous

²⁸ C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, pp. 26-7.

²⁹ Joel Marks, *Ethics without Morals: In Defence of Amoralism* (Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory), Kindle Locations 447-455. Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

between the rationally permissible and the rationally obligatory. Only the latter imparts a rational obligation to draw certain conclusions. Marks goes on to note that there are eight different possibilities with regard to the connection between the rational and the moral. He writes,

So when we ask whether morality and rationality always go hand in hand, we could be asking any of several different things, namely: (1) Is every morally obligatory act rationally obligatory? (2) Is every morally obligatory act rationally permissible? (3) Is every morally permissible act rationally permissible? (4) Is every morally permissible act rationally obligatory? (5) Is every rationally obligatory act morally obligatory? (6) Is every rationally obligatory act morally permissible? (7) Is every rationally permissible act morally permissible? (8) Is every rationally permissible act morally obligatory?³⁰

The details of Marks' argument are not directly relevant to my purposes in this section, but it is helpful to note that the answer he gives to all eight questions is "No". For my purposes, the most important questions from his list are "(1) Is every morally obligatory act rationally obligatory?" and "(6) Is every rationally obligatory act morally permissible?" These two questions are important since the merely permissible falls outside the realm of moral obligation and obligatory acts are also permissible. So, what reason does Marks have for thinking that rationally obligatory acts might not be morally obligatory (and vice versa)?

Apart from his claim that the connection between morality and rationality is not logically necessary, he illustrates his points with particular examples. In one such example,

³⁰ Ibid., Location 455.

he invites the reader to imagine a situation where the reader has learned that there is a yacht anchored at the harbor with a bundle of cash in it. The reader sneaks into the boat at night, steals the cash and scuttles the boat to conceal the theft. As he starts swimming back to shore, a little boy emerges from the boat and shouts at him, “You took that! I saw you!”³¹ The boy suddenly realizes that the boat is sinking and cries out, “Help! I can’t swim!” The reader cannot save the boy and swim to shore with the cash. He has to do one or the other.

Marks argues that the thief can make a very rational case for why he should not save the boy – the boy is the only person who can implicate him, not only with the theft of the cash but also with the destruction of the boat. By saving the boy, the thief stands to lose everything. The thief can solve all of his problems by letting the boy drown. But, argues Marks, that would be the immoral thing to do. In this case, morality demands that the thief rescue the boy, but rationality seems to dictate otherwise. Marks concludes that rationality and morality can at times diverge, at least in our imperfect world.

I agree with Marks’ analysis. And, in any case, I have already argued that the morally rational is not the same as the morally obligatory in the sense demanded by AC, so even if one disagrees with Marks, there is still the need for the obligatory nature of morality to be defended. DCT is not a theory about what is morally good or excellent but a theory about what we are obligated to do. It is not a theory of the good but of the right.

If moral obligation is taken to be both objective and agent-relative, then AC is indeed a powerful critique of modern moral philosophy. Anscombe believes that is how the concept is used today, and she advises against such use. But DCT defenders believe

³¹ Ibid., Location 470.

that taking moral obligation to be both objective and agent-relative is, in fact, the best way to understand it. Adams writes,

A main advantage of a divine command theory of the nature of moral obligation is that it satisfies the demand for the *objectivity* of moral requirement. Being commanded and forbidden by God are properties that actions have independently of whether we think they do, or want them to. Divine commands are more unqualifiedly objective than human social requirements, inasmuch as their factuality is independent of socially established as well individual opinions and preferences.³²

Again, DCT advocates maintain that human decisions about what is or isn't morally binding presuppose the objectivity of moral obligation, and so obligation cannot be grounded in human decisions. This is in line with Anscombe, who thinks of moral obligation in law-like terms – as commands issued by a person or persons with the relevant authority to do so. A good example would be the legal requirements by which a society functions. We do not consider anything to be illegal unless we also presuppose that there is a person or a body of persons (for example, a government) with the authority to issue the prohibition. To say that moral obligation is agent-relative is to say, roughly, that the concept of “moral” obligation assumes the existence of persons capable of interpersonal interaction. Those who think that human beings alone are the relevant persons in this regard defend SCT. As noted earlier, I will argue that SCT defenders must deny that obligation is objective, in the sense I have stated above. DCT defenders affirm the argument of AC as

³² Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*, p. 256. [Emphasis his.]

stated. Their key task, I will argue, is to show that obligation, in addition to being agent-relative (as SCT defenders agree) is also objective.

The entire project will be divided into four sections and it will proceed as follows. In the rest of this introductory chapter, I will offer a more focused examination of AC with an emphasis on why it matters. The main goal of this chapter is to motivate AC by answering two main objections that seek to blunt its edge against modern moral philosophy by showing that it mischaracterizes the role obligation plays in morality. I will argue that these objections do not succeed against AC and hence it remains the case that a lawgiving agent is necessary to make sense of the concept of obligation. In the second chapter, I will examine how SCT, as defended by Wolf and (in part) Darwall, accounts for obligation. A key component of this chapter is to evaluate whether human beings, individually or collectively, can adequately play the role of lawgiving agents capable of grounding obligation. I will also examine what I take to be the best objections against SCT and why philosophers such as Evans and Adams find it inadequate as an account of obligation. In the third chapter, I will offer an analysis of DCT as Evans and Adams present it and conclude the chapter with an examination of the best objections raised against it.

The concluding chapter will be a short summary of my assessment of the debate between the representative accounts of both SCT and DCT examined in the second and third chapters, and a response to some of the salient points advanced by naturalists. My tentative view is that AC remains a serious challenge to those who hold to the normative view that obligation exists while either espousing naturalism as a metaphysical view or remaining agnostic with regard to the existence of a lawgiving God. But that is only true if there really are features of obligation that SCT cannot account for, principally its

objectivity and agent-dependence when taken to be equally necessary for obligation. To repeat, if obligation is essentially an objective element of morality that also requires agency, then AC is vindicated since it would seem that a transcendent moral agent is indeed required to account for it. Both the objectivity of obligation and its agent-dependence are individually necessary and jointly sufficient to establish the validity of AC as a critique of modern moral philosophy. As we will see, a certain view of the kinds of entities human beings are must be assumed in our moral discourse, and DCT claims to be able to account for it better than alternative views.

1.4 Anscombe's Challenge

Anscombe does not state her argument with neatly defined premises and a conclusion. Instead, she advances a case for the incoherence of the concept of obligation in light of assumptions about the nature of morality in modern theorizing. As noted, she makes claims such as the following, “The concept of legislation requires a superior power in the legislator”,³³ our understanding of obligation came from Christianity, “with its law conception of ethics” that is derived from biblical authority.³⁴ Anscombe maintains that obligation conveys a verdict on actions, “And where one does not think there is a judge or a law, the notion of a verdict may retain its psychological effect, but not its meaning.”³⁵ She continues,

To have a *law* conception of ethics is to hold that what is needed for conformity with the virtues failure in which is the mark of being bad *qua* man (and not merely,

³³ Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”, p. 2.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

say, *qua* craftsman or logician) – that what is needed for this, is required by divine law. Naturally it is not possible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as a law-giver; like Jews, Stoics, and Christians.³⁶

Her recommendation, as already mentioned, is to get rid of the concept of obligation. “It would be most reasonable to drop it. It has no reasonable sense outside a law conception of ethics.”³⁷ The salient features of Anscombe’s argument may be adduced as follows. Obligation is dependent on authority since it has a law-like characteristic that imposes a verdict on actions. The verdict that moral obligation passes on us goes beyond pointing out that we have failed at our craft – that we are bad logicians or craftsmen; it is “an absolute verdict (like one of guilty/not guilty on a man)”.³⁸ Our moral status with regard to our obligations is not determined by how we feel, think or will about it. In other words, whether we are guilty/not guilty is an objective moral fact about us, as a consequence of our actions. For Anscombe, these assumptions about obligation are based on an implicit commitment to the Christian teaching that moral laws are given by God. Exit that assumption, exit our justification for continuing to employ these concepts in our moral theories.

As I see it, there are two critical points Anscombe makes, (a) moral obligation depends on a superior authority, i.e., it is agent-relative, and (b) it is dependent on divine law, i.e., it is objective, at least from a human perspective. Formally stated, the argument

³⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

Anscombe makes in her critique of modern moral philosophy (AC) may be summarized as follows:³⁹

1. If moral obligation is both agent-relative and objective, it can only be grounded in God.
2. Moral obligation is both agent-relative and objective.

Therefore,

3. Moral obligation can only be grounded in God.

DCT defenders accept the argument as it is stated. Both SCT proponents and naturalists reject the second premise of the argument, but for different reasons. As we will see, naturalists who accept the normativity of morality also accept the claim that moral obligation is objective. But they deny that it is agent-relative. Wes Morriston, Erik J. Wielenberg and Russ Shafer-Landau, as we will see, defend this position. This, as I will argue, is what the position presented by Christine Korsgaard and Wes Morriston amounts to. SCT defenders accept the claim that moral obligation is agent-relative, but since they hold that obligation can be, in some sense, grounded in humanity, they deny that it is objective in a way that makes it independent of human beings, individually or collectively.⁴⁰

³⁹ I am taking some liberties in my use of the terms “agent-relative” and “objective” in summarizing Anscombe’s argument. Anscombe herself does not use these terms.

⁴⁰ When I reference naturalists, SCT advocates, DCT defenders, etc., holding such and such a position, I am primarily referring to the philosophers whose work is examined in this project. There are many nuances in the way issues addressed here are treated and I certainly don’t presume to speak for all representatives of a particular view, nor do I intend to speak fully for those whose work I interact with here.

At the heart of AC is the contention that metaphysical naturalism is incompatible with the concept of moral obligation. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explain the thinking behind Anscombe's view in order to make more explicit the nature of the incompatibility she has in mind and why it matters. I will also offer an evaluation of what I take to be the best arguments for retaining the concept of obligation in morality while escaping the force of AC. As already mentioned, I will seek to establish that if AC is a valid critique of modern moral philosophy, it holds true even against philosophers who accept moral obligation while remaining agnostic regarding the existence of a lawgiving God.

According to Anscombe, there is a clear historical link between what she calls "a law conception of ethics" and ethics as practiced by ancient philosophers, such as Aristotle. She argues that Aristotelian ethics did not make use of the concept of obligation, in contrast to modern moral philosophy. But between Aristotle and current philosophy stood Christianity, whose centuries-long dominance in moral philosophy bequeathed to the latter its law conception of ethics that remains in our vocabulary even though most philosophers no longer acknowledge a divine law as the source of moral obligation. For Anscombe, "[t]he concept of legislation requires a superior power in the legislator",⁴¹ and the only legislator superior enough to give it the legitimacy we assume it has in morality is God.

Here is Anscombe's explanation, quoted more fully:

To have a law conception of ethics is to hold that what is needed for conformity with the virtues failure in which is the mark of being bad qua man (and not merely, say, qua craftsman or logician) – that what is needed for this, is required by divine

⁴¹ Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy", p. 2.

law. Naturally it is not possible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as a law-giver; like Jews, Stoics, and Christians. But if such a conception is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the concepts of "obligation," of being bound or required as by a law, should remain though they had lost their root; and if the word "ought" has become invested in certain contexts with the sense of "obligation," it too will remain to be spoken with a special emphasis and special feeling in these contexts.⁴²

In her relatively short article, Anscombe weighed the most prominent secular ethical theories in the balance and found them all wanting. In particular, she argued that Kantianism, Utilitarianism (which she dubbed "Consequentialism"), and Social Contract theories were all built upon a law conception of ethics that cannot be justified from within those theories.⁴³ But Anscombe saw no reason to despair – she believed that the situation could be salvaged. Moral philosophy can be done without the concept of obligation. Here is how she put it,

It would be most reasonable to drop [the concept of obligation]. It has no reasonable sense outside a law conception of ethics...and you can do ethics without it, as is shown by the example of Aristotle. It would be a great improvement if, instead of 'morally wrong,' one always named a genus such as 'untruthful', 'unchaste', 'unjust'. We should no longer ask whether doing something was "wrong," passing directly from some description of an action to this notion; we should ask whether, e.g., it was unjust; and the answer would sometimes be clear at once.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., p. 5.

⁴³ Hence the essay by Roger Crisp, "Does Modern Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?," in *Modern Moral Philosophy* (Royal Institute of Philosophy, Supplement 54), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 75–94.

⁴⁴ Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, p. 7

The key to understanding Anscombe's position is the distinction she makes between referring to an action as "unjust", "untruthful" or "unchaste" as opposed to referring to it simply as "morally wrong". As Anscombe understands it, given the presuppositions of naturalism, declaring an action to be morally wrong is unwarranted since it adds something to the nature of the action that naturalism cannot countenance – it implies that the action is not only contrary to what is virtuous, but it is also *prohibited*. Similarly, morally right actions are actions that not only conform to what is virtuous, they are also *required*. As Anscombe explicitly states, it is not possible to account for this characteristic of prohibition or requiredness in morality without believing in God. Obligation in this sense entails agency that is capable of issuing commands. Anscombe rejects what she sees as Kant's attempt to defend self-legislation as a means to account for compulsion in morality. She also does not think the society can adequately play that role. We will come back to these alternatives to divine agency later in this and subsequent chapters. Specifically, I will examine the concept of self-legislation in chapter 3 when I evaluate Christine Korsgaard's view of moral obligation which she refers to as reflective endorsement.

But we still need to be clearer about Anscombe's distinction between an action being either morally wrong or, say, unjust. For, given the ubiquitous "moral" sense of obligation that Anscombe decries, it may seem counterintuitive to think that she meant to imply that an act that is "unjust", "untruthful", etc., could be thought of as not being "morally wrong". How is it a "great improvement" to think of an act as being "untruthful", "unchaste" or "unjust" as opposed to it being "morally wrong"? Aren't all "untruthful", "unchaste" or "unjust" acts also morally wrong? To get at what Anscombe meant, it is

helpful to consider a conceptual analysis of some key deontic concepts that Anscombe offers in her article. Anscombe argues that in Aristotelian ethics, words like “should,” and “ought” were used to refer to human actions or passions in a way similar to what we mean when we say that a machine “should not” or “ought not” to run without oil. Obviously, when we say that a machine “ought not” to run without oil, we do not mean to say that there is a moral imperative against a machine running without oil; we mean to say that running the machine without oil impedes its optimal performance and may in fact destroy it. There is an ordinary usage of the terms that is perfectly fine both within and outside the moral context. Applied to human actions within the moral context, the terms meant that the actions in question were contrary to what is virtuous. What was lacking in these terms is the very thing we now take them to mean – “some absolute verdict (like one of guilty/not guilty on a man)”.⁴⁵

Similarly, ordinary words like “should,” “needs,” “ought,” and “must” acquired a different “moral” sense when they came to be equated with words like “‘is obliged,’ or ‘is bound,’ or ‘is required to,’ in the sense in which one can be obliged or bound by law, or something can be required by law.”⁴⁶ Words like ἀμαρτάνειν or *peccatum* in Latin, which simply meant being mistaken or missing the mark came to acquire the concept of “sin”, again, implying that the person who commits a wrong act has not only done what is contrary to virtue but she is also culpable. The meaning of “wrong” changed from incorrect to impermissible. Not only was what a person had done “wrong”, the person herself was now judged to be guilty. Anscombe claims that this was a shift from Aristotle’s thinking

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

about morality – a detour in moral theory introduced by Christianity and one that can be corrected by a return to Aristotelian ethics.⁴⁷

If Anscombe's analysis is right, then modern moral philosophers face a dilemma – they can either acknowledge the validity of a theistic foundation for moral obligation or look for a way to practice ethics without the concept of obligation. Anscombe did not think that the former was a viable alternative in the face of rampant naturalism, and she therefore suggested a revival of Aristotelian ethics as the only promising possibility. To summarize Anscombe's claim here, we need to note that the statement, "X ought to do A" is ambiguous between these two claims:

1. It is virtuous for X to do A.
2. X is obligated to do A.

Though Anscombe thinks naturalism lacks a psychology of human nature that would adequately account for the assumptions we make about humanity in our moral theories, she nevertheless seems to assume that (1) can be made compatible with naturalism. She thus encourages her philosophical colleagues to explore ways of doing moral philosophy in terms of (1) as an alternative to law-based conceptions of obligation. But to Anscombe, (2), which is the accepted way to think about obligation in our day, cries out for a supernatural moral lawgiver and it is therefore incompatible with naturalism. For

Anscombe, the philosopher who thinks that reality is exhausted by the natural facts studied by the natural sciences, i.e., that matter and energy, and any properties that may

⁴⁷ This is not to say that Anscombe meant that only Christians are entitled to think of obligation in law-like terms. She is clear that Jews and the Stoics also thought of morality in the same way. Any theistic conception of reality can accommodate such a concept. Anscombe's point is that, by a stroke of history, it was Christianity that introduced the concept to Western philosophy.

emerge from or supervene on their interaction, comprise all of reality, can accept (2) only on pain of incoherence. Statement (2) invites the question, “Who or what is it that requires or obligates X to do A?” Anscombe did not think any answer that did not appeal to God would suffice, hence her recommendation that philosophers give up talk of moral obligation and stick to practicing ethics in terms of the first statement.

1.5 The Cost of Doing Away with Obligation

Anscombe’s optimism regarding the prospects of conducting morality without the concept of obligation raises some difficult questions that need to be addressed. For instance, moral obligation seems to be, in a sense to be examined in detail in this work, entailed by the very nature of morality. To state the point differently, moral obligations do not seem to be the types of states from which individuals, or even societies, can extricate themselves. This is true for at least some of the obligations morality places on us. Take, for instance, the obligation to stop injustice when it is in our power to do so. It does not seem enough to say that the person who knowingly withholds justice from the innocent does what is unjust. Her actions are most certainly unjust, but it also seems to be the case that we ought to be able to say that what such a person does is morally wrong. She ought not to do it – she has an obligation to refrain from so acting. This is no doubt part of the reason why societies the world over can justify taking coercive measures to restrain or punish the unjust.

Similarly, striving to act consistently with virtue is a noble goal, but it also seems to be the case that even those who may choose not to care about being virtuous have an

obligation to act otherwise. Following the dictates of morality does not seem optional, especially within a society. Susan Wolf states the point as follows,

...there are good reasons...for regarding Anscombe's proposal as something we should adopt only as a last resort. There are good reasons, that is, for *wanting* our moral and ethical framework to contain a distinction between the obligatory and the morally desirable, reasons that have been pointed out, for example, by Thomas Hobbes and by John Stuart Mill. Specifically, there is much to be gained – for each of us individually, as well as for society collectively, for all of humanity, and even for the whole of sentient creation – from being able to insist that people behave in certain ways and restrain themselves from behaving in certain others.⁴⁸

As Wolf goes on to emphasize, it is the “ability to insist that people deal honestly with each other and refrain from violence and theft” that forms the foundation of any functional society.⁴⁹ Inculcating virtue in the members of the society from a young age, and even hoping that no elaborate systems will need to be put in place to keep a majority of the people from abdicating their moral responsibilities is something every society should aspire to, but the need to behave within certain limits of morality in any society cannot be adequately expressed in ways that make it sound like it is optional. A truly virtuous person may not think of moral uprightness in terms of fulfilling obligations, but it still seems to be the case that even such a person is, in an important sense, still meeting the demands of morality. The topic of moral obligation would quickly arise should the virtuous person abdicate her duty to be moral.

⁴⁸ Susan Wolf, “Moral Obligations and Social Commands”, p. 347 [Emphasis hers].

⁴⁹ Ibid.

But it is not just the ability to insist justifiably that *others* conform to certain moral precepts that makes the concept of moral obligation so central to our moral experience. Morality makes powerful demands *on us*, sometimes exerting more pressure on us, even when we are prepared to conform to it, than we can comfortably bear. The fact that the expedient and the moral are not always perfectly aligned makes the need to account for the foundation of moral obligation quite critical. Here is how Christine Korsgaard states this point,

And in ethics, the question can become urgent, for the day will come, for most of us, when what morality commands, obliges, or recommends is hard: that we share decisions with people whose intelligence and integrity don't inspire our confidence; that we assume grave responsibilities to which we feel inadequate; that we sacrifice our lives or voluntarily relinquish what makes them sweet. And then the question – *why?* – will press, and rightly so. Why should I be moral?⁵⁰

It seems obligation is too crucial a component of morality – one that is perhaps necessary for morality's practical outworking – to be eliminated from our moral theories, even though it seems to raise serious questions about its ontological foundation. The uncompromising demands it places on us make the search for its ontological foundation paramount. Therefore, Wolf's advice stands; we should only follow Anscombe's advice to do away with obligation as a last resort. But that means that we must have an answer to AC.

⁵⁰ Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 8.

Some philosophers have sought to escape the force of AC by arguing that AC is actually based on a misconception of how obligation arises in morality. A proper account of moral obligation, it is argued, would show that AC poses no threat to the way the concept is understood and used in modern philosophy. In the next section, I will examine what I take to be the best attempts to answer AC by showing that it misses its target and why I think they do not succeed.

