

MORAL CLAIMANTS

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& THE NATURE OF OBLIGATION

WHENEVER WE MAKE MORAL DECISIONS, WE AFFECT OTHER PEOPLE

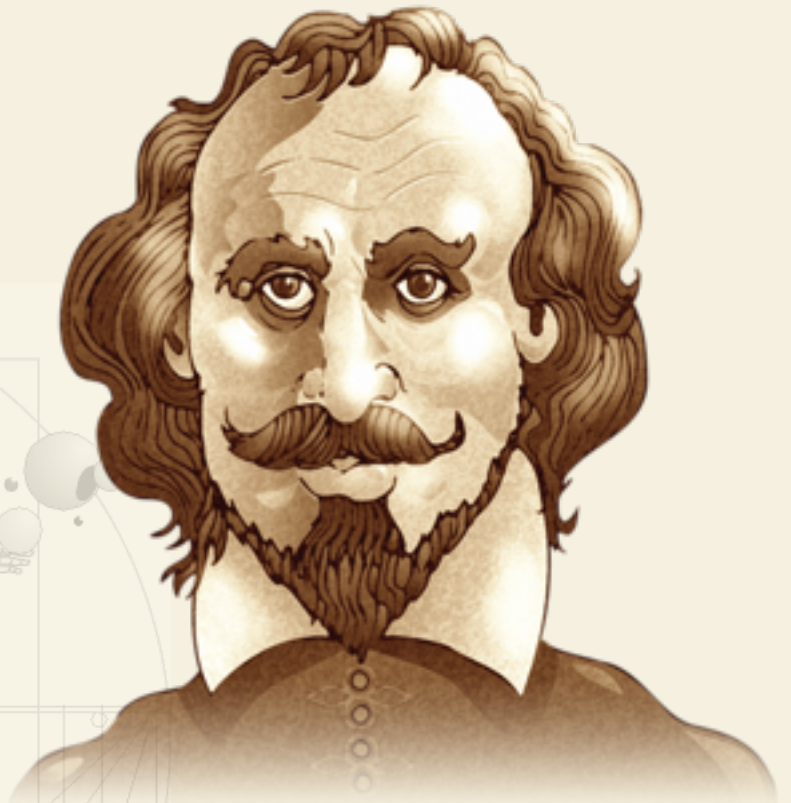
In fact, anyone who is affected by our decisions or has some effect on us could be considered a stakeholder—or, in the language of ethics—a moral claimant.

For all media there are four primary claimant groups:

- our clients/customers,
- the organization for which we work,
- the profession of which we are a part,
- and society as a whole.

The order in which we address these groups will depend on a number of variables, including:

- the media job we hold (in journalism, advertising, or public relations);
- the environment in which we are having to make a moral decision (political, economic, and social factors included);
- the nature of the decision itself;
- and the constraints we feel as a result of these other variables.



No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

John Donne

THE DANGER IS THAT BECAUSE OF THESE CONSTRAINTS, WE ARE MORE LIKELY TO HONOR OUR OBLIGATIONS TO THOSE WHO MOST AFFECT US RATHER THAN THE OTHER WAY AROUND.

For example, because of the reliance on clients in public relations and advertising, the tendency is to consider them the primary claimants, often neglecting those who are affected directly with the media messages—the target publics or audiences.

That's why it's important to develop an organized method of identifying moral claimants.

CONSIDERING THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR ACTIONS IS ONE OF THE PRIMARY WAYS IN WHICH WE DEFINE OUR RELATIONSHIPS TO OTHERS.

We tend to avoid actions that result in negative consequences for others, and to promote actions that bear favorable consequences.

- An advertising agency promotes its client's interests because the consequence of not doing that would be the loss of the client.
- In other words, the client has potentially greater effect on the ad agency than vice versa.

Likewise, the agency has a potentially greater effect on its target audiences (consumers) than the other way around—at least under normal conditions.

STRONG AND WEAK CLAIMS

In effect, we are linked to all our stakeholders (constituents, publics, markets, audiences, etc.) by the effects our actions have on them and by the effects they have on us.

We tend to sort claimants by their relationship to us, and we tend to base our obligations on how reliant we are on them — not the other way around.

In other words, we are more obligated to them, because we're more reliant on them — not because we owe them morally, but because we owe them in a purely functional sense. For example:

1. WE ARE TYPICALLY MORE OBLIGATED TO THOSE UPON WHICH WE DEPEND FOR MAJOR SUPPORT.

- For example, a television station depends on its owner for startup capital, without which it could not survive.
- In most cases the owner has the power position over major decisions the station may make.
- Thus, the owner has a stronger claim on the station's actions.

2. WE ARE TYPICALLY MORE OBLIGATED TO THOSE WITH WHOM WE ARE MUTUALLY DEPENDENT.

- For example, the television station is dependent on its advertisers without whom it could not survive.
- At the same time the advertisers are dependent on the station as a

primary media outlet, which they need to help ensure their survival. We have strong claims on each other's actions.

3. WE ARE TYPICALLY LESS OBLIGATED TO THOSE THAT DEPEND ON US FOR MAJOR SUPPORT.

- For example, the non-profit community (social service agencies, charities, etc.) may use the local television station as an outlet for announcements and for news coverage; however, the station may choose what to run and what not to run. The agencies' claims are, thus, weaker.

4. WE ARE TYPICALLY LESS OBLIGATED TO THOSE THAT ARE TOTALLY INDEPENDENT FROM US AND FROM WHOM WE ARE TOTALLY INDEPENDENT.

- For example, television stations in a specific market do not rely particularly on each other and, in fact, actively compete for the same advertisers and audiences. Their claims on each other are weaker.

