

Necessitation, Constraint, and Reluctant Action: Obligation in Wolff, Baumgarten, and Kant

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Introduction

Kant conceives of obligation in a specific way, namely in terms of imperatives, which, as he explains in the *Groundwork*, are commands that “are expressed by an *ought*, and by this indicate the relation of an objective law of reason to a will that, according to its subjective constitution, is not necessarily determined by it (a necessitation).” (4:413)² As this passage indicates, Kant understands the imperatival character of obligation itself in a particular way, namely in terms of *necessitation* (*Nöthigung*) or, as he clarifies in many other both published and unpublished texts, in terms of *constraint* (*Zwang*) to actions that we perform only *reluctantly* (*ungern*).³ What might not be obvious to present-day readers about this constellation of concepts, including the language of imperatives⁴, is that they are also used to describe obligation in the writings of Alexander Baumgarten, whose textbooks Kant regularly used in the classroom.⁵ However, while a quick comparison of their

¹ The ordering of our names is purely alphabetical.

² References to Kant’s works cite the volume and page number of his *Gesammelte Schriften* (see Kant 1900ff.). We follow the English translations of Kant’s texts in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* and indicate where these translations have been modified. All translations from Wolff’s works are our own, and all the translations of Baumgarten utilize the recent English translations by Courtney Fugate and John Hymers. (see Baumgarten 2013 and 2020) We also use the following abbreviations throughout this chapter: DE = Wolff’s *German Ethics* (2006); DM = Wolff’s *German Metaphysics* (2003); PE = Wolff’s *Psychologia Empirica* (1738); PM = Wolff’s *Philosophia moralis sive ethica* (1750-53); PPU = Wolff’s *Philosophia Practica Universalis* (1738); GV = Wolff’s *Grundsätze des Natur- und Völkerrechts* (1754); BM = Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics* (2013); BI = Baumgarten’s *Elements* (2020).

³ See esp., 6:379 and Section 3 below where we reference many of these passages. In the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, necessitation (*Nöthigung*) and constraint (*Zwang*) are inconsistently translated, such that *Nöthigung*, for instance, is sometimes rendered as ‘constraint’. (see Kant 1997, 377n) In this paper, we consistently translate *Nöthigung* and *Zwang* and their variants as ‘necessitation’ and ‘constraint’ respectively.

⁴ See Schwaiger (1999), 166-7. Since Schwaiger and others have already investigated the historical roots of Kant’s language of imperatives, we do not engage with this topic in this paper.

⁵ In addition to Baumgarten’s *Initia philosophiae practicae primae acroamaticae* (*Elements of First Practical Philosophy*) and his *Ethica philosophica* (*Philosophical Ethics*), both of which Kant used in his lectures on moral philosophy, Kant also used parts of Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics* as the foundation for his lectures on metaphysics, natural theology, and anthropology. See Naragon (2006) and Bacin (2015).

writings makes it clear that Kant preserves some of Baumgarten's terminology, a closer look reveals that Kant understands the relationship between obligation, necessitation, and constraint to reluctant action very differently than Baumgarten: whereas Baumgarten argues that moral or natural obligation is *compatible* with a certain kind of constraint, but it need not have this character, Kant argues that obligation *necessarily* involves constraint to reluctant action.⁶ Not only this, by conceiving of natural obligation as compatible with constraint, Baumgarten himself departed in a subtle but significant way from his most important predecessor, Christian Wolff, for whom constraint is *incompatible* with natural obligation. Although work has already been done to better understand Kant's conception of obligation within its historical context⁷, thus far little attention has been paid to how Kant and his predecessors understand the relationship between obligation, necessitation, and constraint to reluctant action.⁸ Accordingly, our aim in this paper is to sketch the distinct ways in which Wolff, Baumgarten, and Kant understand the relationship between these concepts in an effort to illustrate the subtle ways in which their conceptions of obligation differ from each another.

The paper proceeds in three sections. In section one (1) we sketch Wolff's theory of obligation, according to which obligating a person involves connecting a motive to an action. We then illustrate that although Wolff sees constraint as *incompatible* with natural obligation, he nonetheless says that it is compatible with a certain sort of divine or human obligation. In particular, we show that Wolff believes that obligation is compatible with constraint only when obligation involves the threat of punishment, and that, in this case, we act without pleasure or reluctantly. In section two (2) we argue that Baumgarten makes both some small, mostly terminological changes to Wolff's theory of choice, as well as some more significant changes to Wolff's concepts of constraint and reluctant action: for Baumgarten, acting reluctantly is to act in one way while simultaneously being impelled to act in opposing directions. We illustrate how this enables Baumgarten to say that constraint and reluctant action are compatible with natural obligation as well. At the same time, we

⁶ As we go on to show below, Baumgarten and Wolff distinguish between natural, divine, and human obligation, where natural obligation is equivalent to moral obligation. Indeed, in this paper we take natural and moral obligation to be equivalent for Wolff and Baumgarten. Although it is not a focus of ours in this paper, Kant distinguishes between moral and legal obligation, i.e., the obligation of virtue and right respectively. With respect to Kant's position, our focus is more general, namely to illustrate that obligation most generally considered, and therefore both moral and legal obligation, involves constraint to action we perform only reluctantly.

⁷ See e.g., Klemme (2018) and Schwaiger (2009).

⁸ For instance, in the scholarship on Wolff's conception of obligation, see e.g., Hüning (2004a), (2004b), (2015); Klemme (2007); and Poser (1980), there is no discussion of reluctant action in relation to constraint and obligation. The literature on Baumgarten's ethics is rather small and focuses on very specific topics. Aichele (2005) for instance, focuses on Baumgarten's 'juridical' conception of conscience, whereas Osawa (2018) focuses on the role of God. For some discussion of Kant's conception of obligation as involving constraint, see Alexy (2015), Baxley (2010, Ch. 3; 2015), Sensen (2015), and Villiez (2015).

emphasize that Baumgarten only believes that natural obligation *occasionally* takes on the form of constraint, and thus that it sometimes does not have this character. Finally, in section three (3) we illustrate that although Kant preserves much of Baumgarten's terminology, such as the language of *necessitation*, Kant departs from Baumgarten by conceiving of obligation as *necessarily* involving constraint: as Kant's reply to Schiller's famous objection reveals, obligation must take on the character of constraint to reluctant action on account of the kinds of beings we are, namely beings who are both rational and natural, and thus who possess inclinations that always threaten to impel us in directions that oppose morality. The result, we hope, is a more nuanced understanding of how these three thinkers understand obligation by means of a better appreciation of the subtle ways in which their theories differ from each another.

