

Are Acts of Supererogation Always Praiseworthy?

Abstract: It is commonly assumed that praiseworthiness should form part of the analysis of supererogation. I will argue that this view should be rejected. I will start by arguing that, at least on some views of the connection between moral value and praiseworthiness, it does not follow from the fact that acts of supererogation go beyond what is required by duty that they will always be praiseworthy to perform. I will then consider and dismiss what I will call ‘The Argument From Stipulation’ in favour of holding that acts of supererogation are always praiseworthy. Next, I will examine what I will call ‘The Necessary Connection Argument’, which posits a necessary connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness. I will argue that the intuitions used to motivate this argument are best explained by a debunking explanation.

Introduction

In April 2012 Cory Booker, the Mayor of Newark New Jersey, returned home to find his neighbour’s house on fire. After fighting off a member of his security staff who attempted to restrain him, Booker entered the burning building and saved a woman trapped on the second floor of the house. Both Booker and the woman survived.¹ This seems like a clear example of a supererogatory act, one that goes beyond the call of duty. It also seems like an act that Booker was praiseworthy for performing.

Many who have written on the subject of supererogation have claimed that all acts of supererogation are praiseworthy. In fact they claim that praiseworthiness should form part of the analysis of supererogation. The view that supererogation and

¹ BBC (2012).

praiseworthiness are necessarily connected is so widely accepted that it has been described as The Standard Analysis of supererogation.² In this paper I will argue that The Standard Analysis is mistaken. This issue is important, as The Standard Analysis is often appealed to by those who claim the need to make room for additional deontic categories beyond the required, the forbidden and the supererogatory.³

I will start, in §1, by explaining in more detail The Standard Analysis of supererogation. In §2 I will show that the claim that acts of supererogation are always praiseworthy does not follow from the fact that these acts go beyond what is required by duty. I will then, in §3, consider and dismiss what I will call ‘The Argument From Stipulation’ in favour of holding that acts of supererogation are always praiseworthy. As part of my response to this argument I will argue that there is a *prima facie* advantage for allowing acts of supererogation to be unworthy of praise. Given this advantage, the onus is on those who wish to defend the view that acts of supererogation are always praiseworthy to provide a justification for their view. In §4 I will consider one such justification in the form of Philip Montague’s argument from intuition that there exists a necessary connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness. However, I will argue, in §5, that there is a debunking explanation

² McNamara says that this is part of ‘The Standard Analysis’ (2011 p.203). Mellema says that this is part of ‘The Standard Account’ (1991 p17). The view is endorsed by Horgan and Timmons (2010 p. 32), Jacobs (1987 p.97), Mellema (1991 p.17, Montague (1989 p.102), Peterfreund (1978 p.54) and Raz (1975 p.164). The prevalence of this view in the literature on supererogation is also pointed out by Cowley (2015 p.2).

³ See Mellema (1987; 1991) and Cohen (Forthcoming). For a reply to Mellema’s argument see Archer (Forthcoming a). For a reply to Cohen’s argument see Archer (2014).

that can be given for these intuitions. I will then argue, in §6, that accepting this debunking explanation is preferable to accepting the existence of a necessary connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness.

1. The Standard Analysis

The view that there is a necessary connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness is widely accepted in the philosophical literature. Gregory Mellema claims that part of how “the concept of supererogation is standardly defined,” is that “the performance of the act is morally praiseworthy.”⁴ Similarly, Paul McNamara includes in what he calls ‘The Standard Analysis’ of supererogation the condition that, “the actions [...] are those which their agents are praiseworthy (in varying degrees) for performing.”⁵ Following Mellema and McNamara I will define the standard account of the connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness in the following way:

The Standard Analysis: Necessarily, if an act ϕ is supererogatory then an agent who performs ϕ will be worthy of praise for ϕ -ing.

It is important to get clear on what those who defend some form of The Standard Analysis are claiming. First, this is a view about moral praiseworthiness. There are many ways in which someone may be worthy of praise as the result of performing some act. It might, for example, have involved an impressive display of skill or willpower. The Standard Analysis should be understood as making a claim about moral praiseworthiness or what is commonly called ‘moral worth’. Second, we might understand this claim to mean that only agents who have all round praiseworthy characters are capable of performing acts of supererogation. This is not how this claim should be understood. The point is that the agent must be considered praiseworthy

⁴ (1991 p. 17).

