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Friendship, Freedom, and Special Obligations

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1 Introduction: friendship and freedom

Among the many goods thought to be at stake in the free will debate is friendship. Robert Kane lists it, together with love, as one of ten items that hang in the balance in figuring out if we are free in the sense of being undetermined originators of our actions.¹ Susan Wolf, in describing the worries of many, writes that ‘the most gruesome difference between [a world in which we give up our practices that depend on the assumption that we are free agents] and our world would be reflected in our closest human relationships’ (1981: 291). Although we could form ‘some sorts of associations that could be described as relationships of friendship and love’, the words ‘friendship’ and ‘love’ would take on ‘a hollow ring’. We would inhabit ‘a world of human isolation so cold and dreary that any but the most cynical must shudder at the idea of it’ (1981: 291).

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Interestingly, Kane’s reasoning and the reasoning Wolf lays out for a similar conclusion are completely different. Kane reasons that the relationship itself is more valuable, or valuable in a special way, in virtue of its being freely chosen. The reasoning Wolf lays out – inspired by Peter Strawson and taken up recently in the work of Seth Shabo and others – connects friendship and freedom in a very different way. The key connection in this reasoning is the disposition to the reactive attitudes, such as resentment, indignation, gratitude, and forgiveness. Without our being susceptible to the reactive attitudes, we could not engage in true – or at least particularly valuable kinds of – friendships or reciprocal loving relationships. And since the reactive attitudes themselves are appropriate only if their targets are free agents, true friendship that does not rest on an illusion requires free agency.

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Let us call the first way of connecting freedom and friendship 'the Free Choice Connection'. The idea is simply that freely chosen relationships have a value that can't be realized otherwise. Let us call the second way of connecting freedom and friendship 'the Reactive Attitudes Connection'. The idea here is that without a susceptibility to the reactive attitudes, we could not have a truly personal relationship with another. There has recently been a rich debate about whether either of these connections really holds. For example, as against Robert Kane's defense of the Free Choice Connection, Derk Pereboom argues that at least in many cases, we prefer that love and friendship not be a matter of deliberate decision, and that in cases in which it seems that causal determination of the will to love and friendship would be undermining of its value, what is really problematic are only certain kinds of causal determination that bypass our genuine recognition of the value in others. Thus, on his view, skepticism about free will is not incompatible with friendship.² And as against Seth Shabo's recent defense of the Reactive Attitudes Connection, Pereboom has appealed, in part, to analogue attitudes that seem sufficient for the most personal and loving of relationships (including that of a parent and teenager) to show that reactive attitudes and the free will they presuppose are not necessary.³ While there is undoubtedly more to be said about the debates over the Free Choice Connection and the Reactive Attitudes Connection, in this paper I explore a distinctive third way of connecting friendship and freedom. The basic idea is this: friendship is partly defined by the special obligations friends have to one another. Insofar as having obligations requires an important kind of free will, then, friendship itself will require free will. More precisely, the reasoning can be set out as follows:

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The Special Obligations Argument

- (1) Friendship requires special obligations or duties.
- (2) Special obligations, being obligations, require free agency to meet them.

Therefore,

- (3) Friendship requires free agency.

This argument captures what we can call the 'Special Obligations Connection' of friendship and freedom. Before beginning to evaluate the premises, I want to note one way in which the Special Obligations Connection might be related to the Reactive Attitudes Connection, and to show how each of the premises fits into a larger context. It is possible

to accept the reasoning that we do not need the reactive attitudes *per se* to have friendships, but at the same time think that we need *something* that plays one key role played by such attitudes. In particular, one role that the attitudes have seemed to play is in the appropriate making and responding to certain demands special to the relationship. It is appropriate for friends to ask certain things of friends that it wouldn't be appropriate to ask of strangers. For example, it seems appropriate for a friend to ask for a friend's support while in the throes of grief, or to lend an ear during a difficult time. Reactive attitudes are sometimes characterized as embodying demands.⁴ But even if we could imagine a friend who reacts to a friend's voluntary absence during a difficult time without resentment or other responsibility- or free will-entailing attitudes, we might still think that she would be entitled to demand assistance of her friend in a way that she wouldn't when it comes to strangers on the street. Thus, one might think that the defenders of the Reactive Attitudes Connection are onto something, but that rather than appeal to the reactive attitudes themselves to make the connection between freedom and friendship, it would be better to focus on what important role in friendship they (contingently) play: namely, in embodying demands. This idea can be captured by the following reasoning:

The Holding to Standards Argument

- (1) Friendship (or a special kind of friendship) requires the appropriate holding to standards.
- (2) Appropriately holding to standards requires free agency.

Therefore,

- (3) Friendship (or a special kind of friendship) requires free agency.

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I explored this kind of reasoning in earlier work. But I now want to explore the suggestion that this reasoning itself may rest on something more fundamental.⁵ In particular, the relevant demands are in place only if, *and because*, their targets have obligations to do what is demanded or to live up to the standards to which they are rightly held.

Comparing the two lines of reasoning can be instructive in that it brings together two quite distinct literatures – the literature on friendship and moral theory, on the one hand, and the literature on friendship and freedom, on the other. In the friendship and morality literature, (1) is much more common than (1'), and in the free will and responsibility literature, (1') has a natural fit with the Reactive Attitudes Connection. One of my aims here is to see how insights from each literature might

illuminate the other. It is also important to note that in the Special Obligations Argument, we have a parallel to a claim about *moral* obligation: namely, that moral obligation itself requires the freedom to meet such obligations.⁶ So, naturally, some of the arguments for and against premise (2) of this argument will be similar to those for and against the more general claim about moral obligation.

To elaborate, premise (1), the idea that friendship requires special obligations, is most often criticized by consequentialists, whose moral theory would seem to license partiality to our friends only insofar as it is a way of maximizing utility, or well-being, or some other goods. Thus, assuming we can still have friendship if consequentialism is the true moral theory, there is no *special* obligation that one has to one's friends; there is only a general obligation to maximize good consequences, and this obligation may in some circumstances be fulfilled by treating one's friends in special ways.⁷ But the premise can also be criticized by skeptics about moral obligation.⁸ Indeed, it has been challenged, in a novel way, by Pereboom (2014b). These two opponents can share some reasons for the rejection of (1) – particularly, those that appeal to a positive and complete account of friendship that lacks any requirement for special obligations. But the reasoning that appeals to consequentialism itself – understood as a theory that recognizes a *general* obligation – and the reasoning that appeals to skepticism about obligations generally obviously cannot be shared between the different opponents of (1).⁹

A full defense of (1) will answer objections from both of these opponents, and go further by explaining *why* friendship (or a particularly valuable kind) is partially constituted by the existence of special obligations. In Sections 2 and 3, I focus on answering each of the two kinds of objection, and in Section 4 I sketch a positive account of the special obligations of friendship. In Section 5, I turn to the evaluation of premise (2), the claim that if one has special obligations, one must have free agency to meet them. Defending both premises will constitute an argument for a new connection between friendship and freedom.

