Why care? On motivation in care ethics
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CHAPTER FIVE: REFURBISHED OBLIGATION

Introduction

I have argued at several places in this dissertation that caring is, in large part, something that happens involuntarily. The normative pull of finding someone important, or being faced with a plea for help, or some kind of appeal to your compassionate self, is not a reaction that occurs - initially at least – willingly, or contemplatively, or perhaps even consciously. Caring is the moment of being compelled or propelled into a whirlpool of wanting, hoping, compassion, anxiety, and commitment. Frankfurt calls this a “prospective” investment in the object of care; Noddings calls this process “engrossment” and Dalmiya elaborates on this concept as a form of “motivational displacement” in which we must act in “accordance with the point of view of the cared-for himself for his good”.

The virtue-orientated, political and constructivist accounts of caring (Halwani, Sevenhuijsen, Walker and Tronto, for example) emphasise what could be called the ‘competent’ aspects of caring: the volitional and reflective application of, among other qualities, virtue, responsibility, trust and solidarity. I have argued thus far that there is an imbalance in these accounts: that the more compelling accounts of caring contain too few competent elements (to the extent of the complete loss of the self at some points) and that the accounts of competency are not nearly compelling enough. I seek an account that contains both compulsion and competency, for both are desirable in an account of caring: the compelling aspect to explain why we would engage in what is often demanding, sometimes strenuous and even risky commitments. And the competent element because, in order to form the basis of a theory about moral behaviour, it must have normativity; it must address the moral agent and his behaviour in a prescriptive fashion.

I want a concept that combines the notion of the compelling or involuntary or (morally) necessary with the competent or the skilled. Frankfurt speaks of “volitional necessity” which places the emphasis on being willingly compelled or necessitated – or not unwillingly necessitated. I wish to do something similar because I believe (and have argued in Chapter One) that this combination of contrary concepts describes precisely the effect of the

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1 Dalmiya 2002, 36.
The concept I have chosen is obligation. ‘Obligation’ captures both the element of being compelled or forced but, as I shall argue here, it is not mere brute force: it is a delimiting, guiding and informing normative concept. While care ethicists are rigorously opposed to anything even resembling a law-like approach to ethics because it is supposed to be impersonal and universalist,\(^2\) I shall argue here that the idea of self-legislated laws or duties offers ethics of care an advantage. The concept of obligation offers the opportunity to shift attention - in part - away from the mesmeric pull of caring and focus more on the regulative and reflective role the agent can play in committing himself to caring. I shall spend time examining the idea of obligation as a particular type of motivation, a type which I argue is compatible with several important features of care ethics.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: first I shall examine my reasons for choosing obligation, that concept to which most care ethicists are so opposed, as a useful concept for care ethics. Second, I shall look at several care ethicists’ critique of Kantian moral philosophy to find out what it is precisely that care ethicists object to. And third, I shall refer to recent Kantian discussions on the desirability of the concept of obligation and their reply to the critique that this concept is impartial and only achieved at the expense of integrity.

**Why obligation?**

I argue that a (renewed) look at the concept of obligation will offer care ethics the opportunity for further development, especially as regards the moral agent’s capacity to be able to decide how and on what terms to care. The concept of obligation does need some serious revamping or refurbishing though. It is a concept with a very bad press, having come to represent everything that liberty-loving, free agents despise and revile. Obligation, and its association with “duty” and especially with the Kantian Categorical Imperative, is so contentious that it has evoked strong negative reactions (thereby indirectly crediting it with notoriety and significance). Nietzsche’s

\(^2\) See the section on care ethicists’ critique of Kantian moral philosophy below.
reaction (to the categorical imperative in particular) is perhaps the most extreme:

Und durfte man nicht hinzufügen, dass jene Welt im Grunde einen gewissen Geruch von Blut und Folter niemals wieder ganz eingebüsst habe? (Selbst beim alten Kant nicht: der kategorische Imperativ riecht nach Grausamkeit)... (Nietzsche Genealogie der Moral II, 6 (KSA 5.300)

And it has also evoked ridicule. Amongst her comments on Kant’s command to do our duties cheerfully, Baier exclaims:

This is the ultimate in deontology – a string of commands, of which the last reads, “Enjoy obeying the above commands”. For example, in Singapore, the injunctions issued by authorities to the people read: “Don’t spit”, “No gum-chewing”, etc. ending with “Have some spontaneous fun!” (Baier Moral Prejudices 1994, 276)

But even apart from these two rather extreme reactions, obligation is a contested concept in moral philosophy, associated for many with what are regarded as the more negative characteristics of Kantian moral philosophy: rules without content, universalist (achieved by means of ignoring all particularities) and quasi-metaphysical (on the basis of whose authority must duties be obeyed?). In addition, on a practical level, duties are associated with demanding and sometimes onerous responsibilities in life, commanded from above by church, state or society and usually carried out unenthusiastically (not to mention joylessly). Can obligation be rescued from this philosophical doghouse?

One alternative would be to drop the term obligation altogether because of its diverse negative associations. Korsgaard describes how obligations are cursed by several philosophers, accused of being constraining and forbidding, even “repellent and corrupting” - though this does not discourage her from using the term.3 I shall retain obligation because I wish to invoke the philosophical debate on this contentious concept. Obligation is a more everyday concept – it is one we can and do use in daily life usually meaning must (in the sense: I am obliged to return my library books on time if I want to avoid being fined). Obligation, on the other hand, has a specific ring to it and we use it in specific contexts: it refers to an ultimate or supreme type of

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3 Cited in the “Introduction” by Onara O’Neill to Korsgaard 1996, xii.
moral compulsion (I might say, for example, that I have an obligation to vote. In other words, I shouldn’t not use my right to vote.) It can also provoke an angry (knee-jerk) reaction and that is precisely because it is a concept that has authority and history and a series of associations of being commanded and having to obey. When I say I have an obligation to do something I am saying that I am compelled to do it. I am not logically or causally compelled; I have such compelling reasons such that I cannot forbear from a certain course of action. In fact though, despite their various associations, obligation and duty mean the same. Both refer to a system of morality that – supposedly - lies outside of us. In order to remain consistent I shall use obligation.

My understanding of what an obligation is is the following: the binding nature of obligation is an internal happenstance (and not primarily external). To undertake an action because you perceive it to be an obligation is to concur with commitments that you yourself undertook. Or, to put it differently, certain duties will emerge out of specific sets of commitments⁴. Obligations, therefore, come from somewhere. They can be generated entirely outside of yourself, for example in the sphere of state and public justice; but if they are moral commitments then they are commitments, in a very general sense, to aspects of yourself, for example, to cultivate one’s talents or to strive to improve one’s moral behaviour.⁵ These kinds of prescriptive principles are what Kant called “duties”⁶ and these duties can be understood in the sense of having a personal undertaking or commitment to oneself or to others.