IN THIS KIND OF RANKING, THE NOTION OF CLAIMS IS BASED ON THE NECESSITY TO MAINTAIN CERTAIN RELATIONSHIPS OVER OTHERS. IT IS ENTIRELY FUNCTIONAL.

- For instance, as a PR firm it may be more functionally important to maintain a good relationship with clients than with their target audience.
- That's because the claimants are defined based only on their relationship to the organization and how dependent they are on

THIS DOESN'T SEEM RIGHT...

the PR firm versus how dependent the firm is on them.

- Thus, any ranking will be made purely on a functional basis with no ethical values applied.

BUT, FROM AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE, THIS JUST DOESN'T SEEM RIGHT.

From an ethical perspective, it would seem that the party with the most power in a relationship is more morally obligated, if for no other reason than it has most of the power and therefore more potential for harm to the weaker party.

- Although the weaker party is certainly obligated (perhaps simply to hold up its end of a contract), its position as the dependent party puts it at a natural disadvantage and somewhat at the mercy of the more powerful party.

THE SIMPLE RULE SHOULD BE:

Those with the most power in a relationship are more morally obligated.

And although there are many subtle and varying levels of power within any relationship, the parties involved usually recognize when they have the upper hand and when they do not.

IF WE SUBSTITUTE ETHICAL OBLIGATION FOR FUNCTIONAL OBLIGATION, THE QUESTION THEN BECOMES, DOES AN OBLIGATION TO A STRONGER CLAIMANT

OUTWEIGH AN OBLIGATION TO A WEAKER CLAIMANT SIMPLY BECAUSE OF THE FUNCTIONAL NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP?

- For instance, does the obligation to turn a profit at an advertising agency absolve the agency of an obligation to be truthful to their target audiences?
- Functionally, they may be better off honoring client interests, but are they better off morally?

EACH DECISION WITH ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS BRINGS WITH IT CERTAIN OBLIGATIONS.

This is the point at which we must begin to balance those obligations among competing claims, and at which need to consider the broader scope of moral obligation.

THE NATURE OF OBLIGATION

Obligation usually implies a bond, either legal, social, or moral an owing of something to someone or something.

- That obligation exists whether we choose to recognize it or not.
- Obligation is a natural result of living within a society.
- Because of our social interactions, we incur obligation, and we tend to recognize that we have done so.

THE TERM "OBLIGATION" IS ROUGHLY SYNONYMOUS WITH THE TERM "DUTY."

- These duties are not merely those that we create through such actions as making promises or incurring debt.
- We also have "natural" duties to others "simply because they are people who could be helped or harmed by our actions."
- We also are obligated merely by being members of human society.
- One is obligated at the personal, familial, occupational, and societal levels—each representing differing intensities of obligation and differing levels of formality.

Obligations arise not only from general social relationships but also from relationships described by our roles and functions in life, including our jobs.

Thus, we are obligated explicitly and implicitly in our relationships with others we come in contact with through our daily work.

ROSS'S MORAL DUTIES

Moral philosopher William David Ross defined six areas he believed all human beings would recognize, in one form or another, as being morally binding.

He referred to these obligations as prima facie duties, which means that they should be considered binding, all other factors being equal—

- in other words, if no other duty or complication interferes with the consideration of the obligation in question.

Ross believed that we would recognize these duties because we are human beings, and as such we are inclined to live in social structures held together in part by obligation.

1. DUTIES OF FIDELITY—

If you promise (explicitly or implicitly) to perform some act or to abstain from performing some act, then you are obliged to perform that act or to abstain from performing that act.

- For instance, most relationships, professional and personal, assume a duty to tell the truth, or at least not to lie.

Duties of fidelity would also include remaining faithful to contracts, explicit or implicit, and keeping promises.

This category also includes duties of reparation:

- That is, if you perform a wrong action with respect to another person, you are obliged to undo the wrong.

2. DUTIES OF GRATITUDE

If any person performs some service (favor) for you, then you have some obligation to the person who performed the favor.

- This would apply both to relationships between friends and to relationships between employer and employee.
- For example, if your employer treats you in an exceptionally favorable manner, above that normally expected in an employee–employer relationship, your obligation would deepen to honor your employer's wishes beyond the duty of fidelity.

3. DUTIES OF JUSTICE

People who deserve to be rewarded because of merit, should be rewarded. Those who do not, should not be rewarded.

- In practice, this can often mean giving greater consideration to the claims of those who deserve it rather than to those who demand it, regardless of their position or power.

4. DUTIES OF BENEFICENCE

If you can make some person better with respect to their state of existence, then you are obliged to do so.

- An example of this would be corporate philanthropy or the pro bono work of professionals.
- In a decision-making situation, this duty may oblige you to act when nonaction is preferred or recommended by others.

5. DUTIES OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT

If you can make yourself better with respect to your state of existence, then you are obliged to do so.

- This can cover anything from preserving your own integrity to taking advantage of a favorable situation for self-improvement.

6. DUTIES OF NON-INJURY

If you are in a position to avoid hurting someone, then you are obliged to do so.

- This may, in fact, be the most important of Ross's duties, since it implies that the possibility of injury to any claimant to whom you are obligated must be assigned some weight.

IN SUMMARY

Naturally, all of the six obligations listed by Ross may be applicable in any potential relationship among systems.

- However, it is more likely, given the direction of consequences, that more of them will come into play with those with weaker functional claims on us.
- Given that there is typically an imbalance in obligation in favor of stronger claimants (e.g., owners, employers, and clients), we need to be particularly careful to offset this tendency by honoring all obligations, especially those to weaker parties.

The key is to remember that we are tied to our stakeholders by more than just economic or political linkages.

We are tied to them socially, and social links imply obligation.

We must always ask not only to whom we are linked, but also in what way we are linked, observing both functional and ethical ties.

