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QUASI-SUPEREROGATION

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According to the tri-partite classification of human actions found in classical systems of deontic logic, all human actions can be identified as either obligatory, permissible (but not obligatory), or forbidden. It has frequently been pointed out that the category of the permissible itself admits of subdivision, and hence the tri-partite scheme can be expanded. It is commonly acknowledged, for example, that so-called acts of supererogation constitute a fourth class of human actions. Although one finds some disagreement concerning the precise definition of the concept, there appears to be reasonable agreement that it is supererogatory for agent *S* to perform action *A* at time *t* only if the following conditions hold: (i) It is morally praiseworthy for *S* to perform *A* at *t*, (ii) It is not obligatory for *S* to perform *A* at *t*, and (iii) *S*'s refraining from performing *A* at *t* is a neutral action, where the performance of an action is neutral for *S* at *t* just in case it is neither obligatory, forbidden, praiseworthy, nor blameworthy for *S* at *t*.¹ Chisholm, Sosa, and others have identified, in addition, a fifth class of human actions. Acts of offence, as they are called, are those actions which constitute the mirror image of acts of supererogation in the following sense. It is an offence for *S* to perform *A* at time *t* only if: (i) It is morally blameworthy for *S* to perform *A* at *t*, (ii) It is not forbidden for *S* to perform *A* at *t*, and (iii) *S*'s refraining from performing *A* at *t* is a neutral action.²

For the purposes of this discussion I shall assume that these five categories (obligation, supererogation, neutrality, offence, and the forbidden) are legitimate, i.e., that there can be human actions falling under any of them, and I shall go on to inquire whether this five-fold scheme, or the 'standard system', as I shall hereafter refer to it, is an exhaustive classification. Consider the following alleged types of human action, and assume that in each case it is neither obligatory nor forbidden for *S* to perform *A* at time *t*:

- (1) Action *A* is such that: (i) *S*'s performing *A* at *t* is a neutral action, and (ii) It is blameworthy for *S* to refrain from performing *A* at *t*.
- (2) Action *A* is such that: (i) *S*'s performing *A* at *t* is a neutral action, and (ii) It is praiseworthy for *S* to refrain from performing *A* at *t*.
- (3) Action *A* is such that: (i) It is praiseworthy for *S* to perform *A* at *t*, and (ii) It is blameworthy for *S* to refrain from performing *A* at *t*.
- (4) Action *A* is such that: (i) It is blameworthy for *S* to perform *A* at *t*, and (ii) It is praiseworthy for *S* to refrain from performing *A* at *t*.
- (5) Action *A* is such that: (i) It is praiseworthy for *S* to perform *A* at *t*, and (ii) *S*'s refraining from performing *A* at *t* is a neutral action.
- (6) Action *A* is such that: (i) It is blameworthy for *S* to perform *A* at *t*, and (ii) *S*'s refraining from performing *A* at *t* is a neutral action.
- (7) Action *A* is such that: (i) *S*'s performing *A* at *t* is a neutral action, and (ii) *S*'s refraining from performing *A* at *t* is a neutral action.³

It is clear that actions of types (5)–(7) can be accommodated by the standard system. Actions of type (5) qualify as actions of supererogation, actions of type (6) qualify as actions of offence, and actions of type (7) qualify as neutral actions. It is not clear, on the other hand, how actions of types (1)–(4) fare with respect to the standard system. In what follows I will argue that types (1) and (2) are easily accommodated by the standard system if three relatively non-controversial principles are adopted, but types (3) and (4) cannot be accommodated by the present system. I then advance some considerations to suggest that it is plausible to think that there can be actions of types (3) and (4), and hence it is plausible to think that the standard system is incomplete.

Actions of types (1) and (2) cannot be accommodated by the five-fold classification as characterized above. It can be seen, however, that the following principles allow their accommodation:

- (P1) To refrain at time t from performing an action is itself to perform an action at t .
- (P2) If one performs action A at time t , then one refrains from refraining from performing A at t .
- (P3) It is praiseworthy (or blameworthy or neutral) to perform action A at time t if and only if it is praiseworthy (or blameworthy or neutral) to refrain from refraining from performing A at t .

Consider a person who refrains from an act of offence. Such a person refrains from performing an action A whose performance by this person at t would be blameworthy. By principle (P1) this person thereby performs an action A^* at t . But by definition it is neutral to refrain from performing an act of offence, and hence the performance of A^* at t is neutral. Moreover, by principle (P3) it is blameworthy to refrain from performing action A^* at t . For to refrain from A^* at t is to refrain from refraining from A at t ; but performing A at t is blameworthy. Hence by (P3) refraining from refraining from A at t is blameworthy, and so refraining from A^* at t is blameworthy. Thus, action A^* meets both of the conditions which are required to be an action of type (1), and I conclude that one refrains from an offence only if one's action is an action of type (1), given principles (P1)–(P3).

