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Nietzsche on the Banishment of Supererogation by Luther and its Influence on Modern Ethical Life and Moral Theorizing*

Abstract: Nietzsche on the Banishment of Supererogation by Luther and its Influence on Modern Ethical Life and Moral Theorizing. Much attention has been paid to Nietzsche's refusal of obligation-centered moral theories (such as Kantian deontology and Utilitarian consequentialism), but few or no attention at all to the historical roots of such conceptions. The aim of this paper is to explore the ways Nietzsche connects the Kantian version of legal moral theory to Lutheran Reformation, taking as its leitmotif the exclusion by Luther of the so-called supererogation (the ideal of a Christian perfect life of sainthood being the most evident case) from the horizon of our ethical life (see D 88; GS 355; NL 1884, 25[271]). After establishing this historical connection, we are in a better position to understand the motivation behind his rejection of legal moral theories, particularly the Kantian version of them. This also allows us to shed new light on the contemporary attempts to characterize Nietzsche's much-discussed perfectionist normative commitments.

“The means of changing your iron duty into gold in everyone's eyes is this: always do a little more than you promise.” (VMS 404; KSA 2, p. 533)

“what we are in fact doing is consuming the moral capital we have inherited from our forefathers, which we are incapable of increasing but know only how to squander [...]”
(SE 2; KSA 1, p. 344)

1 Introduction

I hope it doesn't sound too controversial to say that Nietzsche's ethical reflexions pay much more attention to the axiological concepts of practical normativity

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(such as values, virtues, ideals, goodness, human perfection and flourishing) than to the deontic ones (like duties, obligations, prohibition, right). One interesting thing about ethical theories is precisely the way they seek to connect these two normative subdomains in their attempt to capture the main features of our ethical experience. It is not only a matter of conceptual priority that philosophers have given preference to one of these subdomains, but rather a normative decision concerning the very nature of our ethical life. In other words, it is not so much a decision about how ethical theories must be constructed, as a result of quite different historical and cultural practices putting pressure on philosophical reflexion.¹

Conferring priority to the axiological domain, as it occurred in the ancient Greek ethical schools, implies adopting an attractive approach to questions related to the deontic domain of practical normativity (why one should be sensitive to rules of justice, for instance, is a question that can only be addressed from the perspective of the agent's practical considerations as a whole, which in turn circumscribe the horizon of a form of life). Typical of the attractive approach in ethics is the absence of at least two claims made (if not explicitly, at least accepted as tacit presuppositions) by modern moral philosophers: (1) the overridingness of morality, that is, the claim that, in the process of practical deliberation of non-acratic agents, moral reasons override any other kind of practical considerations (it follows from this claim that there is no real practical conflict from the point of view of morally motivated agents); (2) the legalistic claim that the focus of moral evaluation must be on rules or principles, and only derivatively on characters or forms of life. At first sight, these seem to be two logically independent claims, pertaining to different levels of ethical reflexion (the latter results from a decision taken at the metaethical level of reflexion and giving us instructions about how a moral theory should be constructed in order to best accommodate what is recognized as moral facts, while the former operates at the normative level). They are, however, closely connected insofar as the focus on rules and principles is justified (even if only implicitly) by the need of providing a decision procedure that should be used by agents to solve any practical conflict between moral reasons (deontological constraints telling us what to do and what not to do regarding other people and ourselves) and other kinds of practical consider-

¹ Sidgwick, who was the first to classify moral theories appealing to such a distinction, understood it not only as a matter of conceptual priority, but also as a historical phenomenon. For him, the ancient Greek ethical schools should be characterized through what he called the attractive approach to ethical questions (whereby moral rightness is conceived as a species of the Good), whereas modern moral philosophies tend to adopt a legalistic approach, starting from concepts like duty, obligation, rights and so on. See Sidgwick 1907, p. 105–106.

ations that could appeal to them (commitments that can be widely described in terms of second order desires, interests, goals, ideals, etc.). It is worth noting that such a description applies to both Kantian ethics and classical Utilitarianism, what reveals how strong was the influence of a legalistic understanding of morality on modern ethical theorizing.

Nietzsche's annoyance with modern moral theories comes at least partially from realizing their systematic neglect of the axiological (the question of the good or admirable life) in favour of the deontic domain of our ethical life. According to him, this imbalance has several different roots in Western Culture, one of which can be traced back to the Lutheran Reformation and to an inner experience of Luther himself. Contemporary authors tend to explain why most modern philosophers shifted their focus from the axiological to the deontic domain of our ethical life in terms of a historical appropriate response to the challenges of the newly emergent pluralistic European society, which has also been recognized as a direct result of the Protestant Reformation and the following civil wars.² Nietzsche, in turn, was more attentive to a seemingly peripheral phenomenon. It concerns the exclusion of supererogation, which was, however, at the centre of the theological disputes triggered by Lutheran Reformation long before its political implications started to become clear to some philosophical minds in Europe.