1. Wolff

Wolff presents his theory of obligation as based on two other more fundamental positions he holds: 1) his theory of the good, and 2) his theory of the will.⁹ First, according to Wolff's theory of the good, actions and omissions¹⁰ are good or evil in themselves and by nature, and not by virtue of the decision of a human or divine will. (DE §5) More specifically, Wolff argues that actions are good or evil by virtue of their naturally occurring consequences, that is, based on whether they make what he calls the internal and external states of human beings (both one's own and those of others) more perfect or more imperfect. (DE §2-5)¹¹ For Wolff, *all* actions are either good or evil in this way, and no action is morally indifferent. (DE §3)¹² Second, according to Wolff's theory of the will, when we represent an object as good, our soul becomes inclined [*geneigt*] towards or wills the object. (DM §492) Representing an object as good therefore functions as what Wolff calls a reason or motive [*Bewegungsgrund*] (DM §496)¹³ for willing an action and representing an object as evil is a

⁹ In the Preface to the first edition of the *German Ethics* (see Wolff 2006), for instance, Wolff clarifies that he proceeds in line with the mathematical method (Preface, unpaginated), according to which everything that comes later is grounded on what comes before, and the first chapter of part one proceeds by first discussing his theory of the good (§2-5) and theory of the will (§6-7) before moving to his theory of obligation (§8-11). For a discussion of the more general aspect of how Wolff's psychology fits into his metaphysics, see Goubet (2021).

¹⁰ For the sake of simplicity, we focus overwhelmingly on action in this paper.

¹¹ We cannot discuss the central notion of perfection in the context of our chapter. See for instance Bacin (2017); Schwaiger (2011, 155-165), and Schwaiger (2018) for a discussion.

¹² See Favaretti (forthcoming) who argues that Wolff revised this position in his later Latin works.

¹³ In the first index to the *German Metaphysics* (unpaginated), Wolff states explicitly that *Bewegungsgrund* is his German term for the Latin *motivum*. We therefore adopt 'motive' as a translation for this term.

motive for ‘nilling’ an action, i.e., being disinclined towards an object. (DM §493)¹⁴ Indeed, Wolff argues that willing or nilling an action *requires* that we represent an object as either good or evil, thus if we performed an action in the past, for example, then we must have represented something as good. (DE §6-7)¹⁵

Strictly speaking, to represent an object as good is merely to will and be inclined towards the object, whereas choice, i.e., making a decision and *acting*, requires representing an object as *best*, i.e., the most good on balance with other possible options. (see PPU II, §335) Wolff makes this point clear with the analogy of the scale [*Wage*]: when I represent something as not only good, but as the most good on balance with other possible options, I act; when I represent something as the most evil, I have an aversion towards or ‘nill’ the object; and when I represent an object as neither good nor evil or as equally good and evil, I omit acting altogether.¹⁶ (see DM §509-10) The distinction between mere willing and choice corresponds to what Wolff refers to as the ‘ancient’ distinction between the antecedent [*vorbergebend*] and consequent [*nachfolgend*] will (DM §504): the antecedent will is ‘incomplete’ in the sense that it does not yet possess sufficient enough reasons for choice, whereas the consequent will is ‘complete’ because it does possess sufficient reasons. (DM §504 and see PE §919-920) Put differently, the antecedent will does not yet have enough motives to represent something as the most good or evil, and thus cannot yet act or make a decision, whereas the consequent will possesses sufficient motives to represent something as the most good or evil and thus makes a decision, choose, or act. (see PE §919-20)

As mentioned, Wolff presents his theory of obligation as a consequence of his theory of the good and of the will and defines obligation in terms of connecting a motive with an action: “Obligating someone to do, or omit, something is nothing other than connecting a motive of willing or nilling to it.” (DE §10)¹⁷ Wolff offers the example of the sovereign obligating subjects not to steal by connecting the punishment of hanging to the action of stealing. (DE §8) In this example, obligation takes place by means of the sovereign connecting evil (the punishment of hanging) to an

¹⁴ As we discuss in more detail shortly, Wolff distinguishes between ‘nilling’ [*nicht wollen*] an action, i.e., being disinclined towards an object, and omitting [*lassen*] an action, i.e., neither willing nor nilling an object. (DM §494)

¹⁵ Things are a little more complicated than this in that in his early, German writings, Wolff applies ‘motive’ (*Bewegungsgrund*) to both distinct representations of the intellect as well as for confused representations of the senses, but in the later Latin writings he reserves *motivum* for reasons for action that are distinct representations only. (see PE §890 and §670) We cannot discuss the distinction between distinct and confused cognition in detail here. For discussion, see McQuillan (2017) and Schierbaum (2022).

¹⁶ To be sure, nilling an object does not necessarily require the active avoidance of an object, it can result in omission as well.

¹⁷ For discussion of Wolff’s conception of natural obligation and its cognitive and other requirements, see Hüning (2021).

action (stealing), such that if a subject were to properly cognize the evil connected to this action¹⁸, they would have an aversion to or nill stealing. In the first instance, however, Wolff argues that it is *nature* that obligates us to perform actions that are good and to omit those that are evil, because, as already mentioned, actions have good and evil consequences connected to them *by nature*. (DE §9) More generally, however, he argues that we can distinguish between different kinds of obligation based on the source of the connection between a motive and a reason for acting: if nature is the source of this connection, then we are talking about natural obligation; if the source is God, then divine obligation; and if human beings, then human obligation. (DE §18)

