

Pearls and Leaven

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“Collision of Duties”¹

The expression “collision of duties”² is used for those cases where people are confronted simultaneously with two or more duties that are mutually exclusive; to fulfill one duty means to omit another one. [Bavinck gives examples from classical mythology and then the following from Cicero’s *On Duties* III.23.] “When two shipwrecked men grab hold of one plank, but this plank can support only one man, is one then duty bound to surrender the plank to the other man and perish himself?”

These questions were taken up also in Christian ethics. Jesus himself resolves cases of conflict: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” (Matt. 22:17–22). “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” (Luke 14:3–6) . . . The New Testament does not know any collision of duties, but it does mention collision between duty and inclination (Luke 14:2–6; Matt. 14:6–9) or dereliction of duty (Matt. 22:17, 21). But although there is no collision as such, a conflict can arise owing to the diversity of the objects toward which we are to fulfill our duties.³ Such a conflict is resolved by means of a proper coordination and subordination of those objects: the heavenly above the earthly, soul above body, necessity above honor, God’s

¹ Ed. note: The following is an excerpt from §30 of Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*. It will appear in chapter fourteen of the forthcoming second volume of the English translation of *Reformed Ethics*. The text is the edited text that will be published; bracketed material is inserted by the editor to maintain an orderly narrative flow. The footnotes of the excerpted material have been retained and amplified for the benefit of our readers.

² Latin original: *collisio officiorum* (from *con laedo* = to injure each other; to strike each other).

³ J. T. Beck, *Vorlesungen über Christliche Ethik*, 3 vols. in 2 (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1882–1883), 2:182.

commandments above human laws, etc. Furthermore, prayer, training, and the like are necessary.⁴

[In contrast with the Jesuit casuistical practice of “probabilism,” Protestant ethicists deny that a real collision of duties can exist. For example,] Isaak Dorner denies that a collision of duties as such can exist; the moral law “cannot stand in opposition to itself; for we must ascribe to it perfect oneness in and with itself. Hence there can be no objective conflict of duties.”⁵ Dorner does add: “On the other hand, subjective conflicts of duties are indeed not to be denied. Here belongs the celebrated case of the plank which two shipwrecked persons grasp, while it is able to bear only one.”⁶ Dorner concludes: “We still insist, after all, that there can be no such objectively necessary conflict of duties as could not be solved by wisdom.”⁷

[Bavinck agrees with this in principle but adds a qualification.] Now it is undoubtedly true that the law is singular, whole, an organism, and that God’s commandments by their nature never converge in such a way that a need exists to violate a commandment through sin.⁸ Intrinsically, in the abstract, all commandments together form a single harmonious whole; love governs all. But the law of God comprises many commandments, specifically two tables: commandments with respect to God and commandments having to do with our neighbor. Concerning the latter there is a great variety of relationships, such as father or mother, son, brother, daughter; domestic servant toward a family; citizen toward the state; professional toward society; etc. In a word, we live in a great

⁴J. T. Beck, *Vorlesungen*, 2:182–83.

⁵Isaak A. Dorner, *System of Christian Ethics*, ed. August Johannes Dorner, trans. Charles Marsh Mead and R. T. Cunningham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1887), 213 (§ 22).

⁶Dorner, *Christian Ethics*, 220.

⁷Dorner, *Christian Ethics*, 220.

⁸Thus William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof* (Leyden and London: W. Christiaens, E. Griffin, J. Dawson, 1639; reprint, Amsterdam and Norwood, NJ: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum and Walter J. Johnson, 1975), III.xvii.26.

variety of spheres, and every sphere comes with its own duties. There are duties toward God, to ourselves—our soul and our body, our honor and reputation—and toward our neighbor, family, parents, brothers, country, society, to art, science, and the like. Why would it not be possible that the duties of one sphere clash with those of another? Why could there not be cases in which we are bidden to do this by the duties of one sphere and to do that by those of another? Such cases may well have been possible in the state of original perfection, and even for Jesus. Precisely because we live in various spheres, standing in various relationships to various objects, God's commandments may therefore occasionally conflict, objectively and genuinely. That is not at all in conflict with the inner unity and harmony of God's law (this remains untouched), but instead is precisely the maintaining of God's law in the various spheres of life, evidence that the law of God controls the whole of our life always and everywhere.