2 The contemporary debate on supererogation

Before turning our attention to the historical context of the Lutheran Reformation, it would be helpful to begin with the contemporary debate of supererogation, just to clarify some concepts and to shed some light on the problem. Supererogation is the technical term contemporary moral philosophers use to refer to a class of actions that seems particularly hard to accommodate in the deontic framework of the modern moral theories, namely, actions that go 'beyond the call of duty'. Modern moral theories used to ignore these cases and to take for granted that our actions allowed for an exhaustive threefold classification: obli-

² Representative of this position is, for instance, John Rawls. See his *Lecture on the History of Moral Philosophy*, esp. Rawls 2000, p. 8–9: "The Reformation had enormous consequences. To see why, we have to ask what it is like for an authoritative, salvationist, and expansionist religion such as medieval Christianity to fragment [...]. The Reformation gave rise to the severe conflicts of the religious wars, which the Greeks did not experience. The question it raised was not simply the Greek question of how to live, but the question of how one can live with people who are of different authoritative and salvationist religion".

gations (acts which are our duty to perform and whose omission is blameworthy); permissions (acts which can be or not be performed as a matter of moral indifference); prohibitions (acts which are our duty not to do and whose performance is blameworthy).

The first contemporary philosopher to contest the exhaustiveness and adequacy of this threefold classification and to draw attention to the seemingly deviant class of actions as well as to the conceptual difficulties implied by it was J. O. Urmson in his seminal article published in 1958 (*Saints and Heroes*). His starting point is the recognition by our ordinary, pre-reflective ethical experience of actions that are morally good and praiseworthy, considered highly meritorious by everyone and at the same time not (strictly) required from anyone. As one could easily infer from the title of his article, the most typical cases of such actions are those performed by saints and heroes, both in the traditional and in the more prosaic sense of these words. Saints and heroes are called so because they are supposed to have performed actions which go *beyond the call of duty* and involve overcoming both internal and external difficulties, taking great risks and making sacrifices in order to achieve good ends (generally recognised as morally good ends, but not necessarily, as I am going to suggest). At least *prima facie*, no one seems to be morally justified to require from someone else the performance of saintly and heroic deeds, or to blame someone for having failed to perform them. But the class of supererogatory actions has been meant to include much more than those exceptionally rare cases, namely, all types of actions whose performance doesn't allow for a description in terms of duties, at least in the uncontroversial and minimal sense that they are completely optional. So described, supererogation includes a wide range of moral phenomena such as charity, generosity and gift-giving, acts of kindness and consideration, forgiveness, mercy and pardon, as well as volunteering (Heyd 1982, p. 2–3). The first question raised by this class of actions concerns the nature of practical necessity the agent who performs such acts associates with them from the first-person perspective.

Since the publication of Urmson's paper in the late 1950s, an intense debate about whether our ethical theories would be able to accommodate this undeniably important part of our moral experience has taken place among moral philosophers. By reflecting on this notion philosophers have been faced with a surprisingly wide range of problems, mostly concerning technical details of our ethical theories and the way they are expected to articulate the deontic and the evaluative subdomains of our ethical experience. One of the most intriguing puzzles posed by the analysis of supererogation lies in the fact that, regardless of the ethical framework one adopts to address the phenomenon, it seems to evade any satisfactory accommodation. A quite nice formulation of this puzzle was

given by David Heyd (1982) in his monographic study on the subject: “Supererogation, being different yet related to duty, can be accounted for neither by a theory which attaches no importance to deontic concepts, nor by a theory which takes duty as exhausting the whole realm of moral behaviour” (Heyd 1982, p. 3).

One could be tempted to conclude from this quotation that there is no point in discussing Nietzsche’s ethical thinking in connection with supererogation. Nietzsche’s well-known dismissal of the very idea of moral oughts and duties, whose normative authority and conceptual meaning supposedly depend upon the belief in God conceived as a moral legislator (see TI Skirmishes 5),³ gives us a glimpse into an ethical landscape where no room should be left for any practical category whose meaning is governed, even if remotely, by the rules of the deontic domain. But that would be a rather extreme and unwarranted conclusion, whose plausibility depends on the supposition that our deontic vocabulary is constrained by a moral grammar of categorical and universal rules.⁴ After all, this is at least partially a matter of semantic dispute. The presupposition shared by most of the moral philosophers working in this field is that the concept of supererogation must meet two logical conditions: correlativity and continuity. The condition of correlativity means that supererogatory acts derive their value from their being ‘more than duty requires’. This conceptual stipulation locates the notion of supererogation within a quasi-deontological framework. But that depends on how one interprets the concept of ‘duty’. I will suggest that one could accept the correlativity condition as a necessary condition for ap-