The first attempt to escape the force of AC by attempting to offer a clearer understanding of the concept of obligation in morality is given by Christine Korsgaard. The second is offered by Wes Morriston, among others. Korsgaard argues that AC is built on the erroneous assumption that punishment is essential to moral obligation. Morriston argues that once one recognizes an action to be morally right, one thereby recognizes it to be obligatory and no further justification or grounding is needed for this obligatory character of the act. To further motivate AC, and to better appreciate its force as a critique of modern moral philosophy, these two objections need to be answered.

1.6 AC and Agent-Centered Obligation

The first objection to AC I will consider here is raised by Christine Korsgaard. In order to evaluate it, we need to distinguish between two claims that are easy to conflate. Consider the following two statements:

1. I am obligated to do X.
2. I am obligated to do X entails that I will be punished, judged or blamed if I don't do X.

Although it seems *prima facie* evident that (1) and (2) are both necessary for moral obligation to obtain, it seems to me that AC does not require (2). Actually, (2) seems to yield an impoverished view of morality, especially if it is understood to be the primary motivation for a moral life. I agree with Louise Anthony when she states, “The suggestion that there would be no moral value unless virtue was certain to be rewarded and vice punished is tantamount to a reduction of moral value to prudential value.”⁵¹ A person who does what is right solely because of the fear of punishment can hardly be said to be a morally exemplary person. As Mark Timmons notes, “...moral theory concerns questions about the morality of actions (what to do) as well as the morality of persons (how to be).”⁵²

Ideally, a morally good person will be disposed to do what is good without being driven by the fear of punishment. I would argue that the goal of moral education should be to turn human beings into good moral agents – people who naturally and routinely do what is right.

But more could be said about the two statements above. Not only are they conceptually distinguishable, the first need not entail the second. To see this, we need to note that it is possible to require that something be done without imposing any consequences on the failure to fulfill the terms of the requirement. It is also possible to require that something be done, with a detailed explanation of the consequences of not meeting the requirement, and still decide not to mete out the consequences once the obligation is broken. That is certainly the case whenever forgiveness is offered to the guilty party. DCT advocates, like Adams, acknowledge this fact. Adams writes,

⁵¹ Louise Antony, “The Failure of Moral Arguments,” pp. 108-9.

⁵² Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), p. 7.

...the fear of punishment is not the best of motives, either morally or religiously; and emphasis on it can lead to the suspicion that the obligations under discussion do not fully fill the emotional and motivational role that we expect of moral obligations. There are better motives for compliance with divine commands, grounded in subtler aspects of a complex structure of requirements and sanctions.⁵³

To further appreciate the significance of the distinction between these two statements, I will now summarize, with a few additions, a critique of Korsgaard's rebuttal of AC that is offered by Maria Alvarez and Aaron Ridley.⁵⁴ Here, I am only concerned with the place of the fear of punishment as a motivation for moral obligation. I will examine Korsgaard's own account of obligation more fully in chapter 3.

Korsgaard argues that Anscombe's whole case is built on (2), and if it could be shown that moral obligation does not depend on (2), it would follow that Anscombe's complaint against modern philosophy's understanding of obligation fails. Alvarez and Ridley respond to Korsgaard in two ways. They argue that, first, Korsgaard is mistaken to think that AC is motivated by the fear of punishment. Secondly, they argue that taking the fear of punishment out of the picture does not adequately answer AC.

With regard to the question of the motivation behind AC, Korsgaard seems to be mistaken when she attributes the following view to Anscombe,

...Anscombe and, although to a lesser extent, also Williams, share an important assumption with their Sentimentalist predecessors, for both tend to think that the

⁵³ Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*, p. 252.

⁵⁴ Maria Alvarez and Aaron Ridley, "The Concept of Moral Obligation: Anscombe contra Korsgaard," in *Philosophy*, No. 4, October 2007, pp. 543-552.

primary force of saying that I am obliged to do something is that I will be judged, punished, blamed, or will blame myself, if I do not.⁵⁵

In other words, Korsgaard seems to think that Anscombe must be committed to (2) above in order for AC to work. According to Korsgaard, (2) is in fact not necessary for moral obligation to obtain; (1) is sufficient. So, if Korsgaard can show that it is possible for one to be obligated to do something without the threat of judgment, punishment or blame, and if the only role God plays in morality is to ground such threats, she believes that she will have shown that the concept of obligation in morality does not rely on God after all, especially if, as Korsgaard believes, the deliberative process an agent goes through to arrive at a moral course of action is enough to show whether the agent is obligated to perform the action. The *prima facie* plausibility of AC will thereby have been shown to rest on a mistake and it therefore poses no threat to moral obligation as understood today. Here is a fuller context of the quote just given above,

In her famous 1958 paper "Modern Moral Philosophy," Elizabeth Anscombe argued that the moral "ought" and "obligation" are specifically modern notions that classical philosophers like Aristotle did very well without. Anscombe claims that these ideas are naturally associated with a divine law conception of ethics, and, in the absence of that conception, lack sense. Similar charges have been made more recently by Bernard Williams... But Anscombe and, although to a lesser extent, also Williams, share an important assumption with their Sentimentalist predecessors, for both tend to think that the primary force of saying that I am

⁵⁵ Christine Korsgaard, "Kant's Analysis of Obligation: The Argument of Foundations I," in *The Monist*, vol. 72, No. 3, July 1989, p. 317.

obliged to do something is that I will be judged, punished, blamed, or will blame myself, if I do not.⁵⁶

Korsgaard goes on to say that the strength of Anscombe's critique of modern moral philosophy (AC) lies in the fact that (following the Sentimentalists) Anscombe conceives of morality from the perspective of a spectator or a judge. The spectator judges a certain moral situation to be right or wrong and then turns those "affections of approval or disapproval" against herself. That, says Korsgaard, is the only way obligation is thought to arise from the spectator's perspective. By contrast, Korsgaard joins the Rationalists in arguing that obligation is actually an agent-centered concept that follows a deliberative process from the agent's own perspective. She writes, "The primary deliberative force of saying 'I am obliged to do this' is not 'I will blame myself if I do not' but 'my judgment that it is right impels me to do this'".⁵⁷ She goes on to argue that this agent-centered approach to obligation can be ascertained in the writings of classical philosophers like Aristotle.

Aristotle's person of practical wisdom does the virtuous action for its own sake and *for the sake of the noble* (*το καλον*). He is moved to act by an ethical quality, a moral beauty and nobility, which he apprehends in the action. He does not merely act on some spontaneous natural affection which sideline judges applaud. And this element of moral action – this feature of how it looks from the agent's point of view – essentially drops out of Sentimentalism.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 330.

⁵⁷ Korsgaard, "Kant's Analysis of Obligation," p. 317. [Emphasis hers]

⁵⁸ Ibid., 317-18.

So, is Korsgaard justified in claiming that AC is based on the assumption that the primary force of saying that I am obligated to do something is that I will be judged, punished, blamed or will blame myself, if I do not? The answer seems to be no. Since a detailed analysis of the Sentimentalists' view of moral obligation lies beyond the scope of this work, I will set it aside and concentrate my focus on whether the feature of doing a "virtuous action" based on "how it looks from the agent's [own] point of view" really drops out of Anscombe's view. Again, Korsgaard argues that Anscombe leaves out the agent's own perspective and instead approaches obligation from the perspective of the judge or spectator. The reason I am obligated to carry out a certain action is because it is an action that "sideline judges applaud". If that is true, then it follows that moral obligation does indeed require a legislator.

Consider statements (1) and (2) again:

1. I am obligated to do X.
2. I am obligated to do X entails that I will be punished, judged or blamed if I don't do X.

According to Korsgaard, Anscombe must endorse (2) in order for AC to be a valid critique of modern moral philosophy. But, Korsgaard continues, (2) is not necessary for obligation to obtain and concentrating on the agent's own perspective on morality gives us the concept of obligation we need in morality. If this is true, Anscombe's complaint about modern moral practice rests on a mistake – she ignores the agent's own perspective on

morality and instead concentrates on an external standard of judgment imposed on the agent.

As mentioned above, the crucial question in response to Korsgaard is whether Anscombe indeed built her case against obligation on the assumption that modern moral philosophy approaches morality from the spectator's perspective. I would argue, as Alvarez and Ridley do, that Anscombe took into account the agent's own perspective on moral obligation and still came to the conclusion that obligation ought to be jettisoned. I will give a couple of reasons for this reading of Anscombe, i.e., evidence from Anscombe's article on the topic and Anscombe's influence on the rise of virtue ethics.

In her critique of modern moral philosophy, Anscombe seems to be working with two main concepts that run parallel with each other, i.e., the concept of *conformity to virtue* and the concept of *obligation*, and her claim seems to be that the latter is problematic in light of other assumptions modern philosophers hold. In her own words, the notion of obligation "really does add something to the description" of an action. Anscombe thinks that moral philosophy can be done quite well without this addendum.⁵⁹ In describing the concept of moral obligation embraced by the Stoics, she writes, "...whatever was involved in conformity to human virtues was required by divine law".⁶⁰ In the passage quoted above, she says that a law conception of ethics, which is her chief target in her article, holds that "what is needed for conformity with the virtues failure in which is the mark of being bad qua man (and not merely, say, qua craftsman or logician) – that what is needed for this, is required by divine law."⁶¹ And towards the end of the article, she wonders what would

⁵⁹ Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy" p. 15.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 5

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 6.

prevent a person from committing injustice if the concept of “moral ought” were to be jettisoned. Anscombe’s answer is that the reasons may vary for different people. For example, the philosopher, as was the case for Plato and Aristotle, might eschew injustice on the grounds that only virtuous acts can make a human being flourish and injustice distracts from that goal. A non-philosopher might simply say that injustice just seems disgraceful. But when Anscombe considers how a DCT adherent would answer the question, one would expect the fear of punishment, judgment or blame – by self or others, including God – to loom large in the answer, if Korsgaard’s reading of Anscombe is right. But once again, Anscombe appeals to the two concepts – conformity to virtue and moral obligation – to weave together the answer she thinks the believer in divine laws would give. She writes,

The man who believes in divine laws will say perhaps "It is forbidden, and however it looks, it cannot be to anyone's profit to commit injustice"; he like the Greek philosophers can think in terms of "flourishing." If he is a Stoic, he is apt to have a decidedly strained notion of what "flourishing consists" in; if he is a Jew or Christian, he need not have any very distinct notion: the way it will profit him to abstain from injustice is something that he leaves it to God to determine, himself only saying "It can't do me any good to go against his law."⁶²

⁶² Ibid., p. 16. Anscombe does not think that what is meant by “flourishing” has been worked out enough to justify the use of that concept in modern moral philosophy. That was in fact one of her thesis in her influential article – that there is a need for a more developed philosophy of psychology in pursuit of precision in the terms used in the field of moral philosophy. She writes, “...but it can be seen that philosophically there is a huge gap, at present unfillable as far as we are concerned, which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human ‘flourishing’” (*Modern Moral Philosophy*, p. 15).

A DCT advocate, according to Anscombe, is capable of giving the same answer that the Greek philosopher would have given in response to the question why one should avoid injustice, but with the caveat that injustice is also forbidden by God. In other words, fear of punishment (statement 2 above) is not the primary reason Anscombe thinks reflective believers in divine laws would give for doing what is right. They too think in terms of flourishing, i.e., they too recognize the value of virtuous lives, but they also understand virtue to be divinely required of them. Injustice is not only “forbidden”, it also “cannot be to anyone’s profit to commit” it. Alvarez and Ridley write,

It seems clear that Anscombe does not endorse the sentimentalist assumption, that the ‘primary force of saying that I am obliged to do something is that I will be judged, punished, blamed, or will blame myself, if I do not’. For Anscombe, as for Korsgaard, the notion of obligation is closely bound up with the notion of law, and for the former the notion of moral obligation, in particular, is bound up with that of divine law. ...as Anscombe sees it, the primary force of saying that I am morally obliged to do something is simply that this action ‘so described’ is demanded by divine law and that, if divine law demands it, it follows, as a conceptual truth, that this the right thing to do full stop (i.e. regardless of the present appeal of the action or of whether any sanctions are attached to breaching that law).⁶³

Thus, Korsgaard’s attempt to refute AC by offering an agent-centered account of obligation, as opposed to the spectator account she attributes to Anscombe, is mistaken. Anscombe herself seems to provide enough evidence to show that an agent-centered account of obligation is an integral part of what she was concerned about. And even if the

⁶³ Maria Alvarez and Aaron Ridley, “The Concept of Moral Obligation: Anscombe contra Korsgaard,” pp. 545-546.

threat of punishment is set aside, we still need to address Anscombe's claim that a legislator other than the agent herself stands behind the concept of obligation.

DCT advocates recognize that sanctions are not the key driving force for good moral behavior. They see the end goal of morality as the perfection (one could say, "ultimate flourishing") of the individual herself. For example, George Mavrodes and C. S. Lewis even argue that morality itself is not the ultimate goal of a DCT-centered life. Since they believe that human life extends beyond earthly existence, they envision a realm of perfection where morality will not occupy the central place it does in our morally imperfect world. In a perfect world, talk of "right", "wrong", "duty", etc., would at best be forgotten altogether or be mildly entertaining. George Mavrodes argues that a theistic view of the world "gives morality a deeper place in the world than does a [naturalistic] world and thus permits it to 'make sense.'" Perhaps it also "suggests that morality is not the deepest thing, that it is provisional and transitory, that it is due to serve its use and then to pass away in favor of something richer and deeper."⁶⁴ Similarly, CS Lewis writes:

I think all Christians would agree with me if I said that though Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, all about duties and rules and guilt and virtue, yet it leads you on, out of all that, into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke. Every one there is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ George Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality" in *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 586.

⁶⁵ CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 132.

Anscombe's juxtaposition of flourishing and divine commands in moral obligation seems quite similar to a position suggested by J. L. Mackie in answer to the Euthyphro dilemma – a key objection to divine command theories that we will consider in detail in chapter 3. In Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates poses a dilemma for the view that goodness is grounded in the gods. The dilemma is best understood in the form of a question. Do the gods will the good because it is good or is the good good because the gods will it? Either horn of the dilemma invites unpalatable consequences for the divine command theorist. If the gods will what is good because it is good, then the good is independent of the gods; the gods themselves are subservient to it. On the other hand, if the good is good because the gods will it, then the good really is arbitrary. The gods could command anything, and it would be "good".⁶⁶

If the good and the right are independent of the gods, then the commands the gods might issue with regard to the good are really redundant. This is the aspect of the dilemma that I am interested in in this section – the charge of redundancy. I will examine other aspects of the dilemma later. Mackie proposed the following as a solution to this dilemma,

It might be that there is one kind of life which is, in a purely descriptive sense, most appropriate for human beings as they are – that is, that it alone will fully develop rather than stunt their natural capacities and that in it, and only in it, can they find the fullest and deepest satisfaction. It might then follow that certain rules of conduct and certain dispositions were appropriate (still purely descriptively) in that they were needed to maintain this way of life... But, further, God might require men to live in this appropriate way, and might enjoin obedience to the related rules. This would add an objectively prescriptive element to what otherwise were hard,

⁶⁶ Plato, "Euthyphro," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), pp. 1-16.

descriptive, truths, but in a quite non-mysterious way; these would be literally commands issued by an identifiable authority.⁶⁷

Though the dilemma was originally posed in terms of “the good” in Plato’s dialogue, it applies in terms of “the right” as well. In the context of my topic, it applies in terms of obligations: do the gods command the good because it is good or is the good good because the gods command it? Mackie’s proposed solution deals directly with obligations, envisioning God’s commands as God’s requirements for human beings to live in accordance with principles that are consistent with the kinds of creatures they are and that would therefore help them flourish.⁶⁸ If Mackie is right, then God’s commands are entirely consistent with certain actions having intrinsic worth independently of the commands. In that case, AC gains further legitimacy as a challenge to philosophical positions that reject divine authority while remaining committed to obligations. Having a robust view of the flourishing of humanity as the end goal of morality in general and moral obligation in particular is not inconsistent with conceiving of moral obligations as divinely instigated. Anscombe’s critique, in fact, takes both to account.

But one could wonder where God’s authority to issue moral commands comes from. DCT advocates appeal to the fact that human beings owe love, obedience and loyalty to God as their Creator. Knowing God and following God’s commands would be the highest good human beings could achieve, especially if it is true that human beings are made in God’s image for the purpose of knowing and worshipping God, as Christian theism

⁶⁷ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 230-1.

⁶⁸ What remains to be answered is the nature of the relationship between the gods (or God) and the good. One could grant Mackie’s proposed solution to the Euthyphro dilemma in terms of the obligations morality imposes on humanity and still insist that the good is independent of God. This will be explored further in chapter 3.

contends. Reflecting on the justification of the authority that God possesses over human beings, Evans writes,

There are several (not mutually exclusive) principles that could explain or justify divine authority. One is the principle of gratitude just discussed in connection with the obligations of children to parents. Good and conscientious parents give their children a great deal: time, effort, material resources. Gratitude for such efforts is good, and gratitude appropriately expresses itself in respect and appreciation for the parents. However, God as Creator is the giver of every good that any humans have, including their very existence. It seems plausible then that the debt of gratitude humans owe to God vastly exceeds the gratitude they owe to parents or any human benefactor.⁶⁹

The other principles that Evans mentions include the supreme, intrinsic good of an appropriate relationship with God and the fact that God, as Creator, has a rightful claim over all of His creation, including human beings.⁷⁰ If Evans is right, then the claim that God has authority over humanity is justifiable. There are, therefore, reasons other than the fear of punishment for holding that human beings have an obligation to follow God's commands.

A second reason why it is doubtful that Anscombe saw the threat of sanctions as the sole motivating factor for the concept of moral obligation is the fact that she is widely credited with initiating interest in virtue ethics. Such an outcome would be strangely odd if she didn't really think she was offering a viable alternative to divine command morality and if her chief complaint against modern moral philosophy could have been easily answered by pointing to the kind of distinction Korsgaard makes between an agent-

⁶⁹ C. Steven Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, p. 64.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-66.

centered view of obligation and a spectator account of obligation. It is true that Anscombe could have set in motion events that led up to the popularity of virtue ethics without offering virtue ethics as an alternative to a law conception of ethics. Her critique of current moral philosophy could have been effective enough to force philosophers to look for an alternative even if Anscombe herself did not suggest one, or didn't even have one in mind.

But such does not appear to be the case. As already mentioned, Anscombe makes several explicit gestures towards Aristotelian ethics as a viable alternative to modern moral philosophy since the former, in her estimation, fares well without the concept of obligation. Even if it can be shown that Anscombe herself favored a divine origin of moral obligation, as Julia Driver argues,⁷¹ she seems to say enough about the need for an alternative approach

⁷¹ Julia Driver, "Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/anscombe/>. Driver argues that Anscombe's critique has been read in two different ways. While some have interpreted Anscombe to have been advocating Aristotelian ethics, others have understood her thesis as a defense of divine ethics. According to the latter reading, Anscombe was simply offering a *modus tollens* argument for the superiority of DCT. Drivers writes:

Here is the straightforward interpretation in simple *modus ponens* form:

- (1) If religiously based ethics is false, then virtue ethics is the way moral philosophy ought to be developed.
- (2a) Religious based ethics is false (at least for her interlocutors).
- (3a) Therefore, virtue ethics is the way moral philosophy should be developed.

But one person's *modus ponens* is another person's *modus tollens*:

- (1) If religiously based ethics is false, then virtue ethics is the way moral philosophy ought to be developed.
- (2b) It is not the case that virtue ethics is the way to develop moral philosophy
- (3b) Therefore, it is not the case that religiously based ethics is false.⁷¹

According to Julia Driver, there is evidence to show that Anscombe herself seemed to favor the second way of understanding her paper. In addition to Anscombe's public statements and activities in support of various moral causes, Driver sees the evidence in Anscombe's article itself, specifically in Anscombe's claim that there is, at present, an unfillable gap between our psychology of human nature and the assumptions we make about human nature in our moral theories (Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, p. 15). But even if a legitimate case can be made that

to lead the reader to think her suggestion was in fact genuine. I believe this helps make sense of Anscombe's rather sanguine readiness to do away with the concept of obligation in morality. In her mind, the concept is unnecessary to morality – one that she believes morality could do well without.

Finally, it seems hard to avoid the objectivity of obligation, even when the agent goes through the deliberative process. I will have more to say about this in chapter 3 when I examine Korsgaard's own view in more detail.

1.7 AC and Other Types of Normativity

When Anscombe says that “the moral sense of ‘ought’, ought to be jettisoned”,⁷² she is obviously using the word “ought” in two different ways in that sentence. Her second use of the term cannot be moral; otherwise her claim would be self-stultifying. Normative concepts are used in senses other than the moral sense. If these other uses of normative concepts can be understood without the need to appeal to legislators, then perhaps the moral sense can be so understood as well. Morriston develops an argument against AC along these lines. He maintains that these other uses of the concept of ought are self-evident and they do not need to be grounded in anything. If that is true, then moral obligation can be understood in the same way and it therefore needs no grounding either. He offers two ways in which his argument against AC would work,

The first is simply to deny that duties must be constituted by commands in order to have imperative force. There are, after all, lots of normative laws that do not require

Anscombe herself favored theistic ethics, it remains the case that we need to explore whether her specific challenge to philosophy is valid, which is the main focus of this work.

