

CHARACTER-DEPENDENT DUTY: AN ANABAPTIST APPROACH TO ETHICS

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I propose a theory of moral obligation that is inspired by the way obligation has been understood in the Anabaptist tradition. I use the resources of the theory to explain and defend the appropriateness of the Anabaptist claim that Christian ethics is unique. I also use the theory to show that some of the standard objections to Christian pacifism, the most visibly distinctive feature of Anabaptist ethics, are misplaced when pacifism is understood as an application of the theory I defend. Finally, I suggest some theological and theoretical advantages this theory.

In this paper, I shall articulate and defend a theory of moral obligation that is inspired by the way obligation has been understood in the main strands of the faith tradition which has its origins in sixteenth century Anabaptism. I intend this theory, which I shall call "Anabaptist Ethics," to be both faithful to the spirit of moral views that have predominated in the Anabaptist tradition, and plausible, independent of Anabaptist assumptions. The key to understanding Anabaptist moral sensibilities, as I see it, is to understand the traditional Anabaptist claim that the ethic they espoused was, in important respects, appropriate only for Christians. I shall therefore begin by offering some evidence of Anabaptist moral sensibilities that are indicative of the spirit I mean to capture.

I. The Anabaptist Background

The 1527 "Schleitheim Confession," probably the single most influential document in the Anabaptist tradition, says this, concerning the exercise of lethal force:

We have been united as follows concerning the sword. The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and kills the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the [Hebrew] law the sword is established over the wicked for punishment and for death, and the secular rulers are established to wield the same.

But within the perfection of Christ only the ban [excommunication] is used for the admonition and exclusion of the one who has sinned, without the death of the flesh, simply the warning and the command



to sin no more.

Now many who do not understand Christ's will for us, will ask: whether a Christian may or should use the sword against the wicked for protection and defense of the good, or for the sake of love.

The answer is unanimously revealed: Christ teaches and commands us to learn from him, . . . Now Christ says to the woman who was taken in adultery, not that she should be stoned according to the law of his Father (and yet he says 'what the Father commanded me, that I do') but with mercy and forgiveness and the warning to sin no more, says: 'Go, sin no more.' Exactly thus should we also proceed, according to the rule of the ban.²

The adherents to this confession insist that God proscribes for Christians (in this case, the exercise of lethal force) what he prescribed for pre-Christian Hebrew believers and still ordains for secular rulers. Anabaptists made similar claims about the swearing of oaths, divorce and remarriage, participation in government, etc. That is, they claimed that God prohibits, for Christians, conduct, in these areas, that he wills (or permits) for others, and vice versa. The rationale for these distinctions has never been worked out by Anabaptists, in a systematically satisfactory way. It was enough for most traditional Anabaptists that the Scriptures amply attested to these distinctions along the lines they claimed. Notice that, in the "Schleitheim Confession," it was enough to show that Jesus took their side of the matter despite the fact that he was very well aware that God had directed otherwise in the Old Testament.

There were, however, a variety of explanations offered here and there. For example, the early Anabaptists frequently claimed, as in this confession, that, as Christians, they were subject to "the perfection of Christ," i.e., they were obligated to live according to the ideal standards set by the life and teachings of Christ. The idea seemed to be that since Christians were "in Christ" the standard of their conduct was to be the perfection of Christ, whereas those not in Christ were "outside the perfection of Christ," that is, not subject to these ideal standards. The differences between the duties of Christians and those of non-Christians were sometimes attributed to the sin that prevailed in non-Christian communities. Thus, according to the "Schleitheim Confession," the prescription of lethal force was appropriate in both of the relevant non-Christian communities because of the presence in them of the sort of wickedness that needs to be kept in check by the threat of deadly force. But, on other matters, such as divorce, sin was the occasion of divine concession to human weakness.³ A document, representing ten different Anabaptist denominations, was commissioned in the Second World War to defend conscientious objection to military service. It claimed that the differences between the New Testament and various divine revelations in the Old Testament on such matters as, "polygamy, divorce, concubinage, war, retaliation, and so forth" was that this revelation "was in every period more or less adapted to the spiritual level and the spiritual capacity of the people to whom it was given," but that "what

has now been revealed through the incarnate Christ [is] the final standard and practice for the Christian."⁴ Elsewhere, in response to the question "Is it possible to live here and now according to the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount?", the document says, "It is not possible except for those who are born again and who are willing to follow Christ and bear their cross after him."⁵

II. Moral Obligation

I would now like to suggest a theory of moral obligation that both makes sense of the Anabaptist claim that the duties of Christians are different from those of non-Christians, and makes sense of the hints at Anabaptist explanations for such a state of affairs. Let me begin by making two basic claims that I take to be plausible on Anabaptist theological assumptions:

- (a) Moral obligation is determined by God's will, and
- (b) God's will, and therefore moral obligation, is relative to human character.