An important, but implicit, aspect of Wolff's theory of obligation, which will be important once we turn to Baumgarten, is that there is a sense in which obligation can be described in terms of 'making an action necessary': if obligation amounts to connecting a motive to an action, and human beings necessarily act in accordance with what they represent to be best, then obligation involves making it *morally* necessary that a person act in a certain way.¹⁹ Indeed, in the *German Metaphysics* Wolff admits that there is a sense in which human beings act in accordance with what they represent as best *with necessity* (DM §521): whatever we represent as best *determines* that we act accordingly. Put differently: if we represent an object as not only good but the best among the possible options available to us, then unless something better comes along, we *necessarily* choose that object. At the same time, and similar to Leibniz's defense of freedom in the *Theodicy* (see e.g., Leibniz 2007, 63), Wolff argues that the necessity involved in choosing the best, and thus the necessity involved in obligation as well, is compatible with freedom because alternative actions are still *absolutely* possible in the sense that there is nothing logically contradictory about us choosing another course of action. (DM §515-16) Thus, Wolff argues that it is merely *certain [gewiss]* (DM §517) or *hypothetically* necessary that we act in accordance with what we represent as best, but not *absolutely* necessary in the sense that alternative courses of action are absolutely impossible.²⁰ Accordingly, Wolff defines freedom in

¹⁸ Indeed, Wolff's theory of obligation accords an important role to our knowledge of good and evil. For a discussion see Walschots (forthcoming).

¹⁹ Admittedly, things are much more complicated than this. In order for obligation to work, a number of further conditions must be met. As Wolff himself makes clear in his example of stealing, for example (DE §8), the good or evil connected to an action must follow with the same kind of necessity possessed by naturally occurring consequences. Furthermore, the motive connected to an action presumably must be of a sufficient strength, otherwise it would have insufficient influence on our choice (this is a point Baumgarten stresses, as we discuss below). Finally, and as already mentioned, human beings must be aware of the good or evil connected to an action in order for such a connection to influence their choice. See Walsh (forthcoming) for a recent discussion of Wolff's account of obligation.

²⁰ See DM §575 where Wolff distinguishes between these two kinds of necessity. While he is clear there that "the necessity of morals", i.e., the kind of necessity involved in obligation, is a version of hypothetical necessity, *moral* necessity can be distinguished from other kinds of hypothetical necessity, such as the necessity of nature, in that the former is *normative* and the latter *descriptive*.

terms of the capacity [*Vermögen*] of the soul “to choose from two equally possible things that which pleases it the most” (DM §519), as well as in terms of a certain kind of *self-determination* (DM §519), namely where the soul is determined to action by its *internal* representations of the good rather than by anything *external* to the soul. (DM §518-19)

Although freedom is compatible with a certain kind of necessity, Wolff argues that free action is antithetical to *constraint* [*Zwang*]. As Wolff states in the *Vorbericht* to the third edition of the *German Ethics*: “My entire moral science [*Moral*] is built on the nature of the free will and knows of no constraint [*Zwange*]” (§10). When discussing the analogy of the scale, for instance, Wolff addresses the objection that the analogy implies that choice is necessary. (DM §510) He replies by clarifying that motives do not “necessitate [*nöthigen*]” or compel the soul to choose: “For the question is not whether motives are a constraint [*ein Zwang*], but whether one of them is stronger than the other.” (DM §510) Wolff goes even further and argues that the will *cannot* be constrained: “because we can will nothing except what we hold to be good, and we can will nothing, except what we regard as evil (§506), but the understanding cannot be constrained [*gezwungen*] in its representations; so it is in no way possible to constrain [*zwingen*] the will.” (DM §522) Wolff primarily has what he calls ‘external’ (*äusserlich*) constraint in mind here, that is, constraint by a force external to the soul. (see PPU I §579) This sort of constraint takes place either when we are constrained by something external to the soul but nonetheless internal to the human being (such as when bodily processes force us to twitch, for instance), or when we are constrained by something external to the human being entirely (such as when another person forces one’s hand to do something). (DM §519, §987 and see GV §4 and PPU I §580) Wolff also claims that it makes no sense to conceive of acting freely in terms of ‘internal’ (*innerlich*) constraint either (DM §987), because by determining ourselves to act when we act according to our representation of the best, we are acting *voluntarily* (*willkürlich*) (DE §518) and thus are not constrained to act.

A main reason why Wolff conceives of action in accordance with our representation of the best as antithetical to constraint is that he conceives of constraint as the exact opposite of acting *gladly* [*gerne*]. For Wolff, representing the good is connected to the experience of pleasure [*Lust*] (DM §404), which means that when we act based on the representation of the best, we seemingly always act gladly [*gerne*] or with pleasure. (DM §987) Since freedom simply means choosing what pleases us the most (DM §519), as noted above, Wolff argues that it makes no sense to conceive of acting in accordance with the representation of the best, i.e., freely, as being constrained, for: “who would want to say that they are constrained to that which they do gladly?” (DM §987) This means, of

course, that constraint can only take place if we act *ungladly*, without pleasure, or reluctantly (as *ungern* is often translated). Wolff argues that this only happens in a very specific case, namely when we prefer a lesser to a greater evil. More specifically, Wolff argues that when we prefer a lesser to a greater evil, we intentionally regard a lesser evil *as* good “in so far as one regards it as a means to avoid greater evil, even if one does not hold it to be good in itself.” (DM §507) In such cases, what we regard as ‘best’ we take to be evil in itself but we nonetheless represent it *as* good only because it is both a lesser evil and a means to avoid an even greater evil. Although we still act in accordance with our representation of the best in such instances, we do not act *gladly* because we think that what we recognize as ‘good’ or ‘best’ is not good in itself, thus we do not simultaneously experience the pleasure that would occur if we thought the object was good in itself. Accordingly, when we choose a lesser evil to avoid a greater one, this is the only case where, on Wolff’s view, we voluntarily choose the best but we act *ungladly*, without pleasure, or reluctantly.

