

## II—DAVID OWENS

### THE VALUE OF DUTY

The obligations we owe to those with whom we share a valuable relationship (like friendship) cannot be reduced to the obligations we owe to others simply as fellow persons (e.g. the duty to reciprocate benefits received). Wallace suggests that this is because such valuable relationships are loving relationships. I instead propose that it is because, unlike general moral obligations, such valuable relationships (and their constitutive obligations) serve our normative interests. Part of what makes friendship good for us is that it involves bonds of loyalty. Our lives go better if we are bound to others in this way.

In his ‘Duties of Love’ (2012), Jay Wallace maintains that:

- (1) There are duties people owe to others in virtue of standing in loving relationships with them.
- (2) These duties of love cannot be derived from more general moral obligations laying down duties we owe to one another simply as persons.
- (3) These duties of love provide a ‘paradigm for understanding the general notion of obligation, a paradigm that can fruitfully be extended to the case of specifically moral obligation’ (Wallace 2012, p. 176).

About claim (1) I am agnostic. To be more precise, I am agnostic about whether loving relationships (such as certain forms of friendship) involve obligations in virtue of being loving. But I certainly agree that relationships like friendship do involve obligation, and I agree that claim (2) (i.e. ‘non-reductionism’) is true of such obligations. I’ll call obligations of which I take claim (2) to be true *relationship obligations*.<sup>1</sup>

I offer an explanation for the truth of (2) which depends on the idea that relationship obligations are grounded in the value of certain forms of duty, in the fact that it is good for us to be bound to

---

<sup>1</sup> Like Wallace, I shall interchange ‘obligation’ and ‘duty’.

one another in various ways. I suggest that this fact differentiates relationship obligations from ‘general moral obligations’ such as obligations not to mislead others or to help those who have helped you. What grounds the latter is the value of the actions that they mandate, the provision of help or of correct information. We need not suppose that there is any further value in our being *obliged* so to act.

I’ll argue that relationship obligations cannot be derived from or reduced to general moral obligations precisely because the two forms of obligation have a rather different basis. Relationship obligations are rooted (in part) in our *normative interests*, our interest in phenomena like rights and obligations. By contrast, general moral obligations (including those obligations to which the reductionist hopes to reduce relationship obligations) are grounded in our *non-normative* interest in pleasure, truth, beauty, and so forth.<sup>2</sup>

If this explanation of the correctness of (2) is accepted, we might entertain doubts about (3), about Wallace’s idea that reflection on relationship obligations can explain the normative significance of general moral obligations. These are indeed both forms of ‘relational obligation’, obligation whose performance is owed to some party, a party wronged by non-performance. But, if I am right, many of the general moral obligations we owe each other simply as persons have a quite different basis from those we owe each other as friends, relatives, and so forth. In the last section I’ll assess the prospects of establishing some explanatory connection between these two forms of relational obligation.

## I

*Relationship Obligations.* Wallace’s title is ‘Duties of Love’, but we shall have a better shot at least some of the issues raised by his paper if we don’t characterize our topic in that way. True, many of the plausible candidates for relationships that involve *sui generis* obligations characteristically involve love, for example, friendship, romantic involvement, parent–child relations, and so forth. But, first, these relations need not always be loving (parents do not always love their children, nor children their parents). Second, even where they

---

<sup>2</sup> I call such interests ‘non-normative’ not because they lack normative significance but because they take non-normative objects.

do involve love, it is not obvious that the love generates the obligation. Third, and most importantly, there are other relationships, not (standardly) loving relationships, which plausibly entail *sui generis* obligations.

Consider the case of friendship. It is hard to get clear on the role of love in friendship both because it is hard to get a handle on love and because friendship comes in so many varieties. Perhaps I love my old college friends, however infrequently I see them, but do I love the gym buddy whom I meet every week? He might be offended if I didn't count him amongst my friends, and there are things I would feel obliged to do for him that I wouldn't feel obliged to do for a passing stranger. On the other hand, I wouldn't *greatly* miss him if I never saw him again.

Consider now my acquaintance, John. I do not love John and John does not love me, yet there is a nexus of duty between us. I mustn't forget his name nor fail to recognize him in a public place. I mustn't refuse him a brief word if he clearly wants to speak with me, nor express indifference when he informs me that he failed to get the job for which he applied. It might be argued that some such forms of regard are owed to perfect strangers with whom I happen to fall into conversation. If so, that may be because we have here a further obligation-involving relationship, namely conversational partnership. The rules of politeness in conversation require that we not interrupt, nor change the topic nor terminate the conversation abruptly, that we look at the person we are talking to, refrain from shouting, and so forth. We take on these obligations by entering into a conversation with someone, as we take on the obligation of friendship or acquaintanceship by choosing to make these connections.

