

Discussion Guide, Advanced

Episode 11

According to many modern liberals, moral obligations arise in only two ways. First, there are universal duties that we owe to every human being, such as the duty to avoid harming people unnecessarily. Second, there are voluntary obligations that we acquire by consent, as when we agree to help someone or promise to be faithful to our partners and friends. According to many modern liberals, there are no other types of moral obligation.

Critics of liberalism disagree. They say there is a third type of moral obligation that is neither universal nor voluntary. We can be morally obligated to a particular community even though we haven't assumed the obligation voluntarily. Obligations of membership and loyalty can arise from shared identities, communities, and traditions—because we're someone's son or daughter, someone's friend, a member of a particular community, or a citizen of a particular country.

Obligations of membership

Are there moral obligations of membership and loyalty that are neither universal nor voluntary? Are we sometimes obligated to do more for people who are closer to us? Is it possible to be obligated to do something for someone even if you haven't chosen to be obligated? Are there obligations of membership and loyalty that can compete with universal duties to humanity? As you think about these questions, consider the following examples.

1.

If you caught your brother shoplifting, would you call the police? Should you call the police? Many people would hesitate to report their own brother. Is this evidence of a special moral obligation that competes a universal duty of justice, or is it mere prejudice?

2.

If you caught your best friend cheating on an exam, should you turn him in for the sake of fairness? Or should you keep quiet out of loyalty? Are you under two competing obligations, or is your sense of loyalty a prejudice you should overcome?

3.

Do parents have greater obligations to their own children than to other people's children? Suppose your child is drowning next to the child of a stranger. Do you have a greater moral obligation to save your own child than to save the stranger's child? Why?

4.

Are all parental obligations voluntary? Are parents obligated to care for their children merely because they chose to have children?

5.

Do children have a greater obligation to help their own parents when they are in need than to help other needy people?

6.

Are filial obligations voluntary? Children do not choose their parents. If children have a greater obligation to help their own parents than to help other people, where does this obligation come from?

7.

Say there is a shipwreck, and the captain has to make a choice. He can either escape with his own son, or he can let his son drown but save several hundred of the ship's passengers. What should he do? If he chooses to save the passengers, his wife will never forgive him. Is she being unreasonable?

8.

In the American Civil War, General Robert E. Lee led the Confederate Army, even though he thought that slavery as a practice should come to an end. Lee said he could not bring himself to raise arms against his slave-holding countrymen in the South. Was there something admirable about Lee's reticence, or was it merely prejudice? Is it evidence of a special moral obligation that competes with a universal duty to humanity?

9.

Do Americans who live in El Paso, Texas, have greater moral obligations to people who live in Alaska than to people who live right across the river in Mexico? Why? What is the source of this obligation?

10.

Is patriotism a virtue? Or is it merely prejudice for one's own? Most people do not get to choose what country they will live in, and no one chooses where they're born. Why are we obligated to the people of our own country more than to the people of any other?