[To resolve apparent conflicts, Bavinck defends the practice of casuistry, i.e., assessing concrete cases by the law of God.] Casuistry does not wish to deaden the moral individuality and moral character, to rob believers of the right to evaluate, but only to inform, to aid the conscience in evaluating. After all, one faces countless difficult cases in life. Never to discuss these at all will not do. Every ethicist discusses them, whether briefly or at length. Modern ethicists, when they say they must leave these cases to the individual person, are also supplying a rule. In fact, if one rejects casuistry, one is rejecting any practical ethics at all. At that point, one should not talk about suicide, dueling, killing in self-defense, divorce, capital punishment, compulsory school attendance, the right to revolt, etc., each of which is a case of conscience.⁹ In fact, the conscience, which then has to decide everything, will then likewise be engaged in casuistry,

⁹Latin original: *casus conscientiae*.

that is, it will weigh the pros and cons according to God's standards, and then make a decision.¹⁰

[Bavinck then borrows from the tradition of theological ethics (notably William Ames) to draw up a few rules:]

1. Duties toward God take precedence over duties toward ourselves and the neighbor, family, country, government, etc.: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).¹¹ [Bavinck discusses the following examples: Naaman bowing in the temple of Rimmon (2 Kings 5:18); the disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–8, Mark 2:23–28, and Luke 6:1–5).]¹²
2. When duties of the same class conflict with each other, the weightiest duties take precedence . . . One must rather surrender life than speak falsehood or break a promise. The soul takes precedence over the body, honor and chastity and all moral goods take precedence over life.
3. The interests of the soul of one person take precedence over the material interests not only of myself but also family, country, and

¹⁰ Cf. Thor Sundby, *Blaise Pascal. Sein Kampf gegen die Jesuiten und seine Verteidigung des Christenthums*, trans. Heinrich Paul Junker (Oppeln: Franck, 1885), 37; Ferdinand Brunetière, "Une Apologie de la Casuistique," *Revue des deux mondes* 67, no. 1 (January 1885): 200–13 [Ed. note: this is a review of Raymond Thamin, *Un Problème dans l'antiquité. Étude sur la casuistique stoïcienne* (Paris: Hachette, 1884)].

¹¹ Greek original: *πειθαρχεῖν δεῖ θεῷ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀνθρώποις*; Bernardinus de Moor, *Commentarius Perpetuus in Johannis Marckii Compendium Theologiae Christianae Didactico-Elencicum*, 7 vols. (Leiden: J. Hasebroek, 1761–71), 2:675.

¹² ὄδον ποιεῖν in Mark can also mean "go away" (*weg gaan*), not "make a way" or "clear a path" (*banen*); see Heinrich August Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospels of Mark and Luke*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. William Dickson and William Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1880), 43 (on Mark 2:23). Ed. note: Bavinck appears to have misread Meyer here: "The only correct explanation is: *they began to make a way* (to open a path) *by plucking the ears of corn* . . . We must rather conceive of the field-path on which they are walking—perhaps at a place where it leads through a field of corn which it intersects—as overgrown with ears, so that they must of necessity, in order to continue their journey, *make a path*, which they do by *plucking the ears of corn* that stand in their way." Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark makes no mention of the disciples eating.

humanity. I may and must be prepared to lay down even my life, money, property, and name for the sake of my country, family, etc., but I may not commit an immoral act, lie, kill, commit unchastity, and so forth on behalf of country, family, etc. The value of virtue surpasses that of the world. The soul possesses nothing even when it gains the entire world.

4. If equal interests of myself, family, country, and humanity conflict, then those belonging to the broadest sphere take precedence over those of the narrower sphere. Those of the family take precedence over those pertaining to myself; those of country take precedence over those of family. Thus, a son is obligated to oppose his father who is conspiring against his country, and, if necessary, to turn him in.
5. When in doubt, abstain;¹³ if we are uncertain and in doubt about which of two duties must be performed, then we should do nothing, for everything not arising from faith is sin. Or, if we must perform either of two duties, then we should perform the more probable, i.e., the one that commends itself as most probable, not to the learned experts¹⁴ but to our own conscience. It is preferable, at that point, that we choose the safest route, the one that at any rate is not a sin, and the one in connection with which we have no interest, but suffer disadvantage rather than seek personal advantage.¹⁵ But we may never choose the lesser of two evils, for our conscience can never obligate us to do what it judges to be evil.

¹³ Latin original: *in dubiis abstinere*.

¹⁴ Latin original: *doctor gravis*.

¹⁵ William Ames, *Cases of Conscience*, III.xvii.q. 12.