One might insist on drawing a line between a loving friendship on the one hand and these lesser forms of involvement.<sup>3</sup> One might suppose that the obligations associated with these lesser forms are indeed derivable from obligations we owe to persons as such when the particular circumstances of a conversation are taken into account, but such suppositions are tendentious and we should be reluctant to make them at the outset. It is no easy matter to say which friendships are loving relationships. And the obstacles to deriving

---

<sup>3</sup> I say 'lesser' but, as Goffman says of conversation, 'It is this spark, not the more obvious kinds of love, that lights up the world' (1963, p. 113). The value of acquaintanceship and conversational involvement (as well as relations of hospitality or neighbourliness) is neither small nor purely instrumental, even though none standardly involve love.

the obligations of conversational partnership from, say, general principles of reciprocity seem no less formidable than those that belabour the attempt to portray obligations of friendship as obligations of reciprocity. Best not to characterize our very topic in a way that assumes otherwise.

Rather than seeking to pin love down, I suggest we take the whole class of apparently *sui generis* relationship obligations and try for an account that will cover them all. I propose that all of these relationships share the feature that we value them precisely because they involve rights, duties, obligations, permissions, and so forth. That is part of why such relationships are good for us, why they make our lives go better. Part of what we look for in a friendship, for example, is the obligations (and the rights) of friendship.<sup>4</sup> And these bonds and permissions will often be present even where the spark of love is hard to detect.

Obligation tends to be recessive within friendship. When attention shifts to the *demands* of friendship, this is often a sign that something threatens to go wrong, but we shouldn't infer that true friendship is unclouded by thoughts about obligation.<sup>5</sup> Obligations become salient when there is a chance that they will be breached, and breach is sometimes a real possibility even in the best of friendships, for the best of friends have other demands upon them. Should they resolve these conflicts, resist the temptations, and remain loyal, we'll think what a good friend they are, and not that our relationship falls short of some obligation-free ideal. Obligations are also salient when the friendship becomes closer or more distant: 'We're too involved for me to be able to abandon him now', 'She no longer feels she has to share her plans with me', and so forth. Reflection on such normative change is a part of any living friendship.

I don't want to deny that love is sometimes needed to engender obligation. Many things that are valued for their own sake are so valued only within a certain context. Obligation is no exception. It is in the context of a conversation, of a social interaction which characteristically informs and amuses, etc., that the obligation not

---

<sup>4</sup> I emphasize obligation because it is the focus of Wallace's discussion. We should not lose sight of the fact that permissions are a no less valuable aspect of friendship, such as the ability to ask your friend personal questions that would be inappropriate from the mouth of a stranger.

<sup>5</sup> As Wallace observes, there is, in general, no tension between acting out of love for a friend or relative and acting out of a sense of duty (Wallace 2012, pp. 191–2).

to interrupt has value. And it *may* be that certain obligations of loyalty of the sort that characteristically exist between friends are valuable because formed in the context of a characteristically loving relationship.<sup>6</sup> I say only this: what generates the *sui generis* obligations of friendship, conversation, and so forth, is the fact that in the context of these relationships, such obligations are good for us.<sup>7</sup>

## II

*Normative Interests and Non-Reductionism.* Thus far we have been taking non-reductionism for granted; we have been assuming that relationship obligations can't be derived from what we owe each other simply as persons. Wallace supports this claim by arguing that certain reductive strategies will not work. These strategies take the following form: find some feature *F* characteristically associated with the relevant relationship and then argue that, on general moral grounds, relationships with feature *F* generate obligations. For example, when you are involved with someone, that usually creates certain expectations about how you'll behave, and you owe it to each other (simply as persons) not to gratuitously arouse false expectations on significant matters in others. Furthermore, being involved with someone often entails some transfer of valuable goods and services, and when you receive a benefit from another person you owe them certain forms of reciprocation simply in virtue of the fact that they have (deliberately) benefitted you.