A. Divine Will

I take (a) to be the less controversial of these two claims. What I have in mind is the familiar view that it is God's will which obligates people to do what they are morally obligated to do. There are, of course, many different senses in which God can be said to will something, and not all of them are directly relevant for moral obligation. What I have in mind is the view that it is our obligation to perform all and only those actions that God would prescribe for us if he were to instruct us on the actions in question. More precisely, I take the connection between moral obligation and God's will to be the following:

- (1) An action, A, is morally obligatory for a person, P, in a set of circumstances, C, iff: God would prescribe A for P in C, if God were to instruct P with respect to A in C, and
- (2) A is morally wrong for P in C, iff: God would proscribe A for P in C, if God were to instruct P with respect to A in C.

B. The Relativity of Obligation to Character

In order to understand (b), we will need to take a brief detour into theology to make some claims that I shall not defend, but which I intend to be plausible, if not entirely uncontroversial, on broadly Christian grounds—not just on Anabaptist assumptions.

1. Theological background

God, according to Christian faith, created humanity. Moreover, he created human beings to fulfill the purposes for which he created humanity. Taken together, these purposes constitute the human *telos*, the fulfillment

of which would constitute achievement of the human good. The primary purpose for which human beings were created is to love God. Part, but not all, of what it is for human beings to love God is for them to love each other. The whole of what God intended people to *do* expresses love for God, either by expressing love for other human beings, or by expressing it in some way not reducible to love of human beings.

Human sin has, however, seriously undermined the achievement of those purposes. It has done so in two ways. It has directly undermined the achievement of our *telos* in so far as human sin is *constituted* by a refusal to cooperate with God's purposes for humanity. It has also undermined the fulfillment of our purpose by so corrupting human nature that human beings have become *incapable* of achieving God's purposes for them. Redemption is God's effort to save humanity from sin. For ethics, the principal expression of this is God's effort to help human beings to become people who love God and love their fellow human beings.

2. *The redemptiveness of moral obligations*

Morality is, I suggest, intended by God to redeem us, i.e., to restore us to the life for which we were created by God. Our moral *obligations* are those action-guiding principles that are most redemptive for us. They are obligatory because they are the principles that God, given his redemptive purpose for morality, would prescribe for us. Redemptive, and therefore obligatory, principles are those that best promote the fulfillment of our *telos*. Principles promote the fulfillment of our *telos* by tending to improve the degree to which our lives approximate lives lived in accordance with the love of God and the love of others human beings.⁶ In short, it is our obligation to follow God's will. It is God's will that we follow those action-guiding principles that are redemptive. Redemptive principles are those most likely to improve our conformity to the love of God and others. They tend to improve our conformity to the love of God and others, directly, by encouraging actions more closely approximating it, and, indirectly, by contributing, through habituation, to the improvement of our character. An improvement of our character, as I intend it here, is any improvement in the degree of our inclination to live in conformity to the love of God and others.

One obvious way in which principles can fail to be redemptive is by requiring too little conformity to the love of God and others. For example, principles which permitted us to kill anyone whom we found unattractive would clearly not be redemptive because they required too little conformity to the love of others.

It is tempting to think that the principles which are obviously the most redemptive are the principles, "Love God" and "Love others," or perhaps better the single principle, "Act only in ways that are most loving toward God and most loving toward others." After all, any improvement in the degree to which one conforms to that principle is an improvement in conformity to the love of God and others. But that way of viewing redemptiveness considers only our *telos* and ignores our fallenness. Consider a philanthropic billionaire, who nevertheless enjoys a lavish lifestyle. He uses his wealth to the considerable benefit of those less fortunate than he partly because he takes himself to be obligated to provide such assistance. Let us suppose that,

if he gave all but \$35,000 of his annual income to charity, the benefit to others would be maximal. But his character and his love of luxury is such that he cannot constructively aspire to live on only \$35,000 per year, i.e., he is unable to improve his conformity to the love of God and others by such aspiration. If he believed it to be his obligation to live on only \$35,000 per year, it would tend to corrupt him by habituating him to the violation of his obligations. On the other hand, prescribing some lesser degree of generosity to which he can constructively aspire would be redemptive for him since it would tend to directly improve the degree to which his actions benefitted others, and because those actions would tend, through habituation, to improve the degree of generosity in his character. So action-guiding principles can fail to be redemptive, not only by requiring too little conformity to the love of God and others, but also by requiring too much such conformity.

