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Heroism as Moral Paradox

While heroes and heroines abound in mythology and literature, it was not until 1958 that the question of the ethical status of heroism was raised. J.O. Urmson's seminal article "Saints and Heroes" criticized traditional ethical theory, arguing that the usual tripartite classification of actions, viz. forbidden, permitted, required, could not do justice to the moral excellence of heroic and saintly actions: *To my mind this threefold classification...is totally inadequate to the facts of morality; any moral theory that leaves room only for such a classification will in consequence also be inadequate.*¹ Post-Urmson discussion has placed heroism into a class of actions labeled as *supererogation*, even though Urmson himself did not use the term. Broadly defined, supererogatory actions are morally excellent actions that go beyond the duty of the agent. This working definition is, as one would expect, not a matter of agreement; the refined definition of an individual theorist will follow along with his view on other related ideas, e.g. how to define 'duty', whether altruism is possible, or whether or not this class of actions even exists. David Heyd's Supererogation, Its Status in Ethical Theory (1982), arguably the most complete analysis of this ethical concept, identified six paradigm instances of supererogatory actions, with moral heroism considered the most typical.² The purpose of this essay is to reflect on the introduction of heroism into ethical theory via the concept of supererogation, with a view to deciding how plausibly the theory of heroism fits the facts, i.e.

basic intuitions about heroism. I have been guided by Heyd's definition of supererogation: *An act is supererogatory if and only if:*

- a. It is neither obligatory nor forbidden.*
- b. Its omission is not wrong, and does not deserve sanction or criticism—either formal or informal.*
- c. It is morally good, both by virtue of its (intended) consequences and by virtue of its intrinsic value (being beyond duty).*
- d. It is done voluntarily for the sake of someone else's good, and is thus meritorious.*³

Imagine a squad of soldiers, as J.O. Urmson would have us do: *We may imagine a squad of soldiers to be practicing the throwing of live hand grenades; a grenade slips from the hand of one of them and rolls on the ground near the squad; one of them sacrifices his life by throwing himself on the grenade and protecting his comrades with his own body.*⁴ Let us assume, in this example, that the soldier had the best of motives and that he was neither suicidal nor deranged. There was nothing in his character or personality that even the most suspicious and cynical observer might find to criticize. Let us agree with Urmson, then, that he is a hero, that his action was heroic. Despite the flexibility of the word *heroic* and thus its ambiguity, it is still an appropriate word with which to refer to an action that is morally relevant or has some moral character, whether because of the good consequences that it achieves, or because of the strength of the agent's character or virtue, of which it is an expression, or because of the good will that motivates the action.

Selecting an example of the heroic is not as straightforward as one initially may think, and the fact that the words *hero* and *heroic* are so commonly used to

refer to a variety of praiseworthy people and actions, whether saints or quarterbacks, does nothing to uncomplicate an analysis. The great extension of the term makes it ambiguous, and precision is hard to achieve. Achilles and Ulysses were Homeric heroes, and Socrates was the first moral hero. Joseph Campbell made the hero of the monomyth a staple of literary and cultural studies. Albert Schweitzer and Mahatma Gandhi were living heroes. In 1941 Maximilian Kolbe volunteered to replace another Auschwitz prisoner headed for the gas chamber and died there himself. Dorothy Day was committed to the service of the poor. Many people would offer the name of Mother Theresa of Calcutta as an example of the heroic. While we have to allow the possibility that none of these is perfect and that there will be something to criticize, each is a plausible hero/heroine. The prospect of selecting a person as hero/heroine is daunting, precisely because the observer would have to consider the total character and moral excellence of such a hero/heroine, an overall life rather than a discrete action. One would have to take note of a comment by Susan Wolf, where she prefers the *...mischievousness and sense of irony in Chesterton's Father Brown to the innocence and indiscriminating love of St. Francis.*⁵ Less daunting, then, is the task of considering a heroic action rather than a hero/heroine. The soldier example is workable, because we do not have to scrutinize his total character and life. Selecting his action as an example, it may be countered, already presumes a definition that is yet to be achieved and thus

is circular. Allowing for later revision, however, we use it here because it is plausible and because it helps to move our question forward.

