

CHAPTER ONE

Form as the Condition of Obligation

The first step in this theological anthropology is to reflect on the fact that human beings face possibilities about which they make decisions. This reflection covers important philosophical ground: the nature of obligation, moral worth, value, and the character of form itself. The ultimate boundary condition of form as it puts human life under obligation functions in all the other boundary conditions: people make decisions about their own integration, about engaging others, and about achieving a value-identity that gives life meaning. All the other boundary conditions have form. Within the temporal processes of human life, form determines the possibilities that might be actualized; it determines the value and structure of the things that are in fact actualized; and it is the structured value of the past. So, in all these ways the study of form and its role as a boundary condition for human life is primary and a good first step in this inquiry.

It need not be the first step, however. We could begin with a study of nature as the originating environment for human life, or with a study of human biology, social conditions, and psychology. All of these are important components of human life, and in fact return for consideration in Chapter 2, where we reflect on components as such. But in this theological anthropology, we begin with reflection on human choice because that is at the heart of the existential reality of religion.

The first section develops at some length the connection between the ultimate transcendental trait of having form and the way this is implicated in the human world.¹ The second section focuses on the sense in which form bears value, such that anything that has form has value; this topic is treated at several places in *Philosophical Theology* (I, 10; III, 9). The result of this discussion is a general theory of human life as being under obligation, the topic of Section III. The fourth section spells out a classification of obligations.

I. FORM AND HUMAN POSSIBILITY

Philosophical Theology One, Chapter 10, noted that to be a determinate thing at all is to be a harmony with form. For temporal things such as human beings, so complex and discursive through time and space in their harmonies and interactions, the *future* is form under the aspect of possibility; the *present* is the deciding among alternate possibilities as to which ones to actualize; the *past* is, with respect to form, those possibilities that have been actualized and the exclusion of those that have not. Although human possibilities are contextual in many senses, and eventually are to be understood in terms of those concrete contexts, to begin with a consideration of some of the metaphysical structures of form relative to human life is the most practical beginning. Pervasive traits often are more practical and determinative in the long run than local contextual ones.²

Form is the metaphysical basis of the structure of the future in temporal things. Some remarks are necessary about the metaphysics in this, dealing first with form and then with value as a function of form. According to the analysis in *Philosophical Theology One*, Chapter 12, the future is a harmony with essential and conditional components. The essential component of the future is pure unity, which, when conjoined in contrasts with the future's conditional components coming in different ways from the past and present, constitutes formal patterns as future possibilities. These patterns might unify the plurality of things given to the future as its conditional components by actualized things of the past, relative to present moments that might decide among alternatives. This analysis of future possibility strongly reflects the Neo-Confucian theme of *li*, which usually is translated "Principle" but which Stephen Angle better translates as "coherence."³ The Neo-Confucian slogan "*li* is one, its manifestations are many" can be interpreted in *Philosophical Theology* to mean that, as one, coherence per se or "essentially" is that which would make any plurality cohere and that, as many, coherence is the pattern of any given particular plurality of things (the conditional components of form) that do cohere. Because form needs both essential and conditional components, there is no way in which form or coherence as pure unity can exist by itself, nor any way by which a plurality can exist by itself without some bare coherence.

The *form* of the future is thus a structured possibility for actualization, most likely with a structure that is vague with respect to alternative possibilities for actualization. Because of the plurality of actualized things at any moment, many decision points are involved in deciding on a given, vague future possibility. Thus the future possibility has the structure of a field of alternatives that can be decided by many decision points. In a specious present, a human agent is surrounded by many other "contemporary" agents whose decisions also affect which future possibilities are actualized. A football player, for instance, needs to be aware of what all the other play-

ers are doing and pondering as he structures how he will address the field of possibilities in a given play. And the field of possibilities is not open only to other human deciders: social institutions, movements, wars, climatic changes, changes in underlying natural conditions—all these are among the larger array of decision points that affect a person's possibilities. Between a given person in the present and the possibilities being faced, an array of intermediate decision points also exists. The person will have to keep on making decisions to carry out a present intent for a future outcome. Most if not all human choices involve conjoint actions with others, including other nonhuman factors. Sometimes conjoint actions are cooperative, sometimes antagonistic, and sometimes oblivious. Moreover, because every decision, by the person or by the other deciding processes, changes the field of possibilities, the structure of possibilities itself is constantly changing, a kaleidoscope of shifting alternatives. Given this structure of form and possibility, *an ultimate condition of human existence is to face value-laden possibilities*. The remainder of this section elaborates this thesis.