⁷² Ibid.

a lawmaker. If, for example, you know that two propositions are inconsistent with one another, and you also know that one of them is true, then you should not accept the other. Nobody thinks we need a ‘divine command’ to back up this rule. I see no reason why it should be different for moral rules. If this is right, then the way is open for the non-theist to say that basic moral duties are fundamental moral facts and (like moral values) require no further foundation or ground.⁷³

At first glance, Morrison’s suggestion seems right. One just feels compelled to draw the conclusion entailed by a set of premises, period. That is, it is the premises themselves that entail the conclusion, not a requirement imposed by a (logical) lawgiver. As a matter of fact, it does not appear to be the case that even God would be justified in drawing a conclusion different from the one entailed by the premises. Another way in which Morrison could state his point is to say that logical inferences drawn from true premises in a valid argument are necessarily true. They are true in every possible world. To ask what they are grounded in is to fail to grasp the nature of logical necessity. It is the very nature of logic that forces a particular conclusion on any reasonable person. That is certainly true of a deductive argument such as the following one:

1. If logical inferences are necessarily true, they do not need to be grounded in anything.
2. Logical inferences are necessarily true.

Given these two premises, one ought to draw the following conclusion:

⁷³ Wes Morrison, “God and the ontological foundation of morality,” in *Religious Studies*, (2012) 48, pp. 31-32.

Therefore,

3. Logical inferences do not need to be grounded in anything.

All that would have to be established in such cases is whether or not the premises are true.⁷⁴ If they are true, then the conclusion follows immediately and inexorably. We seem to be under logical compulsion to draw the conclusion given the premises – we can't help but do so if we are right in our inferences. But the compulsion, again, appears to be the result of the nature of the premises, not a “divine command”. Reason alone dictates our conclusions.

Assuming that the foregoing is true, Morriston seems to have a clear case of normativity that he can exploit to account for moral obligation. He builds his argument against AC on what “we know”. We simply know that if two propositions contradict each other and one of them is true, we should reject the false one. Recasting his claim in terms of logical necessity, his argument seems to be the following:

⁷⁴ As it turns out, the claim that necessary truths don't need to be grounded in anything is disputable. For a discussion, see William Lane Craig, “The Most Gruesome of Guests” in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?* Ed. Robert Garcia and Nathan L. King (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 170. Craig writes,

The assumption here seems to be that necessary truths cannot stand to one another in relations of explanatory priority. Not only do I see no reason to think that assumption true, but it strikes me as obviously false. For example, “States of consciousness exist” is necessarily true, since “God exists” is necessarily true. That is to say, the fact that a personal, metaphysically necessary being like God exists explains why it is necessarily true that states of consciousness exist. To give a nontheological example, the axioms of Peano arithmetic are explanatorily prior to “ $2+2=4$ ”, as are the axioms of Zermelo- Fraenkel set theory to the theorems thereof.

1. Necessary truths (for example, logical inferences) do not need to be grounded in anything.

2. Moral obligations are necessary truths.

Therefore,

3. Moral obligations do not need to be grounded in anything.

According to Morrision, morality functions in a way similar to the laws of logic. When we invoke morality in the prohibition of a certain act, we seem to imply that the act is contrary to the nature of morality, regardless of what society (or even God, as Morrision argues) might say. In other words, there is something about morality itself that dictates our moral conclusions. Now, if we accept this reasoning, then there does not seem to be any need to ask what grounds right and wrong. To apprehend that an act is right (or wrong) is at once to apprehend that the act ought to be done (or avoided). Just as we are under logical compulsion to draw certain conclusions given a set of premises, we are under moral compulsion to act in a certain way given our apprehension of the factors involved. For example, to apprehend that a certain act amounts to stealing is to apprehend that we ought not to do it. Like the logical “ought”, the oughtness involved in morality does not appear to presuppose the presence of a lawgiver with the authority to issue commands. Thus, neither DCT nor SCT seems necessary to explain obligation in morality.

So, does the fact that actions have *some character* about them that makes them either right or wrong imply that Anscombe’s demand for a legislator of moral obligation is unfounded? Is this claim an adequate response to AC? I will argue that it is not. AC still

remains a challenge to modern moral philosophy. To see this, we need to note again that Anscombe was already aware of these other uses of “ought”. She wrote,

The terms "should" or "ought" or "needs" relate to good and bad: e.g., machinery needs oil, or should or ought to be oiled, in that running without oil is bad for it, or it runs badly without oil. According to this conception, of course, "should" and "ought" are not used in a special "moral" sense when one says that a man should not bilk... The ordinary (and quite indispensable) terms "should," "needs," "ought," "must" – acquired this special sense by being equated in the relevant contexts with "is obliged," or "is bound," or "is required to," in the sense in which one can be obliged or bound by law, or something can be required by law.⁷⁵

What Morrision’s argument amounts to seems to be the claim that we need to do away with the special, “moral” usage of the concept (which cries out for a lawgiver) and instead use the concept of “ought” in the same way we use it in logic. To say that one ought to do a certain act in the moral realm is equivalent to saying that one ought to draw a certain conclusion in logic. In either case, no lawgiver or legislator is required – the nature of the actions involved dictates the response. Recall our earlier disambiguation of the term “ought” in moral contexts. I noted that the statement, “X ought to do A” is ambiguous between these two claims:

1. It is virtuous (or prudent) for X to do A.
2. X is obligated to do A.

⁷⁵ Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” p. 4.

When the concept of obligation is used in Anscombe's "ordinary (and quite indispensable)" way, i.e., without its special moral connotation where it is equated with being bound by law, it makes claims (1) and (2) essentially equivalent. To say that X is obligated to do A is to say that (morally speaking) A is the correct thing for X to do. Again, it is similar to saying that a conclusion follows from certain premises. As long as the concept of obligation is being used in this sense, Anscombe would have no problem with it. By equating the moral oughtness of an act with a recognition of the act's rightness or virtuous standing, without any reference to a law-like compulsion, Morrison merely concedes Anscombe's point. Far from blunting the force of AC, Morrison's analysis actually confirms it – Morrison simply agrees with Anscombe that the law-like conception of obligation needs to be jettisoned, i.e., he offers us a way of doing ethics without a conception of obligation that requires a lawgiver. But it still remains the case that if there is no agent who stands behind the imperatival force of moral obligation, it is incoherent to retain a law-conception of obligation in ethics. That, again, is precisely the point Anscombe makes.

Morrison's view takes us back to an issue I already addressed – whether we can adequately conduct morality without the concept of obligation in the manner suggested by Anscombe. I have already addressed the question of the cost of doing away with obligation in section 1.5. There, I argued that the ability to insist that *others* conform to certain moral norms is an indispensable component of any functional society. We need to be able to distinguish between what is morally desirable and what is it morally imperative, and we need to be able to hold those who flout their moral obligations accountable. Morality is not optional in the routine functions of a society. I also argued that we need a stable enough

foundation for obligation to account for the pressure morality exerts on *us* to act in certain ways, especially when what morality demands conflicts with our own interests.

The natural question to ask then is whether an account of morality that equates the moral “ought” with other types of “ought”, for example those demanded by reason, can adequately address such concerns and hence offer a satisfactory response to AC. And a satisfactory answer to AC is indeed necessary if we are to continue to hold others responsible for their actions. As Wolf writes, Anscombe’s “...point is to challenge those of us who are not divine command theorists to make sense of our talk of obligations and requirements, and we can hardly meet the challenge by simply insisting that it does make sense, never mind how”.⁷⁶ And John Rawls adds,

The doctrine of the purely conscientious act is irrational. This doctrine holds...that the highest moral motive is the desire to do what is right and just simply because it is right and just, no other description being appropriate... But on this interpretation the sense of right lacks any apparent reason; it resembles a preference for tea rather than coffee.⁷⁷

In the next two chapters, I will assess the reasons why some philosophers think that it is a mistake to equate the “logical ought” with the “moral ought”. Some of the reasons, as we will see, include the claim that moral obligation is sufficiently different from agent-neutral accounts of obligation, for example, the obligations of reason, and it is therefore a mistake to think that the two can be equated even in their function. Obligations of reason are not binding in as robust a sense as moral obligations are. I will also argue that the

⁷⁶ Susan Wolf, “Moral Obligations and Social Commands,” p. 347.

⁷⁷ Quoted by Robert Merrehew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 242.

special character or *nature* of moral acts that determines whether the acts are in *themselves* right or wrong, as Price puts it, is evidence for the objectivity of moral obligation and it does not rule out the need for an agent. Price writes, "...if no actions are, in *themselves*, either right or wrong, ...it follows, that, in *themselves*, they are all indifferent."⁷⁸ This will be developed in greater detail in the next couple of chapters.

But before leaving this chapter, I need to address Morriston's second argument against AC, as promised. Morriston supplements the argument just considered with the following:

But suppose something further is desired. Here is another option. It is a variant of the ideal spectator theory. Even an atheist might consistently identify duties with commands that would be given by a perfect being. That might not settle every question we'd like to have settled; but it would certainly make it a duty not to kill or steal or practise cruelty... [T]he actual existence of God makes no difference to the ontological foundation of morality.⁷⁹

As an answer to AC, Morriston's claim here seems implausible. It is true that an atheist could consistently equate moral duties with the commands that God, if God existed, would issue. But from that fact, I don't think it follows that the atheist would then be justified in inferring that she has moral duties in the law-like sense required by AC. I have summarized AC as follows:

⁷⁸ Quoted by Korsgaard, "Kant's Analysis of Obligation: The Argument of 'Foundations 1'," p. 318.

⁷⁹ Wes Morriston, "God and the ontological foundation of morality," in *Religious Studies*, (2012) 48, pp. 31-32.

1. If moral obligation is both agent-relative and objective, it can only be grounded in God.
 2. Moral obligation is both agent-relative and objective.
- Therefore,
3. Moral obligation can only be grounded in God.

By saying that moral duties amount to the commands that God would issue if God existed, Morrision makes no improvement on his first argument. In his first argument, he says that we are able to recognize right and wrong solely from the nature of the actions themselves. In his second argument, he says our moral duties are the duties that an ideal observer, such as God, would issue. The actual existence of such an observer is irrelevant.

But such duties would not be agent-relative. They would be inherent in the nature of the actions themselves – which allows room for their objectivity in the sense that any observer who thinks correctly about the matter and accounts for all of the relevant facts would have to come to the same conclusion regarding the rightness or wrongness of the action. Morrision’s use of “duties” here must then be understood in what Anscombe calls “the ordinary sense” – without reference to a legislator. Again, Anscombe would not dispute such usage – she in fact encourages it.

According to Morrision then, the second premise of AC is false – moral duties may be objective but they are not agent-relative. That God “would” issue commands that are consistent with the nature of actions is beside the point – Anscombe’s concern is whether it makes sense to conceive of obligation in terms of commands that have already been issued. What “would be commanded” and “what is commanded” are not the same thing.

According to Anscombe, when we say that we have a moral obligation not to carry out certain actions, with “obligation” being understood in the moral sense, we mean that those actions are forbidden. Such a claim assumes the existence of a legislator. That is precisely what Morrison denies in this and the previous arguments.

1.8 Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I would like to note several things. First, Anscombe’s main concern in proscribing the concept of “moral” obligation in our moral theories is her claim that the concept is incoherent in the absence of a divine lawgiver. Secondly, attempts to answer Anscombe’s challenge while retaining the moral sense of obligation in our moral theories, as examined in this chapter, end up conceding her point. They only succeed in providing a watered-down concept of obligation that, while it may not require a lawgiver, is both non-moral (similar to the type of compulsion one feels to draw a conclusion given certain premises) and incapable of grounding the demanding nature of moral obligation. As Wolf notes, the cost of giving up on obligation is high enough to force us to adopt Anscombe’s call to jettison it only as a last resort. Thirdly, there is strong evidence for the conclusion that obligation is objective – it is entailed by the very nature of actions, as Korsgaard and Morrison argue. Both DCT and SCT defenders must account for this claim – for if the rightness (or wrongness) of an action is inherent in the action itself, then no legislator seems to be necessary to account for obligation. We have touched on how such objections can be answered by both SCT and DCT. In the next two chapters, I will develop in fuller detail the cases for SCT and DCT, respectively, in light of such challenges.

CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL COMMAND THEORY (SCT)

In this chapter, I will examine how SCT, as defended by Wolf and (in part) Darwall, accounts for obligation. Specifically, I will offer an evaluation of the defense of the thesis that human beings can adequately play the role of lawgiving agents capable of grounding obligation without the need for a supernatural entity. I will finish the chapter with an analysis of what I take to be the best objections against SCT and why philosophers such as Evans and Adams find it inadequate as an account of obligation.

2.1 Susan Wolf on Moral Obligation

According to Wolf, the “...central features of the notion of moral obligation can only be captured by a theory according to which obligations arise from actual social requirements”.⁸⁰ Wolf identifies God and society as the “two most obvious candidates” for the source of moral obligation. She endorses Robert Adams’ argument that obligation makes sense only within the context of social relationships. Adams’ theory is a defense of DCT, where he argues “that a theory according to which moral obligation is constituted by divine commands...is the best theory on the subject for theists.”⁸¹ In other words, Adams maintains that a human-divine relationship is the relevant social context in which moral

⁸⁰ Susan Wolf, “Moral Obligations and Social Commands,” p. 344.

⁸¹ Quoted by Wolf, *ibid.*

obligations arise, with God, who is the superior entity with the authority to issue commands being the ground of those obligations.

In response, Wolf aims to develop an account of moral obligation that is acceptable to both theists and non-theists. She therefore defends what she calls “a Social Command Theory of obligation”. She writes, “the account I shall be defending is a secular one, according to which obligations arise not from divine commands, but from human ones.”⁸² The challenge facing her is whether she can successfully account for all the central features of moral obligation while locating obligation solely within human interactions.

Wolf gives several reasons why she thinks obligation is both agent-relative and is also grounded in society.⁸³ Among her best reasons include the claim that moral obligations are analogous to legal obligations, which in turn function like commands. Commands presuppose the existence of a person or persons with the appropriate authority to issue them.⁸⁴ Wolf explains,

One common way to think of moral obligation is by analogy to legal obligation, and to think of both on the model of commands. We have a legal obligation to do

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ The other reasons Wolf gives are that God may not exist, and even if God does indeed exist, God’s commands are not easily discernible (ibid., p.345). Since my main concern in this dissertation is to explore the legitimacy of the use of the concept of moral obligation in contemporary moral philosophy, I will leave the question of God’s existence and the epistemological tasks of figuring out God’s laws aside for now. But that is not to say that the topic addressed here has no direct relation to such questions. As we will see in chapter 3, some have argued that the compelling nature of moral obligation is itself part of the evidence for God. See, for example, Angus Ritchie, *From Morality to Metaphysics: The Theistic Implications of Our Ethical Commitments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), in addition to the texts I will explore in chapter 3.

⁸⁴ Again, there are different senses of the concept “ought” that don’t presuppose a lawgiver. When Anscombe says that the moral concept of “ought” ought to be jettisoned, she is obviously using “ought” in a different sense in the second instance. The necessity there is logical, rather than moral – it lacks the idea of commandedness that I noted is a key characteristic in moral obligation. Kant’s hypothetical imperatives would fall under a category other than the moral one.

something if we are required to do it by law, where law in turn must be issued by an appropriate authoritative person or group – a sovereign perhaps, or a duly elected legislature. If *moral* obligations are to be understood as commandments, however, there is a question about who is doing the commanding.⁸⁵

By conceiving of moral obligation in law-like terms, Wolf grants Anscombe's claim that moral obligation is agent relative. Hers is a good example of the kind of moral theorizing that is directly susceptible to AC. If moral obligations are akin to commands that must be issued by a person or persons with the appropriate authority to do so, then it follows that a moral lawgiver is indeed necessary to account for them, a consequence Wolf freely accepts.

Having argued that moral obligation functions in a law-like manner, and hence is agent-relative, Wolf proceeds to explain why she thinks that moral obligation is grounded in society. If successful, Wolf will have an answer to AC since the incoherence of modern conceptions of obligation, as Anscombe charges, arises only if a supernatural moral lawgiver is required to make sense of obligation. By showing that human agents are sufficient for the role, Wolf can successfully account for law-like obligations in moral theories and thus vindicate modern moral philosophy. Wolf appeals to our intuitions to support her claim. Here is what she says with regard to why she thinks obligation is grounded in society rather than God;

Whether or not we have any moral obligations does not seem to depend on the question of God's existence – it seems, for example, that we are morally obligated to refrain from killing, stealing, lying, and so on, whether God exists or not.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 344.

Moreover, such obligations do not seem to be obligations to God, but to each other.⁸⁶

As alluded to in the previous chapter, Wolf insists that there is a need to retain the law-like conception of obligation in ethics. We have obligations to each other, and we need to be able to enforce them. In addition to the practical need to be able to insist that people behave in certain ways, Wolf points out that the distinction between what is morally desirable and what is morally obligatory is necessary in determining the kind of pressure that may be applied to force compliance among those who fail to fulfill their duties. She writes,

Moreover, it would be helpful to appeal to such a distinction to determine how much and what kind of pressure may be put on others who may not be internally motivated to be morally good. When is it appropriate to insist that others behave in morally desirable ways? For what sorts of behavior is it reasonable to blame them? It seems intuitively inappropriate and unreasonable to blame them for failing to be as morally good as possible, but it would be very useful to be able to say of activities within certain limited ranges, that these are morally required, *these* others morally forbidden.⁸⁷

Wolf goes on to point out that there are good reasons not to adopt Anscombe's proposal that we practice ethics without the concept of obligation. She says that those who insist on retaining it while rejecting Anscombe's proposal have two options; they can either identify the authoritative person or group that is the source of obligation or show how it is

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 345.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 348. [Emphasis hers]

possible to employ the concept of obligation in our moral theorizing and practice without appealing to a moral lawgiver – human or divine. The latter route, says Wolf, is the one chosen by a majority of philosophers. Most philosophers hold that it is possible to account for the distinction between “what is required and what is merely recommended” without appealing to any commander. “To say that something is morally required, in this view, is not to say that it is required *by* anyone”.⁸⁸

Wolf is not convinced. To the question of what we really mean when we say an act is required, instead of merely recommended, she states, matter-of-factly, “To be frank, I think that much of the time we don’t really know what we are saying.”⁸⁹ Careful reflection on the meaning of the concept of obligation, adds Wolf, will show that it is indeed an agent-centered one. I would add that, in the absence of agency, the notion of an act being “recommended” is as mysterious as that of the act being “commanded”. Wolf quotes John Stuart Mill approvingly,

We do not call anything wrong unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it – if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproach of his own conscience... It is a part of the notion of duty in every one of its forms that a person may rightfully be compelled to fulfill it. Duty is a thing which may be exacted from a person, as one exacts a debt.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 349.

⁹⁰ Quoted by Wolf, *ibid.*, p. 349-350. [Emphasis in original]

As I argued in section 1.6, fear of punishment is not strictly the determining factor when considering what is or is not one's duty – whether or not a certain act is required holds even if no punishment is intended. Wolf agrees. She writes,

It has been argued by some, for example, that it makes no sense to say that one has an obligation to do something unless there is some actual sanction that attaches to the failure to comply – that, in other words, to say that one is morally obligated to do something commits one to the thought that one must do it or else. Under that construal, a society that does not punish a mode of behavior cannot be said to regard restraint from that behavior as morally obligatory. But Social Command Theories are not committed to this interpretation. Rather, they may associate claims of obligation with the condition that it would be *appropriate to* put pressure on someone to conform to what is obligatory, and *appropriate to* blame him for failing to comply.⁹¹

In other words, punishment, judgement or blame may be justifiably placed on one who flouts her obligations, as Mill suggests. That is indeed a key foundational idea in legal systems the world over. Thus, on Wolf's view, obligations are owed to a person or persons and it therefore makes more sense to speak of them in terms of agency rather than in agent-neutral ways.

Wolf also considers whether it would be sufficient to speak of moral obligation either in terms of the requirements *of morality* or the requirements *of reason*. Concerning the former, she says it is not enough to say that morality requires such and such. Such language does not capture the notion of moral obligation as it is commonly understood. To say that moral obligation is simply the course of action morality requires leaves out an

⁹¹ Ibid., 362. [Emphasis hers]

aspect of obligation that renders the concept incapable of bearing the weight it is assumed to carry in our moral discourse.

To illustrate, Wolf appeals to parallel usages of oughtness. She writes, “Just as morality requires us to tell the truth, etiquette requires us to pass the pot to the left, good spelling requires us to spell ‘separate’ with an ‘a’ (actually with two), prudence requires us to get regular dental exams.” However, these uses of oughtness or requiredness are not the same as the obligations of morality.