Our soldier would be praised because of his extraordinary courage and most likely would be honored posthumously. No one would argue that this was his duty, that it was expected of him, and that, had he not fallen on the grenade, he should be criticized and dishonored. Oddly enough, if he had somehow survived, he might even have pushed any praise and honor aside, with some amazing modesty, claiming that he was "just doing his duty." Self-sacrifice, however, was not his duty, nor the duty of any other soldier. Neither was such an action forbidden. The action has an extraordinarily high degree of moral excellence that transcends any definition of duty. Here is the main feature of heroic action: it transcends the duty of the agent. His modest protestations notwithstanding, Urmsen's soldier went beyond his duty when he sacrificed his life for the squad.

If heroic actions are supererogatory, and supererogatory actions go beyond duty, then, within three ethical theories, we should be able to explain the meaning of 'duty' beyond which actions become heroic.

A deontological sense comes to mind first, especially a Kantian sense, since duty holds a uniquely dominant position for Kant. Morally good actions are good in virtue of their status as duty: Action A has moral value only if action A is performed as a duty. But, because we must say that our soldier did not have a duty to sacrifice himself, we must then say that the sacrifice had no moral value. But it did indeed have moral value, value that Kant cannot explain adequately as

a derivative of duty. Moreover his classification of actions has trouble with the non-obligatory. He says, for instance: *An action that is neither commanded nor forbidden is merely permissible...an action of this kind is called morally indifferent.*⁶ For Kant, permissible actions are morally indifferent. Whatever actions are neither forbidden nor obligatory belong in the area of the permissible. Accordingly Kant would say that Urmson's soldier was permitted to fall on the grenade. This articulation, though, does not do justice to our assessment of his sacrifice. Heroic actions are good, not indifferent. This articulation won't do either. Kant's range of permissible actions does not satisfy; his classification needs to give a plausible account of permissible actions that are not morally indifferent. This complaint, though, comes from a non-Kantian perspective, one that can evaluate an action as good independently of a sense of duty, i.e., an axiological sense that does not depend on a deontological. To the Kantian these two realms are coterminous; for the non-Kantian, duty is not morally all-encompassing.

Perhaps Kant was aware of the inadequacy of the meaning of 'permissible', since the Metaphysic of Morals, expanding the meaning of 'duty', offers a fourfold classification of duties achieved from the conjunction of 'self' and 'others', on the one hand, and 'perfect' and 'imperfect', on the other. A perfect duty is one that is strict, rigorous, and admits of no exceptions. Imperfect duties, prescriptions of general ends, do not specify any particular action with which to achieve a general end, and an agent has some choice about how to

fulfill imperfect duties; he has latitude over the means. Does this help to understand heroism? Our soldier's sacrifice is not a duty to himself, whether perfect or imperfect. Heroic actions are too uncommon to be perfect duties. A prescription to cultivate one's talents is Kant's example of an imperfect duty to oneself; the prescription of benevolence, an imperfect duty to others. If heroic action has any place in a Kantian scheme, it would have to be an imperfect duty to others. This possibility, though, would challenge or compromise a higher duty, viz. one's duty to oneself. Not only does a rational agent not have a perfect duty to sacrifice himself, he has a perfect duty to maintain his own well-being. If we were to insist that the action was morally good, the sacrificial action must be re-classified as duty. He was obliged to sacrifice himself, and, not only he, but everyone, because the action must be open to universalizability. When deliberating within the Categorical Imperative, one must consider whether the maxim under scrutiny, viz. whether to sacrifice one's life, would be conceivable in a world governed by this law of nature. Can we conceive of a world in which everyone has a duty to sacrifice himself? Such a prospect seems, on the face of it, strange. A more plausible reading of Kant would hold that there is no such duty, and that the duty of self-preservation is pre-eminent. We are encouraged too by his strong statements against suicide; even while suicide and self-sacrifice are different, they are similar as challenges to a duty of self-preservation.

The soldier's sacrifice, deontologically, is morally good only if it is his duty. He must understand this action to be his duty and have the moral motive of doing

his duty. While a deontological theory derives moral goodness from a concept of duty, Utilitarian theory presents the opposite, viz. that duty is derived from goodness. Action A is a duty, only if action A is good (useful, pleasant). To a Utilitarian, judgments of moral goodness are independent of, and prior to, determination of duty. Duty is dependent on utility. What is morally 'good', though, is extensive, since the useful and the pleasant are included, and so it becomes necessary for a Utilitarian to restrict the realm of 'goodness' so as to determine where duty lies.