2 Friendship, special obligations, and consequentialism

We can start by noting the intuitive plausibility of the idea that friendship comes along with special obligations. We can imagine circumstances, for example, in which it seems that one ought to give a friend a ride when her car breaks down, but that a similar obligation doesn't necessarily apply to a stranger (even a stranger who poses no threat to you). Or that one ought to be there for a friend who needs an ear, but that one

does not fail in an obligation when one is not there in a similar way for a stranger. It is natural to think friends ought to give special weight to each others' needs and interests in their deliberations about the future, and it is plausible that doing so is part of what makes two people friends. Still, these reactions might be explained away.

A first attempt to explain these away on a consequentialist account would be to point out that the general obligation to, say, maximize well-being or value is most often met precisely *by* favoring those who are closest to one. Henry Sidgwick, for example, puts forward this idea:

The commonly received view of special claims and duties arising out of special relations, though *prima facie* opposed to the impartial universality of the Utilitarian principle, is really maintained by a well-considered application of that principle. (1907: 427)

The idea is that the fact that we (contingently) derive more pleasure from interactions with friends and those close to us, together with the fact of our greater knowledge of how we might benefit them, makes it the case that we are in a better position to create more utility by giving more to our friends than to others. The best way of understanding this, I take it, is that we really have the single general duty, but the way we best fulfill it is co-extensive with the way we would fulfill special obligations if we had those instead. But, as many have pointed out, the match is at best imperfect.¹⁰ In easily conceivable – and likely real – cases, I could provide greater benefits that would help foster other friendships at a smaller, albeit significant, cost to my own.

But Sidgwick also suggests another response on behalf of the consequentialist: 'The Utilitarian will evidently approve of the cultivation of affection and the performance of affectionate services' (1981: 431). The basic idea here has been developed by several contemporary consequentialists in the form of a 'sophisticated consequentialism' that takes the *cultivation of dispositions* to favor one's friends as itself maximizing.¹¹ The idea is that it is possible that the acts involved in forming such a disposition will produce the best consequences overall, even if it means that in the future one will sometimes be disposed to do wrong (Arneson 2003: 394; see also Norcross 2012). I will here briefly canvass Arneson's reasoning, as I think it is both representative of a sophisticated consequentialist approach and is also subtle in particular ways that will be important for our purposes.

The idea that we might be better off cultivating dispositions to do wrong is only one part of the sophisticated consequentialist picture.¹²

Arneson starts by pointing out that it is consistent with consequentialism that friends helping friends is intrinsically more valuable than strangers helping strangers (other things being equal) (2003: 393). But this observation will only go so far. The appearance to be explained away or accommodated is that genuine friendship can require helping a friend in some circumstances when impartial calculations, even those recognizing the special value of friendship itself, entail that one ought not help one's friend.

To this, Arneson offers a picture of friendship as requiring only mutual affection, care, and a strong desire to help each other. There need not be anything like an obligation lurking here. At the same time, it is true that the mere strong desire to help a friend might dispose one to act wrongly in some circumstances (according to the impartial consequentialist calculation). So, even on this picture of friendship, forming and sustaining friendships may be such as to dispose one to act wrongly. Still, overall, doing so can be good-maximizing, given the value of friendship, and so itself not violate the consequentialist prescription. Alternatively, Arneson concedes that more than a strong desire may be required for friendship; perhaps one must *will* that one provide special help to be a good friend.¹³ Here it is even clearer that forming and sustaining a friendship is likely to dispose one to do wrong. And, further, it seems that there will be a *norm* of friendship that one be such as to will to provide special aid and act accordingly. But here, too, Arneson sees no contradiction. As long as one or the other of these conceptions of friendship is plausible, there is no undermining of consequentialism. There are no special *obligations* to friends that are not simply instances of a single maximizing principle. To the contrary, if we were to act in a way contrary to such a principle in being partial to a friend, we would act wrongly.

Still, as Arneson recognizes, the consequentialist picture will be revisionary. There will be occasions when one will be morally required to betray a friend or end a friendship, for example – when the cost in good consequences outweighs the benefit of the friendship itself. And these will likely include occasions that intuitively call for a very different response. And, although, as Arneson notes, the conception of friendship includes norms of a sort (good friends ought to will and act in the way in which they are disposed, *qua* friends), these norms must be conceived of as *non-moral*. Otherwise, the reconciliation will not work. In favor of the conception of such norms as non-moral, Arneson points out that the very plausibility of the conception of friendship he puts forth might be affected by what moral constraints we recognize: 'The

possibility needs to be entertained that the common-sense view about the special ties of friendship is just an artefact of current widespread dismissal of act consequentialism' (2003: 397).

I believe that Arneson is right that the plausibility of the conception of friendship is affected by what we take the right moral theory to be. As some evidence for this, note that there is, in theory, a large logical space for such a conception of friendship to be embraced by non-consequentialists. After all, there is nothing consequentialist *per se* about the conception of friendship proposed. But it is a space rarely occupied, at least in any explicit way, by contemporary theorists.¹⁴ Mark Bernstein (2007) appears to be a notable exception here, arguing that we can understand friendship without obligations for partiality, without adopting a consequentialist (or at least maximizing consequentialist) account of morality. On his view, we do not have an obligation to help a friend over a stranger, when we have a scarce resource that we ought to share with one or the other, for example. But at the same time, he seems to recognize the existence of moral options and the permissibility of spending your free time with your friends and not others. I think it is at this point that the view becomes less plausible than one that is embedded in a consequentialist account. If I have options left open by general moral obligations, then it appears inconsistent with my having friendships, or at least good ones, that I *not* choose to spend some of that time with, and helping, friends who could use help. It seems less undermining of our friendship if I am, as a result of extensive general moral obligations, less able to spend time with and help my friends than if I simply choose not to do in order to to serve my own interests. If, for example, on my way to meet a close friend who is going through a break-up with her romantic partner, I come across a victim of a hit-and-run car accident who needs to be rushed to the hospital in order to survive, I am obligated to stop and help, and it doesn't seem that my friend could reasonably complain that I am a bad friend in doing so. Now imagine that this happens most of the time when I would otherwise be able to meet my friend to talk through her break-up; even then, while my friend might be understandably frustrated, she would not necessarily be entitled to complain that I have violated an obligation of friendship. On the other hand, if nothing else makes a moral demand on my attention, and I simply choose not to meet my friend, or instead choose to listen to a stranger's break-up woes, then either I'm a very bad friend who has violated the obligations of friendship or I'm not really a friend at all.

