

ISHTIYAQUE (ISH) HAJI

Free Will and Obligation

Moral obligation or what morality requires permeates our everyday lives, including legal, educational, and numerous other social institutions. It guides our behavior, is the basis of sundry interpersonal relations, and as many presume is the final arbitrator of normative conflict. We thus highly value moral obligation and believe that being deprived of it would be forbiddingly costly. But can our world in fact accommodate moral obligation? In this project I develop a dilemma about freedom and obligation---the "obligation dilemma"---that imperils moral obligation. The dilemma is fueled by whether determinism or its falsity ("indeterminism") is true. Determinism implies that all our behavior is ultimately the product of facts of the past and the laws of nature. The dilemma purportedly shows that moral obligation is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism. Hence, if it is sound, nothing can be morally obligatory for anyone. My primary goal is to develop the dilemma as powerfully as possible to show that there is indeed a problem with the very possibility of obligation. A clear, detailed, and cogent defense of the dilemma will achieve the further goal of inspiring sustained philosophical work to solve it.

The project will be executed in these steps: Drawing from my past research, I will invoke a minimal set of plausible principles to show that moral obligation requires free will. Regarding the deterministic horn, I will argue that determinism is incompatible with moral obligation because determinism precludes free will. Regarding the indeterministic horn, I will defend the view that indeterminism is incompatible with moral obligation because seemingly plausible accounts of moral obligation featuring indeterminism imply that our allegedly free actions are too much of a matter of luck to be obligations. I will explore whether determinism (or indeterminism) influences moral blameworthiness in virtue of affecting moral obligation.

The project will contribute to a deeper understanding in philosophy and everyday life of such key issues as the precise nature of moral obligation and whether free will requires indeterminism. It will uncover the characteristics of the freedom moral obligation requires. It will reveal significant differences in the freedom requirements of moral obligation and those of moral responsibility. In addition, the project will trace important connections between moral obligation and moral responsibility, probing such concerns as whether anyone can be morally responsible for anything if nothing is obligatory.

This research will be of interest to academics working in philosophy and in other disciplines, such as law, theology, education, and social and developmental psychology. Questions concerning moral obligation frequently infuse the core issues in these disciplines. Although my focus and methodology is philosophical, the project will be of considerable interest to the general public. My research assistant and I will engage in outreach efforts at branches of the Calgary Public Library by, for example, presenting short evening talks or holding informal workshops at these branches, to foster public awareness of the central ideas the project generates. These include whether obligation is fundamental to our lives, how we relate to one other, and what life would be like---what form, for instance, would moral education or the criminal justice system take---if our world were without moral obligation. A graduate student will be recruited as a research assistant and receive training in research methods and theories, knowledge mobilization, and publication.