We are now in a position to see how the claim that God's will for us is redemptive implies that God's will is relative to character. Moral redemption is the project of restoring fallen human beings to the love of God and others. Which principles are redemptive, and therefore obligatory, depends not only on our generic fallenness, but also on the specific and variable degree and type of corruption from which our character suffers. Thus, for example, it would violate the obligations of a pedophile, but not those of most people, to operate a childcare facility. It would similarly be wrong for a kleptomaniac to work in a mint or a bank. In each case, the relevant employment would tend to diminish the conformity to the love of God and others of the person in question, by making it much more likely that he would harm others and corrupt his character.

On the other hand, the obligations of Mother Teresa to provide assistance to others were probably greater than those of a typical American teenager. If Mother Teresa had believed herself to be obligated to provide the degree of assistance to others that she did in fact provide, it would have tended to improve the degree to which her life conformed to the love of God and others. The teenager would likely be in a situation analogous to that of the billionaire. That is, his character would probably not enable him to aspire constructively to provide that sacrificially for others.

Let me now be more precise in spelling out the relationship between redemptiveness and obligation. Notice that, in the examples I offered, redemptiveness depended very crucially on that to which the people in these examples could, or could not, constructively aspire. To get clearer about what it is to constructively aspire to a moral principle, let me begin by clarifying what it is to aspire, in the relevant sense, to the fulfillment of an action-guiding principle.

- (3) A person, P, aspires to fulfill an action-guiding principle, R, iff:
 - (i) P believes that she is morally obligated to fulfill R, and
 - (ii) P seeks to fulfill R, in order to fulfill her moral obligation.

One can fail to aspire to fulfill a principle either by failing to believe that she is obligated to follow it, or by failing to seek to fulfill it for the right reason. Whether or not someone aspires to fulfill a principle, is strictly a matter of her motives. To aspire constructively requires more.

- (4) A person, P, constructively aspires to fulfill an action-guiding principle, R, iff:
- (i) P aspires to fulfill R, and
 - (ii) P's aspiring to fulfill R, tends to improve her conformity to the love of God and others.

One can fail to aspire constructively to fulfill a principle in two basic ways, by failing to aspire to it, or by aspiring to it without its tending to improve the moral excellence of her life.

Although the constructive aspiration to, and the redemptiveness of, an action-guiding principle are closely related, they are not equivalent. Constructive aspiration to a principle is neither necessary nor sufficient for redemptiveness. If it were necessary, a person could, simply by refusing to aspire to a principle, guarantee that he is not obligated to fulfill it, even if the aspiration would be both possible, given his character, and constructive for him. But surely if God were to instruct such a person redemptively, he would prescribe the fulfillment of such a principle. If it nevertheless failed to contribute to his redemption because he refused to aspire to it, it would not be because the principle was unredemptive for him, but because his response was unredemptive. The redemptiveness of a principle, for a person, requires only his *ability* to aspire constructively to it, not his actually aspiring to it.

To see why constructive aspiration is not sufficient for redemptiveness, consider the following example. Mary slanders other people whenever she feels like it. She could improve her conformity to the love of God and others by aspiring to fulfill either of the following action-guiding principles.

(R₁) Slander others iff, doing so is beneficial in some way to oneself.

(R₂) Never slander others under any circumstances.

(R₁) and (R₂) are incompatible with each other, i. e., there are possible circumstances in which it would be impossible to fulfill one of them without violating the other. Let us suppose that aspiring to fulfill (R₂) would tend to improve her conformity to the love of God and others more strongly than would aspiring to fulfill (R₁). If constructive aspiration were sufficient for redemptiveness, Mary could nevertheless make it redemptive, and therefore obligatory, for her to slander others, for her own economic benefit, despite the fact that she could constructively aspire to avoid it.