To say ‘X requires Y’ in these examples is to say that you should Y if you value X, or perhaps that not Y-ing is inconsistent with valuing or caring about X. The admission that X requires Y, however, only gives you a reason to Y *if* you care about X, and it may only give you a strong reason to Y if you care about X and about being consistent with your value of X, *very much*. When I say to someone that she must see the new Almodovar film, I do not mean to say that she has an obligation to see it. In so far as moral musts and moral requirements are understood along parallel lines, they too cannot be understood to express judgements about moral obligation.⁹²

The distinction Wolf makes here is essentially the same one that Kant makes between hypothetical commands (hypothetical oughts) and moral commands/oughts.

To get to the requirements of morality as commonly understood, a social component must enter the picture. When we say morality requires X, “we mean to say that *we* require X on moral grounds or for moral reasons”.⁹³ The addressee is required to fulfill her moral

⁹² Ibid., 351. [Emphasis in the original]. I will return to the point Wolf makes here when I consider Wittgenstein’s remarks on the same topic in chapter 4.

⁹³ Ibid., [Emphasis in the original]

obligations regardless of how she feels about them. For Wolf, such an account of obligation cries out for agency, a demand she believes SCT can meet.

Similarly, it is not sufficient to say that moral obligations are the requirements of reason. Wolf clarifies what she means when she equates moral obligations with the requirements of reason. She writes, “According to this proposal, the claim that one is morally required may be used to single out cases in which moral reasons not only count in favour of something, they count decisively. That is, they outweigh all other reasons that might favour doing anything else.”⁹⁴ Wolf maintains that having decisive moral reasons to act in a certain way is not the same as having the moral obligation to so act. One could have decisive moral reasons to carry out a certain act and still not be morally obligated to do it. Wolf gives an example to show that it is possible for one to have decisive reasons to do something, fail to do it and still not be morally culpable. Her example involves the question of whether or not one should drive an SUV. She is convinced that there are decisive moral reasons not to do so, but she doesn’t think that these reasons place a moral obligation on every other person. She writes,

Now it seems to me, and to many of my friends, that people who have no special needs to which SUVs particularly answer should not drive them. The danger they add for other drivers and passengers, the extra damage that they cause to the roads, their unnecessary use of scarce resources, constitute decisive moral reasons to choose another car, not to be outweighed by considerations of fashion and of just liking the way driving an SUV feels. ... The point is, I believe that there is decisive moral reason not to buy an SUV - but I do not think it is morally obligatory.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Ibid., 352.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 354.

Wolf summarizes her reasons for the claim that decisive moral reasons are not sufficient to place an obligation on moral agents in the following way: firstly, as her example shows, she argues that knowing that someone has decisive moral reasons to do something does not always entitle us to judge or blame her for not doing it. Secondly, failure to do something that one has decisive reasons to do in non-moral cases does not issue in the kind of blame or guilt that obtains in moral cases. Failure to follow one's exercise routine, eat a proper diet, get enough sleep, etc., even when one has decisive reasons to do these things, does not imply that others have the right to demand that one do these things – nothing is owed to others in such cases. Nor does such failure rise up to the level of making one incur the kind of guilt that accompanies moral failure. Wolf concludes, "If it is appropriate – as we are insisting that it is – to blame someone for a failure to do what is morally obligatory, the fact that her failure constitutes a violation of decisive (or all things considered) reason will not explain why."⁹⁶ Thirdly, there are times when what one has decisive reasons to do and the obligations of morality are not perfectly aligned, at least intuitively. For these and other reasons, Wolf believes that it is insufficient to identify decisive moral reasons as the basis upon which moral obligations are binding.

Not surprisingly, Wolf believes a social command theory of obligation can answer the concerns just raised. She holds that when there are actual demands that have been issued within a society, it is easy to account for why a member of the society falls under obligation to meet those demands. She quotes Adams approvingly,

The actual making of the demand is important, not only to the strength, but also to the character, of the motive. Not every good reason for doing something makes it

⁹⁶ Ibid., 353.

intelligible that I should feel that I *have* to do it. This is one of the ways in which having even the best of reasons for doing something does not as such amount to having an obligation to do it. But the perception that something is demanded of me by other people, in a relationship that I value, does help make it intelligible that I should feel that I have to do it.⁹⁷

SCT would explain why one is compelled/obligated to carry out certain acts where having decisive reasons falls short of such compulsion – one acts in response to the demands of one’s society in order to prevent disruptions in the society. Wolf holds that the need for social order necessitates the existence of moral obligations among the members of the society. Similarly, being members of a society entitles one to sit in judgment of, or to blame, whoever flouts the rules of conduct in that society.⁹⁸ Finally, Wolf points out that stated societal demands obviate the possibility of blaming a person for not fulfilling duties she knows nothing about. Concerning this last point, Wolf writes, “Social demands and expectations, on the other hand, must be readily accessible – for unless a principle or rule is publicly expressed, and general consensus about it ascertainable, it will not satisfy the conditions of being a social demand or expectation in the first place”.⁹⁹

Before offering a critique of Wolf’s view, I will now consider what Darwall has to say about SCT since, in my estimation, he makes helpful contributions in its defense that are meaningfully complementary to a position like the one Wolf defends. Unfortunately, I am not convinced that Darwall answers AC adequately, as we will also see in the next chapter.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 358. [Emphasis in the original.]

⁹⁸ As we will see below, Wolf’s view does not account for the fact that societal commands are at times in conflict with moral obligations.

⁹⁹ Wolf, *ibid.*, 359.

2.2 Darwall on Moral Obligation

Darwall has devoted much time and space in developing a theory of moral obligation and accountability that is a formidable challenge to AC. Gary Watson summarizes Darwall's thesis as follows:

Although he doesn't advertise it in just this way, we can see Darwall's book as a response to Elizabeth Anscombe's famous complaint against "modern moral philosophy." Anscombe charges our discipline (and perhaps our moral culture) with a kind of incoherence. Having abandoned traditional theological assumptions, it continues to employ concepts to which it is no longer entitled. What remains is a moral 'ought' with the supposed special force of law but without a lawgiver. According to Anscombe, coherence recommends either trading in this "law conception of ethics" for an ethics of virtue or else (impossibly, perhaps) returning to an ethics of divine authority. *One of the main achievements of Darwall's book is that it provides an answer to this challenge. The authorities to whom modern moral consciousness appeals are simply you and I. The "moral law" is what we have the authority to demand of one another.*¹⁰⁰

It is not the intention of this work to interact in detail with Darwall's vast treatment of this subject. But I will return to his view in chapter three. In this section, I will only examine two ideas that I believe are central to Darwall's main argument and that are directly relevant to my thesis. Specifically, I will examine Darwall's arguments that moral obligation is *second-personal* and it calls for *equal accountability* among moral beings.

¹⁰⁰ Gary Watson, "Morality as Equal Accountability: Comments on Stephen Darwall's *The Second-Person Standpoint*," in *Ethics*, vol. 118, no. 1, (October 2007), p. 37. [Emphasis added.] Darwall's book that Watson is referring to is *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Harvard University Press 2009).

The first argument seeks to establish that moral obligation is agent relative while the second is a defense of SCT – moral obligation must hold among equals, and since human beings and God are not equal, God cannot be the source of moral obligation.

2.3 Darwall: Morality as Second-Personal

We begin then with Darwall's claim that moral obligation is *second-personal*. The key to understanding what Darwall has in mind with this concept is to note a distinction he makes between agent-neutral reasons and agent-relative reasons for action. The second-personal conception of obligation is a subset of agent-relative reasons for action. He offers a helpful example. Suppose I am stepping on your foot, causing you pain. There are several things you could do to get me to stop doing so. You could, for example, try to convince me that, all things being equal, causing unnecessary pain is a bad state of affairs in the world and I should stop such from happening whenever it is in my power to do so. You could try to get me to reflect on the resentment I would feel if someone had his foot on mine, causing me pain. You could convince me that stepping on your foot is embarrassing to you. Such reasons may be enough to get me to stop stepping on your foot. But Darwall says those types of reasons for action do not capture the essence of moral obligation. They leave out a necessary component of obligation, namely, the fact that what makes it obligatory for you to demand that I take my foot off yours is that you have the authority to issue such a demand. He explains,

According to me, however, in feeling resentment one sees oneself as having a valid claim not to be so treated and therefore sees others as having an additional, second-personal reason not so to treat one, one that supplements any reason provided by

the badness of any plight resulting from, or in, being so treated. The latter...is an agent-neutral reason that anyone has to prevent or alleviate the plight. The former, as I am arguing, is an agent-relative reason that people have not so to treat others themselves. Its second-personal character derives from the fact that it has to do with a legitimate claim or demand, since it is of the nature of claims and demands that they have addressees and implicitly bid for reciprocal recognition of the authority that legitimates them. Their address comes, as I like to put it, with an RSVP that invites a reciprocating address that realizes mutual respect and reciprocal recognition (hence mutual second-personality). And its agent-relativity is rooted in this second-personal character, since second-personal reasons all concern agents' relations (indeed, their relatings) to one another.¹⁰¹

For Darwall, then, obligation is an irreducibly social or relational concept that is founded on the fact that agents have the standing to make legitimate claims on other agents. Darwall contrasts his view with Korsgaard's understanding of moral normativity, according to which the agent's own rational analysis of the situation is the basis upon which the agent "endorses" certain actions. Darwall says that accepting certain reasons for action is not enough. Second-personal competence is also required. He writes,

To see oneself as under obligation is not just to accept better or conclusive or preemptive reasons, even when such reasons involve a certain characteristic content, for doing one thing rather than another. It is, rather, to see oneself as being subject to authoritative demands and, consequently, responsible or accountable for acting in some way.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Stephen Darwall, "Reply to Korsgaard, Wallace, and Watson," in *Ethics*, vol. 118, no. 1, October 2007, pp. 53-4.

¹⁰² Stephen Darwall, "The Second-Person Standpoint," in *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, vol. XVI 2009, p. 125.

A person who approaches obligation in the manner suggested by Darwall, which Darwall would argue should include everyone who reflects correctly on the nature of obligation, also realizes that she is subject to blame, judgement, punishment, etc., should she fail to fulfill her duty. This, Darwall holds, is what separates moral obligation from other types of “ought”, including non-moral oughts. Elsewhere, he defends what is now a familiar theme – that neither the moral “ought” nor practical reasons are sufficient to bring about obligation.¹⁰³ One can have very good reasons to do something morally right and still not be obligated to do it. Accountability and responsibility are also needed, and we are responsible *to someone*. Darwall notes that such diverse philosophers as Suarez in the late 16th and early 17th century, J. S. Mill and Nietzsche have defended this view. In words that echo what Wolf says about the social component of obligation, Darwall writes,

I think it’s a conceptual truth that what we are morally obligated to do is what we are responsible to the moral community for doing. Exactly *who* is the moral community is itself contestable. Theological voluntarists might believe it is really just God. You and I might believe it is just persons – people who are capable of holding one another morally responsible.¹⁰⁴

So far, Darwall’s argument is consistent with DCT, for it could be the case that the social component of obligation implies that human beings are responsible to God. But his work is a defense of the view that human beings are the ones who hold each other accountable - we are not accountable to God. It is therefore important to look at another pillar of his defense of SCT that I think is crucial to the case he makes and one alluded to

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. [Emphasis in the original.]

two quotes above. But before doing so, it is worth noting that, if Darwall is right about obligation being an irreducibly agent-relative or second-personal notion, this makes AC even more compelling. Moral obligation presupposes the existence of an agent or agents with the authority to issue commands. To continue to use the concept without accounting for its rootedness in agency is incoherent, and if the concept requires a supernatural anchor, modern moral philosophy does indeed need to be revised. Some way of justifying the use of the concept in moral philosophy is needed. Darwall thinks this demand can be met if we realize that the authority behind our moral obligations is simply you and me, not God. He defends this latter claim by saying that moral obligation holds only among equals.

2.4 Darwall: Morality as Equal Accountability

As noted, Darwall argues that obligation requires *equal* accountability. If he is right, then it follows that obligation can (and must?) be accounted for solely on the basis of human society without the need for God. This would mean that AC can be fully answered, and modern moral theorizing does not rest on a mistake. This point is not lost to Darwall. He explicitly registers his intention to respond to AC. He writes,

This will turn Anscombe's famous claims in "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958) on their head. Although I agree with Anscombe that morality is inconceivable without the idea of addressable demands, I maintain that her claim that they require divinely addressed demands ultimately overturns itself in the way I have indicated.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 115, note 45.

Darwall's major point is that the arguments that drive AC, and that seem to necessitate DCT, are themselves built upon assumptions that render DCT unnecessary. As noted before, it will not be possible to examine Darwall's challenging, variegated and widely defended argument in detail in this work. Here I am only interested in isolating the strands of the overall argument that are most relevant to blunting the force of AC. One of those strands is a claim that Darwall attributes to Purfendorf, to wit, "In holding people responsible, we are committed to the assumption that they can hold themselves responsible by self-addressed demands from a perspective that we and they share".¹⁰⁶ That must also be an assumption those who appeal to God make with regard to our relationship with God. In order for God to hold me accountable, it must be the case that I have the relevant second-personal competence to recognize God's authority to do so and to apply it to myself. In other words, I must be "capable of acknowledging God's censure internally," which means I must also be able to hold myself accountable. This is true of any moral agent, and it is the basis upon which obligation arises. Obligations then exist within a community of agents that are capable of holding each other accountable – a community of agents that are second-personal competent. Darwall writes, "It follows that we human beings can enter (individually) into moral community with God only if we have the authority to form a moral community ourselves as mutually accountable free and rational persons: a Kantian 'realm of ends'".¹⁰⁷ But if we have the authority to form a moral community ourselves, why do we need to bring God into the picture? Darwall sees no reason to do so.

In chapter 5 of his "The Second-Person Standpoint", Darwall traces the development of the concept of moral obligation in Western philosophy to early modern

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 112.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 115.

teaching on natural law. He specifically examines the writings of Francisco Suarez and Samuel Pufendorf, both of whom believed that human beings are morally accountable to God. Darwall argues that these “natural lawyers” held to two ideas that could not be fully accounted for by the view that morality is accountability to God. Darwall believes these two ideas lead naturally to his conception of morality as equal accountability. The ideas in question are the following; (1) Accountability is a necessary component of morality – “Moral norms don’t just say what we are required to do, but also what we are answerable for doing.”¹⁰⁸ Morality demands that we account for our conduct, and violating its demands counts against us. (2) “The second idea is that moral norms derive from demands one will has the standing to address to or make on another (free and rational) will and that can arise through, and that are presupposed by, this second-personal relationship.”¹⁰⁹ Darwall concludes,

People can sensibly be held accountable for complying with norms only if they can themselves accept and determine themselves by them (Pufendorf’s Point). But that can be guaranteed to be so only if what makes the demand-warranting norms valid is their issuing from a process that people can, at least in principle, go through in their own reasoning and thereby make the relevant demands of themselves.¹¹⁰

Darwall’s argument seems to solidify the case for SCT. Moral obligation is a subset of agent-relative reasons for action and it assumes, at least in principle, the ability of individuals within a community to hold themselves (and others) responsible to meet their

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 242.

social obligations. In other words, any competent moral agents, *qua* agents, possess everything they need to form a complete moral community without an appeal to God. I will return to Darwall's view in the next chapter.

2.5 Objections to SCT

As already mentioned, there are a lot of similarities between the views advanced by both Wolf and Darwall in defense of SCT. They both agree that a law-like conception of moral obligation is the best way to account for its imperatival force, and, consequently, they both grant that the moral "ought" is different from other types of "ought", including the rational "ought". They both hold that obligations can be accounted for solely from within human society, and they are therefore intent on answering AC without ceding any grounds on the way the concept of obligation is used in modern moral philosophy. I will now examine what I take to be the best objections against the version of SCT defended by both Wolf and Darwall.

As mentioned above, one of the best reasons Wolf gives for limiting moral obligation to human societies is the fact that we seem to be accountable to each other, not to God. She says we would still be accountable to each other in the same way whether or not God exists. Another way Wolf's point could be raised is to ask whether defenders of DCT would suddenly give up their moral convictions if they ceased to believe in God. The answer seems to be no – one does not need to believe in God in order to lead a moral life. All things being equal, belief in God, or lack thereof, does not seem to affect our basic moral intuitions in a significant way.

One could say that belief in God adds the fear of punishment as a motivation to lead a moral life. But as I have already argued, and as Korsgaard, Wolf and Adams also point out, fear of punishment need not be the primary motivation for an adherence to one's moral duties. And since this is a point on which Wolf and I agree, I will address more directly her claim as stated – we seem to be accountable to each other, not to God, and would still be accountable even if God did not exist. As an answer to DCT, I think the response is inadequate. DCT advocates could accuse Wolf of giving an epistemological answer to a metaphysical question. One could grant that we are responsible to each other and still ask why that happens to be the case. It could be the case that God made us in such a way that we would have the ability to recognize the worth of human beings (including ourselves) and to want to honor that worth in ourselves and others. Also, a DCT advocate might dispute the claim that we are responsible only to each other and not to God. As a secularist, Wolf may not have any regard for what God commands, but a DCT advocate is committed to such a view. We would then have competing intuitions at play, resulting in a stalemate.

Wolf also says that actual commands issued by the society are needed to account for the force of moral obligation. Again, she writes, “Social demands and expectations, on the other hand, must be readily accessible – for unless a principle or rule is publicly expressed, and general consensus about it ascertainable, it will not satisfy the conditions of being a social demand or expectation in the first place”.¹¹¹ This seems to be a problematic position to hold for several reasons. Wolf's view could easily fall prey to the criticisms advanced against moral relativism, especially given the fact that she acknowledges that societies get their moral obligations wrong quite regularly. Societal commands presuppose

¹¹¹ Wolf, “Moral Obligations and Social Commands,” p. 359.

the existence of justifiable moral obligations, not the other way around. Wolf does avoid moral relativism, as we will see shortly, but it seems to be the case that she must presuppose the objectivity of obligation to do so.

Also, Wolf's view makes it very hard to account for cases in which no societal injunctions have been issued against certain actions. If obligations just are the (stated) demands of one's society, then it is hard to see how one could be held accountable for demands that one's society is yet to delineate. It seems implausible to say that one needs to know what society has actually commanded in order for one to know that certain acts are wrong. It is true that our societies influence us to a great, and perhaps irreversible, degree but it is doubtful that the influence is deterministic. Moral reformers, as we will see shortly, seem to bear this out. Little children seem to possess a certain level of understanding right and wrong that can perhaps not be attributed to prior training.

It is also true that societies do command actions that are morally abhorrent and they fail to command what is in fact morally praiseworthy. Wolf herself recognizes this point. She writes,

Surely, it might be argued, what moral obligations we have does not depend on the endorsement of society. Some acts, it seems clear, are morally impermissible regardless of what society says. Societies, as we know, have failed to forbid acts we all recognize as morally appalling – like genocide. According to the Social Command Theory, it appears that the members of such societies had no obligation to refrain from participating in genocide. But this seems a *reductio ad absurdum*. Any theory that fails to recognize genocide as morally intolerable has to be wrong.¹¹²

¹¹² Ibid., p. 361.

In answer to this objection, Wolf expresses skepticism over the view that societies have, in their moral codes, stated rules of behavior that condone, for example, genocide. She argues that societies that engage in expressly immoral behavior do so in spite of, not because of, their own moral standards. She gives the example of Christians who have engaged in crusades despite the fact that Christianity itself has clear injunctions against killing. She writes,

When we discuss societies that have engaged in genocide, enslavement, and other moral abominations, we often refer to the fact that the practices in question are condemned by the society's own moral code. (Many such cases occur, for example, in societies that are predominantly Christian, some of them even in the name of Christianity, despite the central roles Christian ethics accords to the commandment against killing, the injunction to love thy neighbor, and the Golden Rule.) Insofar as we regard blame and punishment for these practices to be appropriate, we rely on the thought that the participants in these practices were in a position to know better. They had the basis in their own moral training to recognize that what they were doing was wrong.¹¹³

While I am sympathetic to Wolf's response here, I think it coheres better with the claim that moral obligation is objective, hence not grounded in humanity, than with her view. To correct the mistakes societies make in issuing moral injunctions, Wolf says that those societies ought to have known better. But that is true only if there is a standard that exists independently of the decisions that societies make and to which societal decisions ought to conform, meaning that moral obligations are objective after all.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 363.