An example: if I say that I have an obligation to read my son a bedtime story (instead of watching the eight o’clock news), what do I mean? This is because I believe that the daily reading of a bedtime story calms and soothes him and prepares him for sleep and that these considerations outweigh my desire not to. Wherein does the obligatory part of my daily bedtime reading come from? I shall say it comes from within and not primarily from without. Therefore, I am not primarily motivated by the duty to read my son a bedtime story – rather I chose to undertake this commitment.

⁴ Korsgaard goes so far as to argue that obligations are a result of one’s moral identity and in this sense must be obeyed or one will face the extirpation of one’s own identity (1996, section 1.2.2, 16 – 18).
⁵ These examples are ones given by Kant in his *Groundwork* and *Doctrine* and refer to what he calls “imperfect duties”: duties which are prescriptions of general ends and require judgement (rather than obedience) to fulfil them (“perfect duties” are proscriptions of specific types of actions, the violation of which are morally blameworthy). But Kant also describes imperfect duties towards others: the prescription of benevolence (*Groundwork*) and the promotion of the happiness of others (*Doctrine*).
⁶ I shall not distinguish here between ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect’ duties.
lie? I regard it as an obligation – a self-imposed obligation I must hasten to add – because even when I don’t feel like reading, I can refer to that part of my belief that says that it is a good thing to do, not only for him but for me too (if he sleeps restfully, after all, then I can watch the ten o’clock news instead). My belief that it is ‘a good thing to do’ transcends any short-term lack of desire that I might have to skip reading to him. But what makes it compelling? Well, if my goal is that he sleep restfully and I know that reading to him helps to achieve that goal, then in the interests of a good night’s rest (for both of us), I must read to him. Furthermore, he expects me to read to him – his bedtime story is part of a going-to-bed ritual on which he is also dependent for a good night’s sleep. In short, I have an obligation to read to him – and while it might not be an absolute obligation because on some occasions it is just not possible to read to him for all kinds of intervening reasons – it is a general commitment upon which both of us rely.

And in moments of reluctance on my part to read, I recall my reasons for reading in the past; I treat it as an obligation, as something I must do (if I can do so). Because of my and his expectations (his good night’s rest) I am compelled to read to my son, in the sense that my reasons for doing so are so compelling that I cannot forebear from reading to him.

Care ethicists’ critique of Kantian moral philosophy

For the sake of clarity, I will briefly repeat a few general characteristics of care ethics that I have already mentioned in the Introduction. Care ethics is generally explained by contrasting it either with so-called contract theory or with Kantian morality. The individual in contract theory, or in theories derived from it, is portrayed as being impartial, rational and abstract. And the moral identity of this subject of moral theory is conceived as being entirely independent of the history and culture of which the subject comprises a part. In other words, it is a subject that understands himself as abstracted from his own particularity and identity. This subject has been described by the political philosopher Michael Sandel, in a critique of Rawls as “the dispossessed self: the self who, strictly speaking, has nothing”. The problem is that this model, with its ideal and abstracted subject, has become paradigmatic for our concepts of social relations, argues Verkerk, which

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7 These two approaches converge in the political philosopher John Rawls, author of A Theory of Justice 1971, for example.

means that relationality, dependence, embeddedness and vulnerability are seen as deviating from the paradigm.9

Accounts of care ethics, au contraire, emphasise responsiveness to particular situations. The morally salient features of these situations are perceived with an acuteness thought to be made possible by the carer’s emotional posture of empathy, openness, and receptivity.10 Responding to the needs of others in their concrete specificity is understood as responding to them as unique, irreplaceable individuals rather than as “generalised others” regarded simply as representatives of a common humanity, as Seyla Benhabib argues in “The Generalised and the Concrete Other” (1986). And it is the conclusion of Virginia Held (philosopher, feminist and author of texts on, amongst others, women’s morality) that

Caring empathy, feeling for others, being sensitive to each other’s feelings – all may be better guides to what morality requires in actual contexts than may abstract rules of reason or rational calculation.”(V. Held “Feminist Reconceptualisations in Ethics” in Janet Kourany (ed.), Philosophy in a Feminist Voice 1998, 100).

It shall not come as any surprise, then, that care ethicists distinguish their ethics from what they perceive to be the greatest shortcomings of Kantian moral philosophy.11 There are two particularly important kinds of criticism of Kantian morality made by care ethics.12 Firstly, care theorists argue that Kantian moral philosophy is only concerned with moral impartiality and the preferences of ‘abstracted’ individuals. This emphasis, they argue, unfavourably contrasts reason to affectivity or relationality and the consequence is that this type of moral philosophy excludes the identity of humans as fallible and vulnerable but only sees them as being reasonable and

9 Marian Verkerk 1994, 57.
11 A note on terminology: though Verkerk distinguishes between contract theory and Kantianism though most other care ethicists do not, so I shall persist in representing the opposition as being one between care theorists on the one hand and Kantians on the other.
12 There are too many names to provide a comprehensive list of those care ethicists with a Kant or Rawls critique, so a few names will have to suffice: Annette Baier (1994), Marilyn Friedman (1987), Carol Gilligan (1982), Virginia Held (1998), Daryl Koehn (1998), Mary Jean Larrabee (1995), Rosemarie Tong (1999), Joan Tronto (1996), Marian Verkerk (1994).
autonomous. And this is because Kantian moral philosophy supposedly excludes non-formal, relational issues. What is meant by ‘non-formal’? In the words of Benhabib:

“Even in highly rationalised modern societies where most of us are wage earners and political citizens, the moral issues which preoccupy us most and which touch us most deeply derive not from problems of justice in the economy and the polity, but precisely from the quality of our relationships with others in the spheres of kinship, love, friendship, and sex. (“The Debate over Women”, 187 cited in Maria Pia Lara Moral Textures. Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere 1998, 202)"

Identity in care ethics - a combination of autonomy, individuality and vulnerability – is not formed on the basis of formal principles. Rather non-formal relations characterised by affection, connection, and compassion, for example, form identity. And this leads Held to suggest, as ‘maternal thinkers’ like Ruddick and Noddings also do, that these non-formal relations are found in the practice of nurturing:

“…the most promising model, symbol, or metaphor for autonomy is not property, but child-rearing. There we have encapsulated the emergence of autonomy through relationship with others… Interdependence (is) a constant component of autonomy. (V. Held “Feminist Reconceptualisations in Ethics” 1998, 108)"

Thus that aspect which care ethicists most urgently wish to rectify in what Sandel calls the “dispossessed” individual: the aspect of people’s connectedness to each other. It is a connectedness that presupposes a series of attitudes (like responsiveness, openness, and empathy) and a consequence of having these attitudes is that individuals are primarily identified with “non-formal” relations of affection, compassion, interdependence and vulnerability.

