'Duty or Responsibility'

I

[206] One often calls discussions that have led academics astray ‘a battle over a word'. When this happens, it is not because the word in itself does not matter. On the contrary! It is because the word is not treated with enough respect. When an academic discussion of a philosophical kind so often descends into a battle over a word, this is simply because one has not begun with clarifying what resides in the word, what its substantial meaning is, but one skips over this analysis of the word. One does not consider the word's ‘basic’ meaning, that is to say the meaning that it has in ordinary speech. On the contrary, one immediately turns to thought constructions, and 'the word' is reduced to a label for this thought construction. But the fact is that the word and the topic cannot be separated – by contrast the thought construction and the word can be separated, because in that context the word is a mere label. What one calls a battle over a word is therefore in reality a battle over the labels in an intellectual set-up. The word and the topic under discussion cannot be separated! Responsibility as a relation in which we are bound cannot be dealt with independently of the word ‘responsibility’. The understanding of some task as a duty cannot be dealt with independently of the word ‘duty'.

That is to say, if one fails to reflect on the word’s meaning, one is in danger of letting the topic slip away, for the topic is bound up with the word and conversely. One comes to the discussion with more or less brilliance, more or less precise ways of thinking of one another’s intellectual set-up, and one ends up with a so-called battle over words, because everyone has his own way of setting things up intellectually, but all have the same labels. The only way to avoid a battle over the word is to focus on the word’s [207] basic meaning. Then we know the shared topic. In this way one can battle over the word’s meaning, that is to say over who has understood the word’s meaning correctly; but this is a different and more fruitful battle than what one calls ‘the battle over a word'.

This is only an introductory methodological consideration. But not without significance. The newspapers have become so large, that no one can ‘read' them any longer, but on the contrary one ‘runs through them', as it is said. But in the transition from ‘reading' to ‘running through’ the word is profaned for people, as it loses its ‘substance'. Why can everyone today give a talk at the dinner table off the cuff – with no preparation? Because the words are smooth, blunted, powerless – they can trip off the tongue without the speaker being liable for them. The words have no substance; they do not come down and strike, but remain hanging in the dining room in a cozy fug. Why is a pause in the conversation embarrassing? Because the word in its profanation has become so cheap,
that it costs nothing to entertain. It is therefore appropriate when a philosopher today (Heidegger) declares that it is the work of philosophy ‘to preserve the force of the most elemental words in which Dasein express itself, to keep the common understanding from leveling them off to that unintelligibility which functions in turn as the source of pseudo-problems’. It is the pastor’s responsibility as a preacher to go against the word’s profanation and for the sake of preaching to try to give something back of their primordial force. Not to use words interchangeably, but to restore and retain them in their meaning. For example, not to use words like ‘duty’ and ‘responsibility’ interchangeably, but to hold onto their meaning, each for itself. ‘Do not say that these are quibbling comments about words, anything but upbuilding. Believe me, it is very important for a person that his language be precise and true’ (Søren Kierkegaard). And with this I come to the topic itself.

II

Our language contains a large number of moral concepts, that are at our disposal when we want to give a summary expression for the kind of relation that the gospel puts us in vis-à-vis our fellow human beings. But it is not thereby said that any of these moral concepts are equally suitable for rendering what the gospel says. Indeed we must not assume, that just because a concept is ‘moral’ that this qualifies it as Christian. As if the gospel simply took up the moral theme once more in a religious variation. On the contrary [208], the whole of Jesus’s proclamation critiqued the generally existing morality – and that in its rigorous and major form in phariseeism – thus we must accept that the gospel rejects morality, so that it is simply inappropriate to use moral concepts and words to render the gospel. And that regardless of their right to belong in our language, and regardless that by this right to belong, they are for us obviously and exclusively the expression of everything moral. And from this standpoint we will now investigate the two moral concepts ‘duty’ and ‘responsibility’.

‘Duty’ – in this word is straightness, uprightness, rigour, and discipline. The person who fulfills his duty clicks his heels together and looks neither to the right nor the left. And the word ‘duty’ is also pompous and of some considerable solemnity and serenity. ‘Duty’ brings peace of mind. – In the word ‘responsibility’ by contrast there is not dead discipline, but a living unrest and excitement; it has gravity and fatefulness. It is threatening. The responsible person is already under an indictment, from which he frees himself by bearing responsibility to the end.