⁵ (2011 p.203).

with regard to the performance of the act in question and what leads the agent to perform it (her motivation, dispositions etc). It is quite possible then, on this account, for a villainous person to perform an act of supererogation (providing they are not acting in character).⁶

2. Does Beyond Duty Entail Praiseworthiness?

In the previous section I outlined The Standard Analysis of supererogation according to which praiseworthiness is a necessary condition of supererogation. In this section I will argue that The Standard Analysis does not follow straightforwardly from the fact that acts of supererogation go beyond what is required by duty. This, I will argue, shows that The Standard Analysis is a substantive, non-trivial account of the connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness.

The starting point of almost all attempts to analyze ‘supererogatory’ is that this word is roughly equivalent to the ordinary language phrase ‘beyond the call of duty’.⁷ From the fact that these acts go beyond duty, the following two claims seem to follow:

Morally Optional: If an act ϕ is supererogatory then ϕ -ing is neither morally forbidden nor morally required.⁸

⁶ Montague makes this point (1989 p.102).

⁷ Chisholm and Sosa (1966), Cohen (Forthcoming), Dorsey (2013), Ferry (2013), Heyd (1982) Horgan and Timmons (2010), Kamm (1985), Mellema (1991), Peterfreund (1978) and Portmore (2011).

⁸ This claim is endorsed by Benn (2014), Dorsey (2013), Ferry (2013), Heyd (2011), Horgan and Timmons (2010 p.37) and Portmore (2011 p.91).

Morally Better: If an act ϕ is supererogatory then ϕ -ing is morally better than some permissible alternative.⁹

We might think that The Standard Analysis follows straightforwardly from *Morally Better*. If the supererogatory acts are the morally best acts available to an agent then we might think that it follows that they will be praiseworthy to perform. Indeed this would follow if we assume that it is always praiseworthy to perform the morally best act available.

However, while this claim may seem right at first look, according to McNamara, it should be rejected. According to McNamara, an act can be morally good, even the morally best act available, without being praiseworthy, as praiseworthiness also involves an assessment of the agent.¹⁰ Of course, how someone acts plays an important role in establishing whether she is praiseworthy or not. However, in order to establish whether or not someone is praiseworthy, it is commonly thought that we must look to more than simply the act she has performed. On this view, the motivation behind an action contributes to the praiseworthiness but not the moral

⁹ The claim that supererogatory acts are morally better than non-supererogatory acts is endorsed by Dancy (1993 p.127), Dorsey (2013 p.2), Ferry (2013 p.574), Hansson (2013), Heyd (1982 p.5) and Portmore (2011 p.92). As McNamara points out, we need to appeal to the concept of ‘The Minimum that Morality Demands’ in order to make sense of this (1996 p.427). Benn (2014) makes a similar point.

¹⁰ (2011 p.209).

status of the act. As John Stuart Mill puts the point, “the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much with the worth of the agent.”¹¹

Although, on this view, praiseworthiness involves an assessment of agents, we might think that agents will always be worthy of praise whenever they perform a morally good action. This is also rejected by those who hold that a distinction exists between the moral status of an act and the worth of the agent. It is after all a familiar thought that someone can perform the right action for the wrong reasons.¹² For example, suppose John is in a situation where the right thing for him to do is to save a child who is drowning in a pond. John saves the child from the pond but he is motivated by the thought that doing so will bring about positive media attention. Supporters of this view claim that despite the fact that John performs a good action he is not

¹¹ Mill (2001 p.18). What motives we must look for is subject to debate. We might think that the agent must be acting from the motive of duty as Kant (1993) does. Alternatively, we might think that an act is praiseworthy if it stems from good will, as Arpaly (2003 Ch.3) does. Finally, we might think, as Markovits (2010) does, that an act is praiseworthy if the agent’s motivating reasons coincide with the reasons justifying the act’s performance.

¹² As pointed out by Arpaly (2003 p.69) and Scanlon (2008 pp.56-57). Kant also distinguishes acts that are in line with duty from those that possess moral worth. In order to have moral worth, an act must be performed by an agent who is motivated in the right way (1993 p.11).

praiseworthy. This is because John's action, while morally desirable, is performed for the wrong reasons.¹³

Similarly, McNamara claims it is possible to perform an act that goes beyond duty but fails to be praiseworthy.¹⁴ To see this consider the following example:

Cunning Candidate: Jane is a power hungry misanthrope standing for election as mayor. She wants to become mayor so she can more effectively enact her evil plans. Jane passes a burning building and hears a child scream for help. Inspired by the positive media reaction to Booker's act of heroism, Jane recognizes that by running into the burning building she could save the child and also that doing so is likely to win her

