**duty/义(Yì)**

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| European Perspective | Nikolas Århem | 21 Apr 2022 |

The English word “duty” (moral or legal obligation, responsibility) derives from the 14th century Anglo-French word *duete,* in turn originating from the Old French *deu,* meaning “due, owed” and “proper, just”. Further back, we can trace the origin of these words to be derivatives of the Latin *debitus* (past participle of *debere*, “to owe”).

Before proceeding with our analysis of this word, let us recall that it is very hard to view Europe as the repository of a single ethnic culture in the way Han China may be regarded as such. Instead, Europe is composed of a plethora of cultures which have all been heavily influenced if not shaped by some fairly powerful unifying cultural forces, foremost of which are

1. Christianity (particularly institutional Catholicism, since only a few countries took the Orthodox trajectory)
2. The influence of the Roman Empire (and through it also the Greek cultural legacy)
3. A similar path to modernity, through the Renaissance period, the scientific revolution and industrialization

Considering the fact that there is no single or “original” European culture, it is useful to trace the etymologies of the word duty in a couple of other European languages. While the French word *devoir* has the same Latin origin, *debitus*, the equivalent word in Swedish[[1]](#footnote-1) *plikt* (cf. German *pflicht*) has additional connotations; according to the oldest recorded usage of this word in Swedish texts, it means “[an expression of] obedience, submission, dependency” as in “stå i plikt hos någon” (“to stand in duty under somebody”), i.e., “to owe someone obedience” (The Swedish Academy Dictionary). Primarily, the term appears to have a military sense, i.e., it describes the military duty owed by a person, a unit, or even a province/region to an authority (ultimately, to the person of the king). However, *plikt* (duty) can refer to many other forms of duty as well, for example the duty to attend church service (*kyrko-plikt*), or various family-related or domestic duties, such as “fatherly duties” or “husbandly duties” etc. One can also be duty-bound to an oath. In all of these meanings, there is nonetheless the idea of submission to an authority, or having an obligation to someone or to a binding rule, norm or contract. These meanings are mainly representative of how the word was understood in the late 16th century, a period when Swedish society was strictly religious and also highly militaristic, and when the person of the king had to be unconditionally obeyed and venerated. These examples suggest that the meaning of the word is simultaneously derived from ancient customs and from Christianity (which entered Scandinavia around 1000 AD). It is clear that, already at this time, the concept of duty (plikt) had connotations of “something to be paid”, “something that is owed”.

Although Sweden during the Middle Ages did not have a feudal system patterned on mainland Europe’s lord-vassal system, the basic feudal principle was similar. Essentially, Europe’s feudal system was not very different from the Iron Age system which had also produced the Scandinavian Viking Period. Lords (*jarlar*) were bound to each other, and to their overlords, through bonds of duty. Likewise, farmers were bound to their lords through similar bonds, but from an inferior position. Bonds between the King and his lords were maintained through gifts and feasts. The King/lord bound men to him through generosity, and oaths and service was expected in return. Over time, the Church gradually formalized the system, and the relation between king and subject became less personalized. Towards the 15th and 16th century, all across Europe, however, the knightly class (the Lords) tended to lose its position as a relevant military force, and power became instead much more concentrated in the person of the king.

Evolutionary psychologists and socio-biologists studying the evolution of morality claim that much of human morality (of which duty is a part) can be explained by so called “kinship altruism”, a phenomenon which they have observed also among non-human animals. Simply put, they argue that the cooperative and “altruistic” behavior observable among many animals has evolved in nature because it grants the group as a whole a higher chance of survival (for example, what is seemingly a suicidal behavior for an individual might in fact help its kinship group toward survival). The same argument applies to the status hierarchies and the deference towards high-status individuals among non-human animals (as well as among humans).

However, many questions remain unexplained, among them, for example, the duty (customary obligation) in many human societies to treat strangers (e.g., visitors from far-away places) with respect. Indeed, the stranger-figure is often mythologized in many religions as a potential god (as is the case in Scandinavian religion, where Odin is often figured as a stranger/visitor).

We must also take into consideration the relation between the concept of duty and the concept of law, and also how duty relates to the overall concept of “morality”. Today’s dominant perspective on morality in the West does not accept the idea that morality is derived from religious truth, but nonetheless tends to view morality as a universal feature of humanity. In this regard, Western modernity not only deviates from older Western ideas of morality, but indeed from the notions held by most of mankind’s different cultures, past and present. Hammurabi, the Babylonian king who was first among men to write down a comprehensive set of laws (1755-1750 BC), wrote down these on behalf of a god, Shamash (Babylonian sun god and god of justice). Likewise, the laws of Christianity, Judaism and Islam were all perceived as having been directly decreed by the gods of these respective religions. It is very difficult to anchor the idea of a “universal morality” -- detached from one’s particular culture and society -- within a coherent scientific theory, but this idea has nevertheless progressively developed in the West since the late 19th century. Current thinkers like Francis Fukuyama and Steven Pinker, among others, have thus popularized the idea that the West holds the truth and that Western liberal culture, the U.S. in particular, represents the apex of cultural evolution and human morality.

To an anthropologist with in-depth knowledge of non-Western cultures, such a conclusion seems un-scientific and hypocritical. As an example of an ancient but “liberal” moral stance we might take the Roman pagan morality which required that, whatever other gods local people might worship, they should also worship the roman emperor (and respect the Roman gods publicly). Some peoples could accept this idea, others could not. As we know this dictum put both Judaism and early Christianity on a collision course with Roman pagan-imperial morality. Nonetheless, in a more general sense, there are clearly universal values that can be identified within the vast multiplicity of moralities that exist in today’s world. The love of children, for example, is a universal, as is the notion that one should respect (particularly) elders and that family members have deep obligations towards each other. Curiously, it is actually the West, that in many ways deviate from such apparently universal norms (cf. World Values Survey).

I would like to finish these reflections with a riddle. The Swedish word for duty (plikt), most likely imported from German (pflicht), was probably not used in Scandinavia before the 13th century. However, the more ancient word *skuld*, today meaning “guilt” or “debt”, in earlier times - during the Viking Age (793-1066) and probably before, was the name of one of the three norns, the female deities that lived in a house next to the roots of the World Tree, Yggdrasil, near the well Urdar. The norns were the goddesses of *destiny*. Their names were: Urd, Verdandi and Skuld. According to scholars, Urd means “past” (or happy/unhappy fate), Verdandi means “present” and Skuld means “future” (or “debt”). [What, then, was the relationship between duty and guilt in this context; what did Skuld owe to whom? A debt to the past, to Urd…?

1. Swedish belongs to the Germanic language family. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)