Duty is a task, but responsibility is a burden. Therefore one speaks of ‘doing one’s duty’ and ‘fulfilling one’s duty’. Duty is a task that stands before one, and that one should ‘do’. It is an expectation, that is made of one, and that one ‘fulfills’. By contrast one ‘bears’
responsibility. In all the turns of phrase in which ‘responsibility’ plays a part, it is obvious that ‘responsibility’ as a concept concerns a burden. First and foremost one speaks of ‘bearing’ one’s responsibility. One speaks of ‘handing responsibility over to someone’, of ‘undertaking’ responsibility, of ‘transferring’ responsibility. These turns of phrase make clear that it is a burden, which is placed on or moved on to a person’s shoulders.

Duty is a task! It is a wholly determined characteristic action that is called for. Duty is ‘performed’! By contrast one cannot speak of ‘performing’ a responsibility. On the contrary, a responsibility is something one ‘is conscious of’. And that is to say that ‘responsibility’ always indicates a situation, a relation – namely in accordance with its moral relevance. ‘Responsibility’ indicates the relation in which I stand to a matter or another person – namely the relation in accordance with its moral value. But duty as a task stands alone, while it is a sign of involving a relationship that responsibility has a preposition attached: responsibility is responsibility ‘for’: A person is responsible ‘for’ his spouse, ‘for’ his child. The engineer is responsible ‘for’ the carrying capacity of the bridge, etc. They must ensure the things for which they have assumed responsibility. Because [209] ‘responsibility’ is a situation, in which I am placed, it therefore does not mean that I am conscious of my responsibility. We must precisely not let ourselves stray into the psychological or knowledge-theoretical use of the word ‘consciouness’. ‘Consciouness’ means there is a neutral knowledge of everything outside me. ‘Consciouness’ becomes in psychology and theory of knowledge the same as ‘apprehend’. But ‘consciouness’ is used entirely differently in everyday speech. The reflexive pronoun in ‘to be conscious oneself of something’ shows that it is the person’s relation to the matter that is the content here; the matter is not just an ‘object’. In other words it is the particular situation, that one is conscious of being in. What is the conscientness, when in everyday speech we say: ‘I am conscious of that’? It is just my responsibility, my fault, my failure, my significane, my effort, etc. In short, the way in which I position myself in the factual context. If one by temperament is thus brought to pay attention to one’s own significane, one is conscious of oneself, then is one’s conscientness of the situation ‘self-consciouness’. ‘The self’ in self-consciouness is a significant role that I play – and ‘the self’ is not a constant, empty, isolated I. ‘Consciouness of something’ is a conscientness concerning one of the relations, that I stand in. ‘I am conscious of that’ never means a neutral knowledge of an object; but it means: I am orientated! I am clear concerning my position! Because responsibility is a relation that I stand in – and because ‘conscious’ indicates the person in his relation to a matter or a person – therefore one says that I am ‘conscious’ of my responsibility.

Because the execution of duty is a performance by a person, then it is a personality trait that is ascribed when someone is ‘dutiful’. ‘Dutiful’ says something concerning the person’s character and is thus happily expressed in recommendations – ‘I can recommend him as a dutiful fellow’. By contrast, ‘to be conscious of responsibility’ is not a
character trait; to be 'conscious of one's responsibility' is to have a view on a current relation. People are 'conscious of responsibility' for one responsibility at a time. When one says about someone that he is conscious of his responsibility, one never has his characteristic of being responsible in mind. And this is because responsibility is a relation and not a performance like duty.