3 “Wenn man den christlichen Glauben aufgibt, zieht man sich damit das Recht zur christlichen Moral unter den Füßen weg [...]. Das Christenthum ist ein System, eine zusammengedachte und ganze Ansicht der Dinge. Bricht man aus ihm einen Hauptbegriff, den Glauben an Gott, heraus, so zerbricht man damit auch das Ganze: man hat nichts Nothwendiges mehr zwischen den Fingern. Das Christenthum setzt voraus, dass der Mensch nicht wisse, nicht wissen könne, was für ihn gut, was böse ist: er glaubt an Gott, der allein es weiss. Die christliche Moral ist ein Befehl; ihr Ursprung ist transscendent; sie ist jenseits aller Kritik, alles Rechts auf Kritik; sie hat nur Wahrheit, falls Gott die Wahrheit ist, – sie steht und fällt mit dem Glauben an Gott.” (KSA 6, p. 113–114).

4 Siemens has showed the centrality of the concept of Law in Nietzsche’s practical philosophy, which ought to serve us as an instructive warning against this hasty conclusion (see Siemens 2010a; Siemens 2010b). It would be a big mistake to conflate Nietzsche’s refusal of “moral duties” or “moral law” with an unqualified refusal of deontic vocabulary as a whole. Siemens described the different strategies (negation and reinterpretation of the traditional notion of Law) Nietzsche adopted in order to get to a better understanding of the centrality of this notion in our practical (as well as theoretical) experience of the world. The negation of the traditional conception of Law (the same might be said about other notions belonging to our deontic vocabulary) is just a first move in Nietzsche’s attempt to reinterpret it in naturalistic terms.

plying the concept of supererogation without being forced to limit its use to contexts where the meaning of the concept of duty is governed by the moral grammar of unconditional and universal rules. So redescribed, the correlativity condition requires only that the meaning of supererogatory actions or, to put it more precisely, of supererogatory forms of life, refers to a previous horizon of duties or normative expectations, regardless of how they should be described. One first and crucial consequence of this redescription is that it opens up the possibility of thinking the surplus of value associated with supererogation as a normative episode that can radically change or ultimately reveal the nature of the goodness supposed to be realized by the fulfilment of duties (at any rate, it could help us to gain new insight into the conditioned and instrumental character of deontic concepts and feelings).

The condition of continuity stipulates that the kind of value or goodness produced by supererogatory acts must be of the same type that makes morally obligatory actions good and valuable, that is, they realize more of the same value and goodness each of us as morally responsible agents are required to realize. Through such stipulation, the scenario is set up in such a way that alternative conceptions of the goodness produced by supererogation are a priori excluded. Heyd, who first introduced this condition, seems to have been directly motivated by this additional concern, as the following passage clearly evinces:

This logical condition of continuity is necessary if a Nietzschean morality, for instance, is to be excluded from what is covered by the definition of supererogation. The pursuit of non-obligatory (and non-moral) personal ideals or aesthetic value is not supererogatory, even if it is good and praiseworthy. (Heyd 1982, p. 6)

The fact that supererogation is a notion that first emerges in the context of a religion whose morality is deontologically conceived could be taken as an additional reason for accepting such conceptual constraints. But I would like to suggest that such an aprioristic decision deprives us of the opportunity to consider the matter from another perspective, one that I suppose Nietzsche himself had adopted by attempting to identify the causes and the historical and conceptual implications of the exclusion of the supererogatory by Luther. It also gives us an opportunity to test a new approach to some old questions related to Nietzsche's ethical thinking.

3 Nietzsche's reaction to the historical debate on supererogation

The doctrine of supererogation in the Catholic tradition has a long history behind it, beginning with the interpretation of a few passages from the New Testament where two types of norms are contrasted with each other – those which are commanded (associated with the Old Law of the Jewish religion and the Old Testament), and those which are just recommended (frequently associated with the New Law, the Law of Liberty).⁵ The Church Fathers went on working on this distinction, which was subsequently further developed by the Catholic theologians and has found its ultimate elaboration in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas took over the distinction between precepts and counsels introduced by the Church Fathers and gave an account of it that made clearer the different ways in which both were thought to be connected to the teleological end of salvation. Commandments are binding; counsels only recommended. Commandments express a necessity; counsels are given as a matter of free choice of the agent. Both the Old and the New Law coincide in being means to the end of salvation. But they do the same in quite different ways: The counsels “are about matters that render the gaining of this end more assured and expeditious” (Aquinas; apud Heyd 1982, p. 20). Besides this surplus of instrumental value linked to supererogatory acts, Aquinas emphasizes that those who pursue the ideals recommended by the counsels (chastity, poverty, constant meditation on God's word, etc.) are engaged in achieving a better end than those who are satisfied with mere fulfilling God's commandments. Aquinas describes this higher end as “the perfection of human life”, which is man's total preoccupation with God (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentilis*; apud Heyd 1982, p. 20). This conceptual distinction allows an ideal of perfection that, given the circumstances, sounds

