An Adamsian Theory of Moral Obligations but without Divine Commands

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Abstract

Theological voluntarism is the view according to which certain moral properties or statuses have to be explained in terms of God's commands, will, or other voluntary states of God. In his *God and Moral Law*, Mark Murphy criticizes theological voluntarism in general and Adams' divine command theory of the nature of moral obligations in particular. Furthermore, he puts forward the first sketches for a theory of moral obligation that is not voluntaristic. In this paper, I will first introduce Murphy's proposed theory and will show that it is implausible. Then, drawing on Adams' views of the nature of goodness and virtue, articulated in *Finite and Infinite Goods* and *A theory of Virtue*, I will try to put forward the first sketches of a viable theory of moral obligations that do not appeal to divine commands in explaining moral obligations and explains them in terms of goodness/badness. An important feature of morality that voluntarists appeal to for motivating their view and criticizing views that explain obligations in terms of goodness is the existence of supererogatory actions, that is, actions that are good but not required. I will focus this feature of morality and try to show how a theory of moral obligation that explains obligations in terms of goodness can accommodate this feature.

Keywords

moral obligation, goodness, value, theological voluntarism, virtue, supererogation, Robert Adams, Mark Murphy.

Introduction

Murphy (2019) defines "Theological Voluntarism" as the view according to which "what God wills is relevant to determining the moral status of some set of entities (acts, states of affairs, character traits, etc., or some combination of these)" (Murphy, 2019). According to strong versions of this view, all moral statuses are to be explained in terms of divine will or divine commands, or other voluntary states of God. Weaker versions of the view deny this. According to these weaker versions, only a subset of moral properties is to be explained in terms of divine will or commands, or other voluntary states (Murphy, 2019).

Adams (1999) defends a weak version of theological voluntarism. He grounds the notion of goodness in God's nature and not His will or commands. Yet, his view is a weak theological voluntarist view since he believes the notions of moral obligation and right and wrong actions have to be explained in terms of divine commands.

Murphy (2011) criticizes theological voluntarism in general and Adams' version of theological voluntarism in particular. He then proceeds to put forward the sketch of a theory of moral obligation that is not voluntaristic yet incorporates certain intuitions that Adams appealed to in order to motivate his own view.

Although I am in agreement with Murphy that theological voluntarism is a problematic theory, [1] I think his proposed non-voluntaristic theory of moral obligation is a failure. Thus, my first aim in this paper will be to introduce and rebut Murphy's theory of the nature of moral obligations. Then, drawing on Adams' discussions of goodness, virtue, and moral saints, I will try to put forward my own sketch of a theory of moral obligation that is not voluntaristic and explains the right in terms of the good.

The gist of my suggestion is the familiar idea that the notions of obligations and right actions have to be explained in terms of the notion of goodness. The set of morally obligatory actions is a subset of the set of morally good actions and the set of morally wrong actions is a subset of the set of morally bad actions. This is similar to the general idea of right action espoused by consequentialists and Natural Law theorists. Such theories are sometimes called "teleological" theories of right and good. [2] In my view, what distinguishes right/wrong actions from merely good/bad actions is the *special way* they engage objects of value.

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1. Of course, my reasons are different from Murphy's.
2. See, for example, Scanlon (1998, p. 79) and Sandel (1998, p. 3)

Before proceeding, some illustrations regarding the terms I use and the problems I want to address are in order. I will use the notions of obligation, right, and wrongin the same way Adams uses them. Adams takes the notions of moral obligation, right, and wrong to belong to the ethics of action. An action is morally obligatory if it is *wrongnot to doit* while an action is permissible if it is *not wrong to do it* (Adams, 1999, p. 231). On the other hand, the notions of excellence, goodness, and badness belong to the evaluative realm of ethics and have a wider scope than the notion of rightness/wrongness. While only actions can be obligatory/wrong, the notions of goodness/badness can be applied to character traits, beliefs, emotions, attitudes, *and* actions.

What I want to give an account of in this paper is moral obligation in the sense just explained.

I operate within an Adamsian moral framework and totally accept his view of the nature of goodness that grounds the nature of goodness in the nature of God. Accordingly, I believe my theory of moral obligation is totally theistic. It only abandons appealing to divine commands in order to explain the nature of moral obligations.

