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Abstract

Although psychologists have paid scant attention to the sense of obligation as a distinctly human motivation, moral philosophers have identified two of its key features: First, it has a peremptory, demanding force, with a kind of coercive quality, and second, it is often tied to agreement-like social interactions (e.g., promises) in which breaches prompt normative protest, on the one side, and apologies, excuses, justifications, and guilt on the other. Drawing on empirical research in comparative and developmental psychology, I provide here a psychological foundation for these unique features by showing that the human sense of obligation is intimately connected developmentally with the formation of a shared agent “we,” which not only directs collaborative efforts but also self-regulates them. Thus, children’s sense of obligation is first evident inside, but not outside, of collaborative activities structured by joint agency with a partner, and it is later evident in attitudes toward in-group, but not out-group, members connected by collective agency. When you and I voluntarily place our fate in one another’s hands in interdependent collaboration – scaled up to our lives together in an interdependent cultural group – this transforms the instrumental pressure that individuals feel when pursuing individual goals into the pressure that “we” put on me (who needs to preserve my cooperative identity in this “we”) to live up to our shared expectations: a we > me self-regulation. The human sense of obligation may therefore be seen as a kind of self-conscious motivation.

Humans often do things out of a sense of obligation. But obligation is not a major topic in modern psychology, not even in moral psychology. Presumably obligation is a kind of motivation, but, if so, it is a decidedly peculiar one. It has at least two distinctive features.

1. **Special Force.** Obligation has a peremptory, demanding force, with a kind of coercive (negative) quality: I don’t want to, but I have to. Failure to live up to an obligation leads to a sense of guilt (also demanding and coercive). Unlike the most basic human motivations, which are carrots, obligation is a stick.
2. **Special Social Structure.** Obligation is prototypically bound up with agreements or promises between individuals, and so has an inherently social structure. It can even happen that an outside party judges that an agent is obligated to do something although the agent himself does not think so. Breaches of obligations often prompt normative protest, from the offended party, and apologies, excuses, and justifications from the offender.

My aim in this target article is to explain humans’ sense of obligation, including these two special features, in moral psychological terms. Where did humans’ presumably species-unique sense of obligation come from evolutionarily, and where does it come from ontogenetically? What are its functions, and from what more primitive components was/is it built? My larger goal in answering these questions is to fit obligation into a larger picture of human sociality.

1. Philosophical background

Despite its almost total neglect in psychology, obligation has been a major topic in moral philosophy for centuries, albeit most often in the context of normative discussions attempting to tell us what we are obligated to do. But there have been some influential descriptive approaches as well (in so-called metaethics) that attempt to discern what human obligation is in the first place. I consider in this section two such approaches, and then, in the sections that follow, attempt to improve on them through modifications based on empirical results from the fields of developmental and comparative psychology.

The first philosophers to consider obligation from a more or less psychological point of view were the Enlightenment moral philosophers, especially David Hume (1751/1957). Although contemporary research in moral psychology has focused mainly on what Hume dubbed the natural virtues, such as sympathy, just as important in his overall account are what he dubbed the artificial virtues, such as justice. The natural virtues are so-called because