5 For the history of this concept see Heyd 1982, Kersting 1989, Hruschka 1998. Just to mention two *loci classici* of this discussion in the *New Testament*: The first one is to be found in the parable of the Good Samaritan, where we find the unique occurrence of the term *supererogation* in the Latin translation of the Bible. After having paid him two pence for the care and expenses of the robbed and wounded man he had rescued, the good Samaritan says to the innkeeper: “and whatsoever thou shalt spend over and above (*quodcumque supererogaveris*), I, at my return, will repay thee” (Luke x, 35). The second passage is more explicit about the relevant distinction between commandments and recommendation. The distinction is introduced by Jesus while replying to the following question put by the young man: “what good shall I do that I may have life everlasting?” – “if thou wilt enter into life”, Jesus says, “keep the commandments”, and then adds: “if thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in Heaven. And come follow me” (Matthew xiv, 16–24).

like a rather bold formulation: Counsels are supererogatory, “because although necessary to perfection, they are superfluous for salvation” (Heyd 1982, p. 21).

Now, it is a well-established historical fact that the Church’s practice of selling indulgences was theoretically justified by the idea of supererogation: The Spiritual Treasure of The Church, from where the indulgences were supposed to be drawn to be distributed for the remission of sins upon due payment to the Church authorities, was believed to store the “superabundant merit of Jesus and the Saints, whose good works excelled what was necessary for their own salvation” (Heyd 1982, p. 19).

The theological disputes around the *opera supererogationis* triggered by the Lutheran Reformation in the early sixteenth century touched upon a wide range of intricate issues which divided Protestants and Catholics. They went far beyond Luther being upset about the Church’s corrupt practice of selling Indulgences: there was much more at stake, namely, the doctrine of justification by works, the contribution of human effort in achieving salvation, the role of God’s grace, the effects of original sin on the fate of humankind, freedom of the will and predestination, the source of merit, the possibility of fulfilling God’s commandments and the like. Of course, I do not intend to reconstruct such debates here. Instead I will focus on the way Nietzsche reacts to the Lutheran gesture of excluding the possibility of supererogation as well as on the conjectures he offers about its historical implications.

But before doing it, let me give a short overview of Luther’s position on the dispute: According to him, “Human works are never sufficient for attaining salvation. Without God’s grace no amount of good works has any meaning, and it is only through God’s will that we can do the good acts at all. Man is justified by faith alone. Our duty (toward God) is infinite and can be never wholly fulfilled.” (Heyd 1982, p. 27) In Luther’s own words, “no saint has adequately fulfilled God’s commandments in this life. Consequently, the saints have done absolutely nothing which is superabundant. Therefore, they have left nothing to be allocated through indulgences” (Luther 1957, p. 213: Explanation of the 58 Thesis). Even acts of martyrdom and self-sacrifice are not over and above one’s duty; they are required as well. Luther’s critique of supererogation had as its most immediate effect the transformation of Christian morality into a purely deontological conception of ethics. This is an important point stressed by Nietzsche in his reaction to the Lutheran exclusion of supererogation.⁶

⁶ The earliest textual evidence attesting this awareness dates from a posthumous note of summer 1880: “Luther läugnet daß Gott Gefallen haben könne an den ‘gerühmten geistlichen Werken der Heiligen’ – etwas boshaft. Nur an den 10 Geboten” (NL 1880, 4[56]; KSA 9, p. 112–113).

Nietzsche identifies at least three elements in the campaign against supererogation led by Luther: his incapacity to understand a power organisation like the Roman Catholic Church; the psychological impact of his personal failure to realize the ideal of a perfect ascetic life; and his personal urge for unconditional obedience.

Nietzsche's critical engagement with Luther's negative attitudes toward supererogation occurs firstly in *Daybreak*. By that time, he was deeply interested in rethinking the values and goals of contemplative life in a secular age and the conditions under which one could realize them. By setting up this project, two earlier modern philosophers were particularly important for him. Montaigne, who was a continued source of inspiration in his attempt at figuring out how a philosophical life emancipated from any influence of ascetic ideals would look like; and Pascal, who offered him a fascinating and disturbing exemplification of how intense and successful the pursuit of the ideal of a contemplative life within a religious context could be.⁷

For Nietzsche, the incapacity to understand 'the cardinal questions of power' is not an idiosyncratic feature of Luther's personality, but something that requires an explanation in the wider context of the German character, as can be read in the aphorism 358 of *The Gay Science*:

