

Supererogation and Theism

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Abstract

It has frequently been argued that from a theistic perspective there can be no such thing as an action of supererogation. Here I summarize some of this opposition to the concept of supererogation and I suggest that, although it is a mistake to argue that there can never be actions of supererogation in human life, there are some important lessons to be learned from these opponents of supererogation.

It has frequently been argued that from a theistic point of view there can be no such thing as an action of supererogation, at least for human moral agents: one who is genuinely committed to theism ought to recognize that there are no actions whose performance is morally praiseworthy but not obligatory and which are not blameworthy to omit. In what follows I will briefly summarize some of this opposition to the concept of supererogation. I will then suggest that, although it is a mistake to argue that there can never be actions of supererogation in human life, there are some important lessons to be learned from these opponents of supererogation. Accordingly, the class of supererogatory actions may well be considerably smaller than many philosophical ethicists have been inclined to assume.

Etymologically, the term 'supererogation' refers to paying out more than what is required of one. Thus, parents who pay the full cost of their children's private school tuition and, though financially hard-pressed, go on to send the school an additional thousand dollars can be argued to have performed an action of supererogation. They are obliged to pay a certain sum of money for services rendered, and they fulfill this obligation. But they pay an additional sum of money to the institution and thereby exceed the requirements of obligation. Thus, their action arguably fulfills the requirements stated above: their payment of an extra thousand dollars is not itself obligatory, it is morally commendable or praiseworthy, and its omission would not be morally blameworthy.

Not all alleged actions of supererogation, however, involve paying out more than what is required of one. Sometimes risk taking is argued to be supererogatory, as when one rushes into a burning building at great risk to one's own life to rescue a total stranger. In some contexts the mere promise to perform a future action can count as an action of supererogation. And it has frequently been pointed out that even small actions of kindness or courtesy can qualify as actions of supererogation. Again, any non-obligatory praiseworthy performance of an action whose omission is not blameworthy is an action of supererogation. Supererogatory actions, therefore, can range from actions of heroic self-sacrifice to relatively trivial actions of kindness or courtesy. ¹

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Difficulties with the notion of supererogation which are rooted in a commitment to theism can be traced at least as far back as Luther and Calvin, both of whom appear to have taken a decidedly dim view of the idea that human actions can be both praiseworthy and yet not obligatory. It has been argued by David Heyd, Joseph Allen, and others that their position can best be explained (at least in large part) as a reaction to the writings of Thomas Aquinas, where one finds the first semi-systematic treatment of supererogation and related topics.² It was the feeling of the reformers, on this interpretation, that the Church (appealing to the authority of Thomas) promoted the idea that human actions can be supererogatory in order to justify the practice of indulgences. The latter are possible only if a person can build up a treasury of merit by transcending the requirements of moral obligation, and hence the doctrine that some non-obligatory actions are nevertheless praiseworthy might be thought to confer some plausibility upon the practice of indulgences.

In the case of Calvin the heart of the problem seems to have been the Thomistic distinction between commandments and counsels. According to Thomas:

The difference between a counsel and a commandment is that a commandment implies obligation, whereas a counsel is left to the option of the one to whom it is given. So in the new law, which is the law of liberty, counsels are fittingly added to the commandments, but not in the Old Law, which is the law of bondage.³

Clearly aware that the acknowledgement of this distinction opens the door to the possibility of supererogatory works, Calvin protests bitterly:

These commandments -- "Do not take vengeance; love your enemies," which were once delivered to all Jews and then to all Christians in common -- have been turned by the Schoolmen into "counsels", which we are free either to obey or not obey. What pestilential ignorance or malice is this! ...The reason they assign for not receiving them as laws is that they seem too burdensome and heavy, especially for Christians who are under the law of grace. Do they dare thus to abolish God's eternal law that we are to love our neighbor? ...Either let them blot out these things from the law or recognize that the Lord was Lawgiver, and let them not falsely represent him as a mere giver of counsel.⁴

One who goes out of his way to show love to his neighbor does precisely what God requires; it is not an act whose performance can rightly be regarded as purely optional.

