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Book Reviews



M. v. Ackeren and M. Kühler (eds.)

The Limits of Moral Obligation: Moral Demandingness and Ought Implies Can

(New York: Routledge, 2016), 210 pages. ISBN: 9781138824232. Hardback: £90.00.

It seems reasonable to think that what we are morally obliged to do will be in some way connected to what it would be morally good for us to do. However, a familiar line of thought in moral philosophy holds that there are limits on what we can be morally required to do. First, it is claimed that there is a limit to how demanding moral obligations can be. Second, the principle of ought-implies-can holds that we can only be morally required to perform acts that we are capable of performing. The aim of this timely collected volume is to address this gap in the literature by collecting papers that investigate the interrelations between these two debates and the consequences for how we should understand the nature of moral obligations. The book certainly succeeds in achieving this aim and makes an important contribution to the literature on the limits of moral obligation.

The book begins with a helpful and impressively comprehensive overview from the editors of the literature on moral demandingness and ought-implies-can. After that the book divides roughly in two, with half the chapters focused primarily on moral demandingness and half focused primarily on ought implies can. I will explore two general themes that arise from this collection, focusing on those chapters that are most relevant to these themes.

One interesting theme that emerges is that the existing literature on moral demandingness appears to rest on an overly simplified conception of what constitutes demandingness. Brian McElwee argues that there is an important lack of clarity in the literature on demandingness concerning precisely how we should understand demandingness in this context (p. 22). Where an explanation is offered, it tends to be given in terms of *cost*. McElwee persuasively argues that this way of understanding demandingness is insufficient. The reason for this is that the *difficulty* of an action also contributes independently

to how demanding it would be to morally require that action from people. McElwee defends this claim through an appeal to the appropriateness of the sentimental reactions commonly associated with a failure to perform a moral obligation. According to McElwee, if someone is morally obliged to act in a certain way then they will be worthy of blame if they fail to act in that way. This is important because feelings of blame are less appropriate for the failure to perform a morally good act that is difficult than one that is easy. As a result, we need to accept that difficulty also has role to play in placing limits on moral obligation. McElwee then claims that ought-implies-can may simply be a limiting case of this more general principle.

The issue of the insufficiency of *cost* conceptions of demandingness arises again in Claire Benn's discussion of the relationship between acts of supererogation (those that are beyond the call of duty) and moral demandingness. As Benn points out (p. 70), a common thought in the literature is that supererogatory acts are those that are too costly to be demanded from people. After considering various ways of supporting this connection, Benn concludes that only 'The Confinement Objection', according to which a moral theory is too demanding if it confines the range of our permissible options, is plausible. However, a moral theory could avoid the confinement objection without making room for the supererogatory by allowing for the existence of tied options (p. 78). Benn concludes that there is only a contingent connection between supererogation and demandingness.

The importance of getting clear on what exactly is meant by demandingness is further emphasized by Marcel van Ackeren's detailed discussion of Joseph Raz's view of moral demandingness. Reading these three essays together presents a convincing case that anyone wishing to object that a moral theory is too demanding ought to clarify exactly what is meant by demandingness. One way to do so is through a phenomenological investigation, as Sophie Grace Chappell does in her account of the way in which encounters with value can generate demands. One of Chappell's key claims is that encounters with value, unlike encounters with ordinary objects, can be epiphanies. These are, "revelations to us of something that founds, or that revolutionizes, the whole way we see the world and think about value" (p. 85). This is an intriguing suggestion and Chappell does an exemplary job of motivating this thought through detailed discussion of examples from literature and history. However, more could have been said about exactly how we should understand what an epiphany is. Does Isaac Newton's encounter with a falling apple that led to his insight into the nature of gravity count as an epiphany? It seems that it should but it doesn't easily fit with the initial account Chappell provides,