

burdens are not fairly distributed among slaves and slave owners, and societies with slaves hardly maximize the good, counting everyone equally.) Thus, despite the fact that a society may have adopted a regime that permits slavery, none of the conventionally assigned duties relevant to the ownership of slaves will have any moral force.

This point is, of course, a general one. It covers not only property regimes (assuming, for the sake of argument, that these are indeed conventional) but all conventional duties whatsoever. The mere existence of a convention does not in and of itself guarantee that the duties assigned by that convention have any moral force. Conventionally assigned duties only have moral force when this can be derived from something else—consequences, fairness, promising, and so on. If one or more of these factors supports the convention, then to that extent the duties assigned by that convention will indeed be genuine moral duties. Often enough this is just what happens. But it does not always happen. Some conventional duties have no moral force at all.

It should be noted, finally, that even if a convention does succeed in generating some genuine moral duties, this is no reason to assume that the convention is therefore impervious to moral critique. Perhaps only certain aspects of the convention are morally legitimate. If so, only some of the duties assigned by that convention will have force. Or perhaps the convention—despite being fair and beneficial on the whole—could be improved. Then we must work to improve it. To say that a convention has moral legitimacy—and that its duties are real—is not to say that the convention is morally perfect. Conventional duties can often be improved upon.

4.5 Duties to Oneself

There is one further class of special obligations that warrants particular attention: duties to oneself. Are there any such duties? The issue is surprisingly controversial. Traditionally, I think, there would have been nothing especially contentious about the suggestion that there are moral restrictions on how I may treat myself. Nowadays, however, many find the notion of moral duties owed to *oneself* somehow suspect.

It is sometimes claimed that talk of duties to oneself simply makes no sense, since such duties would have nothing to do with the basic point of morality, which is to govern our treatment of *others*. Morality, it might be suggested, is a matter of counting others equally, not harming them, not lying to them, and so forth; in a word, the essential outlook of morality is *other-regarding*. In contrast, duties to oneself, if there were any such thing, would be *self-regarding*, and as such they fall outside the scope of morality altogether. In short, the only genuinely moral duties concern how we behave toward others; given the very nature of morality, there are—and can be—no duties to oneself.

Of course, given the existence of duties to others, we might well have *derivative* duties concerning ourselves. For example, I might have a duty to keep myself fit, so as to be able to meet my obligations to my children. But these would not be duties I owe to *myself*. Duties that are truly duties to oneself make no sense. Or so the claim goes.

Clearly, whether a position of this sort is right depends on a number of metaethical issues concerning the purpose and extent of morality. Given a conception of the nature of morality as essentially other-regarding, duties to oneself will simply be impossible. But there are other metaethical conceptions which take a broader view of morality than this. According to one such broader conception, although the moral point of view certainly includes other-regarding concerns, it is not necessarily exhausted by them; there may be a place for self-regarding considerations as well. If so, the possibility of duties to oneself cannot be ruled out. (There are, of course, still other metaethical conceptions, including some for which self-regarding considerations are absolutely central to the moral enterprise.)

Given the limited scope of the present book, we cannot undertake to adjudicate between these rival metaethical positions. For the sake of argument, therefore, let's tentatively adopt the more tolerant point of view. That is, let's assume that the possibility of duties to oneself cannot be ruled out by metaethical considerations alone. That doesn't yet give us any reason to believe that there *are* any moral duties to oneself; it simply leaves the possibility open.

Where, then, should we look to find plausible duties to oneself? A natural place to start is by considering the implications of the various normative factors that we have already identified. Of course, up to this point, when exploring the different normative factors, I have cast the discussion in terms of the treatment of others: I've talked about harming others, for example, or keeping the promises you have made to them, or compensating them for harm you have done to them, and so forth. No doubt, doing things this way has implicitly suggested that the factors have a restricted scope—that they only apply to my treatment of everyone *else*. But despite this, it does seem possible (at least, until we discover otherwise) to view the factors as actually having a very wide scope, so that they govern my treatment of absolutely *everyone*—not just my treatment of others, but my treatment of myself as well. Thus, if we make the tentative assumption that the factors are truly universal in this way, we will want to investigate the possibility and moral implications of harming myself, lying to myself, making promises to myself, and so on for all the other normative factors as well.

Now for some of these factors, it is fairly simple to think of cases to which they apply that involve only me. For example, I am certainly capable of harming myself. Similarly, I am also capable of benefiting myself—promoting my own well-being and thereby promoting the overall good. Of course, this is not yet to say that these factors have any genuine moral

weight in cases where they apply; it is merely to make the *logical* point that it is at least possible to do these sorts of things to myself.