Thus, in the minds of the reformers the concept of supererogation seemed to represent at best a misunderstanding of the requirements of God's law and at worst a justification of the indulgences. Naturally, then, their inclination was to reject the possibility of supererogatory works; it is not within the power of human agents to exceed the requirements of God's laws, much less accrue merit by superseding these requirements, and any doctrine lending support to this idea is to be regarded with suspicion. Even the saints, according to Luther, "have done nothing which is superabundant. Therefore they have left nothing to be allocated through indulgences ...";⁵ their actions of martyrdom are obligatory, not superabundant. And, according to Calvin, the doctrine of superabundant works is, "...patched together out of terrible sacrileges and blasphemies".⁶ The concept of supererogation, moreover, was seen by the reformers as conflicting with the doctrine that persons are justified by faith alone. If there are no works according to which persons can be judged righteous in God's eye, how can it be maintained that persons can perform actions which are praiseworthy outside the confines of duty? To maintain that actions of supererogation are possible would seem, on the face of things, to fall into the scholastic trap of assigning merit to human works. Again, so much the worse for the idea that works of supererogation are possible.

To a certain degree, and for slightly different reasons, the reservations of the reformers can be detected among present day theists. How, given an allegiance to theism, can supererogation really be judged possible? If God exists and possesses the moral attributes customarily assigned to him, and if something is truly praiseworthy in the eyes of God, is it not something which ought to be done? Ought one not always pursue that which in the eyes of God is the best possible course of action? In his essay, 'The Theology of the Religious Life', Karl Rahner develops this point in terms of the perfection to which a person is called. (His discussion is directed to those who have embraced Christianity, but clearly his reasoning can be applied to theism in general.)

All Christians are called to perfection. Grace constitutes a call that is the basis of moral obligation, and it calls men to love God and their neighbor with all their hearts and all their strength. ...God gives us, then, the power to love him and our neighbor as well with all our hearts, and he imposes on us an obligation to do so. Hence, all Christians can and should attain to that perfection outside of which there is no other.⁷

It is frequently pointed out that one has a duty to strive for perfection, but Rahner's point is unmistakably much stronger. One has an obligation not only to strive for perfection but to attain perfection. Thus, every praiseworthy action one performs is presumably the partial fulfillment of an obligation to attain perfection, and it is hard to see how there can be any room in such a scheme for a praiseworthy action which in no manner contributes to the fulfillment of one's obligation. A similar emphasis can be found in Joseph Allen's book, *Love and Conflict*. Commenting upon Urmson's example of a soldier falling on a grenade to save his comrades, Allen writes,

It is sometimes observed that we would not appropriately blame a person...for not being sacrificial in that wayThere is certainly an attraction in that way of thinking. From the standpoint of covenant love, however, there is something morally lacking, something that ought to be done, on the part of the soldiers who do not sacrifice their lives to save their comradesThe idea that second-mile actions are not duties is a reflection of ordinary conventional morality, not of the requirements of covenant love....If by the strict requirements of covenant love a person ought to have gone the second mile -- ought in the case of the grenade to have attempted to fall upon it -- then that person is to be blamed for not having done so.⁸

Ordinary conventional morality conceives of second mile actions as actions which are optional to perform, but from the perspective of covenant love (a love arising out of gratitude to God) such actions are required of moral agents. And those failing to fulfill such requirements have failed to do their duty. In the face of such requirements, then, there appears to be little room for the possibility of performing actions of supererogation.

