View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Asbury Theological Seminary

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 4 | Issue 4 Article 5

10-1-1987

Vocation

Robert Merrihew Adams

Follow this and additional works at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy

Recommended Citation

Adams, Robert Merrihew (1987) "Vocation," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.
Available at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol4/iss4/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

VOCATION

Robert Merrihew Adams

Is there a way in which we can have obligations that do not follow from general ethical principles in conjunction with non-normative facts about our situation in the world? I argue for an affirmative answer to this question, based on a divine command theory of vocation. I explore the structure of such a theory, deriving from Kierkegaard the idea that a vocation will normally be closely connected with one's selfhood, and that it may override other *prima facie* obligations. Epistemological issues about vocation are also discussed.

Is there some task in the universe that is *mine* in a morally valid way? Are there ethical concerns that have my name on them, so to speak? The idea that there is such a thing is a very important idea, and one that it might be difficult to live without. There are so many goods in the world that I could promote, and so many needs in the world that I could try to meet. There is a danger that I will be either fragmented, going too many different ways; or crushed, seeing my obligations as unlimited; or immobilized by the clamor of competing claims. An idea of what is *my* task in the universe, and what things are *my* things to care for, may both impel me and free me to devote my attention to those things.

But what makes a task mine? How does an ethical concern get my name written on it? In some cases there is no special problem about this. Those are the cases in which application of accepted general ethical principles to the empirical non-normative facts of my situation tells me that I am morally obliged to do a certain thing. The cases in which I am most likely to be morally fragmented, crushed, or immobilized, however, are those in which this procedure fails to write my name legibly on any particular task. Is there, then, some other, more individual way, less dependent on general ethical principles, in which a task might become mine and be recognized as mine? In a Christian ethical theory (and in other, similar theistic ethical theories) an affirmative answer to this question may be offered in terms of *vocation*. That is the main theme of this paper.

Section 1: *Are There Irreducibly Individual Ethical Facts?*

Let us begin with a rather general inquiry about the possibility of irreducibly individual ethical facts, and first of all with an epistemological point. There are

All rights reserved.

a wide variety of cases in which we think we are entitled to moral judgments, about the particular case, which we cannot justify on the basis of general ethical principles plus the empirical, non-moral facts of the situation. I will mention two examples.

(1) It might be wondered how firmly someone's statements and other acts have committed her to act in a certain way. If she has not made any explicit promise, it may be hard to be confident of any general principle that we might use to decide the issue. In fact, when trying to decide whether such a principle is correct, we commonly consult our intuitions about particular cases that do and do not fall under it. So if one is trying to decide how committed someone is in a given case, it may be much closer to the truth to say that one's judgment about the particular case will be part of one's evidence for any general ethical principles one accepts as relevant to it, than to suppose that one could provide a grounding in terms of general ethical principles and empirical, non-moral facts for one's decision about the case.

(2) We might ask what would be equitable compensation for a certain loss—for instance, the destruction of an object of great sentimental value. No doubt there are some general ethical principles that we can formulate about equitable compensation. But they are not likely to be nearly fine-grained enough to do the job. Therefore one of the things that is characteristic of judgments of equity is that in order to make them one has to have a certain *sense* of equity. And what that boils down to is that one has to be able to judge directly about a particular case, what, roughly speaking, would be an equitable compensation in this case.

Such examples support the thesis that there are ethical facts that are irreducibly individual from an epistemological point of view, in that we cannot derive them from general principles. However, when we turn to the metaphysics as opposed to the epistemology of morals, it must be said that the facts considered thus far are not clearly incompatible with the doctrine that moral truths as such must be *universalizable*, in the sense that they must apply to anyone in a sufficiently similar situation. The judgments made in my examples are clearly compatible with the following universalizing judgments: (1) If somebody else had behaved in a sufficiently similar way, she would be committed if and only if this person would be committed. (2) If two losses are sufficiently similar, whatever compensation is equitable for the one is equitable for the other. Such judgments as these are all that is demanded by the universalizability doctrine.