An important fact about everyday morality that theorists like Adams rely on to motivate their view is that there are good actions that are not obligatory and bad actions that are not wrong. They conclude from this fact that obligation cannot be totally explained in terms of goodness and add demands or commands of a third party (God, moral community, etc.) as a constituent of moral obligations. The focus of this paper will be on this feature of everyday morality. I will try to put forward suggestions as to how a teleological theory that wants to explain the right in terms of the good can actually achieve this aim.

There is another important feature of everyday morality that I will not have space to discuss in this paper. So, I only explain it briefly to set it aside. Morality in general and moral obligations in particular exhibit a substantial amount of partiality. The positions of a victim and a wrongdoer vis-á-vis one another seems to be different from the position of an observer vis-á-vis both of them.

For example, it is to the victim that the wrongdoer owes an apology and the victim is the one that he has to reimburse. Furthermore, in many cases, the reasons we have for engaging with our loved ones or people with whom we have certain relationships seem to be different from the reasons we have to engage people who are total strangers. The title that is assigned to this feature of morality and moral obligations is "agent-relativity."A teleological theory of moral obligation has to incorporate this importantfact.

Murphy on moral obligation

Murphy's account of moral obligation

In section 6.5 of Murphy (2011), he provides an admittedly brief and sketchy positive account of moral obligation.

Murphy concedes that not all morally good or bad actions are obligatory or wrong. He further concedes that what distinguishes morally good/bad actions from morally obligatory/wrong actions has something to do with the existence of a third party that can hold the violator of moral obligations responsible (Murphy, 2011, p. 167). His suggestion is that "]t]o be a moral obligation, …, is to be something that it is morally necessary that one do and, as a result of this necessity, others are justified in *insisting* that one do"[1] (Murphy, 2011, p. 171). According to him, "what morally necessitates are goods" (Murphy, 2011, p. 164). For example, what makes it the case that "one ought to refrain from lying" is a moral necessity is ultimately that knowledge is good and lying is opposed to goods (Murphy, 2011, p. 164). Accordingly, we can rewrite the above quote about moral obligation as follows without losing any content of importance: 'to be a moral obligation is to be something that is good that one do and as a result of this goodness, others are justified in *insisting* that one do.'

As is evident from the above quotation, he replaces the notions of demand and command in Adams' theory with "insistence". According to him, unlike demanding which presupposes a sort of normative empowerment of the demanding party that enables her to create new reasons for action, insistence presupposes that some moral necessity is already in effect and it is a way of "seeing to it" that people conform to that moral norm (Murphy, 2011, p. 169).

But when are people justified to insist that others conform to a moral norm? Murphy's answer is that seeing to it that people conform to moral norms is good and because of this, the default position is that everyone is free to do so. But there are certain reasons that restrict that freedom in certain situations and contexts. For example, "[i]n particular types of case, some actions are so much better to be done without being told to do them that one should not insist. In particular types of cases, not being free to insist on some action makes possible a valuable sort of social relationship. Some types of morally necessary actions are so hard for humans to do that insisting that they act upon them would be no more than haranguing to no good end. And so forth" (Murphy, 2011, pp. 169-70). His final position is that "what will determine the shape of what our moral obligations are, as opposed to simply the moral

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1. Emphasis is mine

necessities that we are under, is how likely insisting is to be effective, how difficult the action is, how important it is to the value of the action that it not be subject to insistence, and so forth"(Murphy, 2011, p. 170).

Reflections on Murphy's suggestion

I think Murphy's suggestion fails as a theory of moral obligation sinceits edicts are incompatible with our practice of insistence and our intuitions about what our moral obligations are.

Freedom to insist seems to be neither necessary nor sufficient for turning a morally good action into a moral obligation. It is not necessary because there might be situations in which someone is violating what intuitively is a genuine moral obligation but no one is free to insist that he stops doing so. Suppose someone is a dishonest person and lies to other people about all sorts of things. It is uncontroversial that he is violating the moral obligation of not lying. But suppose that this person has a very fragile psychology so that if anyone complains to him about anything in his behavior or his moral character, he will kill himself. I think it would be wrong in this case to insist that that person stops lying. Thus, we have moral obligations in place without the freedom to insist!

Freedom to insist is not sufficient as a mark of the obligatory since there are many morally good actions that intuitively are not moral obligations but other people are free to insist that one adheres to them. For example, it is good if I donate a certain sum of surplus money that I have to efficient charitiesrather than using it to buy a new shirt for myself. Yet intuitively, it is not obligatory. But I think it is not at all inapt or inappropriate if my parents or friends insist that I donate that money to charities. Here we have insistence without obligations!