It seems that the Germans do not understand the nature of a Church. Are they not spiritual enough for that? Not mistrustful enough? The edifice of Church rests, at any rate, on a Southern freedom and liberality of the mind as well as on a Southern suspicion against nature, man, and Spirit [...]. (KSA 3, p. 603; translation: Nietzsche 2001)

Nietzsche sides with Erasmus and Montaigne in his political objections to the spirit of Protestant Reformation. Both Erasmus and Montaigne recurred to sceptical arguments in order to neutralize theological disputes, or at least to move these disputes from a theological to a political or institutional terrain.⁸ By recom-

⁷ See among others the following passage from the Nachlass: "Vergleich mit Pascal: haben wir nicht auch unsere Stärke in der Selbstbeziehung, wie er? Er zu Gunsten Gottes, wir zu Gunsten der Redlichkeit? Freilich: ein Ideal, die Menschen der Welt und sich selber entreißen, macht die unerhörtesten Spannungen, ist ein fortgesetztes Sichwidersprechen im Tiefsten, ein seliges Ausruhen über sich, in der Verachtung alles dessen, was 'ich' heißt. Wir sind weniger erbittert und auch weniger gegen die Welt voller Rache, unsere Kraft auf einmal ist geringer, dafür brennen wir auch nicht gleich Kerzen zu schnell ab, sondern haben die Kraft der Dauer." (NL 1880, 7[262]; KSA 9, p. 372).

⁸ For a historical reconstruction of the uses of sceptical arguments by Erasmus and Montaigne in the context of the theological and political disputes triggered by Lutheran Reformation see Popkin 2003, p. 3–16, 44–63. Nietzsche emphasizes this point in his critique of Luther's inca-

mending a sceptical solution to the dispute about the criterion of truth for religious propositions, they were in a better position to offer a defence of the authority of the Councils and the Catholic Church exclusively based on pragmatic and political reasons.⁹ The question of what means to lead a good Christian life should be answered by focusing on the actions one performs and on one's internal disposition of heart. The enormous complications and esoteric subtleties of theological disputes should not interfere with, let alone prevent anybody from being a good Christian. Even his most polemic work against Christianity, *The Antichrist*, gives room for these more sympathetic views about the meaning of a Christian life:

It is false at the point of absurdity to think that Christians are characterized by their “beliefs”, like a belief in salvation through Christ: only the practice of Christianity is really Christian, living like the man who died on the cross... a life like this is still possible today, for certain people it is even necessary: true, original Christianity will always be possible... [...] To reduce Christianity, to reduce being Christian to a set of claims taken to be true, to a simple phenomenalism of consciousness, is to negate Christianity [...]. In every age (with Luther, for instance), “belief” has just been a cloak, a cover, a curtain behind which the instincts play their game... (KSA 6, p. 211–212; translation: Nietzsche 2005)

The second element identified by Nietzsche concerns Luther's painful experience of personal failure in fulfilling the Law and realizing the highest ideal of perfection related to it. This is offered as a psychological account of the sudden conversion of both Luther and Paul from fanatical defenders into equally fanatical annihilators of the Law, in the following passage of aphorism 68 of *Daybreak*:

Luther may have felt a similar thing when he wanted in his monastery to become the perfect man of the spiritual ideal: and similarly to Luther, who one day began to hate the spiritual ideal and the Pope and the saints and the whole clergy with a hatred the more deadly

capacity to understand the roots of Church's power and legitimacy in the aphorism 358 of *The Gay Science*: “He destroyed the concept of the ‘Church’ by throwing away the belief in the inspiration of the Church councils; for the concept of the ‘Church’ retains power only under the condition that the inspiring spirit that founded the Church still lives in, builds, and continues to build its house” (KSA 3, p. 603; translation: Nietzsche 2001).

⁹ A good illustration of Nietzsche's sceptical reply to Luther with an unmistakable Montaignian flavour is the aphorism 82 of *Daybreak*: “Der geistliche Überfall. – ‘Das musst du mit dir selber ausmachen, denn es gilt dein Leben’, mit diesem Zurufe springt Luther heran und meint, wir fühlten uns das Messer an den Hals gelegt. Wir aber wehren ihn mit den Worten eines Höheren und Bedachtsameren von uns ab: ‘Es steht bei uns, über Diess und Das keine Meinung zu bilden und so unsrer Seele die Unruhe zu ersparen. Denn die Dinge selbst können ihrer Natur nach uns keine Urtheile abnöthigen.’” (KSA 3, p. 78) Nietzsche contrasts Luther to Montaigne also in NL 1884, 25[419], KSA 11, p. 121 and NL 1884, 25[491], KSA 11, p. 143.