The correct relationship between redemptiveness and constructive aspiration is, I suggest, the following:

- (5) An action-guiding principle, R, is redemptive for a person, P, iff:
- (i) P can constructively aspire to fulfill R, and

- (ii) There is no action-guiding principle, N, incompatible with R, such that, P's aspiring to fulfill N would tend to improve P's conformity to the love of God and others as strongly as would P's aspiring to fulfill R.

In other words, a principle is redemptive for a person if he can constructively aspire to it, and doing so would improve his conformity to the love of God and others more than would aspiring to any incompatible principle.⁷

What remains now is to indicate more precisely the connection I have already claimed between redemptiveness and God's will.

- (6) If God were to instruct a person, P, with respect to an action A, in circumstances, C, he would prescribe A for P in C, iff:
 - (i) There is an action-guiding principle, R, which is redemptive for P in C, and
 - (ii) Performing A is required in order for P to fulfill R in C.
- (7) If God were to instruct a person, P, with respect to an action A, in circumstances, C, he would proscribe A for P in C, iff:
 - (i) There is an action-guiding principle, R, which is redemptive for P in C, and
 - (ii) P's performing A in C would violate R.

To summarize, God would prescribe actions conforming to redemptive principles and proscribe those violating redemptive principles. And, as I claimed in (1) and (2) above, we are obligated to perform those actions God would prescribe and obligated to avoid those God would proscribe. Our obligations, in short, are to perform all those actions required by redemptive principles and to avoid all those actions violating such principles.

I have not yet addressed what might seem to be a crucial question, To what principles should one aspire? The answer is no different from what it would be on any moral theory. One should aspire to abide by those principles one is obligated to follow. It might seem, however, that this answer is circular. After all, aspiration plays a key role in my account of what makes a principle obligatory. But this problem is only apparent. A principle's being obligatory, on my account, does require that it be possible to aspire to it. But, whether it *is* obligatory depends on whether it *would be better*—more conducive to our moral redemption—to aspire to it than to aspire to any incompatible principle. So understood, there is nothing viciously circular about the relationship of obligation to aspiration. We ought to aspire to those principles the aspiration to which would be most conducive to our moral redemption.

Let me summarize the claims of Anabaptist Ethics more informally. We are obligated to perform all those actions which God wills that we perform. God wills, in the relevant sense, that we perform all, and only, those actions which it would be redemptive for God to prescribe for us. We are similarly obligated not to perform any action that it would be redemptive for God to proscribe for us. Whether it would be redemptive for God to

prescribe (or proscribe) an action for us, depends, in part, on our character.

3. *Communal constraints on redemptiveness*

Thus far, I have been treating the relationship of obligation to redemptiveness as though it were an entirely individual matter. It, of course, is not. This should not surprise the Christian who believes that the good life so centrally involves our relationships with others. What an individual does affects, for good or ill, the dispositions of others in the community to which she belongs. Moral practices are, to a very great extent, socially sustained. Whether an action-guiding principle, for a person, serves God's morally redemptive purposes is determined, in large part, by what practices are socially sustainable in the communities to which that person belongs. Whether a practice requires too much or too little conformity to the love of God and others, depends, in part, on what the character of members of her communities is. The character of community members affects what principles they can collectively to aspire constructively, that is, it affects what principles they can aspire to in such a way that a community's collective conformity to the love of God and others tends to be improved by such aspiration.

Suppose, for example, that a member of the board of directors of a not-for-profit hospital is married to a contractor who is bidding on a major construction project at the hospital. Even if the board member were quite capable of supporting the bid that is best for the hospital, she would be obligated not to participate in the decision. The explanation of this is that God would proscribe such participation because it would violate God's redemptive purposes. In our society such participation would likely contribute to a practice that would harm the interests and character of people in that society. Other people would be encouraged to participate in decisions involving potential conflicts of interest. In American society, the risk is unacceptably great that such people would have the sort of character that is susceptible to the abuse of their power, to the harm of others, the corruption of their character, and the encouragement of yet others to violate duty in their own interests. Even if discharging one's fiduciary responsibilities in conflict of interest situations were an individually sustainable practice, it would be a violation of her obligations. For, given the character of her community members, it is not a socially sustainable practice because it is not a practice to which the members of her community can collectively aspire constructively.