The sense of "human nature" correlative to the facing of alternative possibilities for decision is that of the decision-maker, the agent. In many important circumstances, decisive agency is a matter of spontaneous action, of freedom. Human freedom has many dimensions in addition to creative choice, but the point to stress here is that the facing of possibilities is a model for spontaneous emergence, one of the principal symbols for the ontological ultimate reality, the act of creation. In free choices, individuals create something that was not there before, a novelty that resolves a previously unresolved alternative for actualization. This human and very common sense of spontaneous emergence is important for grasping the ubiquity of spontaneous emergence as a model for the ontological ultimate. Of course, free choice is also characteristic of persons in general, and thus a part of the equally ubiquitous use of personhood as a model for the ontological ultimate. Nevertheless, the primary significance of the personhood model is the intentions that lie behind choice, the function of purposes in actions. To the extent that purposes or intentions determine the choice of a person, that choice is not spontaneous emergence; rather it is caused by the nature of the agent. True freedom of choice in the human case is personal in the sense that it includes intentions, purposes, and other motives among the antecedent factors that shape the field of possibilities. But the choice is not genuinely free unless there is also the creative emergence of a novelty. In a free choice, the novelty that emerges spontaneously, over and above all antecedent determining factors shaping possibilities, determines which of those possible antecedent motives will be decisive. A person gives himself or herself the decisive motive, purpose, or intention by choosing an action that actualizes the possible alternative determined by that motive. This is why people sometimes are surprised by their choices. Genuine free choice is more a model of spontaneous emergence than of personhood.

II. VALUE

Concerning value, a possibility has an internal structure for how the components of a harmony might be integrated. This structure has the value of integrating these components with this formal pattern in this existential situation, giving rise to the harmony's value-identity (*I, 10; III, 9*).⁴ Value itself is a function of form: any formal pattern is the expression of the value of having its components together in the way of the pattern. The structure of a possibility has two principal variables, complexity and simplicity. Complexity refers to how the diversity of different components is sustained within the form, and simplicity refers to how the layering and organization of patterns within patterns gives rise to stark unified contrasts. Complexity without simplicity would be mere conjunction: a and b and c and . . . Simplicity without complexity would be mere homogeneity: a/a/a, and so forth. Any formal pattern has both complexity and simplicity of varying kinds and degrees. Patterns complex enough to be future possibilities have many layers in which things on lower levels are combined to create new entities on the higher levels, which in turn are combined to create yet new entities within the form. The value is greater the more the entities within the form at the higher levels are focused to be in contrast with one another. "Contrast," a technical term from Whitehead, obtains when two or more things with different natures just fit together.⁵ The contrast is greater the more different the things are from one another. The characters peculiar to each are more focused the more they arise out of a dense hierarchy within themselves; each is itself a contrast arising from the complexity/simplicity structure of its components. Leibniz called something like this mixture of complexity and simplicity the "density of being."⁶ The value of the possibility lies in the kind of mixture of complexity and simplicity the form holds and also the degree to which complexity and simplicity are maximized.

Most signs in human semiotic systems articulate things in the world that are high-level contrasts, often neglecting the underlying hierarchies. For instance, we note human beings and their actions, not the underlying biology that makes them possible. We note nutritious foods without registering their underlying chemistry in relation to our metabolism that makes them nutritious. Experience is more complex in its valuational patterns the more it does register the underlying value hierarchies at play and their relations with one another. This illustrates the point that formal possibilities for people have a character that is grasped by the people only in the respects in which people's intentional structures of interpretive experience are able to grasp them, a point that is discussed at greater length elsewhere (*III, 9–10*).

Form as possibility thus is a possible value: to actualize the form is to actualize its value. Every actual thing has form, of course, and so every actual thing has a value. Because its form is relative to the forms of other things, and its possibilities before being actualized constituted a field of possibilities for

many things to actualize together, the values of things are related, including both those that are actualized and those possible values that are excluded from actualization.

This point is of enormous importance for the whole of *Philosophical Theology*. Because value is resident in any form, valuation always has an objective component. The intentional, subjective side of interpretation always is involved in selection of the respects in which to interpret things valuatively, as the Confucians have steadily pointed out. The other side of this, however, is that value is resident in the things to be valued relative to human intentionality, a point equally stressed by the Confucians. Thus there is no sense in which valuation can be completely subjective. Even when it is horribly mistaken, valuation is measured against the value in the forms of the things evaluated. This position accords with the classic Western view and the Confucian view from the earliest times that to be is to be valuable. It is at odds with the common position in modern Western philosophy that things are only facts and that to attribute value to them is somehow problematic, a matter of justifying a human prejudice.

