Sede Amministrativa: Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di *Filosofia, Sociologia, Pedagogia e Psicologia Applicata*

_____

SCUOLA DI DOTTORATO DI RICERCA IN: FILOSOFIA

INDIRIZZO: UNICO

CICLO XXVIII

ONLY THROUGH MORAL COMPLEXITY:

THE CASE OF SUPEREROGATION

Direttore della Scuola: Ch.ma Prof.ssa Francesca Menegoni

Supervisore: Ch.mo Prof. Antonio Da Re

Dottorando: Simone Grigoletto

Only Through Moral Complexity:
The Case of Supererogation

Abstract

The present research work will focus on two morally relevant issues: the nature of the experience of a moral agents and a possible account of the concept of supererogation. Even if, at a preliminary stage, these two subjects look to be unrelated, it will become clear how they both are expressions of the complexity typical of the moral domain.

I will endorse, as a starting point, the approach of moral phenomenology as defined by Maurice Mandelbaum. A phenomenological study is then intended as the analysis of what it is like to perform a given act from the perspective of the first-person. Accordingly, the experience of the moral agent appears to be manifold and heterogeneous. On a normative level, the best moral account that allows the management and the comprehension of such complexity seems to be moral pluralism. In particular, I will distinguish between two sorts of pluralism: *methodological pluralism* (about the different ways of moral reasoning) and *axiological pluralism* (about the different values that we take to have ultimate relevance). These denominations represent two ways of understanding morality in virtue of its *complexity*. As such, the approach of *moral complexity* relies on the acknowledgment of the manifold structure of morality. In this regard, I will consider the account offered by Charles Larmore in his *Patterns of Moral Complexity*. His admission of different and equally valid moral principles does not only explain something essential about our moral experience, but it will also become particularly helpful as I will try to apply his theory to the justification of supererogatory acts.

Supererogation, as I will highlight, is a moral concept that relies on the existence of the many levels of morality and on the many possible achievements of the good. In this way, a clear distinction between the Right and the Good will provide the

theoretical space for this category of acts. I will define this as *the need of complexity*, that is, the need of a multilevel theoretical structure that resembles the distinction between *precepts* and *concepts* that gave birth to the concept in the Christian tradition.

I will try to show how the loss of *moral complexity* is the first responsible of the theoretical struggles that the major monist theories (in particular Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics) face when confronted with the justification of supererogatory acts. These theoretical approaches usually tend to be anti-supererogationists for a clear reason. When the level of the Right and the level of the Good merge into the same category there is no easy way to give an account of morally good acts that go beyond the call of duty. I believe that the endorsement of a pluralist system will solve the so-called *problem of supererogation* by reestablishing a clear distinction between the two faces of morality: the *deontic* and the *evaluative*. This is why, in the final chapter, I will introduce the *Multiple Sources Dynamics* as possible explanation, on a normative level, of how supererogatory acts can be performed. A system that provides multiple sources of the good has the tools to explain the establishment of our moral obligations and, at the same time, it can explain how we are able to see and foster some other good that lies beyond the level of requirements.

In the present work, moral pluralism will be taken to be a sort of *inference to best explanation* of different morally relevant issues. This claim will be warranted by highlighting how moral pluralism can explain why our moral experience is so essentially complex (to the point of facing true moral dilemmas) and by showing how it can provide a satisfactory account of the concept supererogation. If these two subjects (which will be considered, at this point, directly related) are proved to hold true, the endorsement of a pluralist system will be considered the preferable option over the other normative systems.

Only Through Moral Complexity:
The Case of Supererogation

Abstract

Il presente progetto di ricerca si concentrerà su due questioni di rilevanza morale: la natura dell'esperienza morale degli morali ed un possibile giustificazione del concetto di supererogatorio. Anche se, ad uno stadio preliminare, queste due questioni non sembrano essere in relazione, diventerà chiaro in secondo momento come esse siano entrambe espressioni di quella complessità tipica dell'ambito morale.

Come punto di partenza, seguirò l'approccio della fenomenologia morale come viene definita da Maurice Mandelbaum. Tale studio fenomenologico è quindi inteso come l'analisi, dalla prospettiva della prima persona, di cosa voglia dire fare una data azione. A questo proposito, l'esperienza morale dell'agente appare multiforme ed eterogenea. Ad un livello normativo, la miglior teoria che permette di affrontare e comprendere tale complessità sembra essere il pluralismo morale. In particolare, distinguerò due tipologie di pluralismo: un *pluralismo metodologico* (che riguarda i diversi modi di ragionare moralmente) ed un *pluralismo assiologico* (che riguarda i diversi valori a cui diamo una rilevanza assoluta). Queste due interpretazioni rappresentano due modi di comprendere la moralità in virtù della sua essenziale complessità. Come tale, l'approccio della *complessità morale* si fonda sul riconoscimento della struttura variegata della morale. A questo proposito, analizzerò la posizione di Charles Larmore come espressa nel suo *Strutture di complessità morale*. La sua identificazione di diversi principi morali egualmente validi, non solo spiegherà qualcosa di essenziale riguardo all'esperienza morale, ma diventerà particolarmente funzionale quando, nell'ultimo capitolo, farò riferimento alla sua teoria per la giustificazione degli atti supererogatori.

Il supererogatorio, come evidenzierò, è un concetto morale che si fonda sull'esistenza dei diversi livelli della morale e sulle

molteplici modalità di conseguire il bene. In questo modo, una chiara distinzione tra il Giusto ed il Bene fornirà lo spazio teorico per questa categoria di atti. Definirò tale operazione la *necessità della complessità*, ovvero, il bisogno di una struttura teorica a più livelli che ricordi la distinzione tra *precetti* e *consigli* che ha dato vita al concetto nella tradizione cristiana.

Cercherò di dimostrare come la perdita di *complessità morale* è la prima causa delle difficoltà teoriche che le principali teorie moniste (in particolare utilitarismo ed etica kantiana) si trovano a fronteggiare nella giustificazione degli atti supererogatori. Questi approcci teorici, infatti, tendono ad essere anti-supererogazionisti per un motivo ben chiaro. Quando il livello del Giusto ed il livello del Bene si fondono nella stessa categoria, non resta alcun modo diretto di rendere conto degli atti moralmente buoni che vanno oltre il senso del dovere. Credo che l'adozione di un sistema pluralista risolverà il così detto *problema del supererogatorio*, ristabilendo una chiara distinzione tra le due facce della morale: il *deontico* e l'*assiologico*. Da qui il motivo per cui, nel capitolo finale, introdurrò la *Multiple Sources Dynamics* come una possibile spiegazione, ad un livello normativo, di come si diano le azioni supererogatorie. Un sistema che garantisca molteplici fonti del bene ha gli strumenti per fondare le nostre obbligazioni morali e, allo stesso tempo, per vedere e perseguire beni di altro genere che stanno oltre il livello degli obblighi.

In questo lavoro il pluralismo morale viene inteso come una sorta di *inferenza alla miglior spiegazione* di diverse questioni moralmente rilevanti. Questa affermazione verrà giustificata evidenziando come il pluralismo morale possa spiegare perché la nostra esperienza morale è essenzialmente complessa (fino al punto di fronteggiare reali dilemmi morali) e dimostrando come si possa fornire una giustificazione soddisfacente del concetto di supererogatorio. Se queste due questioni (che a questo punto si danno come direttamente relazionate) sono verificate come valide, l'adozione di un sistema pluralista sarà considerata come l'opzione preferibile tra i vari sistemi normativi.

Simone Grigoletto

Only Through Moral Complexity:

The Case of Supererogation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I:
MORAL COMPLEXITY AS THE REQUIRED BACKGROUND OF MORALITY

Chapter I:
Preliminary Claims: A Matter of Approach

Chapter II:
What Is Moral Complexity?

PART II:
SUPEREROGATION IN NORMATIVE ETHICS:
DEFINITION, JUSTIFICATION AND NEW PERSPECTIVES

Chapter III:
Supererogation: Why, What and How

Chapter IV:
Why Monist Theories Struggle With The Justification of the Concept?

**Chapter V:
A New Perspective: A Pluralistic Account of
Supererogation**

Only Trough Moral Complexity:
The Case of Supererogation

Interrogator: "*Could machines ever think as human beings do?*"
Alan Turing: "*Most people say no...*"
I.: "*You are not most people...*"
A.T.: "*Well, the problem is that you are...asking a stupid question.*
I.: "*I am?*"
A.T.: "*Of course machines...can't think as people do. A machine is different...from a person. Hence, they think differently. The interesting question is, just because something, uh, thinks differently from you, does that mean it's not thinking? Well, we allow for humans to have such divergences from one another. You like strawberries, I hate ice-skating, you... cry at sad films, I... am allergic to pollen. What is the point of-of different tastes, different...preferences if not to say that our brains work differently, that we think differently? And if we can say that about one another, then why can't we say the same thing for brains...built of copper and wire, steel?*"

It is with this dialogue that, in the movie *The Imitation Game*, Alan Turing is imagined to explain to the police officer the nature of thinking in regards to artificial machines[1]. The grounding argument has great philosophical appeal: just because there are different ways of thinking, it does not mean they are not all part of what we consider *thinking*. If we apply this idea to the moral domain, we can further appreciate the

---

[1] Turing A. M., *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, in 'Mind' 59(1950), no.236, pp.433-460.

1

intuitive allure of this point. The almost infinite number of variables that a moral agent faces in the everyday moral life and the resulting diversity of moral deliberations by different agents gives us a glimpse of the typical complexity of moral experience. Not only we acknowledge complexity, but also we consider it contradictory in nature as we see the large number of conflicts of value, opinions, rules of conduct that arise. However, we should not, for this reason, lose faith in finding a unifying feature among the different expressions of what we call morality. Rather, I believe that the answer to the question 'how do we deliberate morally?' can specifically help us to cast some light on another troublesome question: 'what does it mean to live a good life?'. Again, if we take these questions seriously we cannot but acknowledge that human beings can bring about their moral choices differently. Just because we can identify different ways of reasoning, it does not mean that we cannot conceive all these ways of reasoning as constitutively moral. It is only by understanding *how* and *why* this is the case that we can strive for some desirable moral progress.

In the very beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* morality was defined by Aristotle as the achievement of an end[2] (τέλος), and this end is humans' greatest good: happiness[3] (εὐδαιμονία). Notice that conceiving morality as teleological subject does not entail a consequentialist theoretical framework. As we have briefly underlined, the final moral end (that of a life lived well and in communion with the others) can be achieved in many different ways and not only by paying attention to the consequences of our acts. Following the Aristotelian starting point, I believe that only by better understanding *how* we try to accomplish a given end, we will be able to realize it (no matter what that end might be). The present research work has been carried out with the belief that interpreting our moral capacities will help us to identify our final moral destination. As a consequence, if we recognize that human beings have different ways of moral reasoning, we will be willing to concede that, in life, we value different things in themselves. These are the two

---

[2] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a.
[3] Aristotle, *ibidem*, 1097b.

interconnected understandings of moral pluralism that I hope will become clear in the following chapters: a *methodological pluralism* (that describes the different ways of moral reasoning) and an *axiological-pluralism* (that describes the values to which we assign ultimate importance). If we analyze the first-person moral experience, such a variety of means and ends appears evident even in the same moral agent. This is the complexity typical of morality that will be the focus of the present work: we, as moral agents, do not deliberate in a unique way and neither always for the same end. I might help a friend because I have promised to do so (and I believe in the importance of promise-keeping *per se*) and, at the same time, I might decide to divide my birthday cake equally, because it is the act that maximizes a certain moral good. Again, moral reasoning is not subject to a single and unique source of moral value (*axiological pluralism*) and the different sources of value can be accounted for by different ways of moral reasoning (*methodological pluralism*).

Certainly, the first and most fundamental sign of the complexity of our moral framework is the common distinction between the Right and the Good. The moral approach expressed by well-known works of W. D. Ross, while not explicitly addressed, have always been taken as source of inspiration from the outset[4]. The idea of a pluralistic morality that can distinguish between the realm of obligations and duties (the Right) and a broader category of intrinsic moral value (the Good) is not only a theoretical prerequisite of the moral concepts taken into account in present work, but also decisive for the soundness of most of the arguments in their favor. A moral complex approach to morality primarily means to acknowledge this distinction. A distinction that finds its intuitive appeal in the analysis of the first person moral experience.

The fact that the concept of supererogation springs from the theoretical distinction between the Right and the Good is the reason why I have decided to analyze this peculiar category of acts. Moral complexity and supererogation are only apparently two separated issues. I think that once we realize how the

---

[4] See Ross W. D., *The Right and the Good*, Oxford University Press, 1930. Ross W. D., *The Foundations of Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 1939.

former grounds the latter and, thus, how the latter is an expression of the former we will be able to appreciate the closeness of these two questions of ethics. I take the questions about moral complexity as metaethical questions about the structure of morality (meta-theoretical someone might say) and I consider the debate on supererogation a consequence, at the normative level, of the endorsement of a complex system. The aim of the present work, then, is twofold. First, I will try to show how the two subjects are mutually dependent, as we cannot make sense of supererogation without a complex moral system. Consequently, if we are willing to concede the existence of acts that are 'good, but not morally required' we cannot but acknowledge the complexity typical of morality. Second, if this relation really makes sense I will have obtained a second task: the demonstration of how these two questions of morality can suffice as mutual justificatory grounds. Nonetheless, this will make possible a parallel remark (but not a less important one), specifically about the nature of supererogatory acts. The advocacy of a complex and pluralist system of morality to ground supererogation wants to be, more generally, a contribution to the philosophical debate about the concept as it has raised since the late 50s of the twentieth century. If this secondary achievement is sound, I think we will have the tools to understand what this category of acts needs and, further, why the most widespread moral systems struggle to acknowledge it.