In connection with this there is therefore further a significant difference between flouting one's duty and flouting one's responsibility. 'He does not do his duty' is not as fatal as to be 'irresponsible'. 'Not to do one's duty', that is a weakness – a weakness of character. It is 'a negligence'; we have the very phrase, 'neglecting one's duty'. He 'shirks' and is regarded as slack and unreliable. By contrast, to be 'irresponsible' is quite another matter than being merely negligent. It is to put the other in danger and misfortune. The term 'irresponsible' is therefore not used to blame a weakness of character, – no, it is the whole person, entirely, who is condemned. The 'irresponsible' person stands outside the human community of mutual trust (although he remains inside externally ordered society) – but the person who neglects his duty can get a note in his officially available character book. One can associate with the person who neglects his duty – indeed, his nonchalance is often quite charming. By contrast, with the irresponsible person one is immediately somewhat insecure and uncomfortable.

The concept of duty is rational, for only what is possible can be a duty. A completely impossible task can never be a duty. It can be said when facing an impossible task, that 'it is at least your duty to try'; but if the attempt fails, because the task was beyond a person’s means, then it can never be said that he neglected any duty. 'Duty' is used just as often to determine what it is possible to do – in contrast to what is impossible, what is 'beyond one'. After a failure it can be said: 'but I did my duty', which is to say: 'I did what I could'.

'Responsibility' is by contrast an irrational concept. In responsibility I am already under an accusation, which I retain for as long as I bear the responsibility. If one wanted to put this philosophically, one could say that the concept of responsibility is grounded on the concept of guilt. It is the looming accusation which the responsible person is under which is expressed in the common saying: 'to run from his responsibility'. From the looming accusation's guilt, one cannot escape fast enough. His duty can be 'waived'; one simply lets it be and puts up one's hands. But one cannot 'waive' one's responsibility – one cannot be 'released from it'. People wriggle out of their constraints in the relation and take flight.

One works to finish one's duties each day and rests in satisfaction at the work one has completed. In the case of responsibility the situation is completely different. The more one takes care of the person one is responsible for, the more there is to do. Indeed the
more one does out of responsibility for a person the more one is bound to them. One cannot be done working in responsibility, but one can only get deeper and deeper into it [211]. And even the work’s being hopeless cannot alter this one bit. Responsibility is a dangerous and risky business, insofar as we are still bound more and more.

And thus we have come to the crucial characteristic of ‘duty’ and ‘responsibility’ respectively. The concept of duty requires a justification – but the concept of responsibility does not! The concept of duty is most often presented in opposition to ‘desire’. As is well known, Kant’s ethics is wholly and squarely concentrated on the concept of duty, and the characteristic brought to the fore by him is its opposition to the eudaimonistic way of thinking. Duty gets in man the character of constraint – duty has in humans the form of an imperative: you shall, because human beings are sensuous beings with many kinds of inclinations, in battle with which duty shall be defiantly upheld. But when duty is thus placed in opposition to my inclinations, to everything I want and desire to do, then I must demand a reason. Why should I do what I do not want to do? As the rationalist he is, he seeks his reason in a self-evident maxim, and so answers: you shall act on duty, because it is consistent! ‘You shall act in such a way that the principle that you follow in the action, shall be able to form the basis for a universal form of law’. In other words: to act on inclination is inconsistent. It is thus precisely said, that if I follow just my inclinations, I make myself into the end and everything and all others into means for the satisfaction of my desires. But it is inconsistent – in acting on inclination – to make myself into the end and the others into means, when we are after all human beings all of us. But here it is extremely characteristic, that Kant does not think his thought through to the end. He goes no further down this road and considers: that it is then the interests of other people that come into play. He does not put this respect for the other forward as the ultimate condition and reason. Why not? Because the bringing in of responsibility would blow apart the framework of his ethics of duty. It is often enough pointed out that in the maxims he advances, Kant implicitly puts in a so-called empirical premise. When he says: you shall act in such a way that the principle that you follow in your action shall be able to serve as the basis for a universal lawgiving – he illustrates this as follows: for example you must not lie, though you probably have the desire to do it, for it would not be so good if that desire became taken up into a general law, so all trust would disappear and with it the basis for human [212] communal life. But this thus makes ‘the creation of communal life; or as Høffdingiii says ‘the idea of human life’ into the real reason for duty. That is to say, that here one finds mixed up in the concern for other people another moral concept, namely ‘responsibility’, and challenging the concept of duty in its role as the central moral concept. But Kant holds onto the concept of duty and does not see the new horizon that he has opened up.

