

# On Moral Obligation

Aarhus University, 20-21 May, 2014  
Aud. 3, Building 1441, Tåsingegade

## Conference Programme

### **Tuesday 20 May**

13.15-13.30 Opening of the conference

13.30-14.40 Hans Fink (Aarhus)  
Løgstrup on Moral Obligation and Personal Responsibility

14.45-15.50 Robert Stern (Sheffield)  
Løgstrup's Ethical Demand: Religious or Secular?

16.05-17.15 Anne-Marie S. Christensen (Syddansk)  
'Relate Actively'. Moral Obligation According to Løgstrup & Wittgenstein

### **Wednesday 21 May**

09.00-10.10 Carsten Fogh Nielsen (Aarhus)  
Duty! Kant on the phenomenology and normativity of moral obligation

10.15-11.25 John Skorupski (St Andrews)  
Moral Obligation and the Hermeneutics of Blame

11.40-12.50 Raffaele Rodogno (Aarhus)  
Moral Obligation and Emotion

12.50-14.00 LUNCH

14.00-15.10 David Owens (Reading)  
Wrong by Convention

15.15-16.25 Sten Schaumburg-Müller (Aarhus)  
Legal and moral obligations in international relations.  
Humanitarian intervention and Kosovo 1999

16:40-17:50 Morten Dige (Aarhus)  
Moral obligations at war

## Abstracts

### **Løgstrup on Moral Obligation and Personal Responsibility**

**Hans Fink** (Aarhus)

In his recent book: *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard* (CUP 2012) Robert Stern raises the question of moral obligation: What gives moral obligations their binding and constraining character? He discusses this both at the level of the history of ideas and at the level of current philosophical debate. I shall try to work out what would or could have been Løgstrup's answer to the question of moral obligation based on the account of personal responsibility given in his book *The Ethical Demand*. I shall discuss this answer and compare it with the answers given by Kant, Hegel and Kierkegaard as interpreted by Stern. I shall try to show that Løgstrup offers a way out of the dialectical circle that his three predecessors can seem to remain caught up in.

### **Løgstrup's Ethical Demand: Religious or Secular?**

**Robert Stern** (Sheffield)

The focus of this paper is whether Løgstrup's account of the relation between ethical demand and the idea of 'life as a gift' is best understood in theological terms, or whether it is better to think of it in a secular way. This issue will be approached not so much as an interpretative question (though this will be mentioned), but through a kind of 'internal critique' of the theological option on two grounds (1) It would seem to make God into a 'third thing' in the ethical relation in a way that rejects Løgstrup in Kierkegaard (2) It makes the demand a matter of morality, as based on what we owe to God as our creator, and so something God has the right to demand, even if we can't demand it of each other, where this then puts pressure on Løgstrup's distinction between ethics and morality. It would therefore seem that the theological approach should be rejected. But then, if we read the idea of 'life as a gift' in a more secular way, the question arises whether it do the work required of explaining ethical obligation - where I will argue that it might, if we understand the obligation as a kind of 'exclusionary reason' in Raz's sense.

### **'Relate Actively'. Moral Obligation According to Løgstrup & Wittgenstein**

**Anne-Marie S. Christensen** (Syddansk)

It is possible to distinguish between two views of the origin of moral obligation. According to the first view, moral obligation is founded in the individual; a view exemplified in Kant's idea of practical reason and in the contractualist view of moral obligation as voluntary consent of the individual. According to the second view, moral obligation arises from our relationship to the world or to other humans; a view prominent in ethical theories in the phenomenological tradition. The aim of this talk is to argue, first, that we should add the views of Ludwig Wittgenstein and K.E. Løgstrup to this second group and, in doing so, to show some striking parallels between their views of moral obligation. The second aim is to show how these two thinkers may help us address an objection often raised against relational views of moral obligation, namely that they waiver uncomfortably between two unattractive extremes. On the one hand, relational views often picture moral obligation as extremely demanding, as arising from the indeterminate and unlimited need of the other. On the other hand, it is also often emphasised that any content of such obligations arise solely through the responsiveness of the individual. This seems to leave the subject between the possibilities of either being overwhelmed by an indeterminate responsibility or proceeding from a basically

subjective understanding of how this responsibility obligates her. However, the thinking of Wittgenstein and especially Løgstrup can help us steer free of this threatening, but only apparent paradox.