Suppose next that S 's performance of A at t is an action of type (1). Then S 's performing A at t is neutral, and it is blameworthy for S to refrain from performing A at t . To show that S refrains from an action of offence, it must be shown that S refrains from an action which is blameworthy to perform and neutral to refrain from performing. By principle (P2) S refrains from refraining from performing A at t . And since it is blameworthy for S to refrain from performing A at t , S refrains from an action which is blameworthy to perform. Moreover, this same action (refraining from performing A) is neutral to refrain from performing. For S 's performing A at t is neutral, and hence by (P3), S 's refraining from refraining from performing A at t is likewise neutral. Thus, S 's refraining from performing A at t meets the conditions which are required to be an action of offence, and hence S refrains from an action of offence. Given principles (P1)–(P3), therefore, one performs an action of type (1) if and only if one refrains from an action of offence.

A similar argument shows that one performs an action of type (2) if and only if one refrains from an action of supererogation, given principles (P1)—(P3). Thus, acceptance of (P1)—(P3) makes it possible for the five-fold classification to accommodate actions of types (1) and (2). I believe that it is reasonable to accept principles (P1)—(P3), and hence I believe it is reasonable to hold that actions of types (1) and (2) find a place in the standard system.

It is clear, on the other hand, that actions of types (3) or (4) cannot easily be accommodated to the standard system. By stipulation actions of each of the types (1)—(7) are neither obligatory nor forbidden. Actions of types (3) or (4), moreover, cannot be neutral, since actions of type (3) are praiseworthy to perform and actions of type (4) are blameworthy to perform. Finally, since it is neutral to refrain from actions of supererogation or offence, actions of types (3) or (4) are actions of neither supererogation nor offence. For it is blameworthy to refrain from performing actions of type (3) and praiseworthy to refrain from performing actions of type (4).

From these considerations it is apparent that the standard system is incomplete if actions of types (3) or (4) are possible. While an absolutely conclusive proof that such actions are possible might be hard to come by (it is likewise hard to come by such a proof in the case of supererogation and offence), I will urge that it is plausible to hold that they are possible. It is plausible to hold that actions whose performances are neither obligatory nor forbidden can be praiseworthy to perform and blameworthy to refrain from performing. And it is plausible to hold that actions whose performances are neither obligatory nor forbidden can be blameworthy to perform and praiseworthy to refrain from performing. Actions of type (3) are similar to actions of supererogation, except that it is blameworthy to refrain from performing them, and actions of type (4) are similar to actions of offence, except that it is praiseworthy to refrain from performing them. For the purposes of this discussion, therefore, I shall refer to actions of type (3) as actions of 'quasi-supererogation' and to actions of type (4) as actions of 'quasi-offence'. My proposal, then, is that the five-fold system give way to a seven-fold scheme: obligation, supererogation, quasi-supererogation, neutrality, quasi-offence, offence, and the forbidden (the ordering reflects the fact that there is a sense in which actions of

quasi-supererogation can be viewed as having a subordinate status relative to actions of supererogation, for the latter are so meritorious that the failure to perform them is still above reproach; for similar reasons the category of 'quasi-offence' precedes that of 'offence').

It is customary to understand 'praiseworthy' as worthy or deserving of moral praise (in some unspecified objective sense) and 'blameworthy' as worthy or deserving of moral blame. So understood, it might seem impossible for an action which is truly praiseworthy for an agent to perform at t to be blameworthy for the agent to refrain from performing at t . If it is truly praiseworthy to perform an action of great sacrifice for another, surely it is not blameworthy to refrain from performing this action. And the same may be felt true for any paradigm example of a truly praiseworthy action. For this reason, I believe, it is important to recognize that the concepts of 'praiseworthy' and 'blameworthy' are concepts which admit of degrees. Although two actions are each praiseworthy for an agent to perform at t , one of the actions might be more deserving of praise (or deserving of more praise) than the other. If it is praiseworthy for me to take a disadvantaged child to my cabin for the weekend, perhaps it is more praiseworthy for me to take five disadvantaged children. And if it is blameworthy for me to insult one person, perhaps it is more blameworthy for me to insult five persons.

In this way it is important to acknowledge that the performance of some actions are praiseworthy (or blameworthy) to a high degree, and the performance of other actions are mildly praiseworthy (or blameworthy). In the present context this point is of considerable importance, for if the performance of an action is praiseworthy to a very high degree (a sacrifice of heroic proportions) it would certainly be unreasonable to suggest that it is blameworthy to refrain from performing it. One who chooses to refrain from performing such an action cannot reasonably be blamed for the failure to perform it. On the other hand, it is far from clear that the same holds true for an action which is praiseworthy to a more or less modest degree for an agent to perform at a certain time.