The second objection addresses features of the Kantian ideal of supreme moral law. Care ethicists reject concepts of moral law like the Categorical Imperative and ‘obligation’ because, so they argue, the application of a general law requires that we abstract the object of our moral assessment from its particularity. What is lost if we maintain a moral law is a sense of the uniqueness of persons and their contexts and histories, or a sufficiently informed and compassionate standpoint from which to judge them, they
argue. From a critical perspective, the Kantian moral agent “views its objects “thinly” – with an eye merely to their possible subsumability under some abstract rule”. The general conclusion of such critique is that Kantian moral philosophy is universalist to the exclusion of particulars, and it is these particulars that give each human being a unique history and set of relations and affiliations. Abstracted from its feminist context, what this objection amounts to is scepticism with regard to Kant’s claim to derive from an abstract law of practical reason particular moral laws or duties adequate to the complexities of human life.

The concern is that the idea of disconnecting ourselves from particular others, which is what Kantians supposedly do, might render us incapable of morality, rather than capable of it. In other words, responding to particular others is not only an irreducible part of that type of morality which care theorists endorse, but also that which - in their view - characterises morality. Furthermore, care ethics is also concerned with ‘specific’ others: in other words, the feelings of attachment, or compassion, one might have for a loved-one. For this reason, Kantian moral philosophy is seen as ‘anti-care’. This is an important objection to Kantian morality and shall be addressed at greater length in the section Imputing impartiality.

An example of how the Kantian preference for abstraction and universality precludes other kinds of moral reasoning is given by Gilligan’s critique of Kohlberg. According to Gilligan, the incorporation of a “different voice” seems to demand that the Kantian moral hierarchy, with impartiality at its pinnacle, must be given up. Gilligan argues that if the affective sides of our natures cannot play a constitutive role in the making of the strictly moral side of our characters, this may be a problem for those who place special value on and confidence in their capacities to feel, and who experience feeling as an integral part of and aid to judgement.

Feminist critique challenges not the importance of human judgement and self-determination, but the supposed independence of judgement and self-determination from and priority over the relational aspect of our natures. The Kantian picture of agency, according to this view, seems to presuppose a context of distrust because it seems that relations of dependency are thought to endanger the capacity of self-determination and to interfere with the ability

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13 Cited in Sedgwick 1990, 78.
14 There are several other important objections to Kant’s philosophy including his gender bias. I shall not deal with this particular objection here.
CHAPTER 5

to be impartial in the face of competing self-interest. Left solely to the
devices of inclination, I am a threat to my moral self and I threaten to neglect
or infringe upon the moral selves of others.\footnote{Kant’s supposed ‘context of distrust’ is typified by Sedgwick 1997, 93. Her own
position however is that Kant does not require that we abstract away from the
particularities of any given case, \textit{op cit} 95 and footnote 50.}

To those for whom identity formation involves community and
connectedness to others in an essential way, the Kantian conception of
autonomy – perceived of like this - is obviously problematic. Gilligan argues
that it is not so much self-determination and independence that figure as
central ingredients of female identity, but empathy, co-operation and trust.
Another ‘caring’ kind of self-determination would place less emphasis on
detachment as a necessary precondition. According to this view, the other is
experienced not so much as a potential threat but as someone to be
understood and someone through whom I may come to understand or know
myself. Female identity for Gilligan is formed not in isolation but in
connection with others – both autonomy and moral obligations are drawn
from this context. This is because needs and interests of members of
community change – contexts change – therefore there is no guarantee that
what is identified as the ground of obligation or of human dignity will be
beyond revision. There is no \textit{a priori} metaphysical foundation (Baier makes a
similar point in “Trust and Antitrust” 1994). Gilligan’s autonomy is based on
the capacity to care for and connect with others. Moral ends are real-world
relationships, she says, not antecedently fixed ends that inhabit a transcendent
side of the self.

To summarise, care theorists regard Kantian moral theory, and contract
theory, as containing an insufficient account of the various elements of
human identity that care ethics regards as essential: not only autonomy and
individuality but also connectedness. Thus, for care ethicists, moral theory
should be preoccupied with the quality of our relationships with others,
including interdependence and affection, rather than with the abstract and
impartial values required of political and social institutions. Some care
ethicists argue specifically that women’s experiences have been excluded
from traditional ethical values. In general, the Kantian conception of the
individual as impartial and “extracted” from particularities is regarded as
particularly problematic. Also, Kantian concepts like obligation, obligation
and moral law are regarded as incomplete or insufficient reflections of the
complexity and particularity of human life because they are “universalist”
concepts. Any morality that cannot reflect that complexity, argue care ethicists, fails to have any relevance to real, partial and particular life.

**Kantians to the defence**

Obligation need not be monolithic or insensitive as its critics would imply. On the contrary, as I shall argue here in this rehabilitation of the concept, obligation is not only capable of expressing a complex and profound moral standpoint, it is also an essential notion in the demarcation of motivation for moral actions in real lives. Obligation, namely, is a particular type of moral commitment, expressing a rigorous endorsement of a prescribed course of action; or, as Korsgaard refers to obligation: it is *self-legislative*. While this denotation of what an obligation is is very general, there is nothing in the meaning of obligation that necessarily excludes partialities or particularities. On the contrary, as I shall argue, obligation is neither impartial nor does it lack sensitivity to context and situation.

The claim, or rather accusation, that Kantian morality fails to reflect real, partial and particular life is one that has been taken seriously by two defendants of Kantian moral philosophy: Barbara Herman and Marcia Baron. Although Herman and Baron are responding to critique that originates from philosophers such as Bernard Williams, Michael Stocker and Susan Wolf, I would argue that the content is significantly similar to the objection of care ethicists to Kantian moral philosophy. The objection that a conception of morality as obligation cannot reflect ‘real life’ shall be addressed directly, after I have examined Herman’s and Baron’s reply to their critics. They do this in two stages: first of all by arguing that obligation and inclination are not (by Kant) and should not (by us) be separated from each other. And second by arguing that acting on the basis of obligation is not achieved at the expense of a loss of an important characteristic of humans – namely, ‘integrity’. The concept of obligation that emerges from Herman’s and Baron’s defence is significantly closer to ‘real’ or daily life than the concept in a narrow reading of Kant’s examples in *Groundwork*. And it is precisely this revision or rehabilitation of the concept that is of concern to my argument that obligation plays a unique and important role in the discussion on moral motivation.