More serious problems, however, may arise from cases of other sorts, in which the individuality of an obligation is claimed to be irreducible in a way that appears to be more than epistemological. For instance, there are cases in which people want to say something of the following form: '*I have to* do this [and they mean they *ethically* or *morally* have to do it]—but I am not prescribing a law for anyone else.' I take this to imply, 'I am not saying that anyone else similarly

situated would be under the same obligation.' Sometimes people who feel called or obliged to do something heroic or difficult or controversial will say this about the action that they propose for themselves. Some pacifists, for example, say it about their own pacifism. Such claims are appealing. I would be reluctant to say that they cannot be right. Yet they do seem inconsistent with the universalizability principle.

One way out of this problem is through a divine command theory of vocation.[1] If we conceive of the strongly individual obligations in cases like these as vocations, and conceive of vocations as commands of God, then we can reconcile the plausible individuality intuitions with the universalizability principle. A vocation will be a command of God addressed to a specific individual—a command that does not follow from more general ethical principles. The command will not follow from more general commands that God has issued, or from more general principles that God adheres to, plus other, non-moral features of the situation. Then strongly individual obligations can exist without violating the universalizability principle. For the obligations of a person who has received a vocation from God will be the same as the obligations of any other person whose situation is sufficiently similar. Of course, only those who have received the same vocation from God will be in a sufficiently similar situation. Similarity (even exact similarity) of *mundane* situation will not be sufficient.

With respect to mundane situations (which do not include God's commands), however, obligations can be irreducibly individual in a more than epistemological sense, on a divine command theory of vocation. Let us say that an ethical fact is *situationally determined* if and only if follows (whether or not we are able to derive it) form non-normative facts about the mundane situation and persons involved, plus valid general ethical principles, including any relevant general commands of God. Divine vocations give rise to obligations that are not situationally determined in this sense.

'Vocation' has a narrower sense in this theory than it has sometimes had in Christian ethics. Clearly there are cases in which it is situationally determined that something is morally my task or your task or some other individual's task. And such situationally determined tasks are often called "vocations," with the thought that the general ethical principles involved are backed by God's commands.

I am using the term 'vocation' in a narrower sense in which I think it also is current in Christian ethics, a sense in which my vocation cannot be situationally determined. If I have a vocation, then that must be something that involves a divine command that adds to the stock of ethical principles, so to speak, something that is irreducibly about me as an individual. God's address to me with a specific command is indispensable to the grounding of the fact that this is my task.

My principal reason for preferring the narrower sense is that the claim that

there are vocations in this narrow sense is an important feature of Christian ethics. It is particularly significant for the purposes of ethical theory. The narrower conception of vocation will do much more work in an ethical theory than the broader conception, though the latter may be religiously appropriate in some contexts. We need a term to express the narrower conception, and 'vocation' is historically the obvious, perhaps even inevitable, term for this purpose. Because 'vocation' means *calling*, moreover, it is naturally apt for signifying an obligation essentially rooted in a divine address to a particular individual.

In another way I have expounded the concept of vocation here in a narrower sense than I myself would prefer. I have defined a vocation as a *command* of God addressed to a specific individual. But it is sometimes held in Christian ethics that a vocation can take the form of an *invitation* that offers a possibility to a particular individual, rather than of a command that strictly obliges. I believe that this view is correct. The idea of invitation provides an important alternative way of experiencing and conceiving of vocation in religious life, and one that is important to an understanding of Christian liberty. Divine invitations, moreover, as well as divine commands, can give rise to ethical facts that are not situationally determined. Some of what is said in this paper should therefore be applicable to vocations that take the form of invitations. But there is not room here to go into the subject of invitation in much detail, and for the most part the vocations explicitly discussed will be commands.

Section 2: *Kierkegaard and Abraham*

Few have written more interestingly than Kierkegaard about the idea of having received an irreducibly individual obligation from God, and I propose to make his work a starting point for further development of the theory of vocation I have sketched (although he does not use the word 'vocation' or 'calling' in his discussion of the theme). One thinks at once of his brilliant treatment of the story of God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, in *Fear and Trembling*. At the very center of that book is the idea of an obligation grounded in universal ethical principles being set aside in favor of an irreducibly individual obligation. That is the idea of the famous "teleological suspension of the ethical."

