

Book Review

The Moral Nexus, by R. Jay Wallace. Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. xiii + 306.

Jay Wallace's *The Moral Nexus* is a contribution to moral theory. Moral theory seeks to analyse the form, scope and force of deontic considerations and to connect them with general features of human nature and human life. Moral theory so understood is neither a branch of meta-ethics (concerned with the metaphysics of deontic properties or the semantics of deontic concepts or the epistemology of deontic judgements) nor a part of first order ethics (seeking to advise us about when to keep to promises and so forth); nevertheless it is crucial to our self-understanding. Much writing in ethics largely ignores this level of analysis, taking for granted (and/or eliding the differences between) notions like 'obligation', 'rights', 'wrongs', 'wrongings', 'morality', 'ought', 'reason' and so forth. In the hurry either to prosecute some meta-ethical programme or to offer casuistical advice by thought experiment, these notions are too rapidly deployed and without regard to their attendant difficulties. Wallace's book slows us down, draws our attention to these issues and demonstrates how handling them carefully and thinking them through puts morality in a clearer light.

Wallace identifies a normative structure he calls 'the moral nexus'. Here are its elements:

- (1) the idea of obligation as a consideration which plays a special role in our practical deliberations and which renders apt certain reactive attitudes (blame, and so on);
- (2) the notion of a directed obligation (or a right) whose fulfilment is owed to a specific person or persons to whom you are accountable if you don't perform;
- (3) the hypothesis that directed obligation is the basic form of obligation and that undirected obligations are to be understood in terms of it;
- (4) the hypothesis that directed obligation is to be grounded in the interests of the person to whom fulfilment of the obligation is owed;

- (5) the hypothesis that, within the sphere of directed obligations, the interests of all persons make an equal claim on us.

There is a sixth thought implicit in Wallace's discussion, namely that the moral nexus and its components are of great or even overriding practical importance. Towards the end of this review, I'll ask what might be said in support of this thought but first some observations on (1)-(5).

1. Obligation, deliberation and accountability

Let's start with (1). Early on in his book, Wallace identifies a 'special problem' for moral theory:

The challenge is to make sense of the fact that considerations of moral right and wrong have two very distinctive kinds of normative significance: they represent obligations or practical requirements in the first person perspective of deliberation, and they also structure our interpersonal relations of accountability. My initial case for the relational approach is based on its success in meeting this important challenge to moral theory. (p. 14)

Here Wallace picks up on a central issue in ethical philosophy, one that divides the subject into two schools of thought. *Rationalists* about obligation (for example, Kant) emphasise the special role it plays in our practical reasoning (perhaps its ability to override other types of practical consideration). *Sentimentalists* about obligation (for example, Hume and Mill) instead highlight the distinctive way in which people (the agent included) react to breaches of obligation, with guilt, blame, indignation and resentment, what Wallace calls our practices of accountability.

Wallace plausibly maintains that any adequate account of the nature of obligation (of right and wrong) must treat *both* the deliberative and the accountability aspects of obligation as essential. Simply by highlighting this fact and acknowledging the tricky issues that it raises, Wallace's book makes an important contribution to moral theory. Less clear to me is whether Wallace is seeking to *explain* why obligation has this double aspect. There is room for explanation here: how can obligation play one role in our practical deliberations, whilst playing a quite different role in our emotional lives? In the above passage Wallace appears to accept this challenge but I see no direct response to it in his text. What takes its place is a critique of various theories of obligation for allowing its two aspects to drift apart. In particular Wallace alleges that three influential views – utilitarianism, perfectionism and divine command theory – all treat accountability as no more than a contingent accompaniment of obligation.

For Wallace utilitarianism is an 'individualistic' theory in that it fails to explain why the 'relational' practices of accountability should be essential to

obligation (p. 77). Now, it is certainly true that, according to the utilitarian, our attitudes as well as our behaviour must conform to the utility principle: we should react to breaches of obligation (that is, failures to maximise utility) in a way that itself maximises utility and that might mean refraining from holding wrongdoers accountable on occasion. But note that the utilitarian takes exactly the same line with the subject's own practical deliberations – we should each deliberate in whatever fashion maximises utility – and it is an open question whether this will involve deliberating in accordance with the principle of utility.