Wallace argues that these reductive strategies fail. For one thing, he maintains that relationship obligations exist even where principles of reciprocity or care for expectations do not apply. On this point he may well be right, but I'll focus instead on his assertion that even when such principles do apply, the obligations they generate differ in their 'nature and quality' from the relevant relationship obligations. I agree, but I'd like to understand these differences better.

One of Wallace's examples is suggestive in this regard. He describes

---

<sup>6</sup> For an expression of scepticism on this point, see Frankfurt (1999, pp. 170–1).

<sup>7</sup> A curve is graceful in the context of a certain portrait and the portrait is beautiful (partly) in virtue of the graceful curve of the lip. Similarly, obligation is valuable in the context of this relationship and the relationship is valuable (partly) in virtue of the obligation.

a secret benefactor ... who randomly singled us out to be the recipient of their largesse, where this in turn has had enormous positive effects on our life (saving us from an otherwise lethal childhood disease, for instance, and making it possible for us to attend excellent schools and to graduate from a first-rate university). We would no doubt have extensive moral obligations to such a benefactor, under general principles of generosity and reciprocity. (Wallace 2012, p. 186)

Yet, in Wallace's view, these obligations differ 'in nature and quality' from relationship obligations. How?

Note that Wallace's benefactor might be completely indifferent to the fact that his benefaction generates an obligation to reciprocate. He might even regret the fact that he must bind the beneficiary in this way. And this may be so even when he would appreciate and value the act of reciprocation. He can enjoy Wallace's expressions of gratitude and think that things went better because of them, without thinking the same of fact that Wallace is *obliged* to be grateful and reciprocate. And the same is true of Wallace. Wallace may see good reason to discharge his obligations to be grateful and reciprocate, and even to enjoy doing so without being glad, either for himself or for anyone else, that he is so obliged.

This suggests that the basis of the obligation to reciprocate lies not in any value we place on the bonds of reciprocal altruism but rather on the value of the goods and services received. What makes it the case that I should scratch your back when you have scratched mine is that (a) back-scratching is good for us both, (b) you have scratched my back, and (c) you need your back scratching and I can easily reciprocate. The basis for this obligation lies in a proper regard for our non-normative interest in back-scratching. We need suppose no further interest in being bound to scratch each other's backs. It *might* be that people also have an interest in treating each other fairly, that their own lives go better if they reciprocate, and so forth (Scanlon 1998, pp. 161–4). But if so, what makes people's lives go better is the fact that when such interactions must take place for reasons other than fairness, they do so fairly. We don't seek the opportunity to interact with strangers in order to incur the obligation to treat them in an equitable fashion. By contrast, part of the reason we form friendships is to enjoy the bonds of friendship.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Pursuing the analogy with friendship, Scanlon suggests we might regard the general principles of morality as requirements of a certain 'moral relationship', a relationship we have with those whom we treat fairly or reasonably (2008, pp. 139–41). But even if immoral rel-

We have an obligation to do things for our friends that we don't owe to perfect strangers. That is part of what it is to be someone's friend. To regard yourself as a friend is, in part, to regard yourself as being so obliged. Laura has warm feelings towards me, hangs around with me whenever she can, and so forth, but the two of us don't think of ourselves as friends until we also think of ourselves as *bound* to keep up some sort of contact, not to ignore requests for help, and so forth. This may be conceded. But might someone acknowledge that obligation is a constitutive feature of friendship without also thinking that obligation is part of what makes that relationship valuable for its own sake? Perhaps they might, but if so they would be missing something.

To value a friendship appropriately is, amongst other things, to value these obligations, to regard these obligations as being (like the friendship they partly constitute) good for you. Suppose I'm friends with Sarah and conscientiously discharge the obligations of friendship, helping Sarah out when she's moving house, and so forth. But I place no value on the fact that I'm obliged to help her, on the fact that not helping her would be a form of *disloyalty*, on being bound to her in that way. Nor do I value the fact that she is similarly bound to me. Wouldn't there be something wrong here? Wouldn't this be a case of not valuing the friendship appropriately? A good friend is not merely someone who willingly discharges the obligations of friendship. A good friend thinks that it is good for us that we are friends, that we are so obliged, good for us that these bonds of loyalty mean that we'd be wronging each other if we didn't. One indifferent to (or even resentful of) the bonds of friendship is not, in that respect, a good friend.