¹³ In response to this it might be suggested that there are two ways in which an agent can be deemed to be praiseworthy. One is in virtue of her character traits and the other is in virtue of an act that she has performed. Gregory Trianosky suggests a proposal along these lines for moral blameworthiness. According to Trianosky an agent can be worthy of *deontic* blame for performing a wrong action or failing to perform an obligatory action and worthy of *aretaic* blame for possessing character traits that are the fitting subject of criticism (1986 pp.29-30). Whatever the strengths of this proposal for moral blame I take it that it is not plausible to posit the equivalent claim for moral praiseworthiness. We would not in the case of someone who performs the right act for the wrong reasons, think that he is the fitting subject of any form of praise.

¹⁴ (2011 p.208). McNamara gives two examples of his own but I think his examples introduce a number of complicating factors that are not present in the examples I have given.

some votes in the forthcoming election. Jane has no concern whatsoever for the safety of the child and is motivated solely by a desire to gain votes in the election.

It seems reasonable to think that this act is morally optional and morally better than the alternative acts Jane could perform, such as phoning the fire brigade.

Nevertheless, because of Jane's motives we would not think that she is praiseworthy for acting in this way.

Another way in which an act can fail to be praiseworthy is if it is performed accidentally. Consider the following example:

Accidental Donation: Louise makes a large donation that she can comfortably afford to a famine charity by bank transfer. However, Louise donated the money by accident. She had intended to transfer the money between two of her own accounts to enable her to buy an expensive car. Louise would like to retrieve the money but is unable to do so.

The act of donating the money to charity is morally good. Its certainly seems to be morally better than buying the expensive car. However, Louise is not praiseworthy for acting in this way, as she did so accidentally.

Those who think that it is possible to perform a good act for the wrong reasons are likely to find at least one of these examples plausible. Even if supporters of this view aren't convinced by these particular examples, they will presumably accept that an act can be beyond duty without being praiseworthy. After all, if an act can be good without being praiseworthy then there seems little reason to think that an act could be good, optional and not praiseworthy.

However, there are some views of moral value that rule out the possibility of a good act being performed from the wrong motives. For example, according to Michael Slote's agent-based virtue ethics rightness is to be understood, "in terms of good motivations and wrongness in terms of the having of bad (or insufficiently good) motives."¹⁵ On this view, Jane would not be performing a good act for the wrong reasons, her act would simply be wrong. Similarly, supporters of a fitting attitude account of value, who hold that being valuable consists in being the fitting object of some pro-attitude, might also think that an act cannot be both morally good and unworthy or praise.¹⁶ After all, on this account for an act to be valuable just is for it to be worthy of evaluative pro-attitudes like praise.

Similarly, there are also theories of moral value that would rule out the possibility of a good act being performed accidentally. For example, Mill, thinks that although motives do not form part of the description of an act, intentions do.¹⁷ According to this view, when we are evaluating acts we should look to the agent's intentions. This view seems to rule out accidentally good acts. If an agent like Louise performed a good act by mistake then, on an intention based view, this seems to prevent it from being classed as morally good.

What this shows then, is that McNamara's claim that an act can be beyond duty but not praiseworthy, is too quick. While this is possible according to some accounts of the connection between moral value and praiseworthiness, other accounts rule this out.

We might think then, that the only way to settle the issue of whether The Standard Analysis should be accepted is to also settle the issue of what account of the

¹⁵ (2001 p. 5)

¹⁶ See, for example, Ewing (1948 p.168) and Brentano (1969 p.18).

¹⁷ (2001 p. 18 Fn.2). For more on the relevance of Mill's view of act individuation for supererogation see Archer (2013 pp. 451- 452).

connection between moral value and praiseworthiness we should accept. This task would be far too great to accomplish in a single paper and so we might think that this would spell the end of my attempt to answer the question of whether or not The Standard Analysis should be accepted.

However, there is good reason to think that the issue remains worthy of investigation. The reason for this is that at least some of those who defend The Standard Analysis think that it can be defended even if we think that it is possible for an agent to perform a good act but to be unworthy of praise. After all, defenders of The Standard Analysis think that it this is an *analysis* of supererogation, rather than something that follows from a particular view of the nature of moral value. This is just as well. If the view was simply that the fact that supererogatory acts are always praiseworthy follows from the fact that they are morally good then there would be no need to include praiseworthiness in the analysis of supererogation. In order to prevent their view from being redundant then, supporters of The Standard Analysis must claim that supererogatory acts are always praiseworthy, regardless of our view of the connection between moral goodness and moral praiseworthiness.

