11. Why obey the law?

Is there a moral duty to obey the law? Do we, in other words, have a moral obligation to comply with legal rules solely because they are legal rules? This question is particularly demanding when we are faced with laws that are obviously unjust or unfair, or those laws that make irrational or unreasonable demands on us. This subject has long vexed legal and moral philosophers; this chapter examines what possible reasons there are for obeying the law. The moral basis of obedience may spring from one or more of the following four principal sources: fair play, consent, the common good, and gratitude. Each is briefly discussed.
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