Additionally, it is not hard to give examples of times when societies have in fact been mistaken when it comes to what their obligations are. In my own society, female genital mutilation was accepted by virtually everyone until the arrival of western missionaries. Anyone who tried to escape the responsibility to circumcise their daughters was considered to be the immoral one. Societies do have different codes of conduct at times. In any case, to say that societies that issue wrongheaded commands ought to know better is to say that societies are bound by the nature of morality to prescribe only particular behaviors. That, it seems to me, is to grant the view that moral obligation is objective, i.e., not dependent on anything societies might choose to command or prohibit, for whatever reason. And even if we can account for most of our obligations on the basis of what societies command, it seems to be the case that societies often fail to cover the whole scope of obligations. Adams makes this point in this way,

Moral reformers have taught us that there have been situations in which none of the existing human communities demanded as much as they should have, and things that were morally required were not actually demanded by any community, or perhaps by any human individual, in the situation. In this way actual human social requirements fail to cover the whole territory of moral obligation.¹¹⁴

But if obligations are indeed agent-relative, and if societies do fail to cover the whole territory of moral obligation, then it seems to follow that SCT does not fully account for moral obligations. We seem to have obligations, regardless of what society says, and the fact that we have to work hard to determine what they are in some instances seems to

¹¹⁴ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 248.

be only an epistemological issue (a significant one). And epistemological it has to be, otherwise we end up with a radical version of moral relativism, making it logically incoherent to claim any moral improvement.

Charitably, Wolf acknowledges that DCT would fare better in dealing with at least some of these objections. When considering objections against her own view, she raises the following objection without answering it,

Finally, and, I think, most powerfully, there is an objection to the Social Command view that has no parallel in our assessment of Divine Command views: in so far as we admit the sense and content of the idea that society issues commands, we must acknowledge that the commands it issues are frequently mistaken. Some of the acts that societies have taken to be morally obligatory have in fact been morally horrific; and, some acts that we now think are morally obligatory, society has failed in the past, and perhaps still continues to fail, to demand.¹¹⁵

In arguing that moral obligation is second-personal, Darwall agrees with Anscombe's claim that obligation is agent-relative. As he says, he agrees "with Anscombe that morality is inconceivable without the idea of addressable demands".¹¹⁶ It is Darwall's second argument, sketched above, that poses a serious challenge to AC. Is Darwall right to say that human agents possess all that is needed to account for moral obligation? If so, does that fact show that moral obligation can be adequately grounded in humanity?

¹¹⁵ Wolf, "Moral Obligations and Social Commands," pp. 346-7.

¹¹⁶ Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect and Accountability*, p. 115, note 45.

To begin with, I agree with Darwall's claim that moral agents must be able to recognize the authority from which moral obligations originate and to hold themselves (and others) responsible to meet those obligations. However, this does not seem to be an adequate response to AC. Darwall's argument seems to be open to some serious counterexamples. For example, from the mere fact that I have the relevant second-personal competence and I can therefore hold myself accountable, I don't see how it follows that I have the relevant authority to hold others accountable. Without an objective moral lawgiver, how does one move from the conclusion that such and such is the morally correct thing to do to the conclusion that one is obligated or required to do it? Something more needs to be said. For example, I have the ability to acknowledge and appropriate the requirements set forth by my academic institution regarding earning an advanced degree at the university. While I strive to follow those guidelines and hold myself accountable towards meeting them, I don't think that gives me any authority over those who enforce those guidelines. It is true that my counterexample lacks what Darwall calls "reciprocal recognition of authority", but my point is that obligations can hold even in cases where reciprocal recognition of authority is absent, and if this works in the context of academic rules issued by a university, it is hard to see why it would not work in the larger moral context as well. I will say more about this in the next chapter.

Darwall seems to have succeeded only in showing that we have to be morally competent in order for moral obligations to apply to us – a claim that, it seems to me, Anscombe would not dispute. We can still ask what grounds those obligations. It does not seem enough to say that our obligation to others arises from the fact that they have the authority to make demands on us. Moral demands appear to be, in an important sense,

indifferent to what others might demand of us. They are binding, whether or not others have actually issued them to us. As Gary Watson notes, “Darwall needs a distinction between ‘demands’ that remain in force whether or not anyone issues them and demands that do not.” Watson illustrates,

My reason to return your book is that you’ve asked for it back, not that you have the authority to do so. A different account must be given for my reason not to trample on your garden or your foot, though, since you’ve probably never addressed any such demand to me. The wrongness of what I do in this case cannot consist in my violating a demand that you’ve made. Nor can it consist in your possession of the authority to prohibit me from behaving in this way. For if you actually permit me to trample your foot or your garden, then presumably I am not violating any obligation to you, even though you retain the authority to forbid me to do so.¹¹⁷

There are times when consent is a valid reason for certain actions that would be morally abhorrent without it. If I needed to borrow a bicycle from my neighbor and my neighbor happens to be out of town, it would be wrong of me to break into his garage without his permission to retrieve the bicycle. Anyone who sees me breaking into the garage could accuse me of engaging in acts of vandalism and theft, and rightly so. Even if I harbor no intention to keep the bicycle and would promptly return it when I am done with it, the owner (and anyone else) would be justified in being displeased with my action. But suppose I had just talked to my neighbor on his cell phone, he had informed me that he had misplaced the key to his garage and he is fine with me breaking into the garage to get the bicycle. In that case, I would not be guilty of stealing, even though I would be doing the

¹¹⁷ Gary Watson, “Morality as Equal Accountability: Comments on Stephen Darwall’s *The Second-Person Standpoint*,” pp. 39-40.

same thing a thief would do. In this case, it seems to be the case that my neighbor has the authority to grant me the permission to carry out an act that would otherwise be morally unacceptable. But does such authority extend to all moral situations involving my neighbor? It doesn't seem so. Suppose my neighbor were suicidal and he asked me to kill him. I am inclined to think that neither my neighbor nor I have the authority to end his life. There is a feature of moral obligation that transcends the authority possessed by human beings.¹¹⁸

Ronald Dworkin acknowledges the inadequacy of anchoring obligation in humanity. He writes, "People to whom responsibilities are owed can normally release those who are responsible, but we cannot release ourselves from our responsibility to [to do what is right]."¹¹⁹ Again, moral obligation transcends what society can demand of us and so it cannot be fully grounded in humanity. Dworkin's own answer to this problem is to say that we must acknowledge that "We are charged to live well by the bare fact of our existence as self-conscious creatures with lives to lead".¹²⁰ Notice that, according to Dworkin, it is the "bare fact of our existence", rather than the authority others possess to issue demands, that is the source of our obligations. As Evans notes, Dworkin's response does nothing to answer Anscombe's challenge and may even deepen the mystery. To say that we have obligations placed on us by "the bare fact of our existence", period, is hardly

¹¹⁸ It may be objected that even God would not be morally justified in waiving the obligation I have not to kill my friend. God must also honor the feature of obligation in question, so that appealing to God does not offer us any advantage over SCT. But it is worth noting that God may be bound by this feature of obligation for different reasons, for example, due to God's moral perfection, rather than lack of authority. Presumably, if God created us, then he can determine when our lives come to an end without violating any moral laws.

¹¹⁹ Ronald Dworkin, "What Is a Good Life?" (New York Review of Books (LVIII, 2; February 10 2011), p. 42. Quoted by C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligations*, p. 16.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

satisfying especially when the argument is that obligation is a social concept that makes no sense in the absence of a moral lawgiver – either the society or God. If we have obligations from which we cannot extricate ourselves, and if obligations presuppose a lawgiver (or lawgivers), then AC remains unanswered in the accounts of SCT we have examined so far.

In the next chapter, I will consider in more detail the claim that moral obligation is objective, i.e., what is morally obligatory is not ultimately determined by human beings. If this is true, as some DCT advocates maintain, then the arguments advanced by both Wolf and Darwall cannot adequately answer AC. The objectivity of obligation, as I will argue, is the best way to account for claims such as the following, “In other instances, society has failed to acknowledge moral obligations that its members none the less seem to have.”¹²¹

¹²¹ Wolf, “Moral Obligations and Social Commands,” p. 360.

CHAPTER 3: DIVINE COMMAND THEORY (DCT)

As noted earlier, defenders of DCT consider Anscombe's claims about moral obligation to be a form of vindication of their view. They are happy to grant that obligation is indeed a social concept that holds between or among persons. But they also hold that some features of obligation transcend what human societies or individuals can adequately account for, thus making it the case that anyone who holds to the concept of obligation as it is traditionally understood while rejecting God does so on pain of incoherence. The alleged features of obligation that cannot be grounded in humanity, individually or collectively, are said to be divine in origin. In this chapter, I will explore in more detail the case for DCT and the challenges or objections the view needs to answer. Specifically, I will explore the advantages that DCT is thought to have over SCT and other theories of obligation.

DCT advocates are quick to point out that their theory should not be understood to encompass the entire range of moral concepts. A divine command theory, for example, should not be understood to be an attempt to account for "the good" in general. To this end, Evans writes,

It is important to recognize that this account is only an account of moral *obligations* and thus should not be confused with a general "voluntarist" view of ethics, in which all ethical truths are grounded in the divine will. As I will explain later, the

kind of DCT I want to defend not only is consistent with but actually presupposes that there are ethical truths that do not depend on the divine will.¹²²

Evans goes on to point out that different DCT advocates ground the good in different ways. For example, Robert Adams “rests his account of moral obligation on a Platonic theory of the good”, while others, “such as John Hare, while not rejecting Platonic views altogether, presuppose a more Aristotelian view of the good.”¹²³ Both SCT and DCT defenders agree that obligation can, at least conceptually, be distinguished from other moral truths. Just because some act is good or right to do, it does not follow that we are obligated to do it. Here is how Wolf states this point,

There are plenty of matters of considerable moral significance that do not fall within the realm of the morally obligatory: should one use one’s Christmas bonus to buy oneself a vacation or contribute it to famine relief, where it will supply a family with food for three months? Should one set aside four hours of one’s busy week for workouts at the gym or use them volunteering to be a Big Sister for an inner-city teenager? There are also plenty of matters that do fall within the realm of the obligatory that are none the less of minor concern. In ordinary circumstances it is wrong, albeit trivial, to use one’s employer’s business stationery for personal use, or to shoplift a pack of chewing gum from a supermarket.¹²⁴

As we will see later, the contention that DCT is only concerned with obligation and not other moral truths, like the good, is crucial to the theory since the divine commands that are in some way identified with moral obligations are believed to arise from a God

¹²² Stephen C. Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, p. 26.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Susan Wolf, “Moral Obligations and Social Commands,” p. 356.

who is essentially good and whose commands are aimed at the good. If God is not essentially good independently of his commands, then if God were to command evil and our obligations just were the commands God issues, then we would be obligated to do what is evil. No DCT advocate would accept such a *reductio ad absurdum* of her theory of morality: if a moral theory entails that morality is grounded in a being that can command evil, with the result that human beings would be obligated to follow those commands, then so much the worse for the theory. I will look at this issue in more detail when I examine objections to DCT.

3.1 Some Distinctive Features of Obligation

Moral obligation or duty is but one concept among others that form part of what Evans calls a “‘deontic’ family of concepts”.¹²⁵ Others include forbiddenness and permissibility. An action that is morally forbidden is one the agent is not allowed to do. An action that is permissible is one that is not forbidden, and an action that is obligatory is one the agent is required to do. Presumably, all obligatory actions are also permissible.¹²⁶ Note that it is not enough to say that an action that is obligatory is one that an agent is expected to do. Moral obligation is stronger than that. An action that is obligatory is one that the agent is *required* to do – one that the agent must perform. It does not matter what the agent thinks or feels about the action. Here is how Baggett and Walls state this point,

It would be an easy task to explain moral obligations if by “obligations” we simply meant *feelings of obligation*, but the latter are neither necessary nor sufficient for

¹²⁵ Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, p. 3.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

the former. I might have an obligation to ϕ without the slightest feeling I should ϕ ; perhaps I have neglected a particular duty for so long that I have ceased to feel it to be one. Conversely, I can have the feeling I should ϕ yet have no obligation to ϕ at all. Consider the punctilious moralist saddled with an overactive superego who feels guilty even for minor infractions of etiquette.¹²⁷

As noted earlier, moral obligation is also to be distinguished from other types of obligation. Perhaps the most common form of obligation that at times differs from moral obligation is legal obligation. Whenever I operate a vehicle in the United States, I have the legal obligation to stay on the right side of the road. However, the rule does not apply when I am driving in Kenya – I am obligated to drive on the left side while in Kenya. The decision to drive on either the right or the left side of the road is an arbitrary one (though it is made to avoid consequences with moral implications). One government is not morally superior to another just because it has made it obligatory for its citizens to drive on one side of the road rather than the other. Thus, though the law that instructs me to drive on a particular side of the road constitutes a binding obligation on me – even though it would be wrong in a different country – the specific obligation to drive on one side of the road rather than the other is only a legal one, not a moral one. It is a contingent law, not one that is binding on all human beings wherever they happen to live.

Other obligations that are equally binding but not necessarily moral ones include following the rules of any clubs that I choose to join and various rules of etiquette that prevail in the various societies of which I am a member. All these situations impose certain

¹²⁷ Baggett, David and Jerry Walls, *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning* (Kindle Locations 2879-2884). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition. [Emphasis in the original]

obligations on me, but those obligations could be different (and many times are actually so) in different places. By contrast, all things being equal, moral obligations are binding on all human beings at all times and in all places, whether or not particular human beings are aware of these obligations. Murder, for example, would be morally unjustified even if one's society approved of it.

Thus, though moral obligations function in a manner similar to other types of obligation, they are also sufficiently distinct to be clearly distinguishable from them. As a matter of fact, other types of obligation are expected to conform to morality, so I would argue that moral obligation has a logical priority over the other types of obligation that is nonnegotiable. Philippa Foot and Richard Joyce argue that rules of etiquette are also binding, but they are not willing to place them at the same level as moral rules. Joyce argues that moral obligation has an additional feature other than its binding character. He identifies this additional feature as authority. Because moral obligation has authority, this “gives us a normative system enjoying both features (inescapability and authority)”.¹²⁸

Another important point to note about obligations is that they cannot be adequately grounded on the principle of harm – that what we are obligated to refrain from doing is what harms another person or persons. Sinnott-Armstrong defends what he calls “secular harm-based morality”¹²⁹ to account for moral obligation. The reason we are obligated to perform our moral duties is because we should refrain from causing unnecessary harm to others and to ourselves. He writes,

¹²⁸ Quoted in Baggett, David. *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning* (Kindle Locations 2920-2922). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

¹²⁹ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality Without God?* P. 65.

Why is it morally wrong to kill other people? Because it harms them by depriving them of life. Why is it morally wrong to hit, kick, stab, or shoot other people? Because it harms them by causing pain. Why is it morally wrong to kidnap children? Because it harms them by terrifying them and taking away their freedom to go where they want. Why is it morally wrong to blind people? Because it harms them by taking away their ability to see.¹³⁰

Sinnott-Armstrong goes on to ask many other such questions, and the answer is always the same – morally wrong actions cause harm to others and we should therefore avoid them. One question he doesn't list here, but addresses briefly later is, "Why is it morally wrong to cause harm to self or to others?" Sinnott-Armstrong's answer is that it is irrational to cause harm that brings no benefit.¹³¹ Apart from the fact that one could argue that causing harm may bring benefit to the perpetrator (though not to the victim), Sinnott-Armstrong's answer implies that the ultimate justification for his view is not the principle of harm but the equivalence between the rational and the moral, a view we already saw has problems of its own.

Wielenberg appeals to this principle to account for the wrongness of rape and why we have the moral obligation to refrain from it. He writes,

As I suggested in chapter one, to have an obligation just is to have decisive reasons to perform a certain action. Thus, whatever features of a given act make it obligatory also provide decisive normative reasons to perform it. For example, God

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 60.

or no God, rape harms its victims in terrible ways and this aspect of rape is a powerful reason to refrain from rape.¹³²

As we have already seen, having decisive reasons to do something, or to refrain from doing it, is not sufficient to account for the imperative force of moral obligation. To repeat, one can have decisive reasons to do something and not be obligated to do it. The claim that the fact that certain actions harm their victims is a decisive reason not to do those actions can admit of exceptions. For example, firing an employee who desperately needs the job and may not get another one soon could harm the employee, but it is not clear that it is always wrong. Moreover, not all moral obligations can be thus accounted for in the manner Sinnott-Armstrong and Wielenberg suggest. I would argue that moral obligations obtain even when there is no person who can possibly be harmed by our actions and indeed when there is much to be gained from such actions. Suppose I discover an essay on why AC is a serious challenge to modern moral philosophy. It is a brilliant argument that no one else has advanced. I further realize that the argument was crafted by an obscure scholar in the sixteenth century. The scholar never published the essay, and she in fact never published anything. Her name is not referenced anywhere in print, and nobody alive knows she even existed. An idea occurs to me – why do I need to let anyone else know where I got that argument? No one is being harmed – the writer is certainly not harmed by my action and I am presumably not harmed either since I stand to benefit greatly from this action and I suffer no feelings of guilt or remorse. Why can't I just recast the argument in

¹³² Erik J. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*, p. 57.

my own words and pass it up as my own? Going by the principle of harm alone, I see no way out of such thinking.

There is a fascinating passage in a collection of letters between Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy in which Arendt responds to this type of an argument by appealing to the Socratic dictum that one ought to do what is right in order for one to be able to live with oneself. While reflecting on a question raised by Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as to why he should not murder his grandmother if he wanted to, McCarthy wrote to Arendt to get her opinion in light of the former's work in this area. When Arendt responded by offering the Socratic moral position that one would not want to spend one's entire life with a murderer, McCarthy responded, "The modern person I posit would say to Socrates, with a shrug, 'Why not? What's wrong with a murderer?' And Socrates would be back where he started."¹³³ A person with a hardened conscience could respond the same way in the case of the plagiarized essay. But morality demands that I give credit to this obscure thinker, even though neither she, nor anyone else, would be harmed if I chose to do the opposite.¹³⁴ So, moral obligations hold even when no other human being can be harmed by our actions – in this case they hold, not because someone would get harmed, but because it is morally obligatory to eschew falsehood.

We are now in a position to summarize the distinctive features of obligation that DCT advocates believe can best be explained by an appeal to God. Building on

¹³³ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), p. 177.

¹³⁴ In the quote above, Wielenberg is, of course, not claiming that the principle of harm is the only normative reason one can have not to do certain things. He might argue, for example, that there are other decisive normative reasons to avoid plagiarism, even when no one would be harmed in the process. But that would be to concede the point: the principle of harm is not sufficient to account for moral obligation and it may even be unnecessary in some cases.

Anscombe's reflections, C. Stephen Evans identifies several features of moral obligation, one of which, he claims, distinguishes it from other types of obligation. He points out that (1) moral obligations, especially in the case of what Kant referred to as "perfect duties", have a binary character to them – it is the case that "either I am obligated to perform an act or I am not obligated to perform an act". (2) Evans also notes that moral obligation "has the function of bringing reflection to closure". Once I decide that I am obligated to perform a certain act (or refrain from performing it), no further reflection on the matter is needed. Further reflection could, in fact, be a sign of moral weakness. The only time such reflection may be appropriate and may indeed lead to a change of mind on whether to perform the action is in the case of conflicting, *prima facie* obligations. Only another, more pressing moral obligation can override a duty that I have. (3) Moral obligations also "involve accountability or responsibility." I am held responsible for failure to perform an act I ought to perform (and vice versa). (4) The fourth characteristic of moral obligations that Evans says distinguishes moral obligation from other types of obligations is the fact that "moral obligations hold for persons simply as persons".¹³⁵ The country one is a citizen of, or the family one comes from, etc., do not matter when it comes to moral obligations. Moral agents, *qua* moral agents, have certain moral obligations that are binding on them.

Bagget and Walls, quoting Scott M. James, offer a description of other conceptual truths regarding moral obligation. They write,

¹³⁵ Evans, *God and Obligation*, pp. 13-14. As mentioned before, part of my interest is to clarify what it is about human beings that gives them such uniquely binding ties with morality. DCT advocates answer this question by saying that human beings have unique moral worth because they are a special creation of God – they are different from animals, not just in degree but also in kind.