One doesn't speak of loyalty to a conversational partnership, but the same points apply to such less intimate forms of involvement. If what I wanted from a conversation was simply to be informed and amused, I could often get that more easily by reading a newspaper or listening to the guy on his cell phone. But there is something I can't get in that way, namely the status, the rights and obligations of a conversational partner. If I never valued that status for its own

---

ationships with perfect strangers make our lives go worse, it does not follow that moral relationships with perfect strangers make our lives go better; we might wish rather that we didn't have to deal with them at all. I doubt that one can *ground* impartial morality in the positive value of some moral relationship in the way obligations of loyalty are grounded in the positive value of friendship, citizenship, and so forth.

sake and regretted it whenever in order to be informed or amused I had to give and receive that form of recognition, I would be failing to appreciate a good part of the point of conversation. And if I made that failure obvious, my attitude might well be resented.

Having argued that relationships are valuable for their own sake partly in virtue of the value of their constitutive obligations, I can introduce my central hypothesis: relationship obligations bind (in part) because they are (non-instrumentally) good for us (Raz 1994, p. 41). Perhaps, contrary to what I have supposed, there are people who delight in dealing fairly with complete strangers. Such people value the opportunity to reciprocate benefits received and would regret it if they didn't need to incur such debts. Even if these people are right to take this attitude, their obligation to reciprocate does not rest on the fact that such obligations are good for them. They would be so obliged regardless. By contrast, it is precisely because bonds of loyalty are good for us that they bind.

The content of relationship obligations most often (and perhaps always) reflects the content of our non-normative concerns. One is obliged to provide help and support, for instance, where help and support are good for the recipient. One should also have a special concern with the non-normative interests of one's friends. Doesn't this suffice to explain why one owes more to one's friends than one does to strangers? But there is gap here. Even if friendship renders appropriate various forms of help and support, why should it render them obligatory? For example, it might be good for me to buy my friend Tim a magnificent birthday present, but it wouldn't be good that I be obliged to do so. The difference between the giving of such presents and the things that one *is* obliged to do out of friendship is precisely that the latter are things it would be good to be obliged to do out of friendship.

No obligation binds *merely* because it would be (non-instrumentally) good for us were it to bind us. The mere fact that it would be good for us to be bound to call each other on our respective birthdays does not imply that we are so bound. For that to happen, we must have established a custom of exchanging birthday calls. But custom by itself is equally insufficient (Raz 1986, p. 310). I may be in the habit of expressing agreement with all the opinions expressed by my hero. That does not mean that I am obliged to endorse his every word, whatever the two of us may think. The relationship of hero-worship and its constituent customs and practices are not valu-

able for their own sake. Only practices that make our lives go better by satisfying a genuine normative interest ground obligation.

One might allow that relationship obligations are often good for us whilst denying that these obligations bind us in virtue of this fact. A father fails to keep in touch with his adult children; he liked the children when they were young but has since lost interest in them. Here the father may not be failing in the duties he owes to his children considered simply as persons he brought into the world (they don't especially *need* his help and support), but he probably is failing in the duties of parenthood as generally understood. Wouldn't our dad be better off without this ongoing obligation? Nevertheless, it surely applies to him (the children are rightly resentful of his neglect), and does so regardless of his inclinations.<sup>9</sup>

This example raises tricky questions about how our attitudes influence what is good for us, questions that have nothing specifically to do with obligation. Perhaps both fatherhood and its constituent obligations are good for this man, he just doesn't appreciate what he has got. But I need not insist on this, for, even if it be conceded that such obligations are not good for him personally, it may still be the case that they apply to him because in his society there is a practice of keeping in touch with one's adult children, a practice which is good for the normal human being. As we have seen, our normative interests are satisfied only given the existence of such customs and practices, and once they do exist they may create obligations that apply to all the members of the relevant social group.

To sum up, I maintain that relationship obligations differ from Wallace's general moral obligations in 'nature and quality', not because relationship obligations presuppose loving attitudes, but rather because they rest (in part) on the value of the obligation itself, whilst the general moral obligations depend on the value of non-deontic phenomena.<sup>10</sup> Where the relationship is chosen (as in the case of friendship), it is worthy of choice in part because of the nexus of rights and duties that help constitute the relationship. By con-

---

<sup>9</sup> I'm grateful to Sam Scheffler for suggesting this sort of example.