To develop this point in greater detail, consider situations in which agents resist temptation. In certain circumstances, I believe, it is plausible to regard the resisting of temptation as an action of quasi-supererogation. Begin by considering an action O whose performance

by agent *S* (at time *t*) is an offence. Perhaps *S* is in a restaurant and *O* consists in walking over to the next table and emptying the contents of his plate onto a man whose behavior is particularly obnoxious (if this example is not clearly one of an offence, choose your own favorite example). Assume next that the temptation for *S* to perform *O* at *t* is extremely strong. Suppose, for example, that the man at the next table is making loud jokes and mocking gestures about the physical disabilities of *S*'s wife. Livid with rage, it requires great effort for *S* to resist the temptation to perform *O* at *t*. But suppose that *S* succeeds in resisting the temptation, and he proceeds to ignore the man's behavior.

Here it seems reasonable to judge that *S*'s resisting the temptation to perform *O* at *t* is morally praiseworthy. Although it might not be praiseworthy to a heroic or saintly degree, it appears to be praiseworthy to at least a modest degree. *S* is strongly tempted to express his anger and outrage, and he succeeds in overcoming his strong desire to do so. It requires great effort to resist temptation, and someone who is aware of this fact would be justified in praising *S* for the restraint he exercises.

Consider, however, a world *W* which is as similar as possible to the actual world except that *S* refrains in *W* from resisting the temptation to empty the contents of the man's plate on him. In this world *S* deliberately chooses not to resist his strong desire to seek revenge, and he ends up causing great anguish to his wife and the restaurant's owner, as well as ruining the man's expensive three piece suit. Here it is reasonable to judge that his refraining from resisting the temptation is deserving of blame. It is in his power to resist the temptation in *W*, and he deliberately chooses not to do so, knowing full well the consequences which will result. The other man's behavior, of course, is highly blameworthy, but *S*'s (in *W*) is blameworthy as well. One would be justified in having expected better of him, for he could at least have made an effort to resist temptation, and he can justifiably be criticised for his failure to do so. The performance of *O* by *S* is blameworthy (since by hypothesis its performance is an offence), and it is plausible to judge that the same is true of *S*'s refraining from resisting the temptation to perform *O* at *t*.

In this example, then, *S*'s resisting the temptation is an action which is praiseworthy to perform and blameworthy to refrain from performing. I do not claim that resisting the temptation is highly worthy of

praise or that refraining from it is highly worthy of blame. I claim only that *S*'s resisting temptation is not a neutral action, for it is at least somewhat worthy of praise, and his refraining from doing so is at least somewhat worthy of blame and is therefore not a neutral action. It would be difficult to defend the view, I believe, that *S*'s resisting temptation is not the least bit deserving of praise and *S*'s refraining from resisting temptation in *W* is not the least bit deserving of blame.

In order for *S*'s resisting the temptation to qualify as an action of quasi-supererogation it must also be the case that it is neither obligatory nor forbidden for *S* to resist the temptation. Many cases in which one's resisting temptation is praiseworthy and one's refraining from doing so is blameworthy fail this condition. One might have a perfect opportunity to embezzle company funds with no possibility of getting caught, but resisting this temptation is obligatory in addition to being praiseworthy. Employees have a moral obligation to refrain from embezzlement, and hence it is plausible to suppose that they have a moral obligation to resist the temptation to engage in it (if this point is denied, then the resisting of temptation to embezzle company funds is itself an action of quasi-supererogation).

In the example under consideration, however, the situation is different. While employees have a moral obligation to refrain from embezzlement, *S* does not have a moral obligation to refrain from performing *O* at *t*. The performance of *O* by *S* at *t* is an offence, and hence it is not forbidden for *S* to perform it. Thus, it would be a mistake to draw a parallel between *S*'s behavior in *W* and the behavior of the embezzler. Employees have a moral obligation to resist the temptation to engage in embezzlement, since they have an obligation to refrain from embezzlement. But *S* has no obligation to refrain from performing *O* at *t*, and hence it is hard to see how *S* has an obligation to resist the temptation to perform *O* at *t*.

One might argue (as some have) that it is never morally permissible to act in a blameworthy manner or refrain from acting in a praiseworthy manner, and given this conclusion it follows that *S*'s resisting the temptation in the restaurant is obligatory. On this line of reasoning it is always forbidden to do what is blameworthy and obligatory to do what is praiseworthy, and hence *S* does in *W* that which is forbidden. Clearly, however, one can subscribe to this line of argument only at the

cost of regarding actions of offence and supererogation as impossible. If it is always forbidden to do that which is morally blameworthy, then there is no possibility of one's action qualifying as an offence. And if it is always obligatory to do that which is praiseworthy, then there is no possibility of supererogation.