The first chapter tries to highlight the reasons and the importance of a phenomenological approach to morality. These premises will focus on the overlooked work of Maurice Mandelbaum *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* and its more recent development by Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons. Morality, they hold, is a subject that deals with human agency in the everyday experience. As such, the analysis of such first-person experience cannot but be a preferred starting point. Because of this attitude to the study of morality, we disclose moral complexity.

The second chapter, then, tries to define what moral complexity is. It will be claimed that it is primarily the acknowledgement of the multileveled structure of morality. I

will try to explain the normative consequences of this approach by focusing on the position offered by Charles Larmore in his *Patterns of Moral Complexity* and expanded it in *The Autonomy of Morality*. Larmore's position is taken as a fruitful starting point to manage a pluralistic account of morality. At this stage though, another Aristotelian insight will help us to understand how to deal, more specifically, with the moral justification of an act within a system so understood. Moral judgement, taken as the faculty of moral interpretation, will suffice to the role of facing complexity with less hardship.

The third chapter introduces the concept of supererogation by explaining why I adopt this category of acts to explore moral complexity. As I have briefly underlined above, supererogation is considered a *complex* concept; one that requires a complex system to be justified. In the light of this remark, I will define the concept by following the widespread connotation given by David Heyd in *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*. I will then try to show how the necessity of a complex system to make sense of supererogatory acts finds its roots in the Christian theological tradition that originally gave birth to the concept. The distinction between precepts and counsels as developed by Christian theologians represents the reason why a 'secular' account of supererogation requires a multileveled system of morality that clearly distinguishes between the Right and the Good.

Chapter IV intends to show how if we fail to acknowledge the complexity of morality, the account of supererogation will become problematic. I will try to show how this argument can be generally raised against monist theories, as they fail to distinguish the many levels of the moral discourse. Similarly, this problem arises when we have a theory that conceives the maximization of the good as obligatory. Broadly, both Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics express this same attitude (even if in different forms). It is not surprising then, how both these theories usually tend to endorse forms of anti-supererogationism. The lack of complexity typical of monist systems results in the denial of the theoretical space of supererogation. This point, far from being a specific criticism to

any system, aims at showing a common deficiency of monism in regards to supererogatory acts.

Finally, the fifth chapter tries to answers the deficiencies underlined in the previous one by proposing a pluralistic account of supererogation. If we conceive a moral system as one that allows for a moral agent to have different sources of the good, these different sources will serve as the different levels of moral achievement that make possible to go 'beyond the call of duty'. In particular, one source will represent the level of obligation, while another will show the way to exceed the obligatory. This is what I will call the *Multiple Sources Dynamics*. This explanation will further tell us something about the specific phenomenology that supererogatory acts entail.

Generally speaking, this research work aims at dealing with some of the major issues in contemporary moral philosophy. The metaethical aspects of the main thesis deal with the structure of a moral system and the importance of a phenomenological attitude to the subject. From this outset, further questions typical of normative ethics arise: "how does moral deliberation work?", "how is moral justification possible?", "what is moral pluralism?", "how do we give an account of supererogatory acts?". To all these questions I have tried to answer *only through complexity*, with the belief that a life lived well would be richer if we endorse a moral system that allows to deny theoretical oversimplifications and to exceed the constrains of the category of moral obligation. As such, the overall goal of this work will be that of mapping and recognizing all the different instances of moral complexity. This acknowledgement comes with several beliefs. Only through complexity, we can make sense of what lies beyond the call of duty. Only through complexity, we can give an account of how morality works from the first-person perspective. Only through complexity, we can better promote the pursuing of a flourishing life.

PART I:

MORAL COMPLEXITY AS
THE REQUIRED BACKGROUND
OF MORALITY

1. Why a Phenomenological Approach to Morality?

Aristotle, in the *Metaphysics*, has given the very first specification of *practical* philosophy. He defines it as follows:

"*It is right also that philosophy should be called knowledge of the truth. For the end of theoretical knowledge is truth, while that of practical knowledge is action (for even if they consider how things are, practical men do not study the eternal, but what is relative and in the present).*"[1]

It appears clear that, from the very beginning the study of practical acts (τα ἔργα[2]) was conceived as the study of things collocated in and relative to a time and space (πρός τι καί νῦν[3]). That is, the *moral experience* of the agent is the sphere within which moral acts take place, and thus, actions need to be studied accordingly. It is only through an analysis of moral experience that we can study those acts that are distinctively practical. Immanence (the collocation within a space and time) does not only play a major role in ethics, but also a founding one.

More recently, the study of moral experience has been called *Moral Phenomenology* and this is why the phenomenological approach will guide us through the present work. It should gradually become clear why Moral Phenomenology is the methodology that better fits our analysis. Nevertheless, I want make it clearer by answering another question first: what exactly is *Moral Phenomenology*? It has been pointed out that

---

[1] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, α 2, 993 b 19-23. (trans. by Ross W. D.) in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, McKeon R. (ed. by), Random House, 1941, p.712.
[2] Aristotle, *ibidem*, α 2, 993 b 21.
[3] Aristotle, *ibidem*, α 2, 993 b 22.

"phenomenology" is an ambiguous term[4]. Following this interpretation, with Moral Phenomenology we can refer either to the moral philosophy of the phenomenological tradition lead by Edmund Husserl or to a first-person study of the moral life experienced by a moral agent.

The former understanding of the term "moral phenomenology" refers to the extension of Husserl's First Philosophy (which aims at the comprehension of our pre-conceptual understanding of the world) to the realm of moral values. Within the phenomenological tradition the author whose work takes on this challenge is Max Scheler. He claimed that the cognition of moral values primarily begins with emotions and affects as far as they shape our experience of the world[5]. The very first lines of his essay *Ordo Amoris* state as follows:

"*I find myself in an immeasurably vast world of sensible and spiritual objects which set my heart and passions in constant motion. I know that the objects that I can recognize through perception and through, as well as all that I will, choose, do, perform, and accomplish, depend on the play of this movement of my heart. […] Whether I am investigating the innermost essence of an individual, an historical era, a family, a people, a nation, or any other socio-historical group, I will know and understand it most profoundly when I have discerned the system of its concrete value-assessments and value-preference, whatever organization this system has. I call this system the ethos of any such subjects.*"[6]

For Scheler the understanding of the *ethos* needs to be done through the proper appreciation of the inner emotional states in order to find the classification according to which the system of values has been outlined. The answer that Scheler gives to this issue is that everything is ordered by the degree of *love* and

---

[4] Kriegel U., *Moral Phenomenology: Foundational issues* in "Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences" 7(2008), no.1, p.1.
[5] Kriegel U., *ibidem*, p.3.
[6] Scheler M., *Ordo Amoris*, in Scheler M., *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. by David Lachterman, Northwestern University Press, 1973, p.98-99.

hate that reality presents[7]. Understanding the order of love will ultimately mean understanding the human being in itself. This is because, once we understand the *model* through which we characterize our understanding of the world, we also understand how the human being works, how it structures the reality within which it is possible to think, act, choose, will and so on. The investigation of the model leads, therefore, to the understanding of the origin of such a model[8]. Phenomenology, so conceived, represents the favored methodology to understand the human being.

A second author that derives from the phenomenological tradition with a more ethics-oriented approach is Emanuel Levinas. Levinas refocused the aim of the phenomenological project toward a discipline that sees in the relationship with other subjects the core of the matter and the answer to the questions set by First Philosophy. In his *Totality and Infinity* he defines ethics as the primary way to reach the metaphysical truth[9]. This is because the *other*, and the relationship of the subject with it, is the place where such metaphysical truth is disclosed. The phenomenological experience of what is other than the subject reveals the transcendence of the subject itself. This is why this particular approach is relevant to the understanding of the metaphysical truth. Levinas is not interested in ethics as system of value or as a value theory. Instead, he is concerned with ethics as the essential way to answer the metaphysical questions through the methodology outlined by phenomenological tradition before him.

The phenomenological approach to morality can be understood in various ways. A different approach from those

---

[7] Scheler M., *ibidem*, p.99.

[8] "Whoever has the *ordo amoris* of a man has the man himself. *He has for the man as a moral subject what the crystallization formula is for a crystal. He sees through him as fa as one possibly can. He sees before him the constantly simple and basic lines of his heart.*" in Scheler M., *ibidem*, p.100.

[9] "*Already* of itself *ethics is an "optics." It is not limited to preparing for the theoretical exercise of thought, which would monopolize transcendence. The traditional opposition between theory and practice will disappear before the metaphysical transcendence by which a relation with the absolutely other, or truth, is established, and of which ethics is the royal road.*" in Levinas E., *Totality and Infinity*, Duquesne University Press, 1969, p.29.

that we have seen above is one that deals directly with the moral life of the agent in order to investigate how morality works. Roughly, this can be conceived as the first-person analysis of the moral experience of the subject. In other terms, this approach tries to analyze 'what it is like to do *x*'. An author that clearly expresses this approach (whose work has been mainly overlooked) is Maurice Mandelbaum, who published in 1955 a book entitled *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*. Mandelbaum offers a phenomenological approach that begins from the experience that an agent undergoes when she is confronted with a morally relevant situation[10]. Phenomenology, thus understood, is not a direct outcome of the phenomenological tradition influenced by Husserl[11]. Rather, as clearly expressed in the following quote, Mandelbaum's phenomenological approach starts from a first person perspective:

"*Its essential methodological conviction* [of the phenomenological approach] *is that a solution to any of the problems of ethics must be educed from, and verified by, a careful and direct examination of individual moral judgments. In other words, the phenomenological approach holds that the proper basis for any moral generalization, and for the confirmation which we rightfully demand for such a generalization, are to be found in an examination of the moral judgments which men make.*"[12]

---

[10] Mandelbaum's work is influenced in some degree by the previous work of gestalt psychologist and philosopher Wolfgang Köhler (see Köhler W., *The Place of Value in a World of Facts*, Liveright, 1976). Mandelbaum's book is dedicated to Köhler.

[11] He himself makes it clear in footnote 18 of the first chapter: "*In using the term 'phenomenological' I do not refer to the specific methods of the phenomenological school. I use 'phenomenology to connote any examination of experience or of experienced objects which aims at describing their nature rather than seeking to give an 'explanation' of them. [...] What is included is every descriptive investigation of 'the phenomenal world', that is, of whatever is directly experienced by me or by others.*" in Mandelbaum M., *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, The Free Press, 1955, n18, p.313.

[12] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.31.

I think that from this quote we can gather that the two central presuppositions of Mandelbaum's project are: 1. an adequate moral theory must be originated from a proper analysis of *moral experience*[13] 2. the *moral experience* of the agent fully corresponds to all the various moral judgments she forms[14].

The first presupposition might be a misleading one. What he is saying is not that the phenomenological approach has an ultimate and exclusive role in the ethical inquiry. To claim this, would be a major misunderstanding of Mandelbaum's work. What he is claiming instead is that such an approach should serve as a starting point for an adequate moral investigation. Once we have endorsed it and applied it to the study subject, then ethics would be in a position to confront or to be influenced by what he calls *non-ethical inquiries*[15], that is, other philosophical kinds of inquiry or other sciences (such as anthropology, psychology and sociology).

In order to understand the second presupposition it is important to consider which aspects of a judgment are relevant in Mandelbaum's phenomenological approach and how he discriminates among different kinds of judgment. The reason why Mandelbaum focuses on moral judgments is not to be seen on the content of these judgments[16]. He is not specifically concerned with what different agents deliberate (or at least not primarily), but rather with *how* they form their judgments. Agents can eventually diverge a lot on the specific content of their judgments according to what they take to be morally valuable. At the same time a pure *attitudinal* approach, one that abstracts completely from the content, would end up being arbitrary and unconvincing[17]. What he is trying to propose is an approach that draws from both of these two approaches (*contentual* and *attitudinal*) some relevant points and opens up for a third new way: a *structural* approach. The object of the study then, is the peculiar relationship between the content of the judgment, the attitude of the agent and the situation with

---

[13] See also Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.35.
[14] See also Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.40.
[15] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.31-32.
[16] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.35ff.
[17] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.40.

which the agent who makes the judgment is confronted[18]. This will allow us to determine the common features of our moral judgments and thus to study them accordingly. Put in these terms, ethics can only be considered as a discipline that begins from an adequate analysis of the first-person moral experience and that tries to interpret the relations that animate such experience.

I now want to sketch out the essential framework of Mandelbaum's project. The three central chapters of his work are dedicated to a phenomenological analysis of how the agent judges from the moral point of view in different ways. Briefly, he draws a major distinction between *direct* moral judgments and *removed* moral judgments. The former are judgments where the agent is directly involved in the situation, she is the one making the judgment and who lives the moral experience from "within". The latter are judgments where who is evaluating is not living in first-person the judgmental process. This means that we are evaluating from "without" the relationships between the relevant elements (*content*, *attitude*, and *situation*). Judgments of this kind include judgments made by others, our own judgments made in the past and tentative judgments about future possible courses of action. Moreover, not all *removed* moral judgments belong to the class of judgments that are concerned with moral rightness and wrongness. We can talk of *removed* moral judgment also when we are dealing with judgments of *moral worth*. This other subclass of *removed* moral judgment is concerned with the evaluation of the value of a person as a whole or of a specific character trait. Both judgments belong to the group of *removed* moral judgments (because they are not made directly by the agent involved), but with different specifications[19].

---

[18] "*Therefore, instead of abstracting either content or attitude from the total situation, we shall first inquire into the manner in which a situation appears to one who makes a moral judgment; we shall then attempt to interpret the other two elements in terms of their relationship to this situation.*" Ibidem, p.40.

