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Review of "Ignorance and Moral Obligation", by Michael J. Zimmerman

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Michael J. Zimmerman, *Ignorance and Moral Obligation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 160 pages. ISBN: 0199688850 (hbk.). Hardback/Paperback: \$55.00/-.

In 2006, Michael Zimmerman published an underappreciated paper on the nature of moral obligation in which he argued that our moral obligations depend, not on the facts or our beliefs, but on the evidence available to us (see "Is Moral Obligation Objective or Subjective?" *Utilitas* 18, 2006, pp. 329-361). Two years later, he published a lengthy book in which he argued more thoroughly for the same conclusion (see *Living with Uncertainty: The Moral Significance of Ignorance*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)). In *Ignorance and Moral Obligation*, Zimmerman returns to the central question of those works to respond to objections that have been brought against the views he presented therein. Though not without its weaknesses, Zimmerman's new book is the most thorough defense of what has come to be known as the *Prospective View* of moral obligation and as such is a must-read for those working in normative ethics narrowly construed.

Ignorance and Moral Obligation is composed of five chapters. In the first, Zimmerman poses the book's central question, "What ought one to do when one doesn't know which of one's options is best?" (p. 10), where 'ought' is supposed to express the concept of moral obligation and by 'best' Zimmerman means best with respect to what matters morally (so as not to assume consequentialism). Zimmerman then presents the four leading answers to that question. According to the *Objective View*, one ought to do what *is* best, even if one doesn't know what that is. According to the *Subjective View*, one ought to do what *one believes is* best. According to the *Prospective View*, which is Zimmerman's view, one ought to do what *the evidence suggests is* best. Finally, according to the *Ambiguity View*, there are multiple senses of 'ought,' even when 'ought' expresses moral obligation. On this view, although there are facts about what agents *objectively* ought to do, *subjectively* ought to do, and *prospectively* ought to do, there is no fact about what agents ought to do *simpliciter*, because there is simply no such notion. At the end of chapter one, Zimmerman sets the Ambiguity View aside. Although he (hesitantly) admits that there might be multiple senses of moral obligation, he indicates that he is interested in the sense of moral obligation with which normative ethicists have traditionally been interested, which he claims is the sense of moral obligation that is "of ultimate concern to the conscientious person" (p. 33).

In chapter two, Zimmerman argues that there are two constraints that the correct theory of moral obligation must meet, that neither the Objective nor the Subjective View can meet them, and that the Prospective View, which can meet them, is therefore superior. In particular, Zimmerman argues that the Subjective View fails because it rules out the possibility that agents could be wrong about what they are morally obligated to do. Then

he argues that the Objective View fails because it entails that one who believes that it is the correct theory of moral obligation will sometimes have to violate its dictates (i.e., do what the theory entails is wrong) in order to act conscientiously.

As evidence for this latter claim, Zimmerman presents a case based on a well-known example conceived by Frank Jackson (see “Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection,” *Ethics* 101, 1991, pp. 462-463). A doctor, Jill, must decide how to treat the skin condition of her patient, John. She has three drugs available. She knows that one will completely cure his condition, that one will partially cure his condition, and that one will kill him. Unfortunately, however, although she knows which of the three drugs will partially cure John’s condition, she does not know, for either of the remaining two drugs, whether it will cure him or kill him. Assuming that it is best to completely cure John’s condition and that Jill knows this, then if Jill believes the Objective View, she will believe that prescribing the drug that will only partially cure John’s condition is wrong. But, intuitively, if she is to act conscientiously, then she must prescribe the drug that will only partially cure John’s condition since prescribing either of the others would be too risky. Thus, those who believe the Objective View will sometimes have to violate its dictates in order to act conscientiously.

In chapter three, Zimmerman clarifies the Prospective View and responds to objections to it, the most notable of which was raised by Holly Smith (see “The ‘Prospective View’ of Obligation,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, Discussion Note, 2011, pp. 5-8). According to Smith’s objection, the Prospective View is no different from the Objective View in that it entails that agents who believe it will sometimes have to violate its dictates in order to act conscientiously.

To illustrate this, Smith presents a case similar to Jackson’s. But whereas Jackson’s example reveals that acting conscientiously sometimes requires one to do what one knows is suboptimal, Smith’s example reveals that acting conscientiously sometimes requires one to do what one knows *the evidence available to one suggests* is suboptimal. Therefore, if Zimmerman is correct that those who believe the correct theory of moral obligation will never have to violate its dictates in order to act conscientiously, then the Prospective View, as Zimmerman formulated it in his earlier works on moral obligation, must be false.

In light of Smith’s objection, Zimmerman acknowledges that he must modify the way he formulated the Prospective View in his earlier works. Whereas before he understood the Prospective View as maintaining that one is morally obligated to do what the evidence *available to one* suggests is best, he now understands it as maintaining that one is morally obligated to do what the evidence *one possesses* suggests is best. Once we modify the Prospective View in this way, it is no longer vulnerable to this objection.

In chapters four and five, Zimmerman explores how his views on the nature of moral obligation bear on two other debates. In chapter four, he argues that no theory of moral obligation can be supplemented with a principle of action guidance that is more practicable than the theory itself, and in chapter five, he argues that our moral rights depend on the evidence that others have.

Given how much ground Zimmerman covers, there are a number of places where one might object his arguments, but I will focus my attention on the most obvious weakness in his argument for the Prospective View. As mentioned above, Zimmerman’s argument for the Prospective View depends on his argument against the Objective View, and that argument depends on the claim that acting conscientiously rules out deliberately doing

what one believes to be morally wrong (pp. 32-33). Zimmerman calls this *Constraint #2* and shows that its truth entails the falsity of the Objective View by presenting the first case above. While Zimmerman does not provide an argument for Constraint #2, it does seem plausible, and Zimmerman leverages its plausibility against the Objective View.

Although there is nothing, in principle, wrong with this strategy, I worry that Constraint #2 is not sufficiently compelling to stop proponents of the Objective View from taking the opposite tack – that is, leveraging their reasons for holding the Objective View against Constraint #2, leaving the two sides at an impasse. Having said that, I think there are a couple of things Zimmerman could have done to make this way of responding to his argument less attractive. First, he could have provided an argument for Constraint #2. Or, if that was not possible, he could have identified other, more plausible constraints on the correct theory of moral obligation that, like Constraint #2, entail the falsity of the Objective View. For example, the claim that an individual does not deserve punishment unless he or she has violated a moral obligation (together with plausible auxiliary premises) entails the falsity of the Objective View, and it is, to my mind, more plausible than Constraint #2. Additionally, Zimmerman could have spent more time undercutting the reasons people have for holding the Objective View in the first place. Either of those changes would have made his argument for the Prospective View more convincing.

In the end, however, the book's virtues far outweigh its shortcomings. It is clear and concise, especially given its impressive breadth and depth, and the arguments Zimmerman raises and responds to will be both interesting and challenging to anyone with a particular view of the nature of moral obligation.

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