It is not only the effects on the character of the community as a whole that is relevant. The effects on the character of individuals influenced by one's actions is also relevant. If one is sharing a meal with an alcoholic friend who is struggling with great difficulty to avoid the consumption of alcoholic beverages, it would probably be wrong to order the friend's favorite alcoholic drink. Such an action would be much too likely to corrupt his character by undermining his resolve to avoid a very destructive practice.

This social complication suggests a possible problem. What is one's obligation when there is a conflict between what is socially redemptive and what is individually redemptive? Such conflicts, it seems to me, are fortu-

nately impossible. There are, of course, situations in which there is a conflict between what is redemptive for one's community, or individuals within it, and what *would be* redemptive for oneself, were it not for the character of others. Our board member, for example, would not have had the obligation to avoid conflicts of interest, were it not for the weaknesses of members of his community. But, *given* the character of his community, acting in the moral interests of the community is *individually* redemptive because it improves that individual's conformity to the love of others. His serving the moral interests of his community is a more loving course of action than ignoring those interests would be. In cases, such as that of the pedophile, in which the community's character is morally superior to that of the individual, there is again no conflict, all things considered, between what is individually and socially redemptive. What is individually redemptive for the pedophile is the proscription of unmonitored childcare. It is also socially redemptive for the pedophile to avoid such activity since such avoidance is less likely to result in the corruption of others than any alternative to it.

III. Enabling Grace, and the Uniqueness of Christian Obligation

Thus far, I have considered only natural mechanisms of redemption. But, on a Christian view of things, redemption also has a supernatural dimension. Our character is subject, not only to such causal factors as habituation and social influence, but also to God's enabling grace. It is that supernatural dimension which explains the uniqueness of Christian obligation that the Anabaptist tradition has insisted upon. Because of the salvific work of Christ, the Christian community has, through faith in Him, an access to the enabling resources of the Holy Spirit, that was not previously open to the people of God, and that is not generally open to those outside the community of Christian faith. Christians are also graciously empowered to follow the will of God by the supernatural *revelation* of God in Christ, in the Holy Scriptures and in the Christian community, including the revelation of God's *prescriptions* for his followers. I suggest that the availability of these resources makes unnecessary the sort of compromises with the love of God and others that the obligations of those without these resources reflect. These divine resources make it possible, therefore, for members of the Christian community and for that community as a whole to aspire constructively to follow the principle, "Act only in those ways that are most loving toward God and most loving toward others."⁸ That such constructive aspiration to this principle is possible makes this principle redemptive for Christians. Its observance in the Christian community also serves God's redemptive purposes by making it possible for God to display to others, through the Christian community, the fulfillment of human purposes to a degree not otherwise possible. For these reasons, God would prescribe it to the Christian community, even though it would not serve his redemptive purposes to prescribe it for those outside that community. The "perfection of Christ" is a perfection in the standards of conduct achieved by Christ to which the Christian community can constructively aspire.

It might seem that this Anabaptist distinction between ethics under the perfection of Christ and the lesser requirements for others is similar to the distinction in Catholic moral theology between precepts and the counsels of perfection. There are, however, important differences. The counsels of perfection, such as the counsel to undertake celibacy and voluntary poverty, are, in Catholic theology, morally optional, and properly the vocation of only a relatively few Christians. They are considered something like good advice for the person who is interested in doing her best to serve God. Only the precepts apply to all Christians. However, the rigorous requirements of love in the perfection of Christ are, in the Anabaptist tradition, not merely optional or intended for a worthy few. They are obligatory and intended for all Christians. The reason for this is that the resources of grace that make the aspiration to such standards constructive are available to all believers and are such that they are appropriated by the faithful response of any believer to her calling.

IV. An Illustration: Christian Pacifism

The theory of moral obligation I have been developing can help us to see why pacifism, the absolute refusal to kill any human being intentionally, is thought by Anabaptists to be the obligation of all Christians. Given an Anabaptist understanding of what it is to act in love toward another person, killing that person intentionally can never be the loving way to treat her, although it may be an expression of love for a person other than the victim.⁹ Since the Christian obligation is to love everyone without qualification, Anabaptists have taken the obligation to love others to preclude intentionally killing any of them. It would serve God's redemptive purposes to prescribe pacifism for the Christian community. Anabaptist Ethics also explains why Anabaptists have traditionally denied that pacifism is an obligation of those outside the Christian community. It would violate God's redemptive purposes to prescribe pacifism for human communities whose members could not collectively aspire constructively to pacifism, and for whom the threat of deadly force was necessary to restrain the evil of some of their members.