What I will do in this section is to rally round Kantian-type arguments that refute criticism that claims, firstly, that there is a lack of inclination and, secondly, a lack of integrity inherent in the concept of obligation. On the issue of the exclusion of inclination from moral judgements in Kantian ethics,
I believe that Barbara Herman presents the most compelling arguments for a fruitful combination of inclination and obligation. I will discuss Herman’s arguments in the section *Imputing impartiality*. In *Sustaining integrity* I will deal with the two types of obligation that I have called ‘permission’ and ‘restraint’. What is needed to rehabilitate obligation is the more general point that acting from obligation is not, as Marcia Baron ironically calls it, “morally repugnant”.

*Imputing impartiality: the importance of inclinations*\(^\text{16}\)

One aspect of the general critique of Kant, that he got it wrong when proposing duties to structure moral behaviour, is that duties can only be fulfilled by individuals whose moral judgements are not muddied or confused by inclinations and personal attachments. This criticism is based on the idea that because acting according to obligation excludes inclinations, actions according to obligation fail to include an important aspect of human life and therefore fall short of being adequate expressions of one of the most trenchant human characteristics: emotional reflexivity. In order to argue, as I want to do here, that Kantian duties and ethics of care are less incompatible than supposed, I want to show that the two concepts of ‘care’ and ‘obligation’ are not irreconcilable. I have outlined what care ethicists’ critique of Kantian moral philosophy is and now, with the help of Barbara Herman, I shall argue that ‘obligation’ is not something that is done unfeelingly or without the appropriate inclinations.

In her essay “Integrity and Impartiality” (1983), Herman argues that it is a mistake to understand Kantian moral theory as excluding inclinations from making moral decisions. The denial of one’s empirical nature and the subservience of one’s personal interests in the service of obligation is not a representation but a distortion of Kant’s view, according to Herman. The perspective she adopts is to regard inclinations less as impediments and more as aids when making moral judgements.

\(^{16}\) A note on terminology: Kant distinguishes between “affects” and “passions”. The example he gives of an ‘affect’ is anger and he regards affects (of ‘feelings’ or ‘emotions’) as precipitate or rash, their only virtue being in that these feelings quickly subside. ‘Passions’, on the other hand, are “sensible desires” (“Sunliche Begeerde”) which have become “a lasting inclination (for example, hatred as opposed to anger)” (408). ‘Inclinations’ and ‘affectivity’ may be regarded as denoting the same thing (though affections could be a subset of the inclinations). In contemporary literature the terms ‘emotions’ and ‘feelings’ are most frequently found but I shall (continue to) use *inclination*.
The mistake that these critics of Kant’s inclination arguments make, argues Herman, is that they read Kant as arguing “if inclination, no moral worth”. This is not, she argues, the point that Kant makes with his various arguments and examples. The only point he is making she says, is that inclination alone, whether in the form of sympathy, or honour, or self-preservation, has no moral worth. And this conclusion leads Herman to argue that Kant has said nothing to indicate that inclinations might not aid and guide acts motivated by obligation.

Herman concurs with Kant that affectivity without the guidance of reason cannot serve as the ground for morality, but she adds that this position does not entail that acting in the absence of or in opposition to inclinations is necessarily desirable from a moral standpoint. On the contrary, insofar as affective co-operation diminishes psychological obstacles to acting from obligation, it is something to be encouraged. In other words, Herman sees suitable and appropriate inclinations facilitating rather than preventing our acting according to obligation. Furthermore, she argues, inclinations can assist in making better moral judgements. For example, we should cultivate in ourselves sympathetic feelings as a means of being better prepared to recognise those situations that call for a helping response. And, in the case of helping someone, it would be quite ordinary for the action of the normal agent to be ‘over-determined’: she might act from the emotion-based desire to help and she would act from the motive of obligation.

Herman thus believes that there is a place for inclinations in Kantian moral philosophy. Obligation and inclinations need not be in opposition to each other.

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18 Herman (1993) explores the three examples that Kant supplies in his *Groundwork*: that of the sympathetic man, that of the suicidal man and that of the gout sufferer. From these three examples Herman concludes the following, respectively: that acting from inclination alone is not a moral act; that acts motivated by the inclination of self-preservation under ordinary circumstances have no moral worth; and that satisfying immediate inclinations can be contrary to moral motivations in the long-term. For a detailed and careful analysis of these three examples see pp. 378 – 82.
19 There are numerous examples of this argument by Kant, for example, he argues that sympathy “…however right and amiable it might be, has still no genuinely moral worth. It stand on the same footing as the other inclinations… which if fortunate to hit on something beneficial and right and consequently honourable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem; for its maxim lacks moral content, namely, the performance of such actions, not from inclination, but from duty.” *Groundwork* 398.
other. Much of the time, she argues, the motivating influence of inclinations and the motive of obligation coincide. There is, in the words of Sara Smollett, “no special moral worth imparted by a struggle of motives”;\(^\text{20}\) rather, an internal unity or agreement between inclinations and obligation is preferable.

One could imagine, thus far, that Kantians and their critics could reach some kind of truce on this point: that the motivations of inclinations and obligation could overlap, then there need not be any fierce contention – that they might ideally even work together to motivate us to lead a full-blooded moral existence. Kantian moral agents could wield moral rules and obligations and yet still be emotionally sensitive and have a “thick” conception of others.\(^\text{21}\)

And those moved by inclinations could act as morality requires (though, as Herman \textit{pace} Kant says: “It is to be regarded as a bit of good luck that (one) happens to have the inclination to act as morality requires”.\(^\text{22}\)

So much for happy instances in which the motivation of inclination and obligation coincide. There are two additional points about Kantian duties that need to be dealt with further: first, the controversial point that motivation from inclination \textit{by itself} is not enough to guarantee a moral action and second, the issue of what should happen when inclinations and obligation clash. The first point, about why inclination \textit{pur sang} is not moral, is controversial because Kant’s distinction between non-moral and moral motivations is not intuitively self-evident. Why should an action done out of sympathy not be moral whereas an action done cold-heartedly but according to a principle of rightness is? Herman has analysed this controversy in detail (see footnote 18, above) and finds the answer in the presence of the internal connection between a moral motive and the rightness of a proposed action. In acting from a motive attached to a moral principle, the moral rightness of the action is, as it were, she argues, guaranteed. In action from inclination (for example, responding to someone’s need for help from feelings of sympathy and compassion), this is not so. It is not that someone who acted out of inclination would frequently fail to act rightly: she might and she might not. The point is that the connection between sympathy and helping someone is fortuitous; the connection between helping someone on the basis of a

\(^{20}\) Smollet 2001, 1.