In light of the above objections, I think Murphy's suggestion fails.[1] I now turn to putting forward my own view.

Obligation and value

As I said in the introduction, I believe that the rightness and wrongness of

1. It is worth mentioning that in Note 12 of chapter 6 of Murphy (2011), he says that his view has been influenced by Michael Ferry's work on supererogation. In Ferry (2013) and Ferry (2015), Michael Ferry suggests that what distinguishes obligatory actions from supererogatory ones is that "obligations are the kinds of things that we can properly be held accountable for" (Ferry, 2015, p. 53). This quotation shows the similarity between the views of Ferry and Murphy. Interestingly, Archer (2020) poses objections to Ferry's view that are very similar tothe objections I put forward here against Murphy.

actions are explained by their goodness and badness. The set of morally obligatory actions is a subset of the set of morally good actions and the set of morally wrong actions is a subset of the set of morally bad actions. But what is the difference between an action that is merely good/bad and an action that is right/wrong?Let us start by reflecting on actions that are good but not required, that is, supererogatory actions.

Supererogation: the received view and its shortcomings

Roughly speaking, according to the received view supererogatory actions are defined as actions that are good to do but not required. Paradigm examples of supererogatory actions are acts of heroism and sacrifice, that is, putting one's life in danger in order to save the lives of others. But small favors and acts of kindness also perfectly fit the above definition of supererogation. Giving a ride to a stranger or buying a gift for your friend[1] or helping your neighbor carry his groceries[2] are examples of small supererogatory acts.

There is a further claim made about supererogatory actions that I think is wrong and taking note of it makes the claimthat obligations can be explained in terms of value even more plausible.

It is widely believed that supererogatory actions are optional in the sense that failing to do them is not a moral shortcoming and thus is not blameworthy. This claim might be true about someone who does some supererogatory actions but not all supererogatory actions that come his way. Butif what is meant by this claim is that someone who *never*performs*any* supererogatory actions is not therebysubject to moral criticism then I think it is false. I think we have a strong intuition to the effect that someone who never performs acts of kindness, charity, etc. is far from a good human being and deserves resentment.

Imagine someone who never buys any gifts for his friends or his spouse, who walks coldheartedly away from a neighbor who is struggling in carrying her groceries, who never gives a ride to a coworker even though their destinations are not far apart. I think no one would want to be friends or live near such a person. We can go further and say that there is a strong intuition to the effect that such a person is not a good human being at all![3] Not only isn't it inapt to blame such a person, but I think it is required. It follows that the optionality of all supererogatory actions should not be exaggerated. Performing *some* of the actions we deem supererogatory is thereby morally

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1. This example comes from Ferry (2013).
2. This example comes from Archer (2016).
3. Baron (2015) and Ferry (2015) have similar views.

mandatory in the same sense that performing obligatory actions are morally mandatory and this further narrows the distance between actions that are obligatory and those that are good but not obligatory.

I agree with Urmson (1988) that postulating the notion of supererogation in order to capture actions that are good/bad but not obligatory/wrong is not very informative. According to Urmson, "'supererogatory' is an unnecessary blanket term used to cover a number of types of moral actions which are as worthy of distinction from each other as they all are from duties and obligations" (Urmson, 1988, pp. 168-9).

As I mentioned above, according to the received view, the category of supererogatory actions includes actions that are rare and heroic as well as humble everyday acts of kindness and favors. But these action types are quite different from one another. They play different roles in our moral lives and the responses they extract from us are quite different. Lumping these actions together under the same category only because they are all non-obligatory has the cost of missing the moral significance of each act type. As Baron (2015) nicely puts it, when we talk about spectacular heroic actions "we can … add 'way beyond [duty]' or 'way, way beyond' to indicate that some acts are really spectacular [, but] when we want to single out the saintly or heroic acts, generally what we want to single out, or should want to single out, is something other than how far 'beyond the line of duty' they are" (Baron, 2015, p. 8).

Supererogation, imperfect duties, and obligations

I gather from the above discussion that heroic supererogatory actions have to be distinguished from everyday acts of kindness. While doing heroic actions is totally optional, doing some acts of kindness from time to time is mandatory. This distinguishes the everyday acts of kindness from moral obligations which are such that we always have to do them. In this subsection, I try to come up with a theory as to how we can distinguish acts of kindness from moral obligations. In later parts of the paper, I will turn to saintly and heroic actions.