In the next two sections we will look at two arguments in support of The Standard Analysis that attempt to provide good reason to support this claim. If these arguments are successful then The Standard Analysis will be more than a simple consequence of a certain view of the connection between goodness and praise. Instead it will be an interesting, substantive account of the nature of supererogation that does not depend on our view of the connection between moral goodness and praiseworthiness.

The issue of whether praiseworthiness should be included in our analysis of

supererogation is an important one. If true it will limit the range of acts that can rightfully be classed as supererogatory. This in turn will opens up a need for new deontic categories to capture the range of deontic possibilities. Paul McNamara and Shlomo Cohen have both argued that the existence of a necessary connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness presents us with a need to create new deontic categories to capture the range of possible options.¹⁸ I will argue such arguments are premature, as no such connection exists.

3. The Argument From Stipulation

In the last section we saw that it does not follow from the basic components of the definition of supererogation that all such acts are praiseworthy. One way in which a supporter of The Standard Analysis might seek to respond to this point is to say that we should reserve the term ‘supererogation’ for acts that are praiseworthy. Rather than thinking that it follows from the basic definition of supererogation that these acts are always praiseworthy, we might instead simply stipulate that praiseworthiness is part of the definition of supererogation.¹⁹

Of course, it is not enough for those wishing to defend this view simply to make this stipulation; they need to provide us with some reason to think that we should accept it. McNamara claims that this stipulation is acceptable due to “the absence of any real use of ‘supererogation’ except as a technical term”.²⁰ McNamara’s claim is that because ‘supererogation’ is a technical term used only by philosophers we are free to stipulate that it should be reserved for acts for which the agent is praiseworthy for performing. By itself this does not give us reason to include it in the definition of

¹⁸ McNamara (2011), Mellema (1987) and Cohen (Forthcoming).

¹⁹ This is how McNamara (2011 p.204) explains this possibility.

²⁰ McNamara (2011 p.204).

‘supererogation’, just licence to do so if we find a good reason to. Jason Kawall argues that there is good reason to do so because it is, “useful to have a term for actions in which everything goes right.”²¹ The thought here is that reserving the term ‘supererogation’ for cases where the agent is praiseworthy will prove a useful distinction that will allow us to quickly identify whether we are talking about acts that merely exceed duty or the subset of those acts for which the agent is praiseworthy. Combining these two thoughts provides us with an argument in favour of including a praiseworthiness condition in the definition of supererogation. If we accept both these claims then it follows that we should restrict the term in this way.

The problem with this argument lies not in the reasoning but in the premises. The claim that technical terms should be defined in whatever way is most useful seems to be an acceptable point of philosophical methodology. If philosophers are going to invent a term then they should use it in whatever way will be most useful. However, the other premises are more problematic. There is good reason to reject both of these claims.

The first claim that we should reject is that ‘supererogation’ is a technical term used only by philosophers. The term ‘supererogation’ was not invented by moral philosophers but by Christian theologians to refer to those acts that go beyond what is commanded by God.²² As the term is used in theology to refer to acts that go beyond what is required by duty we should use the term in the same way in moral philosophy. Moreover, ‘supererogatory’ is used in ordinary language to mean ‘superfluous’.²³ This

²¹ Kawall (2003 p.495).

²² Heyd (2011).

²³ This use of the term is pointed out by Heyd (2011, Section 2 and Section 4). Further support for this claim comes from The Oxford English Dictionary (2013) which gives the following example of this use of the term, which appeared in *Time Out* in 1996: ‘By the time he gets his head bashed in, you hate him so much you could

use of the term is easier to reconcile with the simple ‘beyond duty’ definition and harder to reconcile with ‘beyond duty and praiseworthy’.

The claim that this is the most useful way to define the term can also be rejected. The first reason to do so is that the term has a long history of being used by moral philosophers to refer to all acts that go beyond duty, not just the acts of this kind for which the agent is praiseworthy. We have already seen that this is how the term is used in Christian theology and it is the most common use of the term in contemporary moral philosophy as well. Dale Dorsey²⁴, Michael Ferry²⁵, David Heyd²⁶ and Douglas Portmore²⁷ all define supererogation as acts that are beyond duty without making reference to these acts being praiseworthy. As a result, those who see the value in having a term that refers to a subset of the acts that are beyond duty should coin a new term.