**Duty! Kant on the phenomenology and normativity of moral obligation**  
**Carsten Fogh Nielsen** (Aarhus)

“Duty” plays a twofold role in Kant’s explication and explanation of moral obligation. On the one hand Kant believes that human beings, because of our dual nature as both rational and sensuous creatures, experience the requirements of practical reason as constraints, as duty. On the other hand Kant also uses the term “duty” to describe the underlying normative structure of (pure) practical reason, which makes possible, explains and justifies the cogency of this experience. In my talk I will discuss how these two aspects of Kant’s conception of duty are related and highlight (some of) the tensions, which his dual view of moral obligation gives rise to.

**Moral Obligation and the Hermeneutics of Blame**  
**John Skorupski** (St Andrews)

I argued in my book, *The Domain of Reasons*, that the categoricity of the moral - the principle that if an action is morally wrong there is sufficient reason not to do it - arises from the hermeneutics of blame. In this talk I shall discuss further what is involved in hermeneutic understanding of feelings, in particular, of blame, and how blame relates to reasons for action.

**Moral Obligation and Emotion**  
**Raffaele Rodogno** (Aarhus)

In this paper I argue that blame is not a distinct emotion but an integral part of other, distinct emotions. I examine in particular the connection between blaming attitudes, on the one hand, and guilt, shame, and anger on the other. I then explore the extent to which the emotional underpinnings of blame can explain three allegedly standard features of moral obligation, namely, inescapability, authority, and overridingness. Finally, I compare the sentimentalist approach discussed here to what are arguably more substantive (less structural) sentimental approaches such as the CAD triad hypothesis (Shweder et al. 1997; Rozin et al. 1999), i.e., the hypothesis that contempt, anger, and disgust respectively map three moral codes, namely, community, autonomy, and divinity.

**Wrong by Convention**  
**David Owens** (Reading)

Lawyers distinguish acts wrong in themselves (\*mala in se\*) from acts wrong because prohibited (\*mala prohibita\*). This distinction can be applied to non-legal wrongs, for example to those wrongs corresponding to the obligations that exist between family members. I argue that, on standard views, many familial wrongs are neither \*mala in se\* nor \*mala prohibita\*. To understand the normative force of these familial obligations, we must adopt a non-standard view of how wrongs are created by social convention.

## **Legal and moral obligations in international relations. Humanitarian intervention and Kosovo 1999**

**Sten Schaumburg-Müller** (Aarhus)

In March 1999 NATO launched an airborne attack on Serbia in order to prevent ethnic cleansing and further suppression of the Kosovars. From the outset it was highly debated and contested how to understand this military attack. Some authors (such as Cassese and Simma) held the position that the action was unlawful, but morally defensible or even imperative. Others claimed that the action had – or at least could have – legal backing (Mertus, Knudsen). I tend to side with the latter group, arguing that the ‘moralists’ ignore the importance of the human rights provisions in the UN Charter. Setting the legal considerations aside, the situation and the debates highlight and add to the discussion on the relationship between law and morality: It makes sense to engage with a non-legal ought in relation to law – the law does not allow for a specific action such as humanitarian intervention but it ought to – and this ought may or may not be moral. Also, the connection between law and morality is obvious; including human rights into international law may be conceived of as a, perhaps feeble, attempt to introduce morals into international law, which had hitherto been much of a codification of great powers’ interests. In my presentation I shall bring in international law in sketching out my position, which may be labelled ‘border relativity’, a term first coined (to my knowledge that is) by Hans Fink in 1990. Yes, we can distinguish between morals and law also in international relations, however, the borders are not absolute, and perhaps most interesting, there is an element of choice, of interests and of actor positions involved.

### **Moral obligations at war**

**Morten Dige** (Aarhus)

Two positions and the conflict between them have dominated contemporary ethics of war. A traditionalist position represented by Michael Walzer and others argue that "war changes everything", in the sense that the concepts and distinctions from "common" or "domestic" morality needs to be supplemented and to some degree revised in normative analyses of war. A "revisionist" position represented by Jeff McMahan and others resists such revisions(!) claiming that "war changes nothing", morally speaking. The disagreement seems to me to reflect a tension between certain metanorms in ethics, namely consistency and pragmatics. I see no obvious solution to that paradox but I find it important to understand the challenges it poses not only for combatants and politicians but also for ordinary citizens who find themselves at war.