

SUPEREROGATION, MORAL EFFORT, AND THE LIMITS OF OBLIGATION

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ABSTRACT

When a moral agent performs an act of supererogation, the agent is doing something praiseworthy that is not morally required. Doing this requires effort and in particular more effort than merely satisfying the requirements of duty. I refer to this type of effort as moral effort. In the first half of this essay, I explore the role of moral effort in achieving the status of the supererogatory. In the second half of the essay, I defend a view concerning the limits of moral obligation that I call duty minimalism, and I explain how the two parts of this essay relate to one another.

KEYWORDS

Supererogation, obligation, expectation, ought implies can principle, effort

An act of supererogation is standardly characterized as an act that is morally praiseworthy but not obligatory to perform and that is not morally blameworthy to omit. When a moral agent performs an act of supererogation, the agent is doing something praiseworthy that is not morally required. Doing this requires effort and in particular more effort than merely satisfying the requirements of duty. I will refer to this type of effort as moral effort.¹

In the first half of this essay I will explore the role of moral effort in achieving the status of the supererogatory. In the second half of the essay I will defend a view concerning the limits of moral obligation that I call duty minimalism. The two parts of the essay are related in the following manner: While a minimalist approach to

¹ The term “moral effort” has been used by writers ranging from Pope John Paul II to Martin Luther King Jr. I am not aware of its usage in the philosophical literature. However, some authors, such as Dana Kay Nelkin, employ terminology that appears to be closely related.

moral obligation can be used successfully to carry out one's moral obligations, supererogation, by its very nature, resists such an approach because it requires behavior that is morally praiseworthy.

Part of what makes the performance of an act morally praiseworthy is that the agent has undertaken a certain kind of effort, frequently to rise above fulfilling the bare requirements of duty, and I believe that taking the trouble to do so is a central feature of supererogatory behavior.

The first thing to notice about moral effort is that it comes in different forms. Sometimes physical effort is what makes an act supererogatory, as when one mows the lawn of an elderly neighbor. Sometimes the effort is in the form of going out of one's way to do a favor for another. The effort can consist of taking time out of one's schedule to help another. The effort can involve the expenditure of money or other resources for the benefit of another. No doubt there are other forms that moral effort can take.

When one performs an act of supererogation, there is a reason why the performance of the act is morally praiseworthy, and at least part of the reason is that moral effort is involved in bringing it about. This is not to say that one is always aware of exerting moral effort. One might believe that one is just satisfying one's obligations. Alternatively, one might feel privileged to be able to engage in altruistic behavior, and hence what one is doing might feel nothing like effort. But the fact remains that in such cases what one is doing is supererogatory.

The expenditure of moral effort is, of course, not restricted to supererogatory behavior. Typically one must exert moral effort in carrying out one's moral obligations, even those that consist in omitting to act. Thus, in many instances one is required to exert *additional* moral effort to transform an ordinary act into an act of supererogation. In the second half of this paper more will be said about moral effort in connection with moral obligation.

Can there be cases of supererogatory behavior in which no moral effort whatsoever is exerted? I strongly suspect the answer is "no." It might be thought that no moral effort is required in cases where omitting to act qualifies as an act of supererogation. Suppose that a platter of cupcakes is being passed around. By the time it reaches me, there is only one left. I would love to have the cupcake, but I leave it for the next person for purely altruistic reasons. Arguably, my refraining from taking the cupcake is supererogatory, but have I exerted moral effort? Some might think not. My inclination is to say that I have exerted moral effort and that the moral effort consists in my exerting the power of will to leave the cupcake for another. If my refraining from taking the cupcake is praiseworthy, it seems that my exerting the power of will to leave it is part, if not all, of the explanation.

Suppose that I purchase a bouquet of flowers and bring them to a lonely resident at a nursing home. It might be tempting to suppose that my giving her the flowers is an act of supererogation that involves no moral effort because the flowers have

already been purchased and they have already been transported to the nursing home. But it is dubious that the mere act of handing the flowers to her is an act of supererogation. After all, if someone standing outside the door handed me a bouquet of flowers and asked me to present them to her, I would have done nothing particularly praiseworthy. Rather, the act of supererogation I perform appears to be the conjunctive act of purchasing, transporting, and delivering the flowers, and this act *does* involve moral effort.