The soldier's sacrifice is probably useful for maintaining numbers of persons in the military; while one soldier is dead more have survived to fight another day. The episode would probably be useful also for teaching the squad how to handle live grenades safely. Envisioning consequences, though, is an impossibly long task bedeviled by a realization that one can never know enough. The squad may have survived, but the consequences for the soldier's wife, children, and aging parents cannot be excluded from deliberation. Even if we put aside, for now, this question of which useful consequences are to be counted, consequentialism cannot discriminate among the many consequences so as to demarcate those that are duty from those that are not. All useful consequences cannot be a matter of duty, for some principle of discrimination should be available, if we are to derive what is duty from what is 'good' (useful, pleasant). The question is rendered moot, though, by the idealism and spontaneity of the soldier's sacrifice. Utilitarianism cannot draw the line between what is duty and what is

supererogatory, after the fact, just as the soldier at that one crucial moment did not.

We are thus brought to the question of the differentiation of duty and the locus of the differentiating. If he were somehow to survive and modestly protest that he was just doing his duty, the community would override his protestation. Community assessment would seem to be a factor. Citizens expect firemen and policemen, like soldiers, to put their lives in jeopardy, and actions like rushing into burning buildings and dodging gunfire are seen as part of their respective job descriptions. If such actions are their duty, then, by definition, such brave actions cannot qualify as supererogatory. Yet, these same actions require a level of courage and commitment that cannot be considered ordinary. To the extent that the community sees these actions as duty, to that extent the actions are not heroic. Contrariwise firemen at Ground Zero on September 11, 2001 were acclaimed as heroes. What seems to make the difference is the community's interpretation of the action, an interpretation that, in the case of our soldier, trumps both the objective qualities of the actions and the intention of the agent. Community judgment, however, does not seem enough; while it may be involved, it is not sufficient. What if the agent himself interprets his action as life-threatening and still undertakes it for the good of another person? We can imagine a community that thinks little of an individual member's heroic efforts. Even if this were the case, community opinion aside, such an agent, in

summoning internal resources and idealistic resolve, is doing what for him is heroic. Agent intention, then, makes a difference.

Unless and until he would tell us otherwise, the soldier acted freely and autonomously, his sacrificial action embodying an idealism and a special regard for the community of his squad. We would disagree that doing so was his duty. His action was morally excellent but completely optional. What is indicated here, then, is that the Utilitarian tie between 'good' and 'obligatory' is not analytic, and that, if we would join the 'good' and the 'obligatory', we must provide normative justification.

Justification rests, I suggest, on the autonomy of the person, specifically, on his freedom to pursue his own life goals according to his own ideals. While some duties will be imposed by the community on the individual, these externally-imposed duties are lesser in value and in obligation to the duties that the autonomous person places on himself. A citizen has duties imposed on him by members of his community, who, in turn, have a right to his obedience. The duty-right correlation created by externally-imposed duties does not exist, though, in the case of self-imposed duties. No one has a right to expect or demand someone else's self-sacrifice. The famous opening paragraphs of Mill's *On Liberty*, for instance, recognize and even demand full sovereignty over one's body and mind. With full sovereignty or autonomy a given, any duty to sacrifice oneself can originate only in the individual agent, as a self-imposed duty. Oddly

enough, then, any modest protestation by the soldier that he was just doing his duty has a degree of truth, i.e. it was a self-imposed duty.

It is on this point that an anti-supererogationist may raise a question about the origin of one's sense of duty, as Gregory Mellema points out in his 1992 study of supererogation with the example of Kurt Waldheim. It was revealed in 1988 that Waldheim, then President of Austria, had been a Wehrmacht officer from 1942 to 1945. Though aware of Nazi atrocities in Greece and Yugoslavia, he made no attempt to stop them. Addressing the Austrian people, he asked for understanding for all those who, like himself, did not resist the evil:

*Yes, I admit I wanted to survive by following orders...I have the deepest respect for all those who resisted. But I ask understanding for all the hundreds of thousands who didn't do that, but nonetheless did not become personally guilty.*⁷

By implication, resistance to Nazi atrocities was morally superior to non-resistance, yet, while resistance was heroic and deserves praise, non-resistance does not deserve blame. Rather there should be understanding of the vast number who did not resist. One view of this question, that of an anti-supererogationist, is that an agent deserves blame when he does not take up a morally superior task as his duty. The argument would be that, once an action is recognized as morally superior, then this recognition brings obligation to perform. An opposite view is what we are calling supererogation: the non-resisters did not take up the morally superior position, for they did not see this action as their duty. Resistance was morally superior but not a moral obligation.