Wallace appears to miss the last point when discussing the utilitarian's conception of the deliberative significance of obligation (pp. 39-40). Having assumed that the utilitarian's maximizing conception of what makes an action right must enter into the mode of deliberation recommended by the utilitarian, Wallace observes that this makes it hard to capture the distinctive deliberative character of obligation (of which more below). For some rule utilitarians, thinking with obligation in the way Wallace recommends might be a utility-maximising way to deliberate. Be that as it may, the issue is this: does utilitarianism imply a fundamental divergence between the utility principle's role in shaping our deliberations and its role in determining when and how we hold people accountable? Some divergence here is to be expected on any plausible view: Wallace acknowledges that it is often inappropriate for us to blame people whom we correctly judge to be wrongdoers, for example, where there is a good excuse. Only once the utilitarian theory of deliberation and the utilitarian conception of apt blame is before us can we assess how much further any divergence must go and how objectionable it will be.

For Wallace perfectionism is also objectionably individualistic (p. 79) but I want to focus instead on what he says about divine command theory, the theory that obligations bind us because God is in authority over us and commands their performance. Wallace comments:

It isn't really anyone's business whether other people live up to the requirements that are owed by them, individually, to God. It is between them and the deity, as we might put it, and hence not something the rest of us have good reason to get exercised about in the ways characteristic of interpersonal accountability. (p. 80)

Can't the divine command theorist respond that wrongdoing is in principle everyone's business even when performance of the relevant obligation is owed to a specific individual? For example, where a promise is breached, only the promisee (and perhaps other people harmed by the breach) gets to resent this but others may well share the promisee's indignation. I say 'may' because our practices of accountability here are complex. (We'll return to this issue below.) In any case, it seems that Wallace's utilitarian and theistic

opponents are arguably as well placed as he is to accommodate the nuances in our practices of accountability.

2. Directedness and deliberation

Let's move onto claims (2) and (3). Wallace distinguishes himself from some other writers in that:

I do not take it as a given that there is a well-understood notion of a generic moral obligation that admits of both directed and non-directed variants (so that there is a theoretical challenge that we face of identifying the further factor that will distinguish the directed from the non-directed moral duties). (p. 158)

Now Wallace does acknowledge the existence of non-directed obligations and towards the end of the book he advocates a pluralism about obligation, allowing that there are obligations whose performance is not owed to specific individuals, obligations that may conflict with the (strictly speaking) *moral* obligations whose performance is owed to individuals (pp. 230-3). Nevertheless, there remains a sense in which moral or directed obligation is the fundamental form of obligation since, Wallace argues, it is only for directed obligations that we have an account of why obligation constrains deliberation as it must (p. 51).

To follow Wallace's reasoning on the last point we must first ask how obligation does constrain practical deliberation (pp. 27-8). Ordinary practical considerations (call them *reasons*) recommend various courses of action but they do not demand them of us. We are perfectly entitled to weigh the reasons supporting each competing course of action against one another to settle what to do all things considered. I may want a two-week vacation but I also want to stay home and get some redecoration done. I weigh the relevant reasons against one another and decide on a one-week vacation. Though I have only partially complied with the reasons recommending a vacation, my thoughts and actions may be impeccable. Had I instead promised to go on a two-week vacation, things would be different. Here I can't simply weigh my reason to keep my promise against my own personal convenience in order to settle what to do. If I do so weigh it then I am subject to criticism whatever happens. Should I decide in the end on a one-week vacation, I break my promise. But even if, having consulted my personal convenience, I keep it and vacation for two weeks, I have failed to take the bindingness of my promise seriously. Simply to treat the promise as one consideration amongst others to be weighed against my own personal convenience is to ignore its character as a demand. Obligations, promissory and otherwise, should exclude at least some otherwise relevant considerations (like the need to redecorate) from my practical deliberations.