Second, the most philosophically interesting questions about supererogation concern the possibility of acts that are beyond duty, not just those for which the agent is worthy of praise for performing. For example, the issue of how to understand the relationship between moral reasons and moral obligations in a way that makes room for the supererogatory is concerned with all acts that go beyond duty.²⁸ The same is true for the question of how best to reconcile normative ethical theories with the possibility of supererogation. In both cases the issues are concerned with all acts that

supply a supererogatory kick in the face.’ Thanks to Richard Rowland for pointing out this usage.

²⁴ (2013 p.356).

²⁵ (2013).

²⁶ (1982).

²⁷ (2011 p.91).

²⁸ For discussions of this problem see Dorsey (2013), Ferry (2013) and Horgan and Timmons (2010). For a response to Dorsey’s solution to the problem see Archer (Forthcoming).

are beyond duty and not just the subset of these acts for which the agent is praiseworthy.

Finally, a definition of supererogation that does not include praiseworthiness in the definition has the advantage of offering a unified set of deontic concepts. As we saw in the previous section, it is a recognisable feature of our ordinary moral discourse that people can do the right thing for the wrong reasons and as a result deserve no praise for acting in this way. Likewise, many people think it is possible to perform the wrong act but be in no way blameworthy for doing so, if for example the agent has an excuse. This suggests that praiseworthiness and blameworthiness are not part of the definition of rightness and wrongness. There is nothing to stop defenders of The Standard Analysis from accepting this. However, if they do accept this then on their account supererogation possesses a necessary connection to an assessment of the agent's motives that moral obligation and wrongness do not. This presents a *prima facie* disadvantage for defining supererogation in terms of praiseworthiness, as it presents a less unified account of our deontic concepts. This view is committed to this additional connection is not in itself problematic but it does seem like a difference that calls for an explanation. If we are to accept the claim that supererogation is different from obligation and prohibition in this way then I think that we need to be given good reason to do so. In the absence of such a reason we should prefer an account that does not posit this divide.

To sum up, it has been suggested that there is good reason to define 'supererogation' as the subset of acts that are beyond the call of duty for which the agent is praiseworthy for performing. I have argued that there are good reasons to reject this argument and maintain the equivalence of supererogatory acts with those that are beyond the call of duty. In responding to this argument we found that a *prima facie*

advantage for The No Necessary Connection View is that, unlike The Standard Analysis, it does not posit a divide between supererogation and other deontic concepts. This should not be considered a decisive blow but rather as a challenge that defenders of The Standard Analysis should seek to respond to. In the following section I will consider a possible justification that might be given for this divide.

4. The Necessary Connection Argument

So far we have seen that the claim that acts of supererogation are always praiseworthy does not follow from Morally Optional and Morally Better. We have also seen that we should not accept the claim that we should simply stipulate that supererogatory acts must be praiseworthy. In this section, I will evaluate an argument given by Montague in favour of the claim that praiseworthiness should form part of our analysis of supererogation.

Montague accepts that it does not follow from Morally Optional and Morally Better that acts of supererogation are always praiseworthy. However, he argues that this gives us reason to reject this as a full analysis of supererogation, rather than to reject the claim that acts of supererogation are always praiseworthy. Montague explains his view in the following:

Something is surely missing from this account of supererogation. For suppose A is an action which is neither required nor prohibited, but which is nevertheless morally valuable in virtue of being particularly beneficent. Since this characterization of A implies nothing about the motives with which it is performed, we can also suppose that the person doing A acts at his own convenience and for his own enjoyment. Should we regard A as supererogatory? I think not – and this because the person who performs A

deserves no special credit or praise for having acted. The point is that supererogatory acts are necessarily praiseworthy – a point which is reinforced by the examples cited by supererogationists as paradigms of supererogatory acts, and by the frequent (even if largely unexplained) references to praiseworthiness in discussion of supererogation.²⁹

Montague makes three points in this passage to support the existence of a necessary connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness. The first is an appeal to intuition. As Montague points out there is something quite odd about claiming that someone has performed an act of supererogation without being praiseworthy for doing so.³⁰ If we were told that someone has performed an act of supererogation we would usually take this to be evidence that the agent is praiseworthy for having acted in this way. To return to the case of Cunning Candidate, suppose we know nothing about the case and we are told the following, “Jane performed an act of supererogation.” It is quite appropriate to take from this utterance that the speaker views Jane as praiseworthy for acting as she did. We would certainly think it misleading for someone to tell us this if she were aware of what motivated Jane to perform her act. Montague’s next claim is that the best way of accounting for this intuitive oddness is by appealing to the existence of a necessary connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness. Finally, positing such a connection is able to explain why the paradigm cases of supererogation involve praiseworthy agents and why it is so common for people to define supererogation in terms of praiseworthiness.