<sup>10</sup> Historically, utilitarians have sought to reduce relationship obligations to general moral obligations (Mill 1991, p. 197; Sidgwick 1981, p. 258), but a utilitarian may allow that obligation can be a source of pleasure or that we can have a non-derivative preference for obligation. On such a view, obligation has a value which it derives from the value of certain non-normative phenomena, namely that of pleasure or of preference satisfaction. My thought is that (in certain contexts) obligation as such is good for us, and that this fact makes it appropriate for us to want it and/or derive pleasure from it.

trast, what makes being an anonymous benefactor worthwhile is the value of promoting the beneficiary's non-normative interests and (perhaps) of having your own non-normative interests promoted in return. Obligations of reciprocity and so forth require no grounding in our normative interests.

### III

*Aspects of Obligation.* Some readers will remain puzzled by the idea that one might value obligations (and rights) for their own sake. As Wallace notes, being under an obligation renders us vulnerable to blame, resentment and guilt should we breach. Few would welcome these reactions, whether as their subject, their object, or as a bystander. When my friend betrays my confidence, shouldn't I regret not just the fact that I have been betrayed but also the fact that blame and guilt are now appropriate? Doesn't that make the situation worse rather than better? If so, how can I value the obligation for its own sake? And shouldn't others take the same attitude?

An analogy may help. I am devastated when my friend dies an early death. This feeling of devastation is not a good thing. Nor is it a good thing that I find myself in a situation that renders this feeling appropriate. I could be the best of friends and deeply regret both the feeling and its aptness. But I could not regret the fact that should this person die an early death, it would be appropriate for me to feel devastated. To regret that purely normative fact would be to regret a valuable aspect of the friendship—not the attitude of a good friend.

Blame within friendship is in the same case. The bonds of loyalty are part of the good of friendship, and the aptness of blame for disloyalty is a constitutive aspect of this bond. One who values a friendship appropriately cannot regard the fact that the friendship renders blame for disloyalty apt as an unfortunate by-product of the friendship. A good friend cannot regret the purely normative fact that blame would be an appropriate reaction to gross disloyalty on either side, though they will regret it when such blame becomes appropriate.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, both an anonymous benefactor and his beneficiary are free to regret (or at least take no interest in) the fact

---

<sup>11</sup> It is also true, especially within friendship, that forgiveness would often be appropriate. Still apt forgiveness presupposes the aptness of blame and guilt.

that blame would be an appropriate reaction to an ungrateful recipient.<sup>12</sup>

Similar points apply when we turn to another aspect of obligation, namely the way obligation shapes practical deliberation. Here Wallace invokes Raz's idea that when under an obligation to do something one should no longer consider in one's practical deliberations various reasons that recommend breaching the obligation (Wallace 2012, p. 192). This observation picks up on an important feature of obligation. For example, if Tim, a good friend, asks me to help him move house when he couldn't do it without me, in deciding whether to accede to Tim's request I should not even consider mere inconveniences to myself and my family. Even if I still agreed, it would be wrong of me to weigh my family's interest in having dinner at the normal time against Tim's interest in being able to move. Should I decide what to do by adding up the trouble caused to each of my relatives and weighing them against that caused to Tim by my declining to help, Tim would be offended.

Now consider what attitude a good friend should have to such obligations. I might well regret that I must disrupt my family's daily routine in order to help Tim out. After all, the reasons for keeping to that routine are perfectly genuine considerations whose force is not in any way diminished by Tim's request. Furthermore, even before I've decided to comply I might regret the fact that (since Tim has no one else to help him) it is no longer appropriate for me to consider my family's interest in this matter. Neither form of regret is symptomatic of disloyalty. But to regret the fact that, with Tim, it is appropriate for me to set my family's lesser interests aside in situations of this sort, that *would* be off-colour.

There is no analogue of this in Wallace's benefaction example. Having accepted the life-transforming gift, Wallace may or may not welcome the appearance of an opportunity to reciprocate. But he has no reason to welcome the purely normative fact that he is *obliged* to reciprocate and must discount his own convenience should a suitable opportunity present itself. As a conscientious character, Wallace fulfils his obligation when the time arrives, and may indeed be relieved to discharge the debt, but he is not expected to relish incurring it. There is no valuable relation of anonymous bene-

---

<sup>12</sup> I need not deny that these people would be better off if they enjoyed being bound. I say only that such enjoyment is not expected of them and is nothing to do with the basis of their obligations.

faction constituted by such obligations and so nothing that should make Wallace value the debt for its own sake.