Thinking about this range of cases reinforces the idea that having *general* moral options and having special obligations are linked in an

interesting way. This may both explain why premise (1) is challenged much more frequently by consequentialists than by non-consequentialist deontologists, and why the fate of the right conception of friendship may be tied up – at least to an extent – with that of the correct moral theory. One might appeal to the reasoning I just offered *against* Bernstein's non-consequentialist rejection of special obligations in order to argue in a positive way *for* the rejection of special obligations when that is embedded in a consequentialist view.¹⁵ For we can move from the ordinary case, in which circumstances give me an overriding obligation to help the accident victim and so cancel a special obligation to my friend, to a case in which morality itself is consequentialist and so entails that there is no special obligation to my friend. In the first case, friendship surely survives a special obligation being cancelled because of a general moral obligation; and, in a similar way, we should see it as surviving the lack of special obligations because of the general moral obligations that are present if morality is consequentialist.

Thus, it appears that the consequentialist has the advantage when it comes to an argument for a conception of friendship without special obligations. At the same time, the influence between moral theory and conceptions of friendship can go in both directions. For some, it is precisely the apparent existence of special obligations that gives us reason to reject consequentialism.¹⁶ Further, though the analogy to the friend whose way home is regularly and unluckily blocked by hit-and-run accidents is suggestive, and provides initial support to the consequentialist's picture of friendship as not entailing special obligations, it is less clear on reflection that it really is a good analogy. While I believe that the reasoning succeeds in showing that the consequentialist can get further than the non-consequentialist in defending a conception of friendship without special obligations, in the end, as I will now try to show, it does not succeed in making such a conception of friendship plausible.

For the argument by analogy starts by extrapolating from the case in which a person has an obligation that *overrides* an obligation of friendship, to the case in which this happens regularly, to the case in which the only type of obligation there is is not one of friendship. In the first case on this continuum, we are asked to imagine a situation in which one lacks a particular obligation of friendship because one is in a situation in which one ought to save a life. We know that in such a situation one can nevertheless continue to be a friend because we imagine that were the accident to have been averted, one would have met one's friend (and thereby would have done as one ought). Then we are asked to imagine the counterfactual case in which this happens regularly.

Even then, this case is discontinuous in an important way with the final case in which we are asked to consider the scenario in which morality is consequentialist, and so is such that there are no genuine obligations of friendship. In the first two cases, we do not suppose that *all* of one's special obligations are overridden. So, though I might not have an obligation to meet my friend at the time we originally set, I do have an obligation to call when I can, say, and an obligation to be available next week. Further, I have conditional obligations such that, if in the future there is no accident, I ought to be there to meet my friend. And certain counterfactuals of the following form are true: 'had circumstances been different, I would have – and should have – been there for my friend'. So despite the unlucky circumstances that override my obligation to meet my friend, the truth of all of these other claims concerning obligations seems sufficient for us still to count as friends. But none of these sorts of claims is true in the final case. By hypothesis, I have no special obligations to be overridden; I have no new special obligations that arise when the earlier ones are overridden; I have no conditional special obligations. And no counterfactuals of the form, 'had circumstances been different, I would have – and ought to have – been there' are true. The closest claim that might be true in the final scenario is something like this: 'If *morality* had been different, I would have had a special obligation to you (as opposed to the general one that allows me sometimes to engage in partial behavior insofar as it contributes toward the maximization of welfare, say)'. But this is an odd counterfactual, to say the least. It is not clear, for example, that we can coherently imagine the antecedent of the counterfactual.¹⁷ And, even if we can, the meaning is very different from the counterpart counterfactuals in the original accident cases. Thus, the reasoning by analogy is suggestive, and I believe shows that the consequentialist can avoid a particular counterintuitive implication of the non-consequentialist conception of friendship without special obligations: namely, that in a world in which we are morally permitted to either help friends in need or play video games, there is no special obligation to do the former. But, in the end, it does not go all the way in making such a conception of friendship as not requiring special obligations plausible. Thus, without such an argument, perhaps what we should think survives in a consequentialist world is not friendship, but something else with some, but not all, of its important features.

At the very least, the consequentialist rejection of (1) appears to entail a revisionary prescription about what particular duties we have to friends. And it leaves the consequentialist herself with an irresolvable tension between her commitment to consequentialism and her commitment to

her friends, when those inevitably conflict.¹⁸ These are serious costs to this way of rejecting (1). Further, if there were independent reasons to see the norms of friendship *as moral norms*, then that, too, would provide an additional reason for resisting the conception of friendship offered by the consequentialist. And if we were in possession of an appealing account of the source of special obligations between friends, that, too, would add an advantage to what seems initially to be the more natural picture of friendship. In Section 4, I offer some reason to think these can be found. But first, let's turn to another kind of argument against premise (1).

3 Obligation skepticism

Pereboom (2014b) offers a very different way of capturing some of the important work that our talk about special obligations and 'oughts' does, without having us presuppose something that may be false. In earlier work (2001, 2014a), he takes this approach to practices that invoke moral obligations more generally; and here he applies and extends the approach to contexts in which we often appeal to special obligations, such as those of friendship and love-based marriage.

The approach has two parts. First, appealing to similar distinctions made by Harman, Humberstone, Manne, and Hobbs, Pereboom distinguishes between moral obligation, captured by 'ought to do', and a kind of axiological evaluation captured by 'ought to be' (2014b: 12). The former entails that an agent can comply, while the latter does not. Pereboom calls the former sort of 'ought' the 'ought' of *specific action demand*. While it would be unfair to claim that Joe ought to act in a certain way if he cannot, it might not be unfair for you to recommend that Joe act in a certain way in the future if you don't know that Joe can't, and you even have reason to believe that your so recommending will positively influence Joe's future behavior. Thus, Pereboom concludes that there is a legitimate use of the axiological 'ought' in such recommendations. We can use expressions of judgments that feature the axiological 'ought' to recommend to agents morally valuable states of affairs in which they refrain from performing certain actions. This would then be a use of the 'ought' of *axiological recommendation*.