²⁹ (1989 p.102)

³⁰ Feinberg (1961 p.281) and Peterfreund (1978 p.55) makes a similar point.

Montague takes this intuition to provide conclusive evidence for the existence of a necessary connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness. However, as I will argue in the next section, this is not the only way to account for these intuitions.

5. A Debunking Explanation

Until now, those seeking to provide an explanation for the intuition examined in the previous section have assumed that the only way to do so is to appeal to the existence of a necessary connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness. In this section I will argue that an alternative explanation for these intuitions is that asserting that an act is supererogatory tends to convey via conversational implicature that the agent is praiseworthy for performing it. I will defend the viability of this explanation by showing that the connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness passes the tests that are commonly used to identify conversational implicatures. I will then, in the following sections, argue that there is good reason to prefer this explanation to that proposed by Montague.

At this point we should consider a point of philosophical methodology introduced by Paul Grice. Grice noted that a common philosophical manoeuvre is to draw conclusions about a word's meaning from the fact that its use would be inappropriate in certain kinds of situation.³¹ Grice warned that we should be careful about the application of this method, as there may be other reasons, stemming from the general principles of discourse, that explain why the use of the word would be inappropriate in a given context. Before examining whether this could be the case with the proposed necessary connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness I will first give a quick overview of Grice's theory of the general principles of conversation.

³¹ (1989 p.20).

Grice claims that conversations operate according to what he calls ‘The Cooperative Principle’.³² This principle states, roughly, that speakers ought, all things being equal, to make their contribution to the conversation such that it fits with the purpose or direction of the conversation. Grice gives four maxims for this principle:³³

Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as required and not more informative than is required.

Quality: Do not say what you believe to be false or lack adequate evidence for.

Relation: Be relevant.

Manner: Avoid obscurity of expression and ambiguity and be brief and orderly.

Grice argued that the assumption that speakers are following these maxims gives rise to ‘conversational implicatures’. These he defines as follows:

By saying, *p*, utterer *U* *con conversationally implicates* *q* iff:

1. *U* is presumed to be following the maxims
2. the supposition *q* is required to maintain (1)
3. *U* think the recipient will realize (2).³⁴

I aim to show that the link between supererogation and praiseworthiness can plausibly be explained by conversational implicature. To do this, I will show that the proposed connection passes the two most important ways of testing for the presence of a conversational implicature. Grice provides six tests for identifying conversational

³² Grice (1989 p.26).

³³ Grice (1989 p.26-27).

³⁴ Grice (1989 pp.30-31) summarized in this way by Levinson (2000 p.15).

implicatures. The adequacy of all of these tests has been challenged but the following two are generally taken to be the most important:

- a) Conversational implicatures are capable of being “worked out” on the basis, inter alia, of the Cooperative Principle. That is, they are *calculable*.
- (b) Conversational implicatures are *cancellable*.³⁵

Before we examine whether the connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness passes these tests it is worth briefly explaining how conversational implicatures differ from what Grice calls ‘conventional implicatures’. Like conversational implicatures, these do not form part of the literal meaning of the term. However, unlike conversational implicatures, the implicature is part of the conventional meaning of the term. As a result these implicatures are not calculable or cancellable.

One final distinction to be made is that between generalised and particularized conversational implicatures. Grice claims that a conversational implicature is particularized if it arises out of a specific conversational context. A generalized conversational implicature, on the other hand, is one that does not require any special conversational context in order to arise.³⁶ Importantly, for our purposes, these implicatures are harder to cancel than particularized implicatures because, as

³⁵ Grice (1989 pp. 39-40), compiled in this way by Saddock (1991 p.367). Both Sinnott-Armstrong (1984 p. 256) and Strandberg (2012 p.115) take these tests to be the most important.

³⁶ Grice (1989 p.37).

Levinson explains, they are, “routinely associated with linguistic expressions in all ordinary contexts.”³⁷

We are now in a position to examine whether the debunking explanation I suggest is a plausible one by examining whether the connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness passes the tests of calculability and cancellability.