the less he dared to admit it to himself – a similar thing happened to Paul.¹⁰ (KSA 3, p. 67; translation: Nietzsche 1997)

In the same context, Nietzsche refers to Pascal as an illustration of a successful religious life within the Christian Tradition, contrasting him with Luther as two antipodal psychological types. By the time he finished *Daybreak*, Nietzsche was far from thinking of Pascal as the most pitiful example of corruption by Christianity. Instead of that, he is described as the most perfect opponent one could desire for oneself in order to become a free spirit (KSA 3, p. 192).¹¹ In a posthumous fragment, dated summer-autumn 1884, this psychological contrast is located within a wider cultural context that allows for quite different ways of experiencing and realizing Christianity. Here, Nietzsche contrasts the aristocratic type of Christianity represented by Pascal with the more common, crude and plebeian incarnation of it, represented by Luther and more ordinary people.¹²

Besides this psychological contrast, Pascal's slogan "il faut s'abêtir" seems to have inspired Nietzsche in his objection to the main Lutheran theological thesis stating that only faith matters for salvation, which in turn stood at the core of the Reformer's refusal of supererogatory actions. Of course, while revisiting the long-standing dispute over the relationship between faith and works, Nietzsche

10 The same psychological description of Luther's inner experience and its results occurs in an earlier posthumous note of summer 1880: "Luther bekämpfte die Geistlichkeit, weil sein ernsthafter Versuch, ihr idealer Ausdruck zu werden, ihm nicht gelungen war, ihm nun überhaupt unmöglich und bei jedermann unmöglich erschien. Er verdächtigte die ganze vita contemplativa mit seinen Erfahrungen: er glaubte an die Bibel, weil er nicht mehr an den Papst glauben wollte; er gab sie in jedermanns Hände und lehrte das allgemeine Priestertum – er haßte eben die Priesterschaft" (NL 1880, 4[261], KSA 9, p. 165). The theme appears also in NL 1880, 4[59], KSA 9, p. 113: "Luther ließ seine Wuth gegen die vita contemplativa aus, nachdem ihm das Mönchsleben mißrathen war und er sich zum Heiligen unfähig fühlte, rachsüchtig und rechthaberisch, wie er war, trat er auf die Seite der vita practica, der Ackerbauer und Schmiede."

11 "Da steht Pascal, in der Vereinigung von Gluth, Geist und Redlichkeit der erste aller Christen, – und man erwäge, was sich hier zu vereinigen hatte!" (KSA 3, p. 165).

12 "Man muß sich zu einer solchen Denkweise (wie die christliche ist) den idealen, ganz zu ihr geschaffenen Menschen denken – Pascal z. B. Denn für den durchschnittlichen Menschen giebt es auch immer nur ein Surrogat-Christenthum, selbst für solche Naturen, wie Luther – er machte sich ein Pöbel- und Bauern-Christenthum zurecht." (NL 1884, 26[191], KSA 11, p. 200) This theme comes up with some frequency in the posthumous notes on Luther of the 1880s: "Der niedere Mensch sich empörend z. B. Luther gegen die sancti" (NL 1884, 25[70], KSA 11, p. 27); "Der Bauer in Luther schrie über die Lüge des 'höheren Menschen' an den er geglaubt hatte: 'es giebt gar keine höheren Menschen' – schrie er." (NL 1884, 25[271], KSA 11, p. 82); see also NL 1886, 7[5], KSA 12, p. 271.

moves the discussion from a theological to a psychological terrain, which certainly changed the original meaning of the relevant terms.¹³

Nietzsche puts special emphasis on the third and last element he identifies in Luther's campaign against supererogation. For him, the immediate success of the Lutheran Reformation among the Germans must be explained by the fact that it appealed to their most basic instinct of unconditional obedience. The strong influence of Luther on Kant's philosophical formulation of a strict deontological moral outlook is also explained by having its deepest roots traced back to this alleged feature of German sensibility. This claim, both historical and psychological, is made in aphorism 207 of *Daybreak*:

“Man has to have something which he can obey unconditionally” – that is a German sensation, a German piece of consistency: it is to be encountered at the basis of all German moral teaching [...]. Long before Kant and his categorical imperative, Luther had, out of the same sensibility, said that there must exist a being in which man could have unconditional trust – it was his proof of the existence of God; coarser and grounded more in the people than Kant, he wanted man unconditionally to obey, not a concept, but a person [...]. (KSA 3, p. 187–188; translation: Nietzsche 1997)

