

# Your "shoulds" are not a duty

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I have a friend who, after reading my last two posts, still struggled to give up her shoulds. She protested that, if she stopped doing things because she should, then she might do the wrong thing. I see this frequently, even among people who claim to be moral relativists: they protest that if they weigh their wants and their shoulds on the same scales, then they might make the wrong choice.

But this notion of "right" vs "wrong" cannot come from outside. There is no stone tablet among the stars that mandates what is right. Moral relativists usually have no trouble remembering that their narrow, short-term desires (for comfort, pleasure, etc.) are internal, but many seem to forget that their wide, long-term desires (flourishing, less suffering, etc.) are also part of them.

Why did my friend worry that, if she stopped forcing herself to follow her shoulds, that she might do the wrong thing? There are no outside authorities punishing people who don't follow their best interests. There are no heavenly gatekeepers rewarding you for doing something other than what's best. The only reason to care about doing what's right is because you want what's right to be done. Why was she afraid that she would fail to follow her own interests, if she stopped using internal force? It's *you* who wants the right

thing done, so if you fear you're not going to do the right things, then bargain with yourself.

Part of the problem, I think, is that she realized that she wants to both (a) do the right thing and (b) avoid all the effort that entails, and she feared that without the tool of internal force, she would be unable to do as much good as she wants to do. This is a valid concern, and following posts will discuss different tools for doing what you want (without resorting to internal force, which I think is unsustainable — remember, expending willpower is a stopgap, not a solution).

But another part of the problem, I think, was a lingering sense of resentment towards the shoulds, for trying to suck fun and enjoyment out of her life.

I see this often. Picture someone who needs to choose between playing video games all day (and losing their job) or getting abused by customers all day (for not all that much money). They conclude that they "should" do the job, and they feel compelled by the should. And then, over and over, I find my friends resenting their shoulds, as if the shoulds came from outside, from Beyond, from the Intergalactic Oughtauthorities. They treat their should like shackles that bind them to the "right path", the one where have to go to work when they could be playing video games.

But the shoulds aren't the shackles. There aren't any oughtauthorities. You always get to do as you please, within the

bounds allowed by the universe. It's the *situation* which forces you to choose between bad and worse. Don't resent the bad option for being better than the worse option — if you must resent something, resent the situation.

(Or, better yet, turn your resentment into a cold resolve to *change* the situation.)

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If you ever start to feel that your shoulds are obligations, then remember this:

*The shoulds were made for us, not us for them.*

There are no facts about the stars that say what you ought to do. Your shoulds are not written in the heavens, nor in the void.

But your shoulds are written in *you*.

What you "should do" in any given situation is a fact about your brain and the situation (which takes into account your current state of knowledge, and the amount of time you have available, and so on).

In other words, someone with a ton of computing power and intimate knowledge of your brain could *tell* you what you should do in any given situation.

Imagine being told some of those facts about what you "should do, as computed by someone with ridiculous amounts of computing power. They print them out on a sheet of paper, and hand it to you. What would this sheet of paper look like?

I think that most people expect it would look like a long list of obligations, full of uncomfortable task they're actively trying to not remember. Most people seem to expect a highly aversive list that reads something like this:

- Clean your room.
- Send a message to that one friend you fell out of touch with who sent you a message on your birthday.
- Reconcile with your father.
- Donate more to charity.
- ...

This is exactly the notion of "should" that I'm trying to discharge.

Your true shoulds, if I could show them to you, would not look like a list of obligations. Your true shoulds would look like a *recipe for building a utopia*.

They would look like a series of steps that make the world the best place you can make it.

And they wouldn't tell you to do anything psychologically unrealistic, either. Just as the list wouldn't say "snap your

fingers in just such a way that alzheimers is cured," the list wouldn't say "work yourself to the bone for 16 hours a day while still remaining in high spirits." No, the true shoulds (as computed by someone with deep knowledge of your brain and ridiculous amounts of computing power) would appear to you as a psychologically possible list of things that happened to have surprisingly awesome impacts on the world.

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The things that you feel resentment towards are false shoulds, or at least twisted shoulds. Encountering one of your *actual* moral bonds feels very different indeed. A true opportunity to execute a moral commitment feels not like an obligation, but like a *privilege*. It feels like executing a Screw The Rules I'm Doing What's Right trope.

In fiction, picture the moment when the villain reveals that doing the Right Thing will start a war, and the hero sets their jaw, looks them in the eyes, and says "so be it," and then does the right thing anyway.

In real life, think of Irena Sendler, who smuggled thousands of Jewish children to safety during the holocaust, who was captured by the Nazis and tortured and had her legs broken and was sentenced to death, and who escaped anyway,

and then *went back*.

Imagine what was going through her mind, when she decided to go back and save more people. Now, of course, I have no idea what she was actually feeling, but when I imagine what it would take for *me* to go back under those circumstances, I imagine feeling fear, and a hint of despair at finding myself still capable, but also a burning resolve to do the right thing anyway.

I imagine her feeling that having the opportunity to go back was a *privilege*. Not an external obligation whispered down from the heavens, but an internal fire, a defiance of the natural order, a need to make the world *different* from the way it would be otherwise.

Irena didn't have an *obligation* to keep fighting. She had more than discharged her moral duty. And while I'm willing to bet that at least part of her was scared, and at least part of her wished she had been crippled and unable to return, there was also a part of her that didn't look at the opportunity to return to save more children as a misfortune, but as an honor.

Can you begin to see the difference between a false should, and a true moral commitment? Think of a false should, one that gives you a strong sense of obligation and a hint of resentment (such as "finish this paper" or "go to work tomorrow"). Now imagine of Irena Sendler, offered the opportunity to return to Warsaw. Imagine what went on in her head, in that moment.

I imagine a mind afraid, but unified, because for her, it wasn't really a choice. Innocent children were still dying, and there was only one thing to do.

*That's* what a true moral impulse feels like, when you find one. Not like an obligation, but like a piece of cold iron found deep in your core, the thing that you touch — or that touches you — in the moment that you really see the best option available to you, the moment that you realize you already know which way this choice is going to go.

Your shoulds are not shackles, and I caution you to be wary of anyone who tries to force a should upon you. For if you are not careful, you may start to feel like your shoulds are obligations, and you may start to resent them.

Human moral bonds aren't compulsions. They are what let Irena Sendler see the opportunity to risk life and limb to save just one more child, and treat it not as a duty, but as an honor. If you told *her* that she didn't have to go back, that she'd done enough, that she'd earned the right to turn away, and you asked her why the hell she was still going back to Warsaw,

then she's allowed to reach inside, touch that something of iron, look you in the eyes, and say "because I should."

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*That's* how you use a should. Not with obligation and resentment, but with steel in your heart and no other choice that compares.

I strongly encourage you to unpack your shoulds into their component wants and desires — I would rather not be responsible for inspiring a bunch of people to run around shoulding themselves and saying "no, it's OK, these are the true moral bonds." Rather, the point I'm trying to make is this:

Many treat their moral impulses as a burden. But I say, find all the parts that feel like a burden, and drop them. Keep only the things that fill you with resolve, the things you would risk life and limb to defend.

Those moral impulses are not a reminder of your grudging duty. They are a reminder that you value things larger than yourself. They are a description of everything you're fighting for. They are the birthright of humanity, they are your love for fellow sentient creatures, they are everything we struggle so hard to send upwards to the stars.

They aren't a duty. They're an honor.