Wallace suggests that the exclusionary character of obligation is perfectly intelligible provided we are dealing with an obligation whose fulfilment is owed to someone. This is because the values underwriting such a directed obligation ‘are held in common by two different parties, the agent who stands under the directed duty and the claimholder to whom it is directed’ thus explaining why the agent would lack the unilateral discretion to satisfy or fail to exclude some otherwise relevant reasons (pp. 49–50, 57). How satisfying this explanation is turns on how we understand ‘held in common’. If it means merely that the values involved bear on the interests of both parties, it is unclear why that alone should imply that each party must exclude otherwise perfectly relevant considerations from their deliberations about whether and how to realize that ‘shared value’. I suspect Wallace has something else in mind, something which is indeed present in the case of promising, and that this is why he illustrates his point with the example of a promise.

At least part of the point of a promise is to give the promisee the right to weigh all the relevant reasons (the promisor’s convenience included) and decide whether they should perform. Here the promissory obligation should exclude a certain range of otherwise relevant reasons from the promisor’s deliberations about whether to keep their promise precisely because the deliberative significance of those reasons should be left to the judgement of the promisee: the promisee should get to decide whether, for instance, inconvenience to the promisor is sufficient to justify non-performance. But I worry that promising is in this respect a special case. In other equally central instances of directed obligation, the reason I lack the discretion to weigh all the relevant considerations myself is not because someone else should have it instead.

For example, I am obliged not to humiliate my friend even if doing so would save me a great deal of money. Furthermore, I shouldn’t even be weighing my need for the money against the costs to my friend of being humiliated; that alone would be disloyal. And finally, this is a duty that my friend can’t waive – he can’t make it permissible for me to humiliate him by weighing the relevant reasons and deciding that this would be OK because I’d be so much richer. Now, in this case the obligation is clearly directed: my friend can demand that I not humiliate him and resent me for so doing. It is also true that my reason not to humiliate him has exclusionary force but the connection between these points remains obscure. We can still ask why the fact that a ‘shared value’ renders me accountable to him should also prevent me from considering certain other pertinent and important values when settling how to behave towards him.

3. Blame and personal resentment

Following Strawson and other writers in the sentimentalist tradition, Wallace gives a central role to reactive attitudes like blame when describing our

practices of accountability (pp. 70-1). I side with Wallace (and against other authors like Scanlon) in treating such reactive attitudes as essential to the phenomenon of obligation. But Wallace also maintains that amongst the apt reactions to breach of an obligation, the resentment of the wronged party is 'paradigmatic' (p. 83) or 'primary' (p. 99) and that third-party indignation must be 'vicarious'. This might simply be a restatement of the idea that wronging is the fundamental form taken by a wrong (that is, by a breach of obligation) and so the paradigmatic cases of wrongdoing are those in which somebody is entitled to resent the wrong. On the other hand, Wallace may be going beyond that idea.

Here are three further claims Wallace might be making: (a) that third-party indignation is in place only if personal resentment is also in place; (b) that the capacity for indignation presupposes the capacity for personal resentment; and (c) that the only form of blame essentially or conceptually tied to the idea of a wronging is personal resentment. As to (a), we've already noted that sometimes third-party indignation remains apt even though I've lost my standing to resent a wrong done to me. These cases might be dealt with by treating them as special or non-paradigmatic. As to (b), even if you do learn to react to wrongdoing by empathizing with the victim's resentment, it might still be that you have not fully understood what it means for a wrong to be committed until you have grasped the *prima facie* aptness of third-party indignation. That leads us to (c). Why suppose that personal resentment is the only form of accountability essential to our idea of a wrong?

Some historians of law and morality have attributed this very notion to the pre-modern mind. On a 'private law' model of inter-personal morality, murder is a matter between perpetrator and victim or else between two families or tribes and is no business of unaffected by-standers. By contrast, isn't it part of the modern idea of directed obligation that injustice to others is the concern of all (and not just those within the same community or those who happen to be adversely affected by it)? When someone is wronged it is apt *ceteris paribus* for everyone to express indignation, to demand that the injustice cease. Where the wrong takes the form of a wronging, this third-party indignation and these demands will be a crucial form of recognition of the moral personality of the victim and a vindication of their rights. (In the eyes of many, such vindication is also one of the functions of the criminal law.)