With the banishment of the supererogatory, the pursuit of a perfect Christian life lost all its legitimation and, consequently, its practical conditions. This is a result one would have expected Nietzsche to enthusiastically celebrate. Why did he react in such a surprisingly opposite way? We can get a better understanding of this if we keep in mind that Nietzsche's point is not about the substantive or concrete ideals or values to be realized by a perfect Christian way of life, but about the more formal aspects of any ethical outlook. Regardless of the concrete values to be realized, the idea of supererogation left room for some individuals to engage themselves in practices of self-overcoming. In the context of the ascetic lives of saints, the fruition of the feeling of increasing power Nietzsche associates with those practices entirely depends on illusory mechanisms, such

13 Nietzsche revisited this old dispute in the aphorism 22 of *Daybreak*: “Werke und Glaube. – Immer noch wird durch die protestantischen Lehrer jener Grundirrtum fortgepflanzt: dass es nur auf den Glauben ankomme und dass aus dem Glauben die Werke nothwendig folgen müssen. Diess ist schlechterdings nicht wahr, aber klingt so verführerisch, dass es schon andere Intelligenzen, als die Luther's (nämlich die des Sokrates und Plato) bethört hat: obwohl der Augenschein aller Erfahrungen aller Tage dagegen spricht. Das zuversichtlichste Wissen oder Glauben kann nicht die Kraft zur That, noch die Gewandtheit zur That geben, es kann nicht die Übung jenes feinen, vieltheiligen Mechanismus ersetzen, welche vorhergegangen sein muss, damit irgend Etwas aus einer Vorstellung sich in Action verwandeln könne. Vor Allem und zuerst die Werke! Das heisst Übung, Übung, Übung! Der dazu gehörige 'Glaube' wird sich schon einstellen, – dessen seid versichert!” (KSA 3, p. 34). See Bluhm 1953.

as false metaphysical beliefs and superstitions about human physiology. This fact notwithstanding, Nietzsche recognises behind the figure of supererogation at least a symptom of the ineradicable human tendency to self-overcoming.¹⁴

For Nietzsche, the original exclusion of supererogation by protestant reformers should not be taken as having merely technical consequences on the way modern moral philosophers, after the death of God, had to manage to internally articulate the deontic domain of our ethical life and to connect it with the evaluative one. This gesture has condemned them to an even more reductive view of the ethical life, based on unconditional obedience to moral obligations and prohibitions, which maintains only a vague connection (if any) with our spiritual aspirations and inner necessities. For Nietzsche, Luther's inaugural gesture of excluding supererogation as both a theological mistake and an ideological excuse for the most abusive institution of the Roman Catholic Church represented a further, considerable step forward in narrowing the ethical horizon circumscribed by Christian Tradition, deepening the authoritarian features of its original deontological moral conception. Nietzsche's emphasis falls not so much on the exclusion of a class of acts, still less on the theological elements of the dispute between Reformers and Catholics, but mainly on the exclusion of a form of ethical life, within which the pursuit of perfection, even under the extremely unfavourable conditions set by Christianity, had secured its status as a meaningful option.

I suppose it goes without saying that Nietzsche was not interested in preserving the ethical life of Christian saints and ascetics, let alone in the restoration of the medieval ethical worldview. He recognizes as the most significant and entirely unintentional result of Luther's campaign against the alleged higher men of Christianity the merit of having opened again "the way [...] for an unchristian *vita contemplativa* in Europe" (KSA 3, p. 88; translation: Nietzsche 1997). Luther helped to destroy an anachronistic way of life, but he did it for all the wrong reasons. Wrong reasons which in turn have proved to be a powerful obstacle to the cultivation of healthier ethical ideals. The promise of an unchristian *vita contemplativa* in Europe remained unfulfilled partially due to the fact that the exclusion of supererogation raised a widespread suspicion among all kind of people, including philosophers, against the very possibility of higher forms of ethical

14 "An sich sind asketische Gewohnheiten und Übungen noch fern davon, eine widernatürliche und daseinsfeindliche Gesinnung zu verrathen: ebensowenig Entartung und Krankheit die Selbstüberwindung, mit harten und furchtbaren Erfindungen: ein Mittel Ehrfurcht vor sich zu haben und zu verlangen: Asketik als Mittel der Macht" (NL 1886, 7[5], KSA 12, p. 271).

life and ideals of self-perfection.¹⁵ Instead of making room for healthier ideals of contemplative life, the decline of the *homines religiosi* brought about a flattening of the European mind, whose perfect incarnation lies in the industrious modern scholar, with his admirable childish and naïve belief in his own superiority over the religious man:

Every age has its own, divine type of naiveté that other ages may envy; and how much naiveté – admirable, childish, boundlessly foolish naiveté – lies in the scholar’s belief in his own superiority, in the good conscience he has of his tolerance, in the clueless, simple certainty with which he instinctively treats the religious man as an inferior, lesser type, something that he himself has grown out of, away from, and *above*, – he, who is himself a presumptuous little dwarf and rabble-man, a brisk and busy brain- and handworker of “ideas”, of “modern ideas”! (KSA 5, p. 77; translation: Nietzsche 2002)