These sentiments can perhaps be dramatized by imagining a man who scrupulously attempts to fulfill all of his moral obligations but regards all other good works as supererogatory and hence optional. Over the course of time he faithfully does the former and consistently declines to do the latter. He faithfully performs actions that are explicitly required and refrains from actions which are explicitly forbidden. But it is also apparent that he never goes out of his way to help another when under no strict obligation to do so. Never one to attend to the small needs of those around him, he likewise never volunteers for church or community service. And when approached by another with the request of small favor, he politely declines without fail (whereupon, if he is rebuked for declining the favor, he retorts that the rebuke is out of place on the grounds that the omission of an action of supererogation is never blameworthy).

Very few, I believe, would be inclined to admire this man's behavior or attitude. There seems to be something fundamentally wrong about his approach to living the moral life. He is clearly a legalist of sorts, perhaps the worst of sorts, and it would not be an exaggeration to think of him as a type of modern day Pharisee. One might argue, in fact, that his approach to morality is self-defeating in the long run. Both Kant and Mill argued that all human agents have duties of "imperfect obligation", according to which certain good works are required on at least an occasional basis.⁹ Good works that are optional on any specific occasion become obligatory to perform at some time or other. Thus, while it may be optional to do a favor for one's neighbor on a specific occasion, one who never goes out of one's way on behalf of another violates a duty of imperfect obligation. If Kant and Mill are correct, therefore, the man described above appears to violate some of his moral obligations after all.

While there might be some disagreement concerning exactly what is objectionable about this man's behavior or attitude, many theists, I suspect, would be tempted to locate at least some of the blame for his disagreeable behavior in the assumption that actions of supererogation are possible. For it is by assuming that actions of supererogation are possible that he is able to justify the behavior he exhibits. In this way it might be tempting to conclude that actions of supererogation are little more than the imaginary constructs of persons who wish to escape from burdensome moral obligations.

Just as the reformers viewed supererogation as the blasphemous invention of those wishing to justify indulgences, one might similarly view it as a device calculated to justify a modern day callous disregard for the needs and well-being of others. (An alternative position for theists would be to hold that actions of supererogation are possible to perform but blasphemous to attempt; according to this point of view, perhaps, even if they are possible, they shouldn't be).

It is here that the philosophical ethicist will perhaps appeal to common sense. If it is granted that human agents are capable of doing that which is morally good or praiseworthy, it is hard to see why at least some actions of supererogation are not possible. Suppose that on the day before payday Elizabeth finds herself with a grand total of twenty dollars. Seeing a neighbor in need, Elizabeth hands the twenty dollar bill to the neighbor, thankful for the opportunity to help another. From the point of view of pure common sense, it is hard to see why her action is not supererogatory. One cannot reasonably expect her to give away all of the money she possesses, and hence she does something which appears to be praiseworthy but not obligatory. Some, of course, will reply that she is doing precisely what she ought to be doing, and hence she is merely fulfilling a moral obligation. If something is truly praiseworthy, then one has an obligation to do it.

Thus, in the spirit of what Rahner and Allen are proposing, Elizabeth does nothing supererogatory; indeed, withholding the twenty dollars from the neighbor in need would be morally forbidden. There is something initially appealing in the claim that, if we are the creatures of a morally perfect God, we have an obligation to do whatever is good and praiseworthy. But I believe that upon closer inspection this claim turns out to be difficult to defend in its unrestricted form. Suppose that two of Elizabeth's neighbors, knowing of the twenty dollar bill in her possession, stand on her porch desperately requesting it (each needs twenty dollars within an hour to avoid eviction). Handing it to the first would be praiseworthy, and handing it to the second would be praiseworthy. Thus, by the principle that the performance of an action is praiseworthy only if it is obligatory, it follows that Elizabeth has a moral obligation to give both neighbors the same twenty dollar bill. This, however, is an obligation that is not in her power to fulfill. It appears, then, that a denial that supererogation is possible in circumstances such as these leads to the consequence that human agents are saddled with hosts of moral obligations which cannot possibly be jointly fulfilled. If it is praiseworthy to donate one's life savings to charity, then one has a moral obligation to donate the entirety of one's life's savings to each and every legitimate charity.