I have made my case by taking obligations of reciprocation as the paradigm of a ‘general moral obligation’, but the same points apply to our obligation to take due care of others’ expectations and of their emotional vulnerabilities. A conscientious person cannot be indifferent to the expectations he has aroused, nor to the vulnerabilities he has engendered in those around him. But why should he value having incurred these obligations? By contrast, though one can incur obligations of friendship unwillingly, in so doing one fails to appreciate the good of friendship.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV

*Explanatory Priority.* I have argued that relationship obligations cannot be reduced to those obligations we owe one another simply in virtue of being persons. So, might the boot be on the other foot (as Wallace supposes)? Stated in my own terms, the issue is whether relationship obligations, those grounded in our normative interests, can claim some sort of explanatory priority over those rights and duties which we have simply in virtue of our non-normative interests.

It all depends on what sort of explanatory priority Wallace has in mind. Speaking of ‘duties of love’, Wallace says

It is hard to imagine a basis for scepticism about these relational duties that isn’t also a basis for scepticism about relational duties in other, more impersonal contexts. If our friends and children and parents cannot make claims on us in virtue of standing in these distinctive relationships to us, then why should we suppose that strangers should be capable of making similar claims? (Wallace 2012, p. 197)

If the diagnosis of the debate offered earlier is correct, this priority claim looks dubious. I’m confident that human beings have normative interests, that they value rights and obligations for their own sake, but I see no reason to believe that such interests are a feature of any person, of any creature to whom the general principles of morality apply. A rational organism lacking normative interests

---

<sup>13</sup> For more discussion of the points made in this section, see Owens (2012, ch. 4).

would not be subject to relationship obligations, yet they could still demand that we acknowledge their need for various forms of help, reciprocation and non-interference (and we they). Such organisms fall within the nexus of relational duty.

Here is a parallel. It would be hard to imagine human beings who took no interest in the aesthetic. Enjoyment of the sky, the sound of birds, the attractiveness of persons, the cut of clothing, quite apart from anything that could be called a work of art, is a pervasive feature of human life. The normative landscape that we inhabit would be utterly different if these things didn't matter to us. But couldn't there be a race of rational Philistines who differ from us on this point? And wouldn't the human race and the Philistines owe each other many of the same forms of regard that we human beings owe one another?

I think the same is true of a race (followers of Rousseau perhaps) whose lives are not enhanced by rights or obligations, who are averse to any relationship that makes one vulnerable to apt blame, guilt, etc., and constrains one's practical deliberations. We would owe these Rousseauians many of the same forms of concern that we owe fellow humans who are complete strangers to us. And they would owe us a similar concern. The needs we share for goods, services, information, etc., would not be deprived of normative significance just because rights and duties are sometimes good for us but never good for them, just because we seek out bonds of loyalty and rights of intimacy that leave them cold.

There are other forms of explanatory priority. Further down the same page, Wallace writes:

My own view is that relationships of love provide a fruitful paradigm for thinking about the more general idea of relational obligation. We have an intuitive grasp on the idea that a relationship of this kind might be constituted by a distinctive nexus of reciprocal duties and claims. This idea is connected to our sense that relationships that are structured in these normative terms are distinctively valuable, relationships that we have good reason to nurture and to support and to enter into in the first place, and to affirm when we look back on the lives we have led. The real challenge, it seems to me, is to extend this paradigm from the case of intimate personal relationships to the more abstract case of morality. (Wallace 2012, p. 197)

Here Wallace suggests a genealogy of obligation. Obligation enters human life as one of the building blocks of relationships that we

value. From that starting point we somehow extend the notion of obligation to cover people with whom we have no valuable relations, whose connection with us makes neither our life nor theirs go better. They are simply fellow persons.

It does seem plausible to suppose that creatures like us with normative interests would first grasp the normative force of obligations whose imposition makes our lives go better, and only then come to appreciate that there are other demands on us whose force does not depend on this. If so, that is not a fact about the logical relations between concepts, one that would manifest itself in any creature that can employ the notion of obligation. It is a fact about us humans, one we'd expect to see reflected in the moral development of human children or in the social history of the human race. So how might the genealogy work? How might we move from interested forms of obligation to an appreciation of disinterested obligation?