It is often interpreted as a suspension of the ethical in favor of the religious, but *Fear and Trembling* does not describe it in those terms. What we do read about almost as soon as the concept of teleological suspension is introduced is "the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal."[2] The central tension here is not so much between ethics and religion as between the universal and the individual. Kierkegaard is prepared to understand the universal as well as the individual duty theologically, in terms of commands of God;[3] the paradox of the teleological suspension of the ethical is "that the

single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute."[4]

An absolute relation to the absolute, in *Fear and Trembling*, is a relation to God based on a direct personal command from God that is absolute in the sense of being independent of the universal commands that God has issued to all and sundry. This irreducible individuality is precious in Kierkegaard's eyes because he sees the universal commands of God as too impersonal: "in the duty itself [that arises from them] I do not enter into relation with God."[5] The absolute relation to the absolute, endowed with this value, is the telos for the sake of which the (universal) ethical is teleologically suspended (and for the sake of which, in Kierkegaard's view, it existed in the first place).[6]

The story of Abraham, as Kierkegaard interprets it, and the idea of a teleological suspension of the (universal) ethical, raise in the most dramatic form an issue that I want to study (in Section 4). The pursuit of a vocation can come into collision with the interests, and even the rights, of other people. Can the irreducibly individual considerations arising from a vocation override a universally grounded obligation?

Another theme of *Fear and Trembling* is that the individuality of a vocation can be a source of epistemological problems. Kierkegaard dwells at length on the inability of his Abraham to explain himself to the other people involved in his action, and suggests that it is "not . . . due to his wanting to place himself as the single individual in an absolute relation to the *universal* but to his having been placed as the single individual in an absolute relation to the *absolute*" (p. 93). If Abraham's action were based on universal ethical principles, his reasons would be intelligible to all; but as things stand, Kierkegaard thinks, it would be hopeless for him to try to explain himself. This issue will be discussed (briefly) at the end of Section 3.

The case of Abraham, however, as presented in *Fear and Trembling*, is not an ideal example, because it is not a particularly plausible model of vocation for Christians. In anything like the situation that Kierkegaard describes, anyone who stood in the Christian tradition, and whose previous experience of God fell within what I take to be the typical range of Christian experience, would be neither rationally *nor religiously* justified in believing that God was commanding him to kill his son. Kierkegaard has left us, however, a more plausible and equally interesting case of vocation in the story of his own broken engagement, which is widely thought to motivate many of the concerns of *Fear and Trembling*. This example will illuminate the main topic that I wish to discuss in Section 3, the relation of vocation to selfhood.

Having fallen in love with, and courted, Regine Olsen, a girl much younger than himself, Kierkegaard proposed marriage and was accepted. "But inwardly," he wrote several years later, "the next day [after becoming engaged to Regine]

I saw that I had made a false step."[7] Having decided that it was a mistake, he set about to break the engagement; and when Regine would not agree to a termination, he felt obliged to end the relationship in what appears to have been a particularly harsh or even cruel way.

What were Kierkegaard's reasons for breaking the engagement? In the account from which I have quoted he mentions penitence about his past life, and the thought that his melancholy would prevent marital happiness. There was also an explicitly religious dimension. "But there was a divine protest, that is how I understood it. The wedding. I had to hide such a tremendous amount from her, had to base the whole thing upon something untrue."[8] In this document, however, the divine protest is not unambiguously a vocation in the sense that concerns us. It could be a situationally determined obligation derived from a need to conceal from Regine certain facts (not identified in Kierkegaard's papers) and a general principle requiring openness in marriage.

The idea of vocation comes into the story much more clearly if we succumb to the almost irresistible temptation to interpret as substantially autobiographical the story of the broken engagement in "Quidam's Diary" in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work, *Stages on Life's Way*. Like Kierkegaard, Quidam worries about being unable to satisfy the requirements of marriage with respect to openness.[9] And like Regine, Quidam's fiancée fights to keep the engagement from being broken. A third character in *Stages on Life's Way* renders the following verdict on this struggle.