What of a failure to perform one's recognized and assumed duties? Are there sanctions of any kind? All persons have social, professional, and personal roles that impose duties, and other persons, having the right to expect the performance, may impose sanctions for non-performance. Non-performance deserves sanctions, ranging from mild, informal criticism all the way to formal, severe punishment. Sanctions against Person A are appropriate only if Person B has a right to A's duty-performance. In a situation where A has imposed a duty on himself, B, having no right to A's duty-performance, has no justification in punishing A. Urmson's soldier, if he had a duty in any sense of the word, had a self-imposed duty, one that only he could know of, and one that he autonomously took upon himself.

The question of whether this duty was morally good raises again the connection made by the Utilitarian between the good and the obligatory, but from the opposite direction. The Utilitarian, envisioning many desirable outcomes and presuming that the achieving of these must be someone's duty, must decide which of these is one that he himself must perform. In the case of a self-imposed duty, the determination of what is obligatory being made, its justification as good should be clear to the agent. Understanding the soldier's sacrifice as self-imposed, we receive some help from the Utilitarian. The sacrifice saved the lives of a squad of soldiers at the price of just one. The soldier's family notwithstanding, the Utilitarian's hedonic calculus should approve. In addition there is intrinsic value to the act itself, as well as in its outcome.

Safeguarding human life is an ethical principle of the highest order, and the many laws, rules and policies that apply this principle are the duties of the soldier-as-citizen. His sacrifice is related to, and continuous with, these duties, yet goes conspicuously beyond them. Heyd writes, "*...supererogation should be characterized as realizing more of the same type of value attached to obligatory action...there is a common and continuous scale of values shared by supererogation and duty.*"⁸

Because the soldier acted autonomously, his action was voluntary. Had he acted in fulfillment of an external, imposed duty, there is always the possibility that he would have acted in order to avoid punishment. But, the origin of this duty being himself, his action is voluntary and his motive uncorrupted. He might have acted otherwise, e.g. run away, accepted death without taking action. His intention was altruistic, meaning that he stood to gain nothing by this action for himself, and his death clearly benefited his comrades.

The third great normative tradition, Virtue Ethics, is less able to accommodate heroism. This inability is ironic, in that courage is one of Aristotle's prime examples of a moral virtue. One of the basic tenets of the Nicomachean Ethics is that virtue is a well-entrenched disposition, or a stable equilibrium, a state of one's character, and that a virtuous action lies at the mean between extremes of excess and deficiency. Supererogatory actions do not lie at a mean but are defined by their departure from the mean. If the doctrine

of the mean is correct, then supererogatory actions, inasmuch as they lie outside the mean, can never be virtuous.

Moreover, there is a unity among the various virtues, such that, to have one in full measure, a person must have other virtues as well. The virtue of courage, for instance, requires the virtue of perseverance. Accordingly an observer cannot attribute virtue to an agent on the basis of a single action. Did Urmson's soldier possess Aristotelian virtue? Observers cannot say that he was virtuous, because they have seen only a single action and have no way of perceiving and interpreting his character.

Judgments about character or virtue are determinants of what is good, or, moral rightness and goodness are understood in terms of character or virtue. Throwing one's body onto a grenade in order to save the lives of one's comrades would be virtuous if and only if such actions were characteristically or typically performed by a virtuous person. We are left without any way of deciding who would qualify as a virtuous person without lapsing into circularity, for we would wish to propose the soldier as such a virtuous person, but, according to Aristotle, we cannot do so. Even virtuous persons must perform morally neutral actions, or must take actions now and then based on incomplete or wrong information. Even virtuous persons must make mistakes. When, exactly, would this virtuous person be an exemplar for lesser mortals in their deliberation? Even if we were to put this impediment aside, and even if we could agree on how to assess the total character of the virtuous person, we would have to admit that the standard

of rightness or goodness has been set too high and there is no space for the supererogatory. How can anyone move beyond Aristotle's virtuous person? We seem to need a criterion of rightness or goodness before we look up to Aristotle's virtuous person.

