

Words Poorly Used #95 — Obligation

In a recent Socrates Cafe of Louisville, we voted to deliberate the old chestnut, “can there be a just war?” Why we did this, I don’t know. Maybe we hoped this time would be different, wherein we would come up with a no nonsense answer. Foiled again. One of the reasons this attempt was abortive, however, was that we kept getting into the tall weeds of what an individual might be obligated to do. Is a person obligated to save a drowning offspring? Well, what does that have to do with war? “Obligation” is every bit as abstract as is “just.” Trying to graft these words onto other concepts such as humane action or war or war excused by humane action just makes them murkier. We decided nothing in our deliberations. Surely we didn’t hope to do otherwise. We didn’t even come close to defining a workable model for an obligation. We did end in being dissatisfied, disappointed, and disgruntled.

— Kilgore Forelle