> If she had conquered he would have been lost. Even though her light-heartedness (which after all is a security which steadily depreciates) had been capable of making him a happy husband, this is not what he ought to be.[10]

The last clause is the key: "This is not what he ought to be." The suggestion is being made that Quidam, and I think Kierkegaard, has a certain vocation. There is something that he ought to be which is incompatible with fulfilling the role of a happy, and correspondingly a satisfying, husband; and therefore he ought not to be married.

What is it that he ought to be? Why is it incompatible with a happy marriage? The answer suggested at the beginning of the diary, where Quidam starts to wrestle with the question, "whether I was capable of giving my life such an expression as marriage requires," is that he is called to be a soldier on a certain kind of frontier, which involves a certain kind of spiritual struggle whose intensity is not likely to make for conjugal bliss.

> Ought a soldier of the advance guard to be married? Dare a soldier on the frontier (spiritually understood) take a wife, a soldier on duty at the

> extremest outpost, who is fighting day and night, not exactly against Turks and Scythians, but against the robber bands of an innate melancholy, a soldier of the outpost who, even though he does not fight day and night, though for a considerable period he has peace, yet never can know at what instant the war will begin again, since he cannot even dare to call this quiet a truce?[11]

Certain judgments about Kierkegaard's case seem to me plausible. (1) The view I am taking Kierkegaard to have had about his vocation seems to me at least partly, and importantly, right. Not, I think, in all parts of it. It is hard to swallow the idea that anyone is called by God to be unhappy or melancholy. But Kierkegaard's actual achievement makes it humanly and religiously credible that he was called to struggle in a peculiarly introverted way on a certain spiritual frontier; and it is also quite plausible that this particular sort of struggle would have been incompatible with a good sort of marriage. I do not mean to suggest that all sorts of spiritual struggle are incompatible with a good marriage—quite the contrary. But it is hard to imagine "The Kierkegaard we know and love" as a happy and satisfying husband, and that is surely connected with the kind of struggle in which he was engaged, or with the (highly introverted) manner in which he felt called to struggle.

(2) I also think that it was very likely right for him to break his engagement. His judgment in thinking that he ought to do that, both for Regine's sake and for the sake of his vocation was probably sound. This certainly does not mean that I think he was blameless, either in proposing marriage in the first place, without having taken stock of all this, or in the harsh (and to my mind indefensible) *manner* of his breaking the engagement. But on the central issues as to what Kierkegaard's vocation was, and whether in view of that it was right for him to break his engagement, I am inclined largely to agree with him—or at least to think that his position commands respect and that there is not a sufficient basis for disagreeing with him.

Section 3: *Vocation and Selfhood*

Kierkegaard's conception of vocation is intimately related to his ideas about selfhood. It is significant that the crucial statement in the verdict on Quidam is not, "This is not what he ought to *do*," but, "This is not what he ought to *be*." Kierkegaard sees the vocation first and foremost as a vocation to be a certain kind of person—and, in the closest connection with that, to pursue certain projects which, in his view, are partially constitutive of selfhood. Wrestling in a certain intense and introverted way with certain kinds of spiritual issues was such a project for Kierkegaard. If my vocation is connected in this way with my selfhood,

it is not attached solely or even primarily to "my station and its duties." One should not see one's vocation as simply arising from the circumstances in which one happens to be born, or from the gainful employment one has undertaken, or from one's parents' (or other people's) expectations.

Furthermore, I think that on Kierkegaard's conception, his vocation is a constituent of his selfhood that does not follow from the other constituents. For if a vocation is not situationally determined, it does not follow from non-normative facts about the self, nor from them plus general ethical principles. On this view Kierkegaard's selfhood has a basic constituent that is irreducibly normative. A fact about what he, Søren Kierkegaard, *ought* to be is part of what *makes him* who he is.

This is not a metaphysical thesis. It is not being claimed that Kierkegaard's vocation is one of his essential properties, which are metaphysically necessary for his identity in the strictest sense. The concept of selfhood at work here is more ethical than metaphysical. Kierkegaard's selfhood, in the sense in which it is spoken of here, and in which he usually speaks of it, is constituted by those facts about him that make questions about his identity in the metaphysical sense humanly and morally interesting. His vocation is part of what makes him who he is in the sense that it is part of what gives his existence, his life, a unity that is humanly and morally significant. It is part of what matters about his being himself.