\(^{21}\) Baron argues that Kant does not argue in favour of the extirpation of emotive feelings, rather he favours cultivation and taming of the emotions. Properly cultivated, he argues, some emotions are crucial for virtuous conduct. 1995, 224 – 6.

\(^{22}\) Herman 1981, 377.
principle is not. All helping actions are not also right actions: helping, although frequently good and sometimes right, is not always so.

My daughter, for example, might come to me late on a Sunday evening in some distress because she has to hand in a book report the next morning and has “forgotten” to write it on the weekend. I could help her with this task – I certainly would out of sympathy for her plight - and I believe that this would be a good thing to do. Indeed, my sympathy might extend to the degree of wanting to write it for her (perhaps she also has other unfinished homework) but this is the point at which I need to be aware of the line between my inclination to help out of sympathy and the ‘rightness’ of my motivation to help: it would not be ‘right’ for me to do her homework. It would contravene some principle according to which the point of doing homework is to educate the child to whom the task was appointed. It is not my sympathy that is misplaced; it is my action of helping my daughter to the extent of doing her homework for her that is. Right actions, therefore, are those that are not done from inclination alone and (usually) refer to some broader or more general principle other than the immediate issue at hand (i.e. I will not do my daughter’s homework for her because the point of homework is that she gains some kind of benefit from it by doing it herself). My helping my daughter with her homework to precisely the right degree so that I alleviate her distress about undone homework, but at the same time do not contravene the principle of her having to do the bulk of the work, is not fortuitous: as every parent with school-going children knows, such help is the result of very context-sensitive and careful judgement.

The second point, the issue of what happens when inclinations and duties clash, also needs to be addressed. I have said that Herman makes the acute point that a clash between the motivations driven by inclination and those by principle does not enhance the moral worthiness of the deed. Rather, one can imagine that such contention will make moral actions more onerous to carry out. If my inclination is to watch an episode of Desperate Housewives rather than test my daughter’s Latin homework in preparation for an exam the next day, and I am inclined to let that inclination inform me as to what I should do, then I will make it harder for myself to experience the motivation to fulfil my obligation to my daughter. By allowing my inclination to dominate, I am suppressing the motivation (that I otherwise do have) to fulfil my obligation. My inclination, in this case, obscures my obligation though, if I were to reflect on my obligation to any degree, I would perceive that rehearsing Latin verbs with my daughter outweighs my own desire to lie on the couch and enjoy the antics of four suburban American housewives.
How does obligation ‘outweigh’ inclination? On reflection, I would realise that the benefits of my daughter achieving good results for a school subject are more significant and worthwhile than the benefits gained by my instantaneous gratification. In general, when the internal unity between inclination and obligation is not achieved, the Kantian would have moral motivation (i.e. obligation) override inclination: obligation being precisely that type of reflective motivation that does not involve instantaneous gratification. This is the sense in which moral action does not require inclinational motivation - but if inclination corresponds to obligation, so much the better.

But the argument that inclination and morality can correspond goes part of the way but does not altogether satisfy the more severe critique that obligation is performed at the expense of something inherently human, namely integrity. I will turn to this argument in the following section.

Sustaining integrity and obligation

Because it is believed that obligation is a mono-motivation that merely commands, some critics argue that obligation is only achieved at the expense of integrity. The implicit argument behind such a criticism is that commands are obeyed at the expense of partiality, that the inclination towards human attachments is repressed by doing that which is right. One of the better-known critics is Bernard Williams who argues that what these theories (i.e. theories involving obligation for all moral agents) seem to demand that the price for morality is that we give up our humanity in order to act from obligation. They demand that we surrender our integrity, he says.23

What are we to understand by ‘integrity’? Integrity is usually defined in terms of being “steadfast”, involving “adherence to a strict moral code” as well as “being unimpaired; being whole or undivided; completeness”.24 In relation to the self, this is a concept that is used varyingly. For example, both Gilligan and Williams use integrity to stand for a demand, either within or against morality, for some space a self can call its own (although it is likely

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23 Williams in “Persons, Character and Morality” in Moral Luck 1981. Other examples are: Michael Stocker who argues that theories such as this, which insist upon driving a gap between moral reasons or justifications and our empirical or emotive motives, force upon us a kind of “schizophrenia” (“The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories” 1978). And Susan Wolf’s arguments about the importance of integrity and sanity for qualifying moral deeds in “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility” 1982.

24 http://www.thefreedictionary.com/integrity
that they think very differently about the self who needs to stake this claim). This is by no means a definitional account of integrity. Margaret Walker, on the other hand, defines integrity as primarily relational or, rather, other-directed, because it is measured by how reliably others may depend on congruence between my position, action and responsibility taking. She defines integrity therefore in terms of the self being accountable to and reliable towards others and not merely as occupying an own space within an existing moral context.

Williams might accept that inclinations could not do the same job as the motive of obligation, but he argues that the exclusion of inclinations as motive stands in the way of an agent’s acting in a natural and humanly appropriate way. Obligation is, for critics like Williams, a formalistic approach that does not ‘fit’ the spontaneous and sometimes inconsistent character of human behaviour in general.

Take Williams’ lifeboat example: Williams argues that, if his wife were drowning, the thought that it is a morally correct thing to do to rescue his wife is “one thought too many”. In other words, he would, in the first place, simply obey his inclination to save his wife rather than ponder on the correctness of his action or on the rule, if any, that states that you should, if so capable, rescue those in immediate danger of drowning. Inclinations like sympathy lead moral agents to take the welfare of the other as their object, argues Williams, and this is what makes action done on a sympathetic basis the right thing to do - and not some rule that states that you should. What was uppermost in his mind when he rescued his wife was concern for her welfare and not the rule about life-saving. Note that Williams does not reject the idea as such of there being rules governing right behaviour; what he does is he queries the priority of these rules over inclinations like sympathy or concern for someone’s welfare.

Having argued that the motives of inclination and obligation should ideally overlap or coincide, Herman’s reply to Williams’ critique that Kantian morality separates inclination and obligation and degrades the former, is to argue that the motive of obligation should be seen as a limiting condition. ‘Limiting condition’ motives do two things: firstly, they permit us to act in accordance with inclination while at the same time fulfilling our obligation and, secondly, they restrain us from acting on the basis of our inclinations in some way that contravenes obligation. Both permission and restraint are

25 Walker 1998, 115 and see also my Chapter Two: Practices of responsibility.
CHAPTER 5

called limiting conditions because they establish the boundaries, as it were, of scope of actions.