The basic picture that emerges from the discussion up to this point is the following. First, moral effort is typically involved in meeting one's moral obligations, whether doing so requires one to act or refrain from acting. Second, additional moral effort is typically involved in exceeding one's moral obligations. Third, when one exceeds one's moral obligations one's action (or omission) becomes a candidate for qualifying as an act of supererogation. Fourth, if one's action or omission qualifies as an act of supererogation, the additional moral effort is at least part of the reason why the performance or omission of the act in question is morally praiseworthy or meritorious.

Here I acknowledge that some acts of supererogation (perhaps leaving the cupcake on the plate) do not consist in exceeding the requirements of duty. In such cases the moral effort in question is not moral effort *in addition to* the moral effort needed to satisfy some duty or obligation. It is simply moral effort by virtue of which the act achieves the status of supererogation.

I turn now to a consideration of moral effort as it pertains to the limits of moral obligation.

Living the moral life requires effort. But how much effort is enough? In the remainder of this paper I will address this question by discussing a view I call duty minimalism. The duty minimalist believes that a bare minimum of effort is perfectly acceptable in discharging one's moral duties, as long as they are discharged in a satisfactory manner. The duty minimalist, unlike some types of moral skeptics, acknowledges that certain moral duties or obligations are binding on us. The question is, how much effort ought we put into carrying them out? The minimalist will say that the bare minimum is permissible.

In what follows I describe duty minimalism, lay out some background assumptions, and defend the view against a number of objections.

No doubt there are several ways in which one can be a duty minimalist. I believe the following version is defensible. Suppose one knows that one has a moral duty to bring about a state of affairs, one knows that performing action A will bring it about, and one knows that other ways of bringing it about will require more effort. Then, other things being equal, one is permitted to discharge one's moral duty by performing action A.

The phrase "other things being equal" is intended to make allowances for duties of an over-riding nature. Suppose I have a duty to bring about a state of affairs, I know

that action A will bring it about with the least amount of effort, I also know that action B will bring it about, and I know that I have a separate duty to perform action B. Then presumably I ought to bring about the state of affairs by performing action B, and hence omitting B in favor of A is not permissible

A student turns in a term paper, and you have a moral duty to read it and assign it a grade. It is badly written and you find reading it tedious. You read it in about thirty minutes and assign it a grade. Based upon many years of grading term papers, you are sure that the grade you have assigned is the grade the paper deserves. You could have spent hours reading it so as to gain a depth of appreciation for what the student was really trying to say. You could have written copious comments for the purpose of helping the student learn how to write better papers in the future. But you opted for the minimal effort in discharging your duty.

Here you could claim, and rightly so, that spending hours on the paper would have qualified as going beyond the call of duty. If you were bound by institutional requirements to provide copious comments on all the student papers, that would be a different story. In this case you were not.

Some might feel that the view I am defending is one that is obviously true and practically tautologous: Once you have satisfactorily fulfilled a duty, you have satisfactorily fulfilled a duty. However, there are many others who will resonate to the idea that as moral agents we ought to go beyond the bare minimum in carrying out our moral duties. These include certain act utilitarians who believe that one ought always attempt to make life as good as possible (New, 1974), certain divine command theorists who believe that God requires all of us to strive to achieve perfection (Allen, 1984; Rahner, 1965), and a number of philosophers who believe that all of us ought always to do the best that we can (Feldman, 1986; Goldman, 1978; Zimmerman, 1993). The objections and replies in the next section will address some of their concerns.

For the purposes of this essay I will assume that the ought implies can principle is true, at least most of the time (Peter Graham seems to have found some counter-examples to the principle, but they do not affect the present discussion). If I am unable to perform an act, then I am not morally obligated to perform it.

It is worth pointing out that obligations to refrain from performing actions often involve little or no effort. I have a moral obligation to refrain from murdering the kindly old man who lives next door, and fulfilling this obligation takes no effort whatsoever. But obligations to perform acts can require considerable effort, and these obligations will be the focus of the present discussion.

