EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Nicholas Wolterstorff

For most of the twentieth century, ethical theorists primarily focused their attention on the ethic of action; and within the ethic of action, the good and the obligatory were the basic categories of analysis. Theorists understood the morally obligatory as a particular species of the morally good; and a principle challenge they saw facing them was to explain what more must we must add to an action good for us to do to make it something obligatory to do: what more must we add to make an action something such that, if we fail to do it, we are morally guilty?

Some thirty-five years or so ago, the ethic of the agent gained the attention of theorists, in the form of virtue theory. This event immeasurably enriched ethical theory. In one way or another, some theorists tried to reduce the ethic of action to virtue ethics; more customarily, however, they saw the ethic of action and the ethic of agent as two independent, though interacting, dimensions of moral evaluation.

Gregory Mellema’s The Expectations of Morality represents a strikingly innovative intervention into this discussion. The focus of Mellema’s work is, once again, on the ethic of action; but Mellema shows that, if our theories are to catch the richness of moral evaluations of action, we need to identify and analyze more than the category of morally obligatory as a subcategory within the morally good. Admittedly theorists had always recognized a few additional categories—for example, the category of the superogatory. A superogatory action is one that is good to do without being obligatory to do, and whose performance, in addition, makes the agent praiseworthy. Mellema strikes off in a new direction altogether.

In our everyday lives we all form expectations about what our fellow human beings will do, and we act accordingly; I mean to say, we all form beliefs as to what our fellow human beings are likely to do. But quite a different concept of expectation exists with which we also operate, distinct from this predictive concept. Usually when we tell people what we expect of them, we are not informing them of what we predict they will do—we may even believe that they will not do it—but informing them of what they should do, on pain of being blameworthy. Some things are expected of us as college or university students, and as college or university professors; as medical patients, and physicians; when we are near a door and see someone struggling to open it, and when we see a child wandering about lost in a shopping mall. In all such cases, our failure to do what is expected of us reflects poorly on us; we become appropriate subjects of disapproval, blame. The concept of expectation employed in all these cases is normative (evaluative).

We are morally obligated to perform some actions we are normatively expected to perform; failure to perform the actions makes us blameworthy in
THE EXPECTATIONS OF MORALITY

that specific way which consists of being morally guilty. But Mellema argues, with great cogency, that this is not the case for all normative expectations; some of what is normatively expected of us is not something whose non-performance would make us morally guilty. Blameworthy, yes; but not guilty. Thereby he opens our eyes to a whole rich category of moral evaluations that has eluded our theorists, even though, in the everyday, we all work with the category of the normatively expected in our lives. To pay no attention, in our theories, to any other subcategory within the good than that of the obligatory (and the supererogatory) is to treat the realm of the moral as far more rigorous and forbidding, far less rich in its differentiations, than it actually is.

In Chapter Three of his discussion, Mellema argues that, while no philosopher has thus far offered a sustained analysis of this concept of the normatively expected, some philosophers have, at least in passing, identified it. I am dubious about this second point. All of the passages he cites strike me as using the concept without identifying it, as we all do in our lives in the everyday, or as identifying and using that other concept of predictive expectation. Thus I think Mellema’s discussion is more innovative that he appears to think. No sustained analysis of the concept has occurred. And I am not convinced that any previous philosopher has even so much as identified the concept. At least, none in the Western tradition. Mellema cites passages from Islamic thinkers in which, so I think, the concept is identified — or, if not this precise concept, something quite close to it.

I must not give the impression that Mellema spends the bulk of his time identifying this concept of normative expectation. Of course, that was necessary; given the tradition, we all enter the discussion inclined to think that normative expectation is just moral obligation. But Mellema goes well beyond identification to give us an account of normative expectation. He shows what such expectation comes to, how the concept relates to other categories of moral evaluation, how what is normatively expected of us relates to our knowledge of what is normatively expected of us, and so forth.

I predict that some time will have to pass for those who work, or read around, in moral theory, fully to absorb Mellema’s contribution. Many attempts will occur to argue that the old familiar categories of moral obligation, supererogation, suberogation, and the like, are quite sufficient to deal with the phenomena that Mellema indicates. I should add one prediction: eventually others will see Mellema’s discussion as having shattered the old rigidities and made us see that the ethic of action is far richer, far less stereotyped, than we have been taught to think. This is one of those books that opens up a whole new, and intriguing, vista.

Nicholas Wolterstorff
Noah Porter Professor
Department of Philosophy
Yale University