[19] "*A judgment of moral rightness or wrongness concerns the application of moral criteria to a specific action; a judgment of moral worth predicates a particular type of value (moral value) of a person, or of a trait of character exhibited by him. While both types of judgments are 'removed', that is, neither*

The interesting conclusion that Mandelbaum draws from his analysis is that all these judgments share a feature that combines them into one single *genus*[20]. This is the relation that is established between the agent and the situation that she is living. In making a moral judgment, the agent perceives the *fittingness* (or *unfittingness*) of a certain course of action with the situation that she is facing. This relation can be explained as a *harmony* between some possible courses of action and the end that the agent is pursuing. If a certain act 'leads to' or is 'consonant with' a certain goal, that act *fits* the situation[21]. In the case of a *direct* moral judgment, for example, it will then constitute a moral obligation to act accordingly. This reveals what Mandelbaum calls *reflexive demand*. Once we apprehend the *fittingness* (or *unfittingness*) of a certain act, that act demands to be performed (or omitted). Besides, this *demand* is perceived as coming from outside of us and this is what makes it constitutively moral. In fact, other kinds of demand are generally perceived as coming from inside of us: for example when you are hungry, you feel a demand to pursue a course of action that would feed you as delightfully as possible. This feature is what distinguishes moral choices from non-moral ones: the former are urged by an *objective* demand, the latter by a *subjective* demand[22]. In addition, the claim that moral judgments generate a demand that is felt to come from outside of us, grounds the perception of that degree of objectivity that typically characterizes morality.

I will spend some more pages on a deeper analysis of Mandelbaum's articulation of moral experience later in this chapter. For now, my main concern with this view has been a meta-philosophical one. That is, one aimed at understanding the reasons why such an approach might hold advantages over others in dealing with ethical issues.

Two of the authors that are trying to give new life to Mandelbaum's work are Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons. In

---

is made by the agent in the situation, there are differences between them." in Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.95.

[20] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.181.

[21] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.64.

[22] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.54-55.

the recent years, they have produced several articles that deal directly with Mandelbaum's work and try to underline the importance of his thought. This attention appears to be especially relevant today, when we are seeing a progressing opening of the philosophical research to other branches of the sciences that study the human being from a different perspective. Mandelbaum himself was an opponent of that philosophical trend that tried to exclude from the philosophical inquiry the influence of other sciences like psychology, sociology and anthropology[23]. His phenomenological approach could regain interest in light of the recent development that philosophy is undertaking in this period. As such, this might be a first answer to the question that the title of this section poses: a phenomenological approach to morality can be justified by the possibility to cooperate and research together with other subjects.

Moreover, the phenomenological approach, as Horgan and Timmons underline[24], gives rise to many fundamental questions regarding moral theorizing. I will now present the two questions that I consider more pressing for the present work. Respectively, the question about *motivation* and that about *potential payoff*:

"Are there any reasons to believe that a phenomenological approach to philosophical questions in moral theory is superior to, or at any rate usefully supplemental to, other approaches? (motivation);
What results might one reach about philosophical issues in moral theory (including both normative and metaethics) on the basis of a phenomenological description of moral experience? (potential payoff)"[25]

---

[23] Horgan T., Timmons M., *Mandelbaum on Moral Phenomenology and Realism,* in Verstegen I. (ed. by), *Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism,* Routledge, 2010, p.106.
[24] Horgan T., Timmons M., *Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory*, in "Philosophical Issues", 15(2005), pp.56-77.
[25] Horgan T., Timmons M., *ibidem*, p.57.

Both these questions are further specification of the question that opened this section: *why a phenomenological approach to morality?* The answers to all these questions require a much more specific project than this. Nevertheless, as we will realize more clearly in the second part of the present work, a phenomenological analysis of some ethical issues is able to bring about some progress in moral research[26]. At this stage, I would like to give a general (but limited) answer that could justify the espousal of this approach. Moral philosophy is constitutively a *normative* subject (even if not exclusively so), i.e. one that deals with the fulfillment (or unfulfillment) of actions in reference to a given idea of the good. Moral experience represents the setting where this process takes place. A study that takes care of understanding the relations between how actions are brought about and the context in which they are brought about seems to be (if not fundamental) of great importance. Moral experience, thus, does not only represent the setting of the moral life, but also the place where to find the ultimate proof of the effectiveness of our theories. These two features ground the motivation to pursue a phenomenological analysis. Moral experience is, at the same time, the setting of our moral life and the sphere where to inspect the legitimacy of the moral progress we argue for. A moral philosophy that does not take into consideration these two aspects, which are implicit in its *normativity,* is disoriented and meaningless. This is the reason why a phenomenological approach (influenced in a certain degree by Mandelbaum's work) is going to characterize the present work.

2. Moral Experience Expanded

Now that I have briefly sketched some features of phenomenological approaches (and Mandelbaum's in particular), I want to challenge one of its presuppositions as underlined above. In particular, the second presupposition of

---

[26] Another hint of possible answers that supports such methodology can be found (other than in Mandelbaum's work itself) in Horgan T., Timmons M., *ibidem*, p.72ff.

Mandelbaum's work states that our moral experience can be fully described by judgmental acts. He writes as follows:

"*What characterizes this approach is the fact that it treats moral experience as a complete judgmental act. Not only are the attitudes which are present and the content which is affirmed to be considered, but it is crucial for such an approach to examine each of these in relation to the situation in which the judgment is made.*"[27]

I believe that Mandelbaum is certainly right in identifying the prominent role of moral judgment in our moral experience. Our everyday moral life is characterized by numerous and manifold judgmental acts. The reason why Mandelbaum claims that they fully express our moral experience is that judgments better express the normativity peculiar to ethics[28]. In other words, ethics is a normative study that deals with normative data. This means that each single datum studied shares the fact that it implies some reference to an 'ought' or a 'norm'. Mandelbaum claims that this peculiar kind of data is to be found "*within the realm of human judgments*" and thus he focuses on the normative judgments that agents make. Thus, this leads him to claim that moral experience fully corresponds to a judgmental act.

At the same time, it seems to me too approximate to claim that moral experience *fully* corresponds to a judgmental act. A blunt "No!" seems to be the most plausible answer to the question "*Is moral experience equivalent to a series of deliberations that lead to certain courses of action according to conscious or unconscious states of mind?*". By *deliberation,* I mean the process of bringing about *x* by the evaluation of the reasons for *x* (i.e. a judgmental act as Mandelbaum puts it). In addition, this can happen, *consciously* or *unconsciously.* The former means that the agent is *actively* deliberating, he is aware of the process that it is going on. The latter means that the agent is *passively* deliberating, he is not aware of the process that it is going on. This happens, for example, when a certain

---

[27] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.40.
[28] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.41f.

judgment has become a habit and so the agent does *x* without actually considering the reasons for *x*. Nevertheless, if asked, he would be able to respond why he is doing *x* (he would be able to give an account of the relevant reasons for *x*). Mandelbaum seems to be aware of something very similar to this when he highlights the distinction between *willed* and *spontaneous* actions[29]. Willed actions are all those actions for which the agent feels responsible. Or better, where the agent acts according to an envisioned goal she wish to accomplish. In this way, the sense of responsibility upon the act arises since the agent feels these are *her* actions. The fact that she is acting in virtue of an end will make possible for her to give reasons for why she acted such and such. This is what distinguishes these actions from *spontaneous* actions, which instead are performed for no reasons other than the fact that we did it. Besides, *spontaneous* actions are all those actions where the agent is not feeling to be acting in first-person. These can be of two kinds: *reflex* or *habitual action*. A reflex is when the action "happens" to agents instead of being consciously brought about by her. For example, when I receive an electrical shock on my hand, my hand jerks away without my willingness to do so. My action has no envisioned goal and I do not feel responsible for it. Mandelbaum claims that the same is true of *habitual* actions. These actions include all those situations where the agent does *x* without consciously governing the action. For example, when wake up I follow a particular sequence in dressing for which I have no particular awareness of every single step. Again, there is no clear sense of responsibility involved in this case, since the agent is not aware of the envisioned goal and neither of the reasons of her acting. It is important to note at this stage that Mandelbaum points out that *direct* moral judgments (contrary to *removed* moral judgements) deal exclusively with *willed* actions[30]. The reason why he holds this is that it is fundamental for a phenomenological analysis that the agent perceives the actions as *hers*. For Mandelbaum only *willed* actions express the feeling of responsibility that makes the phenomenological analysis possible. It is then clear why a *reflex* cannot count as

---

[29] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, pp.46-50.
[30] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.47.

a moral action from this point of view. They are not originated by a moral choice. Recall that for Mandelbaum what differentiates moral choices from non-moral ones is that moral choices place a *demand* upon us to act. Accordingly, however, it seems less clear why all habitual actions cannot be considered so. One thing is to consider *habitual* actions that constituted our everyday routine (i.e. brushing my teeth or preparing breakfast). Another is to claim that *all* habitual acts, lack the sense of responsibility or the moral *demand* that *willed* actions have. Think for example of someone who makes every month a small donation to the same organization for 25 years. The very first time she experiences both *demand* and a feeling of responsibility. But then, as time goes by, this action becomes her habit in the same way as brushing her teeth is. Responsibility and demand may hide in the agent's unconsciousness, but this does not mean that one cannot recall or think back to the reasons why she is making the donation. It is hard to hold that actions such as this one cannot be considered as a *moral habitual action*. As such, the agent who performs it should be able to give a phenomenological account of it through a *direct* moral judgment. It is even less clear why some other particular *spontaneous* acts are left outside the class of actions that can be object of a phenomenological study (be it *direct* or *removed*). Mandelbaum states that actions such as catch hold of the hand of a child in danger are included in the group of *spontaneous* actions. As such, they lack the awareness of the subject that allows for a phenomenological analysis. The agent reacts directly to the situation she is confronted with and she is not aware of the self that originates the act. Rather than actions, we are in presence of 'reactions' or 'responses' and so they lack the sense of responsibility and moral demand that makes the phenomenological analysis possible. If so, such a moral phenomenology would cut out a relevant and common part of our moral experiences. From the moral point of view, we happen to praise many instances of helping behavior, even if they result from habitual behavior[31].

---

[31] I will talk about this issue later in the present work in dealing with acts of supererogation, which, while originated by a certain degree of spontaneity, deserve a proper *moral* phenomenology. See pp.173-180.

My contention is that we can go even further with the line of argumentation that says that moral experience is not only concerned with *conscious* states of mind. Moral experience is actually broader than situations that involve a deliberation process (again, judgmental acts) be it *conscious* or *unconscious*. It seems to me that moral experience comprehends cases where normative judgements, and in general a process that involves the bringing about of some act, play no role. The point is that we can live a moral experience even when we are not engaging any moral deliberation and consequently no act is performed. In order to explain this assertion I will propose three situations in which the formation of a judgment is not necessary to constitute a proper moral experience.

The first case is meant to highlight a case of no-judgmental moral experience within Mandelbaum's framework. Recall that for him, the moral experience of the first-person begins with the *demand* (peculiar of moral choices) that the situation casts on the agent. We can hold that the perception of such a demand is already in itself a sort of moral experience, even if no judgment takes then place (say because I am morally lazy or because I pretend to be morally indifferent). In the situation I am experiencing there is no active deliberation, but only a sort of passive perception of the fact that in front of me lies some moral possibility or moral worth. This does not require excluding the fact that most of the time I react to this with a judgmental act. The relevant claim is that moral experience begins before the actual deliberation process. Thus, we can consider proper moral experiences even all those cases where I try not to listen to the perceived moral demand. For example, every time I look at the books on my desk I feel a strong demand that asks me to work on my long-delayed paper and remembers me of the upcoming deadlines. Nevertheless, I try not to think about it and ignore the workload that would compel me to act. In this case, I do not respond to the demand of the situation with a judgmental act, rather I just try to ignore such a demand. Better, I refuse to bring about the proper moral judgment by deliberately incurring in a moral loss. I hold that this is already in itself an actual moral experience even if it lacks the relevant

elements of Mandelbaum's account of moral phenomenology (the response to a moral demand).

A second interesting case is the role of *empathy* in moral circumstances. With this term many authors have referred to different things. Nevertheless, a definition that seems to be quite widespread nowadays conceives it as the ability to feel the same way as others are feeling. This idea was quite relevant (even if with slight differences) for the work of the eighteenth century British sentimentalists, who referred to the popular notion of *sympathy*[32]. In particular, authors like Adam Smith (but also David Hume) used to assign to *sympathy* a primary role in their moral accounts. The very first lines of his major work on morality, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, define *sympathy* as follows:

"*How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.*"[33]

Moreover and more specifically:

---

[32] These pages are obviously not meant to be comprehensive and a much more detailed work would be required. On the issue of sympathy and empathy it is also worth pointing out the work of Max Scheler in Scheler M., *The Nature of Sympathy*, Heath P. (trans. by), Archon Books, 1970.

[33] Smith A., *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by Raphael D. D. and Macfie A. L., Clarendon Press, 1976, p. 9.

"Pity and compassion are words appropriated to signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others. Sympathy, though its meaning was, perhaps, originally the same, may now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever."[34]

As Smith underlines, the empathic relation represents a fundamental and substantial kind of moral relation. More recently, many other authors have underlined its relevance regarding to moral motivation and, more specifically, in caring-for-others situations[35]. Nevertheless, in order to understand my point is not necessary to grant such a major role in morality to empathy. Once we admit cases where *empathy* can play a certain role within our moral experience, we realize how this broadens our conception of moral experience[36]. In fact, it seems to me that *empathy* represents a particular way of relating with the others, which does not necessarily involve a judgmental act. The way we perceive how the other feels is not, most of the times, a direct result of a deliberation, but rather an immediate thing. Yet, it would be hard to hold that (as Mandelbaum entails) this puts *empathy* off the radar of moral experience. When I understand how a friend feels after she has been affected by an injustice is not a matter of judgment, rather I just experience it immediately in virtue of our long-established relationship. This is already a proper moral experience before I form any judgment on why the deeds that afflicted her are wrong or consider how I could provide effectively some help. The point here is that moral experience begins before (and not functionally to) the formation of moral judgment.