Test 1 Calculability

The first test is that of calculability. Grice argued that if an implicature is conversational then it should be possible to work out the implicature using The Cooperative Principle.³⁸ Conventional implicatures, on the other hand, are not calculable. Saying an implicature is calculable does not mean that this is the only process by which we come to understand that there is an implicature conveyed. The point is that, even if we grasp the implicature intuitively, if the implicature is conversational we should be able to rationally reconstruct it. We do this by working out what needs to be presupposed about what the speaker intends to communicate in order for the speaker to be said to be following The Cooperative Principle.

Let’s start with the uncontroversial claim that a central purpose of moral discourse is to influence how we behave in different situations.³⁹ This partly consists in working

³⁷ (1983 p.127).

³⁸ Grice (1989 p.31).

³⁹ For a defence of the claim that influencing behaviour is one of the central purposes of moral conversation see Strandberg (2012 p.105–108).

out what act to perform. It also involves working out how to respond to people who have acted in certain ways. So when we ask whether killing is wrong we want to know both whether we should kill and how we should respond to those that kill.⁴⁰ I will call these two features of moral discourse *Act Directives* and *Response Directives*.⁴¹

With this distinction in hand we are now in a position to point out the conversational context in which the intuition appealed to in §3 occurs. We are told that it would be odd to describe an act as supererogatory when the agent is not praiseworthy for performing it. In this conversational context the primary goal of the conversation is to assess how to respond to this act. This puts us in a position to give a rational reconstruction of the implicature carried by supererogation assertions. Consider the following assertion:

Cory performed an act of supererogation.

Given what has just be said, we should accept that the primary purpose of this assertion is likely to be response directing. This makes it clear why these assertions commonly carry the implicature that the act is praiseworthy. When we are assessing the deontic status of an act that has already been performed, we are primarily interested in how we should respond to this act. Given this goal, in order to take a

⁴⁰ Scanlon makes a similar point about the two roles moral principles can play (2010 p.23), he claims that moral principles serve as both standards of criticism and guides for action.

⁴¹ Of course, in so far as our responses are themselves acts, *Response Directives* are directing us to perform acts as well. The point, though, is that while *Act Directives* direct us to perform the acts being discussed, *Response Directives* direct us to respond in certain ways to the acts being discussed.

speaker of the above assertion to be complying with the maxim of relation, we must suppose that the speaker views Cory as being worthy of praise for performing the act.

The fact that this implicature does not require any special conversational context provides a response to one line of objection that might be raised against my attempt to explain these intuitions without appealing to a necessary connection. It might be objected that explaining the intuition in terms of implicature can only account for the oddness of utterances that class non-praiseworthy acts as supererogatory. However, the original point Montague made was that it would be odd to *regard* acts as both supererogatory and unworthy of praise. The point then is that we need to explain why this would seem odd even in cases where we are considering the oddness of *thinking* an act to be supererogatory rather than *asserting* that it is. By positing a generalized form of conversational implicature, however, we can say that the reason why it seems odd to regard an act as supererogatory but not praiseworthy is that the implicature is so widespread that we have internalized the pragmatic connection between the two.⁴² This explains why it remains odd to imagine someone regarding an act as supererogatory but not praiseworthy. In addition, it is worth noting that the case we are asked to consider is not entirely devoid of context. We are after all asked to consider the application of ‘supererogatory’ in the context of assessing another person’s act.

Another challenge that might be raised at this point is that nothing has been said to explain how we can explain the other reasons that Montague gives for accepting The Standard Analysis. As we saw in §3, in addition to explaining the intuitions we have to the case of Cunning Candidate, The Standard Analysis also explains why paradigm

⁴² A similar point is made in a different context by Strandberg (2011 p.350).

cases of supererogation involve praiseworthy agents and why it is so common for people to define supererogation in terms of praiseworthiness.

However, the view that supererogation assertions convey claims about the praiseworthiness of the agent is able to provide adequate explanations for both of these issues. First, given the existence of a generalized conversational implicature between supererogation and praiseworthiness it would be odd if people used examples of agents that are not praiseworthy when attempting to give paradigm cases. The reason for this is that the aim in giving these cases is to clearly illustrate the kinds of act in question. It would be confusing to do so by using examples of the unusual cases where no implicature is present. Second, there are two reasons why people might commonly define supererogation in terms of praiseworthiness. One reason is that many people mistakenly think that a morally good act is necessarily praiseworthy. The second is that people commonly mistake the content conveyed by these implicatures for part of the truth conditional content of the term.⁴³ Given the frequency with which this mistake is made it should come as no surprise that it has been made here.