Here is one possibility. Not all forms of friendship, acquaintanceship, etc., serve our normative interests, not all are good for us, and bad relationships do not bind us because they serve no normative interest, because obligation lacks value in the context of such a relationship. Now some forms of friendship are bad because they are exploitative, demeaning or otherwise fail to show the respect we owe our friend simply as a fellow person (Scanlon 1998, pp. 164–5). So a creature capable of appreciating the difference between good and bad friendship could come to see that standing behind the bonds of friendship are certain demands that others can make on us simply qua persons. Disinterested obligation is implicit in interested obligation.

Is this observation enough to meet Wallace's challenge? I suspect that many will want more. In at least some domains, moralists wish to *replace* interested forms of relationship obligation with something rather more impersonal; they seek to chart a course of moral development which leads us out of relationship obligation altogether. I conclude by briefly considering the case of obligations of association.

Suppose we are obliged to obey the laws of our community. In pre-modern political thought, this obligation was usually rooted in some valuable relationship. A kinship group is perhaps the most primitive form of political association; later on a shared language or culture and/or the tenets of a shared religion sufficed to generate obligations of association. Still the polity was founded on social con-

nections and roles that people valued for their own sake: being a Mercian, an Athenian, a Teutonic Knight, sharing certain ancestors, and so forth. Obligations of association made sense to people in the context of such forms of involvement.

Obligations of association are more extensive than those we owe to others simply as fellow persons, and it is natural to think of such obligations of association as exacting loyalty or allegiance to groups, institutions, nations and religions. For example, we are obliged to do more for fellow citizens than for perfect strangers, just as we are obliged to do more for our friends than for foreigners. At the extreme, we are required to risk our lives for our friends or our fellow citizens in circumstances that would not require us to risk our lives for a mere stranger. Can these more extensive obligations be secured without appealing to the idea that such bonds of allegiance are good for us?

Modern Liberalism is reductionist in spirit. It tends to detach political obligation (at least) from valuable relationships and forms of allegiance, placing it on a less parochial foundation.<sup>14</sup> Several strategies have been employed. One appeals to the notion of a contract or an agreement by which people who may have little else in common can bind themselves to mutually beneficial social arrangements. Here the value of the obligations generated by the agreement are regarded as purely instrumental (securing social coordination and so forth) and so require no background relationship to ensure their normative significance.

Another strategy invokes the notion of fairness to underwrite political association. Many suppose that other people's interests are owed a certain consideration simply because we associate with them for mutual advantage and that the rules of a political organization should ensure a fair distribution of the benefits of social cooperation (Rawls 1999, p. 4). The value of social cooperation here is treated as instrumental, not intrinsic, and the political philosopher's task is to lay down principles for dividing up the resulting benefits. Such a political morality is an application or extension of the general principles of reciprocity we invoked earlier in an attempt to explain away the obligations of friendship.

Both of these approaches, and others we have not considered, reject the idea that people bound together in a political association

---

<sup>14</sup> For an influential critique of this project, see Schmitt (2007).

must be embroiled in some other relationship, one that invokes bonds of allegiance and serves their normative interests. In this strand of Liberal thought, fellow citizens need share only non-normative interests in order to arrive at the mutual understanding (actual or hypothetical) that underwrites their polity, a fact that sets limits on the competence of political authorities.<sup>15</sup> But our sketchy history suggests that political association begins by serving our normative interests, and this throws up (in a political context) an awkward question: how exactly we are meant to have moved from a situation in which our political life engages our normative interests to a form of polity that presupposes *only* non-normative concerns? This may be a move we have yet to make.<sup>16</sup>

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University of Reading*  
*Whiteknights*  
 Reading RG6 6AH  
 UK  
 d.owens@reading.ac.uk

#### REFERENCES

- Frankfurt, Harry G. 1999: *Necessity, Volition, and Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, Erving 1963: *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Mill, John Stuart 1991: *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Owens, David 2012: *Shaping the Normative Landscape*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rawls, John 1999: *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Raz. Joseph 1986: *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 1994: *Ethics in the Public Domain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scanlon, T. M. 1998: *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>15</sup> It also implies that whilst Robinson Crusoe will miss his friends, he should not mourn the loss of his political connections.

<sup>16</sup> My thanks to Alex Gregory, Ralf Bader, Joseph Raz, Sharon Street, Nishi Shah, Sam Scheffler and Daniel Viehoff for comments on an earlier draft.

- 2008: *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schmitt, Carl 2007: *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sidgwick, Henry 1981: *The Methods of Ethics*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Wallace, R. Jay 2012: 'Duties of Love'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 86, pp. 175–98.

