

Graveside and Other Asymmetrical Promises

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Abstract: People who make graveside promises consider themselves bound by them, which raises the question of whether a promise can morally obligate a promisor directly to a promisee who cannot acknowledge the promise. I show that it can by using the theoretical framework provided by “transaction accounts” of promising. Paradigmatically, these accounts maintain that the creation of a promissory obligation requires that the promisee consent to the promise. I extend these accounts to capture promises made by proxy and self-promises, and conclude that we can make promises to absent promisees when we bear responsibility for their moral and personal development.

Keywords: graveside promise, self-promise, proxy, moral obligation, promissory obligation

1. Introduction

Examples of graveside promises—that is, promises made to people after they have died—come readily to mind.¹ We promise victims of historical atrocities or acts of terror that they will never be forgotten (consider vows to Holocaust victims, American slaves, and those who died on 9/11). We memorialize soldiers, promising to remember their service. We vow to vote in elections to honor those who secured that right. And we make more personal vows to loved ones, such as promises to work for the expansion of certain social institutions or to further a cause.² Those close to a person who died of a drug overdose might promise to get sober, while those close to a person who left behind dependents might promise they will be cared for. Graveside promises that tend

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1. I use “graveside promise” to encompass any promise made to a dead person, not limited to those made at gravesites. Note that this topic differs from that of keeping promises to the dead, which concerns promises made to people prior to their deaths.
 2. Take Myra Christopher, for instance, whose mother died at home after an extended illness. This experience prompted Christopher to promise at her mother’s grave that she would work for the expansion of hospice care. She writes, “I have spent most of my adult life working to improve care for the seriously ill and dying. My reason for doing so is personal; it’s about a promise I made at my mother’s graveside nearly 35 years ago. . . . That graveside promise I made was to spend my life making it easier for families to have the opportunity we had.” Myra J. Christopher, “A Graveside Promise to Improve Care for the Dying,” *Aging Today* 32(6) (November/December 2011): 11, 18.