With some of the other factors, however, things are much less straightforward. As soon as we try to apply them to cases involving only me, we seem to run up against logical difficulties. It is puzzling whether it even makes sense to try to imagine an act of the relevant kind. For example, it is not at all obvious whether it is possible for me to rescue myself, or to lie to myself, or to compensate myself. Here too, the question is not the moral one—should these factors have any moral weight in these cases?—but rather a logical one: can the factors in question even so much as apply? Is it even possible to *do* these sorts of things to myself?

In principle, it certainly seems possible that there might be certain types of acts that I can do to others which I simply cannot do to myself. If so, then rules governing these acts will never have any relevance in cases involving only me. And this may well be the situation for some of our normative factors. In other cases, however, even though it seems strange to apply the normative factor, it is not literally *impossible* to behave in the relevant way toward myself. Perhaps in these cases the difficulty is actually more like this: on any plausible construal of the factor in question, that factor will only be relevant when certain conditions are met; and it may be impossible to meet some of those conditions in cases involving only me.

But even if we restrict our attention to factors where these logical difficulties don't arise, once we turn to the moral question of whether these factors should be given any weight in those cases where they do apply, a perfectly general problem crops up. For if what is in question is only my treatment of myself, it is obvious that I will always be acting with the *consent* of the person I am affecting. And as we have previously noted, on many views consent robs a constraint of its normal force. Consider, for example, the constraint against doing harm. Normally, it is impermissible to perform an act if it would involve harming someone. But not, as we have seen, if you have the permission of the person you are harming; consent of the victim removes the act from the scope of the constraint. Yet isn't it clear that if I deliberately harm myself, I have my own permission to do so? If so, then at best this will be a case of my permissibly infringing the constraint, rather than my violating it. More generally, whatever the constraint, if consent removes an act from the scope of that constraint, then I always act permissibly in my treatment of myself. Given the force of consent, and given the necessity of there being consent (when "victim" equals agent), there simply cannot be any duties to myself.

Obviously enough, this argument can be resisted by those who deny the relevance of consent. But less obviously, it can also be resisted by those who do accept the relevance of consent—provided that they believe that the force of consent is restricted. Recall the possibility (noted in 3.3) that consent may only work in those cases where the agent has good reasons for

giving that consent. If a view like this is correct, then the mere fact that I necessarily act with my own permission may not be enough to remove my actions from the scope of the various relevant constraints. To return to the earlier example, if I harm myself—and lack adequate reason for doing so—this may well constitute a violation of the constraint against doing harm. At the very least, the mere fact that I consented to my having harmed myself will not be sufficient to show that I have acted permissibly. In short, even if the presence of consent is morally relevant, it won't necessarily follow that anything goes in my treatment of myself.

(A view of this more circumscribed sort seems especially plausible in those cases where my current action affects me, but only much later. Here, it seems more natural to think of the relationship between my present self and my future self as more like that obtaining between two different individuals. All that my current act guarantees is the consent of my present self. But it may well be the consent of my future self that is relevant for waiving the protection of the constraint; and when the time comes, it may be lacking.)

If we assume—if only for the sake of argument—that the force of consent is not unlimited, the possibility of duties to oneself now seems a live one. For if some normative factors can appear even in cases involving only me, and if my consent does not automatically guarantee the permissibility of my action, then in at least some cases my behavior may well involve violating obligations that govern my treatment of myself.

Accordingly, let's review the different normative factors in systematic fashion, beginning with the constraint against doing harm. As we have already observed, I am certainly capable of harming myself. Is it wrong to do so? Not, it seems, if I have good reasons for doing this. I might for example, sacrifice my life so as to save that of my friends or loved ones. Or, more commonly still, I might *risk* harm to myself for the sake of some valuable goal. But it is also obvious that I am capable of harming myself in situations where I lack adequate reasons for doing this. I might, for example, ingest poison on a dare, or cut off my nose to spite my face. Here, it seems, we might well want to claim that such acts violate a moral duty not to harm myself.

