

# Obligation Across Normative Domains

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*Moral obligations* are a central feature of our ethical thought and practice. But are there genuine obligations in other normative domains? What could an obligation be, if not a moral obligation? In this paper, I argue that there are indeed distinct sorts of obligations in other normative domains. In Section 1, I argue for an understanding of moral obligation in terms of appropriate blame and guilt. This account allows us to distinguish what's morally obligatory from what's morally best. It helps us vindicate supererogation, and understand demandingness objections to ethical theories. In Section 2, I argue that we can identify similar phenomena in other normative domains: the prudential, the epistemic, the aesthetic. In each case, there are distinctive reactions, sanctions or criticisms (analogous to moral blame and guilt) which give force to prudential, epistemic, and aesthetic obligations. I consider analogues of moral supererogation and moral demandingness in each case.

## Section 1. Moral Obligation

If something is morally obligatory, it wouldn't just be good to do, or best to do, but one *must* do it. But must on pain of what? At the most general level, one must perform the action, on pain of meriting some distinctive moral criticism or negative reaction.

One attractive way of making this answer more specific is by reference to the moral reactive attitudes: to say that some action is morally obligatory is to say that one *must* perform it, on pain of meriting feelings of moral blame and guilt. This is plausibly the source of the phenomenological potency of first-personal judgements of moral obligation. When one feels morally obliged to do something unappealing, one feels a distinctive emotional discomfort, caught between doing something one doesn't want to do, and being compelled to accept that one merits feelings of guilt and blame.<sup>1</sup>

It may be then that some action is morally best, but not morally obligatory, since it is not an action that someone typically circumstanced would merit the sort of negative reactions distinctive of morality (blame and guilt) for failing to perform. This understanding of the distinction between what is morally best and what is morally obligatory shows how there is conceptual room for the moral supererogation: action which is better than the least required to avoid meriting blame and guilt. It also allows us to see how there be convincing demandingness objections to moral theories. A moral theory will be overly demanding if it treats as morally obligatory an action which is in fact morally supererogatory. It treats failure to perform an action as meriting blame and guilt, when in fact such reactions would be unmerited.

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<sup>1</sup> For characterisations of moral obligation and moral wrongness in terms of the appropriateness of feelings of blame and guilt, see Gibbard [1990]; Skorupski [2010]; Mill [1861].

It is open to someone to accept this framework, but to insist that, as a substantive normative matter, one always merits feelings of blame and guilt simply for doing something other than what was morally best. This view looks extremely unappealing.

The starting point of our best judgements about what is blameworthy is our actual dispositions to feel blame, which we then shape through reflection and discussion with others. We *do not* typically feel blame towards people for failing to perform the morally best available action. A person who devotes a very substantial amount of her spare time and resources to helping the needy, but who does less than the most she possibly can, merits admiration and praise, not condemnation or blame. For this reason a charge of moral wrongness feels misplaced. Feelings of blame are frequently *unfitting* towards someone who acts well, but suboptimally. Consequently, we should reject the substantive claim that one is always morally obliged to do whatever is morally best.

## Section 2. Prudential, Epistemic, and Aesthetic Obligations

If there are to be meaningful notions of obligation in other normative domains, we will need to identify some distinctive charge or criticism with the requisite force in each case, which is analogous to the charge of moral blameworthiness or guilt-worthiness. I do this in the remainder of the paper.

In the case of prudence, it is clear that we do sometimes use deontic language: 'You really *must* lose some weight, for your own sake', or 'You've really *got to* take better care of yourself.' These deontic phrases are frequently deployed in a way that is not moral. Instead of a moral criticism, we may lay a distinctive prudential criticism or charge at the door of someone who fails to comply with the prescriptions in question: a charge of *foolishness* or, simply *imprudence*. Charging someone with being foolish expresses an attitude of 'prudential disapproval'. Such disapproval plays a central role in J. S. Mill's arguments in *On Liberty*.

Epistemic obligations are likewise given their force by a distinctive type of reaction. Judging someone *epistemically irrational* involves some degree of exclusionary reaction. The fitting reaction to a reckless belief-former, or to an incompetent belief-former, is to exclude them from our epistemic community. A person who forms beliefs in ways liable to lead to false beliefs is someone whose testimony is not to be trusted; it is appropriate to exclude her from our community of those whose assertions we rely upon. One has an epistemic obligation then to avoid irrational belief-forming behaviours; one *must* avoid these on pain of meriting (threat of) exclusion from the epistemic community. Thinking in terms of such exclusion helps us see both how talk of distinctively epistemic duty is distinct from moral duty, and how deontic talk ('must'-talk) gets purchase within the epistemic domain.

In the realm of the aesthetic, it may be thought that the notion of obligation is out of place. Two reasons for this are that: (i) aesthetic questions always admit of legitimate

variations in taste, and (ii) the disciplinary nature of judgements of obligation means that such judgements are always out of place regarding aesthetic matters. I argue that in spite of both of these worries, there are aesthetic obligations, using analogies with the other normative domains. Distinctively aesthetic disapproval can be merited, notwithstanding permissible variations in taste. However, as noted by Archer and Ware (2017) over-readiness to express aesthetic condemnation can have serious harmful consequences.