In line with the above, Wolff argues that only one specific kind of obligation is compatible with constraint, namely the kind that involves choosing a lesser evil to avoid a greater one. As Wolff explains in the preface to the second edition of the *German Ethics*: “With this obligation [natural obligation], the human being is entirely free in its actions and it is never freer than when it acts in accordance with it: on the other hand, with all remaining obligation we encounter a kind of constraint.” (unpaginated, see also DE §946) Later on in the *German Ethics*, Wolff clarifies that he conceives of the fear of punishment as a variety of external constraint (DE §1023), and thus that both human and divine obligation can involve constraint insofar as they involve the fear of punishment. Indeed, if fear of punishment is our primary motive for nilling an action, for example, then we find ourselves in precisely the unique scenario described above, namely that of regarding an action we take to be evil (such as *not* stealing, if we mistakenly think that stealing is good) as good only in order to avoid a greater evil (being hanged, i.e., the punishment for stealing). (see GV §5 and PPU I §581) As mentioned, however, because we believe that the action we recognize as good is not good in itself, we do not experience the associated pleasure and thus do not act gladly. Insofar as we do not act gladly in this scenario, it is compatible with constraint, since constraint is just the opposite of acting gladly. (DM §987) As perplexing as it may sound, an important consequence of this picture is that there is a sense in which performing these obligations is *less free* [*minus libera*] (PPU §589) than others: if freedom is defined as choosing that which pleases us the most, and in cases where we act on threat of punishment we act *ungladly*, without pleasure, or reluctantly, then these cases are less free. Indeed, Wolff is explicit that it is less than ideal for obligation to involve constraint because it

treats human beings like cattle (DE, Second Preface), and thus does nothing to perfect the will. (see PM II §138) Accordingly, it is only via natural obligation that human beings can achieve true *virtue* rather than the mere external habit of goodness. (PPU I §321)²¹

In summary, Wolff conceives of obligation as compatible with constraint and reluctant action in a very specific case, namely where we choose a lesser evil to avoid an even greater one, which takes place when we are obligated by means of the threat of punishment. For Wolff, natural obligation, where we are obligated by nature and are determined by our own representation of the good, is antithetical to constraint, for we always perform these obligations with pleasure or gladly. In the next section, we illustrate that Baumgarten makes a subtle but significant change to Wolff's view: he understands reluctant action more broadly than Wolff and argues that a specific kind of constraint is compatible with natural obligation as well. This is an important change, we suggest, among other reasons because it is Baumgarten's broader understanding of reluctant action that Kant will adopt, as will be discussed in section 3.

2. Baumgarten

In the Preface to the *Elements*, Baumgarten states that one of his aims is that of “abridging” and “explaining” (BI *VI) Wolff's works on universal practical philosophy. As a result, the general picture of Baumgarten's moral philosophy that we are offered in Chapter 1, Section I of the *Elements*, entitled ‘Obligation in general,’ is strikingly similar to that of Wolff, especially when it comes to Baumgarten's theory of the good: Baumgarten argues, for instance, that actions are good by virtue of the consequences or “implications” (BI §32-3) they have on the body, soul, and external state of human beings (BI §34, 45); and thus that some actions are good and evil in themselves and by nature, which Baumgarten calls “objective” goodness, in contrast to those that are good through the will of another (whether human or divine), which he calls “subjective” goodness (BI §36); that, on this basis, we can distinguish between “natural” and “positive” obligation, i.e., those to which we are obligated by nature and the positive institution of a being's will, respectively (BI §29); and that *all* actions are naturally either good or evil by virtue of the fact that all actions have natural ‘implications.’ (BI §32) There are of course some important differences between their moral philosophies, and in this section, we illustrate a select few such differences that directly concern our

²¹ This is why moral obligation is natural obligation, namely because only this kind of obligation perfects the will.

purposes in this paper.²² We illustrate that while Baumgarten makes some small, mostly terminological, changes to Wolff's theory of choice, a more significant difference concerns the relationship between obligation and constraint to reluctant action.

The way in which Baumgarten's theory of choice subtly departs from Wolff's is signaled in his definition of obligation: "One who connects the overriding impelling causes [*caussas impulsivas*] with a free determination renders its opposite morally impossible, and therefore renders the former free determination morally necessary, and indeed, obligates it." (BI §13) The point of departure is the language of 'impelling causes', which replaces Wolff's language of motives (*Bewegungsgründe*).²³ In the *Metaphysics*, Baumgarten argues that, in line with the principle of sufficient reason (see BM §22)²⁴, we do not simply desire indiscriminately but always for a reason, thus there are *grounds* of desire, and he calls these grounds the 'impelling causes' of desire or 'incentives':

"Whoever desires or averts intends the production of some perception. Hence, the perceptions containing the ground of this sort of intention are the impelling causes of desire and aversion, and thus they are called the INCENTIVES OF THE MIND <*ELATERES ANIMI*>." (BM §669, see also §342)

More specifically, what grounds desire is cognition, i.e., knowledge: "KNOWLEDGE, insofar as it contains the incentives of the mind, is MOVING [...] and insofar as it does not contain these incentives, it is INERT [...]." (BM §669) Baumgarten agrees with Wolff that we only ever desire what we perceive to be good (see BM §665), thus it is knowledge of the good (see BM §100) that is moving or grounds desire. Furthermore, the way in which we know the good determines the nature of desire: if our knowledge is obscure or confused, then our incentives are "stimuli" (BM §677) and we sensitively desire (see BM §676–§688), but if our knowledge is clear and distinct, then our incentives are "motives" (BM §690) and we rationally desire or "will." (see BM §689–§699)²⁵

Similar to Wolff, Baumgarten distinguishes between merely *desiring* what we perceive to be good and *choosing* what we judge to be best. To capture this distinction between desire and choice, Baumgarten also makes use of the distinction between antecedent (*antecedens*) and consequent

²² See Schwaiger's landmark discussion of some of these most relevant differences in Schwaiger (2011, 118-121; 151-154).

²³ According to Schwaiger (2011, 120, fn.343), the notion of 'impelling causes' is broader than Wolff's notion of 'motive' in that the former comprises rational and sensitive motives alike, whereas the latter, strictly speaking, only comprises rational motives. See also Carboncini (2021, 205-207) and Dyck (2018) for a discussion of Baumgarten's reception and development of Wolff's psychology.

²⁴ For an illuminating discussion of Baumgarten's commitment and specific take on the Principle of Sufficient Reason, also in relation to both Wolff and Kant, see Fugate (2014).

²⁵ For a more in-depth discussion, see Schwaiger (2011, 75-77) and Pimpinella (2001).