My reconstruction of traditional Anabaptist ethics makes it clear that some of the most obvious objections to pacifism do not count against traditional Anabaptist pacifism. Consider the frequently expressed claim that there could never be a successful pacifist nation-state, since, without recourse to deadly force, there is no effective way to restrain the evil of its worst citizens and adversaries. Anabaptists have traditionally agreed. My theory makes moral sense of their view. For those reasons, among others, the prescription by God of pacifism for nation-states would not be redemptive, whereas, given Anabaptist understandings of love and enabling grace, it would be redemptive for God to prescribe pacifism for Christians.

Elizabeth Anscombe has argued against the moral appropriateness of pacifism by suggesting that when people regard it as "ideal," it has deleterious effects. "Unable to follow that," they go "the whole hog" and abandon moral restraint altogether in their waging of war.¹⁰ It should be obvious that her objection does not count against the sort of pacifism I have

been attributing to the Anabaptist tradition. If she is right, then the people of whom she writes cannot constructively aspire to pacifism. To this, the Anabaptist pacifist can reply, "*Exactly*, and that is why such people are not obligated to be pacifists. My only claim is that Christians, who by God's grace can collectively aspire constructively to pacifism, are obligated to be pacifists."

V. Advantages of Anabaptist Ethics

Much work could fruitfully be done to clarify further the theory I have been explicating and to make it more plausible. Much of what needs to be done involves integrating it into a plausible moral epistemology. There are unanswered questions, for example, about how an atheist could be either morally excellent or insightful, without loving God at all, recognizing that the love of God is the most basic standard of moral excellence, or understanding that moral obligation is determined by God's will.¹¹ As it stands my account of the human telos remains radically incomplete. What it is to love God and to love each other will depend not just on the fact that we are to love God and others but also on facts about the specific nature with which, and purpose for which, we were created by God. For example, that we are sexual beings, that we experience emotions, that we are capable of reasoning, and that we depend on food for survival, are all important in determining what it is live a life devoted to the love of God and what it is to seek the interests of others. There are, I am convinced, plausible ways to clarify matters like these, but in spite of this unfinished business, we can already recognize some of the considerable advantages of Anabaptist Ethics.

The first advantage is the excellent fit of Anabaptist Ethics with the Biblical narrative. When the Christian Scriptures are read through the lens of this theory, they make more sense. This is not the place to develop the idea thoroughly, but Old Testament anticipations of the New Testament¹² and especially New Testament treatments of differences with the Old Testament, that are otherwise difficult to understand, seem to me to make perfect sense on Anabaptist Ethics.¹³ Nowhere is this clearer than in Jesus' explanation for the difference between his teaching on divorce and that of Moses, whose writings he obviously treated as inspired by God. He says, "Moses permitted you to divorce. . . because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."¹⁴ Here, Jesus seems to claim that, with respect to marriage, God's will for Israel was a redemptive compromise with his original purposes. The redemptiveness of the compromise was due to the fact that their "hearts were hard," a deficiency in their character. Despite that, Jesus prescribes, for his followers, conformity to the original ideal.

Anabaptist Ethics permits one to accept the view that the Old Testament is the word of God, together with the view that divine commands obligate us, without committing us to morally approve the manifestly un-Christian practices of the Old Testament that are there represented as commanded by God. Indeed, if I read the Scriptures through these eyes, I wonder how anyone could ever have claimed to find revealed there that "God holds people of all times and places accountable to one and the same moral law."¹⁵ It seems obvious to me that the moral law which required married

men to procreate by their brothers' widows,¹⁶ and permitted polygamy and easy divorce,¹⁷ is quite different from the Christian obligation to restrict sexual intercourse to life-long monogamous marriage. The soldiers of Israel were held morally accountable, from time to time, to a requirement that they kill every living being in a given city, and their king was severely punished for his failure to comply.¹⁸ Such a requirement seems obviously incompatible with any plausible account of the moral law to which Christians are held accountable.