The suggestion thus far, then, is that there is a legitimate use of 'ought' that can capture at least some of the important work that we typically use 'oughts' to do: namely, to recommend certain courses of action to others (and presumably to ourselves). But we can do this work without presupposing anything false (assuming determinism is true and/or we

are not free to comply with demands that appeal to moral obligations). Pereboom does not stop here, however, because although this allows us to replace a good deal of 'moral obligation' talk, it does not distinguish between mere recommendations that express what we would *like* others to do, and demands that others not perform actions that are 'intuitively morally wrong'. This seems an important distinction to accommodate in some way. To add detail to an example Pereboom uses here, consider an abusive spouse. The demand that he cease his abusive behavior seems different in kind from a recommendation that he bring home whimsical gifts more often, or from a recommendation that he occasionally surprise his spouse by washing their car.

Marking this distinction in a way that does not presuppose the 'ought' of obligation requires more than the move to the 'ought' of axiological recommendation. And Pereboom provides an additional element. The first step is to note that while a violation of a moral obligation would appear to entail that the violator has acted wrongly, the converse does not follow. Pereboom imagines a serial killer who could not have done otherwise due to a psychological disorder. Even if the 'ought' implies 'can' principle would show him not to have violated an obligation, it is still plausible that he did something wrong. How, then, to capture this notion of wrongness?

Pereboom begins by building on a purely axiological ethics proposed by Alastair Norcross (2006). Each option for acting is ranked on a scale according to the value it realizes. If an option is low enough in this ranking in the context that 'it is *prima facie* morally justified (on whichever normative ethical theory is endorsed) for a relevantly situated interlocutor, such as a partner in a personal relationship, to protest the action', then the action can be classified as morally wrong (2014b: 171). Thus, the abusive spouse's behavior counts as morally wrong. And his spouse might go even further in justifiably issuing hypothetical demands of the form, 'if it doesn't stop, I will leave you'.

Pereboom acknowledges that there are costs and benefits to shifting to this conception of 'ought' and 'wrong' talk. For example, on this conception, wrongness is not characterized independently of the conditions under which it is morally appropriate to protest the action, so we give up an intuition that appropriate protest depends on a prior categorization of wrongness.¹⁹ But we preserve many intuitions we have about wrongness, and avoid presupposing something that might be false and doing something unfair in the process.

The approach has some clear advantages. But here I want to explore the idea that it has an additional cost – one that is revealed in a vivid

way by thinking about special obligations in particular. To begin, note that the example of the abusive spouse allows us both to easily recommend prospectively that he cease his abusive behavior in the future and also to call such behavior wrong. In this way, it perfectly parallels our attributing to him a violation of a moral obligation and our invoking a prospective demand that appeals to a moral obligation he has. The picture looks like this:

- | | |
|--|-----------|
| (c) Ceasing abusive behavior and providing surprise
car washing | not wrong |
| (b) Ceasing abusive behavior | not wrong |
| ----- | |
| (a) Continuing to be abusive | wrong |

But note that the abusive behavior in question is, intuitively, wrong no matter what the relationship is between the two parties. So, now instead consider a different choice that a friend might face: she can pick up her friend, whose car battery has died; she can continue playing video games; or she can spend the time it would take to do either of those things acting in such a way that a different, ever so slightly more valuable, friendship flourishes. (Alternatively, she could help an equally valuable friendship flourish, together with adding a slight additional increase in well-being for someone else.) Or, imagine a choice a spouse could face: she could spend precious time with her spouse, play video games on her own, or help another two marriages flourish. In a ranking of states of affairs by value, the options in our friendship example would initially seem to be as follows:

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- (c) Helping another slightly more valuable friendship flourish;
(b) Picking up one's friend;
(a) Continuing to play video games.

Intuitively, however, it seems that one's friend might object – on grounds of the friendship – to both (a) *and* (c). And it needn't only be one's friend who would be in a position to object. It seems that a third party could equally judge that if you really are friends you should choose (b). If this is right, there wouldn't be a single line in the scale of value that would divide wrong action from right.

A similar challenge might be raised in the more general moral case, as well; but, for the moment, let us focus on the context of special relationships – friendships, romantic partnerships, parent-child

relationships, and so on.²⁰ How might an obligation skeptic try to meet the challenge?

One might attempt to do so by adopting a strategy parallel to at least one consequentialist strategy and suggest that there really is a single line, and it is between (a) and (b). Doing (c) is not wrong, even on the proposed conception of wrongness. This may be defensible, but also takes us back to the arguments of the consequentialists canvassed earlier.²¹

A second option would be to claim that it is morally appropriate for a friend to *express* that (a) and (c) are wrong and that they rank lower than (b) on the scale of valuable outcomes, even if what the friend says about the relative values of the states of affairs is actually false. One problem with this option is that at least part of the motivation for replacing moral obligation talk with axiological recommendations and a conception of wrongness in terms of appropriateness of protest is to avoid false presuppositions. One might claim here that making the false presupposition in this case would, perhaps, be less unfair than making a false presupposition in the case of claims concerning the existence of moral obligations. But this would have to be made out, and it still has the cost of licensing the systematic moral appropriateness of saying things that aren't true.

A third alternative would be to offer a different ranking of states of affairs, so that the most valuable is (b). This would be a departure from the axiological ethics Norcross defends. Such a departure is suggested by Pereboom's openness to different normative ethical theories (2014b: 15) and recognition of rights, such as the right to self-protection (2014b: 16). But it is not clear that we can countenance such normative ethical theories without presupposing both rights *and* corresponding duties – or obligations.²² If this is right, then it would undermine the obligation skepticism we started with.

A fourth alternative would be to keep the conception of wrong, but de-couple it from the axiological ethics. That is, one could recognize wrong action as that which it is morally appropriate to protest, without taking it that wrong action always falls below a certain line in an axiological ranking. Defending this alternative would seem to require an account of the conditions under which it is appropriate to protest. This burden will be borne by any of the alternatives, and seems a serious challenge to all.

Nevertheless, I believe that there is strongest reason to pursue the fourth option: while it is clearly revisionary, this option allows for a closer *mapping* of appropriate attribution of 'wrongness', understood in a non-obligation-entailing way, onto 'ought not' in a moral-obligation-entailing way. In other words, I believe that it will allow us to do more

of the (good) work that moral obligation talk can do, insofar as it will be appropriate to use 'wrong' in more conditions where we suppose that there are violations of obligations. In saying that this option is preferable to the first option – which instead takes 'wrong' to map more closely onto the more revisionary sophisticated consequentialist suggestion – it is true that I am supposing that the non-consequentialist deontologist gets things closer to right. And this is true *if* the norms of friendship are in fact of a moral sort that really would compete in an all-things-considered way with the consequentialist principle.

In the next section, I sketch a view about what grounds special obligations, and conclude that, while special obligations are genuinely special, they are a special *kind* of more general moral obligation.