The first type of ‘limiting condition’ motive gives us permission to act as we will on the condition that our action satisfies some additional requirement (that we stay within our budget, not break some rule, etc). The role of the Kantian motive of duty or obligation, argues Herman, is such a limiting condition: it expresses the agent’s commitment that she will not act unless her action is morally permitted. (This means that it is possible that her actions be ‘over-determined’ in the sense of acting both on the basis of an inclination and on the motive of obligation.) Thus Williams must first want to rescue his wife and act on this inclination, an action which coincides with the obligation to care for the welfare of his loved-ones.

The second type of obligation as a limiting condition operates as a restraint and does not motivate or direct the agent to act. Thus, if the agent is motivated to act on the basis of inclination, he is able to respond directly and the motive of obligation merely acts as a regulative presence informing, as it were, the agent of possible contravention of obligation. As a limiting condition, the motive of obligation in fact presupposes the effective presence of some other motive like sympathy, concern, loyalty, commitment, or empathy argues Herman. Obligation’s role here is to prevent or restrain the agent from embarking on impermissible acts the agent has an independent interest in pursuing. So one could well be prompted by feelings of pride prompting one to excel, while committed (in advance, by the motive of obligation) not to do this if it turned out to involve committing impermissible deeds (nothing illegal, nothing harmful to others, nothing that compromises yourself or others, for example). Obligations can, in this fashion, be present but inert – unless called into motivating action if necessary. In the Kantian scheme of things, in order for an action to qualify as a moral action it does require that the motive of obligation be present and effective in its limiting function in the sense that the moral agent is one who is motivationally prepared not to act in ways that are wrong.

Is Herman’s revision of obligation an adequate rejoinder Williams’ critique that dutiful thoughts are extraneous ballast? Yes it is. Williams’ motivations in rescuing his wife satisfy the additional requirements of being concerned about the welfare of a loved-one and of the obligation to come to the aid of someone in distress if at all possible. Furthermore, because Williams is already inclined to rescue his wife out of sympathy, the motivation of obligation is not necessary in an active sense. And lastly, Williams’
sympathy is the direct motivation for his rescuing his wife, in other words, it is that which moves him to do so. But this does not negate the presence, in the background, of an inactive obligation to come to the aid of people in distress. There is nothing in the conception of acting from the motive of obligation that requires an absolute preference for actions done from the motive of obligation as a primary motive, according to Herman. Sometimes the motive of obligation is present but not acted on – this too is clearly part of the moral data of our lives. “Unless this were so there would be little room for moral insincerity”, says Herman\(^{26}\) (and therefore little reason for all this palaver about obligation).

Before I proceed to the following section on obligation, I wish to make a few points. Herman’s contribution to the debate on obligation is to introduce obligation motivating in a ‘limiting condition’ sense. This limiting condition works in two ways: it gives permission to the moral agent who already had the inclination to act in a way consistent with obligation and it is inertly present as a restraint should the moral agent, who is also acting according to inclination, transgresses the conditions of obligation. In the former motivation, obligation is active; in the latter, inert or passive (unless called into life). These two types describe situations in which inclination and obligation, to a large degree, coincide. In instances where inclination and obligation clash, as I described in my example of having to choose between the instantaneous gratification of a Net 5 television series or the educational future of my daughter, I know – on due reflection – that obligation ought to reign supreme. This is so precisely because my inclinations (in this case) tend towards the gratification whereas obligation is the end result of consideration and reflection. This is not the only instance in which obligation must reign. The other important juncture at which obligation must be the direct motivation for action is when inclination fails altogether to provide guidelines for action.

Had Williams been inclined not to rescue his wife, but to remain sitting and to admire the landscape, then – failing all else - his obligation, not only to care for the welfare of his wife but his more general obligation of having to rescue those in distress would become apparent to him\(^{27}\) and he would be

\(^{26}\) Herman 1993, 370.

\(^{27}\) How precisely this works is explored in an article on conscience see David Velleman (“The Voice of Conscience” 1998). Though the discussion on conscience lies beyond the limits of this dissertation let me say the following: according to Velleman, the way conscience works is that the ‘voice’ of conscience speaks with
motivated in the sense of being required to come to his wife’s rescue. If he still sat obstinately by, ignoring his sense of having to do something while his wife drowned, then he would be consciously ignoring or disobeying his obligation. Even in instances in which obligation is flouted, obligation retains its status. Thus, failing all else, obligation is an imperative that comes into play when needed; in other words, when inclination fails to motivate us to perform the right action, then obligation commands us. As such, obligation becomes a fall-back position – something by which we can be compelled should we be insufficiently or inappropriately moved by inclination.

While it is Herman’s goal to defend obligation from accusations of impartiality, a goal which she achieves with great clarity and conviction, what her concept of limiting condition does is to indicate but one role that obligation plays in demarcating moral motivation: the role of switching in, as it were, or being active only when other demarcations, namely inclinations, fail to motivate the right thing to do. As Herman argues, as a limiting condition the motive of obligation can enter only when there is a proposed course of action based on another motive like desire, or sympathy, or whatever.

The argument that obligation does not obfuscate inclinations negates, it would seem to me, the critique that Kantian moral philosophy has no room for integrity whether defined as ‘own space’ or as ‘responsibility’. But there is another, related, accusation made of Kantian moral philosophy that is not entirely yet laid to rest, namely that acting according to obligation is “morally repugnant”. It is true that a lack of integrity can make an action morally

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28 This counter-example is not fictitious. There have been several recorded incidents in which the onlookers have stood passively watching while someone drowned. One can only speculate why this should occur: perhaps everyone assumed that someone more proficient in rescuing would do the rescuing and therefore everyone merely waited; perhaps they all felt that it was too risky to go to the rescue. What is apparent is that inclination - sympathy or concern – failed to motivate the crowd to rescue the victim. In one incident (in August 1993 in the Netherlands in which 200 people apparently merely watched a nine-year-old drown), the police expressed their indignation at the lack of help from the crowd although it later became apparent that a few individuals had tried to retrieve the child. It was decided that no charges would be pressed (in the Netherlands it is against the law not to come to someone’s aid if they require help).

29 Herman 1981, 374.

30 This is the phrase used by Baron, 1995, to typify this critical stance. She argues that
repugnant, but the two are not reducible to each other: the category ‘morally repugnant’ includes ‘lack of integrity’ and other moral deviations. Indeed, the overwhelming bulk of the critique of Kant’s moral philosophy revolves around the accusation that obligation - or obligation, or the notion of universal moral laws - somehow sustains a view of humanity that is morally repugnant or distasteful or otherwise inaccurate.