Moreover (and this leads us to the third case), *empathy* and in general all kinds of moral relation reveal another interesting

---

[34] Smith A., *ibidem*, p.10.

[35] In both these regards, see the work of the psychologist Daniel Batson, who has introduced the so-called *empathy-altruism hypothesis*. See Batson C. D., *Altruism in Humans*, Oxford University Press, 2011. For further remarks on this topic in relation to acts of supererogation, see pp.179-180 of the present work.

[36] I am aware of the fact that this claim would require a much larger project. Take these lines as a hint strictly functional to our discussion of moral experience.

way to expand moral experience beyond what it is merely an expression of a judgmental act. In the case above, we have highlighted how when I empathize with my friend I am living a proper moral experience. I would add here that, since my friend is living a proper moral experience, the agent is not the only one who is doing so. I hold that a proper first-person moral experience is such not only when I am the subject who performs of a certain moral action (the agent). Additionally, we might have relevant cases of moral experience when the subject of the experience is the one who benefits from the moral action. If someone does something good (or bad) to me, I am undergoing a relevant moral experience even if a judgmental process does not necessarily originate this experience. This happens when I perceive to be the beneficiary of something of value (or disvalue). I do not think it is possible to explain this sort of moral experience within the theoretical framework proposed by Mandelbaum as he conceived moral experience as being fully judgmental. One might claim that it is possible to account this sort of experience of the beneficent with the category of *removed* moral judgments of moral worth. However, this is not a case where the beneficent judges from the outside of the situation (i.e. *removed* from it). It is true that she considers valuable what the other does for her, but she is not doing this by living from the outside the situation. She is *directly* experiencing the value of what it is going on between her and her benefactor. In other terms, being the beneficent of a moral act seems to represent a proper moral experience, even if the subject of the experience is not the one who performs the action and who makes the judgment about what to do. Mandelbaum seems to have missed to account for this possible experience.

Moreover, this case holds if the agent benefits the subject of her acts both in virtue of a *direct* moral judgment and in virtue of the empathic character of their relationship (in an immediate way, so to say). If the latter of the two is the case, in order to have a proper moral experience there is no need of a judgmental act neither from the agent nor from whom she is benefiting. This is so because, the performer of the act does so *immediately* and the beneficent perceives this as immediately as the agent does. I believe that we cannot fail to recognize that this is an

actual moral experience. Think, for example, of the case of a terminal patient who is in a state where she is able to perceive the outer world, but she is not able to communicate. She is constantly the object of the cure of the doctors (who do this because they *judge* on moral grounds that it is good to carry out their job), but she also benefits from the care of her beloved ones (who do this likely because they are in empathic relationship with the patient). I believe that the doctors, the relatives and the patient herself are all living a proper moral experience[37], even if for different reasons. The doctors because of a direct moral judgment, the relatives because of empathically caring and the patient because she is broadly benefitting of a moral good brought about by the others.

Finally, we have seen how the phenomenological approach of the first-person proposed by Mandelbaum could be broadened in order to give a more exhaustive account of our moral experience[38]. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily a major downfall or something that would undermine the effectiveness of such approach. Understanding the limits of the phenomenological approach would allow us to apply it adequately and use it consistently. Moreover, this is not to deny the relevance of the analysis of those aspects of our moral experience that constitute it predominately. The focus of the research should remain on all those deliberations to act in a certain way according to the idea of right and wrong (*moral judgments*). We need to acknowledge, at this stage, that the phenomenological approach needs to focus on judgmental acts, since they constitute the large (but not the only) part of our moral experience. For this reason, moral phenomenology remains the approach to be preferred and the one that looks more promising as a starting point for moral theorizing.

---

[37] And probably, at least in the case of the relatives of the patient, an experience that is much more than a merely moral one.
[38] Another interesting and similar attempt to broaden Mandelbaum's conception of moral experience can be seen in Horgan T., Timmons M., *Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory*, in "Philosophical Issues", 15(2005), pp.61ff.

3. Moral Phenomenology Discloses the Complexity of Moral Life

I now want to introduce the issue of the features of our moral life that a phenomenological approach reveals. Let us consider the following example:

Example 1: *Mary has a good friend, who lives nearby, named John. She promised to John that she would help him to move out from his current apartment and to help him bring all his belongings to the new place. When the day of the move arrives she is about to go to John's place when she receives a call from her long-time friend Juliet. They have not seen each other for a while and so Juliet asks Mary to go out for a coffee. If Mary goes out with Juliet, she will not have time to help John that afternoon. Therefore, even if she is very sorry and she would greatly enjoy Juliet's company (more than helping John) she declines Juliet's invitation. After all, she has made a promise to John and keeping that promise is the right thing to do, she believes.*
  Later that day, Mary is at John's new place, which happens to be much smaller than his former apartment. John's struggles to make everything fit in the new place and so he decides to donate much of the stuff that are not necessary anymore. John has a friend, Mark, who has a much bigger house, which would be plenty of space for John's furniture. John has previously promised to Mark that he would receive all that exceeds from the move. Mary, however, suggests that a more fair choice would be that of giving everything to the local prosocial organization in order to have all the goods redistributed to all those that have less. Giving to those that have less in order to maximize the benefits of the donation is the right thing to do, she believes.

Situations like these are common in our everyday lives. We happen to make moral judgments in different contexts, according to different backgrounds, with different aims. As such, we recognize a plurality of variables in regard of how we deliberate morally. If we look at our moral experience through

a phenomenological approach, we realize how complex[39] our moral life is. Understanding the phenomenology of our common moral judgments reveals the manifold essence of morality. Moral experience ultimately discloses that the moral life of the agent, if considered as a whole and not specifically to a single circumstance, appears to be complex. I believe that such complexity is the result of two different features of our moral life: *axiological pluralism* and *methodological pluralism.*

The first way of recognizing pluralism is by the analysis of the content of our moral judgments. If we compare different moral judgments, we notice how we deliberate according to a variable set of what happens to be morally valuable or morally at stake in the given circumstances. This is what I mean by *axiological pluralism,* the fact that our judgments are based upon values[40] that vary their relevance from time to time. In other terms, our judgments vary for their specific content. In the example above, Mary decided to keep her promise grounding her judgment according to the *respect* for the promisee[41]. *Respect* (or the autonomy of other moral agents) happened to be the value that, given the circumstances, appeared especially important to Mary. In that particular scenario, that value trumped all the others assigning a prominent importance to promise keeping. Differently, when she suggested how to donate fairly, her focused changed. She was mainly concerned with the moral value of *equality* (or a certain understanding of *utility* one might say). In this second situation, a different value gained priority over the others. This example shows how, in real life situations, different moral values (irreducible one into the other) can vary their moral relevance for the agent. My contention here is simple: the moral

---

[39] I use "complex" as a non-technical term for now, meaning "composite", "heterogeneous" and "manifold". Starting with Chapter II I will give to this term a more specific and technical connotation.

[40] This term might be highly misunderstandable. What I mean here is simply that different fundamental ideals of morality might happen to be relevant in the related case.

[41] A Kantian line of argumentation could be even more specific than this, claiming that a promise needs to be kept because of the *respect for the autonomy of all other rational agents*. Arguably, we might deduce from this that Kant's ultimate moral end is *freedom.*

phenomenology of the first person highlights a plurality of moral values that happen to have variable moral priority. Moral experience is characterized by a pluralism of values that suggests that we are not necessarily required to pick one of them as having a constant priority over the others. As we will see in the following section, the standard definition of moral pluralism suggests a framework of multiple ultimate moral ends that express a *pro tanto* priority over the others.

A second way to understand the heterogeneity of morality[42] is to notice that we do not make all our moral judgments following a unique and coherent methodology. There are different ways in which we deliberate morally (at least two) and their priority varies from time to time. This is what I call *methodological pluralism*, the fact that our judgments do not always follow the same path to provide a moral deliberation. Again, in the example above Mary decided to keep her promise in virtue of a moral claim derived from a deontological approach. At the same time, once she was confronted with the issue of the fair donation she morally deliberated according to a consequentialist approach. The idea is that, according to the situation, one methodology for moral deliberation might trump another that is considered less efficient in dealing with the situation the agent is facing. The consequentialist approach might appear to be more apt to what is morally at stake in cases such as the fair donation of one's belongings. Vice versa, there happen to be cases, such as keeping a promise, where grounding our deliberation on a deontological framework appears to fit better the circumstances[43]. Moreover, this is not to say that in a particular situation the methodology that the agent endorses is the only one available to reach the same conclusion. There are ways to ground a promise on consequentialist approaches and ways to respect equality

---

[42] Here I do not refer necessarily to the work of Charles Larmore and to his usage of the motto "heterogeneity of morality". I will analyze his position later in the following chapter.

[43] In certain cases, the choice of the relevant methodology might go even beyond the limits of rationalist theories (such us the two reported in the example) to conform to a sentimentalist approach. I leave this issue aside for now, since it is not functional to my point to complicate further the issue.

according to a deontological theory. Nevertheless, the choice among the feasible options is left to the agent, who will pick the most reasonable and efficient way to account for the relevant moral value. A claim similar to the present one has been made by Joshua Greene in one his influential papers[44]. He has tried to show, through experimental inquiry, that moral deliberation by the same agent is a combination of rational and emotional engagement. The moral judgement can be either *impersonal* or *personal*, according to which of the two elements is more influential. The two entail two distinct mental events. The experiments conducted by Greene and his collaborators confronted the emotional responses that different subjects revealed in the analysis of moral dilemmas of different kinds with what they revealed in cases of non-moral choices. What this study has shown is primarily the fact that our moral judgment is a combination of different factors (rational and emotive). This means that our moral judgment is ultimately *complex*. Moreover, his analysis has underlined how judgments, considered distinctively *moral*, can be of two kinds (at least) and how this is true even at cerebral level. This conclusion resembles what I have defined here *methodological pluralism.* However, my classification aims at giving an account of a philosophical distinction (deontology and consequentialism in Example 1) rather than a distinction of psychological and cerebral activities.

My claim is that moral pluralism is developed (at least) on two levels: a *value-related* level and *methodological* level. Amartya Sen makes a similar point, when he focused on the idea of *justice* in cases of *just* allocation of resources[45]. He proposes a scenario where there are plural and competing reasons for justice, all of which are impartial in different ways. Suppose you have to choose which one of three children has to

---

[44] Greene J. et al., *An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment*, in "Science" 293(2001), pp.2105-2108. The main claim of this and the following works by Greene is that emotions play a major role in moral deliberation. As we will see in the following chapter this is a further proof that our moral judgment is much more complex than pure rationalist think it to be.

[45] Sen A., *The Idea of Justice*, Belknap Press, 2009, pp.12-15.

receive a flute about which they are quarreling. The first child is the only one that can actually play the flute. The second child is clearly the poorest and the one that has no toys to play with (the other two being clearly richer children). The third child is the one who has made the flute after many month of work. Who should receive the flute if you were to make the *just* decision? This scenario points out that there is no clear answer to this question. Of course, different theories of justice would straightforwardly point out which one of the children ought to receive the flute[46], but the question about which of the three ways of deliberation we ought to follow remains an open question. Accordingly, we might end up making an arbitrary choice. This happens for two reasons:

"*I also want to draw attention here to the fairly obvious fact that the differences between the three children's justificatory arguments do not represent divergences about what constitutes individual advantage (getting the flute is taken to be advantageous by each of the children and is accommodated by each of the respective arguments), but about the principles that should govern the allocation of resources in general. They are about how social arrangements should be made and what social institutions should be chosen, and through that, about what social realizations would come about. It is not simply that the vested interests of the three children differ (though of course they do), but that the three arguments each point to a different type of impartial and non-arbitrary reason.*"[47]

The problem here is not just which of the moral values at stake gains priority over the others (be it *hedonistic utility, economic equality* or *autonomy*). Further, we are facing the problem of which of the theoretical framework (granted that all three provide impartial results in their own way) needs to be espoused to make the just choice. The phenomenology of cases

---

[46] As Sen underlines, the economic egalitarian would assign the flute to the poorest, the libertarian would assign it to the maker of the flute and the utilitarian hedonist would tend to give it to the one who can actually play the flute.

[47] Sen A., *ibidem,* pp.14-15.

like this reveals the double layer of moral pluralism: *axiological pluralism* and *methodological pluralism*.

Nevertheless, it is worth asking whether this pluralism revealed by a phenomenological approach is only apparent or substantial. Mandelbaum attempted to show that it is just apparent, arguing in favor of deontological monism instead. In fact, he straightforwardly dismissed consequentialism as a moral approach hardly feasible when we are directly confronted with a situation that requires a moral deliberation. In cases of direct moral judgment we do not regularly take into consideration consequences (even if this might be the case of removed moral judgments)[48]. Briefly, he is not convinced that all cases of moral obligation rely on the calculus of consequences, but rather they are grounded on a certain feeling of incompleteness that the agent would perceive in cases of performance (or omission) of a certain act. Mandelbaum's claim is particularly clear if we keep in mind that he is concerned with a phenomenological analysis of the moral experience. This is what leads him to focus on the perception of the relation of *fittingness* of the performance (or omission) of the act, rather than the considerations proposed by teleological approaches.

The point of major interest for the present work is Mandelbaum's confrontation of his theory with Ross's pluralism. His interest in dealing with a theory such as Rossian deontological pluralism revealed that Mandelbaum himself was aware of the possible pluralist outcome that a phenomenological analysis could bring about. Nevertheless he thought (contra pluralism) that some sort of normative unity among different judgments can be found and thus that Rossian pluralism needs to be rejected. On the contrary, Ross proposes a theory with a precise set of obligations that have a *tendency* to be binding on us (*prima facie*). However, there is no ordering principle or rule of thumb to discriminate which one is more binding than the others. The determination of which of these duties is the *actual* duty is left to the agent in the contingent case; the stringency of the duties varies *pro tanto*. Mandelbaum agrees with the idea of the variable stringency and he compares

---

[48] Horgan T., Timmons M., *ibidem*, pp.72-73.

it to *fittingness,* saying that this kind of relation is what determines the stringency of a particular obligation:

 "I should like to propose, in conformity with my previous analysis, that the ground of the stringency of a claim is the fittingness of answering to that claim, rather than to any opposed claim, in the situation which the agent confronts"[49].