Every possibility thus has a value. A possibility that contains alternative possibilities has alternative values. Given the kaleidoscope of shifting possibilities facing a human actor, the value differences are significant, difficult to discern and track, and very complex. No special mystery is here, however. By evolution and culture human beings are habituated to be aware of conditions that affect the value-outcomes of their own actions and the things going on around them. Even very simple animals have this capacity, although perhaps not with the power of semiotic systems to refer to distant and complicated phenomena.

Human beings have some control over their behavior.⁷ This control is limited, first, by what other things do, second by the person's own potentials and capacities, third by the structure of the relevant possibilities, and fourth by the person's discernment, knowledge, and awareness of all the aforementioned. With regard to the first, it makes sense to cooperate with other people so that their opposition does not limit options and to act in harmony with nature so that our intents are not immediately frustrated. Of course, sometimes cooperation requires too much sacrifice of our own intent, interest, and good judgment so that opposition is the best recourse. Sometimes, as in the case of illness, nature seems not always to be amenable to harmony in ways that sustain our integrity, although one's integrity or wholeness itself is something that needs to be harmonized with other values in the possibilities.

With regard to the second, our potentials come from the past, and we can increase them by cultivating lives that provide rich resources. Our capacities are our habits of organizing potentials so as to be able to act effectively in situations. These can be increased by education of various sorts, a theme more steadily important in Confucian thought than in Western thinking that has sometimes supposed that democracy does not allow for demands of elite education.⁸ Nevertheless, potentials and capacities are limited.

With regard to the third, the structures of the possibilities themselves, these are mainly set by circumstances beyond our control. Nevertheless, sometimes it is possible to do things that enhance our possibilities, such as getting a certain kind of education that qualifies us for possibilities otherwise closed to us or making moves in a battle that give rise to a wider range of options.

With regard to the fourth, human beings are limited by how much we understand the forces around us, our own potentialities and capacities, our possibilities, and the connections of all these. These limits can be pushed back by greater understanding, but the ironic effects of ignorance are such that often we do not know in what greater understanding would consist. Moreover, at some point in certain kinds of difficult actions, more information dilutes the effort to accomplish something, although this, too, is something that should be understood. At the end of his regime of education for political leaders in the *Republic* (in Book 7), Plato sent the graduates off to govern the provinces so that they could learn timing, not a matter of more understanding but of a habit of action.

Because human beings have some control over their behavior, within these and perhaps other limits, they determine to this degree which possibilities in their futures will be actualized and which excluded. This is an important, but not the only, sense of human freedom. Some philosophical and religious traditions have denied this freedom. Often the theological motive for denying this sense of freedom is to defend the omnipotence of the ultimate conceived as a creator God, as if the freedom and power of God were in competition with the freedom of human beings. Calvinist Christians such as Jonathan Edwards and some orthodox Muslims (in opposition to the freewill Mu'tazilites) held to this position; their opponents argued that God would be unjust for rewarding or punishing behavior for which the people themselves were not freely responsible. A more subtle understanding of the motives for denying human freedom to control behavior with respect to possibilities of different value, however, comes from understanding the limits to behavior. When other forces are overwhelming, a person is not free. When a person's potentials and capacities are inadequate for decisive action, the person is not free. When the possibilities allow of only one outcome, the person is not free. When the person's ignorance of what is needed to be understood in order to act freely is incorrigible, the person is not free. When the person is not mature in moral discernment and action, the person is not free. In many circumstances, we are not free when we would like to think we are. Nevertheless, in many other circumstances, we are indeed free within limits and to that extent are responsible for what we choose.

III. OBLIGATION

To the extent human beings are free to determine the outcome of possibilities, and the possibilities have differential value, to that extent human beings are

under obligation to do the better rather than the worse. This is the very meaning of obligation: it is better to do the better than the worse. Insofar as a person's actions determine the person's character, the person becomes better or worse by doing the better or worse. To say that a person is under obligation to do something is to say that it is better to do it than not to do it or to do something that excludes it. Kant was right in the *Critique of Practical Reason* to call this sense of obligation "categorical": it has to do simply with doing the better rather than the worse. If a person is in a position to act on the matter, that person is obligated to do it, because not to do it would be to do the worse. Motive for action makes no difference, save that motives sometimes structure relevant possibilities. No matter what one might want, if there is a difference in value between the possibilities whose outcome one might affect, one is obligated to do the better. Of course, sometimes it is impossible to tell the differences in value. And sometimes there are different kinds of value for which no commensurate scaling can be found. But where there is a difference in value, and where whatever one does or does not do affects the outcome, one is under obligation.

