GEORGE NAKHNIKIAN

THE PRINCIPLE OF RECIPROCAL OBLIGATIONS

(Received 15 August, 1987)

(1) and (2), below, are equivalent formulations of what I propose to call 'the principle of reciprocal obligations', PRO, for short:

(1) If \( m \) is a member of a community, \( M \), consisting of more than one person, each member of which subscribes to a code of conduct consisting of a set of rules, \( R \), and, if \( r \) is a member of \( R \), and \( r \) imposes on \( m \) an obligation, \( \tau \), to \( A \), then every other member of \( M \) has an obligation, \( \tau' \), not to prevent \( m \) from \( A \)-ing.

By '\( x \) prevents \( y \) from \( A \)-ing' we are to understand that \( x \) brings it about that \( y \) does not, or cannot, \( A \). The device of subscripting an obligation, as in 'obligation, \( \tau \)', is meant to indicate that the obligation is a singular obligation belonging to a concrete particular individual, and that the obligation exists only because in a concrete particular situation that individual incurs that obligation according to a rule, \( r \). An obligation to \( A \) may be an obligation to be in Boston, or an obligation to fly to Boston.

(2) If \( m \) is a member of a community, \( M \), consisting of more than one person, each member of which subscribes to a code of conduct consisting of a set of rules, \( R \), and, if \( r \) is a member of \( R \), and \( r \) imposes on \( m \) an obligation, \( \tau \), to \( A \), then every other member of \( M \) has an absolute obligation, not to prevent \( m \) from \( A \)-ing, provided that by not preventing \( m \) from \( A \)-ing, the other member of \( M \) does not confront a conflict of duties as a member of \( M \).

(1) and (2) are necessarily equivalent. They have the same antecedent, and their consequents are necessarily equivalent.
Moreover, (1) is necessarily true, because it is entailed by two axioms of deontic logic:

AXIOM 1: If \( m \) has an obligation, \( i \) to \( A \), then \( m \) has a right, \( i \) to \( A \).

AXIOM 2: If \( m \) has a right, \( i \) to \( A \), then \( m \) has a right, \( i \) not to be prevented from \( A \)-ing by any other member of \( M \), and, also, every other member of \( M \) has an obligation, \( i \) not to prevent \( m \) from \( A \)-ing.

Axiom 2 is equivalent to (E):

\[
(E): \quad \text{If } m \text{ has a right, } i \text{ to } A, \text{ then } m \text{ has a right, } i \text{ not to be prevented from } A \text{-ing by any other member of } M, \text{ and, if } m \text{ has a right, } i \text{ to } A, \text{ then every other member of } M \text{ has an obligation, } i \text{ not to prevent } m \text{ from } A \text{-ing.}
\]

The first conjunct of (E) may be aptly called 'the principle of correlative rights'. From Axiom 1 and the first conjunct of (E), it follows that (T):

\[
(T): \quad \text{If } m \text{ has an obligation, } i \text{ to } A, \text{ then } m \text{ has a right, } i \text{ not to be prevented from } A \text{-ing by any other member of } M. \quad ^2
\]

Axiom 2 entails that if \( m \) has a right, \( i \) to \( A \), then \( m \)'s right, \( i \) not to be prevented from \( A \)-ing by any other member of \( M \) is necessarily equivalent to every other member of \( M \) having an obligation, \( i \) not to prevent \( m \) from \( A \)-ing.

Note that \( m \)'s having an absolute obligation, \( i \) to \( A \) is independent of every other member of \( M \) having an absolute obligation, \( i \) not to prevent \( m \) from \( A \)-ing. Whether or not \( m \) has an absolute obligation, \( i \) to \( A \) depends upon whether or not \( m \)'s \( A \)-ing would confront \( m \) with a conflict of duties as a member of \( M \). It is possible that while \( m \)'s \( A \)-ing does not give rise to a conflict of duties for \( m \) as a member of \( M \), another member's not preventing \( m \) from \( A \)-ing does involve that other member in a conflict of duties as a member of \( M \). In such a case, although \( m \) has an absolute obligation, \( i \) to \( A \), the other member of \( M \) does not have an an absolute obligation, \( i \) not to prevent \( m \) from \( A \)-ing. Version (2) of PRO implies no more than that \( \text{vis à vis} \) any other member of \( M \) who would not be confronted with a conflict of duties