Why obligation is not morally repugnant

This allegation can be broken down into three reasons, according to Baron: first, acting from obligation is to act just minimally morally; second, acting from obligation is alienating; and third, acting from obligation is no guarantee of normativity. What Baron argues is that this repugnance is not attached to acting from obligation as such, but only to certain ways of acting supposedly from obligation. She herself argues that acting from obligation is crucial to morally good conduct.

Given the many pejorative associations that we have with the word ‘obligation’, it is no surprise that many people think of a concern to do one’s obligation as a concern to do only what one has to do. We sometimes associate obligations with unconditional commands, especially by social institutions or norms that are themselves sometimes morally dubious, for example, to die for one’s fatherland or betray traitors to the state. Or we are familiar with examples, real and fictitious, of particularly unpleasant people who claimed to live their lives according to obligation – Karenin in Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina is an example of someone who says he acts from obligation but really uses the idea of obligation as an excuse to act in a non-reflective and cowardly fashion. Acting like this is not to be morally motivated at all, but just acting to get off the hook; in other words, such a character only acts according to what he or she thinks morality demands but in fact not according to what morality recommends. Another example is Effi Briest’s husband Baron von Innstetten (in the novel Effi Briest by Theodore Fontane), who is a “man of principles”, called, by one critic, a “textbook example of Kant’s man who acts out of respect for the moral law”. 31 Instetten kills his wife Effi’s lover in a duel and divorces her (thereby condemning her to social isolation) even though he feels no anger towards her lover and still loves Effi - and he does this, apparently, out of a sense of obligation.

philosophers like Michael Stocker, Bernard Williams, and Susan Wolf typify this standpoint (the actual list is much longer).

31 Namely Julia Anna, “Personal Love and Kantian Ethics in Effi Briest”. Philosophy
This is not what someone like Baron has in mind when she describes ‘acting from obligation’. Acting from obligation, in her vocabulary, is a combination of doing that which is required and that which is “recommended”. Though Baron, unfortunately, does not elaborate on this distinction it would seem that the difference lies between obeying the letter of the (moral) law and a sense of a normative choice separate from this law. For example, Huckleberry Finn is someone who has great difficulty in questioning the few principles he has learned, in this case those of a slave-owning society, in order to do the right thing (help the slave Jim to escape). Having grasped what his obligation according to the laws of the state is – to turn Jim over to the authorities – Huckleberry, for a few significant literary moments at least, cannot see what the humane or sympathetic thing is he ought to do. He knows he is required to turn Jim in, but the appeal Jim makes to his protection and compassion recommends that he consider Jim’s humanity and help Jim to escape instead. But, as Jonathan Bennett argues, had Huckleberry turned Jim in to the men hunting the runaway slave, this would have been an example of “bad morality”, and not, as so many critics of Kantian moral philosophy assume, an example of obligation in action. This distinction between what obedience to the dominant norms of a society require and what obligation actually recommends can also be made in the Karenin and Instetten examples: they are required to act as husbands and as responsible members of society but it is recommended that they do so humanely and sympathetically and pay special attention to the plight of those dependent on their support. What the examples of Huckleberry and Instetten show, if indeed they are men of obligation, is that the so-called principles to which they aspire (the principles of a nineteenth-century slave-owning American society on the one hand and a highly stratified bourgeois society in nineteenth-century Germany on the other) need to be flouted rather than obeyed. So-called obligations embodied in societal norms are not necessarily the same as obligations that arise from broader and more general duties that pertain, for example, to humanitarian values of loyalty, trust, friendship and compassion.

Instetten and Karenin have been often quoted as examples of acting from obligation, supposedly in a minimal fashion (this is the first allegation of moral repugnance that Baron describes). I would not describe their actions as being from obligation in any sense: the maintenance of repressive and discriminating social practices cannot be regarded as ascribing to what

32 Bennett 1974.
obligation – in a Kantian sense - recommends we do. The second allegation –
that acting from obligation is alienating – is merely another example of what
Baron argues is not meant by obligation. It has been argued that acting from
obligation is alienating because it is thought that obligation can only be
fulfilled impartially. Should a distance between acting according to
obligation and experiencing feelings of partiality like compassion, concern or
loyalty exist, argues Baron, it would betray or entrench attitudes towards
others which are, morally and otherwise, regrettable. This is an example of
bad morality, not of an obligation.

The example that Baron discusses in considerable detail is Michael Stocker’s
treatment of friendship: someone, acting from a sense of obligation, would
visit a friend in hospital, not out of friendship but out of some sense of being
morally obliged to do so. Stocker assumes that acting from obligation
excludes acting from any other kind of emotions (or other motivations) and
that this separation of obligation from emotion, or distinction drawn between
friendship and obligation, will lead to a kind of “moral schizophrenia”. As
Baron argues, any action performed solely from motives of obligation in the
context of friendship is in itself a morally deficient action, and is patently not
what is meant by acting from obligation.33

The third allegation – that acting from obligation does not guarantee
normativity - is implicit in both the first and the second: if acting from
obligation leads one to react woodenly according to the supposed dictates of
obligation or if one behaves in such a way that you apply the dictates of
obligation in contexts where quite different and affective responses are
needed as well, then it is clear that one cannot distinguish between good and
bad actions. Indeed, behaving in either of these deficient fashions is bad
morality and has nothing to do with what obligation comprises of.

To summarise: what Baron’s discussion of the three allegations against acting
according to obligation - that obligation means acting minimally, is alienating
and does not guarantee normativity - show is that it is not obligation that is
morally repugnant because obligation is a type of motivation which in fact
recommends humane and partial actions. Deeds committed according to the
dictates of repressive and dubious moral institutions, minimally moral deeds

33 In “Is Acting from Duty Morally Repugnant” in *Kantian Ethics*, Baron discusses
this example in great length, 118 – 124. I have selected what I regard as the most
salient point for my discussion though her analysis deserves more space than I accord
it.
and acting impartially when partiality is desired are all examples of bad morality; they are not at all what is meant by acting according to obligation.