(*consequens*) volition, such that antecedent volition involves “incomplete” impelling causes and is “inefficacious”, whereas consequent volition involves “complete” impelling causes and is “efficacious”. (see BM §695 and §671) The point is that merely perceiving the good or desiring is inefficacious will, whereas choice is efficacious willing.²⁶ For Baumgarten, we only ever choose what we ‘prefer’, that is, what we judge to be the *best* among the goods known to us. (see BM §726 and §697) More specifically, what determines choice is what Baumgarten calls the “state of preponderance” (BM §674), that is, the greater total that one or many impelling causes have on balance with the impelling causes that speak for alternative courses of action. Thus, although his terminology is somewhat different, Baumgarten offers a model of choice that is quite similar to Wolff’s, according to which choice is “*determined* according to preference” (BM §726, our emphasis), i.e., we *necessarily* choose what we judge to be best or what we prefer.

This slightly modified account of choice helps explain Baumgarten’s definition of obligation, which, again, is as follows: “One who connects the overriding impelling causes with a free determination renders its opposite morally impossible, and therefore renders the former free determination morally necessary, and indeed, obligates it.” (BI §13) Baumgarten is therefore clear that to obligate someone involves not only connecting a motive or impelling cause to an action or free determination, but connecting ‘overriding’ impelling causes, that is, impelling causes that are sufficiently strong such that, so long as they are correctly cognized, they would produce ‘preference’ and cause a person to choose and act accordingly. (BI §12) Indeed, Baumgarten is much more explicit than Wolff in saying that obligation involves making an action necessary: “One who obligates renders a free determination morally necessary.” (BI §12) It is even likely that Baumgarten coined a new Latin word, namely *necessitation* (*necessitatio*),²⁷ to capture the fact that obligation involves rendering an action morally necessary. To be sure, and as is the case for Wolff, a role for freedom is preserved here in that choice only follows the judgement of what is best with *hypothetical* necessity (see BM §724), not absolute necessity since the opposite of what I necessarily choose according to my judgement of the best is still absolutely or logically possible (see BM §102). Baumgarten therefore defines freedom as desiring or willing “according to one’s own preference.” (BM §719)

The aspect of Baumgarten’s theory of obligation that we wish to focus on for our purposes in this paper is the relationship between obligation and constraint to reluctant action. Generally

²⁶ See BM §669, §671, §675, and §695. In BM §675 Baumgarten distinguishes between three senses of efficacious and inefficacious willing. We are only referring to the third sort here, because only it corresponds to the distinction between mere willing and choice.

²⁷ See Schwaiger (2009, 69-70) and Schwaiger (2011, 119).

speaking, Baumgarten defines both *necessitation* (*necessitatio*, Nöthigung) and constraint (*coactio*, *Zwang*) as “the alteration of something from contingent to necessary.” (BM §701)²⁸ He quickly clarifies, however, that *absolute* necessitation or constraint, whereby “something contingent in itself would alter into something absolutely necessary” is impossible, thus “nothing can be altered into something absolutely necessary”, including human action. (BM §702) What is possible, in the first instance, is “external” necessitation or constraint, i.e., “constraint from without” (BM §707). If this amounts to what Baumgarten calls ‘unqualified’ external constraint, such as when one human being is pushed by another, then the substance (the human being who is pushed) ‘suffers’ something and does not itself act. As such, both absolute and unqualified external constraint are incompatible with action, which Baumgarten defines as a substance acting “through its own power” (§210), rather than by means of something external to it. When action takes place “through the nature of a substance” (BM §710) itself, such as when a plant’s leaves face the sun or the human body pumps blood, this is “internal necessitation” or “internal physical constraint.” (BM §710) However, while internal necessitation is compatible with action, it is incompatible with *free* action because internal necessitation is for an action to be “physically necessary.” (BM §710)

In the *Elements*, Baumgarten argues that only a very specific kind of constraint is compatible with free action, and therefore obligation as well. Indeed, Baumgarten’s discussion of constraint in the *Elements* begins where the *Metaphysics* ends, namely by clarifying that both absolute and unqualified external constraint “do not belong to free actions” and thus they cannot be called “moral constraints,” nor are they “obligations.” (BI §50) He argues that only “INTERNAL MORAL CONSTRAINT, in which a person is said to constrain himself” (BI §51) is compatible with obligation because only this kind of constraint is both compatible with and presupposes freedom. (BI §51) Internal moral constraint “occurs whenever we connect overriding impelling causes with a certain one of our free determinations.” (BI §52) The idea is that, distinct from internal physical constraint, internal moral constraint involves a substance (such as a human being) acting according to preference, i.e., ‘freely’ as opposed to ‘physically.’ Essential here is that we produce this preference ourselves: “INTERNAL MORAL CONSTRAINT’ ... occurs whenever we connect overriding impelling causes with a certain one of our free determinations.” (BI §51) Baumgarten’s point, of course, is not we can create obligations at our own discretion, but rather that we can come

²⁸ Although Baumgarten suggests in this passage that necessitation and constraint are interchangeable concepts, they cannot be; as we go on to show below, Baumgarten allows for some instances of obligation or moral necessitation, to *lack* constraint. (see e.g., BM §723).

to see what our obligations are ourselves. We come to realize what is best and thereby ascertain what we prefer by counting or “weighing” the impelling causes in favour of or against various actions, which Baumgarten calls “DELIBERATING.” (BM §697)²⁹

A key point to stress about this picture is that internal moral constraint is compatible with natural obligation as well. Recall that natural obligation occurs when we ourselves recognize the objective goodness or evil of an action grounded in its natural implications or consequences. Thus, when we come to realize what is best by nature, there is a sense in which we ourselves produce the preference that determines choice and therefore that we constrain ourselves to perform a certain action. To be sure, moral constraint can also be “external,” namely when one person constrains another by means of “SEDUCTION”, i.e., enticements or persuasion, or “FEAR”, i.e., threats or dissuasion. (BI §52) Baumgarten calls this ‘qualified’ external moral constraint and explains that in such cases my action is *both* “produced by something else outside of me” *and* “I am said to HAVE FORCED MYSELF.” (BM §714) In both cases, however, namely in both internal moral constraint and in qualified external moral constraint, a connection is made between overriding impelling causes and a certain free determination, such that a preference is produced in the person constrained and they are thereby necessitated. Not only this, but both internal moral constraint and external qualified constraint are free because, in the case of external qualified constraint, although the overriding impelling cause is given to us from without, we ourselves nonetheless recognize it and act according to preference (BI §52), thus we can be said to constrain ourselves in this case as well.

