

The Victorians on Duty: a few examples, to be contrasted with the behavior of Tom Jarndyce, Mr. Gridley, Nemo (presumably), and – perhaps – Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

1. Dialogue between John Jarndyce and Esther:

“Esther, my dear, do you wish to ask me anything?”

He looked so attentively at me, that I looked attentively at him, and felt sure I understood him.

“About myself, sir?” said I.

“Yes.”

“Guardian,” said I, venturing to put my hand, which was suddenly colder than I could have wished, in his, “nothing! I am quite sure that if there were anything I ought to know, or had any need to know, I should not have to ask you to tell it to me. If my whole reliance and confidence were not placed in you, I must have a hard heart indeed. I have nothing to ask you; nothing at all.” (BH 112)

2. The lesson Esther derives from her exposure to the “philanthropists” Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle:

I thought it best to be as useful as I could, and to render what kind services I could, to those immediately about me; and to try to let that circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself (BH 117).

2. Captain Swosser’s advice:

“It was a maxim of Captain Swosser’s,” said Mrs. Badger, “speaking in his figurative naval manner, that when you make pitch hot, you cannot make it too hot; and that if you only have to swab a plank, you should swab it as if Davy Jones were after you. It appears to me that this maxim is applicable to the medical, as well as to the nautical profession.” (BH 247)

3. Thomas Carlyle, from *Sartor Resartus*:

Do the duty which lies nearest thee.

And:

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might.

4. Tennyson, from “The Charge of the Light Brigade”:

Theirs not to reason why,

Theirs but to do and die.

5. Matthew Arnold, from *Culture and Anarchy*:

Now does any one, if he simply and naturally reads his consciousness, discover that he has any rights at all? For my part, the deeper I go in my own consciousness, and the more simply I abandon myself to it, the more it seems to me that I have no rights at all, only duties; and that men get this notion of rights from a process of abstract reasoning, inferring that the obligations they are conscious of towards others, others must be conscious of towards them, and not from any direct witness of consciousness at all. But it is obvious that the notion

of a right, arrived at in this way, is likely to stand as a formal and petrified thing, deceiving and misleading us; and that the notions got directly from our consciousness ought to be brought to bear upon it, and to control it. So it unsafe and misleading to say that our children have rights against us; what is true and safe to say is, that we have duties towards our children. (175-76)