Two final comments are in order before proceeding to the objections and replies. First, some duties will be so difficult to bring about that even the minimal required to discharge them will be no small achievement. An example might be a duty to overcome an addiction. Second, in some situations one might have a (second order) moral duty to discharge a particular moral duty in a minimalist fashion for the sake

of efficiency. For example, at the scene of an accident the easiest way to administer first aid might be to rip the victim's clothing, and under the circumstances one might possibly be obligated to administer the first aid in that fashion.

In this section of the paper I consider three objections that might be made to discredit duty minimalism. The first objection requires a fairly lengthy response.

Consider the following example. You promised me that you would try to get in touch with the superintendent of schools in order to plead that my dismissal was unfair. You put in a call, you are told that the superintendent is in a meeting, and you breathe a sigh of relief that you are spared an unpleasant and unwanted conversation. By trying to get in touch with her, you consider the obligation discharged (technically, you have brought about the state of affairs of trying to contact her). I might feel that you have reneged on your promise, but strictly speaking you have not. Had you made repeated efforts to converse with the superintendent, those efforts would have exceeded the requirements in effect.

Still, there seems to be something morally deficient (or adolescent) in your legalistic interpretation of the promise that you made me. Surely I am justified in expecting a greater output of effort than a single telephone call. The first objection, then, is that moral minimalism does not seem to square with the reasonable intuition that in situations such as these more can be expected.

Elsewhere I have called attention to the expectations of morality and have argued that moral agents can be morally expected to do that which they are not morally obligated to do (Mellema, 2004). Thus, moral expectation is a wider category than moral obligation. Although we are always morally expected to carry out our moral obligations, we do not always have a moral obligation to carry out our moral expectations.

You promised that you would try to get in touch with the superintendent to plead my case. The promise created an obligation, and strictly speaking you fulfilled the obligation. But I could reasonably expect you to do more, and, assuming that at the time you made the promise you didn't expressly say that you would try only once, you can in fact arguably be expected to do more.

If a person is morally expected to bring about a state of affairs and the person fails to do so, then, other things being equal, the person is morally blameworthy for failing to do so. Now blameworthiness is capable of coming in degrees, and the degree to which a person is blameworthy will depend upon the situation at hand. But the failure to do what one is morally expected to do will be blameworthy to at least a minimal degree.

Suppose you can be reasonably expected to make more than a single attempt to reach the superintendent. Then the failure to make more than a single telephone call is morally blameworthy to at least a minimal degree. And this is true in spite of your having satisfactorily discharged your moral obligation.

Thus in some situations we are morally permitted to exert the bare minimum of effort to carry out what we are required to do, but we can still be morally blameworthy for failing to do more.

A variant of the ought implies can principle applies to moral expectation, I believe. If a person is unable to perform an action, then the person cannot rightly be expected to perform it. Hence if a person exerts the bare minimum of effort to fulfill a moral obligation and person is unable to exert more effort, the person bears no moral blame for exerting the bare minimum of effort.

Recall that an act of supererogation is an act that is morally praiseworthy but not obligatory to perform and that is not morally blameworthy to omit. Earlier I remarked that expending more than the minimum necessary to fulfill an obligation qualifies as going beyond the call of duty. Doing so, however, does not automatically qualify as performing an act of supererogation. The reason is that there are actions, such as resisting the temptation to retaliate, that go beyond the call of duty, but whose omission is blameworthy (for more on this, see Mellema, 1991, Chapter Five).

Just as one can take a minimalist approach to moral obligation, one can take a minimalist approach to moral expectation. Suppose that an elderly neighbor rings my doorbell and asks for help to free her car from a snowbank, and suppose I am morally expected to help her (that is, it would be at least mildly blameworthy for me to refuse). I spend a couple of minutes helping her, but the car will not budge. I then advise her to place a call for a tow truck, and I return to my house. No doubt I could have done more, but that would have been to go beyond the call of expectation.

It would be difficult to criticize a person who takes a minimalist approach to moral expectation. If I exert a minimum of effort to discharge a moral expectation I have still discharged it and am not morally blameworthy in that regard. One would have a hard time finding a sound basis for criticizing me for abandoning my neighbor after helping her.