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4 Special obligations and general obligations

In setting out my view of the nature and source of special obligations as moral in an important way, it will be helpful to clarify what I think a plausible view is required to do and what it is not required to do. First, it is not obvious from the outset that special obligations must have a single source or kind of explanation. It might be, for example, that some special obligations have their source in explicit promises, and so are the paradigm of the so-called 'voluntarist' approach, while others have their source in appropriate gratitude for the receipt of non-voluntarily assumed benefits. Of course, there might be an additional argument that all special obligations ultimately have a single source, but at least at the outset the defense of special obligations would not appear to require unity of explanation as a requirement.

Second, I will defend the view that special obligations are moral in the sense that they compete with other general moral obligations. This is a view that is inconsistent, as we saw, with the consequentialist-friendly idea that there are *norms* of friendship without there being such obligations.

The approach to special obligations that seems to me the most promising, particularly for a central core category of personal relationships, is an approach that takes voluntary activity to be grounding of special obligations. I will point to some of its advantages and then explain why I think it can be part of a powerful picture whose overall appeal is greater than the best consequentialist picture of friendship. According to the voluntarist approach I will defend here, our special obligations are ultimately grounded in voluntary actions or activities that constitute the assumption of such obligations. This is an intentionally broad

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conception of the approach, and does not require the explicit agreement or consent that is sometimes associated with the label 'voluntarism'. Consistent with it is the idea that the obligations in all loving relationships are generated by voluntary actions that in turn commit one to the assumption of those obligations, whether explicitly or implicitly, in one moment or over time. In these and other kinds of relationships, it might (also) be that we voluntarily engage in patterns of behavior that encourage expectations and foster trust and in so doing acquire duties to meet those expectations and confirm that trust. I will not here attempt to limit the kind of voluntary activity that grounds such obligations, but will take such voluntary activities as examples of the relevant voluntary activity.²³

The voluntarist approach accounts nicely for much of the divide between cases in which we think we have special obligations and cases in which we do not. While it seems clear that spouses have obligations to each other, and parents to children, there are (for the most part) clear voluntary actions, either in the form of explicit promises (as in marriage) or implicit assumptions of obligation. Where there is not (say, in a forced marriage), it is also unclear that one acquires such obligations. More controversially, I doubt that children have any obligations to their parents *just in virtue* of being their children, or even in virtue of having received a benefit thereby. That is not to say that in very many cases, children acquire such obligations, but I think this is (largely) because they implicitly or explicitly take them on: not typically all at once or with an explicit promise (although that can happen too). Nevertheless, when they do, the obligations will take on a special character and have a special content. And the case of friendship itself seems paradigmatic of relationships we choose. This is consistent with 'falling into' friendship as Arneson puts it.²⁴ But we should think of the phrase as metaphorical, and it is difficult to see how friends could fail to engage in any voluntary activities that play a key role in the formation and sustaining of the friendship itself.

Ideally, a complete defense of the voluntarist approach would include a rationale: an explanation for why special obligations are ultimately grounded in voluntary activity that constitutes the assumption of a duty. And it will ultimately matter very much whether one takes the voluntarist account to be exhaustive in grounding special obligations, or simply one piece of a pluralist approach. For my purpose of defending the very idea that there *are* special obligations of a sort that are moral in the relevant sense, I need only show how some such obligations are explained, however. And to do that, it is sufficient to show how the

obligations of relationships that are most paradigmatically formed on the basis of voluntary activity, such as (voluntary) marriage and friendship, can be explained. Insofar as they are similar in key ways to explicit acts of promising, we can assimilate the explanation to the explanation of how promises are obligation-providing. Now, there is controversy about what explains the obligations that arise from the making of a promise too.²⁵ But it seems that if there is any voluntary action by which one can assume an obligation, it is the making of a promise. Thus, it will be sufficient for present purposes if at least some special obligations are grounded in a way similar to that of promising.

Now, one might worry that seeing special obligations of friendship as, in this way, of a similar nature to other moral obligations is not true to the phenomenon. Wallace (2012), for example, suggests that, if such obligations were reducible to moral duties of any kind, then there would not be 'genuine' duties of friendship and love. According to reductionist views of 'duties of love', as Wallace describes them, we have duties to those with whom we stand in reciprocal loving relationships only in virtue of generalizable features of those loving relationships. So the voluntarist approach, among several others, will count as a reductionist view. By contrast, the non-reductionist does not reduce the special obligations to those we love to general moral obligations. We have such duties, as he puts it, not (only) in virtue of our owing things to people as persons, but 'specifically as our friends, partners, parents, and so on' (2012: 176). The duties we have to partners in these relationships are *sui generis*. We have them simply in virtue of being in the relationship. Only non-reductionism recognizes 'genuine duties of love' (2012: 175).

Now, I agree that there is a real distinction between a duty whose ground cannot be specified with any more detail than the relationship and one whose ground can be. The voluntarist view, for example, offers some explanation for how one can be bound to obligations within a relationship, where a non-reductionist view like Wallace's simply cites the relationship itself. But this does not entail that the former view fails to recognize 'genuine' duties of love, or that it is committed to the idea that we don't have duties to our partners and friends *as* partners and friends. The particular obligations of friendship and love differ *in content* from those we have to others. We have obligations to *be good friends*, where this requires a kind of interaction that is different in kind from obligations we have to others.²⁶

I think this is not just a semantic disagreement. Wallace takes the so-called 'reductionist' views – those based on voluntarism, as well as ones based on gratitude for benefits, and vulnerability – as in a class

with 'utilitarian accounts of special obligations', which try to account for our obligations to friends and partners through a general principle of beneficence. But it seems clear that such a principle really does conflict with the idea that there are special obligations to friends, and, as we saw, those who accept it are forced either to deny that friendship is possible or to accept a conception of friendship that does not countenance such obligations. By contrast, accepting one of the other views, such as the voluntarist view, is itself an attempt to justify not only partial behavior, but special obligations themselves. Unlike the consequentialist, the voluntarist can consistently agree that there is no friendship *without* special obligations.

This kind of picture has two important implications. It offers an explanation for why special obligations are not merely 'norms of friendship' that are non-moral in character. They are genuine candidate competitors with moral norms, and we can see this at a level of abstraction that treats both as ones we have in virtue of the voluntary assumption of an obligation to another, say. At the same time, they are genuinely special in the sense that they are obligations we have to each other *qua* friends because of the special character of their content, and the particular kinds of voluntary act on which they are (at least to an extent) based.

Insofar as we are choosing between two pictures, the more advantages in terms of explanatory power and intuitive plausibility one has, the better. I hope here to have added to the positive picture of special obligations of friendship as centrally founded on a voluntarist picture, and to have shown that the best competitor that fails to recognize special obligations is one that rests on a consequentialist moral theory. This suggests that a complete comparison of this picture with the best version of the consequentialist-friendly picture of friendship would require an evaluation of independent arguments for consequentialism itself. But, in the meantime, we can see that the competition is narrowed, and that friendship and the appearance of special obligations remain phenomena to be explained (or explained away) by the consequentialist.