Certainly the most familiar duty of this sort is the commonly accepted prohibition against committing suicide. Often, this prohibition is thought to be absolute. But if the prohibition against suicide derives from the constraint against doing harm, and if consent can undermine the force of that constraint, then it is likely that this absolutism must be rejected. Obviously, those who think the force of consent is unlimited will simply dismiss a prohibition against suicide altogether. But even if consent is only effective in those cases where the person has good reasons to consent, suicide will still sometimes be permissible—provided that in some cases one can have good reason to kill oneself. And it seems clear that one can have such reasons. For example, you might be suffering from a painful and untreatable illness,

or you may have become so incapacitated that your future holds no possibility of the goods that make life worthwhile. (In cases like this, is it still accurate to say that in killing yourself you are *harming* yourself? On a global view of harm, perhaps not (see 3.3); but on a local conception of harm it will be.) Of course, to say that suicide is not always wrong is not the same as saying that it is never wrong. If you lack good reasons, then killing yourself will be immoral.

Obviously, the absolutist concerning suicide will think that such a moderate position does not go far enough. It is, however, difficult to see how to avoid some kind of moderate position here. For it is important to bear in mind that in at least some cases people kill themselves as a way of *saving* the lives of *others*. Such acts of self-sacrifice are almost universally praised—but it is unclear how they can even be *permissible* if there is an absolute prohibition against killing oneself. It is only if we assume that consent (backed by good reasons) eliminates the force of the constraint against doing harm that the permissibility of self-sacrifice becomes explicable. But if consent can have this effect when our goal is to help others, there is no reason to think that it cannot have this effect when our goal is instead to minimize our own future suffering, as in more typical cases of suicide.

In any event, as this discussion makes clear, it does not seem altogether implausible to think that one or more normative factors may indeed generate duties to oneself. At the very least, this seems to be a plausible position with regard to the constraint against doing harm.

What about the requirement to keep your promises? The situation here is somewhat more obscure, but it is not obviously impossible to make a promise to myself. If I do, must I keep it? As usual, consent seems relevant—since I can be released from a promise by the person to whom I have made the promise. But it is at least arguable that such a release isn't effective if it is given without good reason. So suppose that I have promised myself to do something, and have no good reason to release myself from my vow. Perhaps in such a case there is indeed a special obligation to keep the promise that I have made. If so, then we have a second possible source of duties to oneself.

For other constraints, however, the attempt to derive such duties seems much less straightforward. Consider, for example, the constraint against lying. As we have previously noted, it is not at all clear that it is even so much as possible to tell a lie to myself. I can certainly say something that I don't believe; but I may not be able to do this with the intention of deceiving myself. If this is right, then the prohibition against telling lies may have no possible relevance in cases involving only me. (On the other hand, we do talk about the possibility of self-deception, and we normally take this to involve some kind of moral shortcoming. Is this a simple application of a more general prohibition against being deceptive? That seems wrong; but the issues are too complicated to pursue here.)

Or consider the obligation to compensate those we have harmed. If I harm myself—do I then owe myself compensation? One possible complication, of course, is that compensation may not be owed when one has the consent of the person harmed. On the other hand, even with consent, compensation might be owed anyway, if the person consented without good reason. So suppose that I have indeed harmed myself without adequate reason: must I now compensate myself for this? Obviously, however, it is rather difficult to get a grip on what compensation would come to in a situation like this. I can hardly transfer resources from myself to myself in an effort to make myself whole. So this constraint too may have no implications in cases involving only me. (Am I perhaps obligated to *use* the resources I already have—so as to undo the damage I have done to myself?)

An obligation to rescue seems equally unpromising as a source of duties to myself. No doubt, I can sometimes rescue myself from danger. But even if we assume that there is indeed an obligation to rescue those in danger, presumably the obligation only extends to those cases where the people in danger are incapable of saving *themselves*. So if I am *capable* of rescuing myself from some danger I find myself in, a relevant background condition won't have been met; the special obligation to rescue simply won't become engaged. Similarly for the principle of fair play: presumably if all the members of some practice choose to stop that practice, they are not being unfair to one another; so in "practices" involving only me, fair play won't be violated if I decide against carrying on. And a similar point seems true—finally—for gratitude. Even if there are obligations to repay favors, such an obligation is discharged once the recipient of the favor has done something comparable for the benefactor. But in cases where I do something for myself, the recipient *has* already benefited the benefactor (since the recipient is the benefactor), and so there can be no further debt.

This leaves us with just one further factor (of those already identified): goodness of results. Presumably my own well-being is a component of the overall good. Furthermore, I am obviously in a position to affect it. At the very least then, if my action will benefit me in some way, it seems plausible to think that this is a factor that will be relevant in determining morally what I should do. (For example, it seems permissible to count my own good in determining whether the threshold for some constraint has been met; I need not limit myself to considering the good that is at stake for others.) But can there be a *duty* to benefit myself? As we saw, it is somewhat controversial whether there can ever be a requirement to promote the good. But if there can be such a requirement, then why shouldn't my own good count too? Perhaps, then, there is a duty to benefit myself, to promote my own well-being. This is sometimes called a duty of *prudence* (although this often suggests an element of exaggerated cautiousness or frugality that is not relevant to our present concern).