Baron tries to explain everyday acts of kindness by appealing to the Kantian notion of imperfect duties.[1] In her own terms: "Kant's imperfect duties are first and foremost duties to adopt certain ends. For Kant, the obligatory ends — the ends it is a duty to adopt — are others' happiness and one's own perfection... In virtue of my duty to have others' happiness as my end, I have

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1. Since this essay is not an essay in Kantian scholarship, it does not matter for my purposes whether Baron's interpretation of Kant's view is accurate or not.

duties to act so as to promote others' happiness. It is not that I have a duty merely to do this now and then, but neither am I required to do it constantly, or at every opportunity…In a nutshell: we have a duty to promote others' happiness, but do not have a duty to do so at every opportunity, or as much as we possibly can" (Baron, 2015, p. 4).

This is a very interesting idea that incorporates the above-mentioned intuition about the importance of small good actions that are not obligatory. The question that needs to be addressed now is what determines which actions are always, or as Baron puts it, "severally obligatory" and which actions are not. I now try to answer this question within the Adamsian theistic ethical framework.

In chapter 1 of Adams (1999), he identifies the good with the object of pursuit, love, and admiration. A good human life is a life that is for the good. Human welfare is also defined by him as the "enjoyment of the excellent" (Adams, 1999, p. 93). The notion of being for the good is explicated in Adams (2006). "There are many ways of being for something. They include: loving it, liking it, respecting it, wanting it, wishing for it, appreciating it, thinking highly of it, speaking in favor of it and otherwise intentionally standing for it symbolically, acting to promote or protect it, and being disposed to do such things" (Adams, 2006, pp. 15-16).

It follows from the above points that the moral status of actions should be evaluated according to whether they have the *appropriate relationship* with the good or not. Bad actions engage objects of value in defective ways. Wrong actions are a subset of bad actions and what makes them distinct from other bad actions is the *especially bad ways they engage* objects of value. In order to identify the nature of wrongness and the distinction between actions that are severally wrong and those that are not and also the difference between these two and actions that are bad but not wrong, we need to identify the special badness of wrong actions.

I think it is beneficial for our task of identifying the nature of moral obligations to first identify factors that are relevant to our deontic evaluation of actions that we deem wrong. The first and most obvious feature isthat many such actions harm the good. In different ways, they attack, destroy, or violate objects of value. For example, murder or killing animals without good justification destroys objects of value. Theft, fraud, and other financial wrongdoings harm people, who are objects of great value, by depriving them of the means necessary for their flourishing. Actions that are insulting to people or acts of betrayal, promise-breaking, treachery, or disloyalty harm the good by harming people, who are highly valuable, and also by harming and having an eroding effect on institutions that are intrinsically good; institutions

such as friendship and marriage.[1]

Another factor pertinent to the (im) permissibility of actions is the set of mental states or character traits that lie behind the action and motivate or cause the action. Regardless of whether the action is harmful to the good or not; an action *can* become wrong if it is done for or out of vicious intentions, motivations, or character traits. For example, consider a university professor who refuses to supervise a student because he is a racist and the student belongs to the ethnicity he despises. While he is free to refuse supervising a student, he is not free to do so out of racist hate. Accordingly, his refusal is wrong even if he can provide false excuses for his refusal that conceal his real intentions and thereby no harm is inflicted on the student.

It is part of the meaning of the term "good" that it has to be cherished, respected, and promoted. Actions performed out of vicious mental states such as hatred, malice, etc. that fail to pay the good the respect it is due are wrong.[2]

Note that my view is not that every action performed with bad intentions or out of vicious character is wrong. One can do a good or obligatory action with bad motivations or intentions. For example, a politician can donate to charity not out of a duty to help the needy but with the intention of self-promotion. This does not make his action wrong. To borrow an idea from Fitzpatrick (2012), actions performed because of bad mental states become wrong only if no one can perform those actions with good mental states. For example, refusing to supervise a student because you hate people of his ethnicity is something that no one can act well by doing. But giving to charity is something people can do with good intentions and thereby act well by doing. Accordingly, even someone who gives to charity with selfish intentions or motivations is doing a right action even if from certain respects his action is bad.