(1) Moral creatures understand prohibitions. (2) Moral prohibitions do not appear to depend on our desires, nor (3) do they appear to depend on human conventions, like the law. Instead, they appear to be objective, not subjective. (4) Moral judgments are tightly linked to motivation: sincerely judging that some act is wrong appears to entail at least some desire to *refrain from* performing that act. (5) Moral judgments imply notions of desert: doing what you know to be morally prohibited implies that punishment would be justified. (6) Moral creatures, such as ourselves, experience a distinctive affective response to our own wrongdoing, and this response often prompts us to make amends for the wrongdoing.¹³⁶

Some of the features of obligation identified by both Evans and James seem to be related in important ways. For example, Evans notes that obligation implies accountability, and James says obligation involves the notion of desert and that it invokes an affective response from agents and the desire to make amends for any wrong done. To say that obligation involves the notion of desert and that it invokes affective responses is closely linked to accountability. Also, Evans notes that obligation holds for all moral agents – every morally competent human being has certain moral obligations just by virtue of being human. James notes that obligation is independent of our desires (and I would add will) or human convention. Both claims – that obligation holds for persons as persons and it is independent of human desires, will or convention – raise a couple of issues that are central to any robust account of moral obligation. First, they point to the fact that moral obligation is objective and not subjective – human beings discover it; they do not invent or create it, either individually or collectively. It holds true, whether or not they know about it or acknowledge it. James adds an epistemological dimension to obligation when he says that

¹³⁶ Baggett, David. *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning* (Kindle Locations 2891-2894). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

obligations are understandable. Human beings are the sort of creatures that can apprehend and appropriate this objective realm of morality that is independent of the sum total of their physical makeup.¹³⁷ Second, the two claims – that obligation holds for all people and is independent of any human effort or acknowledgement – also imply that there is something about human beings that makes them morally valuable and that connects them to this objective realm of morality in a nonnegotiable way. Further, James says that obligation is linked to motivation. This appears to be similar to Evans' claim that obligation brings reflection to closure; once one realizes that such and such is the right thing to do, then one is thereby obligated to do it. Recall Evans' summary,

To say that I have a moral obligation to ϕ is not simply to say that I have a reason to ϕ , or even to say that I have a decisive reason to ϕ ... To say that I have a moral obligation to ϕ is to say that I must ϕ , and it is to say that there is someone who has the right to expect me to ϕ , and who may rightly be disappointed in me and blame me if I fail to ϕ .¹³⁸

To be under obligation is not merely to have good or even decisive and overriding reasons for action. It is not merely to recognize that a certain course of action is prudential, desirable or even right. All these are important aspects of obligation, though they may not all obtain in every instance in which we are faced with a moral obligation. But without

¹³⁷ The question of exactly *how* this happens is beyond the scope of this project. But it could be argued that we apprehend the laws of morality in the same way that we apprehend the laws of logic, mathematics and metaphysics. I do not need to follow a describable process to reach the conclusion that $1+1=2$, or to draw a certain conclusion given simple, straightforward premises. I automatically and inexorably “see” the conclusion. Something similar happens when I encounter injustice, for example. I just “see” it.

¹³⁸ C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, pp. 26-7.

authoritative commands, we are not yet at the level of obligation. As we have seen, Wolf and Darwall have argued that obligation is a social concept, with Darwall emphasizing that it is irreducibly second-personal. We have obligations precisely because others have the right to demand that we refrain from doing certain things. It is that right that makes obligation possible. If Wolf and Darwall are right, then obligation is necessarily a social concept and, like other laws, e.g., legal statutes, the moral imperative requires a lawgiver. Of course, for Darwall and Wolf the lawgiver is the human person and her society. For DCT advocates, God is the appropriate, ultimate lawgiver.

The features of obligation we've just considered seem to have provided the motivation for Anscombe's charge against the concept of obligation in modern moral philosophy. Both SCT and DCT defenders agree that obligation is a social concept that requires authoritative commands to back it up. They also agree that obligation holds true for all persons *qua* persons. In chapter one, I summarized these two ideas by saying that obligation is both agent-relative and objective. It is agent-relative because it is social, and it is objective because its truth status is not affected by anything human beings might feel, think, do, etc. For AC to be successful against SCT, it must be shown that the features of obligation delineated above are more at home in DCT than in SCT – that it is impossible for SCT to account fully for the agent-dependence and objectivity of moral obligations. But before answering that question, it is instructive to take another look at the way in which SCT responds to AC.

3.2 SCT as an Answer to AC

In chapter 1, I pointed out that for AC to be successful, it needs to be shown both that a lawgiving agent is necessary to make sense of the concept of obligation and that human beings, individually or collectively, do not fully suffice as the appropriate lawgiving agents. As we have seen, SCT advocates make a strong case for the necessity of a lawgiving agent in morality but balk at the claim that human beings alone cannot fit that bill. They insist that the agents behind moral obligation are indeed human beings themselves. DCT advocates also hold that obligations require agency and they insist that obligations are best understood as God's commands. It is instructive to revisit briefly the tension between these two positions before looking at the positive case for DCT and objections against the view.

J. L. Mackie echoes Anscombe's critique of modern moral philosophy when he insists that European philosophical conceptions of obligation can be traced to Christianity (and, I would add, Judaism). He writes,

Another way of explaining the objectification of moral values is to say that ethics is a system of law from which the legislator has been removed. This might have been derived either from the positive law of a state or from a supposed system of divine law. There can be no doubt that some features of modern European moral concepts are traceable to the theological ethics of Christianity. The stress on quasi-imperative notions, on what ought to be done or on what is wrong in a sense that is close to that of 'forbidden', are surely relics of divine commands. Admittedly, the central ethical concepts for Plato and Aristotle also are in a broad sense prescriptive or intrinsically action-guiding, but in concentrating rather on 'good' than on 'ought'

they show that their moral thought is an objectification of the desired and the satisfying rather than of the commanded.¹³⁹

Mackie makes several claims here that are directly relevant to AC and which actually render it significant support. But before looking at these claims, I would like to offer a caveat here regarding what Mackie means when he writes about the objectivity of morality. In his understanding of the objectivity of morality, Mackie seems to be willing to allow the laws of a state that status. It is not clear where the laws of such a state would come from, according to Mackie. If he means that the state makes them up, i.e., they are grounded in society, then he and I would be using the concept of “objectivity” differently. When I say, for example, that moral obligation is objective, I mean to say that it is independent of anything human beings could do to bring it about – it is there whether or not human beings are aware of it. I would prefer to use the term “universal” to talk about laws a society has come to agree upon.¹⁴⁰ Presumably, it is possible for all the nations of the world to agree to drive on the right side of the road. In such a case, driving on the right side of the road would be universal, but not objective in the sense I am using the term. But it is very possible that Mackie means the same thing I do since he imagines a situation where a (human) legislator has been removed – he must mean human since, in the next sentence, he allows for divine laws to operate in such an “objective” realm (and thus allows

¹³⁹ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 45. Mackie, of course, writes all this to denounce it since he does not believe obligation, much less morality, exists – hence the subtitle of this very book.

¹⁴⁰ Though this does not mean that a society cannot come to an agreement regarding a moral law that is objective in the sense I’m using the term. This is, in fact, how I believe morality works. Most societies will endorse objective moral laws – for example, that murder is wrong. But when I say a law is universal rather than objective, I’m setting aside my use of objectivity for the sake of the argument.

for a divine legislator in an objective moral scenario). Arguably, obligation is objective even from God's perspective if it is indeed fixed by God's perfectly good and immutable nature.

Regardless of how Mackie meant to use the concept of objectivity in this quote, he does believe, like Anscombe, that the concept of obligation in Western philosophy is a relic of Europe's Judeo-Christian heritage that is directly linked to divine commands. Also, like Anscombe, he holds that the prescriptive nature of the ethical concepts used by Plato and Aristotle are action-guiding in a way that eschews "the commanded" in favor of "the desired" or "the satisfying". The emphasis for Plato and Aristotle is more on "good" rather than on "ought". That is exactly the case that Anscombe was at pains to make. Interestingly, Anscombe urges her contemporary philosophers to jettison the concept of obligation because they have rejected God while Mackie rejects the concept because he does not think it points to anything that exists. Either way, AC remains a challenge to anyone who wants to continue to speak about obligations as traditionally understood.

This is where SCT comes in. As we have seen, SCT advocates, such as Wolf and Darwall, hold that obligation can be grounded in society. In my opinion, SCT, if successful, is the best answer to AC since it allows modern moral philosophy to retain its use of the concept of obligation without contradiction. It is the only way in which modern moral philosophy can keep alive the concept of obligation because it accounts for agency in obligation, which is what sparked Anscombe's complaint. For if obligation can be grounded in society, then of course AC fails and moral philosophers can continue to use the concept without any fear of incoherence. And if a DCT advocate accepts the key tenets of the social command view, it would seem that she thereby weakens the case she has for

DCT. For if it is true that social situations automatically give rise to obligation, then there seems to be some hope that all other obligations can be accounted for in the same way. The person who holds the view that moral obligations arise naturally from social situations, it seems, would not feel the force of AC. In other words, SCT needs to be answered well in light of statements such as the following one from Evans:

Someone who accepts a social theory of obligation [like both Evans and Adams] is committed to the claim that there are social institutions that directly give rise to normative claims. There are normative claims about parenting that arise from the institution of parenting, and do not depend on volitions of particular individuals. Someone who understands what it is to be a parent also understands that certain things are required of parents.¹⁴¹

If it is true that our obligations arise naturally from our social roles, then why do Evans, Adams and others feel the need to defend DCT? This question acquires greater urgency when we consider Darwall's claim that obligation must hold among equals. To review briefly what we saw in chapter 2, Darwall's thesis about obligation is built around the claim that "...being subject to moral obligations includes accountability to those with the normative standing to demand compliance."¹⁴² Traditionally, it was God who was assumed to have the normative standing requisite to demand compliance, hence the popularity of DCT in centuries past. Darwall argues that the literature that developed DCT also planted the seeds for the view he defends, i.e., his claim that moral obligation should not be conceived of as accountability to God but as accountability among humans.

¹⁴¹ Evans, p. 27.

¹⁴² Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*, p. 100.

According to Darwall, “voluntarist natural lawyers” (i.e., DCT advocates), such as Suarez, Purfendorf and Locke held two ideas that are crucial to his thesis.¹⁴³ First, they held that morality does not just tell us what we are required to do “but also what we are answerable for doing”. Secondly, they insisted that “moral norms derive from demands one will has the standing to address to or make on another (free and rational) will and that moral obligation would not exist but for the possibility of reasons that can arise through, and that are presupposed by, this second-personal relationship.”¹⁴⁴ Here is how Darwall summarizes his thesis,

Morality as equal accountability is the conception I defend in this book. According to this conception, moral norms regulate a community of equal, mutually accountable, free and rational agents as such, and moral obligations are the demands such agents have standing to address to one another and with which they are mutually accountable for complying. In Kantian terms, norms of moral obligation are “laws” for a “kingdom of ends,” which structure and define the equal dignity of persons as beings who may not be treated in some ways and must be in others and who have equal standing to demand this second-personally of one another.¹⁴⁵

Darwall seems to have put into place a pillar that completes the SCT edifice in a magnificent way, though, as we will see later, his view fails to answer AC in a satisfactory way. By insisting that obligation is second-personal, i.e., agent-relative, he agrees with DCT (and other SCT advocates) that obligation is akin to a command that requires a commander. But by insisting that it must hold among equals, he not only grounds it in

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 101. [Emphasis his]

humanity, he also rules God out as its source. When we add the claim that social institutions naturally give rise to moral obligations, we seem to have an airtight response to AC. In the next section, I will examine why DCT defenders still think their theory is superior to SCT.

3.3 Advantages of DCT over SCT

We are now in a position to examine the reasons given for the alleged superiority of DCT over SCT. Since DCT and SCT advocates all agree that obligation is agent-relative (and not merely driven by agent-neutral outcomes of actions), I will not spend much time making the case for the role of agency in DCT. The case DCT advocates make for the agent-centeredness of moral obligation is similar to what we have seen already. I would instead like to focus more explicitly on two themes that I have alluded to which I believe are central to any theory of obligation and which seem to be better accounted for by DCT. These two themes are the alleged agent-centered objectivity of obligation and the nature of the human being as a moral agent. But before looking at these two themes in greater detail, it is important that I revisit my response to Darwall's claim that obligation must hold among equals.

If Darwall is right that obligation must hold among equals, then God has no role in it and human societies can fully account for obligation. But as we saw in chapter 2, this is a controversial claim. I agree that others have the right to demand that I treat them in a particular way, but I would argue that their right to make such a demand on me is logically prior to their appropriation, let alone articulation, of it. It may help to raise this point in the form of a question. Do human beings have value and dignity because they recognize value and dignity in each other or do they recognize value and dignity in each other because they

already possess them? DCT advocates would argue that it is the latter – human beings are already the kinds of entities that possess dignity and worth. This seems to be correct, and it seems Darwall would also agree.

That human beings have dignity and worth, when morally understood, seems to be something we discover. Take, for instance, societies where certain practices are accepted by everyone within those societies. There have been times when certain groups of people have been convinced that they are inferior to others and they have learned to accept their “inferior” state, all the way to slavery. I would argue that there is a fact of the matter as to what the correct obligations are even for such a society. A society that convinces some of its members that they are inferior is contravening the laws of morality and hence failing at its moral obligations. It is hard to avoid the objectivity of obligation in light of the fact that human beings get it wrong so often. Obligations remain in force regardless of the decisions societies might make. If this is true, then it seems equally true that the right or authority Darwall says humans possess to make demands on others is objective. It is true that humans have equal rights and authority to make those demands on each other, but we can still ask where these rights and authority come from.

Gary Watson chides Darwall for not explaining how moral demands can remain in force even when no human being has issued them – if obligations just are the demands human beings have a right to make on each other. He writes,

It seems that Darwall’s explanation of the distinction between these importantly different kinds of moral requirements and corresponding second-personal reasons—those that arise from actual prohibitions and demands and those that do not—appeals to certain implicit understandings and hypothetical conditions. But as

far as I can tell, it is never well worked out. I merely note that without an account of how requirements can exist without an exercise of someone's authority, Darwall's answer to Anscombe's objection (that we can't have laws without a lawgiver) remains obscure.¹⁴⁶

For a DCT defender, moral requirements remain in place even when no human being has issued them because they are grounded in God. We are therefore back to our two themes: objectivity of agent-centered obligation and the nature of the human being as a moral agent. Even in Darwall's own theory of obligation – obligation as equal accountability – he assumes that human beings have equal worth and dignity and they must be treated in certain ways. He writes, "In Kantian terms, norms of moral obligation are 'laws' for a 'kingdom of ends,' which structure and define the equal dignity of persons as beings who may not be treated in some ways and must be in others and who have equal standing to demand this second-personally of one another".¹⁴⁷ Again, I would argue that we need an argument for the claim that all human beings have equal dignity. A normative declaration that human beings ought to be treated in such and such a manner does not answer the question why that should be the case. The claim is not honored in all societies, and societies have in fact treated certain of their members as inferior. I would argue that societies do not confer this equality in dignity and moral rights on the members; the members already possess them just by virtue of being human. It is the challenge of every moral theory to account for this fact. We will return to this issue in the concluding chapter.

¹⁴⁶ Gary Watson, "Morality as Equal Accountability: Comments on Darwall's *The Second Person Standpoint*," p. 40.

¹⁴⁷ Darwall, *Second-Personal Standpoint*, p. 101. [Emphasis his]

Let us now see why DCT advocates believe they have a better way to account for obligation.

3.4 DCT on the Objectivity of Obligation

We have already seen that both DCT and SCT advocates hold that obligation is agent relative. If obligation is also objective – if it remains in force regardless of what societies might choose to do – then by logical necessity, the agent cannot be human beings. This implies that DCT may be better suited to account for it.

A helpful way to flesh out once again the nature of objectivity I have in mind and why it is thought to point to God is to note briefly a distinction Christine Korsgaard makes between what she calls “substantive moral realism” and “procedural moral realism”.¹⁴⁸ The latter is the view Korsgaard defends. According to substantive moral realism, there are intrinsic normative moral facts that are supposed to be the objects of our moral theorizing. Those moral truths or facts are real and they exist independently of what our own value system might be. It is our duty to conform our thinking about morality to those facts. For reasons we will see shortly, Korsgaard believes that substantive moral realism is untenable. She defends procedural moral realism which holds that it is the procedure of our practical reasoning that gives rise to our normative moral principles. John Hare captures the difference between these two positions in this catchy line, “So we are supposed to have to

¹⁴⁸ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 35. Responding to Korsgaard’s view of moral normativity in full goes well beyond the scope of this project. Here, I am only interested in her understanding of objectivity in order to highlight the way I am using the concept.

choose between the view that moral value is like a hedgehog, something outside us that we discover, or like a hedge, something we create”.¹⁴⁹

To illustrate what Korsgaard means by procedural moral realism, she appeals to Kant’s example of how hypothetical imperatives work. Just as Kant held that if we will an end we thereby acquire a reason to will the means to that end, it can be shown that our practical reason sets our will on a course towards the end, giving us a procedure we must follow. She writes,

To will an end, rather than just wishing for it or wanting it, is to set yourself to be its cause. And to set yourself to be its cause is to set yourself to take the available means to get it. So the argument goes from the nature of the rational will to a principle which describes a procedure according to which such a will must operate and from there to an application of that principle which yields a conclusion about what one has reason to do.¹⁵⁰

Korsgaard goes on to say that Kant held a similar view regarding moral principles. It is through our will that we engage in the process of practical reasoning that in turn yields our normative duties. “There are then facts, moral truths, about what we ought to do, but that is not because the actions are intrinsically normative. They inherit their normativity from principles which spring from the nature of the will – the principles of practical reasoning.” Korsgaard helpfully concludes,

¹⁴⁹ John E. Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 177.

¹⁵⁰ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 36.

The procedural moral realist thinks that there are answers to moral questions because there are correct procedures for arriving at them. But the substantive moral realist thinks that there are correct procedures for answering moral questions because there are moral truths or facts which exist independently of those procedures, and which those procedures track.¹⁵¹

According to Korsgaard, the substantive moral realist conceives of ethics as a *bona fide* field of knowledge that is concerned with a real body of information that is a part of the way the world really is. That part of the world includes what we take moral normativity to be.

The reasons for which Korsgaard rejects substantive moral realism have a direct bearing on AC. She argues that the “Modern Scientific World View” has taught us that we can no longer accept the existence of intrinsically normative entities that cannot be harmonized with it. Such entities, Korsgaard continues, are too disconnected from what naturally motivates us to be of use to us. She quotes Mackie, approvingly,

If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else ... Plato’s Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be. The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something’s being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built into it.¹⁵²

Mackie finds such a scenario as an extant reality too fantastic. It is out of line with modern scientific thinking, and Korsgaard rejects it as well for the same reason. But DCT advocates, and Anscombe, hold that this is exactly how modern moral philosophy assumes morality works: obligation is taken to be both objective and agent-relative, i.e., there is assumed to be an objective system of value, complete with binding obligations, to which all human beings are subservient. Moreover, human beings are the sorts of entities that are intuitively aware of this moral realm that is objectively independent of them and they have the ability not only to recognize their moral worth and intrinsic value but to apply them to themselves and to each other.

If we assume that human beings were created by a loving God who cares about them, as Christianity does, then such a moral scenario would fit perfectly in our moral discourse. A God who cares about his creation would create them in such a way that they come to apprehend this objective moral realm and apply it to themselves. Such moral facts would fit Mackie's criteria for objective moral values quite well: they would be utterly different from anything else in the physical universe, we would apprehend them differently than we apprehend the physical universe, which would seem to require a special moral faculty, and they would be directly motivating. It's no wonder that, elsewhere, Mackie, concludes,

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 37.

...we might as well argue...that objective intrinsically prescriptive [moral] features, supervening upon natural ones, constitute so odd a cluster of properties and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the course of events without an all-powerful god to create them. If, then, there are such intrinsically prescriptive objective values, they make the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them.¹⁵³

In other words, by allowing God in the picture, DCT removes the mystery from the objectivity of agent-centered morality and preserves modern moral philosophy's use of the concept. On DCT, morality, as modern moral philosophy understands it, makes sense. Without God in the picture, there are certain assumptions philosophers make that are unjustifiable, hence Anscombe's complaint.

But this does not mean that human beings must acknowledge the existence of God to recognize and apply morality, including moral obligations, to themselves. Robert Audi distinguishes between the semantic and the ontological views of moral terms and argues that DCT is not committed to the former. If, for example, the concept of moral obligation was understood to be semantically equivalent to whatever commands God has issued, then it would follow that no person who has no concept of God would endorse moral obligations. Also, anyone who rejects the existence of God would *ipso facto* have to reject the notion that moral acts are obligatory. But, argues Audi, one does not have to acknowledge God in order to *know* that morality is obligatory, and denying the semantic equivalence of divine commands and our recognition of the obligatory nature of morality does not undermine DCT at all. Audi writes,

¹⁵³ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), p. 115-6.

On the ontic view, however, the *concept* of the obligatory, like other moral concepts, need not be theological. One implication of this is that although an obligatory act could not fail to be divinely commanded at least implicitly, one could still *know* that an act is obligatory without knowing that it is so commanded. Identifying moral with theological properties does not automatically foreclose the number or variety of cognitive handles by which we can grasp moral properties. Just as one can know one is reading the author of *King Lear* without knowing one is reading the author of *The Winter's Tale*, or (to take a closer analogy) know one is drawing a circle without knowing one is drawing a plane figure whose circumference equals its diameter times pi, one can know that an act is obligatory without knowing that it is divinely commanded.¹⁵⁴

The second reason Korsgaard rejects substantive moral realism is due to what she sees as its inability to account for the motivation moral normativity is supposed to have. When a person finds himself unmotivated by his duty and wonders what motive he should have for doing it, it doesn't do any good to tell him that "the fact that it is his duty just is the motive." He is aware of that fact, and that fact fails to motivate him right now. "In a similar way, if someone falls into doubt about whether obligations really exist, it doesn't help to say 'ah, but indeed they do. They are real things'".¹⁵⁵ In other words, according to Korsgaard, to say that normative moral principles are real, or they really exist, is merely redundant and does not explain why morality is normative.

