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The Dichotomy of Obligation and Choice

By Nathaniel Le

Every action you take is a choice. There is a motive behind every act that was, will be, and is made by you to accomplish a purpose. One such motivation is obligation and the belief that one must take an action to fulfill it. From paying mortgages to following your friend up on a promise made with them, life is full of obligations that bind us, but do these obligations actually exist? In the novel *Of Mice and Men*, written by John Steinbeck, the story follows Lennie Smalls and George Milton as they labor on a new ranch with an ensemble of other workers and cast while also dealing with Lennie's main problem: his mental disability. Lennie's disability forces George to care for him as his actions cause trouble, but to say that it obligates him is wrong. Obligation does not exist since every action that is taken is by choice, not duty or commitment. It is contradictory to free will; everything is a choice.

The definition of obligation states: an act or course of action to which a person is morally or legally bound, but this conflicts with human nature. Freedom of choice is fundamental to being human, with many wars being fought over the constriction of such a right. It guarantees that no matter what

external parties are present, one always has the autonomy to choose between different options. Obligation, therefore, is a violation of this as it binds a person to choose only one option. In *Of Mice and Men*, George is often frustrated with Lenny's antics, belittling him and stating, ". . . if I was alone I could live so easy . . . You crazy son-of-a-bitch. You keep me in hot water all the time" (Steinbeck Pg 11). Yet, George still continues on with Lennie, not out of obligation to him, but because he values him over his own self interest. Obligation has no merit because everyone always has a choice whether to do something or not.

An argument against this logic presents itself in the existence of an obligation within choices; one that has a person obligated to choose the best outcome. Although novel, such an idea is easily debunked by the definition: an act or course of action to which a person is bound. By leaving a person the choice to choose an option, whether it be the best or not, one cannot be bound to an act or course of action. Obligation simply cannot coincide with free will. In the novel *Of Mice and Men*, George listens to a conversation passed around by the other workers in the bunkhouse concerning Candy's dog and if he should be shot. In the end, Candy resigns, but he states later, after talking with Lennie and George, "I oughtta of shot that dog myself, George. I shouldn't oughtta of let no stranger shoot my dog" (Steinbeck Pg 61). Within these series of events, we clearly see how one could perceive Candy as having an obligation to be the one to shoot his dog, but as he had chosen not to: to forego his 'duty', there could not have been an obligation to begin with.

If not an obligation, then what is the feeling that one has to choose one option over another? Quite simply, it is the emotion of want. Fundamental as human motive, it is the reason that we ‘do’ anything. From instinctual desires including the want to live or sleep, social needs like the need for attention and esteem, or personal wants such as land or the happiness of another, want drives every decision we make. The novel *Of Mice and Men* features a myriad of situations brought upon by the desires and wants of the workers manifested into their choices. In the last scene, George is tasked with choosing between two options: let the others kill him for killing Curley’s wife, or shoot Lennie himself. Steinbeck writes, “And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie’s head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger” (Steinbeck Pg 106). George chose to kill Lennie himself, but he did so not out of any obligation, but because he wanted to do so. He felt tied to Lennie, just as Candy did to his dog, in a way that mattered to him and not the others. No obligatory goal was achieved in doing so; just the fulfillment of what George wanted for Lennie. It’s through this we see that obligation does not exist but is instead a misnomer for the want that fuels choosing.

There are, however, consequences to every choice. When obligated, a person cannot suffer any consequence for their actions as they themselves are not in power of their own decisions or desires, but we already know that to be false. Every decision taken by you is an extension of freedom, but it is also

by this freedom of choice that you are held responsible for your actions. In *Of Mice and Men*, a character named Curley is unfairly beating Lennie when Steinbeck writes, “Curley's fist was swinging when Lennie reached for it. The next minute Curley was flopping like a fish on a thread, and his closed fist was lost in Lennie’s big hand” (Steinbeck Pg 63). This quote exemplifies consequences as the decision Curley chose was a poor one resulting in a severe punishment. Not just this, but every other choice that anybody makes in *Of Mice and Men* is the main cause of consequences that soon followed: Lennie grabbing a woman’s dress leading to a manhunt, George not abandoning Lennie, Candy allowing Carlson to shoot his dog, etc. Each choice has consequences, good or bad, that impacts what happens in the plot as well as the character themselves. Under obligation, one’s actions are excused, but since there is no such thing as a choice that has no consequence, the basis of free will and choice, there must not be such a thing called obligation.

This lack of obligation does not entail for humanity a dissolute society in which people are constantly breaking promises and contracts under the excuse of, “I have no obligation to follow them,” but something more subjective. The lack of obligation within the world is not a terrible thing that will lead to ruin, but is instead a neutral platform by which people are grown through the actions they take on their own. In a blog written by Gregory Sadler, a holder of a PhD in philosophy from Southern Illinois University, he defines prohairesis as a rational desire within oneself, but then writes

how Epictetus stated what prohairesis is, saying, "By the time he is done with it, it signifies the very core of the person - the self, if you like," (Sadler). By Epictetus' definition of prohairesis, one's choices affect the core, and a person's core dictates the choices of a person. In this cycle, one grows as a person in a minute, slow process. It is a person's will and choices that paint whether they are good or bad, not how well they follow an obligation.

We humans live by free choice. It is in our nature to do so; to decide for ourselves, to choose based on what we want. Obligation is an inherent contradiction to this, being unable to exist if free choice is absolute. It cannot exist because of the nature of humanity to be free with their choice, the inability of it to drive choices, and the nature of every action to have a consequence. *Of Mice and Men* tells of how choices affect you and the people around you. It is a story of choosing what one should do out of their own desire to be with one another, not an obligation. More than this, it tells of choosing to see the invisible. Choosing to talk with the other. Choosing to accept the outsider. Choose to live for others, do not be obligated to it.

Works Cited

Sadler, Gregory. "What Does Epictetus' Mean by 'Prohairesis' ". *Medium*. n.p, 6 May 2017. Web. 22 November 2019.

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