Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?”

Dissatisfaction with moral philosophy
• There seems to be some kind of detachment between moral philosophy and moral thought.
  o And, Prichard (and others at Oxford at the time) thought, there might be some value in actually attending to the ways in which we ordinarily think and talk about morality.

How the “moral question” arises
• At some point, we recognize that those things we think are moral obligations often conflict with our desires, inclinations, preferences, and the like.
  o And this leads us to wonder: “Why be moral? Are there good reasons not only for thinking that these things are obligatory, but also for actually doing them? I have a sense of obligation, but why abide by it?”

General philosophical responses to the “moral question,” and why they fail
• Because ultimately, it’s in our interest to do as we ought.
  o Problem: This, at best, explains why we ought to want to do those things, and not why we ought to do them.
• Because the consequences of doing as we ought are intrinsically good.
  o Problem: This violates the famous Is-Ought prohibition; from the observation that \( x \) is good it does not follow that we ought to do whatever will result in \( x \). So if our sense of obligation comes from somewhere, it cannot come from such an observation.
  o Another, more serious, problem: My sense that I ought to repay a debt never arises as a result of considerations about the intrinsic goodness of whatever would result from my repayment; rather, my sense that I ought to repay the debt arises immediately from the fact that I incurred the debt in the first place.
• Because the actions themselves are intrinsically good.
  o Problem: No action can ever be considered “good” in isolation, i.e., wholly removed from the motive that prompted it – “good actions” are those that are performed with good motives. Actions we call “good” fall into roughly two categories:
    ▪ Those done from a sense of obligation.
      • But it’s precisely the legitimacy of this sense of obligation that we were questioning in the first place!
    ▪ Those done on the basis of a good desire (e.g., to help a friend).
      • So I don’t have reason to act in accordance with my sense of obligation, and instead, should just do whatever I desire to do, provided that the desire itself is a good one?

Prichard’s positive view
• Our sense of obligation – i.e., our awareness of moral ‘ought’ facts – is absolutely immediate and underivative.
• Awareness of a moral obligation depends upon two “preliminaries”:
  o Recognition of the nature of the action itself
  o Recognition of the relations shared by the people involved
    ▪ Example: I’m obligated to repay Tom $50 because (a) the action constitutes the repayment of a debt, and (b) Tom is the one to whom I am indebted.
Three objections

- Doesn’t this imply that our obligations are many, and sort of a disorganized mess?
  - Prichard: Of course our obligations are many – e.g., to keep promises, to repay debts, to promote the general welfare, etc. – and some have nothing to do with others. But so what? Wouldn’t it be weirder, and more contrary to experience, to expect there to be only one?

- Again: what about moral disagreement?
  - Prichard: Sound moral intuition is only possible in a “developed human being,” and there are differing degrees of development; probably a lot of moral disagreement involves one or more of the parties to the disagreement failing to adequately recognize the two preliminaries; owing to a lack of thoughtfulness, even the best men are often blind to their own obligations.

- Won’t there be circumstances in which two or more obligations conflict? What then?
  - Prichard: Obligation itself admits of degrees; and our capacity for moral intuition allows us not only to recognize our various moral obligations, but also to recognize which obligations are greater.

So what is moral philosophy? Does it all rest on a mistake?

- If it’s a systematic attempt to answer the “moral question,” then it’s a huge waste of time.
  - Asking, “Why be moral?” sounds to some like asking, “Why ought I to do the things that I ought to do?”

- On the other hand, a worthwhile endeavor would be to (a) investigate our capacity for moral intuition itself, and (b) perhaps catalog the various obligations, etc., that we intuit.