This is all perfectly consistent with the fact that (unlike in the criminal law which serves other social functions) the wronged party has a special status: they alone can forgive the wrong, can receive apologies, can make or waive demands for compensation. This is so, we may agree, because the wrong involves a setback to the interests of the wronged party whilst also insisting that such setbacks, when unforgiven and uncompensated, are in principle everyone's concern. Neither personal resentment nor impersonal indignation is logically prior: both are conceptually bound up with wronging.

4. The place of the moral nexus

I'll conclude our discussion by turning to claims (4) and (5). For Wallace, it is a 'characteristically modern' notion that the interests of other people make claims on us simply in virtue of their status as human beings and *The Moral Nexus* is addressed to those of us who are prepared to accept this idea (pp. 21-2). Some readers might endorse Wallace's humanitarianism and yet still wonder whether it is only human interests (or only the interests of humans and non-human animals) that generate such claims. Furthermore, though all the interests of all humans make some claims on us, others may ask whether they do so with equal force. And people may worry over both matters without being at all sceptical of normativity or morality as such.

One character, call them the *aesthete*, thinks there are constraints on the will deriving from the beauty of things, constraints that look rather like Wallace's obligations. We have a duty not to destroy beautiful objects, a consideration which has preemptory practical force and the violation of which arouses rightful indignation from all. True, such a violation often affects the interests of those with the capacity and opportunity to enjoy the thing in question and these people can resent the destruction but, in the aesthete's view, that is a secondary matter. The primary wrong is against the value of beauty and indignation is in place regardless of what human interests are thereby affected. Furthermore, this aesthetic value is what *explains* why depriving humans of the opportunity to enjoy the thing matters where it does.

Wallace does not deny that there are deontic considerations of this sort nor that they are in a 'maximally capacious sense' *moral* considerations (p. 3). So what should be said about their importance relative to the considerations that constitute Wallace's moral nexus? The question will arise wherever there is some impersonal value that we are bound to respect or even promote. That value might for example be epistemic. A scientist may think it their duty to pursue scientific understanding because of its great value. In so far as it is in our interests to have things of value, fulfilling such duties would be in our interests too but, in the scientist's view, neither the value nor the duty is conditional on this. Indeed, there are cases in which there would seem to be no *benefit* in understanding a certain matter and yet the scientist might still feel bound to look into it. What would be wrong with treating *impersonal* demands of this sort as the thing that matters most in life?

Another character, call them the *partialist*, agrees with Wallace that what matter most are the things that affect human interests but the partialist denies that we owe equal consideration to the interests of all human beings. They might agree that there *are* such impartial considerations – that we owe help to needy strangers and wrong them if we don't offer it – whilst also giving the needs of friends, family and so forth priority over those of strangers. Wallace doubts that our special obligations to friends and family can be

derived from the universal principles of impartial morality (pp. 64-5). The partialist adds that these irreducible special obligations are their first priority and that we should worry about the demands of universal morality only once the Christmas presents have been bought, friends entertained and so forth. This is, I take it, the attitude of many perfectly modern people whatever lip service is paid to cosmopolitan ideals.

Without doubting either the reality or the importance of Wallace's moral nexus, one might seek to place it in a wider normative context. That is not because the nexus needs external support, because we must demonstrate that 'a commitment to relational obligations is implicit in the structure of rational agency' (p. 16) or some such thing. The point is rather that rational agents are subject to various normative suggestions originating outside Wallace's moral nexus and without some notion of how they all fit together, we are left to wonder whether we should take their suggestions as seriously or even more seriously than those which Wallace analyses so effectively.

I've considered only part of *The Moral Nexus* in this review. In particular I have ignored Wallace's valuable discussion of some more practical issues to be found in the book's final chapter. These include the nature of rights, the role of aggregation in moral reasoning and our obligations to future persons. *The Moral Nexus* also contains much illuminating and effective criticism of other influential views in practical philosophy. I've focused instead on the book's central positive claims and on the fascinating picture of morality that it defends.

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