What Mandealbaum found instead to be problematic is the idea of *prima facie* obligations intended as the *tendency* to be binding. For Mandelbaum (being a monist) there exist one and only one obligation that binds us into its performance (or omission), namely the one that *fits* the situation. All other options lose any kind of bindingness, once they have been overridden by the *actual* duty. There is no thing such as the "*tendency* to be binding" of the various duties, thus it makes no sense to talk about *prima facie* duties: the only duty there is, it is the actual one, that is, the one that *fits* the situation[50]. It has been pointed out that the main difference between Ross and Mandelbaum on this regard is that the former thinks that other prima facie duties are outweighed by the actual duty, while the latter thinks that the alternatives are *silenced*[51] (they lose all their bindingness).

The key of Mandelbaum's argument against the existence of a variety of duties (such as in Ross) is the distinction between *regret* and *remorse*. He claims that a proper phenomenological analysis would reveal that once we are confronted with different options, those options that have been abandoned in virtue of the actual duty generate a form of *regret*. Mandelbaum distinguishes *regret* from *remorse* as follows: *regret* is what we

---

[49] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.76.
[50] "*In my opinion, a strictly phenomenological description reveals that what we take to be the more stringent of two irreconcilable moral demands is that demand which we still feel to be levelled against us after our initial, segmented view of our situation has been replaced by a new view of what constitutes its essential nature. Thus, what we judge to be really obligatory is not the 'stronger' of two demands, but that action which is a fitting response to what we take to be the dominant element in the total situation which we face.*" in Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.80.
[51] Horgan T., Timmons M., *ibidem*, p.73.

feel when we contemplate something of disvalue that our act has brought about; *remorse*, on the other hand, is the feeling we have for something that should not have been done[52]. Ross claims that, even when a prima facie obligation is overridden in favor of another, it keeps its tendency to be binding. Nevertheless, if this were true, a sentiment more apt to the dismissal of a prima facie duty would be *remorse* rather than *regret*. If omitted duties keep a certain degree of bindingness, their omission would generate *remorse* rather than *regret*. The phenomenological analysis proposed by Mandelbaum reveals that this is not the case. The fact that we perceive only *regret* should reveal that the actual duty is indeed only one, that the bindingness of the overridden options is just apparent (be it a misinterpretation of *regret* as *remorse*) and it therefore points out that there is no need to talk about prima facie duties.

Mandelbaum's reconstruction of the moral experience of an obligation might be considered sound in cases of relatively simple moral choices. We can recognize how his understanding of an obligation (being it the result of a phenomenological analysis) is closely related to the idea of moral motivation. A duty is ultimately the one that happens to have more motivational power, the one that ultimately provides reasons which motivate us to perform (or omit) a certain act. Although this might seem correct for an approach to moral inquiry that is concerned with what the agent *feels*, one might wonder if this is still the case for much more complex moral choices. Let us think, for example, of true moral dilemmas[53]. In cases where the agent genuinely does not know which of the opposing options needs to be preferred, there seems to be no clear prevailing relation of *fittingness* (given that the reason why it is so is not due to some sort of epistemic lack by the agent). In fact, both the options seems to fit the situation adequately and thus they both propose a viable course of action. In such cases, it is harder to hold that only one of the two is the actual duty

---

[52] Mandelbaum M., *ibidem*, p.80.
[53] I refer here to cases such as the one famously proposed by Sartre. This is a dilemma where a youngster does not genuinely know what the right thing to do is: whether to join the army to commemorate his brother who has been killed by the Nazis or to stay at home in order to assist his ill mother.

and that the other options lose all their bindingness. It is not surprising then that the agent who finally decides somehow (even randomly) what to do feels a certain moral loss for not having done the option of the dilemma that has not been performed. This feeling, I believe, is much more similar to moral *remorse* than mere *regret* and this should reveal that, after all, ignored options do not completely lose their bindingness (at least in the case of dilemmatic choices). If this argument is right, Mandelbaum's critique of the Rossian approach does not hold anymore.

Furthermore, we could argue that duties are not grounded merely on *fittingness*. Some moral obligations are true of an agent, even if she does not adequately experience their fittingness to the situation. Think, for example, of the negligent schoolchild who does not want to do his homework. Does he recognize the *fittingness* that studying has with the situation (in this case caring about his future)? We might argue that he does perceive the fittingness, but this is not enough to make him willing to give up playing basketball with his friends for the whole afternoon instead of studying. Think then of the relentless tax evader, who has a moral obligation (and not only that) to pay taxes even if he is not able to understand how this could *fit* his situation (paying for the luxurious car he has bought). Cases like these give us a hint of the fact that *fittingness* is sometimes not enough to lead agents to a certain action. Something similar is expressed by cases where an agent ignores her obligations. Ignorance greatly affects our obligations and consequently our moral judgments[54]. Sometimes we have obligations we do not know to have and this does not allow the agent to perceive the *fittingness* proper of the situation. Even if not felt, the obligation remains. It should not be surprising that our moral experience is affected by the agent's knowledge of the situation. It is, however, more problematic to claim that the agent could fail to ground certain obligations as in the case of the ignorant agent who does not perceive the *fittingness* of the situation due to a lack of knowledge. Similarly to the case of the negligent moral agent,

---

[54] See Zimmerman M. J., *Ignorance and Moral Obligation*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

this should reveal how the relation of *fittingness* is necessary, but not sufficient to bring about a moral obligation.

All these cases reveal that obligations are not grounded exclusively on the relation of fittingness. This kind of relation is essential to a proper moral experience of direct moral judgments when it comes to motivate the agent to act (or refrain from acting). Nevertheless, claiming that the actual duty is exclusively identified by the perception of what fits the situation is not fully accurate. Some more complex situations might express a scenario that does not go along with the theory outlined by Mandelbaum. This reduction of the role of fittingness in the formation of a moral obligation aims at restoring the idea of prima facie duties proposed by Ross and favors the sort of moral pluralism that seems to characterize the heterogeneous experience of the moral agent.

Mandelbaum argues in favor of monism because he thought that (as in the case of direct moral judgments) all judgmental acts express a normative unity in virtue of their all being based on the relation of *fittingness*. This however does not entirely explain why different judgments should all be part of the same group. They might have the same phenomenological structure (the feeling of fittingness), but this is not enough to explain *why* we perceive that *fittingness* (the content that grounds it) and *how* we get to the feeling of *fittingness* (the normative methodology that triggers our moral deliberation). As matter of fact both the content of different judgments (which grounds the fittingness relation) and the methodology of moral decision (which generate the fittingness) could vastly differ from one judgment to the other. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons summarize *fittingness* as follows: "*an action is fitting to a situation when aspects of that situation provide* reasons *that make the action appropriate, and it is most fitting when the combination of reasons there are uniquely favor the action in question*"[55]. My claim is that we do not have to underestimate the fact that, as we have seen in the example above, reasons could be grounded on different values (*axiological* pluralism) and can be provided by different methodologies (*methodological*

---

[55] Horgan T., Timmons M., *ibidem,* p.67.

pluralism). Even if all judgment originate a certain feeling of *fittingness* perceived by the agent, it seems reducing to claim that they do so consistently with moral monism. To the question *"Assuming that experiences of fittingness are what unifies our moral experiences, how interesting is this sort of unity?"*[56] we could answer that fittingness does certainly express a sort of unity among different moral experience. This unity is nevertheless limited to the phenomenological level. Once we try to go deeper into the explanation of our moral decisions, we see that we lose that unity in virtue of the diversity of the contents that grounds our experiences and the variety of methods of deliberation that set the perception of fittingness. This is why I believe that a phenomenological analysis is consonant with the claim that the complexity of the moral life is expressed on two levels: a) as the pluralism regarding the *content* of our judgments (values) and b) as the pluralism about the *method* according to which we formulate our judgments. The very essence of morality appears to be manifold and heterogeneous and this is why we will refer to it as *moral complexity*[57]. This is ultimately, what the phenomenological approach discloses: moral experience is characterized by some sort of moral pluralism[58].

The approach of *moral complexity* underlines that we need to take into account the fact that our moral lives are much more manifold and various than we would like them to be. Moral phenomenology, as far as it is concerned with the first-person moral experience, discloses such *complexity* of our ordinary

---

[56] Horgan T., Timmons M., *ibidem.*

[57] I am going the leave these claims unwarranted for now. The entire Chapter II will be dedicated to a better understanding of this issue.

[58] *"It would seem that when it comes to the mere phenomenology of moral experience in concrete cases (involving deontic judgments), such experiences do not comport with monism—rather, moral experiences of being obligated, for instance, seem to be evoked by a variety of factors that vary from one circumstance to another. The factors involved in feeling an obligation of gratitude, for example, differ from the factors involved in coming upon someone who is in need of help. Indeed, a virtue of versions of ethical pluralism (featuring a plurality of prima facie duties which collectively attempt to specify a small set of underlying features in virtue of which actions have the deontic status they do have) is that they are faithful to much concrete moral experience."* in Horgan T., Timmons M., *ibidem*, p.66.

moral life. The awareness of this feature should point out why there is no need to oversimplify our moral theories in search for an ultimate and unified end. If our moral experience does not appear simple, there seem to be no good reason to think that our theories need to be such. This is especially true for the inquiry in moral philosophy, where the focus needs to be on the agent who deliberates how to act morally, rather than on the theory to which the agent should conform herself. It seems to me that this line of thought regarding the peculiarity of moral philosophy is well described by Arthur Schopenhauer in his *Early Manuscripts*:

"*A theoretical philosopher is one who from the representations of all classes can furnish a copy in concepts and hence for his faculty of reason (Vernunft), just as the painter copies on canvas what he has seen, the sculptor in marble, and the poet in pictures for the imagination (which, however, he gives only in the seed of the concepts from which they have first sprung). A so-called practical philosopher, on the other hand, is one who does the opposite and controls his actions according to concepts; thus just as the former transfers life into the concept, does the latter carry concepts over into life. [...] The theoretical philosopher enriches his faculty of reason and gives it something; the practical philosopher takes something from his faculty of reason and lets it serve him.*"[59]

Borrowing this distinction from Schopenhauer, we could say that the approach of *moral complexity* reminds us the priority of *life* (the *moral* life we could add) over *concepts*. This motto highlights the task of those dealing with the understanding of moral deliberation. It should not be surprising that this task is of great importance for our ordinary lives and, as such, giving the proper account of the first-person moral experience is a challenge that cannot be easily dismissed.

---

[59] Schopenhauer A., *Manuscript Remains in Four Volumes: Volume I Early Manuscripts (1804-1818)*, Berg, 1988, p.122.

4. Why Is *Moral Pluralism* So Important?

Moral Pluralism is the theoretical framework that takes into account more than a single and unique source of morality. In other terms, pluralism is the moral approach that considers more than a single ultimate moral end. Moreover, a pluralist holds that these ultimate ends might eventually come into conflict generating what we call a *moral dilemma*[60]. This view is to be distinguished from the approach called *Moral Prioritism*[61], which allows many sources of morality without considering the possibility of moral dilemmas. In fact, *Prioritists* hold that dilemmas can be explained away by a precise ordering of the principles that rule the moral structure[62]. Finally, in order to complete this rough sketch of moral frameworks, we can distinguish (at the two opposite ends of the moral gamut) *Moral Particularism* and *Moral Monism*. *Particularists* claim that there are no moral principles apt to help us in moral deliberations. Furthermore, moral principles might mislead the moral agent in recognizing the relevant moral reasons that the situation exhibits. The recognition of *moral reasons* is the only source of morality and reasons may vary greatly according to the situation[63]. Contrary, *Monists* hold that morality can be ruled by principles[64] and this happens thanks to a unique principle,

---

[60] Many relevant authors of the 20th century have leaned toward a pluralist account of morality. In different degrees, authors such as W. D. Ross, I. Berlin, B. Williams and T. Nagel all belong to this group. In Applied Ethics, the bioethical framework outlined by Beauchamp and Childress is another good example of moral pluralism.

[61] In the breakdown of the taxonomy of different moral frameworks I am referring to Gaut B., *Moral Pluralism* in "Philosophical Papers", 22(1993), pp.17-40.

[62] John Rawls, for example, proposed a conception of justice based on two principles (the first one based on *basic liberties* and the second one on equal opportunities and the fair distribution of the goods), with the first one always having a priority over the second (the so-called *lexical order*). See Rawls J., *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition*, Belknap Press, 1971, §11.

[63] J. P. Sartre, J. McDowell and, more actively, J. Dancy have argued in favor of this view.

[64] Pluralists and prioritists share this claim too. Together with monists they all belong to the group of *moral generalism* believing in the possibility to

source or an ultimate end that coherently manages the outline of morality. Monist theories can vary a lot on what they take to be morally relevant as the founding principle and, as such, they can express divergent responses to the same issue[65]. In fact, these distinctions are based on the number of principles that a moral theory allows and on how such a theory manages its principles. This is to say that these differences are exclusively drawn upon the theoretical structure of moral theories. Nothing has been said about the differences in terms of the content of the principles or in terms of the methodology that animates the principles. For example, two pluralist theories, while structurally identical, might vary on what they take to be part of the set of relevant moral principles. Or again, two monist theories, while structurally identical, might vary on how the single principle should work[66]. This is how we can summarize different moral approaches based on their identification of the relevant moral sources[67]:

Particularism	No moral principles at all
Pluralism	A set of moral principles that can come into conflict generating *moral dilemmas*
Prioritism	A set of moral principles that never come into conflict due to a precise ordering system
Monism	A single and unique moral principle
	Table 1.1

---

generalize from the particular situation a set of moral principles (or a single one). Clearly, *generalists* stand jointly in opposition to *particularists*.