In the end, this should be considered a relatively predictable long-term effect of the Lutheran Reformation, since its more immediate efficacy seems to Nietzsche to have largely depended on the basic mistake made by its leader in evaluating the merits of the alleged supererogatory works of saints out of his inmost experience:

For all too long he sought the way to holiness with self-castigations – finally he came to a decision and said to himself: “there is no real *vita contemplativa!* We have allowed ourselves to be deceived! The saints have not been worth any more than all the rest of us.” – That, to be sure, was a rustic boorish way of making one’s point – but for Germans of that time the right and only way: how it edified them now to read in their Lutheran catechism: “except for the Ten Commandments there is no work that could be pleasing to God – the celebrated spiritual works of the saints are self-fabrications” [...]. (KSA 3, p. 82–83; translation: Nietzsche 1997)

15 “‘Everyone his own priest’ – behind such formulas and their peasant cunning was hidden in Luther the abysmal hatred of ‘the higher human beings’ and the dominion of ‘the higher human beings’ as conceived by the Church; he smashed an ideal that he could not attain, while he seemed to fight and abhor the degeneration of this ideal. Actually he, the impossible monk, pushed away the *dominion* of the *homini religiosi* [...]” (KSA 3, p. 604; translation: Nietzsche 2001).

4 Concluding remarks: some conceptual similarities

So far, we have explored how Nietzsche reacted to the historical exclusion of supererogation. I think, however, there are striking similarities between the idea of supererogation and some of Nietzsche's ethical positions which deserve a much closer examination than was possible to do here due to space constraint. Before concluding, let me give just a brief example: I started this paper affirming that by addressing the category of supererogation philosophers could get a better understanding of how the evaluative and the deontic domains of practical normativity relate to each other. Very similar questions are raised by Nietzsche's idea of the gift-giving virtue. The conceptual connections between this Nietzschean Idea and supererogation are, therefore, the first ones that deserve to be explored by a more systematic approach to the issues at stake here. They seem to operate under the same logic of superabundance, but Nietzsche's concept of the gift-giving virtue violates the condition of continuity. So, one first systematic challenge to be faced involves calling into question the definitional status of this condition for using the concept of supererogation. Of course, the definitional debate is not to be reduced to an arbitrary decision about how to use the concept. The pragmatic criterion should be: how to define the concept in a way that permits us to gain a better understanding of the relationship between the two domains of practical normativity (the evaluative and the deontic). How should they be articulated by one who adopts the ethical perspective of the gift-giving virtue, for instance? How do our usual concepts of duties, obligations, rights and justice look like when they are considered from this perspective? In the second Essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche holds that what confers unifying meaning to the categories of the deontic domain is the human acquired capacity of making and keeping promises. After tracing the genealogical constitution of the main normative structures related to the deontic domain, he speculates about a society so conscious of its power that it could allow itself the noblest of all luxuries, that of overcoming justice. This highly hypothetical scenario reveals great similarity to the idea of supererogation: The act of mercy withdraws the logic of reciprocity governing the sphere of justice:

Justice, which began by saying "Everything can be paid off, everything must be paid off", ends by turning a blind eye and letting off those unable to pay, – it ends, like every good thing on earth, by *overcoming itself*. The self-overcoming of justice: we know what a nice name it gives itself – mercy; it remains, of course, the prerogative of the most powerful man, better still, his way of being beyond the law. (KSA 5, p. 308–309; translation: Nietzsche 2007)

But more frequently, he speaks of duties in terms of personal duties, submitting the concept to the logic of his perfectionist commitments. What kind of practical necessity should one associate with this personal imperative? Certainly, one which needs to be deeply rooted in the motivational set of the agent herself.¹⁶ Here again, his seemingly paradoxical formulation reveals a similarity with the phenomenon of supererogation, more precisely with its phenomenology. People who perform supererogatory acts in their superlative sense (acts involving great risks and sacrifices) used to describe themselves as having performed them out of duty. But at the same time, they don't believe anyone else should be required to act the same way. The kind of practical necessity they feel compelled by is strong enough to allow for a description in moral terms; but they are somehow aware of the fact that they acted out of a strictly personal demand.¹⁷ Once we disregard the moral vocabulary used by people while reporting their own experience of performing supererogatory actions, what remains of their phenomenological description has an unmistakable Nietzschean flavour (in the very restricted sense of how they talk about their duties). They seem also to be using "a moral formula in a supra-moral sense" (KSA 5, p. 205; translation: Nietzsche 2002), even if they are not aware of doing it.

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¹⁶ See *The Antichrist* 11, KSA 6, p. 177–178.

¹⁷ About the phenomenology of supererogatory agents see Horgan/Timmons 2010.

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