Many thinkers resist this notion of obligation. Several kinds of objection are raised. First, some people say that to be under obligation requires that someone places you under obligation, for instance, a God, or someone in authority such as a military commander or an aristocrat to whom you owe loyalty. The difficulty with this is that it is possible simply to deny being obligated by the command. One can always reject the claim of the other to command one's obedience, and it might be possible to give reasons why obedience should be denied, for instance, that the command is to do a bad thing and that disobedience leads to the greater good. What justifies the claim of obedience in the long run is only that the commands are better than their alternatives, even if the justification moves through a long circle of justifying a social arrangement of authority, such as that in battle you should follow the commands of the ones in charge even if they are not the wisest. Obligation coming from authority is only justified if the authority is justified as the best to follow.

A second objection is that you are under obligation only if you first accept the obligation, as in accepting someone as the authority, or as in signing on to a project of a society or other body, even oneself. Without accepting the obligation in the first place, the objection goes, it is not binding upon you. But this amounts to saying that there is no real normative obligation, no categorical imperative, only obligations that follow from needing to be consistent with one's own will. Kant called these "hypothetical imperatives" because they have the form "if you want A, you ought to do B in order to get it." Kant's problematic arose out of the more general cultural view among Enlightenment scientists that nature has no value that ought to be respected. But an obligation obliges you whether or not you want to accept it—that is why it is obligatory rather than simply what you want. Obligation consists in the fact that choosing the better makes you a better chooser, and choosing

the worse makes you a worse chooser. Accumulated character over time, in part, is the complex summary of better and worse choices.

A third objection is that the whole notion of obligation depends on there being some truth to the view that there are better and worse persons, better and worse choosers, better and worse ways of responding to the normative claims of being under obligation. If in fact there are no real values in things, in human beings or in the things to which they relate, then there can be no real obligation. People simply are who they are. Sometimes this view is softened to say that there are attractive and unattractive characters, a matter of aesthetic character. But aesthetic traits do not bear on moral character in any way that relates to obligation. This is the most powerful objection because it rests on denying the thesis that things have real value. To the extent the arguments given here are valid, that to have form is to have value and that the form of the human chooser has the value that comes from the value of the choices made, the objection falls to the ground. Without the thesis that things have real value, this objection to the very idea of obligation is valid.

David Hume is famous for saying that you cannot derive an “ought” from an “is.” By “is” he meant facts with no value character. G. E. Moore developed this argument with what he called the “naturalistic fallacy,” namely, to believe that natural things have value that might imply obligation.¹⁰ He suggested an objectivist position on value, however, namely, that “value” is a “simple, non-natural quality” that inheres in some things, as the color yellow inheres in some things. The much simpler and less arbitrary metaphysics of *Philosophical Theology* says, contrary to both Hume and Moore, that “is” always implies “ought” where it lies in the way of human choice because all facts have value.

A fundamental ultimate condition of being human, therefore, is to lie under obligation. This is part of the nature of being human in a world best understood as processes of interacting harmonies. This ultimate, natural, condition is registered in all the reflective religious traditions, although with highly varied interpretations.

One universal dimension of this is the obligation attendant upon ritual participation: the ritual obliges the participants to do certain things (*II, 13*).¹¹ As ritual is usually understood, pre-Axial Age religions ritualize a much wider array of life activities than Axial Age religions. But if ritual is understood in a Confucian sense, as is urged in this study, it extends to any semiotically structured activities including language. A language speaker is obliged to follow the rules of syntax and semantics if communication is to take place.

Beyond ritual, however, the great religious traditions articulate and train for the general proposition that human beings lie under obligation. The West Asian religions often express this in terms of obedience to the commands of God. Sometimes this is understood to mean that obligations are obligatory because God commands them, not because of any intrinsic distinction between better and worse. This understanding is a default position

when a group wants to defend something it takes to be obligatory but that it cannot defend rationally. The contrary understanding also is operative in the West Asian religions. In the account of creation in Genesis 1, God creates the elements of the cosmos and then “sees” that they are good. Plato’s *Euthyphro* is a classic examination of the dilemma: is the good good because the gods will it, or do they will it because it is good? The position of *Philosophical Theology* is that the ontological creative act creates a world in which determinate beings exist as harmonies, all of which have value in themselves and relative to each other. There can be no antecedent divine intention to create valuable things, but also there could be no creation of determinate things without them having harmonic form that ipso facto is valuable. This position is compatible with important strains in Judaism, Christianity, Islam (which particularly emphasizes obligation), and Greek and Roman Paganism.¹²