[65] The influential and dominant moral theories developed in the 18th century can all be ascribable to moral monism. Kantian Ethics and Utilitarianism, as part of this group, have probably generated the broadest and most articulated debate in Normative Ethics of the last centuries.

[66] Think of the well-known distinction between deontology (adherences to one's duties) and teleology or consequentialism (consideration of the act's consequences). In this regard, another interesting methodological distinction is that between agent-relative theory and agent-neutral theory introduced by D. Parfit and T. Nagel. See p.71-72 of the present work.

[67] It would be inappropriate to distinguish them by their acknowledgement of moral principles. While most of these theories endorse at least one principle of morality, this term might be misleading in the case of *particularism*, which, while having no precise principles or duties, does certainly have sources of morality (*reasons*).

I will now focus on a confrontation of moral pluralism with the alternative moral frameworks. In fact, the previous section has revealed how *pluralism* seems to be the moral framework that better faces the outcome of a phenomenological analysis of our moral experience. Pluralism, as defined by John Rawls, is consonant with a moral life that presents a variety of moral principles that occasionally generate moral conflicts:

"*Once we reach a certain level of generality, the intuitionist maintains that there exist no higher-order constructive criteria for determining the proper emphasis for the competing principles of justice. While the complexity of the moral facts requires a number of distinct principles, there is no single standard that accounts for them or assigns them their weights. Intuitionist theories, then, have two features: first, they consist of a plurality of first principles which may conflict to give contrary directives in particular types of cases; and second, they include no explicit method, no priority rules, for weighing these principles against one another: we are simply to strike a balance by intuition, by what seems to us most nearly right.*"[68]

Remember that Rawls refers here to *pluralism* with the name of *intuitionism*, using the term with a broader understanding than usual[69]. The reason why he does this is an issue related to the Priority Problem. Rawls, in fact, defends a *prioritist* view and considers pluralist theories as dealing with the choice between the many principles only by mere intuition. He holds that they do not have other way that this to pick one of the conflicting principles rather than another. Thus, he has tried to undermine the plausibility of moral pluralism by claiming that a way of giving principles a priority is necessary and actually exists. It is necessary because people would otherwise fall outside the perspective of justice as fairness defending principles on particular interests. At the same time, a method to prioritize principles, given the existence of a variety of them, exists. Rawls believes that we can order them according to the notion of the so-called *lexical order*. This notion entails that the agent always

---

[68] Rawls J., *ibidem*, p.34.
[69] Rawls J. *ibidem*.

fulfills the first principle before considering the next one. Subordinate principles cannot be brought about if the superior principles are either satisfied or do not apply[70]. However, it could be pointed out that a strict serial order of the principles of this kind, even if it would go along well with the majority of cases, it could eventually bring about counterintuitive results. If this were the case, a *prioritist* view of this kind would lose the original advantages it holds over pluralism. Berys Gaut, who claims that *prioritism* might allow suspicious and unreasonable outcomes, has made a similar point. Think, for example, of a case where, in order to comply with the respect of someone's liberty (as the right to participate in a specific governmental decision), a society gives up a major economic benefit for a large number of people[71]. The fact that principles are so strictly prioritized makes it harder to deal with peculiar cases where it would be reasonable to allow a different order of principles. Nevertheless, this should not degenerate to the claim that a lack of priority rule would allow principles to be confronted in virtue of particular interests (as Rawls seems to believe). Pluralists can easily hold that adequate discrimination between principles does not have to reflect particular interests and inequalities of power and this needs not to be done by mere intuition. They can apply the same principle that prioritist do without thinking that it is always the case that this happens. What differs from one approach and the other is the belief that a certain priority rule is *exhaustively* true of *all* moral deliberations[72]. Pluralism thus, still holds some advantages when following a priority rule would give rise to particularly counterintuitive results. In that situation a pluralism might simply that a given priority rule does not apply in the relevant circumstances.

---

[70] *"This is an order which requires us to satisfy the first principle in the ordering before we can move on to the second, the second before we consider the third, and so on. A principle does not come into play until those previous to it are either fully met or do not apply. A serial ordering avoids, then, having to balance principles at all; those earlier in the ordering have an absolute weight, so to speak, with respect to later ones, and hold without exception."* Rawls J., *ibidem*, p.43.

[71] Gaut B., *ibidem*, p.22.

[72] Gaut B., *ibidem*, p.28.

It has been pointed out that pluralism brings about some advantages which are consonant with a widespread version of common sense morality. Gaut expressly highlights these advantages and lists them as follows[73]: 1) while recognizing the existence of a variety of principles, pluralism does not require us to pick one of them to have priority over the others. This might happen to be a difficult rather arbitrary move; 2) pluralism explains the phenomenology of moral dilemmas in which we are confronted with two conflicting moral demands. Other moral frameworks struggle in explaining away the fact that such a phenomenon happens; 3) pluralism gives an account of the fact that we, as moral agents, do not perceive our role as unitary. We can get morally relevant reasons in virtue of our role in society, our role in our family or group of relatives or, generally, many different facts about ourselves. This heterogeneity of moral life is better explained by moral pluralism while being quite consistently in accord with common sense morality. This is important because any inquiry in the field of morality does not start from a blank page. We are, without exceptions, already part of a variety of moral values originated from different traditions and inherited convictions. The best way to systematize all of them is to allow a plurality of sources from which morality springs.

Since a phenomenological analysis reveals the need of a variety of principles to make sense of moral experience, *prioritist* theories represent the most tempting alternatives to *moral pluralism*. As we have seen though, pluralism still holds some advantages over them (such as the possibility to drop a counterintuitive priority rule). It is now worth turning to a brief analysis of the advantages of moral pluralism over the other two moral frameworks we have highlighted above: *particularism* and *monism*.

Although particularism would be consonant with the heterogeneity of moral experience, it will nonetheless leave some theoretical gaps, which will make us prefer pluralism instead. Particularists, in fact, hold that the morally relevant properties are many (like pluralists do). However, they also

---

[73] Gaut B., *ibidem*, p.35ff.

claim that moral principles are not useful tools of morality, rather they can misguide our judgments since they are generalizations that do not take care of the particular case. As such, moral principles are to be though as crutches, which can help us walking, but also can they can lead us into error. My claim is that, in the case of pluralism, principles are more like running shoes rather than crutches. They make us go faster in moral matters, even if you do not recognize their benefits or simply you do not realize you are using them. Particularism, on the other hand, is all about recognizing the moral reasons that the particular situation offers, regardless the contribution of principles. Nevertheless, pluralism allows the appreciation of the situation too, since none of the principles has an exhaustive and absolute priority over the others. Provisional priority of a principle over the others has to be gained according to the particular case. And while this allows pluralism to avoid the counterintuitive results of a generalist theory, it still allows for moral principles to provide some help in the appreciation of the relevant moral reasons. The main disadvantage of particularism is that it leaves the agent with no tools other that her moral sensibility for reasons. This might end up being too vague in complex situations or when the agent is not particularly experienced or used to the present situation. The mere ability to recognize certain reasons for action might not be enough. If this is the case, particularism might be vulnerable of the charge of being *relativistic*. If no principle can aid the decision, the moral agent will arbitrarily choose what to do. The fact that pluralism does not discharge the importance of principles, while holding that they have to be tested in the particular situation, supports the suitability and the advantages of this theoretical framework. Therefore, the real advantage of pluralism over particularism is that, while holding that morality is characterized by a variety of factors (including contingent ones), it can still accommodate the grounds to provide adequate moral reasons.

On the other hand, choosing pluralism over monism seems to have many advantages too. In fact, if we take moral experience as it appears, moral pluralism has more overall justifying potential than monism. This is true on different

regards: a) pluralism is the theoretical approach that better responds to the complexity of moral life and the heterogeneity of its sources as disclosed by a phenomenological analysis; b) it goes along well with what commonsense morality holds about the different moral roles and moral sources that the same agent has[74]; c) pluralism (unlike monism) can explain the existence and the phenomenology of moral dilemmas[75]; d) monism struggles to make sense of complex moral concepts in a way that pluralism does not[76]. All these elements particularly favor pluralism over monism (and generally over all other theoretical options). These claims share a lot with the thought of Isiah Berlin who states that the belief of realizing an *ultimate harmony* in the field of morality is a fallacy. Although ethics is ultimately complex, we cannot but try to soften collision between its elements, look for compromises and establish contingent and temporary priorities[77].

In conclusion, *Moral Pluralism* is important because it represents the theoretical framework that better faces the explanatory needs required by the complexity of our moral lives. This is ultimately and most of all the reason to favor pluralism as the most attractive moral theory: its ability to give an account of the phenomenology of the first person experience as a *complex* system. Rawls rightly acknowledged how proponents of *Moral Pluralism* take their theory as the theoretical answer to the complexity of moral life[78]. This answer is necessary to make

---

[74] This refers, to a certain degree, to the preexistence of rules, values, traditions and teachings that already characterize our moral lives before any theoretical framework applies;

[75] In fact, the alleged existence of a unique moral source should not entail any insolvable moral conflict.

[76] As we will see extensively on the second part of this work, the peculiar case of the concept of *supererogation* represents a good example of this evidence.

[77] Berlin I., *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Princeton University Press, 2013, pp.17-18.

[78] "*The intuitionist believes to the contrary that the complexity of the moral facts defies our efforts to give a full account of our judgments and necessitates a plurality of competing principles. He contends that attempts to go beyond these principles either reduce to triviality, as when it is said that social justice is to give every man his due, or else lead to falsehood and oversimplification,*

sense of our moral experiences and to aid the decisional processes that challenge all moral agents. A *complex* (plural) moral approach is the answer we are looking for when we reflect on what to do from the first-person moral point of view. Furthermore, this moral framework is relatively similar to a widespread version of common-sense morality. Similarly, pluralism entails the idea that from a moral perspective we are not a single, coherent and unitary agent. The different roles we fulfill and the various sources of morality bring about a moral life that is ultimately *complex* and as such is to be explained. This is what I call *the need of moral complexity*. Our moral lives require such a theoretical depth in order to be interpreted:

"[…] *our moral values are rooted in our view of what are the salient facts about ourselves, in our self-understanding, which is socially conditioned. We view ourselves as standing in several salient relationships: as friends, lovers, sons or daughters, parents, colleagues, fellow-men, and co-inhabitants of the earth with many different sorts of beings. Each of these parts of our self-conception is expressed by a set of duties we have. We also think that it is important that we can feel pain and suffer, but also that we can exercise our autonomy in choosing our life-plan (in which suffering may be acceptable if it is necessary for great achievements) – and also that we have to live together with people in communities, constituted by inherited, shared values. Each of these facts is salient in our view of ourselves, but only the pluralist is in a position to allow that such a complex self-understanding can find appropriate expression in the realm of values as a plurality of principles.*"[79]

---

as when one settles everything by the principle of utility. " in Rawls J., *ibidem,* p.39.
[79] Gaut B., *ibidem,* p.36.

WHAT IS MORAL COMPLEXITY?

1. Moral Complexity: a matter of structure

Moral Complexity is not, in the first place, a *new* theoretical framework of morality and neither a new moral theory. Rather, by Moral Complexity is intended a moral approach originated from the analysis of the heterogeneous sources of morality as revealed by moral phenomenology. As such, morality is a *complex* subject composed by *complex* elements. Only through the analysis of this complexity, we will get a grasp of what stands behind the moral experience of the moral agent. Now, from this point of view, Moral Complexity is primarily the study of the already-existent moral framework that assists us in identifying ultimate moral ends and consequently supports our moral deliberations. This task will be considered completed only inasmuch as committed to the recognition of how our moral reasoning works in ordinary life. This matter, as far as it is relevant for practical philosophy, needs to be concerned with of how things are from the perspective of the moral agent. The theoretical practice that tries to affect our moral experience through the oversimplification of how things look will be contrary to this approach. Such an approach that ensures the complexity of morality is widely shared by pluralists. This is the case of David Ross, who writes:

"[…] *it is more important that our theory fit the facts than it be simple, and the account we have given above* [pluralism] *corresponds (it seems to me) better than either of the simpler theories with what we really think* […]"[1].

Moral philosophy, as far as it is intended as the study of what ought to be done, needs to maintain the priority of life over concepts. The focus of the present chapter then, is to outline

---

[1] Ross W.D., *The Right and The Good*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.19.

the structural features that make our moral life so authentically *complex*. It will not be surprising however, if this study will be of some help to highlight the content, rather than just the mere structure, of what it is of ultimate moral relevance.

A first step toward the understanding of Moral Complexity is to take the difficulties that characterize our moral life (roughly *hard choices*), not as something we need to explain away through a moral theory, whose task is to make difficulties fall silent. Hard choices are not necessarily unsolvable; they simply remember us that morality could be characterized by challenging moments. Such choices might become even more challenging when *hard choices* become *moral dilemmas* and thus unsolvable. The reason why this happens is the ultimately *complex* nature of morality. Here is where morality reveals its *complex* essence and the manifoldness of the moral experience - this (as I have underlined in the previous chapter) will lead to the acceptance of pluralism.