Finally, the symbolic significance of an action can be relevant to its permissibility regardless of its consequences. The issue of symbolic value is discussed in detail in Adams (1999). Symbolic value has a significant

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1. It should be noted that being harmful to the good makes an action *pro tanto* wrong. It is still possible that an action thatis very harmful to the good can be permissible, even obligatory, if it is necessary for securing a greater good. For example, amputating the limb of a human being is permissible if it is necessary for saving his life. Or killing a human being is permissible if it is necessary for preventing the death of thousands of people.

2. Just like the previous discussion, the wrongness here is *pro tanto*. There are circumstances in which it is permissible to intend harm tosomething of great value for the purpose of securing a greater good. I think I am permitted to intend the death of a human being and act on that intention because if I refuse to do so, another person will not only kill that human being but he will kill a second human being as well.

importance in moral life. A martyr for a just cause who refuses to succumb under pressure is doing something valuable even if his resistance doesn't have any actual good consequences. By his resistance, he is symbolically expressing his devotion to the good. On the other hand, a one-time salute to a dictator mighthave notangible bad consequences but it is wrong since it is a symbolic expression of support for a very bad person or a very bad cause.

Does the seriousness of the harm an action poses to the good or the severity of the opposition it shows to the good have a bearing on its permissibility? I think so. It cannot be denied that the seriousness of the harm an action poses to the good is relevant in determining the seriousness of the wrongness of a wrong action. It figures in the way we rank and prioritize our obligations when they come into conflict. Murdering a human being is a much worse action than breaking his arm and is a much more serious moral wrong. Accordingly, we think it is permissible to break someone's arm if it is the only way to save his life. It is then only natural to say that the severity of harm to the good can render an action wrong.

Similar points can be said about the severity of the badness of mental states that cause an action and the symbolic opposition of an action to the good. For example, racist hate is much worse than unjustified personal animosity. Regarding the symbolic opposition to the good, making lampshades out of human skin[1] is much worse than giving a one-time salute to a student bully because the symbolic degradation of objects of great value is much more evident in the former than in the latter. Again, it is only natural to think that the severity of the badness of mental states behind an action or the severity of the symbolic badness of it has a bearing on its wrongness

Furthermore, the value of the object being wronged is important in ranking different morally wrong actions that are equally harmful to the object. Killing a human being is a much worse action than killing a chicken and is a more seriously wrong action. This is so because the object being harmed is of much greater value.

I gather from the above discussion that the seriousness and significance of the harm and opposition to the good and also the value of the particular object being violated or opposedare important factors in determining its moral (im) permissibility. But such a view faces two counter-examples immediately.

First, there are morally wrong actions that are not that harmful to the good. For example, stealing a piece of bubble gum, while wrong, doesn't seem to

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1. I have borrowed this example from Adams' discussion of Jeffrey Stout's views in Adams (1999). The example is originally Stout's.

pose much harm to the good. On the other hand, there seem to be (in) actions that are seriously harmful to objects of great value but are not obligatory. For example, many people think we don't have an obligation to donate money to save the lives of people inflicted with famine in faraway countries even though such inaction is seriously harmful to the life and wellbeing of inhabitants of those countries. So, one might object to my view that these counter-examples show that the degree of harm to the good is neither necessary nor sufficient for an action to be right or wrong.

My response to the first counter-example is that my view is not that being seriously harmful to the good is a necessary condition for wrongness. I explicitly said that actions can be wrong because they are symbolically opposed to the good or stem from vicious character traits even if they don't have any harmful consequences. I believe the wrongness of the action in this counter-example is more due to the mental states that caused it and its symbolic opposition to the good rather than its actual harmfulness to the good. Assuming that private property is an institution necessary for securing a good and flourishing human life, which is the most excellent creaturely object we know, stealing is an intrinsically bad action since it is by definition in violation of this institution and thus opposed to the good. Someone who steals even a very cheap object like a piece of bubble gum lacks the appropriate respect for the institutions necessary for the protection and promotion of the good. Furthermore, he lacks the appropriate respect for the owner of the object he is stealing because he takes his property without permission. He thus acts out of faulty beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and emotions. By actually committing the act of theft, he furthermore expresses his lack of respect for the good. Accordingly, his action is symbolically opposed to the good because it bears witness to the agent's lack of respect for other people's will andintuitions that are crucial for the well-being of people. I noted above that some objects of value are so valuable that even small violations of them or opposition to them amount to moral wrongdoing. This is also part of the reason for the wrongness of stealing a small object or telling a small lie.