Buddhism in its various forms presents a rhetoric that seems to some to downplay obligation as too closely connected with attachments. Buddhism sometimes has been criticized for not taking seriously enough the obligations to change material conditions so as to relieve suffering. Yet nothing in the account of obligation in *Philosophical Theology* requires that people be attached to their obligations. Kant went so far as to say that obligations are purer in some sense when they run contrary to inclinations or attachments.¹³ Obligation is a real objective condition that consists in the value differences among different possibilities, such that the better possibilities ought to be actualized rather than the worse. When a field of possibilities faces a group of potential actors, and that field has better and worse possibilities, someone should do something about the obligation to actualize the better. In this case it is useful to distinguish the objective obligation from the subjective responsibilities of someone or a few people to fulfill the obligation for the group. Division of labor in a society depends on people playing roles with subjective responsibility for objective possibilities that oblige everyone. Nevertheless, even when a general obligation becomes an individual’s personal subjective responsibility, the fact that the person has this responsibility is not necessarily a matter of attachment. Release from attachments in Buddhism, interpreted in a variety of ways, does not mean that actions are not obligated when they might make a difference to the value of the outcome. The Eightfold Noble Path of the Buddha is an organized way of defining general personal and social obligations that people need to address in order to enter onto the path of release from the attachments that cause suffering. In various forms of Buddhism, special obligations come into play on the path toward liberation, for instance, obligations to a teacher or guru, or the obligations attendant upon the bodhisattva’s vow to postpone liberation until all sentient beings are released.

The forms of Hinduism are too varied to typify in a single approach to value and the human condition of lying under obligation. Nevertheless, a background theme through most forms of Hinduism is “dharma,” meaning obligations that uphold the order and value of the cosmos. The dharma

obligations are different for different kinds of people, and in fact are among the essential conditions that define the differences among castes.¹⁴ A persistent theme in many kinds of Hinduism is the obligation to perform the sacrifices that sustain the gods and their world order.

Obligation is perhaps the most conspicuous element of the Confucian philosophical-religious tradition. Obligation is interpreted, in the Doctrine of the Mean, for instance, as arising from the continuum between human beings having the normative structure of Heaven as their inner nature and the structures of all things in the human world (the “ten thousand things”), each of which has its own valuable nature to which certain responses are appropriate and others not. The Mencian line of Confucianism stresses the natural capacity of people to discern the values of things and to respond appropriately, a natural capacity that can be cultivated by removing obstacles to its habitual operation. The Xunzian line of Confucianism stresses the need for learning how to discern values and appropriate responses but still holds to the fundamental aesthetic basis of obligation. As a path toward sagehood, Confucianism emphasizes the education and personal cultivation necessary to fulfill obligations. Because of its insistence that individuals are defined in their social context, this educational and personal cultivation requires the concomitant cultivation of the institutions of society so as to facilitate the easy and complete fulfillment of obligations. Classical Daoists tend to deride the Confucian preoccupation with concerns for righteousness but offer a discipline of conforming to the Dao as a way of fulfilling obligations without effort. The contents of obligations differ significantly among schools of Chinese thought and practice.

A number of scholars involved in recent comparative Confucian-Western thought have suggested that progress is made by likening Confucianism to virtue-ethics in the Western sense as interpreted from the Aristotelian tradition by Alasdair MacIntyre.¹⁵ But this likeness can be deceptive. Virtue ethics in the West has been oriented to determining what we ought to do and stands in contrast or complement to ethical orientations such as deontological and consequentialist ethics for determining the same thing. In the Confucian case, a great deal of what has been called ethical is a function of the quest for wholeness, from the array of issues having to do with filial piety, practices of meditation, to the institutions of apprenticeship. Another large swath of Confucian issues has to do with developing ways of discerning, appreciating, and responding to other people, to social institutions, and nature; in *Philosophical Theology*, these are issues of engagement with others, and involve cultivating special skills and orientations to the world. Much of the cultivation of the Confucian ideal character has to do with orientation to these kinds of ultimacy.

But Confucians also have to figure out what to do when confronted with alternative possibilities with differing values, that is, determining obligation in the sense under discussion in this chapter. In this regard, the Confucian project

seeks out the worth of things, “investigating” them, in the language of the Great Learning.¹⁶ Certain elements of the project have to do with cultivating sincerity so that personal ego and selfishness do not get in the way—these are like virtue ethics. But in this instance the removal of selfishness is instrumental to getting a truer view of what the things are to which one might respond. Then figuring out the response, although it involves having a clear heart that intuitively responds well to the values of things, includes also learning to harmonize and bring under control the causal paths that move from the instincts of one’s heart to accomplish a complex choice. As to choice among possibilities, determining what to do, Confucianism holds to an objectivist metaphysics in which things deserve to be treated certain ways because of the values of who or what they are, and personal virtue often is required to be able to see this and to act upon discerning choices. The obligation is to do the best thing, given the differently value-laden possibilities, and virtue is only instrumental for this. All in all, the Confucians, especially the Neo-Confucians, emphasize the need for study, commitment, growth, imagination, and maturation in order to be able to discern value-laden possibilities relevant for moral action. With regard to wholeness and appropriate engagement, however, virtues of certain sorts are more nearly the point of responding to the relevant ultimates, surely so in the former case.