I turn now to the second objection. A person who subscribes to duty minimalism might well be motivated by desires that are morally suspect. Suppose that you promise to contact the superintendent only because I have badgered you about it. You are resentful about having to do this and through clenched teeth you vow to do the minimum necessary to fulfill the promise. After being told that the superintendent is in a meeting, you take a perverse delight in my misfortune. Then it is possible that you are quite blameworthy for the attitude you display, this in addition to being blameworthy for failing to do what is morally expected of you. How can duty minimalism be permissible in cases of this sort? What shall we say about cases in which one's motives are morally perverse?

My response is that moral minimalism is not shown to be false by cases of this nature. Surely taking a perverse delight in another's misfortune is blameworthy, but it does not follow that selecting the option that involves the least effort is impermissible as such. Just as bearing blame for failing a moral expectation is

compatible with duty minimalism, the same is true here. Bearing blame for taking delight in another's misfortune is compatible with duty minimalism.

Suppose, the objector may continue, that one's taking a perverse delight in another's misfortune is not only blameworthy but morally impermissible. Surely in that case it would be impermissible to select the option that takes the least effort because it involves doing something that is impermissible. And this would show that moral minimalism as a general theory is mistaken.

This situation is more interesting, and it might initially appear that duty minimalism is not feasible in situations of this type. Nevertheless, I believe this is only an apparent problem for duty minimalism. The situation can be summed up as follows. Person A has promised to attempt to bring about a state of affairs that will benefit person B. Person A attempts to bring about this state of affairs in a way that involves the least effort. The state of affairs in question does not occur, and person A takes a perverse delight in this.

Here we imagine that A's taking a perverse delight is not only morally blameworthy but morally impermissible. Does it follow that A's attempting to bring about the state of affairs by means of exerting the least effort necessary is impermissible? Surely this does not follow. A's taking a perverse delight is an action that takes place subsequent to A's attempting to bring about the state of affairs. The fact that A's subsequent action is impermissible is perfectly consistent with the permissibility of A's attempting to bring about the state of affairs.

Of course, A might take a perverse delight in the thought that the state of affairs in question might not take place, and this perverse delight might take place at the same time that A attempts to bring it about. But surely a distinction can be made between the perverse thought and the attempt to bring about the state of affairs, and there is no inconsistency in judging that the former is impermissible and the latter is not. The perverse thought might constitute the violation of duty, but it is the violation of a duty other than the duty to bring about the state of affairs.

If one does the minimum possible to fulfill a moral expectation and one's motive is to spite the person one is helping, one might be blameworthy for having such a motive. Suppose I take great pleasure in my neighbor's misfortune and make a pretense of helping her (I do not exert much effort) and walk away amused that she is no closer to having her car freed from the snowbank. Then, although I have fulfilled the moral expectation in question, my attitude might render me worthy of moral blame.

The responses to the first two objections rest upon a distinction between that which is morally blameworthy and that which is the violation of moral duty. But isn't this distinction problematic? Isn't it always impermissible to act in a morally blameworthy manner? Let us call this objection three.

The following argument demonstrates that an act can be morally blameworthy without being morally impermissible. Suppose I promise to give one of my prized

possessions to two different people. Then three courses of action are open to me: (1) I give it to person number one, (2) I give it to person number two, and (3) I give it to neither of these persons. All three courses of action are morally blameworthy to at least a minimal degree because each one involves breaking at least one promise. Moreover, I cannot avoid one of these courses of action. Thus, I cannot avoid a morally blameworthy course of action, and by an application of the ought implies can principle the action I end up performing is morally permissible. If I have no choice but to perform some blameworthy act or other, then I have not violated duty by performing this act.

In this section of the paper I have attempted to demonstrate that moral minimalism is a defensible theory. We are not duty-bound to exert more than the minimum necessary in discharging our moral obligations, other things being equal. Others may criticize us for not exerting more effort in these situations, but the most that this shows is that we are morally blameworthy for omitting to do more.

In conclusion, I have argued that a central feature of supererogatory behavior is undertaking a certain kind of effort that I have called moral effort. Every act of supererogation is praiseworthy to perform, and part of what renders an act praiseworthy is the expenditure of moral effort. In the fulfillment of moral obligation the amount of moral effort we are required to exert is the minimal required in discharging our moral obligations.²

² I am indebted to members of the Calvin College Philosophy Department for criticisms of an earlier draft.

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