In conceiving of natural obligation as compatible with constraint, Baumgarten departs from Wolff in a significant way. A major reason that enables Baumgarten to do so has to do with his understanding of reluctant action. Baumgarten defines constraint (*coactio*) in relation to free action, which he calls “CONSTRAINT IN THE STRICT SENSE”, in terms of “the production of a reluctant [*invitae*] action.” (BM §714) What is significant about Baumgarten’s view is that he understands reluctant action more broadly than Wolff. According to Baumgarten: “I desire or avert RELUCTANTLY [*invitus*] (ungladly [*illubenter*], against one’s will [*contra lubitum*]) when the preponderance is not very great towards preference, or when many and likewise great things seem to impel me to the opposite of that which I desire or avert.” (BM §713, translation modified) In this definition, Baumgarten does not restrict acting reluctantly to the case where one acts *ungladly* or

²⁹ Baumgarten offers a fascinating account of deliberation and proceeds to list 12 questions that one can ask oneself to assist in the process of determining what is best, such as: ‘how much good can come about from a given action and its opposite?’ and ‘how much effort is required to make these options actual?’ (BM §696)

without pleasure [*illubenter*] but expands it to refer to any case where we act in one way but are also impelled in opposing directions. This is a small but significant move because it means that a broader category of action can be described as ‘reluctant’ action. According to Baumgarten’s model of choice, a single impelling cause or incentive is just one reason among many that speaks for or grounds a desire such that, on its own, a single impelling cause merely *impels* or encourages a person to act in the way it suggests but does not determine choice. Thus, although one would necessarily choose option A, for example, if the total impelling causes speaking in its favour were greater than those that speak for, say, opposing alternatives B and C, I nonetheless remain *impelled* by the impelling causes that speak for alternatives B and C when choosing A. Put differently, if I choose A, I not only cognitively recognize the grounds speaking in favour of alternative options B and C, but these cognitive grounds continue to be *moving* and exert an impelling force on me even if I choose A. Thus, while I might necessarily choose A if it has the most cognitive reasons speaking in its favour on balance with other, alternative options, Baumgarten’s conception of reluctant action implies that I would perform A *reluctantly* if I were to be simultaneously *impelled* by strong cognitive grounds that speak for alternative options B and C. This is a much broader category of action than the one Wolff described, where reluctant action, or action performed *ungladly* or without pleasure, was limited to the case of choosing the lesser evil to avoid a greater one. While Baumgarten defines those cases as reluctant as well (see BM §713), because they involve being impelled by opposing alternatives too, he expands the definition of reluctant action to cover *all* the cases where we act in one way but we simultaneously will alternative courses of action or are impelled in an opposite direction. This is significant because it means that any instance of obligation, *including natural obligation*, that involves a person simultaneously willing an opposing course of action counts as acting *reluctantly*. Not only this, but these cases are also instances of constraint since constraint simply means “the production of a reluctant action.” (BM §714) Baumgarten’s broader sense of reluctant action therefore makes it possible for him to say that natural obligation is compatible with constraint and reluctant action as well.

By way of conclusion to this section, it should be noted that while Baumgarten conceives of obligation as *compatible* with constraint, he is clear that not *all* instances of obligation take the form of constraint. As he states towards the end of the section on moral constraint: “Sometimes all obligation is called constraint, but only very broadly and unsuitably.” (BI §55) Indeed, not all action involves being simultaneously pulled in opposite directions, thus not every action is reluctant. On the contrary, Baumgarten discusses that it is possible for a person to act with “pure pleasure” or

“sheer displeasure” (§713, see also §661), such that one *only* possesses impelling causes to either desire or avert a particular action, i.e., where one possesses no simultaneous impelling causes pulling one in opposed directions. He also says that it makes no sense to say I am simultaneously impelled in an alternative direction, and thus act reluctantly, in cases where there exists “a remarkable preponderance” (BM §713) of impelling causes. As such, when we are obligated to an action by means of impelling causes that only add to the impelling causes we already possess that speak in favour of a particular action, for example, such that we *only* experience pure pleasure or a large preponderance in relation to one option only, and where we have either none or very few and insignificant impelling causes that speak in favour of opposing alternatives, then we are obligated but *not* constrained. At the same time, the point of Baumgarten including a chapter on moral constraint in his discussion of obligation is to explain how some cases of obligation, indeed perhaps many, *can* be conceived in terms of constraint, that is, the production of reluctant action, and that natural obligation is compatible with constraint and reluctant action as well. This marks an important difference between his theory of obligation and Wolff’s.³⁰

3. Kant

One of the most fundamental ways in which Kant departs from both Wolff and Baumgarten concerns the concepts of freedom and choice. Indeed, Kant likely had both figures in mind when he refers, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, to the “otherwise acute” men who believe that there is a difference between choice being determined by representations that originate in the senses as opposed to the understanding, when in fact both sorts of representation determine choice in exactly the same way, namely by means of the *degree* of pleasure involved, thus leaving no room for the possibility of *pure* practical reason. Thus, Kant not only ridicules the psychologically determinist conception of choice common to both Wolff and Baumgarten by calling it “the freedom of a turnspit” (5:97), but he also proposes a substantially different theory of the good, according to

³⁰ It should be noted here that, strictly speaking, Wolff’s philosophy also has the resources to explain being ‘impelled’ towards opposing courses of action at the time of choosing a particular course of action: while I might necessarily choose according to what I judge to be best, for Wolff, representing something as good is not only to will it, but also to be inclined towards it, as we have seen in section 1. Thus, Wolff too might say that I could choose A while simultaneously being inclined towards B and C. The point, however, is that Wolff describes the scenario where one chooses A but remains inclined towards B and C as neither constraint nor reluctant action, and that he reserves those terms exclusively for the scenario discussed above, namely where we prefer a lesser to a greater evil.

which the goodness inherent to pleasure, which Kant calls “the agreeable”, is different in *kind* from moral good, or “the good” proper. (see e.g., 5:58)

Kant’s rejection of psychological determinism is significant because it implies that he rejects understanding obligation in terms of connecting a motive or impelling cause to an action. Put differently, Kant’s rejection of psychological determinism implies that he rejects conceiving of obligation in terms of *necessitation*, if by necessitation we mean making it necessary that a human being act in a certain way by giving them a motive that will *determine* their choice, so long as they sufficiently cognize it. Nonetheless, and as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Kant continues to understand obligation in terms of necessitation, so he must understand necessitation in a substantially revised way.