An illustration might help explain what I think Korsgaard is driving at. Suppose Ben, a young teenager, wakes up before anyone else in his home. He looks out the window and realizes that the pile of firewood his dad had neatly arranged a few days before has

¹⁵⁴ Robert Audi, "Divine Command Morality and the Autonomy of Ethics" in *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 24, no. 2, April 2007, p. 122.

¹⁵⁵ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 38.

tipped over and the firewood is scattered all over the ground. He decides to go out and rearrange all the firewood. When he's done, he realizes that the grass needs to be cut. He goes to the shed, gets the lawnmower and mows the entire lawn. He comes back to the house in time for breakfast. As the family takes their places around the table, Ben sees a note on the table from his dad instructing him to rearrange the firewood and cut the grass. What is the source of Ben's "moral normativity"? How do we account for the source of his obligation to carry out these two tasks? The procedural moral realist has a ready answer – Ben's reflective endorsement is the source of both his motivation and sense of obligation. His dad's note played no role at all. Forced to choose between Hare's hedge and hedgehog mentioned above, we are clearly dealing with a hedge here.

The points that Korsgaard makes are indispensable for any proper account of morality. If obligations are entirely disconnected from us as moral agents, it is difficult to see how they can motivate us to do anything. But whenever we reflect on our identity and work towards conforming ourselves to it, we have a grip on ourselves and we have reasons to live and act. Here is the relevant passage from Korsgaard.

If this is right, our identity as moral beings – as people who value themselves as human beings – stands behind our more particular practical identities. It is because we are human that we must act in the light of practical conceptions of our identity, and this means that their importance is partly derived from the importance of being human. We must conform to them not merely for the reasons that caused us to adopt them in the first place, but because being human requires it. You may give up one of your contingent practical roles. But so long as you remain committed to a role, and yet fail to meet the obligations it generates, you fail yourself as a human being, as well as failing in that role. And if you fail in all of your roles – if you live at

random, without integrity or principle, then you will lose your grip on yourself as one who has any reason to live and to act at all.¹⁵⁶

Korsgaard is surely right to emphasize the role of the agent *qua* agent in the deliberation process. However, this is a point that DCT defenders already take to be a key pillar of their theory. For example, John E. Hare, a DCT advocate, writes in response to Korsgaard,

We do not need...to restrict ourselves to these two choices, to see moral value either as hedgehog or as hedge. I have developed elsewhere a view I call “prescriptive realism” that, I claim, preserves the merits of moral realism and moral expressivism without the pitfalls of either...To make a full-blooded moral judgement is to feel attraction to what we understand the moral law to command and repulsion from what we understand it to forbid, and to endorse with our will this feeling of attraction or constraint. There are ingredients here of cognition, emotional response, and volition. All three of them can be found separated in Kant’s complex account of respect in the second *Critique*. The point is that Korsgaard’s use of one of these features, the first-person procedure of endorsing, does not show that there is no place for the other two.¹⁵⁷

In other words, DCT advocates do not think of obligation only in terms of an external influence in the name of a divine law. They see themselves as active participants in the moral order – they have to take on morality as their own, and they also recognize the value of growing in character. The value of character development in DCT is a point I emphasized in chapter 2. While Korsgaard emphasizes the agent’s role in morality, DCT

¹⁵⁶ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 121.

¹⁵⁷ John E. Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History*, p. 178-9.

advocates point out that both the agent's active participation in morality and the external standard are important. In the case of Ben, the teenager, it would be hoped that his dad would have been training him to become a reflective individual who endorses his moral choices voluntarily. But this assumes that there is also a fact of the matter as to the person Ben is supposed to become and what moral choices he should make. If Ben were to act strictly in accordance with his current identity, he would rather pick up his skateboard and head out in search of his buddies. Rearranging the firewood and cutting grass without express instruction and perhaps supervision are characteristics of an identity he must work hard to attain – not one he currently possesses. As we will see later, the type of entity a human being is and the objective standard of right and wrong we are supposed to conform to are foundational ideas to any moral theory.

It is actually Korsgaard who has a difficult time doing away with the external standard in her bid to promote the reflective process. In the quote above, she encourages us to act in accordance with our practical identity. G. A. Cohen presents Korsgaard with a dilemma that her view needs to resolve. The difficulty lies in how our identity is to be chosen. Cohen asks us to imagine an idealized Mafioso. He does not believe in being good to others, telling the truth, keeping promises, etc. “And when he has to do some hideous thing that goes against his inclinations, and he is tempted to fly, he steels himself and we can say of him as much as of us, with the same exaggeration or lack of it, that he steels himself on pain of risking a loss of identity”¹⁵⁸. So, does the Mafioso really have the obligation to live up to his identity even when his inclinations lead him away from that identity (and into what we could consider to be his correct identity)?

¹⁵⁸ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 183.

While Korsgaard is willing to say that the Mafioso indeed does have the obligation to live up to his identity, “because it is the endorsement, not the explanations and arguments that provide the material for the endorsement, that does the normative work”,¹⁵⁹ she nevertheless wants to say that the Mafioso should keep reflecting until he arrives at morality. “His obligation to be a good person is therefore deeper than his obligation to stick to his code.” I would agree with that, but this seems to point to the fact that there is indeed a standard that we are supposed to be aiming at in our moral deliberation. And even more importantly, we have the obligation to work towards this standard – which is a point DCT advocates are eager to make. Angus Ritchie responds to Korsgaard as follows:

If valuing was not a response to a property in the thing or action chosen, but merely an expression of my identity, morality would also become self-referential, and therefore intolerably narcissistic. It is one thing (and a perfectly fair thing) to remind me that I ought to do the right thing because otherwise I would violate my deepest commitments, and in a sense become a different person. But the force of that reminder lies in the fact that I take those commitments to be correct. They are not tastes or lifestyle choices. I am committed to them precisely because I think them worth committing to. Once again, it seems that the features of agency and choice on which Korsgaard wishes to found her account of value are themselves parasitic on prior judgments of value.¹⁶⁰

If this analysis of Korsgaard’s view is correct, then it offers a good example for why it is difficult to deny the objectivity of morality and moral obligation and retain a robust sense of either. Hare argues that even Kant, who is the inspiration behind

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 257.

¹⁶⁰ Angus Ritchie, *From Morality to Metaphysics: The Theistic Implications of Our Ethical Commitments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 100.

Korsgaard's view, did not do away with the objectivity of obligation. According to Hare, Kant held that the moral law is necessary and it therefore does not need a creator. "Rather, God and we are, non-symmetrically, authors of the obligation of the law but not of the law itself. We endorse the law, but we do not bring it into existence."¹⁶¹ Mackie reads Kant the same way – he says that the reason Kant referred to his ideal community of moral agents as the "kingdom of ends" instead of "a commonwealth of ends" was because he needed to give God a place in it.¹⁶² In other words, active participation, or reflective endorsement by agents, is exactly how DCT advocates envision morality unfolding in concrete human lives. By saying that the correct level of reflection would bring us to our correct status as moral agents since it shows us what our moral obligations are supposed to be, Korsgaard's view becomes difficult to distinguish from DCT. It's no wonder that Evans sees it, ultimately, as an endorsement of (substantive) moral realism – the very view Korsgaard sets out to discredit.¹⁶³

The objectivity of agent-centered obligation then is one of the main reasons why DCT defenders think SCT cannot adequately account for it. But objectivity does not imply that the agent has no active role to play in appropriating that moral order. The need for the agent to be an active participant in his or her moral life, interestingly, explains why SCT succeeds as much as it does. According to DCT, human beings are made in such a way that they can apprehend and apply morality to their lives. We are in touch with morality at a very deep level. It is why DCT advocates hold that it is not necessary for one to believe in

¹⁶¹ John E. Hare, *God and Morality*, p. 177.

¹⁶² J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 45.

¹⁶³ Stephen C. Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, p. 144.

God in order to have a full-blown theory of morality with which they are in agreement. But when it comes to the justification of morality, then God is needed.

The demand morality places on us carries with it a force that gives some plausibility to DCT if that force is to be maintained in our moral theorizing. The morally right is not just the most rationally compelling, the most urgent or the most critical action one can take; it is also the action one must do. One has no choice in the matter if one wants to avoid guilt. One doesn't do it just in case one wants to be a moral person; one does it, period. You are under obligation to get it done. You can choose not to do it, but that does not get you off the hook. If you choose to flout your moral obligation, you are guilty of wrongdoing. According to DCT, society cannot adequately account for such a force that is present in moral obligations. You don't follow moral dictates just because the society of which you happen to be a member demands it; you would still be morally culpable even if your society demanded otherwise. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Martin Luther King Jr. summarized this idea with the following line, "I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts him."¹⁶⁴ This is what Anscombe was getting at – the way moral obligation is understood in morality seems to assume that there is a transcendent, eternal "oughtness" that confronts all moral agents. Wittgenstein also advocated for the idea that, if we limit ourselves to the physical universe, we cannot find adequate grounds for morality, and specifically moral obligation. A brief summary of his

¹⁶⁴ Martin Luther King, Speech available at https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-acceptance_en.html. Accessed March 13, 2018.

thought in this regard might help shed more light on the transcendent nature of moral obligations that should give a greater voice to AC today.

In his early work, Wittgenstein held that clarity about the propositions we use to refer to the world can help us solve our conceptual problems by elucidating the actual applications of our concepts at least in some cases. But he also insisted that the problem does not seem to admit of such a ready solution in ethics. As D. Z. Phillips points out, in addition to logical and mathematical propositions, “propositions” for Wittgenstein meant “empirical propositions which describe the world either truly or falsely.”¹⁶⁵ This means that judgments of value that are foundational to ethics cannot be captured in propositions. Thus, life presents us with a clear conception of how our ethical concepts can be applied to various situations, yet ethics and religion themselves fall outside our conception of the very propositions that would help us capture that application. “Hence the paradox: we seem to have a use for ethical and religious judgments, but we cannot give an account of how such judgments can have an intelligible place in our lives.”¹⁶⁶

In his *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein gives some helpful examples to illustrate his point. He writes,

Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said, "Well, you play pretty badly." And suppose I answered, "I know, I'm playing pretty badly but I don't want to play any better." All the other man could say would be, "Ah, then that's all right." But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said, "You're behaving like a beast." And then I were to say, "I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better." Could he then

¹⁶⁵ ¹⁶⁵ D. Z. Phillips, “Ethics, Faith and ‘What Can Be Said’”, in *Wittgenstein: A Critical Reader*, ed. Hans-Johann Gloc (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 349.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

say, "Ah, then that's all right"? Certainly not; he would say, "Well, you ought to want to behave better." Here you have an absolute judgment of value, whereas the first instance was one of relative judgment.¹⁶⁷

The problem for Wittgenstein is how to account for the claim that one *ought to want* to behave differently in the case of lying but not in the case of playing tennis. As he notes, saying that one ought to want to behave differently is an absolute judgment of value and it appears to have a specific application in our lives. But, according to Wittgenstein, it is not possible for there to be ethical propositions since such propositions would not correspond to any state of affairs in the world, or, as Phillips puts it, they don't "describe the world either truly or falsely"¹⁶⁸. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein was emphatic on this point:

In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value – and if there were, it would be of no value.

If there is a value which is of value, it must be outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie in the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental.

It must lie outside the world.

Hence also there can be no ethical propositions.

Propositions cannot express anything higher.¹⁶⁹

The argument Wittgenstein appears to be making here is that the fact that events in the world happen to take place says nothing about their value; they just happen. No mere

¹⁶⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics" (1929), available at <http://www.galilean-library.org/manuscript.php?postid=43866>. Accessed on December 17, 2011.

¹⁶⁸ Phillips, *Ethics, Faith and 'What Can Be Said'*, p. 349.

¹⁶⁹ *Tractatus* 6.41 – 6.42:

description of an event in the world attaches any moral significance to it. An extra determination, “a judgment of value”, has to be made to establish the moral status of the event. Since propositions express what is in the world, what lies outside the world cannot be expressed propositionally. Thus, the absolute nature of moral judgments puts them outside what can be said. Wittgenstein concludes, “Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water [even] if I were to pour a gallon over it”.¹⁷⁰

Another argument against the transcendence of ethics considered in Phillips’ article is the attempt to ground the ethical in the empirical. Wittgenstein argued that this too will not work. For example, on utilitarian grounds, it could be argued that the ethical is nothing over and above the empirical; it is simply to be located in “policies of behavior which can be predicted and calculated” or what is needed for flourishing¹⁷¹. The thinking that underlies this argument is akin to the justification given for behaviorism in the philosophy of mind. Just as mental states, according to behaviorism, are nothing but overt, observable behavior that can be quantified and calculated, ethics too can be cashed out in terms of the survival benefits accrued by human beings through the application of certain principles.

Phillips argues that the reason this move will not work is because the ethical involves ‘an additional principle of discrimination’.¹⁷² It is not satisfied with matching means with ends but also asks whether the ends *ought* to be desired or pursued. In other words, it is possible to have means and ends that would confer some benefits to at least some human beings without those means and ends being acceptable within an ethical

¹⁷⁰ Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*.

¹⁷¹ D. Z. Phillips, *Ethics, Faith and ‘What Can Be Said’*, p. 352.

¹⁷² J. L. Stocks, quoted by Phillips, *Ethics, Faith and ‘What Can Be Said’*, p. 352.

framework. The ethical places some constraints on the ends we are justified in pursuing. Moreover, “[t]he concept of ‘flourishing’ is already informed by moral considerations”.¹⁷³ We must assume that it is the best thing for human beings to flourish before we can set flourishing as our goal in life. Whereas “needs” are a means to an end in other contexts (for example, a plant needs water in order to flourish), “need” in ethics is itself an expression of ethical judgment – for example, the liar *needs* to be told his behavior is reprehensible. The ethical brings with it a sense of obligation that transcends the sum total of the describable activities involved in some action or event.

To see that absolute judgments of value are not reducible to relative values of judgment, Wittgenstein provides yet another helpful illustration. He argues that relative judgments of value lack the compulsion component that characterizes ethical judgments. For example, if I were to say that such and such is the right road to Granchester, I merely mean it is the best (perhaps the quickest, most scenic, one with the least amount of traffic, etc.,) way to take if you want to go to Granchester. But notice that the judgment that the road is indeed the best one to take is conditioned on a predetermined end. It is devoid of sense for anyone who has no interest in going to Granchester. Not so with an absolute judgment of value: it is not devoid of sense even if I don’t want to change my behavior. As noted earlier, one ought to want to change one’s behavior when ethical considerations enter the picture.

Moreover, trying to ascribe absolute value to relative judgments of value leads to absurdity. Wittgenstein explains,

¹⁷³ D. Z. Phillips, *Ethics, Faith and ‘What Can Be Said’*, p. 352.

The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily chosen end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, ‘*the absolutely right road*’. I think it would be the road by which *everybody* on seeing it would, *with logical necessity*, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the *absolute good*, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily* bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge.¹⁷⁴

Just as there is no such thing as an absolutely right road, a road that every person is logically compelled to take, there is no describable state of affairs in the physical universe that presents the good to us with such compulsion. With these arguments, Wittgenstein believed that the thesis that the ethical lies beyond the world rests on a secure experiential and conceptual foundation.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics”, quoted by Phillips in *Ethics*, pp. 353-4.

¹⁷⁵ Perhaps it could be argued that one should not put much stock in the claims made by Wittgenstein about morality in his earlier work since Wittgenstein later repudiated his own views. But to dismiss Wittgenstein’s arguments for the transcendence of ethics on such grounds would be premature. While it may be easy to “throw away the ladder” with regard to some of his earlier views, for example, his philosophy of language, the recalcitrance of the moral ladder is evidenced by the fact that the compulsive element of a moral conscience continued to dog Wittgenstein’s steps many years after the *Tractatus* was completed. While acknowledging the hopelessness of trying to account for morality within the limits of his early philosophical views, Wittgenstein, acknowledged that morality could nevertheless not be dismissed lightly. He wrote the following in 1929 in his *Lecture on Ethics*, quoted above,

This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. *But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it* [emphasis added].

3.5 DCT on Intrinsic Human Value

Another assumption that lies at the root of all discussion about moral obligation is the intrinsic value of humanity. As we have seen, Darwall maintains that it is our dignity as human beings that gives us the authority to make certain, binding demands on each other. Korsgaard builds her theory on the practical identity of the human person, but she, in the end, says that there is an identity that we are supposed to strive for in our moral pursuits. The Mafioso in Cohen's example must ultimately value humanity to come to a right conclusion about what his real obligations are. It is hard to make sense of the need for human beings to pursue a moral life without assuming that human beings have intrinsic worth.

In this section, I would like to look briefly at Wielenberg's attempt to account for the intrinsic value of human beings within a naturalistic framework. I will follow Wielenberg in defining a given thing's "intrinsic value" as the value it has "solely in virtue of its intrinsic properties", and "extrinsic value" as "the value it has in virtue of how it is related to things distinct from itself".¹⁷⁶ The question becomes, how do we account for the commonly held view that human beings have intrinsic worth? How do we know that we are not just highly evolved apes beset with delusions of grandeur? Wielenberg's answer is to say that all explanations have to stop somewhere.¹⁷⁷ Following Aristotle, he opts to stop his explanation for the value of humanity with the declaration that some things are

¹⁷⁶ Erik J. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*, p. 2.

¹⁷⁷ The details of Wielenberg's theory of morality and moral obligations, including his explanation of how moral facts supervene on physical facts, need not detain us here. My interest is how he accounts for intrinsic human worth within his naturalistic framework.

intrinsically valuable – i.e., valuable in and of themselves. Human beings and human relationships are such things. He writes,

I suggest that among our common sense moral beliefs is the belief that some things distinct from God are intrinsically good: for example, the pleasure of an innocent back-rub, or the love between parent and child. These things, it seems to me, are good in and of themselves. What makes them good, what explains their goodness, lies entirely within their intrinsic nature.¹⁷⁸

Wielenberg goes on to say that his view fares better than that of the theist: theistic views, like that of Linda Zagzebski, cannot explain the intrinsic value of things. Wielenberg maintains that since “Zagzebski’s divine motivation theory implies that ‘the goodness of everything ultimately comes from the goodness of God, so in a sense the goodness of everything in this world is extrinsic.’”¹⁷⁹ In other words, on DCT, nothing in the world has intrinsic value since the value of all things is derived from God. Because of this, Wielenberg concludes that the challenges that confront the view he holds do not count against the view enough to discredit it any more than the challenges that confront DCT discredit it. The question is which view is better defended. He, of course, believes that his atheistic, non-natural¹⁸⁰ moral realism makes better sense of the data of experience in the moral realm.

¹⁷⁸ Erik J. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*, p. 84.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ As we saw in chapter one, Wielenberg holds that moral facts exist as brute facts. Since they are not part of the facts studied by the natural sciences, he says that they are unnatural, hence the “non-natural” label attached to his view. In other words, he is a naturalist who accepts the existence of some non-natural properties.

Nevertheless, I believe Wielenberg's view loses its seeming plausibility when we take into account what naturalism entails with regard to the nature of the human being. Mark C. Murphy offers a summary of the difficulties that confront anyone who would try to build a system of value with the resources of the modern scientific world view, to borrow Korsgaard's phrase. Murphy writes,

...while most contemporary moral philosophers are not theists, almost none of them accepts the sociobiological account of morality. And it is obvious why most moral philosophers do not accept this wrongheaded view. If we start only with the facts of evolution, we will never extract from it any normativity – we will never be able to cross the gap simply from a story about how our species in fact evolved to any claims about what we genuinely have reason to favor or promote. [A sociobiological account of moral value] is no account of moral value at all, but an account of the *appearance* of moral value.¹⁸¹

Wielenberg crosses the gap from naturalism as defined in chapter 1 to moral realism by accepting the existence of non-natural moral facts that he says supervene on the physical. But what is true of moral facts, it seems to me, is also true of human beings as well. If we cannot extract normativity from the facts of evolution, it seems we have no grounds for extracting intrinsic value of human beings themselves from the facts of evolution either. If the choices before us are creation by a loving and caring God, as DCT advocates hold, or the facts of evolution, then it would seem that the former, if true, is better equipped to account for both moral facts and the value of human beings. Nor does

¹⁸¹ Mark C. Murphy, "Theism, Atheism, and the Explanation of Moral Value," in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?* ed. Robert Garcia and Nathan L. King (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), p. 122.