However, Kant is not so hard-boiled a rationalist that mere contradiction is to him enough of a reason. As is so often said, there is a deep rooted mysticism in him. The
result is for Kant literally heavenly. In overcoming inclination human beings lift themselves above themselves and in the will’s freedom from determination from its own sensible existence, it has placed itself under a purely formal discipline; but pure reason is not of this world, but of the intelligible one.

But the remarkable thing is now, that although duty is willed with full strength, human beings must be led by a ‘you shall’ in defiance of all inclination, so that human beings are after all concerned with themselves in doing their duty. And that leads to duty taking human beings out of the relation that they stand in to humanity. Duty isolates people. Duty makes human beings into private people, and in this privacy duty is the conception of the human being by himself. And one says: ‘But duty is religiously grounded! Human beings shall precisely not act dutifully for their own sake – but for pure reason’s sake, because human beings are denizens in the intelligible world!’ So much the worse. The mystical-religious reason just means that the concern with oneself occurs with greater solemnity. There are examples enough in Kant: one has to handle one’s own being in one’s relationship to one’s higher purpose – one shall have respect for one’s own personal being – humanity in my own person shall be holy to me, etc. Indeed duty will eventually develop a sense of satisfaction in oneself. And – it is explicitly stated – that it is in fact a duty to cultivate the feeling of self-satisfaction – of course, while trying to prevent basing duty on this self-satisfaction. Eudaimonism was excluded with this reservation – as a justification, but not in human reality. This has been noticed; for example the German church historian Karl Holl notes that Kant in his ethics however silently calls on a refined eudaimonism for help: ‘According to Kant, a person submits himself to the law (or idea) [213] because he will thereby gain his true “dignity”. But that is to say, that in acting morally he enjoys himself in his dignity’. The smug nobility: I have done my duty! – Why should I do my duty? Kant answers in one place: so as not to despise myself in my own eyes....in order not to come to appear shameful to myself....to not be unworthy in my own eyes... to not sink in personal worth. ‘In one’s own eyes’ demonstrates that duty casts a magic circle around a person and traps him hopelessly in the self. Because the concept of duty isolates a person, therefore he seeks a reason. For when a human being is left wholly alone, then one can indeed ask: ‘But why should I do anything other than what I have the desire to do?’

This question does not arise in relation to responsibility. What matters is that the concept of responsibility as opposed to the concept of duty does not require any justification. The other person, for whom the person has responsibility, is in responsibility set over the responsible person. Therefore there is no need for a justification for responsibility. The question concerning justification is indeed always already known beforehand by the self in the responsibility relation, because in this relation the other, for whom one has responsibility, is set over me. Here a ‘why’ is therefore set aside. It is already expressed with the word ‘responsibility’ – namely for the other’s sake! For his sake, for whom the
responsible person is responsible! Because the justification is settled with the concept itself, mysticism is excluded. The mysticism is conjured up first from the problem of a justification. Responsibility is unpretentious and prosaic. In responsibility a human being is not alone; but he is for the other – and in the preoccupation with that there is neither time nor place for such refined interests as justification for the person’s behaviour. No religion with its citizenship in the intelligible world can compel the person out of his self-preoccupation – religion can only give self-preoccupation pomposity. A human being can only escape his self-preoccupation by means of a fellow human being. In other words, not through duty, but through responsibility. In duty the person is wholly alone with his esteem for his higher determination, and fellow human beings are outside. This ‘outsideness’ is expressed in saying that we have duties ‘against’ others. Just as the community with the other in responsibility is expressed linguistically in that responsibility is ‘for’ the other. It is thus also a linguistically problematic phrase, that one unfortunately time and again encounters – notably in intellectual expositions – ‘to have responsibility for oneself’! In duty one is alone at home with oneself. In responsibility one is engaged in planning and working away from home and with the other.

It would now be appropriate to briefly summarize the analysis of ‘duty’ and ‘responsibility’ respectively, before we move on to some final remarks.