In summary of our argument so far in this chapter, one ultimate dimension of the human condition is that we have obligations and can and do fail them and that this is recognized across religions.

Three things should be said at this point about the place of this theory of obligation relative to some competitors. The first is that this is a wholly realistic theory of value (*III*, 9). That is, value is constituted by the nature of form itself, namely, its character of combining simplicity and complexity in a hierarchy of layers of formal harmony. The values of possibilities are what they are by virtue of their forms, whether or not anyone recognizes them. This is the simplest metaphysical hypothesis about value in an array of hypotheses most of which tie value to human intentionality or purpose. Theories that attempt to derive value from the subjective side of human intentionality have insurmountable difficulty saying *why* some things should be the object of human intention and purpose. Although value is always relative to human purpose from the standpoint of human experience and decision, what makes one possibility more valuable than another is a function of what it gets together in what pattern. This value is something to be discerned relative to choice: as Peirce said, one of the most important questions for human beings is what purposes are worth having, and that is a function of the character of possible objects of purpose. Value lies in the character of form itself.

The second point to notice is that the hypothesis here always relates the future as possibilities of varying value to human beings under the intentional stance. Values are meaningless to human choice save insofar as they do relate directly or indirectly to the intentionality structure of human life. Form

becomes interesting possibility when its internal possible variations are relative to human choice. In this sense, the possibilities afford options for choice. So, the *real* values need to become *objective* values in some sense, that is, objects for intentions, in order to be engaged in choice. A number of current ethical theories define value in terms of a combination of objective and subjective conditions. Of course, human valuation is always such a combination. But the hypothesis here says that value is resident in the formal possibilities per se. The intentional grasping of the possibilities by individuals involves interpreting the possible future options in terms of their own situationally determined intentionalities. So, only those aspects of the real values in the possibilities can be interpreted and thereby engaged for which the people have signs to recognize. Moreover, the deployment of signs to sort the focal things to be interpreted against a background is a function of multiple layers of valuation built in to the habits of the interpreters' culture and personal experience. In this sense, the values that function in human experience as consciously recognizable are always a combination of the subjectivity of the intentional interpreters and the real values of the possibilities that they engage. Many theories that recognize the objective-subjective interplay do not have the theory of interpretive experience as engagement among their resources, and thus are stuck trying to derive value from the interaction of possibilities and interests that still have no way of recognizing anything as having value to enter the situation. Many approaches to the reality of values in nature suffer from presupposing the split between fact and value, which sets up their task to prove that some facts have value because of their relation to human experiencers. If the framing conceptuality is that nature is merely factual, so that the problem of the naturalistic fallacy makes serious sense, then there are two deficient responses. One, made by G. E. Moore, is that value is a "simple non-natural property" that just sticks to some things and not others, as some things are yellow and others are not. The other is that human experience projects value onto what are in fact only value-neutral things because of human need, impulse, desire, or delectation.

Third, part of the normativity of facing possibilities of different values is the meta-obligation of people to find ways of discerning what the humanly relevant possibilities are. Societies attempt to cope with this by means of cultural habits of valuation, by rituals, debates over principles, calculations of advantage and enjoyment, the development of historical projects, summary rules of what is discerning in certain circumstances, and a whole host of other theories determining what to do. One aspect of the virtue-ethics traditions that have arisen in many cultures is that they focus on the cultivation of good forms of intentionality, those aimed at the most important human values. So there is a recursive function relative to possibilities defining obligation. We engage those possibilities only insofar as we can bring them in to the ambiance of our interpreted world. But the possibilities themselves are what bear value. Therefore we need to know what that value is in order to respond

to our obligations. Hence, we are responsible for understanding the possibilities insofar as they bear upon life.

IV. OBLIGATIONS: MORAL, SOCIAL, PERSONAL, AND NATURAL

The complexity of obligation can be indicated, albeit briefly, by developing a classification of some of its main loci. The distinctions drawn here are arbitrary in many ways, as is the assignment of labels. The distinctions among kinds of obligation come from the structures of possibility as these are faced by human actors. These structures are exceedingly complicated and filled with intertwining causal patterns. The labels come from the English-language traditions of moral discourse in which they have had both vaguely overlapping and also technically defined differentiated definitions. In this discussion they are assigned somewhat arbitrary meanings. Four kinds of obligation are discussed: moral, social, personal, and natural. They correspond to four kinds of fault discussed in Chapter 5, namely, moral fault, which tracks into the brokenness of moral guilt and condemnation; social fault, which falls into the brokenness of guilty betrayal; personal fault, which becomes the brokenness of existential guilt; and natural costliness, which when broken is blood guilt.