The character of vocations as not situationally determined is important for their relation to selfhood. One reason for this is that the tasks involved in vocations typically go far beyond any obligation that could follow from those general ethical principles that are plausibly regarded as non-consequentialist. If vocations were situationally determined, they would have to follow chiefly from considerations about the value of the consequences of satisfying them. If I have a task that is situationally determined, what puts my name on it will typically just be the way in which my particular non-normative characteristics serve as raw materials or natural resources for the purposes of morality or religion. We all have situationally determined tasks of this sort; but I think there would be something deeply alienating—a loss of selfhood—in allowing them to determine the shape of our lives as deeply as a vocation is often supposed to shape it.[12]

"That may be," a voice objects in my mind's ear, "but is it less alienating to allow your life to be profoundly shaped by a command of God that is arbitrary inasmuch as it is not derived from general ethical principles? Is it not your own preferences that must shape an unalienated life for you?" This objection seems correct if it is directed against a conception of my vocation that has nothing much to do with my own desires and feelings. But I think it would be more typical to perceive my vocation as rooted in a divine purpose for my life in particular, which precedes and conditions my desires and feelings, but which is

manifested and perceived (in large part) through them and not in complete independence of them.

This is an important reason for connecting vocation with selfhood. Certainly not all vocations are aptly described as vocations to be a certain kind of person. There are also vocations to do certain things. But it is difficult to think of God's relation to us on the model of a supervisor who distributes various tasks to subordinates without its mattering very much to the selfhood of the employees which one gets which job. One reason why this is not a plausible model for divine vocation is that most believers would (and I think should) be skeptical of an alleged vocation that is not supported by any deeply rooted aspirations and feelings of the individual concerned. (Of course I am speaking here of vocations in the narrow sense, which are not situationally determined.)

Nonetheless it is worth dwelling on the point that there can be vocations to do certain things as well as vocations to be a certain kind of person. Adequate appreciation of this point may require a conception, both of vocation and of selfhood, that places less emphasis than Kierkegaard does on projects clearly defined, and firmly fixed, in advance—a conception that makes more room for responsiveness. On this view your relationship to God and to other people will be a large part of what matters most about you; and your selfhood may be constituted in a history in which you hear God speaking to you in different ways on different occasions.

Suppose you feel a special and continuing obligation to speak out, as occasion offers, on behalf of a particular oppressed group, having met some members of the group and heard them talk about their plight. It is not situationally determined that you ought to do this rather than devoting the time and energy involved to other, equally worthy purposes. But you see it as a task that has your name on it, and religiously as a vocation, or part of your vocation. This can hardly be described as a vocation to be a certain kind of person. It need not even become one of the central projects of your life. But this vocation is still related to your selfhood insofar as part of what matters about who you are is that you have heard God speaking to you in and through and for these people.

The importance of one's own aspirations and feelings to the manifestation and perception of one's vocation suggests at least two alternative accounts against which the claim that a vocation is not situationally determined needs to be defended. These accounts would derive the vocation from other features of the self. In the first place it might be claimed that one gives oneself a vocation by choosing a project and committing oneself to it. Kierkegaard's emphasis on the importance of choice could sometimes be read as suggesting this idea, as when he has Quidam explain why he cannot give up his reserve by saying, "I have employed fifteen years to form a life view for myself and to attain proficiency in it. It is a life view which stirred my enthusiasm and was entirely in accord

with my nature, and so I cannot suddenly be made over."[13] Does this mean that Kierkegaard thinks of himself (if he is Quidam) as having given himself a vocation by forming a life view for himself?

It must be granted that on any ethically tolerable view of vocation it will be possible at least to delimit one's vocation by undertaking commitments to other people. In thinking about what sort of person I ought to be, and what life-projects I ought to have, at any given time, I surely must take into account the commitments I have made to other people, if they are counting on me to fulfil them.

