MORAL OBLIGATIONS AND SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS: A HUMEAN REDUCTION

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In this paper I shall argue that an account can be given of the sense of duty without reference to such specifically philosophical notions as "moral law," "moral rule," "moral principle," and "moral intuition." By shifting out of this vocabulary into talk about social roles, role expectations, and role modulations, attention is directed away from an attempt to justify people's moral judgments by demonstrating their consistency with those principles—an attempt that is likely, in view of the immense diversity of these judgments, to be unsuccessful and to have, at best, only an intellectual interest—and turned in a direction that, more modestly, concentrates on the kind of small-scale theory that helps us understand a little better how moral attitudes, moral judgments and moral changes occur.

In order to illustrate the effect of the shift from a moral-principles language to a social-roles language I give two sketches of how small-scale theory might develop—a suggestion about the nature of moral commitment and a suggestion about the causes of moral change. These features of the moral life are closely interrelated, inasmuch as, on the one hand, a principal element in the production of moral change is some innovator's commitment to the change in question. And,
on the other hand, commitment, whether this be commitment to change or
to the status quo, emerge in the context of very specific types of
expectations for role behavior, which I will describe.

I may as well say at the outset that, since I think the
differences between people who prefer a moral-principles language and
those who prefer a social-roles language are of the deep kind that I
call differences in world view, I do not expect the discussion that
follows to convince those who are not initially sympathetic. But I do
hope it will at least make the position more persuasive to the already
persuaded.

I.

My approach is Humean—not in the sense that I will be tracking
any actual discussion by Hume, for Hume did not make the move I am
going to make, but in the sense that I use Hume’s discussion of natural
necessity as a model for an analysis of obligation, or moral necessity.
I shall argue that the latter, like the former, so far from being a
feature of the world around us, is a feature of ourselves as observers
of, responders to, that world.

According to Hume, then, the

idea of a necessary connexion among events arises from a number of
similar instances which occur of the constant conjunction of these
events. . . . But there is nothing in a number of instances,
different from every single instance, which is supposed to be
exactly similar; except only, that after a repetition of similar instances, the mind is carried by habit, upon the appearance of one event, to expect its usual attendant. . . . 2

If I release my grip on a rock which I am holding in my hand, there is no reason why it should fall, and so no logical justification for my believing that it will fall. It might just as well, as far as the nature of things goes, fly upward into the air or burst out singing "Rock of Ages Cleft for Me." But as a matter of fact, it has never leapt into the air or burst into song; it has always fallen. Because it has always fallen, I expect it to fall on the next similar occasion, and I mistakenly attribute my expectation—which is only a subjective feeling in me—to a natural necessity in the physical world.

Physics dissolves into natural history; it is a record of how things happen to have behaved on the occasions when, and in the places where, scientists have been in a position to observe them. The so-called laws of physics (e.g., the law of gravity) are no more than observed regularities to which we have attached a feeling of expectation. This expectation, "which we feel in the mind, this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant," is the sole source of "the idea of power or necessary connexion." 3

So far Hume. A similar, and as I think even more persuasive, account can be given of moral necessity—more persuasive because though moral laws still have a grip on some people’s minds, they hardly have
the social cachet that they, along with physical laws, once had. In Kant's day almost everyone would have agreed with him that the onus probandi lay on anyone who, like Hume, challenged the physical a priori. In the Age of Reason that was also true of the moral a priori, but the onus has now probably shifted from challenger to defender.

However that may be, my thesis is quite simple. It is that the duty people feel to perform such-and-such acts does not arise from the nature of those acts, for any act that is frequently repeated in the appropriate circumstances will come to be experienced as entailing an obligation to perform it. Rather, it arises from the fact that the act in question has been repeated often enough for people to count on it's being performed again in similar circumstances. Thus, if physics dissolves into natural history, moral theory dissolves into social psychology.

The key words here are "act" and "in the appropriate circumstances." In the first place, then, it is important to distinguish between events (e.g., a knee jerk) and acts (e.g., kicking a punt). Hume's argument, as he himself formulated it, applied to any and all behavioral regularities. My expansion of his argument applies only to behaviors where the observed regularities result from (or are thought to result from) some voluntary act.

Thus the sphere of moral expectations, in distinction from those nonmoral expectations regarding nature which Hume discussed in the Treatise and the Enquiry, is the sphere of the voluntary. A physician who taps a patient's knee with a rubber hammer expects the
knee to jerk; if it does not he may be surprised or alarmed, but he
does not blame the knee or the patient. If a patient fails to keep an
appointment, the physician may or may not be surprised, but in either
case he will blame the patient so long as he believes the patient could
have kept the appointment had he chosen to do so. As the line between
the natural and the voluntary shifts, so the sphere of moral
expectations also shifts. Animists commonly praise or blame nature for
behaviors that nonanimists would neither praise nor blame, because they
attribute those behaviors to the intentional acts of spirits. And
consistent behaviorists, if there are any, blame a patient for a broken
appointment no more and no less than they blame a knee for its failure
to respond to a tap.

Assuming, then, that people generally allow a sphere of the
voluntary, even though they may bound it differently, we have now to
describe the particular kinds of circumstances within that sphere in
which specifically moral expectations arise. As an example, consider a
new dean who has come into office after the long "reign" of an
autocratic predecessor. Uncertain what will be acceptable to the
faculty, he seeks, and accepts, the advice of the department heads on
an administrative appointment that he must soon make. This creates an
expectation, however slight, on the part of the department heads that
they will be consulted, and that their advice will be taken, regarding
subsequent administrative appointments--something they would certainly
never have expected from his predecessor. Perhaps it also creates a
slight expectation on the part of the dean that he will again consult
them, an idea that would never have crossed the mind of his predecessor. If he does consult them again this strengthens both the department heads' and the dean's own expectations that the group will be consulted. In due course, what was initially experienced merely as an expectation of future decanal behavior comes to be experienced, merely because the expectation has been repeatedly satisfied, as decanal duty—not merely something that he does but something that he ought to do.

This is a case in which a defeated expectation generates indignation. And if the dean has internalized these expectations he will feel the same weight of censure (self-blame), whenever he fails to consult the department heads, that the department heads level against him. Social censure and self-blame operate powerfully to induce the dean to satisfy, and in satisfying to strengthen, the department heads' expectations, and eventually the practice of consultation will be incorporated in the by-laws of the faculty and approved by the trustees. It is practice, then, and the expectations arising from that practice that make it binding on the dean to consult the department heads. His autocratic predecessor certainly never consulted them, and nobody so much as dreamed that he ought to. Without anyone quite realizing it, and certainly without anyone deliberately planning it, the governance of the university has undergone a sea change.

But clearly not every defeated expectation generates indignation. If the dean regularly arrives in his office at 9:00 a.m. people who have business with him—not only his secretaries but all
those department heads—will soon come to expect him to arrive at that hour and will plan their own day accordingly. If some day he does not turn up until noon they will doubtlessly be annoyed, but they will hardly feel indignation. What, then, are the differences in the social contexts of these two expectations that lead people to feel indignation when one of them is frustrated and only annoyance when the other is frustrated?

Before tackling this question I shall summarize the main features of this Humean reduction:

Every social role (e.g., those of dean, of department heads, of physician, of patient) consists in a set of specific behavioral responses ($R_1, R_2, R_3\ldots$) in specific social circumstances ($C_1, C_2, C_3\ldots$). What the specific response in any specific circumstance is, depends on a variety of factors (e.g., the age, temperament and experience of the agent). But the occurrence of response $R_1$, whatever it happens to be, in circumstance $C_1$, creates, both in the agent and in those with whom he is interacting, a slight expectation that when $C_1$ recurs he will again do $R_1$. Every repetition of $R_1$ in $C_1$ strengthens this expectation.

Further, behavioral responses in certain, as yet unspecified, social situations come to be experienced not merely as expected but as morally compelling, just as expectations generated by repeated occurrences of natural events come to be experienced as physically necessary. But the necessity—physical in the case of natural events, moral in the case of social behaviors—is not in the events or the
behaviors. Those are just whatever they are. The necessity in both cases is something "we feel in the mind" as a result of regularities that we have observed.

On this view, then, moral principles, moral rules and moral laws are simply generalizations about some common features of some social roles. To say that truth-telling, for instance, is a moral principle is to make the empirical assertion (which is subject to falsification) that over a great sweep of human history a common feature of many different social roles has been an expectation that the role players in all these roles will tell each other the truth.

II.

This account is likely to be resisted by moral philosophers and all those who, whether philosophers or not, are disposed to believe in moral absolutes. In the rest of this paper I shall (1) try to meet what I think are the main—they are certainly typical—objections to the reduced view that I have put forward, and at the same time (2) spell out the specific features of those social contexts which give rise to expectations that are experienced as morally, rather than as merely socially, compelling.

It will perhaps be allowed that I have given a not implausible account of how social norms emerge and why they have whatever force they have. But moral norms, it will be said, are different, and my account does not begin to explain their nature or their authority. What, then, is a moral norm? What, for that matter, is a norm? A norm
is an instruction to a role player that playing this role well calls for him to act in such-and-such a way in such-and-such circumstances. Thus there is a norm for the dress of physicians, and there is a (different) norm for the dress of auto mechanics. Though both of these norms allow for considerable variation in costume, for physicians or mechanics to venture beyond this tolerated range of variation exposes them to censure. They are subject to this censure for no other reason than because people have come to expect physicians to dress in such-and-such a way and mechanics to dress in such-and-such a different way, and people have come to expect them to dress in these ways for no other reason than because they have in fact dressed in these ways. Physicians' dress and mechanics' dress change over time; as their dress changes the norm, doubtlessly lagging a little, changes too. That is, people come—but not everybody at the same time—to expect all physicians and all mechanics to dress in the new ways, whatever they are, and so censure those who are slow in accommodating to the new norms.

Everyone, presumably, will agree about this; nobody, presumably, is made uneasy by the relativity of social norms—e.g., the norms for dress—to the actual behaviors of actual people in actual social settings. The question is why the same sort of account should not be given of those norms which people who believe in moral norms call moral norms—for instance, the norm that physicians should not lie to their patients and that auto mechanics should not lie to the people who have brought their cars in for repair? What is the difference
between the norm, "Wear a white jacket during your consulting hours" and the norm, "Tell your patient the truth about the gravity of his illness"? Certainly one obvious difference is the intensity of people's reactions to the violation of a norm. When the violation is merely ridiculed or only mildly censured (someone eats peas with his knife) the norm is called a social norm; when the violation is severely censured it is called a moral norm.

Thus there is indeed a difference between social norms and moral norms, but it is not a difference between the kinds of norms they are, only a difference between the kinds of responses people make to norm-violation. Moral norms, that is to say, are not *sui generis*; they are just those norms, whatever they happen to be, about which, for whatever reasons, one feels strongly. In this country at this time good manners, including eating peas with one's fork, are only social norms—if, indeed, they are still that. Nobody attaches much importance to them, even those who are punctilious about following them. But in other countries at other times, good manners are immensely important; they are marks of, and so help maintain, the class distinctions on which those societies are based. For someone like the Duchesse de Guermantes good manners not only mattered a great deal; they were all that mattered, and Marcel's failure to distinguish between bowing to her in the Opera-Comique and bowing to her in the street was as serious, really, as would be the failure of a game keeper to distinguish between, say, shooting pheasants and shooting peasants—except for the fact that the silly old Republic made an issue
of it. Or take the hullabaloo over the recent disclosure that the Princess of Wales apparently does not address her husband as "Sir." Elderly upper class Englishmen may feel strongly about this; if they do it is because they see it not as an isolated solecism but as evidence that the world is going to pieces.

In a word, we can now specify one feature of the kind of social context in which a norm violation generates moral indignation rather than annoyance. If the violated norm is taken as symbolic of a whole way of life, one in which the people concerned have a very large investment, or if it is believed that the norm protects those people from some serious harm, violation of it is likely to produce a strong enough response for what would otherwise be merely a social norm to become a moral norm. Thus twenty years or less ago smoking in public places, so far from violating any social norm, conformed to one and was consequentially admired. More recently smoking has come to conflict with a new social norm and so is censured. Indeed, so heated and so widespread is the indignation over the adverse effects of smoking on the lungs of nonsmokers that it is moving rapidly toward becoming the violation of a moral, not a merely social, norm. Thus norms are context-relative: What is a social norm at $t_1$ for $I_1$ may be a moral norm for him at $t_2$ and a moral norm for $I_2$ at $t_1$.

But unless all indignation is moral indignation there must be some second feature of those social contexts that elicit specifically moral responses to defeated expectations. Let us assume, then, that the indignation felt by elderly Englishmen when they learn the Princess
of Wales does not address her husband as "Sir" is correctly described, however intense that indignation may be, as social indignation, and that the indignation felt by the department heads when the dean ceases to consult them regarding appointments, even though their indignation may not be particularly intense, is correctly described as moral. What difference in social context makes these two cases different?

In order to understand the difference, notice, first, that we constantly read other people's behavior for their intentions, in the same way that we read their letters for the messages they contain, and we may discover that we have misread their behavior in the same way that we may discover we have misread their letters. Someone extends his right arm from his side; we read this as an intention to admire the quality of our new jacket. Instead, his arm continues to move up towards his face—we see that his intention is to remove his glasses. We are mildly embarrassed, possibly disappointed, but we are not indignant. Moral indignation is one's response when the reading and misreading involve a particular kind of intention, the intention to cooperate. Moral indignation occurs when (1) we have read a bit of someone else's behavior as meaning an intention to cooperate, (2) that person's cooperation would help us and his failure to cooperate would harm us, (3) it turns out we have misread it—it was not an intention to cooperate, and (4) we believe our original reading was justified—the other person constructed his behavior carelessly, he changed his mind in mid-stream without warning us, or he wanted us to misread it.
So much in general. To return now to our examples, the difference between the Princess of Wales case and the department heads case is this. On the one hand, the Princess of Wales had done nothing that would lead anyone—neither the Prince nor the elderly Englishmen—to believe that, because she had called the Prince "Sir" before she married him, she intended to call him "Sir" when she became his wife—marriage from her point of view was a difference that made all the difference. On the other hand, repeated consultation had led the department heads to believe that a tacit commitment had been made—on the basis of prior experience they had discounted the dean's injunction, "Don't take this as a precedent." When we are dealing with another person rather than with merely inanimate nature, we believe that his behavior means something, and that it means to him pretty much what it means to us. If we didn't believe this we would never seek to interact with people; we would merely react to their behavior, as we react to a stone that is falling in our direction. In the case of people, in contrast to stones we of course observe behavior, but we do so in order to be able to infer intentions, and we respond, not to the behavior, but to what we take those intentions to be.

When it is a matter of inferring, or reading, the intentions of people involved in any sort of joint activity—Hume's example of two men, each with an oar, engaged in rowing a boat is a good one—each party is likely to read the other's behavior as showing an intention to continue the activity that is under way. Thus the expectation that somebody intends to go on doing something (which is different from, and
stronger than, the mere expectation that he will do it) occurs when some joint activity is under way. The possibility of social life depends on most people developing this kind of expectation in most situations involving joint activity; clearly, cooperation cannot wait on the successful negotiation of explicit contracts.

Three further comments: First, there may be disagreement among the participants about whether the pattern of behavior in which they are involved is, or is not, a pattern of cooperation. The department heads, believing that the dean's behavior in consulting them fits the pattern of cooperation, are indignant when he ceases to consult. He, however, may see his behavior as fitting the learning-to-do-my-job pattern, in which case his behavior does not in the least commit him to consult once he has gained the experience he thinks he needs. Here again, then, what is a social norm for I₁ at t₁ may be a moral norm for I₂ at t₁ and, quite possibly, a moral norm for I₁ at t₂.

In cases of this kind much depends on whether one party to the disagreement can persuade the other that his understanding of the other's behavior was warranted. If the dean persuades the department heads that he never meant to cooperate and that their eagerness to participate in decisionmaking has led them to over-read his intentions, their indignation is likely to be dissipated, even though their disappointment may remain intense. Or if they, in their turn, convince him that his behavior, however unintentionally, justified their understanding of it, he is likely to feel some obligation to consult them. The critical question for each party, then, is the other party's
intentions: Did he mislead me, or did I misread him? If the two parties cannot agree about whether it is a case of misleading or of misreading their dispute may have to be referred to the courts, which, over the centuries, have developed rules for deciding whether such-and-such a verbal expression means that an understanding exists.

Second, explicit promises and formal contracts (the verbal expressions on which courts focus attention) do not underlie cooperation and "justify" it. On the contrary, at the human level of social organization the very notions of promising and of contracting depend on expectations that cooperation has already generated, expectations that we can see operating in societies far too simple to have conceived the notions of promise-keeping and contracting, let alone to have formulated explicit rules. But of course, once promise-keeping and contracting emerge as social institutions they provide alternative routes to commitment. And because people on the whole keep promises and fulfill contracts, violations of them occasion moral indignation just as does a simple failure to continue cooperation once it has begun.

Third, cooperation does not actually have to begin for one party to understand that the other means to cooperate. If you sit down beside me in the boat and pick up an oar I read you as intending to join me in rowing, before you have so much as dipped your oar into the water. And even if this patient has never before made an appointment with this physician, so that the physician has no reason, based on prior experience with this patient, to expect him to be punctual, the
physician knows—and the patient presumably knows—that the role of
physician and the role of patient involve cooperation at many points,
including the making and keeping of appointments. It is enough, in a
word, if the actual behavior (telephoning, asking for an appointment,
accepting it) fits, in memory or in anticipation, the pattern of
cooperation.

In a word, moral indignation arises not when just any expectation
happens to have been defeated but when the expectation is one based
on one's understanding of another person's intention to cooperate. But once again what distinguishes a moral norm from a social norm is not a feature of the world; it is only something "felt in the mind," in this case the indignation felt when one realizes that what one had supposed to be a mutual understanding to cooperate was not one.

III.

But even if it be allowed that I have correctly described the feeling that is aroused when a moral norm is violated, and correctly specified the circumstances in which this feeling is aroused, many philosophers will argue that my account ignores what to them is the all-important difference between feeling obliged and being obliged. What distinguishes moral norms from social norms is not a difference in feeling but that fact that, whereas social norms are, all of them, embedded in roles and so change as the roles change, moral norms are independent of roles and so do not change as roles change. My account,
that is, does not, and cannot, account for the categorical nature of moral rules, or principles, such as the duty to tell the truth, the duty to keep promises, and the duty to treat human life as sacred.

My reply is that a moral principle is simply an expectation that has been abstracted from all of the roles in which it is actually embedded. Behaviors that are specific to one and only one role (such as addressing one's husband as "Sir") are not likely to be abstracted from the social role of which they are a part, but behaviors that are expected in many different roles are easily abstracted and so considered apart from any and all roles; they then seem to be, as philosophers say, "universally" binding. In a word, because these expectations have been abstracted from their concrete settings in specific roles, they seem to philosophers to have an obligatory force that puts them in opposition to, and gives them a moral priority over, any and all of the roles in which these expectations are actually embedded.

But ordinary people, who may go along with this view as long as it is stated in general terms, recognizes that the philosophers' moral principles are context-relative as soon as they are face to face with a concrete situation in which they have to make a decision. They at once put truth-telling, promise-keeping and the other so-called moral principles back into the various roles from which the philosophers have abstracted them. That is, people commonly take into account the specific social role they happen to be performing at the time they find they have to choose, for instance, between lying and telling the truth.
A university president who on occasion lies to his faculty without a qualm (he would probably describe it to himself as fudging a bit; "lying" is an ugly word) might not for a moment consider lying to his wife or children. A physician who would tell the truth about a very gloomy prognosis to a young man with family responsibilities (he would say that the young man needs to get his affairs in order) might lie to an elderly patient with the same prognosis ("Let him die in peace"). And so on.

Thus when a norm ("Do not lie") is contemplated from a distance it may very well look universal, categorical, role-transcendant; seen from a distance it has a halo around it. But as one moves close up in order to decide whether to follow it or to violate it in this or that particular situation, it turns out very much to have a series of local habitations, that is, to be as context-relative as any so-called social norm. The only difference is that it happens to be a norm that has a local habitation in several different roles. This explains why the violation of a moral norm is commonly regarded as graver than the violation of a social norm: expectations regarding a norm associated with several roles will have a greater weight than expectations regarding a norm associated with but a single role.

But my examples of university presidents and physicians do not begin to reflect the actual diversity of norms or the relativity of norms to social context. For my examples are drawn from the expectations of upper-middle class, late twentieth century Americans for the behavior of late twentieth century professional people. And
even here, within a relatively small and seemingly homogeneous social class, a consensus on verbal formulas (for instance, "Lying is wrong," "Life is sacred") may mislead. It is like the virtual unanimity of the affirmative answers to a pollster's question, "Do you want peace?" (or "lower taxes?" or "a balanced budget?") as long as the answerers never consider what they might have to sacrifice for peace, lower taxes or a balanced budget.

Thus moral philosophers are a bit myopic. They also tend to be both ethnocentric and class-centric. They not only focus their attention on Western society and largely ignore non-Western societies; even within Western society they concentrate on the opinions of philosophers, theologians, jurists and other highly respectable people, so that the norm "Life is sacred" looks much better established than it would look if the opinions of gangsters, ghetto residents, and CIA agents were also taken into account.

Let me put this in a different way in order to bring out a second, but connected, point. A moral principle stands to the instructions that are embedded in a number of social roles in the way that "horse" stands to Dobbin and "cow" to Bossie. One can move up a ladder from lower-level principles to higher-level principles as one can move from "horse" and "cow" to "animal." In a word, moral philosophers construct taxonomies of moral principles much as botanists construct taxonomies of plants. These moral taxonomies correspond more or less closely to the instructions embedded in social roles—though we may suspect that the correspondence is less close than the
correspondence between a botanical taxonomy and the plant kingdom.

It is a question what good these classificatory systems are. If one's interest in moral principles is at about the level of the interest of a man who breeds racers for people who want to win the Derby and hunters for people who ride to the hounds, the answer is, "Not much." On the other hand, abstract moral principle afford a harmless satisfaction to those who delight in system, order, and hierarchy, and they can be useful whenever people want the "good reasons" they give for whatever they are doing today to be consistent with the "good reasons" they gave yesterday for doing a quite different thing in seemingly similar circumstances—just as botanists can extract from a botanical taxonomy good reasons for calling two quite different looking plants "potentilla."

Though one might, then, not particularly want to be a moral taxonomist oneself, one could no more object to moral taxonomies than to botanical ones, were there not so often a whiff of medieval realism about the former, which one detects much less often about the later. It may be that moral philosophers use "Lying is wrong" to refer to a set of similarities shared by a subset of instructions that occur in a number of otherwise different social roles—as botanists presumably use "potentilla" to refer to a subset of similarities shared by a subset of plants. But listen to sentences in which "moral principle" occurs. They have a quite different tone from sentences in which "potentilla" occurs, a tone that lifts moral principles out of the ordinary run of classes and suggests that they are important in some special way. The
"moral principle" type of language is appealing, I think, because it slips an "ought" into an "is"—because in the twinkling of an eye it converts a class—which may have a very large number of members, but which is still only a class—into something transcendent and authoritative.

The term "universal" works the same magic. The notion of consensus gentium once appealed, and possibly still appeals, because a rule on which all mankind agrees has an authority that cannot be traced to political institutions or historical traditions, for these obviously vary from tribe to tribe; it must, then, have a "higher" source. Despite the fact that people today know rather more about the diversity of moral beliefs and practices than did the ancients, some of the aura surrounding the consensus gentium survives: magnifying a consensus has the advantage that dissenters from the consensus are diminished to an increasingly insignificant minority. From this point of view an almost complete consensus works as well as a complete consensus: it enables one to write off the minority as a lesser breed, deficient in some way because it fails to recognize the authority that everybody else recognizes. In a word, if the dissenters can be made to look not just like a minority but a very small minority, they can be treated not merely as statistical deviants but as moral deviants. Once more, a slippery transition has been made from "is" to "ought."

It was Hume, so far as I am aware, who first noted this slippery transition. In a well known paragraph in the Treatise, which he introduced with characteristic—and studied—casualness, he wrote:
I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation which may, perhaps, be found of some importance. In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with. . . . instead of the usual copulations of propositions is and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought or an ought not. This change is imperceptible, but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought or ought not expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others which are entirely different from it.\(^5\)

If Hume is correct moral norms cannot be distinguished from "merely" social norms either by claiming that (1) moral norms, as abstractions, have unlimited scope ("Life is sacred"), whereas social norms, as concrete rules, have only limited scope ("Eating peas with a knife is good manners among upper class people in the U.S. and the U.K."), or by claiming (2) that moral norms are universally acknowledged ("Only deviants fail to recognize that life is sacred"), whereas social norms are acknowledged only by relatively limited social groups ("Upper classes in the U.S. and the U.K., but not upper classes in China and Japan, acknowledge that eating peas with a fork is good manners"). For if there is a gap at all between "is" and "ought" then
there is just as much of a gap between an abstract "is" and an abstract "ought" as there is between a specific "is" and a specific "ought," and just as much of a gap between a universally acknowledged "is" and a universally acknowledged "ought" as there is between a restrictedly acknowledged "is" and a restrictedly acknowledged "ought."

But is Hume correct? I think he is certainly correct in holding that there is no conceivable way of getting from "is" to "ought," but the analysis in the first section of this essay, if it is correct, shows there is a straightforward causal relation between "is" and feelings of "ought," for the feeling of obligation is readily attached to the performance of any behaviors that are parts of well established social roles.

This answer should satisfy Hume; it is fully in accordance with his proposal to "introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects." But the moral philosophers to whose criticisms I have been replying will not be convinced. They will regard my own transition from "is" to feelings of "ought" as even more slippery than the one I accused them of making. They will say that the "ought" I have derived from "is" is not a real "ought"; it is just another "is"--the "is" of a feeling of "ought." We are back to our starting point.

In this imaginary debate between the moral philosophers and myself we have--alas!--been talking past each other the whole time. I shall therefore break off my attempt to meet the moral philosophers' objections to my Humean reduction by countering with some of the difficulties their own unreduced version of moral obligation
encounters. Instead, I shall take a different tack and try to deal directly with the feeling, shared by many nonphilosophers, of course, that some acts are "right" and others "wrong," irrespectively of what people's social expectations for these acts are. I do not question the existence of a widespread belief that duties are independent of social roles, any more than Hume questioned the existence of the feeling of necessity, but I shall try to show that its existence depends on a context of unnoticed social expectations.

IV.

It is widely believed, then, that people have an obligation to perform certain acts even if those acts are not elements in any social role whatever, indeed, even if those acts are directly antithetical to acts which important social roles require. Thus it is often said in criticism of nineteenth century Americans that they had a duty to preserve the life, liberty and property of Blacks before anybody—even the Blacks themselves—expected their lives, liberties and property to be preserved, and of twentieth century Germans that they had a duty to Jews even if (indeed, especially if) no social roles survived in Nazi Germany which incorporated rights for Jews.

As long as this feeling of the seeming independence of duty from role expectations is taken to be veridical, i.e., as giving insight into the nature of things, the account that philosophers give of it—that its source can only be a set of ideal, transcendental norms—will seem plausible, and the reduced language that I am
recommending will seem inadequate. Accordingly, it is not enough for me to point out the difficulties in which the moral principles language is emeshed. I must give an account of this feeling—and it is a feeling—that shows that it too is dependent on social expectations, even in the hypothetical circumstances described, viz. even when there are no social expectations that support it. Or, to put this less paradoxically, I shall show that acts thought to be obligatory because they correspond to the requirements of some transcendental norm are all factually responses to the actual norms of a subgroup that is out of phase in some respect with the actual norms of the larger group of which it is a part. But for this answer to be convincing or even intelligible I must introduce the concept of role modulation.

Viable societies exist at all, and have whatever stability they happen to have, only because most people most of the time have successfully internalized the social roles they find themselves playing. But human societies are not societies of ants; men and women don't internalize their roles that completely. They are constantly adjusting their behavior to the diverse and complex environments in which they play their roles—either to changed circumstances or to existing circumstances that they once ignored but that they have now come to regard as relevant to the role in question.

A role, in other words, is not a straightjacket; it is more like a rather loosely fitting garment. To outsiders, who are wearing a different garment, this one may seem restrictive and unchanging. To those wearing it, it fits, on the whole, quite comfortably, even if,
here and there, it pinches a bit. People try to adjust it at the places where it pinches, opening up a seam here, taking one in there. Adjustments of this kind—modulations, I shall call them—are going on all the time. Accordingly, obligation, understood in the reduced way I have proposed, is not an all or none affair; it is rather a matter of differential weights that are attached to the norms that are embedded in, and that, collectively, form the role; and these differential weights vary over time.

To understand obligation it is therefore necessary to attend as much to the concept of role modulation as to the concept of role, and it is important to remember that role modulations, usually small but sometimes large, are occurring all the time. A modulation is large if it looks large, and it looks large if it affects a norm that people think is important. It follows that a proposed large modulation usually raises what people call a "moral" issue, whilst proposed small modulations do not.

Not all modulations succeed, of course. A modulation may disappear as soon as it is introduced—the introducer himself may not like the look of it when he sees it in action, or it may be defeated by the hostility of moral conservatives who hold, with the Harry Claverings of every generation in every society, that "No man has a right to be peculiar. Every man is bound to accept such usage as is customary in the world."7

Modulations may be important or trivial, and those that are important for one society may be trivial for another. But all
modulations depend on a capacity to notice differences—differences which others, with less sensitive antennae, have overlooked but which, once noticed, are recognized by some community or other to be relevant. Thus Emma Woodhouse was one who had successfully internalized the role expectations for an early nineteenth century English gentlewoman; she perceived herself as—indeed, she was—a lady. When she poked rather cruel fun at poor, defenseless Miss Bates, Mr. Knightley, whose antennae were much more sensitive than Emma's, pointed out to her the disparity between the role of lady and her behavior on this occasion: "I cannot see you acting wrong, without a remonstrance. How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?—Emma, I had not thought it possible." Though Emma "tried to laugh it off... she was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart."8

Mr. Knightley's antennae picked up a relevant similarity between poor, dull Miss Bates and the better off, more attractive women to whom Emma would never have been rude; Emma perceived the similarity the moment it was pointed out to her, and saw that she had to extend the scope of the norm "lady" to the Miss Bateses of this world. (Perception of a relevant different among the women covered by the norm would have led to a reduction in its scope.) What I am calling the perception of a similarity (or dissimilarity) corresponds closely, I think, to what some moral philosophers call a moral intuition. As compared with "intuition," "perception" is a reduced term. I prefer it
for that reason: it deflects any tendency to regard the experience in question as a specially significant and veridical insight. Everyone agrees that "perceptions" may be mistaken; "perceptions" are also obviously relative to the perceiver's interests: a similarity that stands out prominently for one individual may be unnoticed by those who have other fish to fry. This applies as much to the perception of similarities (and dissimilarities) that are relevant to so-called moral norms as it does to similarities (and dissimilarities) that are relevant to so-called social norms.

That is why I have brought Mr. Knightley, Emma, and Miss Bates into the discussion. Today that particular modulation, and the differentiations in the environment to which it was responsive will be viewed as trivial, though they were weighty for the social class of which Mr. Knightley, Emma, and Miss Bates were members. I have chosen it precisely because it seems trivial—to reinforce the point that there is no difference between the ways in which trivial and important modulations are introduced, and no difference in the ways in which they become established, if indeed they become established. Modulations that take on do so because they call people's attention to aspects of the situation that, now that they attend to them, seem to them to be relevant. These modulations become a part of the culture and are now defended as correct usage by all the Harry Claverings who, earlier, had condemned them as deviations.

It took no more than self-assurance for Mr. Knightley to correct Emma. Modulators who propose large-scale modulations—Beecher
and his fellow abolitionists, for example—need courage as well, and a strong sense of rectitude. This is often, but not necessarily, supported by religious belief—the Quakers' inner light is a case in point. In any event, proposers of large-scale modulations characteristically have more confidence in their judgment than a careful survey of the available evidence would warrant. But for them of course, it isn't a matter of judgment or evidence. People put forward such large modulations as abolition of slavery, probably less because they have made a calculation of costs and benefits (though they may use such an argument ex post to justify the modulation), than because they feel deeply about it.

Role modulators of this type—large-scale modulators like Beecher and Martin Luther King—are not fundamentally different from small-scale modulators like Mr. Knightley. Both call attention to the fact that people outside some norm as it is currently understood (slaves; the Miss Baseses) are similar in an important respect to those inside the norm (human beings; ladies). Both point out that exclusion harms those who are excluded. Both feel strongly about the harm and try to communicate this feeling to others, whose changed behavior, if they are influenced by the modulator, will change the norm in the desired direction.

On the other hand, large-scale modulators, unlike small-scale modulators, usually get involved in politics and should, therefore, be distinguished from the politicians—Lincoln, Johnson—with whom they become involved and who may preside over, and even participate in, the
modulation the modulators are advocating. Politicians characteristically respond to the pressure of events, including the pressure exerted by modulators; they do not actively advocate a modulation well in advance of a substantial movement in its favor. They are not risk-takers in the same sense that modulators are risk-takers, and modulators who acquire public office are likely at the same time to acquire caution.

Finally, modulators are usually admired only in the abstract and at a distance. It is generally recognized that a society in which there were, literally, no modulations at all would be an absolutely static society—not a human society at all. Hence the social utility of modulators is widely acknowledged. But what one wants is modulations that are occurring somewhere else, at some other time. Individual modulators, when they are close enough to have to be dealt with directly, are usually heartily disliked, for the obvious reason that one has to decide whether to accept the modulation they have proposed or to reject it. And most people find most modulators, again seen close-up, to be obsessive, intolerant, impatient, demanding—in a word, "difficult."

If large-scale modulations are usually launched by individuals of the kind just described, these modulations, somewhere along the road to becoming established roles, are likely to be reinforced by the sanctions of courts and self-regulating bodies. But no such sanctions are likely to be introduced—still less to be sustained—unless they are based on substantial, spontaneous consensuses. Accordingly, the
key element in moral change is always a risk-taking decision by morally sensitive individuals, who, having perceived a failure of fit between an existing role and the situation in which they now have to act, seek to modulate the role accordingly. The spread of a modulation through a society, prior to its codification in institutional or legal forms, is quite like the spread of an esthetic innovation—a new style in art or in music. If the modulation, whether moral or esthetic, takes on, we may be sure that it has brought into focus some aspect of people's experiential field that is important to them and that was missed in the earlier, unmodulated formulation.

It follows that when, in the reduced language I am using, one equates an obligation to do x with the social expectations for some role, one must take account of the fact that this role is constantly changing through time as people respond in various ways, and at various rates, to the various modulations proposed by various modulators. How does this affect the argument that, since some duties are at least some of the time independent of roles, obligation cannot be reduced to social expectation? Or, rather, how does this bear on the summary reply to this objection that I put forward at the beginning of this section?

If one thinks of a role synchronically, as an "instantaneous" slice of time, the role is always stable and uniform; it changes only between successive synchronic slices. Looked at synchronically the role is stable, and everybody therefore has a well-defined duty: it is to conform his behavior to the norms set out for him in that role, and
everybody knows what his duty is. (As a result of what used to be
called weakness of will or for some other reason some people may fail
to do their duty, but that is irrelevant, since failure to do one's
duty implies that one has a duty to do.)

If one thinks diachronically things look very different. All
sorts of modulations, large and small, are emerging, gaining adherents,
losing them, gaining them again. . . . There is now no longer anything
like an agreed-on set of expectations that completely determine every
role player's duty. Instead, at any time a number of different sets of
expectations are making claims against the role-players, some of whom
are more responsive, some less responsive, some responsive in this
respect, some in that respect, to the various claims.

Even in the case of as simple a norm as the dress code for
physicians, it is not the case, as we have already seen, that people
wake up some morning to find that overnight the dress code has changed
to white jackets from suit coats. Rather, it is the case that a rich
patient has suggested to A that he would look well in a white jacket,
that he has tried it and found that his patients do not resist too
much; that B has heard of the change, and though he liked the idea, has
settled more cautiously for modest gray instead of stark white; that C
wears his suit coat under a white jacket; that D continues to wear his
suit coat when he interviews patients in his office but puts on a white
jacket to examine them. . . . What is true of the way in which this
simple norm modulates is even more obviously true of the way a complex
norm modulates, say, the norm that specifies eligibility for voting.
It is, therefore, an oversimplification to think of a sharp contrast between a lone modulator (say, the first abolitionist) and all the other role players, a monolithic block of slavery supporters who continue to feel an obligation to conform to all of expectations that were in effect before any of the modulations started. On the contrary, at any time there are a number of people who are, to a greater or lesser degree, modulating, there are other people who are, to a greater or lesser degree, resisting the modulation, and there are still others who are marking time, hoping that the modulation will either succeed or fail before they have to act.

The modulators may be scattered; they may never actually meet each other. But to the extent that each individual modulator writes letters to the press, solicits funds from his neighbors, make speeches . . . his behavior fits a pattern of cooperation with the other individual modulators. They form a group whose members expect each other to continue to write, to solicit and to speak. Even two or three gathered together in the name of some cause they believe in are enough to constitute a group, providing that, as with St. John Chrysostom, they believe in it passionately. Groups are generated by intensity of commitment as well as by propinquity or by frequency and variety of meetings. And groups generated by intensity of commitment, however numerically small, will have social expectations for their members, based on some pattern of cooperation into which their behavior fits, to which these members respond. Indeed, in accordance with what I have said about the distinction between moral and social norms being a
function of strength of feeling, in the case of small groups of modulators the expectations much are stronger and the responses more intense than in the case of (say) social clubs.

But, I will be reminded, before two or three can be gathered together in the name of a cause, there must be a very first modulator, a very first abolitionist. You can hardly claim, this critic will continue, that the first abolitionist's obligation to free slaves (which you admit he has when he is joined by even one other abolitionist) comes into being only when they join forces.

Well, that is what I am saying. But to begin with, I am not persuaded that there ever was, or could be, a first abolitionist. The argument that there must be one, is plausible only if we adopt a synchronic view of time and first take a slice in which there are no abolitionists and then a slice in which there are, say, three. Then it seems to us that if we were to take slices between these two slices we would come across a slice in which there are two and finally a slice in which there is but one. The real world does not seem to me very much like that; people do not "become" abolitionists in the way in which the room becomes illuminated a light switch is flipped, and to argue that there must be a first abolitionist is like arguing that there must be a first chicken (alternatively, a first egg). The reply is that, last as chickens and eggs evolved together out of a simpler reproductive system, so full-fledged, and so noticed, abolitionists emerged out of unnoticed, smaller-scale modulators.
But assume for the sake of argument a time-slice view of things and suppose ourselves to have found the first—the very first—abolitionist situated in a world of slavery supporters. He may be first, but if he has memory and imagination he is not alone. He is united with illustrious predecessors—Aristotle, who, though certainly only a very cautious modulator, was critical of slavery; Jesus, who, though he did not talk about slavery, possibly regarding it as something to be rendered unto Caesar, can hardly have viewed it favorably. . . . And he is united in anticipation and hope with successors and supporters. So this first abolitionist is very much a member of a group, a company of saints. It may seem to us, time-slice people that we are, that he is only remembering a past that is finished and looking forward to a future that is not yet—not much of a company, we may say. But that company is phenomenologically present now, in his so-called "specious" present, which is not at all specious to him. Accordingly, we can account socially for the obligation felt by that very first abolitionist in exactly the same way that we account for the obligation to row that is felt by the person sitting beside me in the boat and holding an oar.

And, finally, to return to the claim that my reduced account of obligation is inadequate because duties have their source in ideal transcendental norms, not in actual operative norms: we need only to distinguish between the actual norm of some social group and the actual norm of a subgroup that is out of phase with the larger group. The so-called transcendental norm is simply the modulation that some group or
other is proposing. It looks transcendental and ideal only because one is ignoring the context of modulating opinion in which it is actually emerging.

Thus what we have found to be true of the putative first modulator is true of any critic of the reduced view who insists that it must be mistaken because Americans, say, had an obligation to free slaves before anyone, even Blacks, even the first abolitionist, had conceived the idea that slaves ought to be free. Such a critic doubtlessly believes himself to be in a different time slice from the time slice occupied by the institution of slavery; believing himself outside he believes himself to be evaluating slavery "objectively."

But there is a great difference between feeling that slavery is hateful and feeling that slaves ought to be free. The feeling that slavery is hateful is something that anybody can experience from any time slice. The fact that my critic feels not only that slavery is hateful but also that slaves ought to be free shows him to be, not outside the time slice containing the institution of slavery but very much inside it, united in memory and anticipation with those early abolitionists and responding sympathetically to their expectations for him. He is so keenly aware of his response—so keenly aware that slaves ought to be free—that he quite fails to notice that he is responding to, resonating with, those expectations. Thus the obligation that critics of my reduced view feel people have to change a social norm (say, slavery), like the obligation that the putative first abolitionist felt and like the obligation the public has eventually come to feel to
accept the changed norm, is not something in rerum naturam; it is something "felt in the mind"—in this case the mind of my critics themselves—as a result of their having internalized the norm of some social group.

V.

If this long argument be accepted everything that can be said about moral obligation—including what is said about obligation being independent of roles—and that is ordinarily talked about in a special sort of "moral" language can also be talked about in the reduced language of social roles, role modulations, and role expectations. Nevertheless, though everything that can be said in either language can be said in the other, some people will prefer one language and other people the other, the situation being similar to Wittgenstein's duck/rabbit drawing,\textsuperscript{10} where although every duck-feature is also a rabbit-feature and every rabbit-feature is a duck-feature, some people see a duck and others a rabbit.

For my part, I prefer the reduced language because, on my system of cost-accounting, one gains more by using it than one loses—the reduced language focuses attention, as it were, on a fascinating duck bill instead of on a rather dull pair of rabbit's ears. That is to say, it focuses attention on understanding why people feel committed to some course of action, on understanding why modulators modulate, why resisters resist, why modulations that we hoped would succeed peter out, why those we hoped would fade away take on. . . . In contrast,
the moral principle language, by focussing attention on what "really" means in the question, "What ought people really do?" distracts attention from such matters. That, at least to me, is a heavy cost. But even I will admit that the moral principle language nevertheless has one advantage. Presumably speakers of both languages believe morals are important; otherwise they would not talk about them. The moral principle language makes morals sound important; that the reduced language does not do.
FOOTNOTES

* I am much indebted to the following friends and colleagues for comments on earlier drafts of this paper: Burton H. Klein, Bruce E. Cain, Edward Green, James McGilvray, Alan Schwartz, Robert M. Stewart, Peter Westen, and Charles Young.


2. Enquiry, Sec. 7, Pt. II.

3. Ibid.


5. Treatise, Bk. III, Pt. I, Sec. I.

6. This is the subtitle of the Treatise.

7. The Claverings, ch. xxii.

9. Mr. Justice Bazelon's address at the 1981 annual meeting of the American Psychological Association is a good example of the way a modulation can start. Relying on his long experience hearing cases in which psychological "experts" testify, the judge discussed what he called the "sins" of the profession: a tendency to make "conclusory pronouncements," a failure to "expose the facts under their conclusions" and "the values underlying their choice of facts," and a failure to "come clean on the uncertainties of opinion that may exist. . . ." The fact that extensive excerpts from the address were printed in the APA Monitor, (vol. 12, no. 10) shows that this modulation is beginning to spread, though it is far from clear that it will eventually take on.