Moral obligation, as the term is used here, refers to the value-differential possibilities that relate to bringing the right or optimal order to human relations and to the natural and social contexts that underlie those relations, as these possibilities are presented for choice in quotidian situations. The boundaries of this definition become clearer in contrast to the other forms of obligation discussed. Internally, it comprises obligations to do the better in interpersonal relations with direct personal contact, in relations with others mediated by small and large group community structures, and in relations with other individuals who are anonymous and perhaps distant, although subject to being affected by one's actions. The emphasis in moral obligation is on attending to those possibilities that, negatively, respect the humanity of those involved and, positively, contribute to its enhancement. Because of complicated roles in social structure, obligations to respect and enhance humanity are of many different kinds. Moral obligation obviously involves proper engagement of others and the abilities to discern their worth, a topic concerning the ultimate reality of engagement of those within one's existential field, the topic of Chapter 3.

People are affected by one's actions through the mediations of many different causal processes. The institutions of society, for instance, are the primary carriers of moral consequences of actions that are registered in most cultural semiotic systems. Therefore, some of the most significant morally freighted possibilities are those that have to do with the goods or harms that might be done to those institutions, such as families, friendships, living communities, workplaces, and the like. When the relations among individuals are significantly affected by mediating institutions, moral obligations are often

described in terms of justice. Social institutions, however, are not the only kind of mediators among persons. Natural causal structures are also important, and perhaps in the long run are more important. Care for the environment insofar as that sustains and enhances human life is a moral concern. Care for the conditions of nature that promote or harm health is another. Many aspects of nature are not susceptible to being modified by human behavior, but far more aspects are susceptible than cultural traditions had believed prior to the development of modern science. Nurturing nature for the sake of its support for the conditions of good human life is a moral concern. Any possibilities that hold differential values for human welfare in respect of protecting and enhancing humanity in individuals, including possibility structures for social institutions and natural causal foundations, provide moral obligations.

Social obligations, by contrast, are those having to do with playing roles in groups, communities, and societies. As Confucians have long stressed, perhaps more than other traditions, to be humane is to inhabit and be obliged to perfect certain fundamental roles in society, such as in family relations, friendships, local and perhaps larger community functions, and in cultural production. Societies define these roles in many different and often conflicting ways, but they include: roles in domestic life, gender identity, education, nurturance; care of the young, elderly, sick, weak, and outcast; roles in economic production, in the provision of shelter, clothing, and tools; roles in military operations, in protection against floods, droughts, fires, and barbarians; roles in government, legislation, policing, and the judiciary; and roles in the enhancement of culture and civilization in the arts and crafts, music, literature, speech, and ritual sensitivity.

Most people play many social roles. No one plays all of them, and societies are structured by the differential assignment of roles. Many social roles are age and cohort specific. Some roles are simply given, such as those having to do with family position. Others, such as leadership roles, need to be assumed, although there can be moral obligations to assume such roles. People learn to play some roles just by functioning in society as the roles dictate; other roles need to be learned through various forms of education and experience. Confucians would point out, rightly, that most roles are defined vaguely in terms of their social function, and that part of being humane is learning to individuate those roles. Parents, for instance, have social obligations to nurture and educate their children; each parent needs to individuate his or her way of caring for each of the individual children as well as the particular structure of the family. Social roles are one kind of ritual, and the playing of rituals ought to be perfected; this is a general theme of social obligations: the obligation to perfect one's ability to fulfill the obligations of one's social roles. Heroism is extraordinary devotion and skill in playing certain kinds of social roles.

In addition to playing the roles to which one is obligated, one also bears the project of integrating these roles within one's life. The diversity of roles and social relations they define constitute important components

of life to which one needs to find compartments so that together they can be integrated with personal wholeness, a topic of Chapter 2. Societies differ wildly in the social roles they present to individuals, although all the social functions mentioned earlier need some roles or other to fulfill them.

The roles themselves are not morally neutral, however. Some roles are morally harmful, for instance, roles in an economic system that is oppressive, or certain familial roles in a dysfunctional family. The role of a corrupt official in a government is a bad one, and someone who is heroically successful at such a role is a villain of heroic proportions. For the most part, the obligations to judge the morality of a social role, to support good roles and to dismantle and change bad ones, are elements of moral obligation. The relevant considerations have to do with how the social roles mediate the ways by which individuals are treated in their humanity by actions within the society. The lines between social and moral obligation are blurred when certain social roles, for instance, those of legislators or political leaders, are charged with monitoring and improving the roles in a given society. In modern societies influenced by the Axial Age religions, social roles are idealized as having a moral direction in the ways they are played. But as the corrupt politician illustrates, certain social roles can be played successfully, according to the rules of the role, but without moral probity.

