

## 9.9 | *Duty*

### MORAL OBLIGATION

Not all the authors who acknowledge that man is bound by duty or moral obligation to act or to refrain from acting in certain ways explicitly employ the words “duty” or “obligation” in their ethical treatises or moral discourse. Some writers who assert that there are certain things that a person ought or ought not to do if one is going to act rightly, or certain things that one ought or ought not to desire if one is going to seek real, not merely apparent goods, make these points in the context of discussing virtue and vice rather than duty or obligation.

The reader is, therefore, referred to Section 9.10 on VIRTUE AND VICE for statements about what ought or ought not to be done or sought, which imply the existence of duties or obligations even though they are not so denominated. In the ancient world, the Roman writers rather than the Greeks stress duties and enumerate or classify them; in the modern world, the same thing is true of

the German moralists, such as Kant and Hegel, as contrasted with such English writers as Locke, Hume, and J. S. Mill.

Closely connected with this difference in emphasis is the importance accorded to law—civil, moral, and divine—in the consideration of right and wrong in human conduct. Those who lay great stress on law and obedience to it also tend to conceive acting rightly as doing one’s duty or fulfilling one’s obligation; and they also differentiate duties as legal or civil, moral, and religious according to the kind of law that one is under obligation to obey. Because of their concern with the divine law and the natural moral law as well as with eternal salvation or beatitude, Christian moralists and theologians conceive right conduct in terms of duty as well as in terms of virtue and happiness. For the relation of duty to law, the reader is referred to Section 9.3 on MORAL LAW and Section 12.1 on LAW AND LAWYERS.

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1 Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

*Ecclesiastes 12:13*

2 What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

*Micah 6:8*

3 *Hector.* You [Rhesus] owe us much. You have spurned it and to your friends in distress come with late relief.

Yet here are others, who are not our kin by blood, who came long ago, and some of them have fallen and lie buried in their mounds, who greatly kept faith with our city,

while others, in their armor, by their chariot teams, have stood whatever cold winds or thirsty heat the god sends, and still do endure it, without sleeping, as you did, snug beneath the covers.

*Euripides, Rhesus, 411*

4 No aspect of life, public or private, in business or in the home, in personal matters or in dealing with others, is without its moral duty. To discharge such duty fulfills all that is morally right. To neglect it is inherently morally wrong.

