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On John Laird's "Value and Obligation"*

Amir Saemi

Unjustly forgotten, Laird's "Value and Obligation," I argue, is of great relevance to contemporary moral philosophy. There are, at least, three main theses in Laird's paper:

- (T1) We can't understand judgments of value and obligation in terms of mere feelings and desires.
- (T2) Desire must be guided by cognition of some value.
- (T3) Judgments of rightness and obligation must be grounded in judgments of value.

These claims, though contested in contemporary literature, present an effective approach, rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, to tackle theoretical problems in moral philosophy. According to them, we ought to do A (say, help the poor) because A exhibits the greatest value open to us, and, given (T3), it makes no sense to ask why we should care about the value of our actions. Moreover, an individual with adequate moral education has motivation to do A because she desires A, and she desires A because A is valuable.

Humeans argue that moral obligations, to be motivating, ought to be understood in terms of desires (e.g., Williams, Finlay) and thus (T1) can't be right.¹ However, there is an important worry for such views: intuitively, we ought to do or not to do certain actions no matter what our desires are (e.g., we ought not to commit genocide). In the face of this worry, some deny the intuition (e.g., Harman, Joyce, and Williams), while others hold that we can account for the universality of morality if there are good psychological or evolutionary reasons to think that everyone has a shared de-

* A retrospective essay on John Laird's "Value and Obligation," *International Journal of Ethics* 23 (1913): 143–58. All unattributed page references are to this article. I am truly thankful to Jeff McMahan, Matthew Hanser, and Nasir Mousavian for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 101–13; Stephen Finlay, "The Obscurity of Internal Reasons," *Philosophers' Imprint* 9 (2003): 1–22.

sire (e.g., Foot).² However, Laird thinks that a Humean view of this kind cannot account for the authority of moral obligation. To illustrate, let us make a distinction between two senses of ‘universality’ of moral requirements. On the one hand, for all persons it is true that they ought not to commit genocide. On the other hand, the universality of moral requirement should not be contingent. Laird holds that while Humean views may account for the former, they cannot account for the latter (149).

According to Laird, the Humean motivational argument provides no reason to reject (T1) if we adopt a cognitive account of desire as stated in (T2). Laird holds (T2) on the ground that desire has intentional content and “when we desire anything, we desire to possess it, or cause its existence, or modify it in some way. The cognition which guides desire has this aim in view. . . . The desire for anything also includes the awareness of value in that which is desired. It is desired because it indicates a situation that is better than the present” (151). Laird’s last sentence, however, needs revision. One can accept (T2) while holding that something may be desired because it is better than what would otherwise happen, even if it is worse than the present; for example, when pain in the future is inevitable, I will desire the lesser of two pains, even though that lesser pain is worse than the pain-free present. (T2), however, is criticized by some philosophers, including Velleman, Stocker, and Railton: (T2) overintellectualizes desire and excludes the possibility of desiring the bad.³ Concerning the first worry, while Laird holds that the “explicit form” of cognition is judgment (150), he leaves open the possibility of having implicit cognitions that are not in the form of judgment. There are two options for Laird in dealing with the second worry, though it is not entirely clear which one he favors. According to Laird, “if our desires and our feelings always harmonized with our judgment, the evil doers would be few. The growth of character consists in regulating them. . . . If they impel to action, they do so because of their strength, . . . and strength is not authority” (150). Passages like this suggest that cognition of (apparent) value has just a regulating, justifying, or guiding role for desire. This is consistent with saying that the cognition of value is not necessarily part of desire; that is, we may have misguided or defective desires which are not for any good. On the other hand, even if Laird accepts that apprehension of some value is part

2. Gilbert Harman, “Moral Relativism Defended,” *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975): 3–22; Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Philippa Foot, “Moral Beliefs,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1958): 83–104.

3. Michael Stocker, “Desiring the Bad: An Essay in Moral Psychology,” *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979): 738–53; J. David Velleman, “The Guise of the Good,” *Noûs* 26 (1992): 3–26; Peter Railton, “On the Hypothetical and Non-hypothetical in Reasoning about Belief and Action,” in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, ed. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 293–321. See also Amir Saemi, “The Guise of the Good and the Problem of Over-Intellectualism,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 48 (2014), forthcoming.

of any desire, he could claim that when someone desires a bad thing, the evil is characterized as desirable by the agent (see Anscombe).⁴

The celebrated buck-passing objection to (T3) reads that it is not the property of being valuable that underlies obligations; rather, the properties in virtue of which the thing is valuable underwrite obligations. To understand Laird's response, let us make a distinction between an act-type being moral and an act-token being done morally. Laird holds that to act morally (i.e., for the act-token to be done morally) one needs to have the right intention (154).⁵ On the assumptions that the right intention includes the judgment that the action is valuable and that to act morally is just a matter of responding properly to one's reasons, the cognition of value is necessary to respond properly to one's reasons and to perform one's duty. The buck-passing objection has less purchase on such an account. Moreover, Laird has another response to the objection. He states that "the rules are not commanded in their own right. There is a reason for them, and the reason lies in their worth" (155). Laird imagines a case of conflict between two duties. In order to know what to do in such a case, he holds, we should look at the grounds of those duties asking what would be the best thing to do in this case. In other words, Laird thinks that the properties underwriting a judgment of obligation must be capable of evaluative comparison, and this would be impossible if the grounds of duties do not indicate a value in the action.

My goal in this essay is not to show that Laird has convincing arguments against objections. Rather, my point simply is that Laird's position and his arguments are relevant for contemporary debates in moral philosophy and are worth taking seriously.

4. Elizabeth Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 70.

5. For this distinction see Matthew Hanser, "Permissibility and Practical Inference," *Ethics* 115 (2005): 443–70. Also, see Amir Saemi, "Intention and Permissibility," *Ethical Perspectives* 16 (2009): 81–101.