

The Nature of Obligation

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Malloy 411

Wednesday 12-3pm and by appointment

1 This course

The goal of this class is to analyze the notion of an obligation or duty. It is common sense to think that we have assorted obligations, but it is not always clear, after reflection, how these obligations arise or what they amount to. Basic questions like these have inspired considerable thought and debate: Do our obligations change depending on how we lead our lives? Do obligations make sense in situations where there is no risk of sanction for not performing one's duty? How does the presence or absence of divine governance affect our obligations? Is the divine duty-bound like us, or is it the ultimate source of all obligation? Can one be obligated to cultivate particular character traits or to believe specific things, even as these characteristics seem to be out of our control? What do we do when moral duty or religious duty seems to conflict with social or civil obligations? If society owes something to a person, how does that obligation translate into duties on other individuals? Are there obligations so strong that no circumstance could override them?

We are going to address these questions by reading a few very influential and very different philosophical works from different time periods. On the one hand we will be interested in the traditional philosophical project of determining how our authors answer these questions and what arguments they muster in support of their answers. We will evaluate their arguments and determine whether they give us a deeper or different understanding of the notion of obligation. On the other hand we will work to appreciate these

philosophical works as literary and human achievements. Since the authors lived in very different times and places from one another, and since they were living under such different religious and social conditions, there is perhaps more to be learned from how they thought about obligations than from how they answered questions about them. We will ask what sorts of assumptions our authors made that seem unusual to us and how these might color the way they thought of their place in the world. We also will ask what sorts of assumptions we have made in our lives that we might want to reevaluate after exploring our authors' very different world-views.

2 Texts

You should read (and study) all of the texts below. They are listed in the order that we will discuss them in class. Notice that I'm not including a weekly breakdown of readings. That's because I like for the entire class to determine the pace in which we work through the material. I don't think we'll have a problem covering all the reading, because there's not a whole lot of it. So I want to reserve time for us to delve more deeply in matters that interest you.

1. "Euthyphro," by Plato
2. "Apology," by Plato
3. "Crito," by Plato
4. "Phædo," by Plato
5. *On Obligations* by Cicero
6. *Fear and Trembling* by Søren Kierkegaard
7. *The Sovereignty of Good* by Iris Murdoch

3 Requirements

Keep up with the readings—trying to stay a little ahead. Attend class regularly and participate in discussions. Write two short essays (a few pages should do) according to guidelines I will explain to you. Write a third, more

developed essay, submitting first a draft and later a final version. Write a final exam. Your grade will reflect the value of your contribution to class, the quality of your short essays, your performance on the final exam, the degree to which you improved and developed your thoughts throughout the semester, and above all the quality of your third essay. My goal is to help you appreciate and analyze the concept of duty. I believe that if you mull over the works that w're reading, you'll come up with some interesting ideas. If I know that you're engaged in this endeavor in good faith, then I will work with you on rewrites or extra short essays to help you improve your showing in the class. If, by the end of the course, you've developed some theses that interest you and communicated them to me well in formal writing or classroom discussions, then you should do pretty well.

4 Note

Please be aware of the University's policies regarding academic honesty, anti-discrimination, and access to education for students with disabilities.

Here is the web-page of the office for students with disabilities:

<http://www.nd.edu/~osd/NEWHOME PAGE.htm>

Here is the Philosophy Department's web-page devoted to academic honesty, with links to information about plagiarism and the University's honor code:

<http://philosophy.nd.edu/undergraduate-program/honesty/>

In addition I am someone you can approach if you have concerns about discrimination or proper scholarly behavior, whether or not the concern is related to this course.

5 Important dates

October 1	first essay due	
October 8	no class	I'm away.
November 5	second essay due	
November 19	essay draft due	
November 26	no class	Thanksgiving
December 10	third essay due	
December 18	exam	10:30am