Test 2 Cancellability

The second test I will apply to the question is that of cancellability. According to Grice, conversational implicatures can be denied without contradiction or misuse of words.⁴⁴ While this test is a useful one in testing for conversational implicature things are not always as straightforward as they are in these examples. As Saddock points out, the more generalized the conversational implicature the less clear it will be that

⁴³ As Grice points out (1989 Ch.1).

⁴⁴ Grice (1989 p.39).

cancelling the implicature does not involve some form of misuse of words.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, even highly generalized conversational implicatures will be more cancellable than conventional implicatures.⁴⁶ We are now in a position to apply the test to supererogation to see whether the implicature can be cancelled. Consider the following utterance:

It was beyond the call of duty for the election candidate to save the child but she deserves no praise for doing so.

As pointed out in §4 there does seem to be something odd about this. For this reason the connection between supererogation utterances and praiseworthiness cannot be one of particularized conversational implicature. However, the implicature is sufficiently cancellable to be counted as conversational rather than conventional. We can see this by comparing it to the following case where praiseworthiness is part of the conventional meaning of the word:

The election candidate acted commendably by saving the child but she deserves no praise for doing so.

In this case the speaker would be guilty of misusing the word ‘commendable’. When compared to a case of clear conventional meaning such as this one we can see that the implicature is cancellable, albeit less obviously cancelable than particularized conversational implicature. As a result, applying the cancellability test supports the claim that the connection between supererogation and praiseworthiness is one of generalized conversational implicature.

⁴⁵ Saddock (1991 p.373).

⁴⁶ Saddock (1991 p.373).

In this section I have suggested that rather than viewing the intuition considered in §3 as evidence of a necessary connection, we can instead explain this intuition by appealing to the presence of a generalized conversational implicature. In the next section I will argue that there is good reason to prefer this debunking explanation rather than to posit a necessary connection between the two.

6. Grice's Razor

The reason why we should prefer the debunking explanation over the appeal to a necessary connection is given by a methodological principle that Grice termed 'Modified Occams' Razor' but which I will call 'Grice's Razor'.⁴⁷ Grice defines this as the principle that, "Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity."⁴⁸ What this means is that if there is a plausible pragmatic explanation that can be given for some linguistic phenomena then we should prefer this to an explanation that increases a term's semantic complexity. This can be applied in several ways. First, if to account for some linguistic phenomena we must choose between positing a more restrictive use of a term or a pragmatic explanation then we should choose the latter. The same holds for a choice between positing a brute ambiguity and a pragmatic explanation. The justification for this principle is that it is a principle of parsimony. Applying it helps to provide simpler theories by opposing the unwarranted postulation of entities and by ensuring that no theories are postulated to explain something that can already be explained by a theory we are already committed to.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Grice (1989 p.47). The label 'Grice's Razor' is given by Davis (1998 p.19)

⁴⁸ (1989 p.47).

⁴⁹ These points are made by Hazlett (2007 p.674).

When we apply Grice's Razor to the two explanations we have for the intuition raised in §3 we can see that this principle supports the debunking explanation. Accounting for this intuition by positing a necessary connection to praiseworthiness increases the semantic complexity of the term, as instead of one term to cover all kinds of act that go beyond duty we now have two; one that applies to all acts that go beyond what is morally required and one that covers the subset of these acts that the agent is worthy of praise for performing. The debunking explanation, on the other hand gives a pragmatic explanation for this intuition. If we accept that the pragmatic explanation is a viable one, then it would be theoretically redundant to accept a more restrictive use of the term 'supererogation' to explain a datum that can already be explained by existing theoretical commitments.

Conclusion

In this paper I have investigated whether praiseworthiness should form part of our analysis of supererogation. I argued first that in order for there to be reason to include praiseworthiness in our analysis of supererogation, we must be given reason to think that acts of supererogation are always praiseworthy even if we think that an act can be good without the agent who performed it being praiseworthy. I then considered two arguments for this position. First, The Stipulation Argument, which I rejected on the grounds that 'supererogation' is not a technical term that is used only by philosophers and more importantly is not most usefully defined in terms of praiseworthiness. I then considered the most plausible argument in favour of The Standard Analysis, The Necessary Connection Argument. I responded to this argument by offering a debunking explanation for the intuition used to motivate it. I then argued that the methodological principle of parsimony known as 'Grice's Razor' gives us good reason to favour this debunking explanation. The conclusion of this discussion then, is that

there is no good reason to include praiseworthiness in the analysis of supererogation and so The Standard Analysis should be rejected.⁵⁰

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