Here one might elect to bite the bullet and simply resign oneself to embracing these consequences, one of which appears to be a repudiation of the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'. But it is hard to deny that these consequences are somewhat less than appealing. Moreover, an alternative position seems available to those who believe that we are the creatures of a morally perfect God, a point of view that can be briefly characterized along the following lines. Through His grace God's creatures are capable of performing praiseworthy actions, and many of these praiseworthy actions are also obligatory. But not all of these praiseworthy actions are obligatory, for God likewise endows his creatures with the ability to transcend the requirements of obligation. By the grace of God they have been given the capacity to go the extra mile and show love to their neighbor in special ways that are not strictly required. God, then, has created his creatures with the capability of free and spontaneous outpouring of love which goes beyond strict obedience to what is required of them. Such outpouring of love need not, of course, be viewed as building up a treasury of merit. Nevertheless, these acts fall outside the boundaries of obligation, and it is a part of God's plan that his creatures are provided with opportunities to perform them.

For the purposes of this essay I call attention to this alternative point of view solely to illustrate the possibility of reconciling supererogation with the proposition that we are creatures of a morally perfect God. Naturally it is a point of view that will be rejected by those whose views have already been surveyed. But if there are powerful arguments to show that at least some actions of supererogation are possible in human life, as I have attempted to suggest, it is a point of view which is arguably more plausible than those suggested by the opponents of supererogation. Nevertheless, it is not my purpose here to argue in favor of this alternative view. On the contrary, in the remainder of this discussion it will be my concern to propose that there are lessons to be learned from these theistic opponents of supererogation, lessons that are perhaps instructive to philosophical ethicists whose discussions of supererogation are frequently far removed from the concerns of theologians and philosophers of religion.

Championing the cause of supererogation appears to place one in the position of saying that going the second mile is merely nice to do but optional. And this impression is reinforced when one examines the philosophical literature on supererogation. But isn't there some truth to Allen's suggestion that the performance of second mile acts can at times be expected of moral agents? One need not follow Allen's lead in finding all such acts to fall into the realm of obligation from the standpoint of covenant love, including the sacrifice of one's life for comrades. But are there not, in certain circumstances, second mile acts that are more than optional? I shall conclude with three separate lines of reasoning which seem to show that it is plausible to answer this question in the affirmative.

First, it is important to recall that the failure to perform an action of supererogation is by definition neutral, and hence one who declines the opportunity to perform an action of supererogation does nothing that is either forbidden or blameworthy. Thus, the omission of an action of supererogation is in and of itself entirely above reproach, morally speaking. And here one is reminded once again of the pharisaical man who doggedly defends his right to avoid actions of supererogation.

What needs to be pointed out, I believe, is that from the fact that the failure to perform an action of supererogation is never blameworthy it does not follow that the failure to go the second mile can never constitute behavior which is blameworthy. There are times when one can justifiably be criticized for failing to do that which is praiseworthy but non-obligatory. Elsewhere¹⁰ I have argued that an example of such a situation consists in resisting a strong temptation to insult a person by whom one has previously been insulted. While it is commendable to resist this strong temptation, it is nevertheless blameworthy simply to yield to the temptation and insult the person. Thus, there are times at which one can be expected to do that which is praiseworthy but non-obligatory. This is a point that seems to have been overlooked by philosophical ethicists, theologians, and philosophers of religion alike, but it something that, I believe, has far-reaching implications for one who is attempting to live the moral life. A person is always expected to do that which is morally obligatory, but this is not all that can be expected of us. We can likewise be expected at times to do more than what is strictly obligatory.

From these observations it follows that going the second mile is not always supererogatory. It is never blameworthy *per se* to refrain from an action of supererogation, but one can frequently be blamed for failing to go the second mile. The legalist who defends his right to refrain from actions of supererogation is correct in assuming that such refraining is not blameworthy. But his mistake is to assume that each time he refrains from a praiseworthy non-obligatory action, he thereby refrains from an action of supererogation. Hence, he wrongly concludes that each time he passes up an opportunity to perform a small action of kindness for another, it automatically follows that he is immune from blame or criticism. Surely one can reasonably expect that he will not always decline opportunities to go out of his way for the sake of another, and the same holds true for all of us.