However, the conclusion that I can unlimitedly give myself a vocation by choosing it or committing myself to it is hard to accept. (It also does not fit very well with Kierkegaard's statements about the "divine protest" and what he ought to be.) Suppose I were to set myself to become gregarious, or to become introspective—forming for myself a view of life built around that, and trying determinedly to adhere to it. Could I in that way make that part of my vocation? I think not. My choosing such a project (even if I succeed in it) does not make it part of what I *ought* to be.

According to a second reductionistic account my vocation may be seen as arising from my moral feelings and intuitions, particularly including my feelings and intuitions about my vocation (conjoined with other facts about me). consider the case of a North American Christian who believes herself called to go as a medical missionary to Bolivia. Such a person, being asked, "Why do you think you are called to do that?" might say, "God has laid this concern [for the needs of the people in Bolivia] on my heart." How should we interpret this? We may be tempted to interpret it as meaning that the missionary imperative for this individual is derived from psychological facts about her concern, in the following way. She feels this concern in herself. And that feeling itself gives rise to the missionary imperative for her. It is not just the ground for her belief in the imperative, but the ground of its existence. For there is a general imperative to act on certain kinds of concerns if one feels them in certain types of situations. So if she did not feel this concern, she would not have a vocation to go to Bolivia. But given that she does feel the concern, and that there is a general imperative to act on such feelings in such a situation, it is her duty and vocation to go as a medical missionary to Bolivia.

This subjectivistic reduction of the notion of vocation in such a case seems to me unwarranted. In saying, "God has laid this concern on my heart," as a reason for her belief about her vocation, the intending missionary would normally regard the feeling of concern as a phenomenon in and by which God's particular will was objectively perceived. She would not think, "This is a fact about me which gives rise to a vocation," or "This is just a ground or occasion for applying this general principle about acting on certain types of felt concern." She would believe rather that in experiencing this concern she was perceiving God's will

for her, which preceded her concern and was manifested and communicated to her by her feelings.

Furthermore, I think she need not (and I hope she would not) believe in the general imperative, "Act on this type of feeling of concern in this type of situation." A moral theology of vocation is quite a different thing from a subjectivistic ethics that obliges you to act on certain kinds of feelings. 'God has laid this concern on my heart,' is not normally to be understood in terms of an imperative to act on certain kinds of feelings as such. Who I am normatively, as Kierkegaard would surely agree, is something that goes much deeper than how I feel at any moment (or indeed for quite a period of time), and is to be seen as conditioning the feelings, rather than the other way around.

It is worth dwelling briefly on the *epistemological* importance of this interpretation of the feelings in such a case. The belief that one has been individually commanded (or even just invited) by God to do something is not one to be accepted uncritically. It is subject to various tests: the test of conformity with what the individual and her community already believe about ethics and God's general purposes, the test of congruence with other facts that are known about her and about the world, and the tests of living it out: Is the sense of vocation strengthened or weakened by prayer? Does it survive tribulation? Is acting on it fruitful?[14] In saying this I do not mean to give the impression that a sense of vocation should be easily overthrown by negative results on some of these tests. For one of the things that is important about a sense of vocation is that it is something that can give one guidance, and that one can act on with some firmness, in the face of discouragement and in the face of some negative results.

The epistemological point I want chiefly to make, however, concerns the case in which all of the tests have been passed, with great and evident fruitfulness. In these circumstances it would be very plausible to judge that the individual's sense of vocation was veridical—that she really did have a vocation to do this, as she believes. But I think it is also true that in making that judgment, I would be relying, at least in part, on the sense of vocation itself. My judgment would not be based simply on the passing of the external tests, and on the external, observable truths. That someone did such good work in this field, and in a way that seems theologically and ethically correct and fits her abilities, etc., may be enough to establish that it was a good thing for her to do; but it is not enough to establish that she had a vocation to do it. If it is to be established that she had a vocation to do it, an indispensable part of the evidence will be that she had a sense or intuition or conviction of the vocation. In believing that she had the vocation I would be taking this sense or intuition or conviction of vocation as a veridical apprehension of a vocation—of a fact about what God was communicating to her.