This also allows us to say something about the best approach for a skeptic of moral obligation to take. Insofar as it is a *desideratum* to capture much of what is intuitive in our judgments while remaining fair in our practices, there is some reason to try to map a non-obligation notion of wrongness onto a non-consequentialist picture, if possible, rather than onto a consequentialist one. If it is not possible, the cost might not only be acceptance of some counter-intuitive claims about moral theory generally, but also the denial of the nature, or even existence, of friendship of a particularly valuable kind. For this reason, the idea that special

obligations are moral obligations, albeit of a very special kind, supports a view of non-obligation-entailing wrongness as separable from a purely axiological ethics. At the same time, it remains difficult to see how any particular alternative categorization of wrongness could be justified once we have given up the idea of obligation.

5 Obligations and freedom

If the obligations of friendship are really of the same sort or sorts as (other) moral ones, then it is especially easy to see how the reasons for premise (2) in the Special Obligations Argument will just be the reasons that have been given for the thesis that *moral* obligations require free agency. So, let us turn to the debate over the truth of that thesis. That thesis is supported by a natural appeal to the so-called 'Ought Implies Can' principle, according to which, if one ought to perform (or refrain from performing) an action, one can do so. The principle is sometimes taken to be axiomatic, though it has been argued for in a variety of ways. Elsewhere, I have defended the principle on two main grounds. First, the concept of obligation is itself a concept of action-guidingness, and this would seem to have application only if actions could be so guided. Second, the principle explains our intuitions about a variety of cases in which, upon finding out that an agent cannot fulfill what we thought was an obligation, we retract our judgment that the obligation is in place, and instead in many cases attribute a 'second-best' obligation.²⁷ (For example, the plane on which you are flying to a friend's wedding is hijacked: you are no longer obligated to be there on time. Perhaps you acquire an obligation to let your friend know why you missed her wedding when you eventually land.)²

While there is a rich debate about the principle itself, I will here focus on the question of whether, if the Ought Implies Can principle is true, the 'can' is one that requires free agency.²⁸ To see how this question arises, consider the idea, familiar from the free-will literature, that if determinism is true, then no one can do otherwise than they actually do. In other words, if determinism is true, then no one has the ability to do otherwise. If that is the case, and one does not do as one ought, then one thereby violates the Ought Implies Can principle. One ought to have done something that one could not have done. Thus, if the Ought Implies Can principle is true, and if determinism is true and precludes the relevant ability to do otherwise, then we have no obligations that we do not in fact meet.²⁹ If this reasoning is sound, then it seems that the Ought Implies Can principle entails both the existence of alternate

possibilities for unmet obligations and the rejection of determinism, both of which are components of some of the most influential accounts of free agency.

But, as has been pointed out, even if this reasoning were sound, the acceptance of indeterminism would not by itself be sufficient for the ability to do otherwise that appears necessitated by unfulfilled obligations. As Pereboom writes,

Furthermore, one might also claim that if our choices and actions are partially or truly random events, then we could never do otherwise by the sort of agency required for it to be true that we ought to do otherwise. But if it is never true that one ought to do otherwise, what would be the point of a system of moral 'oughts'? (2001: 143)

Or, as Haji puts the point,

the sort of control agents must exercise over their actions if these are to have one or more of these normative statuses – the sort encapsulated by the deontic principle that 'ought' implies 'can' – is not the sort that they possess in 'indeterministic' worlds of *certain varieties*, if particular versions of this deontic principle are true. Such worlds are just as threatening to moral anchors [e.g., obligation and permissibility] as are deterministic ones. (1998a: 176)

In other words, adding indeterminism to the world by itself does not generate the *ability* to do otherwise entailed by the Ought Implies Can Principle for unfulfilled obligations. That ability cannot be the bare physical or metaphysical possibility that the world might turn out in such a way that, by luck, we do something else. Whatever it is, the ability is one that itself requires control by the agent. It has to be in my control that I do what I ought to do if I am able to do it in the relevant sense. The kind of control that is required to do what you ought, even when you don't, looks very much like the idea of control that is required to be blameworthy for an action.

On my view of the nature of the kind of freedom needed for responsibility, what one needs to act freely is the ability to do the (or a) right thing for the right reasons. Call this account the 'rational abilities view'. This view entails that: when one does not do the right thing, or does it for the wrong reasons, one must have the ability to do otherwise if one acts freely. But one does not need the ability to do other than act freely when one does the right thing for the right reasons. While I believe that

there are strong independent reasons for accepting the view (including its intuitive plausibility), it is also mutually supporting of the reasoning just given for the idea that the Ought Implies Can principle implies a kind of ability to do otherwise that involves control. To see this, consider the following derivation, connecting obligation, blameworthiness, and alternative possibilities:

(i) If *S* is blameworthy for having performed action *a*, then *S* ought not to have performed action *a*.

(ii) If *S* ought not to have performed action *a*, then *S* could have refrained from performing action *a*.

Therefore,

(iii) Principle of Alternate Possibilities-Blame: A person is morally blameworthy for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise. (Nelkin 2011: 100–1)

If one can only be morally blameworthy for an action when one does something one ought not do, then the alternate possibilities requirement on blameworthy action can be seen to rest on the more fundamental thesis that when one fails to do as one ought, one *could have* done as one ought.³⁰ In other words, the alternate possibilities requirement for unfulfilled obligations that is captured in the Ought Implies Can Principle can be seen to ground the alternate possibilities requirement for blameworthy action. At the same time, there is no sound parallel derivation to be found for the idea that one needs alternate possibilities for praiseworthy action. And this, too, fits well with the view of the freedom required for responsibility as a substantive ability to act for good reasons. For that view implies an asymmetrical answer to the question of whether alternate possibilities are required for blameworthy and praiseworthy actions. If you have the substantive ability and exercise it, you need no alternative; if you have the substantive ability and fail to exercise it, you need an alternative.³¹ Thus, the idea that the Ought Implies Can principle entails that ought-claims apply when one has precisely the freedom to do the right things for the right reasons provides mutual support to both this reading of the Ought Implies Can Principle and to the conception of freedom at hand.