Second, it is frequently pointed out that there is an entire domain of moral judgments which goes beyond the realm of deontic moral judgments. In addition to deontic moral judgments (which embody judgments of blameworthiness, culpability, fault, or negligence for one's actions) there are the so-called aretaic judgments, judgments which concern the manner in which one possesses or fails to possess virtues or vices. Thus, a positive aretaic judgment may be made about a person who is just or courageous, and a negative aretaic judgment may appropriately be made about a person who is unjust or cowardly.

Occasionally it is appropriate to make a negative deontic judgment about an act which a saintly or highly virtuous person performs, and occasionally it is appropriate to make a positive deontic judgment about an act which proceeds from a character deserving of a negative aretaic judgment. Moreover, as Gregory Trianosky points out¹¹ a person who fails to perform an act of supererogation may have acted from a less than virtuous motive. Hence, while no negative deontic judgment can justly be made about the person's omission, it may nevertheless be appropriate to make a negative aretaic judgment about the omission. The failure to perform an act of supererogation cannot, by the very nature of supererogation, be judged blameworthy in and of itself, but this failure might well proceed from an underlying disposition which can be criticized on aretaic grounds.

This phenomenon, Trainosky argues, explains why people frequently feel a need to make excuses for the failure to perform acts of supererogation. When asked to donate time or money for charitable causes, people tend to feel that a simple "no" is inadequate. From a deontic point of view, of course, no further response is necessary. From a deontic point of view there is no need to apologize for the omission of a supererogatory act. Nevertheless, people sense that others will make a negative judgment if it is not made clear that the omission is occasioned by circumstance, not a lack of virtue. Thus, Trainosky concludes, people are aware that the omission of a supererogatory act invites the possibility of negative judgments regarding the underlying character of the agent which gives rise to the omission.

Third, it is frequently pointed out by theologians and philosophers of religion that God has called his creatures into various areas of service or vocation according to the special gifts with which they are endowed. Accordingly, the manner in which one conducts one's life outside of these areas differs from the manner in which one can be expected to conduct one's life within these areas. For in these areas of life one arguably has a calling frequently to go beyond the strict fulfillment of duty, to show love for others in ways are not strictly required.

Within such areas of life, then, one can be expected to transcend the fulfillment of duty, even in ways which involve excelling in service to God and man. This point of view does not, of course, completely vindicate the opponents of supererogation. For one can understand the concept of vocation in such a manner as to regard areas in one's life beyond the scope of one's vocations as areas in which supererogation can be operative. One cannot be expected to excel in service to God and man in every conceivable area of life, and hence the possibility of performing actions of supererogation in other areas of one's life is preserved. Thus, while the possibility of supererogation tends to fade or diminish in areas where one has a special calling, the same does not happen outside of these areas.

In his article entitled 'Vocation', Robert M. Adams's comments on Kierkegaard's conception of vocation points to an important respect in which this point can be connected with what has already been shown about the relevance of virtue to duty: Kierkegaard's conception of vocation is intimately related to his ideas about selfhood. It is significant that the crucial statement in the verdict on Quidam is not, "This is not what he ought to do," but, "This is not what he ought to be." Kierkegaard sees the vocation first and foremost as a vocation to be a certain kind of person.¹²

By insisting that vocation be understood in terms of the mandate to be a certain kind of person, Kierkegaard seems to suggest that the obligations arising out of one's vocation often require one to possess virtues of various sorts. To be a certain kind of person implies that one has come to possess such virtues, and hence the requirements of vocation go well beyond the requirements to perform certain types of actions. Not only is one summoned to go beyond the call of duty within the scope of one's vocation, but the manner in which one actually responds to this summons can be judged on both deontic and aretaic grounds. Given the way Kierkegaard understands vocation, then, it is not enough to perform certain types of action; one must also exhibit certain types of virtues. Again, the requirements of the moral life go beyond the realm of the deontic.