Nowadays, it is more typical to think of the requirement to promote one's own well-being as a requirement of *rationality* rather than of *moral-ity*. But we began this section by putting aside the metaethical assumption that moral requirements can only be based on other-regarding considerations. And once we have done this, it is not at all clear why a requirement to promote my own overall well-being or happiness should not be considered one of my moral duties. Of course, it might be suggested that talk of a *duty* in this context makes no sense, since each person will inevitably do what he can to promote his own happiness. However, a moment's reflection shows that this is unduly optimistic: people often fail to have sufficient regard for their future.

The argument that I have just given for a duty to promote one's own well-being derives that duty from the more general requirement to promote the good. Defended in this way, the duty is only a rule of thumb. If even more good could be done overall by benefiting others, rather than by nurturing my own future well-being, there is no objection to my doing this. But some may think this casts the duty in too weak a form. It might be suggested that it is wrong for me to sacrifice my own well-being even if this leads to a net *gain* in the overall good—at least, it's wrong if the incremental overall gain is slight. Doing this is "selling" myself "too cheaply." That is to say, perhaps there is a *constraint* against forgoing my own future well-being, even if doing so would lead to some modest increase in the overall good. Such a constraint certainly need not be absolute. When the gain to others is *significant*, it may well be permissible to sacrifice my own welfare. The point is simply that it may not be permissible to do this when the net gain is minimal.

Note that if there were such a constraint, it would be a pure positive duty: I would be required to promote my own well-being, and this requirement would not have been triggered by any earlier action on my part. Furthermore, it does not seem possible to derive this constraint from any of our earlier examples of pure positive duties. On the one hand, a requirement to promote my own well-being does not seem explicable in terms of a duty to rescue or in terms of obligations of gratitude. And on the other hand, as we have just seen, if the requirement to promote my own well-being is indeed to have the force of a constraint (rather than being a mere rule of thumb), it cannot be derived from a requirement to promote the overall good. Therefore, if there is such a constraint, we will have identified a new basic normative factor—albeit one that only concerns my treatment of myself.

However, it is not at all clear that there is any such constraint. Put aside the obvious point that the consequentialist will reject it (since the consequentialist rejects all constraints). Even deontologists are likely to find the constraint we are considering problematic. For it should be noted that if there were such a constraint, it would go well beyond saying that everyone

is to count equally. It does not merely require you to view your own well-being as no less important than that of everyone else (our original rule of thumb did that). Nor does it even stop with saying that you are sometimes *permitted* to count your own well-being more heavily than that of others (a possibility to be considered in the next chapter). Rather, the constraint says that you are morally *required* to give your own well-being more weight than that of others. And it is difficult to believe that any such requirement could be mandated from the *moral* point of view.

In any event, it is important not to confuse the constraint we are considering with the more modest duty of *self-respect*. To respect yourself is to recognize your own worth and value (and to act upon this recognition). So a duty of self-respect might plausibly be thought to have several components. First, you are required to count your own well-being as no less important than that of others. Second, you are required to “make something of yourself”—to develop your talents in such a way as to promote your own well-being, as well as contribute to the overall good. Third, recognizing that you have the same moral value as others, you are required to “stand up for your rights”—to protest and defend yourself against mistreatment at the hands of others. All three of these more specific duties can be readily embraced without endorsing a constraint requiring you to promote your own well-being even when greater good can be done for others. Of course, one might try to argue that such a constraint is in fact a fourth component of the duty of self-respect. But this fourth component seems much more controversial than the first three; and at any rate, it does not seem especially plausible to suggest that I fail to show adequate self-respect if I make a sacrifice so that others may gain even more.

Are there any other special obligations that I owe to myself? It might be noted that all the suggestions we have been examining concern natural duties, so perhaps we should end by considering the possibility of *conventional* duties to oneself. In principle, it must be admitted, it does seem possible that a society might conventionally assign each of its members a set of duties governing each person’s treatment of himself. In terms of their *content*, then, such duties would be self-regarding. Assuming, however, that these conventions derive their moral force in the normal way—that is, via promises, fair play, or overall consequences—the *source* of the moral force of such duties would actually be other-regarding. Thus, allegiance to any such conventional duties would be owed primarily to others. Despite appearances, then, even if there are duties of this sort, it does not seem especially helpful to think of them as being duties owed *to oneself*.