*Duty* is an achievement in overcoming desire and inclination, which is why duty has an imperatival form. Duty is ‘fulfilled’ or ‘performed’, since it is an act with a determined character, that is required. One finishes the work of duty and rests in satisfaction at the work that has been completed. Duty gives life a rhythm. Through achievements, duty forms the character of a person; it can be stored as part of it and make it superior. ‘Being dutiful’ is therefore an admirable character trait. ‘Being neglectful of duty’ is equivalently a character fault. Because duty is a performance it inevitably follows that only what is possible can be a duty. As duty is a person’s act on their own, it requires a justification, which means an answer to the question: as it is now only myself that matters, why should I overcome my inclinations? And in the justification, a person’s preoccupation with himself in duty is emphasized, insofar as preoccupation with oneself now happens in celebration of the human being’s higher destiny. In duty the human being is imprisoned in himself and stands outside being with other humans, which is given expression in the saying that he has duty ‘against’ others, when duty eventually brings us in contact with them.

*Responsibility* is the relation to other human beings according to the relation’s moral relevance. Because the responsibility indicates a relation to another, a preposition belongs to the word responsibility: responsibility is responsibility ‘for’. Because responsibility is a situation in which I find myself towards an other, I am ‘conscious’ of my responsibility. ‘Responsibility’ is not known in a general way, but is attributable to the
person one responsibility at a time. The other, for whom the person has responsibility, is in responsibility set above the self of the person responsible, which is why the question concerning justification is settled by the responsibility relation itself, which indeed has come about for the other’s sake. Because the justification is rendered redundant, mysticism is excluded. In the responsibility the responsible person is placed under a looming accusation; the responsible person can win nothing for themselves, but can either deal with the task at hand or fail in it. Responsibility is therefore a burden. Responsibility is something one ‘bears’. Correspondingly irresponsibility is not just a character flaw, but condemned, because it brings the other, for whom one has responsibility, into disaster. Responsibility is something I can only work my way into more and more deeply. Responsibility is without rhythm.

III

[215] It follows from this analysis – if it is correct – that it is not difficult to see that it is just as unsuitable to represent the gospel’s message to us as ‘duty’ as it is suitable to represent it as ‘responsibility’.

Concerning the unsuitability of the concept of duty it may be enough to say, that the gospel clearly enough tells us that it is not God’s will to create a small private bliss between him and the individual person for the sake of this person’s private happiness. And we can add to this, that self preoccupation or phariseism are unavoidable in duty ethics, for with duty is invariably given insight into the value that in this way is attained by the performer’s disposition. The engine of duty will inevitably be the projected image of the self as fulfilling it’s duty – as happens in Kant, as we saw. The inevitability of phariseism is the paradox of duty. As soon as the weakest consideration arises we no longer do our duty – without further ado, but we are concerned with what we can get out of it. We shall appear in our own eyes to have fulfilled out duty. In duty ethics every moral thought [tanke] is an ulterior motive [bagtanke].

Only what is possible can be a duty; as long as I always do all that I can, I am certainly sure to have done my duty. And in this way, too, only what is possible can be a duty, as duty requires a resistance from the ego in its inclinations. That a human being should do the good out of sheer desire or inclination is implied to be impossible by the concept of duty itself, as with the concept of duty is implied acting despite inclinations and desires. Duty demands nothing more than that the good work is done despite of them – that that good work should happen by itself is impossible for the concept of duty. The concept of duty with its distinction between possible and impossible is in this way a protestant variation of the catholic church’s distinction on the one hand between divine command, compliance to which God demands of every human beings – human being’s ‘bare’ duty – and on the other what the gospel merely recommends as constituting provisions of
higher perfection. This distinction between the possible, the divine command, and the impossible, which the gospel recommends, inevitably leads in the catholic church to the assertion that these perfect provisions, which provide more than God demands, are of ‘additional merit’. And it is instructive to see what trouble duty ethics has in avoiding this rock, as duty ethics precisely wants to avoid all talk about merit. It is characteristic to see how self-sacrificing, noble and lofty deeds just become something shady in Kant’s eyes, [216] and how he requests that we at all costs search their motive in an esteem for duty – he cannot allow in any idea concerning merit. But exactly because it lies in the concept of duty itself that only the possible can be a duty, the idea of merit can be avoided only in an affected and artificial way, when now sometimes the impossible actually occurs in significantly disinterested action. But ‘one need (then) only to think about it a bit, and one will always be able to find a guilt, which he contracted in some way against humanity (even if it is only that by human inequality in the bourgeois constitution one enjoys benefits for which sake others have do with so much less?) in order thereby to displace the idea of duty with the selfish delusion about merit’. But the concept of duty must be discarded on the same grounds as the opposition between divine command and evangelical recommendation, namely because God simply wants the impossible from us as human beings: that we do his bidding happily and with desire – out of love for him. This was Luther’s reason to reject this catholic distinction between command and recommendation, and it must be a reason for us to reject the concept of duty. The gospel judges more harshly than duty. Duty ethics only judges inclinations in their possible victory over duty. The gospel judges inclinations in their very existence, namely that human beings do not as a matter of course love God and his creatures.