The second counter-example is more problematic since I think I am committed to the view that being seriously harmful is sufficient to make an action *pro tanto* wrong. This challenge is similar to the challenge of explaining our intuition that we have different obligations vis-á-vis our family and friends compared to strangers. This is a very plausible and widespread intuitionbut it is related to the issue of agent relativity that I don't ave space to discuss in detail here. Briefly, one can endorse agent-relative value and accordingly claim that from the perspective of people in a specific community or country, people in faraway countries don't have the same agent-relative value as people in that community. Or alternatively, we can say that given the limited time,

energy, and resources we have, each community has to focus on its own problems because trying to solve all the problems in the world means that you will not solve any problems. At the end of the day, if one is able to establish that there is a way for people in a country to help people in faraway countries without enduring serious costs, I have no problem with saying that they have an obligation to do so and our intuitions need modification. It should be also noted that a view such as Adams' view also faces versions of this problem. The intuition that we don't have obligations to help people in faraway countries is a highly plausible one. Accordingly, Adams has to explain why God commands me to help a citizen of my country but does not command me to help someone living in another continent.

Articulating the taxonomy

I think we are now in a position to articulate criteria for distinguishing actions that are severally wrong, actions that are not severally wrong but their total abandonment is wrong, and actions that are bad but not wrong.

Above I mentioned several factors that are relevant to the deontic status of actions. I think they can be listed as follows: 1) harm to the good, 2) the mental states, character traits, intentions, and motivations behind the action, 3) symbolic value of the action, 4) the degree of goodness of the object of the action, 5) the severity of the harm that the action imposes on the good or the severity of badness in the way that the mental states behind the action engage with the good or the severity of the symbolic import of the action.

As I said before, in the Adamsian framework I adopt, the goal of moral life is "alliance with the Good." Accordingly, I suggest that actions that are severally wrong are actions that committing them make one opposed to the good in a way that one cannot be called an ally of the good if he does not repent or apologize and reimburse for that action. They have this effect of making their agent opposed to the good by involving a combination of harm to the good, betrayal of mental states that lack appropriate orientation vis-à-vis the good, or symbolic opposition to the good. An action is obligatory if not performing it would be wrong.

Actions that are not severally obligatory but their total abandonment is wrong are different from severally morally wrong actions in that not doing them every time does not involve the wrong-making combination of harm, bad mental states, or symbolic opposition to the good. Of course, if one refuses to doany of these actions in his whole life then his inaction is wrong since it would then involve the wrong-making combination above.

Let me illustrate my suggestion with an example. All agree that lying is wrong; even little lies about unimportant and nonconsequential issues. On the

other hand, not giving a ride to your coworker every day is not wrong since giving a ride to your coworker is a small act of favor. What distinguishes these two actions? By the lights of my suggestion, I have to identify wrong-making features in a little lie that are not present in the case of not giving one's coworker a ride every day. Lying is an action that is by definition opposed to truth and knowledge. Truth and knowledge are objects of great value; accordingly, every act of lying is by definition opposed to the good because of this. Furthermore, even lies about unimportant issues erode the sense of trust between people which is necessary for sustaining and promoting the good. Lying also involves a kind of manipulation of the one being lied to and thus is disrespectful to him and given the fact that human beings are objects of great value, disrespecting them even to a small degree is impermissible. Given all these bad features of lying, someone who lies even about unimportant issues is either opposed to the good or lacks the appropriate respect for the good and accordingly, his act of lying betrays his bad character traits. Accordingly, lying is an action that is opposed to the good and is rooted in faulty character traits and attitudes that are opposed or indifferent to the good and thus is wrong.

Let's turn to the case of not giving a ride to your coworker. First of all, unlike lying, whose object is falsehood and manipulation, or murder, whose aim is the destruction of life, or using profanity, whose aim is to insult others, not giving a ride to someone is not essentially and by definition opposed to the good. Its deontic status is determined by its consequences and motivations that give rise to it. Now, not giving a ride to your coworker need not have any consequences that are harmful to the good. The cost of transportation is not that high so that not giving a ride to someone on a single occasion amounts to harming that person. Furthermore, someone who does not give a ride to a coworker on certain occasions needs not be motivated by malicious or indifferent attitudes. In most instances, he just wants to be alone! Accordingly, under ordinary circumstances, not giving a ride to a coworker is not something wrong and the agent is not susceptible to any negative reactions or evaluations. Of course, as I repeatedly said before, if one refuses to do any acts of kindness in his whole life then this refusal would be wrong. It would involve the combination of wrong-making features that are responsible for the wrongness of severally wrong actions.