Section 4: *Pursuing a Vocation at Some Cost to Others*

An issue about vocation that arises quite clearly in connection with Kierkegaard's broken engagement, and is obviously related to the theme of *Fear and Trembling*, is whether it can be right to pursue a vocation when it impinges painfully on the interests, or even the rights, of other people. In pursuing a vocation one is *apt* to come into collision with the interests of other people. It is not just something that may happen; rather, it is in the nature of the case. If we think of vocation as a ground of action that is not derivable from reasoning about the interests of other people, then it stands to reason that there is a built-in potentiality for conflicting with those interests. Experience suggests that this potentiality is fairly frequently actualized. Kierkegaard's breaking his engagement provides one example of this; let us think about a few others.

Our intending medical missionary, for example, feels called to go to Bolivia; but it may be that this action will cause considerable distress, and perhaps even some hardship, to her family. Perhaps they will be opposed to it, and she will have to consider whether, in this situation, it is right to follow her sense of vocation against the wishes, and to some extent the interests, of people to whom she is closely bound.

The most extreme case that I want to discuss here is that of Gauguin, who left his family to go to Tahiti to paint, motivated by something that Michael Slote has characterized as an overwhelming passion for painting,[15] but that I would like to think about as something like a strong sense of vocation to paint—though not necessarily as something that Gauguin conceptualized theologically. (I do not wish to discuss here whether either Slote's conception of Gauguin or mine is historically accurate.) One can ask, "Can Gauguin have been justified, or right somehow, or admirable perhaps, in leaving his family in order to go and paint in Tahiti?"

My final example is closer to home. Many of us feel a vocation, or something like a vocation, to do philosophical research. but it is a very demanding activity. It demands a lot of time and a lot of emotional and other concentration and energy. There are almost always other good and useful things that we could do that would benefit other people—things like spending more time with our students or with our families, or answering a higher proportion of our mail. These activities have a larger immediate payoff for the welfare of others than our philosophical research, and maybe their benefit to others will still be larger in the long run. Should we go ahead and do the research anyway? Well, I do. But is that right?

What are we to say about all of this? Gauguin's leaving his family probably lies beyond the limit of what it could be right to do in pursuit of the kind of vocation that might be involved there. But in the other three cases I am inclined to think that it may well be right, and in many such cases would be right, to

pursue one's vocation anyway, at some cost to other people.

What basis might or should this judgment have? One could try to base it on consequentialist grounds, arguing in the case of the medical missionary, for example, that she could probably do more good in Bolivia than she could do by staying home with her family. In the case of philosophical research one could try to argue that one will ultimately do more good for the world by producing one's great essay than one would do by spending more time with one's students or answering one's mail or whatever else one might do instead. I do not find the consequentialist justifications very satisfying—first because their truth seems at best so uncertain, and in the second place because relying heavily on them seems in many cases immodest, to put it mildly.

In the case of philosophical research, one could try to argue on the basis of ordinary non-consequentialist commitments to other people. I have accepted a job, one of whose official duties is that I should be engaged in philosophical research. However, I do not find this account of the matter terribly compelling because I imagine that many of us would satisfy adequately the obligations of this sort that we have if we did less research than we actually do and than we feel called to do. It seems to me more plausible to hold that the vocation one believes one has is itself a ground of the rightness of the actions that it requires.

There is an alternative justification to be considered. One has only *prima facie* obligations to keep one's promises, answer one's mail, and in general to do things that are good for other people. Being *prima facie* obligations, they can be overridden in various ways. Clearly they can be overridden by stronger obligations. But it has been claimed that they can also be overridden by "justifiable self-preference." In order for ethics to be tolerable for us human beings, on this view, it should contain the provision that it is permissible to pursue one's own interests under reasonable conditions, including conditions in which one is pursuing one's own interests in preference to fulfilling a *prima facie* obligation such as promoting the good of others or keeping a promise, when one's own interest is sufficiently important to one in proportion to the weight of the *prima facie* obligation. Only a sufficiently heavy *prima facie* obligation can oblige one to set one's own interests aside.

It is a feature of the theory of self-preference I have in mind that how important an interest is to one—how much weight it has to set aside a *prima facie* obligation—is not a normative but a purely psychological question. How much one cares about it is all that counts. Pushpin is as good as poetry, as far as justifiable self-preference is concerned.