The concept of responsibility knows no limit between the possible and the impossible; the responsible person is namely already under a looming indictment. And that is precisely why responsibility is suitable for rendering the gospel. God is indeed not the instigator for humanity’s evil conscience, so that his judgement should remain within the bounds of the possibilities that the sharp mind of humanity operates with in its evil conscience. God’s judgment is a new and strange speech, whose voice is outside man, and whose content we cannot tell ourselves with the help of ever so much good conscience. God’s judgement hits not primarily the isolated evil action, which we can see ourselves is bad; but God judges that we have ‘already’ made ourselves lords of our own life and forgotten and denied that we are God’s creatures, determined by him to serve the neighbour – to assume responsibility for him. Because sin does not arrive first with the evil act, but ‘already’ with mere independence from God and his command that binds one to the neighbour, therefore we are ‘already’ under accusation. And therefore it is the concept of responsibility that is suitable to express Jesus’s command.

[217] Responsibility is suitable to render God’s word about serving the neighbour. You shall serve your neighbour as yourself. You shall put the neighbour’s needs above your
own! In other words: you are responsible for your neighbour, the person who is set over us because he is the person that we, the responsible, are responsible for.

And so one should not object: but responsibility is indeed a burden, and the gospel’s content is salvation and not new burdens, that are laid on human beings. The gospel does not deny that love of the neighbour is a burden. But the gospel says to us, that the burden will be easy for anyone who has faith in God. Jesus does not say: my yoke is in reality not a yoke, and my burden is in reality an illusion. He makes the burden into a burden, the yoke into a yoke – but adds: my yoke is beneficial and my burden light.

And if the question is: does responsibility not make our life unfree? Responsibility is indeed limitless, especially as we can but work ourselves deeper and deeper into it. But that is exactly what the gospel says: you are already guilty, as truly as your life does not consist in serving the neighbour. But while the human being in duty rests on his own completed work, in responsibility the human being relies on the gracious forgiveness of his sins.

The gospel speaks in a different way from the human ethics of duty. It speaks of something different from that of which we can tell ourselves in our moral commonsense. And this gives rise to the question, of whether it would not make the church’s proclamation clearer if it made it clear, that the gospel does not fit with the given human-civil ethic of duty, and if responsibility is proclaimed at the expense of duty. I wonder if it was not beneficial now and then in the proclamation to re-interpret ‘law’ that after all for modern man is a somewhat distant concept, with ‘duty’ that is close to us: ‘know that a person is not justified by the works of duty, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of duty, because by the works of duty no one will be justified’ (Galatians 2:16). ‘But if you are led by the spirit, you are not under duty’ (Galatians 5:18). ‘For the entire duty is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself”’ (Galatians 5:14). ‘Responsibility is duty’s fulfillment’ (Romans 13:10).

Neither the priest nor the Levite was fully aware whether it was their duty to help the man who fell among robbers. By contrast the merciful Samaritan was as Samaritan not refined enough to have duties – but therefore he had time without fuss to be conscious of his responsibility.

Translated by Hans Fink and Robert Stern
Translators’ notes


3 Harald Høffding (1843-1931), professor of philosophy in the University of Copenhagen (1883-1915). Authority on Kierkegaard and in his time well-known internationally. His History of Modern Philosophy was in print as a textbook in the USA for more than 60 years.