On this regard, moral monism holds the opposite belief: moral conflict can be avoided if we pledge allegiance to a single ultimate moral end. Proponents of monist theories expect to explain away all the conflicts appealing to the principle they endorse or the value they take to be of supreme importance. In this way, the problem of dealing with moral dilemmas would be apparently solved. Additionally, the major monistic traditions inspired by the work of Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill highlight a distinctive problem that pluralism faces. They maintain that pluralist theories struggle to carry out the proper moral justification of a moral act. The fact that the many sources of morality can enter into conflict while holding their incommensurability, is seen as an obstacle that cannot be overcome. If there is no apparent way to discriminate between conflicting options, how would the agent ground moral justification? Michael Gill underlines this shared belief of monists:

"*What I think Mill and Kant took to be the insurmountable problem for pluralism is that it is not able to account properly for*

moral justification in cases in which ultimate moral ends come into conflict with each other [...]. *If pluralists hold that both of two ultimate ends are on the bottom floor of moral justification, they will also have to hold that there is no more fundamental moral end that tells us why we ought to act on one of those ends rather than the other when they conflict"*[2].

I think that these claims give us the possibility to summarize the dispute between monism and pluralism according to two main issues: the existence of moral dilemmas and how moral justification needs to be managed. Both these issues acquire a certain relevance in the sphere of commonsense morality too. Although it is interesting to note that commonsense morality favors monism on the issue of moral justification[3] and, at the same time, it endorses pluralism on the issue of moral dilemmas. The following table illustrates the relation between structural frameworks and two of the central issues of moral philosophy:

	Moral Dilemmas	**Moral Justification**
Monism	Dilemmas do not exist. They can be explained away by the single ultimate source of morality.	We need a reliable tool in order to justify a certain course of action in cases of moral conflict.
Pluralism	Dilemmas exists. They are an expression of the multiple sources of morality.	There is no single principle that can consistently discriminate between conflicting options.
☐ *Shared by commonsense morality*		
		Table 2.1

---

[2] Gill M. B., *Humean Moral Pluralism*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p.130.
[3] Gill agrees with this claim. See Gill M., *ibidem*, p.131 and p.138.

The game between monism and pluralism, I believe, has to be played primarily on these two issues. While according to commonsense morality it appears as 1-1 draw, a research in moral philosophy needs to find a tiebreaker on this matter. As long as monism will be able to give a satisfactory account of the phenomenology of moral dilemmas, it would affirm its superiority[4]. If pluralism, on the other hand, will be able to provide a satisfactory procedure for moral justification, it would fully take care of the moral complexity of our moral experience.

Monism is right in claiming that generally moral justification requires the appeal to a single source of morality[5]. This is the reason why this claim is so appealing to commonsense morality. It would be wrong, however, to think that moral pluralism could not arrange moral justification in the same way. After all, the real task of moral pluralism is outlining which of the many available moral sources gains priority over the others. A priority that is only provisional to the present situation, but still this is a priority that counts in favor of a single moral source. As such, moral justification can be grounded on the single source that is provisionally relevant to the agent. This process, while it might happen to be a complicated one, represents the real advantage of pluralism over monism in the area of moral justification. Pluralism (contra monism) claims that we are not required to use *always* the same moral source and this is important for two reasons: a) it

---

[4] I have briefly underlined in the first chapter why this is not the case.

[5] Although this is not always the case. Think of those cases where we do *x* in virtue of two independent non-conflicting reasons. For example, I make a donation because I want to reduce injustice *and* because it makes me feel better. I would call this a case of *conjunctive justification*. Moreover, there are some other cases where the performance of *x,* while justified by a certain principle *a,* it would also be justified by another principle *b.* For example, I could keep a promise out respect for the other agent *or* because it is better to keep promises for the convenience of society. In this case too (that we could call *disjunctive justification*) moral justification does not necessarily require a single principle, but either of the two. This distinction would certainly require a dedicated and more detailed work.

avoids counterintuitive results[6]; b) it gives the agent the possibility to adjust to the situation. These two claims represent the first step towards the appreciation of pluralism over monism.

As outlined above, the argument in favor of the singularity of the moral source proposed by monist theories is based on the issue of moral justification[7]. This appears clear when we take into consideration John Stuart Mill's preliminary assertions on his *A System of Logic*:

"There is, then, a philosophia prima peculiar to Art, as there is one which belongs to Science. There are not only first principles of Knowledge, but first principles of Conduct. There must be some standard by which to determine the goodness or badness, absolute and comparative, of ends, or objects of desire. And whatever that standard is, there can be but one; for if there were several ultimate principles of conduct, the same conduct might be approved by one of those principles and condemned by another; and there would be needed some more general principle, as umpire between them. Accordingly, writers on Moral Philosophy have mostly felt the necessity not only of referring all rules of conduct, and all judgments of praise and blame, to principles, but of referring them to some one principle; some rule, or standard, with which all other rules of conduct were required to be consistent, and from which by ultimate consequence they could all be deduced." [8]

---

[6] Monist theories have traditionally been charged of bringing about counter-intuitive results when faced with particular circumstances. Kantian Ethics struggles with cases such as the "murderer at door" (see Kant I., *On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy* in Kant I., *Practical Philosophy*, Gregor M. (ed. by), Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp.605-615), while consequentialism generally struggles with cases such as the one of the "drowning partner" (see Williams B., *Persons, Character and Morality* in Williams B., *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[7] In order to examine in more depth this issue see Chapter 7 "Formal Monism" in Gill M., *ibidem*, pp. 128-139.

[8] Mill J. S., *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1904, pp.657-658.

The argument here sketched by Mill is based on the need of a single principle to make moral justification feasible. *Formally*[9] a moral theory has to be grounded on a unique principle, in order to make possible the outlining of the right course of action. Otherwise, Mill claims, it would be impossible to understand which act is the right one. As I have already underlined above, however, the fact that a theory allows for many principles it is not the same as claiming that all of them play a relevant role in the given situation. The point is to understand which of the many principles actually is the relevant one. But this is a question of priority, rather than justification. The worry of monists is that pluralists would bring about this task with a certain degree of arbitrariness[10]. This is the main reason why Mill introduced the principle of utility and here is where the need of *formal* monism seeks a *substantial* answer. As moral agents, we all need a standard that helps us to discriminate between the many options:

"*If utility is the ultimate source of moral obligations, utility may be invoked to decide between them when their demands are incompatible. Though the application of the standard may be difficult, it is better than none at all; while in other systems, the moral laws all claiming independent authority, there is no common umpire entitled to interfere between them; their claims to precedence one over the another rest on little better than sophistry, and, unless determined, as they generally are, by the unacknowledged influence of consideration of utility, afford a free scope for the action of personal desires and partialities.*"[11]

---

[9] Gill distinguishes between *formal* monism (the claim that morality needs a single principle) and *substantive* monism (the claim that morality needs a specific principle). See Gill M., *ibidem*, p.128.

[10] Later I will further discuss how pluralism can handle this task. See section 3 of the present chapter.

[11] Mill J. S., *Utilitarianism*, Hackett Publishing, 2001, p.26.

In order to have a single principle, as Mill states here, such a principle would necessarily be very general. This is the case of the principle of utility or the *greatest happiness principle*: the right thing to do is the one that tends to promote happiness, i.e. pleasure and absence of pain. Now, in order to discriminate the right course of action once we are confronted with a situation of conflicting obligations, the agent would be required to calculate the utility of the options. Due to the generality of the principle, it seems far from obvious how to accomplish this task. How do we measure happiness? How do we compare different kind of pleasures? This procedure, it seems to me, would require the same amount of moral sensibility (or arbitrariness if you want) that pluralism requires. The fact that moral justification is much more reliable and less arbitrary under a single general principle than under a variety of sources or set of principles is simply a false belief. As long as the single principle of morality has such a high degree of generality, it would require an equal degree of sensibility to be applied to the particular case. This is when a monist theory such as utilitarianism is subjected to the same criticism of arbitrariness it tries to avoid. This fact, I believe, undermines the argument which favors that moral justification would require the *greatest happiness principle*. Moreover, it would cast some doubts over the idea that morality would *formally* require only a single principle.

Immanuel Kant, although he proposed a *substantially* different monism, certainly agreed with Mill's *formal* monism. Indeed, while he is not explicit on why a moral theory has to be *formally* monist, he repeatedly claims that morality is *substantially* monist in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*:

"*The present groundwork, however, is nothing more than the identification and corroboration* of the supreme principle of morality*, which by itself constitutes a business that is complete*

in its purpose and to be separated from every other moral investigation"[12]

Again:

"*When I think of a* hypothetical *imperative as such I do not know in advance what it will contain, until I am given the condition. But when I think of a* categorical *imperative I know at once what it contains. For since besides the law the imperative contains only the necessity of the maxim to conform with this law, whereas the law contains no condition to which it was limited, nothing is left but the universality of a law as such, with which the maxim of the action ought to conform, and it is this conformity alone that the imperative actually represents as necessary. There is therefore only a single categorical imperative, and it is this:* act according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."[13]

The argument implicitly says that, since the only thing that the categorical imperative requires is to universalize the *maxim* of the action, there cannot but be a single *objective* principle. In order to be moral then, a *subjective* principle (the maxim of the action) should conform to the only *objective* principle (the Categorical Imperative). It has been argued, however, how such a feature of Kantian Ethics might leave open to the possibility of a pluralistic interpretation of the theory[14]. Thomas Hill claims that, in order to recognize such Kantian pluralism, we need to recognize first some common features that all

---

[12] Kant I., *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p.7.
[13] Kant I., *ibidem*, pp.33-34.
[14] This interpretation does not apply to those ethical theories that are traditionally classified as pluralism with a strong Kantian influence. The work of John Rawls and Robert Nozick fall within these categories, although it might be underlined how it would be more accurate to further specify the degree of pluralism they hold (Rawls, for example, can be considered a prioritist rather than a pluralist).

pluralisms share: a) the presence of many principles[15]; b) the incommensurability of values[16]; c) the right independent of the good[17]; d) the undogmatic and permissive character[18]. Does Kant's theory possess any of these features? Briefly, Hill thinks that: a) Kant's ethics does not admit dilemmas, holding that the categorical imperative is the higher order principle that would help solving them; b) Kant thinks rational moral agents to have an independent dignity (they are all ends in themselves), as such his theory seems fundamentally committed to the incommensurability of values; c) Kant puts the right prior to the good, principles of right are derived by rational reflection rather than any reflection upon *goodness*; d) While on a personal level Kant seemed to be a dogmatic person, his theory reveals the opposite attitude: since it starts from the abstraction from the particular by the rational agent, the theory leaves aside the matter of what particular values are to be preferable. According to Hill, point b) and d) especially represent the features that give to Kant's theory a possible pluralist character. The fact that all agents have an intrinsic dignity (b) gives rise to the fact that they are incommensurable[19]. The incommensurability of values, as we have seen, is a typically pluralist feature. Moreover, Kant's formality of the moral law prevents him (at least on a theoretical level) from any moralistic constraint of the content of maxims (d). The categorical imperative, after all, requires only the universality of the maxim. According to this understanding then, Kant's theory would be in a certain way permissive, undogmatic and nonjudgmental. As Hill puts it:

"[...] *because Kantian ethics starts from the idea of rational agents abstracting as far as possible from particular cultural commitments and preferences, arguments from it should tend to*

---

[15] Hill T. E., *Kantian Pluralism*, in "Ethics" 102(1992), no.4, p.743.
[16] Hill T. E., *ibidem*, p.747.
[17] Hill T. E., *ibidem*, p.748.
[18] Hill T. E., *ibidem*, p.749.
[19] Hill T. E., *ibidem*, p.756.

support a relatively open society with liberties protected and diversity permitted. Cultural diversity would not be glorified as valuable for its own sake, but it would not be suppressed for the purpose of promoting the general happiness."[20]

Although these features represent an interesting pluralistic insight and go along well with the well-known liberal tendency of moral pluralism, it is not enough to fully consider Kant's theory pluralistic. A conception of pluralism that entails only one of the four features that Hill has underlined is too weak and non-comprehensive. These four features cannot simply be considered four different "understandings" of moral pluralism. They need to be taken together to form the set of features that a theory has necessarily to entail if it has to be considered pluralistic. As such, Kantian Ethics falls short in many basic elements of pluralism and thus it cannot properly be conceived a pluralistic theory. Consequently Kant's theory shares with other monistic theories all the shortcomings I have underlined above in regard of the recognition of the phenomenology of moral dilemmas, the acknowledgement of the multiplicity of the sources of morality and the explanation of the nature of moral complexities.

Such reflections on the nature of the different moral frameworks represent the main purpose of what I call the approach of Moral Complexity. While favoring a pluralistic account of morality, Moral Complexity wants to unveil and focus on the structure of moral thought. It is helpful here to resort to some images in order to understand this point. Generally, moral monism thinks of morality as being composed by a *pyramidal* structure[21]. All moral decision are made according to a moral framework that attributes moral value entirely to a single ultimate source of morality. Pluralism, instead, entails a much more complex picture. The many sources of morality require us to think of it as a *network* of

---

[20] Hill T. E., *ibidem*, p.760.
[21] In a certain degree, the same can be said of *prioritism* too.

interrelated points. Principles, norms, values, special obligations, etc., they all play a role in our moral lives when it comes to moral decisions. Their roles cannot be reduced to a single source of morality, otherwise we would not make sense of the complexity that characterizes the experience of the moral agent. All the elements that constitute the structure of morality are ideally placed on the junctions that compose the *moral network*. Each element stands in a variable relationship with the other elements, creating an evolving web that constitutes a *complex* system. This would also mean that every element would be affected in some degree by the mutating of another. For example, if I decide to foster beneficence as the primary moral value in the present situation this will result in a completely new set of moral recommendations. This is ultimately the understanding of morality that I call *Moral Complexity*: the idea that morality is composed by a variety of sources that come into different relation according to the present situation. As such, according to the relational status of the relevant elements hard choices (or even moral dilemmas) might easily arise in the field of morality. The contingent situation, then, is what redefines the balance of the whole structure. However, this is not the only factor that plays such a role. Social context, tradition, education, exemplary figures they all affect the balance and the relation of the elements of our moral system. Provided a system of this kind, a moral choice is given by the ability to understand the different priorities that the elements gain in the contingent case. Accordingly, the agent understands what has the proper moral relevance and then applies it to the right course of action. It would be wrong, however, to think of this process as the varying precedence of a single element over the others. This would recall a *pro tanto* pyramidal structure that takes place each time, where one of the elements plays the provisional role of the overriding one. Unfortunately, this is not *always* the case; moral experience is often more complex than this. Sometimes

more sources claim for their relevance[22] and a balance is hard to find. Most of the times, indeed, a moral choice springs from what appears to be the right compromise between all the sources involved.