Here I shall simply reiterate what was stated at the outset of the discussion. I am assuming that the standard system is legitimate in the sense that there can be actions falling under each of its five categories. I believe it has clearly been shown by others that actions of supererogation and offence are possible, and I shall regard the defense of their possibility as lying beyond the scope of the present discussion. My purpose is to suggest that if actions of supererogation and offence are possible, then it is plausible to acknowledge that the same is true of actions of quasi-supererogation and quasi-offence.

In the present example *S*'s resisting temptation would qualify as an action of supererogation were it not for the fact that refraining from it is blameworthy. And *S*'s failing to resist temptation in *W* would qualify as an action of offence were it not for the fact that refraining from it is praiseworthy. I have argued that refraining from resisting temptation need not be blameworthy to a significant degree and resisting temptation need not be praiseworthy to a significant degree to prevent them from being assimilated to the ranks of offence and supererogation, respectively. No doubt the failure to acknowledge actions of these types has been due in part to the assumption that permissible actions are neutral to perform or refrain from performing unless they are *significantly* praiseworthy or blameworthy to perform or refrain from performing. Some have shown an inclination to suppose that actions of supererogation must involve behavior whose praiseworthy status is comparable to that of saints and heroes. But Chisholm, Heyd and others have pointed out that actions of supererogation can include small actions of courtesy, for example, and in like manner I wish here to suggest that there can be permissible actions which are mildly praiseworthy to perform and mildly praiseworthy to refrain from performing. Although I have not offered a proof that actions of quasi-supererogation and quasi-offence are possible, I have argued that it is plausible to suppose that in some instances it can be an action of quasi-supererogation to resist the temptation to perform action *O* at time *t*,

where one's performance of *O* at *t* is an offence. And although some might find the concepts of supererogation and offence distasteful to begin with, I at least wish to maintain that it seems extremely unlikely that actions of actions of supererogation and offence are possible and actions of quasi-supererogation and quasi-offence are not.⁴

Suppose, then, that actions of quasi-supererogation and quasi-offence are possible. What are the implications for normative ethics? Here I shall briefly note the following:

First, some actions of supererogation are sometimes described as actions in which one "goes beyond the call of duty". If I am correct that actions of quasi-supererogation are possible, then perhaps there are actions in which one can be deserving of blame for failing to go beyond the call of duty. Perhaps moral agents can at times be reasonably expected to do that which goes beyond the call of duty. One who fails to perform an action of supererogation is immune to criticism, but it does not follow that the failure to perform praiseworthy but non-obligatory actions automatically renders one immune from criticism. If actions of quasi-supererogation are possible, one is not in a position to plead that the failure to go beyond the call of duty is automatically above reproach.

Second, if morally praiseworthy actions which are not obligatory can be reasonably expected of moral agents, then one can justly criticise a man whose only moral objectives are to refrain from behavior which is forbidden and to avoid performing praiseworthy actions. If such a man studiously avoids performing praiseworthy actions but faithfully carries out all of this moral obligations, then he can still be criticised for refraining from performing actions of quasi-supererogation. Certain actions which are morally praiseworthy but non-obligatory cannot be deliberately omitted without becoming morally blameworthy in the process. Under certain conditions a person can be expected to resist temptation even when under no moral obligation to do so. Thus, one can be expected to live in such a way as to aim higher than the simple avoidance of what is forbidden. The moral life has requirements which go beyond the strict requirements of obligation.

NOTES

¹ It is not always made clear in discussions of supererogation that the failure to perform actions of supererogation is not blameworthy. Heyd, however, defines the notion in such a way that, ". . . its omission is not wrong, and does not deserve sanction or criticism — either formal or informal." (*Supererogation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 115; see also Robin Attfield, 'Supererogation and Double Standards', *Mind* LXXXVIII (1979), p. 487).

² R. M. Chisholm, 'Supererogation and Offence: A Conceptual Scheme for Ethics', *Ratio* V (1963), 1–14; R. M. Chisholm and E. Sosa, 'Intrinsic Preferability and the Problem of Supererogation', *Synthese* XVI (1966), 321–331.

³ I have omitted mention of actions which are praiseworthy both to perform and to refrain from performing and actions which are blameworthy both to perform and to refrain from performing. It is dubious that such actions are possible, at least for human moral agents.

⁴ An alternative approach to arguing for actions of quasi-supererogation would be to note that it can be (at least mildly) blameworthy persistently to pass up opportunities to perform actions 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 this disjunctive action can be identified as an action of quasi-supererogation. As Mill has noted, however, such actions sometimes take on the status of obligation. While particular actions of charity are supererogatory, for example, Mill believes that one has an "imperfect duty" to perform actions of charity at some time or other (Mill, John Stuart, *Utilitarianism*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907, p. 74). Thus, these disjunctions sometimes take on the status of quasi-supererogation and sometimes (perhaps when they become exceptionally long) that of obligation.

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