Consider the following passage from the *Groundwork*, which immediately precedes his definition of an imperative quoted at the beginning of this paper:

If, however, reason all by itself does not sufficiently determine the will, if it is also subject to subjective conditions (to certain incentives) that are not always in agreement with the objective ones; in a word, if the will does not *in itself* completely conform with reason (as is actually the case with human beings), then actions objectively recognized as necessary are subjectively contingent, and the determination of such a will, in conformity with objective laws, is *necessitation*; i.e., the relation of objective laws to a will not altogether good is represented as the determination of the will of a rational being by grounds of reason, to which this will is not, however, according to its nature necessarily obedient. (4:412-13)

As this passage indicates, Kant conceives of human choice in a drastically different way than Wolff and Baumgarten, namely he regards the human being as the kind of being that does *not* necessarily act in accordance with what they cognize to be best. (see 5:20, 5:32, 5:79, 6:222, 6:379) For Kant, only the divine or holy will is such that “*willing* already of itself necessarily agrees with the law” (4:414) and thus “would not be capable of any maxim conflicting with the moral law.” (5:23)³¹ The human will, by contrast, possesses “sensibility” which is “an obstacle to practical reason” (5:76), which makes it such that what human beings recognize as objectively necessary (i.e., how we would necessarily act if we were purely rational or possessed a holy will) is not necessarily subjectively necessary. In line with this understanding of the human will, Kant conceives of *necessitation* as

³¹ See Stern (2012, 41-99). The difference between the human and divine will for Wolff and Baumgarten is that whereas human beings necessarily act in accordance with what *appears* good, even if they might be mistaken, the divine will is only capable of distinct cognition and thus is never mistaken about what is good. (see DM §984 and BM §863ff. and §890ff.)

referring to the tension between what is objectively necessary and what is subjectively contingent; a tension that takes place in the human will only. As Kant says in the *Metaphysics of Morals*: “an imperative is a rule the representation of which *makes* necessary an action that is subjectively contingent and thus represents the subject as one that must be *necessitated* [genötigt] (*necessitiert*) to conform with the rule.” (6:222) On Kant’s view, necessitation is therefore *relational* in the sense that it signifies the relationship between the objective law of reason, on the one hand, and a subject, on the other, who possesses sensitive inclinations that often pull in a direction that opposes morality. Put differently, necessitation captures the *ideal* nature of morality, that is, the idea that, if one were perfectly rational, one would necessarily act in accordance with what is best or objectively necessary. As such, necessitation and obligation are terms that capture the *normativity* of morality, for Kant. For beings that are both rational and natural and thus who do *not* necessarily act in accordance with the objective law, to represent an action as objectively necessary is therefore to represent a subjectively contingent action *as* necessary; only in this sense does necessitation imply making an action necessary, for Kant.

Kant not only understands obligation in terms of necessitation, but he also seems to *identify* necessitation, and therefore obligation, with constraint. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, for instance, Kant claims that “all duty is necessitation [Nöthigung], a constraint [Zwang], even if this is to be self-constraint in accordance with law.” (6:401, translation modified)³² Not only this, but Kant also claims that obligation involves acting reluctantly as well. Consider the following passage from the *Metaphysics of Morals* which brings all these concepts together:

The very *concept of duty* is already the concept of a *necessitation* (constraint) of free choice through the law. This constraint may be an *external constraint* or a *self-constraint*. The moral *imperative* makes this constraint known through the categorical nature of its pronouncement (the unconditional ought). Such constraint, therefore, does not apply to rational beings as such (there could also be *holy* ones) but rather to *human beings*, rational *natural* beings, who are unholy enough that pleasure can induce them to break the moral law, even though they recognize its authority; and even when they do obey the law, they do it *reluctantly* (in the face of opposition from their inclinations), and it is in this that such *constraint* properly consists. (6:379)

³² Reminiscent of Baumgarten, Kant goes on to draw a distinction between two types of constraint to distinguish between the kind of obligation belonging to right, on the one hand, and to virtue on the other: constraint, he says, “may be an *external constraint* or a *self-constraint*.” (6:379, see also 6:381-3)

In this passage, Kant repeats the point made above, namely that the necessitation involved in obligation is a function of the human being as both a rational and a natural being with inclinations that can oppose the moral law. What he adds in this passage is that necessitation of this sort is to be understood as constraint, and that constraint “properly” consists in acting reluctantly. Not only this, but Kant also clarifies in the above passage that acting reluctantly is to act “in the face of opposition.” Kant reportedly expands on the nature of reluctant action in the *Vigilantius* lecture notes on moral philosophy, where it is said that constraint “consists in the necessitation to an action that one undertakes with reluctance . . . A thing is done reluctantly by a free being, insofar as (1) there is present in it an inclination to the opposite of what it wills to do and (2) he nevertheless does what he wills as a free being” (V 27:519). In the *Mrongovius II* lecture notes as well, we are told that Kant believes that constraint “takes place when we have an inclination to the opposite of an action” and that “constraint always presupposes a hindrance in the will.” (29:616)³³ Understanding constraint and reluctant action in this way is significant, because it implies that Kant does not have Wolff’s narrow definition of reluctant action in mind, but Baumgarten’s broader definition, according to which we act reluctantly when we act in one way but are simultaneously impelled to act in opposing ways.