At the same time, as I have argued in previous work, whether determinism is true is orthogonal to the question of whether one has the relevant ability. I will set aside this commitment for now, however, as I believe that the key claim for our purposes about the implications of the

Ought Implies Can Principle stands without it. For the key claim – that the principle entails that one fails to fulfill an obligation that applies to one only when one could do otherwise in a sense which entails that the failure is in one's control – can be accepted by compatibilists and incompatibilists alike. Whether the relevant conception of control requires determinism or not, it is plausible that the Ought Implies Can principle supports the idea that a central notion of control at stake in debates about freedom and responsibility is entailed by unfulfilled obligations. The rational abilities view can itself be seen to rest, in part, on a naturally unified account of obligations – both fulfilled and unfulfilled – which requires a single kind of control captured by the substantive ability to do the (or a) right thing for the right reasons. Thus, it fits neatly with, and offers mutual support for, premise (2) of the Special Obligations argument. But even if one does not accept the rational abilities view, there is good reason to see the Ought Implies Can principle as one that implicates the control needed to do as one ought, whether one does so or not.³² If this is a different kind of control than that needed for freedom, in the sense required for moral responsibility, then this calls for an explanation.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that philosophers have been right to see an essential connection between friendship and free agency, and to see friendship as one of the great goods at stake in the debate about freedom. At the same time, I have here departed from the recent debate about whether friendship and freedom are essentially connected by the reactive attitudes, and instead have proposed a different connection in terms of obligation. Both connections have the potential to explain why both friendship and moral responsibility are threatened in a similar way by skepticism about free agency. I have argued here that the more fundamental connection turns on obligations of a special sort, rather than on the reactive attitudes that sometimes capture our demand that others fulfill them.

The argument I have given is not complete. In arguing for premise (1) of the Special Obligations Argument – the claim that friendship is partially constituted by a relationship of mutual obligation – I have tried to show that the best hope for rejecting it is conditional on consequentialism. While I have brought out the costs to consequentialism concerning friendship, I have not offered a complete case against consequentialism here. Similarly, in arguing for premise (2) – the claim that obligations require free agency – I have tried to show that, if we accept

the intuitively plausible Ought Implies Can principle, we have strong reasons to accept that obligation requires free agency of the relevant kind. But I have not here rehearsed reasons for accepting the principle in detail. What I have aimed to do is to offer a framework for the Special Obligations Argument connecting freedom and friendship, and to show that the framework itself is part of a promising picture of our deepest concerns about whether we are free agents.³³

Notes

1. Kane takes it that the same freedom that is required for friendship (or a particularly valuable sort) is the same as is required for moral responsibility. Throughout the paper, I will assume that the notion of freedom at issue is the freedom required for moral responsibility, and for desert of praise and blame.
2. See Pereboom (2009) and (2014a: 191–2). It is important to note that I do not accept that free will requires indeterminism, but Pereboom and Kane are united in accepting this claim.
3. See Pereboom (2014a, 2014b).
4. For example, Gary Watson writes, 'The relevance of moral understanding to the expressive theory is this: The negative reactive attitudes express a *moral* demand, a demand for reasonable regard' (1987/2004: 229).
5. See Nelkin (2014: 158, n23).
6. See Pereboom (2001, 2013), and Haji (1998a, 2002, 2012), for discussion of different aspects of this argument.
7. In fact, some consequentialist arguments are targeted at the weaker claim that it is *permissible* to be partial to one's friends when doing so conflicts with consequentialist principles. Since these arguments *a fortiori* count against the stronger claim that we are obligated to be partial under some circumstances, it will be important to consider these.
8. The premise has also be criticized by non-consequentialist non-skeptics about moral obligation. But this position is rarely occupied, and I think that there are good reasons for this. I return to this point below.
9. In this respect, obligation skepticism is the more radical position because it, unlike most forms of consequentialism, will not only entail a rejection of the Special Obligations Argument, but also a parallel one appealing to general moral obligations.
10. See, for example, Brink (2001: 162).
11. See, for example, Railton (1988), Arneson (2003), and Norcross (2012).
12. For a helpful spelling out of various suggestions by sophisticated consequentialists, as well as a critique, see Badhwar (1991).
13. Some consequentialists do not concede this point. See Kagan (1982), who writes that when the 'multifaceted character' of friendship 'is borne in mind, I think, it becomes less plausible for the moderate to insist that these relationships *must* involve a willingness to favor some at the expense of the greater good' (1982: 369). Consideration of more fully detailed cases (including in the text to follow) that lack such a willingness, however, suggest that this is, at the least, a highly revisionary idea.

14. It is true that many discussions of friendship do not include an explicit inclusion of special obligations as a necessary condition of friendship, and one might be tempted to take this omission as tacit acceptance of the idea that they are not necessary. But I think this would be a mistake. For some evidence, see David Annis (1987). He first offers several conditions characteristic of friendship that do not include mention of obligations or duties, but then goes on in one of the main arguments of his paper to defend the idea that such duties are 'constitutive' of friendship. See also, Bennett Helm's (2013) survey of the literature on the nature of friendship which begins with 'three themes that recur consistently', including the 'necessary condition' of 'mutual caring', the distinguishing feature of 'intimacy', and a 'final common thread' in the literature of the condition of 'shared activity'. One might initially be tempted to conclude that this exhausts the consensus view of necessary and sufficient conditions on friendship, and special duties are not among them. But it becomes clear in a later section of Helm's survey that it remains an open question whether friendship necessarily involves special duties (Section 3). Thus, there is good reason not to take the absence of explicit discussion of special duties in initial characterizations of, or discussions of the nature of, friendship as evidence for a rejection of such duties as necessary to friendship.
15. See Arneson (2003: 397–8) for an argument of this type.
16. See, for example, David Brink (2001): 'my doubts about whether associative duties can be fitted within the intellectual net of consequentialism have been fuelled, in part, by my own experiences of the rewards and demands of parenthood. If these doubts are well founded, then consequentialism cannot be the whole truth about morality'.
17. Compare here a question that arises when thinking about Divine Command Theory. Can we imagine that God makes it morally right to torture kittens for fun? It is not at all obvious that we can imagine morality being so different from the way it actually is (or perhaps, from the way we suppose it to be), and this is a problem for such an ethical theory. See Brink (2007: 152).
18. See Norcross (2012).
19. I am not sure whether more would need to be added to the picture to give us standards for *when* it is appropriate to protest. If appropriateness is not determined by wrongness, it is not clear how we would go about figuring this out. Perhaps this challenge is no different in kind from other response-dependent concepts, but the use of 'morally appropriate' on one side of the biconditional seems to point to some set of standards distinct from our actual responses (and in this case, protests).
20. We can imagine a case in which, by breaking my promise, I could perhaps help two others to keep their promises.
21. In a recent paper, Norcross (2012) suggests something like this approach to friendship. Though most of the paper is a defense of 'maximizing sophisticated' consequentialism, he suggests that his scalar approach might at least soften a tension that remains for such a consequentialist: namely, that between the commitment to doing what is morally required by an objectively consequentialist account and doing something else, such as standing by a friend. By moving to the scalar account, we would not have to say that standing by the friend was failing in a moral requirement. It is true that we

would still have to say that standing by the friend was not the morally best thing to do, but that is not *as* strong a criticism as saying that standing by the friend was morally wrong (2012: 178). This response seems fine as far as it goes. But note that there is also no room for the friend to say that *not* standing by her is wrong. Perhaps that is a cost worth paying, and there is much that the friend *can* say. But note that it does appear to be a cost.