Urmson, then, was right in predicting that consequentialism would be more accommodating to heroism than deontology would be, and, *a fortiori*, than virtue ethics. The consequences of heroism for the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" are fairly obvious, and, from these consequences, duties will be derived and taken up. What counts as duty is a constantly moving realm, reflecting the whole range of human knowledge, needs, goals, and values in a community. Amidst this human flux, the heroic action is both constant and variable: constant, in that it always springs from an agent's generosity and creativity; variable, in that its unpredictable content or character changes to meet the needs of the moment. Heroic actions have a contextual character. Dorothy Day, for instance, responded to the poor in New York City; Father Kolbe, to the misery of a fellow prisoner in a death camp. They met varied needs in varied times and places. In moving well beyond what was required, they signaled to a community of observers a range of possibilities, beyond law, beyond public policy, beyond duty.

In a nation of laws like ours, heroic acts seem both necessary and improbable. Heroic acts need duty as a point of reference, in that the heroic, by definition, moves beyond what is required as duty. As are all his fellow citizens,

the hero is forbidden from taking the life of another person and is forbidden too from harming others. Most people manage this much. A hero, however, will emerge, occasionally, who moves far beyond this measure of non-murder and non-harm into a moral frontier land. Here he takes conspicuously generous action in advancing the interests of others and of preserving their lives, perhaps at the expense of his own interests, well-being or life. Heroic actions lie on the same scale of value as duty, but surpass it. Heroism is continuous with duty and yet it stands for a moral creativity. The hero stands at the growing edge of what the community sees as good, the point at which duties end, the point at which his own moral creativity envisions that more is still possible for him, if not for the rest of us. The hero, in short, "pushes the envelope" of society's values.

Heroic acts stand at the juncture of individual action and group identity. Ulysses is not a hero for us, because we no longer need what he has to offer. Oddly, what counts as heroic keeps changing as the realm of duty expands. Unlike the non-fulfillment of duties, the absence of heroic acts cannot be blamed, criticized or punished. The heroic action has its origin in the individual, yet it benefits the community. It cannot be required, although it is essential to community survival, being valued as paradigmatic and as part of the education of the young. Doing one's duty brings some benefits to the agent, but heroic acts may or may not. They may in fact destroy the hero.

Our intuitions tell us that there are actions that are heroic, and we want to take up Urmson's challenge to account for the heroic in secular ethical theory.

Yoram Lubling, writing recently in *Contemporary Philosophy*, claims the following about theory:

*Theorizing is always a form of practice or a dramatic rehearsal in the imagination...theory in general...will amount to nothing more than an Ivory Tower exercise in concept splitting or merely a display of oratory skills or persuasion.*⁹

He may be right at times, but theory, at other times, allows us to sort things out. We need now and again to render life rational, to articulate, to communicate, to achieve consensus, to defend, to urge, to educate the young. And theory, especially ethical theory, helps reduce the level of babble. With regard to heroism, if ethical theory can help us to clarify, in any way, the difference between a Kurt Waldheim on the one hand and a Maximilian Kolbe on the other, we should try it. Results are sometimes murky, but they are results.

¹ "Saints and Heroes," in Essays in Moral Philosophy, Edited by A.I.Melden, pp.198-199

² Moral heroism, beneficence, favors, volunteering, forbearance, and forgiveness. Supererogation, Its Status in Ethical Theory, passim.

³ P. 115

⁴ P.202

⁵ "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.79, No.8, August 1982, p.421

⁶ Kant, The Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of the Metaphysics of Morals, pp.21-22.

⁷ Gregory Mellema, "Introduction," Beyond the Call of Duty: Supererogation, Obligation, and Offence.

⁸ Heyd (1982), p.5

⁹ "John Dewey and the Problem with Pacifism," *Contemporary Philosophy*, Vol.XXVI, No.5-6, p.38

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