

# Owing Something to Another

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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Some duties are *undirected*. Some duties are *directed*.
- 1.2 I argue a duty is owed to someone if that person's wellbeing is the grounds of the duty.
- 1.3 Preliminary: If directed duties necessarily correlate with claim-rights, the Interest Condition is a sufficient condition for rights, also. But I'll leave that an open question.

## 2. The Interest Condition

- 2.1 When offering an account of directed duties, we want to do at least three things.
  - 2.1.1 Answer what it is to *owe* someone a duty. Answer why, when one infringes a directed duty, one wrongs the party to whom one's duty is owed. And, we want (comparatively) good extensional adequacy.
- 2.2 **The Interest Condition.**  $Y$ 's duty to  $\Phi$  is owed to  $X$  if, and in those cases *because*,  $X$ 's wellbeing is the grounds of  $Y$ 's duty.
  - 2.2.1 "Grounds" should be intuitive. Someone else's duty is grounded in one's wellbeing if that duty exists *because of*, *in virtue of*, *due to*, one's wellbeing.
  - 2.2.2 The Interest Condition is agnostic on when someone's wellbeing is of sufficient weight to place one under a duty. It says only, *when* someone's wellbeing places one under a duty, one's duty is owed to them.
- 2.3 Why the Interest Condition? Begin by thinking about why others' most important duties might exist? Plausibly, precisely *because* the actions those duties forbid (or the absence of the actions those duties require) would be so awful for the people they affect. The Interest Condition adds, *when* this is the case, and *because* it is the case, those duties are owed to them.
  - 2.3.1 Let me bolster this argument. When the Interest Condition's antecedent is satisfied,  $X$ 's wellbeing—this thing that is of special importance to  $X$ —is sufficiently important to give  $Y$  a categorical, exclusionary-like reason to act in certain ways. This is no trivial feat for  $Y$ . I suggest that it is fitting that the duty corresponding to this reason would, resultantly, be owed to  $X$ .
- 2.4 The Interest Condition also offers a plausible account of why, if  $Y$  violates her duty, she does not merely act wrongly but *wrongs*  $X$ :  $Y$  has failed to respect this thing, which was

important enough to give her has categorical, exclusionary-like reason to care about, that is of special significance to  $X$ .

### 3. Necessary Conditions

- 3.1 *The Demand Account.*  $Y$ 's duty to  $\Phi$  is owed to  $X$  iff, and *because*,  $X$  has standing to demand  $Y \Phi$ s.
- 3.2 Some problems in extension:
  - 3.2.1 Those with undeveloped, compromised, or damaged rational capacities do not have standing to demand actions from others, because they are unable to demand actions from others.
  - 3.2.2 People to whom duties are owed may have lost the standing to demand, because they are a hypocrite.
  - 3.2.3 And, they might never have had the standing, since it is the sort of duty that requires voluntary performance, and so having the standing to demand would undermine the duty's value and/or existence.
- 3.3 A problem with explanatory power: The Demand Account has the order of explanation the wrong way around. The reason it seems, at the least, open whether one has standing to demand actions required by duties owed to them is *because* it is an upshot of duties being owed to people that they have the resultant standing. This suggests...
- 3.4 *The Demand Condition.* Absent a defeater,  $X$  has standing to demand of  $Y$  that  $Y \Phi$  if, and in those cases, *because*,  $Y$  owes  $X$  a duty to  $\Phi$ .

### 4. Duties to Aid

- 4.1 Some duties to aid seem to be directed, e.g., such as a case in which one is confronted with a drowning child, whom one could save at minimal cost to oneself.
  - 4.1.1 But some duties to aid seem to be undirected, e.g, one's duty *to aid others*, stated generally. This duty is thought to admit latitude when deciding whom to aid, how to aid, and whether to aid on some particular occasion.
  - 4.1.2 Yet, presumably the ground of this duty to aid is the good one could do for those people one could aid. Doesn't this imply all duties to aid are directed? Owed individually to each person one could aid?
- 4.2 No. Consider, ***Inability to Aid***. When one is able to save some members of a group but unable to save everyone, and all else is equal, the fact that one is unable to save the whole group disables duties to save each member of the group. Rather, one is under a disjunctive duty.
- 4.3 Why is Inability to Aid true? Suppose the costs of saving A or B are  $c$  (and suppose in our case,  $c$  is nothing). Is one under a duty to save A? No:  $c$  is not the only cost relevant

to whether one is under a duty to save A. That one will fail to save B, were one to save A, is also relevant. Is one under a duty to save B? No. Same reason as above.

- 4.4 But is one under a duty to save A or B? Yes: *c* is insufficiently weighty to permit one to save no one.
- 4.5 (For the same reason, I think ***Costly Saving Everyone*** is also true: When one is able to save each member of a group but not required to save everyone because it is too costly, and all else is equal, the costliness of saving the whole group disables duties to save each member of the group.)
- 4.6 Now think about one's duty to aid others. One is not under a duty to save each and every person whom one could save, because this means that one will be unable to save others.
  - 4.6.1 And because one's duty to save each has been disabled, the Interest Condition's antecedent is not satisfied—no one person's wellbeing, whom one could save, places one under a duty to save them. Instead, one is under a disjunctive duty to save as many people as one is able to save, until it becomes supererogatory to save more.
- 4.7 Is this disjunctive duty owed to the group of people whom one could aid? Perhaps. Perhaps not.
- 4.8 What of the duty to save the drowning child? The duty will be owed to the child, *if in fact* one is under a duty to aid the child.
  - 4.8.1 More generally, duties to aid someone will be owed to them if, and because, one is under a (non-disabled) duty to aid them, grounded in the good of aiding them.

## 5. Why Not Necessity?

- 5.1 Merely by validly exercising a relevant normative power, one can make it that one owes someone a duty. This duty need not be grounded in the wellbeing of the person to whom it is owed. So it is not necessary for one to owe someone a duty that their wellbeing is the grounds of one's duty.
- 5.2 It might be objected that there are some views on which promissory duties are grounded in the good the promise does for the promisee. E.g., David Owens holds that 'promising exists because it serves our *authority interest*, our interest in having the right to oblige others to [perform promised acts].'<sup>1</sup>
  - 5.2.1 But it is unclear why having an interest in being a *promisee*—on Owens' view, our interest in having authority over others—explains why we, in our capacity as a *promisor*, are able to place ourselves under duties.
  - 5.2.2 General take-home: To offer an adequate account of the grounds of promissory duties, we need to explain why the promisor is able to place herself under a duty merely by exercising a promise. The wellbeing of the promisee looks incidental to this.

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<sup>1</sup> David Owens, *Shaping the Normative Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 146.