22. See Nelkin (2014).

23. See Jeske (2008) for a robust defense of a voluntarist approach that is explicitly non-committal about the scope of voluntary actions that count as 'commitments' in the sense required to ground obligations. As she writes, 'I do have my doubts as to whether there are any conditions, both necessary and sufficient, for an action (or series of actions) constituting a commitment. Of course, one necessary condition on such actions is that they are voluntary and that the agent knows or ought to have known that such actions entail obligations. It is the sufficient conditions for a commitment that I doubt exist' (2008: 83). My own view is that, to the contrary, it is easier to give sufficient than necessary conditions. Explicit promises to be a good friend or spouse, say, would seem to me to be sufficient, but not necessary. Whereas, in contrast, the condition Jeske offers as necessary seems quite strong and also vulnerable to a charge of circularity. Still, despite this disagreement, I am very sympathetic to the general approach Jeske takes.

24. See (2003: 400, n15).

25. For a helpful survey, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/promises/#ProProObl>.

26. Samuel Scheffler (1997) offers a slightly different taxonomy of 'reductionist' and 'non-reductionist' views. According to Scheffler, so-called 'reductionist' views are those according to which 'duties arising out of special relationships can always be reduced to duties arising out of discrete interactions' (1997: 191). This is in contrast to non-reductionist views, which take it that the 'mere fact that one stands in a certain relationship to another person' gives one a 'special responsibility to that person' (1997: 191). This seems to me a false dichotomy. If special obligations are partly *constitutive* of standing in a certain relationship to a person, then even on a voluntarist view (which is also a paradigm reductionist view on Scheffler's taxonomy), one might have obligations in virtue of standing in a certain relationship. When it comes to Scheffler's taxonomy, it might seem at first as though the voluntarist cannot recognize truly special obligations that we have to each other *qua* friends. But because of the special content and implications of obligations of friendship, we have such obligations, even on a voluntarist account.

27. See Nelkin (2011: 111–12), Howard-Snyder (2006: 236), Brink (1994: 231), and Vranas (2007: 181–2).

28. For a recent argument for a modified version of the principle, see Peter Graham (2011), and for an argument against it based on Frankfurt cases, which were originally intended to cast doubt on the claim that responsibility requires an ability to do otherwise, see Fischer (2003).

29. See Haji (1998a), for this reasoning. In fact, Haji goes further, arguing that one also needs alternate possibilities when one *does* meet one's obligations (1998a: 188). See also Pereboom (2002, 2014a) for the articulation of similar reasoning for why determinism threatens obligations (or at least those we do not meet).

30. One might argue that the possibility of excused wrongdoing suggests that the guiding principle here is really Blameworthiness Implies Can rather than Ought Implies Can. (Thanks to David Brink for raising and discussing this issue.) This is a large and subtle issue. I believe that excused wrongdoing is not ruled out on the view that Ought Implies Can, where 'can' is a can of free agency. Violation of an obligation is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for Blameworthiness on the picture I am advancing. While it is true that along with such a violation comes free agency, one might be missing other elements relevant to blameworthiness. And notably, blameworthiness comes in degrees, and a number of factors might mitigate blameworthiness even to a vanishing point. One might be free to do as one ought at the same time as it is more difficult to do than it is reasonable to expect, for example. Thus, there are ways to preserve the possibility of excused wrongdoing on this picture.
31. Note that this marks a significant disagreement with Haji, who argues that alternate possibilities are required not only for unfulfilled obligations, but also for merely permissible actions, including fulfilled obligations.
32. Indeed, one might have other reasons for accepting premise (2). Haji, for example, requires a kind of control that builds in alternate possibilities for each instance of its exercise, but also argues, partly for reasons of *symmetry* of deontic concepts that such control is required for all obligations. (See Haji 2002.)
33. A first draft of this paper was written when I was teaching an undergraduate seminar on the topic at UCSD in the fall of 2013, and I am very grateful to the participants for exemplary discussion of the issues. I also benefited from being able to try out some of the ideas on the Flickers of Freedom Blog (directed by Thomas Nadelhoffer) in January 2013, and from a series of discussions of the justification of special obligations with Nina Brewer-Davis and with Theron Pummer. Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at Derk Pereboom's seminar on Free Will at Cornell University, the New York University Bioethics Center, and the Murphy Institute of Tulane University. Many thanks to those audiences for their incisive and insightful comments. I am also very grateful to Cami Koepke for excellent research assistance, and to Richard Arneson, David Brink, Rachana Kamtekar, Matthew Liao, Colin Collin O'Neil, Derk Pereboom, and Sam Rickless for very helpful comments and discussions of previous drafts. Finally, many thanks to the editors of this volume, Andrei Buckareff, Carlos Moya, and Sergi Rosell.

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Skepticism about Autonomy and Responsibility as Educational Aims – What Next?

Ishtiyaque Haji and Stefaan E. Cuypers

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1 Introduction

In liberal democracies it is widely assumed that educating for autonomy and moral responsibility, arguably both significant in educating for citizenship, are educational tasks educators should set themselves. However, starting from straightforward principles of intentional action, we advance an argument for the skeptical conclusion that educating for autonomy – endowing youngsters with the skills and dispositions needed to live autonomous lives – and educating for responsibility – nurturing children into agents disposed, minimally, to perform actions for which they are not morally blameworthy, and, desirably, to perform actions for which they are morally praiseworthy – is misguided, because education should not aim to attain what is largely beyond reach.

In what follows, in Section 1 we defend the view that our range of options is severely curtailed; frequently we cannot do otherwise owing, basically, to factors beyond our control. These factors, such as our early childhood upbringing, together with considerations that link motivation to perform intentional actions with ability to perform them, customarily preclude our being able to choose or do other than what we in fact choose or do. In Section 2, we discuss the result that our frequent inability to do otherwise threatens elements of both responsibility and autonomy, assuming freedom to do otherwise is necessary for either. On the one hand, if this assumption concerning alternative possibilities is true, we may motivate the further conclusion that education should not aim at something we have good reason to believe we cannot attain.

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