*Cicero, De Officiis, I, 2*

5 We are not born for our own sake. Our country claims a share of our lives, and our friends claim a share.

*Cicero, De Officiis, I, 7*

- 6 If any set of priorities were established to decide where we owe most of our moral duty, country and parents would be listed first. It is they that have laid us under the heaviest obligations. Next in line would be our children and the rest of the family, because they look to us alone for support and do not have any other protection. Lastly we must list our kinsmen. We live with them on good terms and their lot is pretty much cast with ours.  
Cicero, *De Officiis*, I, 17
- 7 We are obligated to respect, defend, and maintain the common bonds of union and fellowship that exist among all members of the human race.  
Cicero, *De Officiis*, I, 41
- 8 Arriving there, he [Mercury] found the Trojan prince  
New ramparts raising for the town's defense.  
A purple scarf, with gold embroider'd o'er,  
(Queen Dido's gift,) about his waist he wore;  
A sword, with glitt'ring gems diversified,  
For ornament, not use, hung idly by his side.  
Then thus, with winged words, the god began,  
Resuming his own shape: "Degenerate man,  
Thou woman's property, what mak'st thou here,  
These foreign walls and Tyrian tow'rs to rear,  
Forgetful of thy own? All-pow'rful Jove,  
Who sways the world below and heav'n above,  
Has sent me down with this severe command:  
What means thy ling'ring in the Libyan land?  
If glory cannot move a mind so mean,  
Nor future praise from flitting pleasure wean,  
Regard the fortunes of thy rising heir:  
The promis'd crown let young Ascanius wear,  
To whom th' Ausonian scepter, and the state  
Of Rome's imperial name is ow'd by fate."  
Virgil, *Aeneid*, IV
- 9 Remember that you are an actor in a drama of such sort as the Author chooses—if short, then in a short one; if long, then in a long one. If it be his pleasure that you should enact a poor man, or a cripple, or a ruler, or a private citizen, see that you act it well. For this is your business—to act well the given part, but to choose it belongs to another.  
Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, XVII
- 10 I do my duty: other things trouble me not; for they are either things without life, or things without reason, or things that have rambled and know not the way.  
Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, VI, 22
- 11 It is thy duty to order thy life well in every single act; and if every act does its duty, as far as is possible, be content; and no one is able to hinder thee so that each act shall not do its duty.—But something external will stand in the way.—Nothing will stand in the way of thy acting justly and soberly and considerately.—But perhaps some other active power will be hindered.—Well, but by acquiescing in the hindrance and by being content to transfer thy efforts to that which is allowed, another opportunity of action is immediately put before thee in place of that which was hindered, and one which will adapt itself to this ordering of which we are speaking.  
Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, VIII, 32
- 12 No man has a right to lead such a life of contemplation as to forget in his own ease the service due to his neighbour; nor has any man a right to be so immersed in active life as to neglect the contemplation of God.  
Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 19
- 13 Since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special regard to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you.  
Augustine, *Christian Doctrine*, I, 28
- 14 A precept implies the notion of duty. But it is easy for a man, especially for a believer, to understand that, of necessity, he owes certain duties to God and to his neighbour. But that in matters which regard himself and not another, man has of necessity certain duties to himself, is not so evident; for, at first glance, it seems that everyone is free in matters that concern himself. And therefore the precepts which prohibit disorders of a man with regard to himself reach the people through the instruction of men who are versed in such matters.  
Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 100, 5
- 15 It is our duty to hate, in the sinner, his being a sinner, and to love in him, his being a man capable of bliss. And this is to love him truly, out of charity, for God's sake.  
Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 25, 6
- 16 We cannot be bound beyond our powers and means. For this reason—that we have no power to effect and accomplish, that there is nothing really in our power but will—all man's rules of duty are necessarily founded and established in our will.  
Montaigne, *Essays*, I, 7,  
That Intention Is Judge
- 17 The knowledge of his duty should not be left to each man's judgment; it should be prescribed to him, not left to the choice of his reason. Otherwise, judging by the imbecility and infinite variety of our reasons and opinions, we would finally forge for ourselves duties that would set us to eating one another.  
Montaigne, *Essays*, II, 12,  
Apology for Raymond Sebond

18 Those who evade the common duties and that infinite number of thorny and many-faceted rules that bind a man of precise probity in civil life, achieve, in my opinion, a fine saving, whatever point of especial rigor they may impose on themselves. It is in a sense dying to escape the trouble of living well. They may have some other prize; but the prize of difficulty it has never seemed to me they had, nor do I think there is anything more arduous than keeping oneself straight amid the waves and rush of the world, loyally responding to and satisfying every part of one's charge.

Montaigne, *Essays*, II, 33,  
The Story of Spurina

19 Human wisdom has never yet come up to the duties that she has prescribed for herself; and if she ever did come up to them, she would prescribe herself others beyond, to which she would ever aim and aspire, so hostile to consistency is our condition.

Montaigne, *Essays*, III, 9, Of Vanity

20 Orlando. O good old man, how well in thee appears

The constant service of the antique world,  
When service sweat for duty, not for meed!  
Thou art not for the fashion of these times,  
Where none will sweat but for promotion,  
And having that, do choke their service up  
Even with the having.

Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II, iii, 56

21 Duty is subdivided into two parts: the common duty of every man, as a man or member of a state; the other, the respective or special duty of every man, in his profession, vocation, and place.

Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*,  
Bk. II, XXI, 7

22 When our passion leads us to do something, we forget our duty; for example, we like a book and read it, when we ought to be doing something else. Now, to remind ourselves of our duty, we must set ourselves a task we dislike; we then plead that we have something else to do and by this means remember our duty.

Pascal, *Pensées*, II, 104

23 The whole future is doubtless determined; but since we know not what it is, nor what is foreseen or resolved, we must do our duty, according to the reason that God has given us and according to the rules that he has prescribed for us; and thereafter we must have a quiet mind, and leave to God himself the care for the outcome. For he will never fail to do that which shall be the best, not only in general but also in particular, for those who have true confidence in him, that is, a confidence composed of true piety, a lively faith and fervent char-

ity, by virtue of which we will, as far as in us lies, neglect nothing appertaining to our duty and his service. It is true that we cannot 'render service' to him, for he has need of nothing: but it is 'serving him', in our parlance, when we strive to carry out his presumptive will, co-operating in the good as it is known to us, wherever we can contribute thereto. For we must always presume that God is prompted towards the good we know, until the event shows us that he had stronger reasons, although perhaps unknown to us, which have made him subordinate this good that we sought to some other greater good of his own designing, which he has not failed or will not fail to effect.

Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 58

24 The more laws are multiplied, the more they are despised, and all the new officials appointed to supervise them are only so many more people to break them, and either to share the plunder with their predecessors, or to plunder apart on their own. The reward of virtue soon becomes that of robbery; the vilest of men rise to the greatest credit; the greater they are the more despicable they become; their infamy appears even in their dignities, and their very honours dishonour them. If they buy the influence of the leaders or the protection of women, it is only that they may sell justice, duty, and the State in their turn: in the meantime, the people, feeling that its vices are not the first cause of its misfortunes, murmurs and complains that all its misfortunes come solely from those whom it pays to protect it from such things.

It is under these circumstances that the voice of duty no longer speaks in men's hearts, and their rulers are obliged to substitute the cry of terror, or the lure of an apparent interest, of which they subsequently trick their creatures.

Rousseau, *Political Economy*

25 I have drawn the great moral lesson, perhaps the only one of any practical value, to avoid those situations of life which bring our duties into conflict with our interests, and which show us our own advantage in the misfortunes of others; for it is certain that, in such situations, however sincere our love of virtue, we must, sooner or later, inevitably grow weak without perceiving it, and become unjust and wicked in act, without having ceased to be just and good in our hearts.

Rousseau, *Confessions*, II

26 Is not a patron . . . one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you [the Earl of Chesterfield] have been pleased to take of my labors, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; till

I am known, and do not want it. I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obligations where no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the public should consider me as owing that to a patron which Providence has enabled me to do for myself.

Johnson, *Letter to the Earl of Chesterfield*  
(Feb. 7, 1755)

27 *Johnson*. It is our first duty to serve society, and, after we have done that, we may attend wholly to the salvation of our own souls.

Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Feb. 1766)

28 *Johnson*. "Sir, you must consider that we have perfect and imperfect obligations. Perfect obligations, which are generally not to do something, are clear and positive; as, 'thou shalt not kill.' But charity, for instance, is not definable by limits. It is a duty to give to the poor; but no man can say how much another should give to the poor, or when a man has given too little to save his soul. In the same manner it is a duty to instruct the ignorant, and of consequence to convert infidels to Christianity; but no man in the common course of things is obliged to carry this to such a degree as to incur the danger of martyrdom, as no man is obliged to strip himself to the shirt in order to give charity."

Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (May 7, 1773)

29 The discipline of colleges and universities is in general contrived, not for the benefit of the students, but for the interest, or more properly speaking, for the ease of the masters. Its object is, in all cases, to maintain the authority of the master, and whether he neglects or performs his duty, to oblige the students in all cases to behave to him as if he performed it with the greatest diligence and ability. It seems to presume perfect wisdom and virtue in the one order, and the greatest weakness and folly in the other. Where the masters, however, really perform their duty, there are no examples, I believe, that the greater part of the students ever neglect theirs.

Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, V, 1

30 A private citizen may feel his interest repugnant to his duty; but it must be from a deficiency of sense or courage that an absolute monarch can separate his happiness from his glory, or his glory from the public welfare.

Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, XLVIII

31 If adversity and hopeless sorrow have completely taken away the relish for life; if the unfortunate one, strong in mind, indignant at his fate rather than desponding or dejected, wishes for death, and yet preserves his life without loving it—not from inclination or fear, but from duty—then his

maxim has a moral worth.

Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, I

32 The necessity of acting from *pure* respect for the practical law is what constitutes duty, to which every other motive must give place, because it is the condition of a will being good *in itself*, and the worth of such a will is above everything.

Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, I

33 A command to like to do a thing is in itself contradictory, because if we already know of ourselves what we are bound to do, and if further we are conscious of liking to do it, a command would be quite needless; and if we do it not willingly, but only out of respect for the law, a command that makes this respect the motive of our maxim would directly counteract the disposition commanded. That law of all laws, therefore, like all the moral precepts of the Gospel, exhibits the moral disposition in all its perfection, in which, viewed as an ideal of holiness, it is not attainable by any creature, but yet is the pattern which we should strive to approach, and in an uninterrupted but infinite progress become like to. In fact, if a rational creature could ever reach this point, that he thoroughly *likes* to do all moral laws, this would mean that there does not exist in him even the possibility of a desire that would tempt him to deviate from them; for to overcome such a desire always costs the subject some sacrifice and therefore requires self-compulsion, that is, inward constraint to something that one does not quite like to do; and no creature can ever reach this stage of moral disposition. For, being a creature, and therefore always dependent with respect to what he requires for complete satisfaction, he can never be quite free from desires and inclinations, and as these rest on physical causes, they can never of themselves coincide with the moral law, the sources of which are quite different; and therefore they make it necessary to found the mental disposition of one's maxims on moral obligation, not on ready inclination, but on respect, which *demand*s obedience to the law, even though one may not like it; not on love, which apprehends no inward reluctance of the will towards the law. Nevertheless, this latter, namely, love to the law (which would then cease to be a *command*, and then morality, which would have passed subjectively into holiness, would cease to be *virtue*) must be the constant though unattainable goal of his endeavours.

Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Pt. I, I, 3

34 *Duty!* Thou sublime and mighty name that dost embrace nothing charming or insinuating, but requirest submission, and yet seekest not to move the will by threatening aught that would arouse natural aversion or terror, but merely holdest forth a law which of itself finds entrance into the

mind, and yet gains reluctant reverence (though not always obedience), a law before which all inclinations are dumb, even though they secretly counter-work it; what origin is there worthy of thee, and where is to be found the root of thy noble descent which proudly rejects all kindred with the inclinations; a root to be derived from which is the indispensable condition of the only worth which men can give themselves?

Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Pt. I, I, 3

- 35 The majesty of duty has nothing to do with enjoyment of life; it has its special law and its special tribunal, and though the two should be never so well shaken together to be given well mixed, like medicine, to the sick soul, yet they will soon separate of themselves; and if they do not, the former will not act; and although physical life might gain somewhat in force, the moral life would fade away irrecoverably.

Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Pt. I, I, 3

- 36 Stern Daughter of the Voice of God!

O Duty! if that name thou love  
Who art a light to guide, a rod  
To check the erring, and reprove;  
Thou, who art victory and law  
When empty terrors overawe;  
From vain temptations dost set free;  
And calm'st the weary strife of frail humanity!

Wordsworth, *Ode to Duty*

- 37 In duty the individual finds his liberation; first, liberation from dependence on mere natural impulse and from the depression which as a particular subject he cannot escape in his moral reflections on what ought to be and what might be; secondly, liberation from the indeterminate subjectivity which, never reaching reality or the objective determinacy of action, remains self-enclosed and devoid of actuality. In duty the individual acquires his substantive freedom.

Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 149

- 38 I have my own stern claims and perfect circle. It denies the name of duty to many offices that are called duties.

Emerson, *Self-Reliance*

- 39 *Captain Vere*. But your scruples: do they move as in a dusk? Challenge them. Make them advance and declare themselves. Come now; do they import something like this: If, mindless of palliating circumstances, we are bound to regard the death of the master-at-arms as the prisoner's deed, then does that deed constitute a capital crime whereof the penalty is a mortal one? But in natural justice is nothing but the prisoner's overt act to be considered? How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?—Does that state

it aright? You sign sad assent. Well, I too feel that, the full force of that. It is Nature. But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King. Though the ocean, which is inviolate Nature primeval, though this be the element where we move and have our being as sailors, yet as the King's officers lies our duty in a sphere correspondingly natural? So little is that true, that in receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents. When war is declared are we the commissioned fighters previously consulted? We fight at command. If our judgments approve the war, that is but coincidence. So in other particulars. So now. For suppose condemnation to follow these present proceedings. Would it be so much we ourselves that would condemn as it would be martial law operating through us? For that law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible. Our vowed responsibility is in this: That however pitilessly that law may operate in any instances, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it.

Melville, *Billy Budd*

- 40 Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.

Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*

- 41 Man prompted by his conscience, will through long habit acquire such perfect self-command, that his desires and passions will at last yield instantly and without a struggle to his social sympathies and instincts, including his feeling for the judgment of his fellows. The still hungry, or the still revengeful man will not think of stealing food, or of wreaking his vengeance. It is possible, or as we shall hereafter see, even probable, that the habit of self-command may, like other habits, be inherited. Thus at last man comes to feel, through acquired and perhaps inherited habit, that it is best for him to obey his more persistent impulses. The imperious word *ought* seems merely to imply the consciousness of the existence of a rule of conduct, however it may have originated.

Darwin, *Descent of Man*, I, 4

- 42 What are called duties to ourselves are not socially obligatory, unless circumstances render them at the same time duties to others. The term duty to oneself, when it means anything more than prudence, means self-respect or self-development, and for none of these is any one accountable to his fellow creatures, because for none of them is it for the good of mankind that he be held accountable to them.

Mill, *On Liberty*, IV

- 43 It is a part of the notion of Duty in every one of its forms, that a person may rightfully be compelled to fulfil it. Duty is a thing which may be *exacted* from a person, as one exacts a debt. Unless we think that it may be exacted from him, we do not call it his duty. Reasons of prudence, or the interest of other people, may militate against actually exacting it; but the person himself, it is clearly understood, would not be entitled to complain.  
Mill, *Utilitarianism*, V
- 44 The feeling of "ought," of personal obligation (to take up again the train of our inquiry), has had, as we saw, its origin in the oldest and most original personal relationship that there is, the relationship between buyer and seller, creditor and ower: here it was that individual confronted individual, and that individual *matched himself against* individual. There has not yet been found a grade of civilisation so low, as not to manifest some trace of this relationship.  
Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, II, 8
- 45 Each one of us should devise *his own* virtue, *his own* categorical imperative. A people perishes if it mistakes *its own* duty for the concept of duty in general.  
Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, XI
- 46 When an exceptional human being handles the mediocre more gently than he does himself or his equals, this is not mere politeness of the heart—it is simply his *duty*.  
Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, LVII
- 47 *Centurion*. [*sulkily*] I do my duty. That is enough for me.  
*Apollodorus*. Majesty: when a stupid man is doing something he is ashamed of, he always declares that it is his duty.  
Shaw, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, III
- 48 *Napoleon*. The English are a race apart. No Englishman is too low to have scruples: no Englishman is high enough to be free from their tyranny. But every Englishman is born with a certain miraculous power that makes him master of the world. When he wants a thing, he never tells himself that he wants it. He waits patiently until there comes into his mind, no one knows how, a burning conviction that it is his moral and religious duty to conquer those who possess the thing he wants. Then he becomes irresistible. Like the aristocrat, he does what pleases him and grabs what he covets: like the shopkeeper, he pursues his purpose with the industry and steadfastness that come from strong religious conviction and deep sense of moral responsibility. He is never at a loss for an effective moral attitude. As the great champion of freedom and national independence, he conquers and annexes half the world, and calls it Colonization. When he wants a new market for his adulterated Manchester goods, he sends a missionary to teach the natives the Gospel of Peace. The natives kill the missionary: he flies to arms in defence of Christianity; fights for it; conquers for it; and takes the market as a reward from heaven. In defence of his island shores, he puts a chaplain on board his ship; nails a flag with a cross on it to his top-gallant mast; and sails to the ends of the earth, sinking, burning, and destroying all who dispute the empire of the seas with him. He boasts that a slave is free the moment his foot touches British soil; and he sells the children of his poor at six years of age to work under the lash in his factories for sixteen hours a day. He makes two revolutions, and then declares war on our one in the name of law and order. There is nothing so bad or so good that you will not find Englishmen doing it; but you will never find an Englishman in the wrong. He does everything on principle. He fights you on patriotic principles; he enslaves you on business principles; he bullies you on manly principles; he supports his king on loyal principles and cuts off his king's head on republican principles. His watchword is always Duty; and he never forgets that the nation which lets its duty get on the opposite side to its interest is lost.  
Shaw, *The Man of Destiny*
- 49 A sense of duty is useful in work, but offensive in personal relations.  
Russell, *Conquest of Happiness*, II, 10