What about bad actions that are not wrong? Like wrong actions, the agents performing these actions are susceptible to negative reactions and evaluations. Nevertheless, they are not wrong and our reactions to them are milder than our reactions to wrong actions. I suggest what distinguishes these actions from actions that are wrong is that even though they involve a combination of bad features such as being harmful, or being rooted in bad mental states, or being symbolically bad, the badness of the elements of that combination is

not as severe as the elements of combinations that make actions severally wrong.

Let me explain with an example from Macnamara (2013). In that example, someone refuses to give his subway seat to an old couple so that they can sit beside each other. The old couple is not left standing of course. The assumption is that there are many scattered seats they could use but if they wanted to sit beside one another they needed that person's seat. That person is certainly allowing some harm to befall the couple but the harm is minimal. Not sitting together for a 15-minute subway ride is hardly a serious harm. Furthermore, the guy is not breaking any laws or unwritten rules about who gets to sit where.

Another assumption of the example is that that person's refusal is not out of any hostilities towards the couple or old people or whatever. He just feels lazy and doesn't feel like moving in that moment. Being lazy is a vice and is certainly bad but, to borrow an important distinction from Adams (2006), it is a ''structural'' vice. Adams defines structural. virtues/vices as follows: "Structural virtues, such as courage and self-control, are not defined by particular goods or evils one is for or against, but rather by types of strength in rational self-government. A structural virtue is not a matter of having one's heart in the right place, but of being excellently able and willing to govern one's life in accordance with one's own central aims and values, whatever they are. Corresponding to structural virtues are what we may call *structuralvices*. They consist not in opposition or indifference to specific goods, but in deficiency in strengths of self-government. Thus, cowardice and incontinence, respectively, are deficiencies of strength in governing oneself in the face of danger or of temptation in general. In this way, they are *vices of weakness*"[1] (Adams, 2006, p. 37). He goes on and makes the following point which is important for my suggestion: "As such [structural vices] do not normally make someone an *enemy*, but at worst an unreliable ally, of people whose hearts are in the right place. Likewise, I think we should not classify them as forms of *wickedness*. A wicked person is someone whose heart is in a bad place, being for things it is very bad to be for and against things it is very bad to be against, or perhaps just not for things it is very bad not to be for" (Adams, 2006, p. 38). Being lazy is a structural vice and accordingly, it is intrinsically less bad than vices such as cruelty or ruthlessness. I concede that structural vices can amount to disastrous consequences but in the example under discussion, the assumption is that the level of laziness of that person is not that great. Finally,

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1. Italics are Adams'

I don't think that the person's refusal has any symbolic badness that can be used against him.

I gather from the above discussion that what distinguishes wrong actions from actions that are merely bad but not wrong is that the severity and the kind of badness that wrong actions involve are such that they make their agent *opposed* to the good while bad actions only make the agent an *unreliable ally* of the good. Of course, if one keeps doing bad actions again and again then he is committing a wrongdoing. The badness in his actions amplifies each time he performs them so that his actions become indistinguishable from wrong actions.

It should be noted that I am not claiming that someone becomes an enemy of the good by performing a single wrong action. The view is that each time someone commits a wrong action he thereby is placed in opposition to the good in that instance. Our overall moral evaluation of someone's life might be quite positive even if he has done some morally wrong actions in his life.

Sainthood and heroic actions

Heroic or saintly actions are different from severally obligatory actions and actions that are good but not severally obligatory in that someone who *never* performs such actions can indeed be a very good person and liable to no criticism from others.

I think the key to answering this question is provided by Zimmerman (1996). Zimmerman tries to make room for supererogatory actions in maximizing moral theories such as maximizing consequentialism. According to him, this can be achieved "by declaring that there is more than one set of values pertinent to the moral evaluation of an act. One set of values must be said to be pertinent to the determination of right and wrong and obligation, the other not. Where *A* is supererogatory, and so it is left to the agent's discretion whether or not to perform it, a maximizing theory must declare its performance to be non-deontically superior but deontically equivalent to its nonperformance; and where *A* is suberogatory, a maximizing theory must declare its performance to be non-deontically inferior but deontically equivalent to its nonperformance" (Zimmerman, 1996, p. 244).