Wielenberg's point that human value would have to be extrinsic if it comes from God weaken DCT since many DCT advocates claim that human beings are intrinsically valuable because they are made in the image of God. They are not just different in degree from all other species; they are also different in kind and thus more valuable, on DCT. Wielenberg acknowledges that Adams's version of DCT does indeed offer explanations for important meta-ethical concepts. By equating the "Good" with "God", as Adams does, it follows that the Good needs no further foundation or source since God needs no further foundation or source. Wielenberg draws the following conclusion,

The upshot is that while Adams's theory does explain some substantive, metaphysically necessary ethical facts, it does so by appealing to other substantive, metaphysically necessary *brute* ethical facts. I think this is a perfectly reasonable approach; indeed, although I will not argue for it here, I think it is the only sensible approach to ethics. My own view is that any ethical fact that can be explained at all is explained at least in part by other ethical facts.¹⁸²

Wielenberg's main point is that his nontheistic view and Adams's DCT follow the same basic approach – they both must assume that there are necessarily existent ethical facts that explain or ground other ethical facts.

A detailed analysis of Wielenberg's well developed moral theory is beyond the scope of this work. As mentioned, my goal is to determine whether he succeeds in accounting for moral facts and the intrinsic value of human beings within his atheistic framework. To do so, we need to see whether the features of obligation addressed in this

¹⁸² Erik J. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*, p. 43.

chapter can be accounted for within Wielenberg's view. I am afraid the answer is no. If obligation has the structure that Anscombe thinks it does, i.e., if it is both agent-relative and objective, then it seems DCT's stopping point has advantages that Wielenberg's lacks. To say that a metaphysically necessary being who is necessarily good exists and is the ground of all value is vastly different from the claim that value exists as a brute fact. With God in the picture, it makes sense to say that obligation is agent-relative and objective. Wielenberg cannot hold the same view of obligation that Adams holds and retain his denial of God – he cannot argue that moral obligation is agent-relative and objective and deny God's existence. He may be able to account for the objectivity of moral obligation, but it does not make sense to take agency as a brute fact without any agent in the picture. Wielenberg must leave out agency as part of his account of the objectivity of moral obligation. He holds the view that to have an obligation to do something is to have decisive reasons to do it. But that is not what Anscombe and DCT defenders mean when they talk about obligations. To redefine obligation as Wielenberg does is to concede Anscombe's point – we cannot think of obligation as an objective, agent-centered concept – which is how it has traditionally been conceived – and remain naturalists.

3.6 Objections to DCT

As is to be expected in philosophy, DCT is not without its detractors. In this section, I will look at two of what I take to be the best objections to DCT. There are other objections that are worth looking into, but I think the two I have chosen do the best job of putting into doubt the overall consistency of DCT as a moral theory. Others that I will not respond to here include the challenge of how to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with the

claim that the world was created by a loving God and the fact that there are so many different expressions of religion and ideas about God. Susan Wolf writes, “One problem with the Divine Command Theory is that God – more specifically, a God who gives commands – may not exist. A second is that even if God exists, God’s commands to us are not easily discerned.”¹⁸³ All these are powerful challenges to DCT and a full-blown defence of the theory must respond to them. But since my goal is to find out if Anscombe’s challenge to modern moral philosophy is justified, I will set aside these objections to DCT. AC could be successful against modern moral philosophy even if DCT proves problematic on the points raised here, for it could be the case that philosophers have borrowed concepts about moral authority from theism while ignoring the challenges raised against theism.

3.7 The Legitimacy of God’s Commands

The first objection I want to look at is the claim that DCT does not seem to settle the question of the need for a foundation for moral obligation even if we suppose that there exists a supernatural Being with the authority to issue commands. For example, it appears to be the case that in order for God’s commands to be morally obligatory for us, it must already be the case that we are obligated to obey the commands God issues. So, the prior

¹⁸³ Susan Wolf, “Moral Obligations and Social Commands,” p. 345. Ironically, the strength of DCT is seen in its explanatory power over these very problems. For example, the Christian doctrine of sin explains what is wrong with humanity; why we go wrong on so many accounts. The claim that we were created in God’s image explains why we are valuable. As David Hume put it,

It is sufficient for our present purpose, if it be allowed, what surely, without the greatest absurdity cannot be disputed, that there is some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for human kind; some particle of the dove kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and serpent. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Kindle Locations 1430-1431).

obligation to obey God's commands cannot itself be one of the commands God issues; otherwise DCT would be incoherent. That prior obligation simply exists. When we ask why we are obligated to do what God commands, it will not do to say that we ought to do what God commands simply because he commands it. As Mark Schroeder states, such a response would look as follows,

Authority Vol: $\Box \forall x (x \text{ ought to do what God commands})$

Schroeder goes on to say,

But that is exactly what we need to get the voluntarist into trouble. For according to voluntarism, every time that you ought to do something, it is because God has commanded it. But why ought you to do what God commands? According to the theory, this would have to be because God has commanded it. But that is surely incoherent. God could not make it the case that you ought to do what He commands simply by commanding it – if it were not already the case that you ought to do what He commands, then such a command would make no difference, and if it were already the case that you ought to do what He commands, then it would be beside the point. So it follows that voluntarism is incoherent.¹⁸⁴

In other words, the prior obligation to obey God cannot itself be one of the commands God issues. It must be the case that we are (inexplicably) obligated to obey God's commands. But if this prior obligation to obey whatever commands God issues can exist without any need to be grounded in anything, the argument continues, why couldn't

¹⁸⁴ Mark Schroeder, "Cudworth and Normative Explanations," in *The Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, vol. 1, No. 3, October 2005, p. 2.

other moral obligations exist in the same way? As early as 1625, Hugo Grotius claimed that human beings would still have moral obligations “even if we should concede that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to Him”.¹⁸⁵ Various other philosophers have pressed this argument over the years. For example, here is J. L. Mackie’s version of the objection,

The commands of a legitimate human ruler do not *create* obligations: if such a ruler tells you to do X, this makes it obligatory for you to do X only if it is already obligatory for you to do whatever the ruler tells you (within the sphere in which X lies). The same applies to God. He can make it obligatory for us to do Y by so commanding only because there is first a general obligation for us to obey him. His commands, therefore, cannot be the source of moral obligation in general: for any obligation that they introduce, there must be a more fundamental obligation that they presuppose.¹⁸⁶

In response, Schroeder points out that the argument, at face value, proves too much. According to the logic of the argument, there is no system of value that would ever succeed in imparting obligations to any moral agent. Take, for instance the atheistic approach taken by Wielenberg, or Korsgaard’s procedural moral realism discussed above. In order for it to be the case that either views succeed in grounding our moral obligations, it has to already be the case that we have a prior, inexplicable obligation to obey those obligations. If we cannot account for that prior obligation, then by this logic, these views are ultimately incoherent. Schroeder writes,

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 7.

¹⁸⁶ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God*, pp. 114-5. [Emphasis his]

So if the... argument successfully shows that not all obligations can be explained by God's commands, then it looks like it must also show that not all obligations can be explained by self-interest, by hypothetical contracts, by what would maximize the good, by what is in accordance with rules no one could reasonably reject, or any other source.¹⁸⁷

That is the first mistake with the argument – it generalizes. The conclusion that we have no obligations whatsoever is not what we were after, for we set out to explain where our obligations come from. In chapter one, we looked at the consequences of doing away with obligations, as Anscombe suggests, and we concluded that the results would be disastrous and against all of our moral intuitions. An argument that leads us to the conclusion that we have no moral obligations takes us much farther than where we started from, and it may be more the case that it is mistaken than that it is right.

It is more likely that there is something wrong with this argument than that we are mistaken with regard to our moral obligations. So, what is wrong with the argument? DCT advocates answer by saying that it makes an assumption they do not need to accept. Authority Vol, as characterized above, is ambiguous. Schroeder characterized God's authority as follows:

Authority Vol: $\Box \forall x (x \text{ ought to do what God commands})$ ¹⁸⁸

But Authority Vol, as stated, can be read in different ways. It could be expressed in a way that does not commit the DCT advocate to there being any commands at all that God

¹⁸⁷ Mark Schroeder, "Cudworth and Normative Explanations," in *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*, October 2005, vol. 1. No. 3., p. 4.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

has issued. In other words, one does not have to assume that God has issued any commands – much less that there is a prior, brute command – to endorse Authority Vol. Authority Vol could be read conditionally. Schroeder again expresses it as follows

Conditional Vol: $\Box \forall x \forall a$ (If God has commanded x to do $a \rightarrow x$ ought to do a)¹⁸⁹

Thus stated, Conditional Vol only entails that we ought to obey any commands God issues, i.e., if God issues any commands, we ought to obey them. It says nothing about there being commands that God has already issued, and as already mentioned, it does not commit the DCT defender to the existence of a brute, prior command. For the objection to work against DCT, it must be shown that DCT is necessarily committed to the existence of at least that prior, brute command. DCT defenders maintain this hasn't been done.

3.8 The Euthyphro Dilemma

In section 1.6, I raised the Euthyphro dilemma with regard to the problem of the over-determination of moral obligation. If moral obligation is necessary for the flourishing of humanity, why think that God's commands are needed for morality to work? What, for example, do we gain from knowing that God commands us not to murder if we already know that murder is wrong? What exactly do God's commands add to the wrongness of murder if murder would be contrary to the flourishing of humanity even in the absence of God's commands? I have already pointed out that DCT deals with the right, not the good, though the former is grounded in the latter. Saying that it is good for humans to flourish is

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

not the same as saying that humans have the obligation to ensure that they and their fellow humans flourish. In addition, following Mackie, I argued that God could command human beings to stick to the only kind of life that would guarantee their flourishing because he cares about them and wants the best for them. As we saw, such commands "...would add an objectively prescriptive element to what otherwise were hard, descriptive, truths."¹⁹⁰ If moral obligations are really God's commands, this would explain the feature of commandedness that is assumed to characterize our moral duties, and the duties would originate from an identifiable authority. That moral obligations are binding commands would not then be mysterious, as Mackie notes.

But there is another aspect of the dilemma that I now need to address more directly, namely, whether the good, from God's perspective, is either arbitrary or independent of God. As noted earlier, the dilemma is best understood in the form of a question; does God command the good because it is good or is the good good because God commands it? If the good is good because God commands it, then the good is arbitrary. God could command anything and it would be "good". On the other hand, if God commands the good because it is good, then the good exists independently of God.

DCT advocates solve this dilemma by pointing out that their claim that God is necessarily good entails that the good is grounded in God. If God is necessarily good, then God always commands the good and he can only command the good. And because he has made his creatures to function in a way that leads to their flourishing, he gives them commands that are aimed to that end, as Mackie points out. Jeffrey Stout finds this explanation, as offered by Adams, satisfactory. He writes,

¹⁹⁰ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, pp. 230-1.

The theory claims that to be morally obligated to do something *is* to have been commanded by a loving God to do it. On the assumption that a loving God has not and will not command hateful or cruel acts, the theory does not entail that any such act is in fact morally obligatory. So the modified theory does not entail the most worrisome consequences of its unmodified predecessor.¹⁹¹

In other words, God's commands are neither arbitrary nor based on a standard external to God; they are grounded in God's own good or moral nature. If this is true, then the Euthyphro dilemma is a false one and the theist is under no obligation to accept it.

3.9 Conclusion

AC challenges the modern philosopher to do away with the concept of obligation in her moral theory since it does not fit within a nontheistic context. SCT goes a long way as an answer to AC since it seeks to explain the source of the command idea in obligation by locating the authority behind the command in human beings. But it still seems to be the case that there are features of obligation that are not fully satisfied by SCT. They include the objectivity of obligation, if objectivity is to be understood to be human-independent. That seems to have been the way Anscombe understood obligation, and other writers, including Mackie, DCT and SCT defenders like Darwall and Wolf, understand the concept in the same way. Thus understood, obligation does not fit within SCT. SCT also seems hard pressed to account for the intrinsic value of humanity which it must assume for the theory to make sense.

¹⁹¹ Jeffrey Stout, "Adams on the Nature of Obligation," in *Metaphysics and the Good: Themes From the Philosophy of Robert Merrihew Adams*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 376.

Moreover, it seems DCT can withstand arguments brought against it. We have considered two of what I believe to be the best such arguments – the problem of legitimizing God’s commands and the Euthyphro dilemma. If DCT is logically consistent and if it accounts for moral facts better than alternative theories, then it seems AC remains a serious challenge to modern moral philosophy.

CHAPTER 4: OBJECTION SUSTAINED: AC AND MORAL OBLIGATION

In chapter one, we saw that the naturalists examined in this project agree with DCT defenders on the objectivity of moral obligation. They both agree that obligation does not depend on human beings in any way. As Sinnott-Armstrong puts it, moral obligations were what they are even when T Rex ruled. “What evolves are only moral *beliefs* and *attitudes*, not moral *facts* or *truths*.”¹⁹² I argued that, for AC to be successful, the objectivity of moral obligation is not enough— naturalists, who reject God’s existence, already accept the objectivity of obligation. So, in addition to objectivity, DCT defenders must hold that obligation is an irreducibly agent-centered concept. It is both objective and agent-centered.

In chapter 2, we saw that SCT defenders argue that obligation is an irreducibly agent-centered concept. To borrow Darwall’s terminology, obligation is irreducibly second-personal. It makes sense only within a social context. DCT agrees with this characterization of moral obligation. But by insisting that obligation is human-centered, SCT defenders must drop the claim that it is objective in the sense described in sections 1.2 and 3.4, and as understood by both naturalists and DCT. Obviously, obligation cannot be both grounded in humanity and exist independently of human beings. The three positions can be diagrammed as follows:

¹⁹² Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality ~~Without God~~* p. 92. [Emphasis his]

	Is Obligation Objective?	Is Obligation Agent-Centred?
Naturalists	Yes	No
SCT	No	Yes
DCT	Yes	Yes

By doing away with objectivity, SCT defenders reduce morality to what society happens to favor at the moment. As we saw, Wolf solves the problem of abhorrent commands issued by various societies in history by saying that such societies ought to have known better.¹⁹³ I agree with that answer, but it seems to me that we must assume a standard independent of the society in question by which we can judge that society, and by which the society ought to have judged itself. DCT does not encounter such a problem since the standard by which societies and individuals are judged does not depend on either the society or the individual. By doing away with agency, while retaining the objectivity of obligation, the naturalists reduce moral obligation to the highly reasonable, desired, suggested, etc. But if SCT and DCT are right, we must also have the “commanded” in moral obligation. Moral obligation makes demands on us very differently from the laws of logic, mathematics, etc. Morality requires that we not only pay attention to it and acknowledge its demand; we must also act on it. We must want to follow its dictates – there is no neutrality.

According to SCT, moral obligation is irreducibly agent-centeredness. According to the naturalists considered in this project, moral obligation is objective. By insisting that it is inconsistent for moral philosophers to assume that morality is both agent-centered and objective while rejecting God, DCT advocates are not tendentiously defining the concept of obligation in order to stack the deck in their favor. AC gains its edge against modern

¹⁹³ Susan Wolf, “Moral Obligations and Social Commands,” p. 363.

moral philosophy on the assumption that obligation is assumed to be both objective and agent-relative. It is not enough to say that moral obligation is reasonable and overriding; it is also commanded. It is not enough to point out what we can take to be the wrong conclusions to draw in our moral reasoning, we must also acknowledge that certain actions are *prohibited* and others *required* of us. Darwall notes that even if Kant succeeded in accounting for normativity in terms of autonomy, his account would still "...not capture, and therefore would not adequately vindicate, the distinctive normativity of moral obligations." He explains, "Moral obligations do not simply purport to provide supremely authoritative reasons. They are also what we are responsible for doing, what members of the moral community have authority to demand that we do".¹⁹⁴ They are irreducibly agent-relative. For Darwall, as we saw, the agents are simply human beings. But if moral obligation is also objective, the agent cannot be human beings. Enter DCT.

In chapter three, we saw that, in addition to objective, agent-relative obligation, DCT defenders claim to have yet another reason why their view accounts for moral obligation better than other views – they have an answer for why human beings are thought to have intrinsic value. Every credible moral theory must account for the worth of humanity – for they all assume that human beings must be valued. Wielenberg, for example, takes moral facts as brute facts but goes on to say that human beings have the properties that they do by accident. He writes,

Evolutionary processes have produced human beings that can reason, suffer, experience happiness, tell the difference between right and wrong, choose between right and wrong, and set goals for themselves. ...And if, as I believe, there is no

¹⁹⁴ Darwall, *The Second-Person Perspective*, p. 214.

God, then it is in some sense an accident that we have the moral properties that we do. But that they are accidental in origin does not make these moral properties unreal or unimportant.¹⁹⁵

But could Wielenberg take “commandedness” itself as a brute fact? He is, of course, free to do so, but we would be left with objective commands that have no agency behind them. Not only would this be quite different from any other category of commands with which we are familiar, for example legal and social obligations that require some authority to issue them, it would hardly suffice as an answer to Anscombe. Again, by decoupling obligation from agency (by likening it to the laws of logic and mathematics, for example), naturalists like Wielenberg merely concede Anscombe’s point. They are doing philosophy without the concept of “the commanded”.

SCT defenders, like Darwall, simply state, as a normative thesis, that human beings are the kind of entities that ought to be treated with dignity. Darwall writes,

In Kantian terms, norms of moral obligation are “laws” for a “kingdom of ends,” which structure and define the equal dignity of persons as beings who may not be treated in some ways and must be in others and who have equal standing to demand this second-personally of one another.¹⁹⁶

DCT defenders are not satisfied with the mere declaration that human beings must be treated with dignity – given naturalism, an argument is needed. Shafer-Landau entertains the position that laws can be objective without being eternal. He argues that the

¹⁹⁵ Eric J. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*, p. 56.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101. [Emphasis his]

laws of photosynthesis and rock sedimentation, for example, are objective, but they have not always existed.¹⁹⁷ In the same way, the objective laws of morality exist because moral agents exist. Not only does this deny agency in objective morality (thus conceding Anscombe's point), the nature of the entities in question becomes paramount. Photosynthesis takes place as it does given the nature of plants, and sedimentation happens because of the nature of rocks. The question that must then be answered is, what is the nature of human beings?

Peter Singer weighs the arguments normally given for the claim that all human beings have equal value and dignity and finds them wanting. For Singer, cognitive abilities, which he thinks are the main reason given for valuing human beings over other species, do not make the case human dignity defenders think they do. He points out that there are non-human animals that have higher cognitive abilities than some severely disabled human beings. He rejects the DCT view that human beings have more moral worth than anything else in creation because they are made in the image of God for two reasons; (1) he doesn't believe God exists and (2) he doesn't think the view, even if it were true, would be accepted in highly secularized societies. Similarly, he dismisses Bernard Williams's view that human beings have the right to privilege their own species because they are the one's doing the judging. Singer points out, rightly, in my opinion, that on this view, which he dubs speciesism, it would be hard to argue against a racist group who comfort themselves with the idea that they are justified in discriminating against certain other people simply because they are the ones doing the judging.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Russ Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*, pp. 86.

¹⁹⁸ Peter Singer, "Speciesism and Moral Status," *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 40, Nos. 3-4, July 2009, p. 572.

Singer's own proposal is that we should adopt a view of morality "...in which moral status depends on some aspects of cognitive ability, and that graduated view is applied to humans and nonhumans".¹⁹⁹ He writes,

...because of the overlap in cognitive ability between some humans and some nonhuman animals, attempts to draw a moral line on the basis of cognitive ability, as Kant and the contractarians try to do, will require either that we exclude some humans—for example, those who are profoundly mentally retarded—or that we include some nonhuman animals—those whose levels of cognitive ability are equal or superior to the lowest level found in human beings.²⁰⁰

As long as the value of humanity is inextricably linked to the capacities they possess, it is difficult to see how we could escape Singer's critique. But DCT, if true, would not fall prey to the critique since the value of human beings is grounded in the fact that they are a special creation of God, regardless of their capacities. They are all equally valuable.

In this project, my goal has been to evaluate the plausibility of Anscombe's claim that modern moral philosophy trades on an incoherence since it continues to employ a concept of obligation that is a relic of an age saturated with divine command thinking. To do so, I have endeavored to clarify what would need to be true in order for Anscombe's critique (AC) to succeed. I have argued that the main hurdles AC needs to cross include the objectivity of moral obligation, its agent-dependence, and the ability to account for human dignity. I have explored whether DCT can make a plausible case for these ideas.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 575.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 574.

DCT defenders work with the assumption that God exists, and from that assumption, DCT is a defensible view of morality. And if moral obligation is indeed objective and agent-relative, then it is itself part of the evidence for God, as J. L. Mackie argues.

But we also saw that DCT has its own challenges that would need to be answered if it is to be accepted as a full-blown theory of morality. My goal was not to defend a particular version of DCT. It was to examine whether AC succeeds against modern moral philosophy. If SCT and DCT advocates are right to point out that we cannot make sense of moral obligation in the absence of agency, then AC has a case to make against modern moral philosophy. If that agency is grounded in humanity, then AC is adequately answered by SCT. But if obligation also has to be objective, i.e., if it exists independently of human beings, as DCT and the naturalists aver, then SCT falls short of a complete answer to AC. If moral obligation is both objective and agent-relative, then AC remains a serious challenge to modern moral philosophy. From what we have seen, I am convinced that there is indeed a need for philosophers to take Anscombe's challenge seriously.

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