Perhaps the concept of supererogation will stand to gain at least a bit more respectability in the eyes of theological ethicists if and when it is recognized that not all instances of going the second mile fall within its domain, that a person who forbears to perform acts of supererogation is not automatically immune from negative moral judgments, and that it is mainly operative in areas of life beyond the scope of one's vocation. One cannot appeal to the concept of supererogation to justify the position that it is always optional to go the second mile, particularly within the scope of one's vocation, or that the failure to perform acts of supererogation inevitably shields one from moral criticism. Accordingly, it is no more a veil behind which to hide from the cries of a world in need than it is a device to justify the idea that human beings can build up a treasury of good works.

But, on the other side of the ledger, perhaps it is time for philosophical ethicists to benefit from the insights of those who have reflected upon the religious dimensions of moral obligation. While one might be tempted to dismiss the views of Rahner, Allen, and others as unreasonable or extreme, I hope to have shown that their core contention is difficult to deny. A moral agent can frequently be expected to do that which is praiseworthy, even when under no obligation to do so. Accordingly, the class of supererogatory actions may well be considerably smaller than philosophical ethicists may have been inclined to suppose.¹³

Endnotes

See David Heyd, *Supererogation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Allen, Joseph, *Love and Conflict*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984, p. 115; Heyd, David, *Supererogation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 27. (Whether the first semi-systematic treatment of supererogation is to be found in the writings of Thomas might be challenged by those who feel the honor should go to Anselm in his *Cur Deus Homo?*. On this point I shall refrain from taking sides.)

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae, Question 108, Article 4.

Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed., John T. McNeill, tr., Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), Volume I, p. 419 (ii, viii, 56), as quoted in Allen, *Op Cit*. Not all of the reformers share Calvin's feelings on this point. Philip Melanchthon recognizes the distinction as legitimate, although he finds only one instance of a counsel in the scriptures (pertaining to the state of marriage); Melanchthon, *Loci Communes Theologici*, ed., Wilhelm Pauck, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 59.

Luther, Martin, 'Explanation of the Ninety five Theses', Thesis 58, *Works*, ed., H.J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955), Volume XXXI, p. 21, as quoted in Heyd, *Op. Cit*.

Calvin, John, *Op. Cit.*, Volume II, p. 672 (iii,v,3).

Rahner, Karl, 'The Theology of the Religious Life', in *Religious Orders in the Modern World*, ed. Huyghe, Gerard, *et. al.* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1965), pp. 54-55.

Allen, Joseph, *Op. Cit.*, p. 127. Allen also points out, in this connection, that there are difficulties in judging precisely when and how one ought to be sacrificial; hence, he argues, the distinction between commands and counsels might still turn out to have some utility.

See for example Mill, John Stuart, *Utilitarianism*, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), p. 74.

'Quasi-Supererogation', *Philosophical Studies*, LII (1987), 141-150. An alternative approach to establishing this point is to say that it can be blameworthy persistently to pass up opportunities to perform acts of supererogation. If so, an agent who refrains from performing a large number of supererogatory actions over the course of time refrains from performing the disjunctive action comprised of these supererogatory actions, and it can be blameworthy to refrain from this disjunctive action.

Trianosky, Gregory, 'Supererogation, Wrongdoing, and Vice: On the Autonomy of the Ethics of Virtue', *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXIII (1986), 25-40.

Adams, Robert M., 'Vocation', *Faith and Philosophy*, IV (1987), p. 454.

For more detail on moral expectation see my book, *The Expectations of Morality* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004). I have benefitted from the criticism and advice of Douglas Schuurman, John Schneider, and members of the Calvin College Philosophy Department.