A central feature of Kant’s view, in comparison with Wolff and Baumgarten, is that Kant stresses that *all* obligation involves constraint and reluctant action. In addition to the passages from his published works cited in the previous paragraph, the lecture notes report that Kant claims that “[a]ll obligation is a kind of constraint” (27:269, translation modified) and that “every obligation is forthwith associated with a moral constraint.” (27:490) This aspect of Kant’s theory of obligation is borne out in detail via his response to Schiller’s famous objection to Kant’s moral theory. In *On Grace and Dignity* (see Curran and Fricker, 2005), Schiller argues as follows: “In Kant’s moral philosophy, the idea of duty is presented with a severity that repels all graces and might tempt a weak intellect to seek moral perfection by taking the path of a somber and monkish asceticism.” (150) To put the objection more succinctly, Schiller’s primary problem with Kant’s moral theory is that duty necessarily involves constraint. Schiller believes, by contrast, that duty involves what he calls ‘grace’, that is, “harmony” (ibid., 147) with the entirety of the human being as both a natural and rational being, such that the human being would ideally always do its duty not reluctantly but ‘with pleasure’ and from inclination.³⁴ Kant’s official reply to Schiller in the *Religion* confirms that the

³³ Thanks to Jens Timmermann for giving us access to his translation of the Mrongovius II lecture notes.

³⁴ See Baxley (2010, Ch. 3) for an excellent discussion of Schiller’s objection and Kant’s reply.

disagreement, or misunderstanding, between the two authors does indeed concern the proper meaning of obligation. (see 6:23n) While Kant clarifies there that he should not be misinterpreted as saying human beings should hate the moral law, for this would lead to them shirking as many opportunities to be virtuous as possible (see also 6:484-5), he is also clear that he disagrees with Schiller that obligation “also has a certain charm (grace) about it” (27:490). More specifically, Kant argues that “it is contrary to the nature of duty to *enjoy* having duties incumbent upon one; it is *necessary*, rather, that man’s impulses should make him disinclined to fulfill the moral laws.” (27:490, our emphasis) Indeed, Kant argues that doing duty from impulse and enjoying duty would destroy obligation entirely. As he explains in the *Vorarbeiten* to the *Religion*:

If all human beings were to follow the moral law gladly [*gern*] and willingly [*willig*], just as is contained in reason and the rule, then there would be no duty, just as one cannot conceive of this law, which determined the divine will, as obligating him. Thus, if there are duties, if the moral principle in us is a command for us (a categorical imperative), then we must be regarded as necessitated to it, even without pleasure and our inclination. To do duty gladly [*gern*] and from inclination is a contradiction. (23:100)

Given the discussion above, it is clear why Kant makes this claim: it is because necessitation is *made possible* by the fact that human beings are both rational and natural, i.e., it is because we possess natural inclinations that can oppose the rational moral law that obligation necessarily involves constraint and reluctant action, that is, being obligated to act in one way but always being pulled to act in opposing ways.³⁵ Thus, as Kant says in the *Metaphysics of Morals*: “when they [human beings] do obey the law, they do it *reluctantly*.” (6:379)³⁶ *Vigilantius* contains a nice summary of Kant’s view:

A necessitation is therefore only conceivable where a contravention of the moral law is possible. ... Where there is no necessitation, there also no moral imperative, no obligation, duty, virtue, ought, or constraint is conceivable. Hence the moral laws are also called *laws of duty* because they presuppose an agent subject to impulses of nature. (27:489)

³⁵ To be sure, we agree with Baxley, (2010, 110-115), who suggests that Kant’s conception of obligation in terms of constraint is not a *phenomenological* claim about what it is like to experience obligation in every instance but is rather a *metaphysical* claim about the nature of obligation given the kinds of beings that we are. Thus, even for Kant we may not necessarily experience obligation as constraint and acting reluctantly in every instance, but only when our inclinations oppose the moral law. Kant’s point is simply that, as natural and rational beings, we can never be rid of the *possibility* that our inclinations might oppose the moral law, and for this reason obligation must always be represented as being inextricably linked with constraint and acting reluctantly.

³⁶ In fact, Kant adds in a footnote here (6:380n) that his view implies that *disobeying* the law involves reluctance as well: no human being is so unholy as to no longer be a moral being, thus from the point of view of the inclinations, the moral law always opposes their pull as well, so disobeying the moral law involves constraint and reluctant action for the human being as well.

Kant therefore departs in a significant way from both Baumgarten and Wolff: by conceiving of necessitation as expressing the tension between the natural and rational nature of human beings, Kant conceives of obligation as necessarily involving constraint and reluctant action. Indeed, compared to Wolff and Baumgarten Kant's position is somewhat radical in that, for Kant, there can be no obligation without constraint and reluctant action.

Conclusion

Our aim in this paper has been to sketch the distinct ways in which Wolff, Baumgarten, and Kant conceive of the relation between obligation, necessitation, and constraint to reluctant action. As we have seen, Wolff argues that natural obligation is *incompatible* with constraint and that only cases where we prefer the lesser to the greater evil, such as when we are obligated by the threat of punishment, are compatible with constraint and reluctant action. We have argued that Baumgarten makes a subtle but significant change to this view: Baumgarten's broader conception of reluctant action, according to which we act reluctantly when we are simultaneously impelled in opposite directions, allows him to say that natural obligation is compatible with a certain kind of constraint as well, namely internal *moral* constraint where an agent brings about a preponderance of impelling causes themselves and therefore constrains themselves. Whereas Baumgarten argues that moral obligation is *compatible* with constraint, but it need not have this character, in the final section we illustrated that Kant conceives of obligation as *necessarily* involving constraint: for Kant, obligation necessarily involves constraint to reluctant action in finite, human beings due to the presence of natural inclinations, which can at any time pull us in the opposite direction. Our analysis reveals, we believe, the central role that freedom plays in obligation for all three thinkers: Wolff, Baumgarten, and Kant rightly stress that freedom underlies obligation, thus how one conceives of this freedom has consequences on the resulting theory of obligation. If one conceives of freedom as compatible with psychological determinism, as Wolff and Baumgarten do, then the *necessitation* of obligation takes on a particular character, namely making it necessary that the person obligated act in a certain way, so long as certain conditions are fulfilled, such as sufficiently cognizing one's obligation. But if one rejects this conception of freedom, as Kant does, then obligation and necessitation take on a different character, namely it becomes the normative pull we feel as human beings to make what is subjectively contingent correspond to what is objectively necessary. We therefore believe that an even more nuanced understanding of how these figures understand freedom would reveal even

more subtle aspects of their theories of obligation³⁷, but we must reserve a discussion of this issue for another occasion.

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³⁷ For a discussion of Kant's account of freedom in relation to Wolff, Leibniz, and Crusius, see Allison (2006).

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