In order to use the maneuver suggested by Zimmerman, I have tocome up with different roles for heroic or saintly actions and moral obligations in our life. I can then claim that heroic actions are non-obligatory even when they have very good consequences because their role is different from that of obligatory actions. Goods create obligations only in certain contexts and for certain purposes.

My suggestion for the role of moral obligations in ethics is that moral

obligations prevent the destruction of certain goods and remove the barriers in the way of their instantiation for the purpose of creating and sustaining the foundations for a just, moral society; a society in which people can develop virtues and become good human beings who are allies of the good.

This suggestion is inspired by what David Heyd says about the difference between the deontic and axiological realms of ethics: "the deontic sphere of morality is often taken as describing the *minimal* conditions of morality, the basic requirements of social morality that secure a just society, while the axiological sphere aims at higher ideals which can only be commended and recommended but not strictly required" (Heyd, 2019, §1). I agree with Heyd's insight since I believe a society infected with rape, murder, theft, fraud, lying, profanity, slander, etc. lacks the bare minimum conditions necessary for people to be able to grow their characters and build an alliance with the good in the sense mentioned above.

On the other hand, a society in which people do not rape, murder, steal, or slander one another is far from an ideal moral society. People have to perform obligatory actions with good intentions and motivations in order for their actions to be morally perfect. But it is not controversial that such a society at least is hospitable to moral growth. People living in such a society have the opportunity to work on their characters and become virtuous people. Similarly, actions such as everyday acts of kindness and chivalry are such that their total abandonment has serious consequences for the well-being of the moral society. It threatens the sense of social trust, cohesion, and neighborliness that is necessary for the well-being of a morally upright society.

I conclude that an action that is deontically superior to its non-performance has to have a great link with sustaining a morally upright society; a society that is hospitable to the good and to virtue.

That brings us to identifying the role of heroic or saintly actions. I think the roleof heroic actions can be gleaned from Adams' account of sainthood. According to Adams, a saint is someone whom "goodness [is] present in him in exceptional power" (Adams, 1984, p. 396). More elaborately, "Saints are people in whom the holy or divine can be seen. In a religious view, they are people who submit themselves, in faith, to God, not only loving Him but also letting His love possess them so that it works through them and shines through them to other people. What interests a saint may have will then depend on what interests God has, for sainthood is a participation in God's interest" (Adams, 1984, p. 398). Saintly actions are those actions that their agent allows substantial harm and difficulty to befall him for the purpose of becoming a vessel of the good.

In light of these definitions, I suggest that the role of heroic and saintly

actions in morality is that they are ways of totally devoting oneself to the good and becoming a vessel for pouring the all-encompassing grace of God onto the world. A doctor who leaves behind his comfortable life to devote all his time and energy to helping people in famine-infected areas has thereby become so devoted to the good that the unconditional love and grace of God, who is the Good, can be seen from his actions and attitudes. Such actions areabsolutely better than their omission but, in Zimmerman's terms, in a non-deontic way. Their function and purpose are different from that of the moral obligations and as a result, they are not obligatory in spite of being better than their omission. Indeed, it can be argued that their value is partially due to their non-obligatory status. They enable us to voluntarily devote ourselves to the good without the fear of social pressure or sanctions being a motivating factor for us performing them.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to put forward a suggestion as to how someone who does not accept the view that moral obligations are constituted by commands or demands of a third party, either God or some other person or entity, can incorporate one of the most important features of everyday morality that gives a boost to rival views. The feature is the existence of good/bad actions that are not obligatory/wrong.

For people interested in religious foundations for ethics, I have to reemphasize that opposition to divine command theories does not amount to opposing religious foundations for ethics. One can accept Adams' religious explanation of goodness and then use goodness to explain moral obligations. Such a theory of moral obligation is as religious as any divine command theory. This is the path taken by Murphy (2011) but as we saw his positive suggestion about the nature of moral obligations is not satisfactory.

Finally, I have to note that my theory is very rough and sketchy. It provides the first steps toward the articulation of a viable teleological account of moral obligations. As I said in the introduction, there are important issues such as the agent relativity of moral obligations that are not discussed in this essay. Also, the issues discusses in the paper have much more details that need to be filled in in order for us to have a viable account of moral obligations.

Ethics declarations

Conflict of interests

The author has no competing interests.

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