To what extent has the concept of obligation, in the hands of Herman and Baron, been rehabilitated? In the first section on inclination and obligation, I argued that the ideal situation is a coincidence of these two motives. In this situation, the agent is moved by inclination and her motives are reinforced and confirmed and if needed, delimited, by the regulations of obligation. Over-determination, in this sense, is the ideal and desired combination of obligation and inclination. Two points were made in this connection: first, inclinations on their own do not guarantee moral actions; and second, in situations in which inclinations and the motives of obligation clash, the commands of obligation must override those of inclination if the moral nature of the action is to be maintained. A clash between the two will do nothing to improve the ease of achievement, on the contrary, obligation fulfilled contrary to inclination is likely to be burdensome and difficult to conclude. Furthermore, in those cases where inclination fails or is significantly absent, obligation should provide the motive for action. While critics of Kantian moral philosophy believe that Kant argues something like “if inclination, no moral worth”, Herman’s reply goes: “if no inclination, moral worth is harder or even impossible to achieve” because, as she argues, acting in the absence of inclination is not desirable.34

In Herman’s account of obligations, they are present as rules in the background to be consulted and used during moments of reflexive action. Regarding obligations as being a restraining motive accommodates a far more subtle sense of what an obligation can be, namely as something that can differentiate between the very many and complex situations in which we operate. They need not always be applied or applied equally strongly. Motives are typically “interwoven”: having to combine a sense of what is right with sympathetic concern, or with profound partiality to someone, is the rule rather than the exception. As Baron says,

Part of what it is to act from obligation is to act with a counterfactual always at hand (though not always in one’s thoughts): one would not do this if it were morally counter-recommended. (Baron “The Alleged Moral Repugnance of Acting from Obligation” 1984, 217)

34 Herman 1983, 237.
What is evident, it seems to me, is that inclination and a sense of what is permissible and what is not (i.e. obligation) are inseparable and intertwined. As Korsgaard argues, pleasure and pain (by which she means remorse and regret) are products of the mind’s awareness of its own activities. This leads her to conclude that inclination must play an essential role in moral life even according to the most rationalistic theory and that it is extremely doubtful that we can imagine a sensible creature that lacks these forms of affect.\(^{35}\) It seems to me that inclination must play a central role in all motivation, including motivations according to obligation. Indeed, the separation of inclination and obligation results in an artificial (or analytical) chasm that is not actually present in motivation. Furthermore, the general disadvantage of this analytic two-step, in the form of the chronology of events – first inclination then obligation; first obligation then inclination – is that it is a linear and two-dimensional way of looking at how motivation works. This results in an artificial flattening out of motivation and a reduction of it to a crude cause-and-effect relation.\(^{36}\)

What I have been doing here is to rehabilitate the concept of obligation and rescue it from the accusations of the heinous incapacity to include inclination and a tendency to inculcate inhumanity. Obligation is, in this rehabilitated form, interwoven with and inseparable from motivating inclination and expresses both limiting requirements and supplementing recommendations. This means, in effect, that the grounds upon which care ethicists rejected obligation as insufficient for the task of expressing the complexity of human lives determined by inclination and attachments, no longer holds. And this opens the way for thinking more sympathetically about obligation in general and, more particularly, about a conception of care.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I aimed to refurbish obligation in the sense of conceptualizing it as a compelling type of motivation which is nevertheless capable of subtlety, flexibility and sensitivity to context. First of all, I spent some time


\(^{36}\) I am indebted for this point to Johan Melse. Martha Nussbaum makes a similar point too – concerning emotions: if, say, compassion is the impulse on the basis of which we react dutifully, then compassion is reduced to being “an internally unintelligent indicator” – “a bell that goes off in the presence of suffering” (*Upheavals*, 382 – 3). This by no means satisfies her idea of what emotions do or does credit to what they are, she says.
differentiating between three different ways in which obligation operates: first, as a straight-forward *command* or *imperative* in the form “You ought to do x” in which x is related to a body of socially endorsed obligations. Second, there are those obligations that are usually inert but become active in order to *restrain* me from doing something. For example, let’s say that I have an inclination to be too charitable – the obligation of my own self-preservation (and that of my dependents), in this case, delimits my tendency to give all my possessions away. These obligations are like signposts that are usually inert but light up when I threaten to wander off the path. And third, there are obligations which need not command because they already coincide with other reasons to do x or y. These other reasons are usually based on inclinations: like the inclination I have to care about the welfare of my loved ones. These obligations *permit* me to do that which I already am inclined to do. They operate as beacons on a course of action I am already inclined to follow.

The significant gain of this three-fold differentiation is that obligation need not be regarded as a monolithic, singular, and inflexible type of motivation. Which does not mean to say that in the refurbished form obligation is any less compelling. On the contrary, I have been at pains to argue that compellingness does not comprise only of imperatives but that there is, on the one hand, an essential cooperation on the part of the moral agent in the form of critical endorsement and, on the other, an unavoidable interaction of obligation-derived motives with other motivation to act, like inclinations.

The implication of this line of argument is that obligatory actions can no longer be regarded as either decontextualised or impartial actions. And this then has far-reaching implications for what is commonly understood as the ‘universality’ of obligation. The Kantian rule-of-thumb is if a maxim cannot be universally willed, then it should be rejected. However, as I argued, there have been significant shifts in thinking about precisely what the scope of universal moral laws is and the current state of thinking about this issue is that practical identities play an essential role in critical endorsement. How universally willed laws can be the product of practical identities (i.e. shaped by cultural, historical and social identities) is only possible, it seems to me, if ‘universal’ is not conceived of as meaning ‘sameness’ but as ‘general’. And, furthermore, that an essential characteristic of that (human) generality is regarded as being mutable. Morality that pays no heed to inclination, context or practical identity is merely bad morality.
In the next argumentative step I wish to argue that care can very fruitfully be reconceptualised as an ethical approach that shares with obligation its approach or methodology. This methodology I have referred to as *compellingness* because it describes the manner in which the moral agent is necessitated to act – in this case, the effect which the normative pull of caring has on her. Why do I think this reconceptualisation would be fruitful? Because, as I have argued in the previous chapters, I believe that care ethics, when it explicates on motivation, tends towards a naturalized or an inclination-steered identification with the cared-for other and/or a voluntary selflessness or suspension of the self and her desires and preferences. While I believe that these are important aspects of care ethics, I am alienated from them by their potential normative vacuity: the suspension of critical judgment and absence of practical identity. What I am aiming at is a combination of care ethic’s emphasis on phenomenological experience of the other (as someone to be cared for) and a motivational methodology that safeguards the normativity of the action of caring. By regarding the commitment to caring as an obligatory one, the moral agent will, I argue, have recourse to a series of limitations and prohibitions concerning the implementation of caring that go a long way towards securing the normative nature of caring. Treating caring as if it was an obligation, I shall argue, is a way of combining these two important features, the experience of the other and moral justification for actions.

The point I shall now elaborate on in the following chapter is that obligations are not externals, someone else’s laws or rules – they are principles we endorse. In other words, what I shall elaborate on is the issue of the “normativity” of obligation.