

Forum

The morality of promising made in good faith

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In their essay, "The immorality of promising" (*The Journal of Value Inquiry* 27(1993): 81–84), Richard M. Fox and Joseph P. DeMarco claimed that "Promising is, as a rule, immoral: it is either an advance declaration of the intention to do the immoral under knowable or unknowable contingencies, or else it is a deceptive, and thereby immoral, offer of assurance" (p. 81). Although I agree with the authors' position that promising creates valid expectations that the assured act will be carried out by the promisor and that promising can potentially be morally problematic, I disagree that the act of promising is, in itself, immoral.

Fox and DeMarco asserted that the purpose of making a promise is to assure that the promised act will be carried out. However, this self-imposed moral duty creates a dilemma in that people cannot justifiably obligate themselves in advance to keeping promises in the face of other possible moral obligations. The authors stated that placing conditions on whether the promise will be carried out or vetoed due to other overriding moral considerations is immoral. Because we cannot have it both ways (making a promise with the condition that it may be broken), Fox and DeMarco's solution is to make the act of promising immoral. This reasoning appears to be circumventing the dilemma by taking the easy way out.

The act of promising occurs on two levels: (1) on an interpersonal level (between two or more people), and (2) on a self or personal level (a promise to oneself). I postulate that promises delivered in good faith are not immoral; conversely, they are morally extra or beyond what is required (provided that the goal or purpose of the intended act is good). Since the act of promising characterized by genuine and sincere intent is morally extra, it is not a necessary obligation on the part of the promisor. The good faith promise is characterized by (1) the moral agent who possesses genuine, sincere, and honest intent to carry out the promised act, (2) the absence of deception, concealment, or false assurance by the moral agent, and (3) the acceptance of the promise by the promisee which in turn is accepted in good faith.

As an interpersonal exchange between two or more people, responsibility

co-exists. The locus of responsibility not only resides with the promisor, but also with the promisee. That is, in no way should the promisee expect a 100 percent guarantee that a promise made in good faith should be carried out without allowing the other to take into account other possible moral considerations which the promisor may unforeseeably encounter in the future. To accept such unquestioning expectation from another is to accept the promise in bad faith. Equally, an individual who delivers a promise and believes that the special moral obligation cannot be broken no matter what conditions may arise in the future is upholding the promise in bad faith. Promises are not absolute commitments to uphold the promised action; it is bad faith to believe the assumption that they are even when given assurance by another.

As an example, let us consider the relational institution of marriage. Vows are exchanged and promises are mutually delivered and accepted as a meaningful ritual representing the obligation of lifelong love. The several promises directly expressed and implicit in the act of marriage are most often articulated and espoused in good faith. However, some of these promises might not be sustained over the course of the marriage. To expect or accept that another's views, actions, emotions, intellect, personality, etc. will not change over the course of time through that person's unique individual, interpersonal, and social development, is to experience the marriage in bad faith. Equally, promises made on a personal level, that is, promises made to oneself which are delivered and intended in good faith, are sometimes unfulfilled due to myriad circumstances over which one may or may not have any control. For example, obese people who promise themselves they will lose weight only to be perennially disillusioned by the inability to lose weight, are not committing an immoral act. Obese individuals who promise themselves to lose weight might well behave correctly in every manner (for example, following a regulated diet, habitual exercise regime, and life-style changes), but still cannot lose weight due to biological or psychological conditions that predispose the person to have a heavy weight. How could that person say a promise made to oneself in good faith is immoral?

While Fox and DeMarco nicely point out that promising can lead to problematic moral dilemmas, their shortcoming is to label promising as immoral even when delivered in good faith. Within this framework, promises are not immoral at all; conversely, they are morally extra, provided the goal is in service of the good. Good faith promises are moral acts within themselves, representing an impassioned commitment to the moral intention under consideration. Promises characterized within an interpersonal context should assume a dual responsibility, while self-promises are contingent on sincere and honest intent followed by good faith actions. Promises delivered in good faith, and equally, promises accepted in good faith are ethically noble and evince their inextricable relationship to human value.