In Defense of Prospectivism about Moral Obligation: A Reply to My Meticulous Critics

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I will begin with a brief summary of the contents of Ignorance and Moral Obligation (Zimmerman 2014)\(^1\) and then respond to some concerns raised by my critics.

1 Summary

The book is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, I distinguish three views about the nature of moral obligation. The first view is this:

*The Objective View:*  
One ought to perform an act if and only if it is in fact the best option one has.

Here “ought” expresses overall moral obligation, and “best option” means, as I put it in the book, the option that is best in terms of what matters morally, insofar as our moral obligations are concerned. The second view is this:

*The Subjective View:*  
One ought to perform an act if and only if one believes that it is the best option one has.

The third view is this:

*The Prospective View:*  
One ought to perform an act if and only if it is one’s prospectively best option.

\(^1\) All free-standing page references below pertain to this book.
By “prospectively best” I mean, roughly, what is best in light of one’s evidence about what matters morally.

The importance of the question as to which of these three views to accept becomes apparent when we confront an obvious fact, the fact that every choice we make is set against a background of massive ignorance regarding our past, our future, our circumstances, and ourselves. In Chapter 1 I discuss and reject certain efforts to reconcile these views, thus setting up the question: Which of these views ought we to accept and which ought we to reject?

In Chapters 2 and 3, I argue that we should reject the Objective and Subjective Views and accept the Prospective View, and I respond to a wide array of objections both to my argument and to the Prospective View itself.

Among those who accept the Prospective View (or something like it) the primary motivation for doing so has often been that of finding a useful guide to action. I argue in Chapter 4 that finding such a guide to action is considerably more difficult than many philosophers seem to have thought.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I address the issue of moral rights, regarding which the Prospective View has some interesting and controversial implications.

I should perhaps confess here that my conversion to the Prospective View came relatively late in my career. For many years I was an unabashed objectivist. I thought that the way in which G.E. Moore had defended his brand of objectivism against the charge that it ignored the relevance of ignorance to moral obligation was exactly right (Moore 2005, p. 98 ff.). Let me illustrate Moore’s strategy by means of the following variation on Frank Jackson’s famous example involving Jill and John:

**Case 1:**
Jill, a physician, has a patient, John, who is suffering from a minor but not trivial skin complaint. In order to treat him, she has three drugs from which to choose: A, B, and C. Drug A would in fact completely cure John; drug B would relieve his condition but not cure him completely; drug C would kill him; and giving John no drug at all would render him permanently incurable. Jill’s evidence indicates (in keeping with the facts) that giving John drug B would cure him partially and giving him no drug would render him permanently incurable, but it also indicates (in contrast to the facts) that giving him drug C would cure him completely and giving him drug A would kill him. Heeding her evidence, Jill gives John drug C, thereby killing him.

The essential details of this case are captured in the following table: