Humanistic Philosophizing

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Sensibility and Speculation in Philosophical Inquiry

By

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1341-6
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1341-9

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PREFACE

Self-understanding—getting a firm thought-grip on ourselves and our human condition in the world's scheme of things—has been a prime object of philosophical inquiry since the very start. It is, of course, an issue of great variety and complexity. No one book can cover the whole range of relevant problems. But what can be done—and what this work endeavors to do—is to address a representative range of important themes of the domain.

I am, as ever, grateful to my unfailingly helpful assistant, Estelle Burris, for helping to put this material into a form suitable for the printer's use.

Nicholas Rescher
Pittsburgh P. A.
April 2018

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is the project of seeking answers to "the big questions" of the nature of man, the characteristics of Reality, and man's place within the scheme of things. The philosopher tries, as best one can, to address this range of complex and difficult issues.

It is often said that philosophy is the pursuit of truth. This is alright in the first approximation. In the first place, it should be stressed that it is only important truths that concern the philosopher: the domain of truth includes immeasurable trivialities to which the philosopher is bound to be indifferent. And, of course, come the immediate questions of just what makes an issue important. And this itself is a philosophical issue which concerns the philosopher as much as truth itself.

And other problems arise as well, for truth itself does not stand alone in relation philosophical significance.

Suppose you asked the Recording Angel a philosophical question such as "Does man (*Homo sapiens*) have free will?" or "Do lower animals have rights?" And suppose the answer comes back affirmatively as per "Yes, it is true that man has free will." You are not really further ahead. For the big questions are: Just what does this mean? What is it to have free will? What basis is there for having rights and what does the possession of rights really involve?

Such a perspective on the matter makes it clear that truth itself does not meet the needs of philosophy but two crucial further issues arise.

The first of these is *grounding*. For we cannot manage to ask the Recording Angel for answers, our only access door to the truth is via inquiry. We do not get the truth direct but only via good reasons to accept something as true. And the second key issue is *understanding*. Knowing that something is a truth does not help us all that much if we fail to understand it. We won't be in a position to explain and comprehend just exactly what it is that a truth-claim calls for. It does not do much good to know that man does (or does not) have free will or if one does not understand just what it is that is at issue with these capacities.

And at this point there arises one of the key and characteristic problems, namely the regressive nature of the explanations essential to philosophical understanding. For ideas—philosophical ones included—can only be explained by means of others. And this sets in motion a regress that is

clearly problematic in philosophy. Consider an example: The idea of a right or entitlement. This is evidently a matter of having an appropriate claim. But this immediately raises the further questions:

(1) What is a claim?
(2) What is it that makes a claim just and appropriate?

We arrive at further problems (and not just one but several) which are just as difficult and problematic as the original. A law of the conservation of difficulties is at work and there are equally serious difficulties on the side of grounding. Even as we can only explain terms by means of other terms, so we can only ground claims by means of other claims. And in philosophy, the grounding claims will generally include some that are just as questionable and problematic as the original. Philosophy cannot eliminate such inherent difficulties but can only try to minimize them.

So why don't philosophers agree among themselves? Why is it that philosophy, unlike science, is a battleground of rival doctrines?

The reason is fairly straightforward. For in any rational enterprise the conclusions must be based on and be coordinated to the evidence in hand. And in view of its commitment to what is called "the repeatability of experiments" and the "robustness of observations," science admits as evidence only those matters on which scientists agree. And in this regard philosophy is crucially different.

The fact of it is that meaningful realism can only exist in a state of tension. For the only reality worth having is one that is in some degree knowable. And so, it is the very limitation of our knowledge—our recognition that there is more to reality than what we do and can know or ever conjecture about it—that speaks for the mind-independence of the real. It is important to stress against the skeptic that the human mind is sufficiently well attuned to reality that *some* knowledge of it is possible. But it is no less important to join with realists in stressing the independent character of reality, acknowledging that reality has a depth and complexity of makeup that stretches the reach of a mind to its limits—and perhaps beyond.

Philosophical reasoning, like all reasoning, needs premisses to serve as evidence. And for philosophers, evidence consists in the data provided to them by their experience at large. And the experiences of people all differ not only with time, place, and circumstance, but also with individual interest, preoccupation, and preparation. But, of course, where there are different premisses, there are bound to be different conclusions.

Accordingly, discord in philosophy is not the product of a lack of rational cogency in the reasonings and deliberations of philosophers. For

here difference in opinion is rather the product of a difference in evaluation of different assessments and priorities. Unavoidable differences in the course of experience provides the basis for unavoidable differences in opinion.

But does the resultant lack of uniformity not invalidate the enterprise?

Not necessarily! For consider an analogy: What is the properly healthy diet or regime for you depends on your medico-biological makeup. It is irrelevant *for you* that other people are differently situated. For you, your own position is decisive. And the philosophical situation is much the same. Based on your experience, certain philosophical positions are appropriate—your evidence provides for conclusion which you should properly hold. For you, the fact that others are differently situated should be irrelevant. Attainment of philosophy to the experiential condition of the individual leaves its rational cogency *for the individual* securely in place.

This sort of position is not an *indifferentistic relativism* of arbitrary choice. It is, rather, a realistic contextualism based on the profoundly rational principle that the appropriate conclusions are a function of the substance of the operative premisses.

Some instructive lessons emerge from realizing that the relation of a lesser intelligence toward a higher one is substantially analogous to the relation between an earlier state of science and a later one. It is not that Aristotle could not have comprehended quantum theory—he was a very smart fellow and could certainly have learned. But what he could not have done was to formulate quantum theory within his own concept framework, his own familiar terms of reference. The very ideas at issue lay outside of the conceptual horizon of Aristotle's science, and, like present-day students, he would have had to master them from the ground up. Just this sort of thing is at issue with the relation of a less powerful intelligence to a more powerful one. It has been insightfully said that from the vantage point of a less developed technology, another substantially advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. And exactly the same holds for a more advanced *conceptual* (rather than physical) technology.

Against this background the studies that comprise this volume address several major areas of philosophical concern: humans and their interpersonal relations, reality and our knowledge thereof, and philosophizing itself. They link together in systemic unity to examine some of the main aspects of our human condition.

Part One deals with the definitive nature of man as a conscious being, the modes of social interaction with one another among contemporary individuals, and the concerns that relate us to our eventual posterity.

Part Two addresses the interactivity with which we humans manifest our connections with one another as bearers of reciprocally acknowledged value, now and across the reaches of time.

Part Three examines some of the complexities of cognition and the role of knowledge of fact and value in a challenging and difficult world.

Part Four deals with the crucial distinction between appearance and reality, the role and roots of reality's intelligible order, and how it is that our over-simple conception of reality makes ongoing room for the progressive unfolding of scientific understanding.

Finally, Part Five canvases the ongoing conflict between realism and idealism. It indicates how a pragmatic approach provides the conceptual resources of reflecting a rational accommodation between these two seemingly conflicting tendencies.

All in all, then, the book provides a many-sided excursus over a wide range of philosophical concerns in an attempt to provide a unified and harmonious perspective on issues where conflict all too often constitutes the dominant theme.

I. ASSESSING MAN

CHAPTER ONE

MORAL APPROBATION

• A Problem of Validation

Suppose that *X* does something morally good, something that is ethically praiseworthy and deserving of approval and appreciation. And let it be that *Y* knows of this. Does this mean that in these circumstances *Y* is morally obligated to approve and appreciate what *X* has done? And would a failure to do so lay him open to reproach and reprehension?

The answer to both of these questions is: Yes. Morality is self-sustaining and self-supportive and demands general approbation of its rulings. Deliberately to withhold endorsement of what is morally appropriate is to act immorally and runs afoul of morality's demands. Ethical skepticism is unethical.

* * *

But whence do these claims themselves derive their validity? What validates their claims of these just-purported contentions? At this point we reach the interesting second-order question of meta-justification. Just what is it that renders those first-order moral claims appropriate and correct? What is the authority and rationale that substantiates our moral judgments?

Consider:

1. They are not semantic tautologies. Their validation is not just terminological conventions regarding moral discourse.
2. They are not observational determinations. Their validation is not a matter of empirical experience and learning from the course of events.

To validate such claims a more convoluted and complex course of justification is required than what is done in the usual, more familiar course of things.

• The Idea of Functional Inherence in a Human Practice

Let us step back to consider the circumstantial context of the issue.

Every line of endeavor we humans cultivate has a function orientation—a set of fundamental aims, obligations, and commitments that are definitive of its nature.

The crucial consideration here is that the various ranges of our activity have to be understood in terms of reference with characteristic concepts, principles, and theses of their own, comprising the conceptions that define the domain at issue. Be it a matter of chess or carpentry, of medicine or minerology, these conceptions define the range of aims, practices, and procedures that are definitive of the discipline at issue. If you are not prepared to consider that medications have ingredients and houses doors, then you do not grasp the definitive fundamentals of the field (pharmaceutics, domestic architecture, etc.) that is at issue. For all of these contentions are constitutively universal to the range of thought and deliberation at issue.

And this sort of thing also holds good for the project of morality. Here, too, certain conditions of procedure are integral to the very project at hand.

Yet those basic facts about morality and its strictures are not simply "self-evident", as with "two times two is four." Nor are they "analytic" and linguistically mandated, as with "knives have blades." Rather, they are functionally implicit in a human practice of a particular sort. Such a practice is—like various others—based on a confluence of the innate capacities and the societally developed modalities of people for the realization of situationally mandated objectives. They are part of what defines and shapes the cultivation of that picture as sine quo non-conditioning of its effective collaboration. For those who engage in the practice at issue, they are—and must be—"perfectly obvious."

Morally engaged people will in virtue of this very fact have an automatic insight into the appropriateness of such project-definitive contentions. By virtue of their engagement in the enterprise, such realizations are, or should be, "self-evident" to practioners. For to question them is to be morally color-blind—to lack appropriate insight into moral issues—a failure in point of thematic sensibility that betokens a deficiency in understanding.

• The Moral Mandate

To be deficient in grasping what is at issue in history—what history as such is all about—is merely to be inadequately informed. To be deficient in understanding what arithmetic is about is to be mathematically im-

paired. Such imperfections of understanding are merely *cognitive* deficiencies and flaws. But to be deficient in understanding what morality—the business of right and wrong—is all about is not just a cognitive shortcoming but is itself a personal failing. It is a shortcoming that lays oneself open not just to pity but to censure. In failing to realize and understand the requisites of morality one comes to have a moral failing—to lay oneself open to reprehension and reproach.

But one critical distinction arises at this point. Entering into various sorts of procedural ranges is optional. Nothing mandates our entrance into the sphere of rhetorical or pharmaceutical or architectural deliberation: all of these are domains of optimality.

In some matters ignorance may be bliss; in others it may be no more than ignorance; but in respect of morality it is itself a moral failing. In this instance, others have a right to expect not only that we should be informed but assiduous. A failure to understand speaks negatively not just for our intellect but for our character. For the moral project is non-optional. The pharmaceutical project, the architectural project, the arithmetical project are optional for us as individuals. (Somebody had best defend the term, but it need not be us.) But the moral project, like the culinary project, is not optional but mandatory. Like it or not, it is something in which a being of our sort, an intelligent free agent, is unavoidably caught up.

But this is not the case with the range of moral deliberation. This, for us human members of *Homo sapiens*, is something that is situationally required for us, something which for us there is no open exit. For the particular practice at issue here—the project of morality—differs from most other human practices in that it is mandatory rather that optional—it is something which we not only can but must collaborate. While we may or may not choose to be accountants, we must be moral agents.

But what of the nature of that "must" which is at issue here? It is not a logico-conceptual moral, but rather a moral/ethical must. For the unusual feature of the moral project (in contrast to most others) is that it is self-mandating. Being moral is a demand made upon us by morality itself—and failing to know it lays us open to moral reproach, coordination, and recrimination.

If you misunderstand the medical or the architectural project, you are not thereby involved in making a medical (or architectural) error. That you understand medicine (or architecture) is not a medical (or architectural) demand. But morality is something different in this regard. If you misunderstand morality, you are making a moral error. Morality requires a proper understanding of itself. To take the morally inappropriate line with re-

spect to a moral issue is to commit not just a cognitive error, but a moral one. It lays you open not just to pity but to reprehension.

• The Overall Validation of Ethical Fundamentals

And so—back to that initial question of what justifies the appropriateness of our claims regarding matter of moral propriety? The answer is that what authorizes the acceptability and indeed requires the acceptance of those moral claims is a compounding of two considerations: (1) their functional suitability in relation to a certain practice (viz., morality), and (2) which for us is itself situationally mandatory (rather than merely available). And so, if you want to claim the moral inappropriateness of lying, you should be willing and able to argue that such action is detrimental to, if not destructive of, the practice of communication that is essential to the constructive management of human affairs.

The conjoining of these two considerations grounds the validity of our morality-characterizing contentions. Functional inherence in a situationally mandated practice is the crux of the matter.

CHAPTER TWO

RESPECT

• What Respect is About

To respect someone is to acknowledge their appropriate rights and claims—to give them credit where it is due.

The respect we humans owe to one another is based on one of two foundations. One—respect for what we can do—is based on accomplishment. The other—respect for what we are—is based on our standing in the scheme of things. The former reflects talent and ability; the latter reflects personal condition and role—the office or function as encapsulated in the person who represents it.

Accordingly, respect is due either for what people are (as queen, parent, or even merely fellow human) or for what they do (as physician, performing artist, or cook). The former mode of respect-desert is a matter of how fortune and opportunity have fitted us into our place in the world; the latter sort of respect must be earned by effort and enterprise. Respect can thus be grounded in:

—sheer humanity
—special status
—achievement

The last of these is a matter of being good at something, including being good at living a human life—at being a good person. But it can also move off in rather different, more specifically functional directions, being good as a teacher, or engineer, or tennis player.

What of showing respect to the bodies of fallen enemies on the battlefield? Here, the term "respect" is used figuratively. It is not those corpses that are being given respect but the brave men who enlivened them. It is a token of our respect for our predecessors that we also manifest respect for their works.

• Objects of Respect

Justice is traditionally held to be a matter of giving people their proper and merited due (*suum cuique tribuere*). Respect is an integral part of this—a matter of acknowledging people's claims to consideration in view of who they are and what they have done. As such, respect, like justice itself, is an inherently ethical conception—a matter of giving credit where credit is due. To respect someone is to have appreciation for their status and abilities.

However, "respect" is sometimes understood as an acknowledgment not of qualitative merit but of procedural limitations. One can respect (i.e., acknowledge) claims, rights, entitlements. One nation's agents can respect the boundaries of another. The arresting officer can respect the rights of an apprehended culprit. Combatants can respect the cease-fire, the armistice, the proscription of poisonous gas. A military commander shows respect for the bravery of a surrendering enemy. Abstract entities (boundaries, rights, abilities) can be appropriate objects of respect.

But this sense of the term is something different from what is at issue here. Respect can be accorded not only to persons but toward things. One can respect the flag, the office (as distinct from its holder). It is figurative to speak of "the Sphinx's right to be protected from vandals." To respect this right is to honor a claim of the wider human community, and not a claim of the Sphinx's. Preservationists show not only appreciation but often also respect for the edifices of the past; vandals fail not only to appreciate but also to respect them. Again, this sort of thing is not at issue here.

Objects of respect can be either abstract (rights, claims, obligations, offices), groups (teachers, physicians, the Founding Fathers), or individuals (Plato, the Father of our country, the Dalai Lama). Animals, however otherwise loved, admired, and esteemed, cannot earn respect. Nor can physical things, however prized or valued (the Statue of Liberty, Stonehenge, the Lincoln Memorial). (But of course those who produced them can—and indeed can be so because of that production.)

When we respect those who fill a demanding and responsible role—physicians, judges, generals—do we not (necessarily) do this because we think well of them as persons but because of the office or function they serve? Such people are respect deserving not necessarily as persons but as functionaries.

• Respect for Achievements

Superior performance in agency is thus one key determinative factor for respect. However, its nature and its thematic orientation matters. Does the superior thief, forger, child molester merit respect? Surely not! Only superior performance in an activity that is itself of positive value or merit deserves respect. Your talent as a forger of $100 bills may understandably elicit admirers and perhaps even envy, but not respect. Respect is bestowed appropriately when someone is respected by others on appropriately merited grounds, i.e., with that respect given deservedly. People must generally do various things to earn respect of a certain sort. Professional people of all sorts are in this category—professional respect can only be achieved through a track record of able professional performance. Only sometimes should respect be given automatically. Respect for human life and dignity is in this automatic category, as is respect for the aspirations of youth or for the gray hair of the aged. And often roots of respect are duly grounded in relationships, whether acquired involuntarily (as when children should respect their parents, or dwellers their neighbors), or voluntarily (as people should respect their spouses or their employees).

Disrespect is not the contradiction but the contrary of respect. The difference is akin to that between not valuing and disvaluing, or between not liking and disliking—that is between not aspiring to positivity and assigning negativity. Respect is bestowed appropriately when it is in fact merited and inappropriately when it is not deserved. And the same goes for disrespect.

Generally, people deserve respect for what they do rather than for what they are. Thus, we respect ability less for its possession than for its cultivation. And we respect beauty not at all, but rather admire (and perhaps envy) it. Only humanity as such—human life and its rationality—provides a basis for totally unearned respect. Only beings we are prepared to regard as free agents can ever merit individual respect. I can admire a statue and condemn the vandal who does it damage, but I cannot *respect* it. (Insofar as I respect a dog for its loyalty or its helpfulness I must also endorse its free intelligent agency.)

Achieving respect takes effort. For *to be respected we must live respectably* and this is not always easy.

"Act so as to deserve the respect of people" is an excellent piece of moral advice, well deserving of being given to children by their parents. Being respect-worthy—deserving the respect of others—is a critical feature of that self-respect which—whether people acknowledge it or not—is a necessary prerequisite of a satisfying life.

We certainly respect the people we hold up as role models. Indeed, viewing someone in this light is a quintessential mode of manifesting respect. On the other hand, we need not and will not always hold up the people we respect as role models for ourselves and others. For example, we respect eccentrics for their dedication to their causes—martyrs, say, or devotees who sacrifice greatly in supporting their lost causes. But we would not ourselves try to emulate them—nor yet urge others to do so. And we respect and admire those whose immense talents go beyond the reach of ordinary mortals: Einstein, say, or Ramanujan.

• The Ethical Aspect

The respectful treatment of others—acknowledging in them the shared humanity that binds us together—is certainly among our ethical obligations. But thinking for ourselves is also a prime human obligation. In matters of cognition, our obligation is not to persons but to the truth. There is no call on us to agree with others independently of our own opinions. Some obligations impose limits on others.

The manifestation of due and appropriate respect is a virtue, and to disrespect someone who does not deserve this is a failing.

Can animals show respect? The can certainty manifest subordination (the defeated buck; the pecking-order bird). But subordination is not enough to make for respect—which calls for the willing apprehension of merit. (It is discussible whether higher primates are capable of this.)

The virtue of bestowing respect where it is due seems to have no general name. In the limited context of specifically social interactions, it is called *respectfulness* and here the corresponding failure to accord respect where it is due is called *insolence*.

Having the respect of people is certainly a desideratum but not one of invariably equal magnitude. Being respected by those who themselves deserve respect is the condition's most positive version.

• Rejecting Respectability

There is no chronological or cultural fixity to people's (often mistaken) view of the criteriology of what deserves respect. Some eras and cultures prioritize the military virtues, others the artistic or humanitarian. The sensible thing is to be broad-minded about it by conceding prospectworthiness to every mode of constructive human endeavor.

For some, the rubric of respectability is of derogatory import. It savors of what is staid, outmoded, replete with antiquated allegiances and bour-

geois materialism. Nevertheless, it seems clear that in general those who take this negative view of respect are merely rejecting some of the currently fashionable standards rather than respect-worthiness as such. Their actual target is not respect but what they see as misapprehension of what is properly required to deserve it.

To disrespect someone is to manifest a lack of respect where it might otherwise be expected. Like respect itself, it can be manifested toward anyone, from pauper to prince. Exercised toward the ruler, it was, in former times, punishable by law under the sentence *lèse majesté*. Even today, it is punishable in legal venues as "contempt of court."

• Self-Respect

Even as respect can be earned so it can be lost. In this regard, contempt is the contradictory opposite of respect. Respect is lost through fecklessness and folly, the former being a failure to seize opportunities for positivity, the later cultivates opportunities for negativity. The loss of self-respect is the most dire and dramatic instance of this phenomenon.

The prospect and indeed the eminent desirability of self-orientation is a crucial feature of respect. The loss of self-respect and a due sense of self-worth constitutes a human disaster of tragic proportions. It is a key requirement of our psychic and ethical well-being to oneself as a focus of value—the bearer of rights and claims to the acknowledgment of our unearned but merited positivities as autonomous human persons and free agents.

We value and indeed even crave being respected by others because without it we cannot easily achieve that sense of self-worth without which a satisfying life becomes something between difficult and impossible.

There are various conceptions in the neighborhood of self-respect that should be distinguished from it. Self-love has the coloration of selfishness about it. Self-administration has an aura of affective egocentricity that is far from admirable. Self-approach is certainly something we should share insofar as the evaluation process at issue is reasonably managed. Self-respect insofar as warranted is unquestionably a prime human desideratum.

• Being Respectful: The Ethical Dimension

Respect can be earned only by an agent or agency that functions in the moral sphere through being able to act knowingly and responsibly. And granting others the respect that is their due—being respectful towards

them insofar as they merit this—is decidedly a virtue. It is not—or should not be—a matter of kowtowing to curry favor with the powerful but one of acknowledging merit where it is due. Failure to accord due respect can issue from any one of several distinct sorts of inadequacies such as *insufficient knowledge* in not realizing that something that has been done deserves respect, or *inadequate evaluation* in not realizing *why* it is that what has been done has respect-deserving merit. Specifically, one should consider:

- *Willful perversity*. Unreasonable refusal to acknowledge that something deserving of respect has this character.
- *Ethical principle*. To treat people respectfully by according them the respect that is their due. Unless there are good reasons to the contrary, such proceedings become an appropriate target of reprehension and reproach.

• Respect and Affinity

When we respect people for what they have achieved through their personal efforts rather than for their role function, then we are bound to see them in a favorable light. They may not be nice and congenial persons—we may not like them—but we do (or should) admire them because of the efforts through which they have achieved this status of having earned our respect.

Respect is a cognitive rather than affective stance. Liking someone—regarding them with affection or even love—is something quite different from respecting them. One attribute can be there in the absence of the other. It is possible to respect people whom one does not particularly like, and one can like people whom one does not particularly respect. One's heroes and role models need not and often will not be particularly likeable, nor need the people we befriend or even love invariably be all that admirable and excellent.

These considerations call for an enlivening by the novelist rather than an elucidation by the philosopher.

Different attitudinal and even architectural responses are at issue. We erect shrines to those we like and love, and monuments to those we admire and respect.

It is one thing to respect someone and quite another to *like* them. Often, we respect people who are not particularly likeable. And sometimes, alas, we like people whom we do not regard as all that respect-deserving.

How is respect related to affinity: do we tend to like the people we respect—and conversely? Well, it all depends on the contingencies of one's personal situation. Jones has an open, outgoing personality. He makes friends easily and has many of them. But in judgmental matters he can be rather demanding. It takes a lot to earn his respect, and only a small number of his "friends" have it. Smith, by contrast, is a rather nonjudgmental person inclined to think the best of people. There are many individuals whom he respects. But in personal relations he is somewhat strong and classical: the roster of his friends is not all that big. One may be liked by the people one respects only because there are so few of the latter group. And whether we are respected by the people one likes will very much depend on the comparative size of the little group. To all appearances, then, the two factors are pretty much independent of one another, though a close coordination between them is ideally desirable.

Respect operates in a manner very different from envy. We respect people for what they can do but do not generally envy them for it. We envy people for what they have, but do not generally view this as a basis for respecting them.

The respectful treatment of people is clearly to the general benefit of the society at large. It oils the gears of social interaction. And it incentivizes people to act in ways that deserve respect.

The respect of others—and, above all, that of people whom we ourselves respect—is a prime form of social capital. Combined with our self-respect—which it greatly reinforces and strengthens—it serves to increase confidence in interacting with others, thereby greatly enhancing the likelihood of successful and satisfying interactions.

• Why Respect? A Validating Rationale for the Practice

A society in which people respect one another is bound to be vastly more congenial and user-friendly than one in which they disrespect one another. Reciprocal respect is a crucial requisite for societal harmony.

The acknowledgment of due claims to the recognition of positivities and merits is not only a personal virtue but also significant societal desideratum.

There is of course nothing virtuous about respect as such—no questions asked. Respect is only virtuous whenever it is bestowed appropriately. There is nothing virtuous about improperly granted respect—respect bestowed without adequate reason or, even worse, for inappropriate reasons. But respecting someone who deserves it is decidedly meritorious.

It is somewhere between difficult and impossible to have respect for a morally deficient individual. And so when one respects someone, it can be presumed that one regards the individual as honest, truthful, sincere, and in general ethically meritorious. We are unlikely to respect people we think lacking in such regards. Accordingly, respect for one another as fellow humans is the foundation for the ethical reciprocity that grounds the moral order in which we humans alone can successfully function by forming a congenial society.

CHAPTER THREE

OBLIGATION

• What Is Obligation?

The obligations we have toward one another constitute a key factor in making us humans into the sorts of beings we are. An obligation is an act or mode of action that an agent is called upon to do because failure to do so precludes goal realization in one or another domain of appropriate human endeavor. Table 1 gives an overview of the general situation. When a certain manner of proceeding is obligatory, then its violation involves some sort of norm-breaking. When a legal obligation is dishonored, there is a breaking of law; when a social obligation is dishonored, there is a violation of mores; when a moral obligation is in default, there is a violation of moral precepts and principles. Every such case involves the breaking of the issue-definitive standards. The agent who defaults on an obligation lays himself open to reproach and reprehension. Unmet in point of intelligence, causality, prudence, or some comparable domain of human virtue.

Table 1: Normative Categories of Obligation

Area of endeavor	**Mode of Obligation**	**Default puts at risk**	**Designation for defaults**
societal	customary	one's social standing	boorish
prudential	well-being	one's well-being	heedless
medical	self-care	one's health	reckless
interpersonal	moral/ethical	one' social acceptability	wicked
legal	law-abidance	one's legal condition	illegal
business	contractual	one's truthfulness	dishonest

Obligation is a matter of adherence to principle and conformity to the rules appropriate to the correlative range of comportment and—in the case of moral obligations in particular—of comportment in matters of human interactions in which the best interests of people are involved.

Every case of obligation-default opens up a roadway to reproach and reprobation: in every instance, the individual creates a condition which those who have his/her best interest at heart must view with dismay and regret.

• How do Ethico-Moral Obligations Arise?

How do obligations arise? Whence do our duties come? What sorts of circumstances and conditions impel us into having obligations of some sort?

Obligation comes into being in two principal ways. One of them arises through a contractual agreement of some sort, be it overt and explicit (as per agreeing to be someone's spouse, or physician, or attorney) or by tacit albeit well understood arrangements (as per being someone's bus driver or child minder). The other arises through coming to occupy a certain membership relation to a person (being their child, for example, or their fellow associate in an organization or similar grouping). The distinction at issue tracks Puffendorf's classical distinction between *acquired obligations* (*obligationes adventitiae*) that come to us via agreements and quasi-controllable obligations like parenthood or citizenship and *rational obligations* (*obigationes congenitae*) that come to us simply via our position in nature's scheme of things (like concern for our parents or fellow humans). We shall have a great deal more to say about these non-contractual obligations later on.

The concept of obligation or duty has a long and elaborate philosophical history.[1] Viewing at the conception in its historical background brings several key distinctions to light. Paramount among these is the distinction between voluntary and involuntary obligations as per:

- *Voluntary obligations* are those that people decide to undertake. These primarily include:
  - — *membership obligations* that are taken on when someone joins an organization (a club, a profession, a branch of military service).
  - — *contractual obligations* that are taken on when one enters into an agreement to provide goods, services, resources or the like.
- *Involuntary obligations* that come about through someone's standing condition or involuntarily acquired relationships. (The obligation of a king to his subjects, of children to parents, or of people toward their neighbors are examples of this.)

On this basis, there are four main categories of obligation as follows:

	Overt	Implicit
By contract	I	II
By membership	III	IV

Examples of the various modes of obligation would be:

I. Obligations of an employee to his employer or of a husband to his wife
II. Obligations of a bus driver to the passengers or of parents to their children
III. Obligations of a club member to the organization and its members or of paramedics to victims
IV. Obligations of children to parents, or native-born citizens to their country, or of people at large to their fellow humans

Clearly, agreements, undertakings, and assurances of all sorts—*contracts* let us call them for the sake of communicative convenience—are an important source of obligation. When we make a promise, or anything like it, direct or indirect, we obligate ourselves to honor it. The husband and wife, captain and crew, builder and client all undertake contractual duties and obligations of various sorts which they are generally (and often legally) bound to honor.

A second source of obligation is constituted by what may be called the *quasi-contracts* represented by tacit and unformulated agreement. It is in this way that the driver of a bus or train acquires responsibilities toward people (i.e., passengers) of whose very existence as individuals he is otherwise ignorant.

However, there are also entirely non-contractual modes of obligation acquisition. This is exemplified by what might be called *role-inherence* through membership in a group—voluntary or not—that carries certain responsibilities with it. Thus, parents have moral obligations toward their children—wanted or not—to provide for their care and nurturing during the period of dependency. The king has duties vis-à-vis his subjects incumbent on him with a kinship he neither sought nor wanted. When a certain role is yours (be it asked for or not), you acquire the moral obligation that goes with it—be it as neighbor, or travel-companion, or father-in-law.

A peculiar type of *role-inherent* duties are those you acquire by virtue of what you are an instance of *Homo sapiens*. They are the reflexively self-oriented duties exemplified by such proceedings as:

—taking care of yourself (physically and psychologically)
—preventing yourself from being a burden to others
—taking care to develop (some of) your talents
—availing yourself of (some of the) opportunities to do good things

Medical obligations for maintaining one's own health—giving due care to one's special needs in matters of diet and behavior—are a prime example of involuntarily acquired obligations. You did not volunteer to obtain these requirements, they came to you unsought for, thrust upon you in the world's scheme of things as an instance of *Homo sapiens*.

Nor did you enlist or enroll as a child of your parents, a sibling of your brothers, a member of your tribe or nationality, etc. And yet all of these involuntarily acquired conditions of yours carry obligations in their wake.

So, toward whom do we have obligations? Quite a few people—all depending.

Some obligations issue from a more or less explicit contract with others. The bus driver has obligations toward his passengers, the physician toward his patients, the teacher toward his students, etc.

Other obligations issue from a virtual or tacit contract; say, parents toward their children or people toward their neighbors and bystanders toward victims. Here, there is a tacit contract which goes "You care for me and mine; I'll care for you and yours—as and when needed."

Still, other obligations instance no reciprocity at all; they issue from our conditions as human beings. Our obligations toward the needy, the helpless, or future generations involve no element of reciprocity. Rather, they are fostered as our self-understanding of what it takes to be a decent human being and relate to our sense of self-worth. If we prize status as humans for ourselves, we of course have to value it in others.

Ethical obligations are governed by the principle that one ought to never do anything that causes unmerited injury to any person's interests. And this, of course, includes the agent himself, as well as people in general. Such ethical obligations root in the final analysis of the metaphysics of person-hood, with special reference to its value and the consequent entitlement to due considerations in virtue to the status of such individuals as intelligent free agents.