On this view, it might be claimed, Kierkegaard is justified in breaking his engagement, the missionary is justified in going to Bolivia, and we are justified (at least much of the time) in pursuing our philosophical research, because we want to do these things. They are necessary in order to pursue interests that we

care very much about. Of course we have to weigh those interests of ours in proportion to the interests of other people that are involved; but we may at least often conclude that the *prima facie* obligations with which they conflict are not weighty enough to oblige us to go against our own interests.

Having a vocation plays no essential role in this pattern or justification; it is not seen as justifying one in doing anything that one would not be justified in doing if one just wanted badly enough to do it. I think that is implausible. Intuitively it seems to me that a divine vocation, or even a subjective but plausible sense of vocation, or of something like vocation, does have more force than a mere strong desire has to override a *prima facie* obligation.

For example, I think that on balance it was wrong for Gauguin to leave his family and to to Tahiti. But I at least think better of him, on the whole, supposing him to have done this out of something like a sense of vocation to paint, than I would if I thought he had left his family and gone to Tahiti just because he felt very tired and wanted very badly to rest on the beach. Or suppose our intending missionary cut loose from her commitments at home just because she wanted very badly to visit tin mines in Bolivia. This does not seem to have the justifying force of a sense of vocation to go and be a medical missionary. Similarly it seems to me that a sense of vocation does have more force than a mere desire would have to justify doing philosophical research, at the expense of other worthy projects; that seems to me to be true even though I think that philosophizing is a noble end even as the object of a mere desire.

No doubt more than one account might be offered of what gives a sense of vocation more justifying force than mere desires, however intense, can have. There is not room here to explore all the alternatives. But it is hard to see why theists would not think that having a vocation (either a command or an invitation) from God to do something would indeed be a strong justification for doing it.

This is a point at which the narrower conception of vocation, according to which vocations are not situationally determined, does work that the broader conception cannot do. A belief that I have a certain vocation that is not situationally determined can be thrown into the scales against other considerations that favor the view that it would be morally better to do something else. A view that a certain task is situationally determined to be mine cannot function in this way, because situationally determined ethical facts depend on what it is best to do in view of more basic considerations.[16]

University of California, Los Angeles

NOTES

1. A divine command theory of vocation does not entail (though it is obviously consistent with) a *comprehensive* divine command theory of obligation. It does not imply that *all* obligations are constituted by divine commands, or that ethical wrongness, for example, *is* the property of being contrary to divine commands. All it implies about the relation of obligation in general to God is that it is possible for *some* obligations to be imposed by a divine command.

2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 55.

3. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 68: "The ethical is the universal, and as such it is also the divine. Thus it is proper to say that every duty is essentially duty to God . . ." See also Bruce Russell, "What Is the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*?" *Inquiry*, 18 (1975): 337-43, and passages of Kierkegaard cited there.

4. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 56.

5. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 68.

6. See *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 55ff.

7. *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, translated and selected by Alexander Dru (New York and Evanston: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), p. 70.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 71f.

9. Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, translated by Walter Lowrie (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 342. 'Quidam' is Latin for 'Someone'.

10. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, p. 390.

11. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, p. 188.

12. Cf. the well know allegation that act utilitarianism is alienating in something like this way, in Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism, For and Against*, by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 108-18.

13. Kierkegaard, *Stages of Life's Way*, p. 342.

14. The value of the actual results will be a more important test in some contexts than in others. If I felt a strong sense of vocation to paint, but my paintings all turned out to be worse than mediocre, you might well suspect that my sense of vocation was not in touch with the relevant reality. But no amount of frustration of his efforts would lead me to think that Archbishop Tutu's sense of vocation to speak out against *apartheid* is not in touch with moral reality.

15. Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), chapter 4.

16. I am indebted to Mary Clark, George Mavrodes, Thomas F. Tracy, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and many other hearers, including members of the 1986 NEH summer institute on the philosophy of religion, for helpful comments on earlier versions of some or all of this material, and for suggesting some of my illustrative examples.