Another advantage of Anabaptist Ethics is that it gives us a plausible way to understand cultural diversity in moral attitudes. If one is used to the idea that the only objective moral obligations there could be are embodied in "one and the same moral law" binding on people of all times and places, the enormous variety, among cultures, of incompatible attitudes about what people ought to do, can be disheartening. The choices seem to be either moral anti-realism, the view that there are no objective obligations, or moral skepticism, the view that human beings, in general, have no reliable way of acquiring moral knowledge. Anabaptist Ethics, on the other hand, can explain, in ways that I hope are now obvious, how there can be an enormous diversity in the objective obligations of different cultures owing to differences in what is redemptive from culture to culture.

Anabaptist Ethics does not entail that there are *no* obligations common to everyone. The obligation not to torture innocent children purely for the fun of it seems like a good candidate for such an obligation. It is hard to see how the permission to engage in such torture could be redemptive for anyone, regardless of how depraved he is. But it does give us reason to expect differences, from person to person and community to community, in even their most fundamental obligations. For example, although the unconditional love of others is among the fundamental principles of Christian obligation, it is not a universal human obligation if, as I argued above, it is a standard of conduct so demanding that some people cannot constructively aspire to it.

One more advantage before I conclude. This approach to obligations suggests a way to clear up a puzzle about supererogation. Those people who perform actions that seem most obviously supererogatory usually deny that their actions are supererogatory. It is not unusual for them to sincerely say that they were only doing their duty when they do what seems to be heroically beyond the call of duty to most people. We seem forced to choose between giving up on the notion of supererogation or denying that the morally best members of a community are as morally insightful as the morally average. My hunch is that the morally average members of a community consider those actions supererogatory that they recognize to be morally excellent but to which they cannot constructively aspire, and in that case they are, according to Anabaptist Ethics, supererogatory for them. The people who perform those actions, on the other hand, *can* constructively aspire to their performance; so they are, as their moral intuitions attest, obligated to perform them.

NOTES

1. The term "Anabaptist Ethics" will serve as the name of my theory only when both words begin with capital letters.
2. Michael Sattler, "Schleitheim Confession," in *Anabaptism in Outline*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1981), pp. 268-269.
3. Daniel Kauffman, ed., *Bible Doctrines: A Treatise on the Great Doctrines of the Bible* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1914), p. 452.
4. Edward Yoder, *Must Christians Fight?* (Akron, Pennsylvania: The Mennonite Central Committee, 1943), p. 47.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
6. Hereafter, I shall refer to such improvement as improvement in the degree of "conformity to the love of God and others."
7. I am committed to the following: A principle is obligatory iff it is redemptive. It is redemptive (in the stipulated sense) iff aspiring to it tends, more strongly than aspiring to any competitor, to improve one's conformity with her *telos*. If there are two principles exactly equal in the strength of such tendencies, neither principle is redemptive or obligatory. But if they beat out all other competition, then their *disjunction* is redemptive and therefore obligatory. Neither principle is obligatory. Both are permitted. But the person in question is obligated to follow one or the other.
8. I am open to the possibility that the right sort of faithful response to God by the Christian community is also required for it to be able to aspire constructively to this principle. I discuss the ramification of this possibility in "An Anabaptist Theory of Moral Obligation," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 71 (October 1997) pp. 588-589, 592-593.
9. I understand that this Anabaptist assumption is highly controversial. But since the point of this article is to defend Anabaptist Ethics, not the pacifist application of it, I shall not defend it here. My only purpose in this section is to show that Anabaptist Ethics gives the Christian pacifist resources for rebutting some important objections to her position.
10. G. E. M. Anscombe, "War & Murder." in Walter Stein, ed., *Nuclear Weapons: A Catholic Response* (NY: Sheed & Ward, 1962), p. 53.
11. I address these issues briefly in "An Anabaptist Theory of Moral Obligation," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 71 (October 1997) pp. 589-591. The metaethical distinctions in Robert M. Adams, "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," in Robert M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford, 1987) pp. 128-143, also gives us resources for this task.
12. See, for example, Jer. 31:31-33
13. See, for example, Gal. 3:19-4:7, and Rom. 6-8.
14. Matt. 19:8 (NIV).
15. "Christian Pacifism: A Just War Response" in *War: Four Christian Views*, 2nd. ed., ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991) p. 105.
16. Deut. 25:5-10.
17. Deut. 24:1-4.
18. I Sam. 15.