Social and moral obligations can come into stark conflict, as when a soldier has the social role of fighting a war that is morally wrong and that he knows to be so, or at least suspects. The plot of the *Bhagavad Gita* raises this dilemma in a classic way: Arjuna, the military hero and leader of his faction, is socially obligated to fight and is morally repulsed at having to kill his friends, teachers, and kinsmen. Krishna persuades him to fulfill his social obligation by saying, in effect, that the moral considerations are trivial or irrelevant (you cannot kill immortal souls), and that other issues are much more important than whether to fight or not. In contrast to the individualism of ancient military heroes, soldiers of our own time sometimes find their military obligations to be reduced to mere instruments of political decisions that they might consider immoral. At some point, many will say that their moral obligations outweigh their social obligations to the military, often with disastrous consequences. Many terrorists feel the opposite side of that dilemma, deciding that they will have to use means they know are immoral in order to fulfill their social obligation to their cause.

Personal obligation, nested in with moral and social obligation, is defined by the possibilities of different values that affect the development of the person's own character. A person's character is extremely complicated, especially as tied in with the causal structures that provide obligations of the moral and social sorts and as implicated in the quest for wholeness. One aspect or level of character development is the obligation to develop good habits and skills at fulfilling moral and social obligations. In most cultures, much of this is learned through the repeated practice of moral action and the performance of social roles. Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* stressed the importance

of practice and imitation in learning to be moral and socially ethical. But in complex societies (and which society is not complex?) sometimes it is necessary to take extra pains to develop oneself into a moral person who is socially adept. Aristotle, for instance, said we deliberate about the means but not about the ends of goal-directed actions.¹⁷ Yet often the issues are so complex that we should deliberate about the ends as well. Plato stressed the importance of innovative thinking and dialectic for the discernment of ends.¹⁸

On another level exist personal virtues that are not, strictly speaking, functions of moral and/or social obligations. For instance, there are moral obligations to care for people and social roles for doing this with expertise; but there is no obligation to be loving that goes beyond care. Yet the Axial Age religions advocate the personal virtue of being loving, however differently they nuance this. Other virtues are like this, such as cultivated sensitivity to others, commitment to beautify one's environment and society, a responsibility for appropriating and representing the accomplishments of the past, and so forth. Perhaps these obligations to personal enhancement can be summed up as obligations to being humane in the richest sense. Different cultures define humane virtue with some variation, and it is central to Confucianism. Yet something like that is an ideal in all cultures because the structure of possibility is such that what individuals are able to do can make them more or less humane, and they are obligated to become more humane where they can. The obligation to choose among possibilities in order to make oneself more humane is related to but not the same as cultivating proper engagement to things in one's existential environment, a different ultimate norm for human life from that of choosing well among possibilities.

Perhaps the highest kind of personal obligation is to develop the best personal value-identity that one can. This includes all the other obligations but as played back to define one's own identity. This sense of personal obligation is taken up in more detail in Chapter 4.

Natural obligation is of a different order from moral, social, and personal obligation and is paradoxical and difficult to express. Perhaps the most effective expression is in the metaphor of "being true" to nature. It is the obligation to live in such a way as to be respectful of the values in nature as these present themselves among the alternatives for choice. In this sense, it is close to the concerns of Chapter 2, having to do with how human beings relate to those things they integrate into their lives, and to those of Chapter 3, having to do with engaging others well. But natural obligation is still an obligation in the sense that it derives from the structure of possibilities with different values that are affected in their outcomes by human actions.

From the cosmos to the local environment and indeed to persons' internal environments, nature bears multitudes of interwoven values. Those values call for respect when they are affected by human behavior. This is perhaps most obvious in the environmental consciousness that has arisen in the last century in modern cultures. It is one thing, a moral obligation, to

protect and enhance the natural environment so that it supports human life. It is another thing to protect and enhance it because of its own actual and potential value, and we have natural obligations to do that, too. As we learn that our influences on the environment extend far beyond direct interactions, specific obligations to nature are revealed to be very broad indeed. From concern about overfishing the lake to concern about destroying the ozone layer is a huge expansion of scale of natural obligation. From that to concern about global warming is yet a more significant expansion. What will the human reach into nature be when we start rocketing our wastes into space, and then follow with our own colonists?

This section has indicated schematically some of the types of obligation people face. But this typology is good only for calling attention to the complexity of obligation. Any given instance of facing possibilities with different values needs analysis of the many dimensions of obligation within it.