As anticipated above, the evidence of such a structure of morality can be appraised in a particular case of moral choice: the moral dilemma. Bernard Williams holds a famous position on this regard, which it seems to me extremely relevant for the present work. The existence of moral dilemmas is explicated by the phenomenological analysis of the moral experience of the agent who faces a choice between conflicting obligations. The fact that she experiences regret (as a form of moral residue) for the moral loss generated by option of the dilemma she has not performed, is a confirmation of the existence of true moral dilemmas[23]. Given this claim, the role of an ethical theory is not necessarily that of trying to smooth conflicts and uncertainties. Moral conflicts are not necessarily *pathological[24]*. To claim this, is the first step towards the acceptance of Moral Complexity. Along with Williams' position, I would additionally claim that moral dilemmas not only are real and undeniable, but also they reveal the ultimately complex structure of morality. Without the multiplicity of the sources of morality such a phenomenology of dilemmas would not be explicable. A *pyramidal* structure of morality would require us to generalize up to the point where the dilemma simply fades away. The argument from phenomenology shows how this is not always the case. The dilemmatic influence (in the form of regret) remains even if the choice between the alternatives has been made and this should be taken as a hint of the actual structure of morality. I believe that if we understand morality as a *network* of many

---

[22] This feature will become extremely helpful in the second part of the present work when it comes to explain *complex* moral concept such as the concept of supererogation.
[23] See Williams B., *Ethical Consistency*, in Williams B., *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1973.
[24] Williams B., *Conflict of Values*, in Williams B., *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p.80-81.

interrelated sources of reasons for action, the phenomenology of moral dilemmas becomes understandable and coherent with the background theory. Dilemmas arise when the agent considers more than a moral source and does not know how to balance them adequately (given that such a balance truly exists). Ultimately, then, moral dilemmas reveal that morality is structurally much more *complex* than most of our moral theories would want us to concede. *Moral Complexity* aims at understanding and taking care of such a distinctive structural feature of morality.

2. Towards an Understanding of Complexity: Charles Larmore

The origins of what can be considered the approach of Moral Complexity are hard to trace. Certainly, the debate of English-speaking philosophical tradition of the twentieth century is characterized by a multitude of authors that have tried to address this issue. Among them, the name of David Ross, Isiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel and Charles Larmore stand out. What all these authors have in common is the inclination to underline that the moral experience of the agent is ultimately complex and, as such, it cannot be oversimplified in favor of whatsoever moral framework. The approach of Moral Complexity, then, is the belief that we, as moral agents, are not required to conform to the moral theories that have greatly characterized (and partly still do so) moral philosophy in the last three centuries[25]. As we have seen in the first chapter, some phenomenological features of what it is like to be a moral agent lead to the espousal of a pluralistic (complex) system of morality. The endorsement of a pluralistic structure of morality is, in a certain degree, another feature that combines the thought of these authors. This is what I have called *the need of a theoretical framework that acknowledges moral complexity*, which can only be satisfied by

---

[25] I implicitly refer to the rise of the great monistic traditions from the eighteenth century to the present days.

the appeal to a degree of theoretical depth that pluralism can extensively grant. Different moral sources can eventually clash with each other, but this, rather than being a problem to solve, is the very essence of our moral lives. We need to keep this essential complexity intact if we want to give a truthful account of morality. Isiah Berlin's words remind us forcefully this important prerequisite of any moral inquiry:

"*These collisions of values are of the essence of what they are and what we are. If we are told that these contradictions will be solved in some perfect world in which all good things can be harmonized in principle, then we must answer, to those who say this, that the meanings they attach to the names which for us denote the conflicting values are not ours. We must say that the world in which what we see as incompatible values not in conflict is a world altogether beyond our ken; that principles which are harmonized in this other world are not the principles with which, in our daily lives, we are acquainted; if they are transformed, it is into conceptions not known to us on earth. But it is on earth that we live, and it is here that we must believe and act. [...] I can only say that those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of forms of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human.*"[26]

If a study of morality wants to give an account of how human beings ultimately are, it needs to keep complexity intact, otherwise it will happen that humans will try to conform to a morality that it is simply cast upon them. *Moral Complexity* wants to avoid this distortion and to do so the espousal of a pluralist system seems the best option overall.

The focal point upon which Moral Complexity is grounded is the heterogeneity of the sources of morality. As such, morality is complex because it is composed by sources of different kinds, which play different roles and are effective on different levels.

---

[26] Berlin I., *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Princeton University Press, 2013, p.14.

As I have said earlier, morality is a *network*, rather than an ordered *pyramid*, of sources. This means that the fact that the sources are different in kind explains why they can eventually enter into conflict. Thomas Nagel in his *Mortal Questions* has argued in favor of this thesis[27]. He claims that we have five fundamental kinds of value and, as such, value appears *fragmented*[28]. By *value* Nagel means source of morality, that is, values are sources of moral reasons to act. These sources cannot be placed into an absolute order in which a certain value *x* is always more stringent than value *y*; to claim this would be *absurd*. Nagel's point is that moral reasons are constitutively different in kind and this highlights the fundamental difference of their sources. Additionally, this explains the nature of unsolvable moral conflicts: as long as a moral agent feels the pull of different kinds of reasons, moral conflict is inevitable. The fragmentation of value is explained by a famous distinction between kinds of reasons that Nagel reexplores in this paper. On the one hand, reasons can be *agent-centered* (or *personal*) when they deal with who the agent is. Reasons of this kind include, for example, special obligations and private commitments. On the other hand, we have *outcome-centered* (or *impersonal*) reasons when they deal with what happens in general[29]. Reasons of this kind include, for instance, utility and perfectionist ends. Roughly, we can understand these two

---

[27] Nagel T., *The Fragmentation of Value*, in Nagel T., *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp.128-141.

[28] "*Obligations, rights, utility, perfectionist ends, and private commitments - these values enter into our decisions constantly, and conflicts among them, and within them, arise medical research, in politics, in personal life, or wherever the grounds of action are not artificially restricted. What would it mean to give a system of priorities among them?*" in Nagel T., *ibidem*, p.131.

[29] While on this article Nagel refers to these kinds of reason as *agent-centered* and *outcome-centered*, the distinction has been drawn on a different terminology elsewhere. Nagel himself in a previous book talks of subjective/objective reasons (see Nagel T., *The Possibility of Altruism*, Princeton University Press, 1970). Derek Parfit is the one who introduced the now-popular and widespread distinction between agent-relative/agent-neutral reasons (see Parfit D., *Reasons and Persons*, Clarendon Press, 1984).

classes of reasons to spring from different points of view[30] and this is what makes them ultimately different. Thus, value appears fragmented and gives rise to possible moral conflicts. Think for example of the famous case of the "drowning partner": imagine yourself in a situation where you can save from drowning either your beloved partner or two strangers. You are not able to save both your partner and the two strangers. So, who would you save? If we look at this case through the two classes of reasons that Nagel distinguishes we are facing a possible moral conflict: a) we certainly have an agent-centered and personal reason to save whoever stands in a special relationship with us; likewise, b) we have an outcome-centered and impersonal reason to save the highest number of possible victims[31]. Cases of this kind show how it is certainly possible to have different kinds of reasons that come from different points of view and which eventually enter into conflict. As Nagel entailed, value, from the perspective of *Moral Complexity*, is fragmented.

It is worth asking, then, the following: is it possible to systematize the many heterogeneous sources of the good? If so, how do we actually deal with them? Charles Larmore has offered in his works some insightful answers to these questions and, at the same time, an interesting bigger picture of the structure of morality and its nature. In this latter regard, Larmore's view is based on a conception of Reason as a faculty that we express by being more or less responsive to the reasons there are. "*Rationality*" he claims "*is the capacity to reason, and*

---

[30] This reference to the different points of view will be extremely relevant later for the explanation of the concept of supererogation. Something similar can be found in Dreier J., *Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't*, in Byron M. (ed. by), *Satisficing Maximizing: Moral Theories on Practical Reason*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.131-154.

[31] Notice that outcome-centered reasons become increasingly pressing if you add a large number of possible victims to be overlooked in favor of the partner.

reasoning consists in responding to reasons"[32]. Reason, thus, involves *receptivity to reasons*[33], which are what ultimately motivates the agent to act accordingly. Larmore takes advantage of a typically Kantian terminology to distinguish between *Vernuft* (*Reason* intended as a faculty) and *Gründe* (*reasons* intended as what grounds a belief or action)[34]. These two elements make possible a conception of the moral experience based on a moral agent who reflects on the given situation in order to acknowledge moral reasons to act. Reflection is a cognitive process (the exercise of Reason) that aims at the acquisition of knowledge of how things are and what reasons for belief and action there are. Motivation, then, (contra the Humean tradition that assigns a fundamental role to desires) comes from knowledge alone. The truth that a belief carries within itself, involves a commitment to think and act accordingly. If I believe that outside is raining, I have a good reason to take an umbrella, whether or not I have a desire to do so. As such, beliefs are not *motivationally inert* and thus moral judgments are ultimately beliefs of the reasons for action there are[35]. It is interesting to note at this point how, according to Larmore, the Kantian distinction between theoretical and practical Reason is fundamentally unnecessary: "*there is a single faculty of reason whose exercise may be styled as 'theoretical' or 'practical' depending on whether its subject matter is belief or action*"[36]. The kind of activity that Reason reveals is the same in its two connotations and, in truth, given the motivational power of beliefs, a much intertwined one.

---

[32] Larmore C., *The Autonomy of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p.135.
[33] Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.109.
[34] This lexical explanation of the terms can be found in Larmore C. *Dare Ragioni. Il soggetto, l'etica, la politica*, Rosenberg & Sellier, 2008, p.69.
[35] Larmore C., *The Autonomy of Morality*, pp.78-79. This is not to say that belief are the only motivationally capable aspects of human agency. Desires too can play a motivational role.
[36] Larmore C., *ibidem*.

Morality, then, consists in attending to moral reasons that the agent acknowledges in the situation. This practice, in order to make sense, needs to be grounded on a moral realist framework that considers moral reasons as *relational*, *normative* and *real* facts. Indeed, moral reasons consist in a certain *relation* (counting in favor of *x*) between some features of the world and a certain possible course of action (or belief)[37]. Reasons are not physical (like a chair and a table are); rather they might be based on some features of the physical world. Rain gives rise to a reason that counts in favor of bringing an umbrella with me. But rain, while it grounds it, it is not a reason in itself. The *relation* between rain and bringing the umbrella is the actual reason. At the same time, reasons are not psychological either. They do not correspond to a certain psychological state of mind. I might really want to use my new umbrella, but if outside is not raining, there is no reason for me to use it. Nonetheless, reasons are real. Precisely they are the link existing between some features of the physical or psychological world and the possible actions of an agent. This is why Larmore defines this peculiar relation to be *normative* in kind, or better, reasons are not considered *physical* or *psychological*, but rather *normative facts*[38]. A sort of fact, as we have seen, that entails a certain course of action. If I have a reason to pay you back, then I ought to do so. The existence of a reason comes with its *normativity*. It would be correct to consider Larmore an *externalist*, one that agrees with Bernard Williams' understanding of "*there is a reason for A to φ*" as *external*[39]. It is not surprising, then, how this view of reasons as not having physical or psychological features in themselves (while relationally dependent on them) expresses a sort of "soft" *Platonism*. While Larmore does not refer to a platonic dimension

---

[37] Larmore C., *Dare Ragioni*, p.71 and Larmore C., *The Autonomy of Morality*, p.128.
[38] Larmore C., *ibidem*.
[39] Rather than the opposing *internal* view of "*A has a reason to φ*". See Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.126.

of the forms, he claims, in fact, that "[reasons] *constitute an intrinsically normative order of reality, irreducible to the physical or psychological facts*"[40]. Reasons form a peculiar part of reality (one that is often neglected): the *normative* realm.

Given this understanding of the faculty of Reason as *responsiveness to reasons* and the conception of moral reasons as *normative facts*, it appears clear how Larmore's moral rationalism entails two further negative claims. Briefly: a) a critique to the Kantian understanding of an Ethics of Autonomy; b) a critique of naturalism, the metaphysical position that limits reality to what natural sciences study.

What Larmore criticizes of a typically Kantian approach to ethics is the conception of human freedom intended as the self-legislation of Reason[41]. Reason is not a faculty that constitutes its own reasons for action and that entails a moral agent who ought to conform to the Moral Law in virtue of this self-legislation (as Kant believed). Rather, Reason is the faculty that has the role of recognizing those reasons we consider good, reasons that exist apart from the agent. In this sense, morality is something autonomous and its authority is not granted by the self-legislation of the agent. This does not mean that Larmore is criticizing the understanding of *autonomy* intended as the necessity for a moral agent of recognizing moral reasons apart from any influence from the other agents or from an institution[42]. What he is claiming is that the foundation of ethics is not necessarily the self-legislating Reason, but rather morality is something that is impossible to conceive from outside or in a sort of pre-moral stage. Morality is something we live in, something that makes sense in its own terms and speaks for itself once we are confronted with it. Morality

---

[40] Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.129.

[41] Larmore's critique of autonomy (intended as the Kantian *Autonomie*) is the core argument of *The Autonomy of Morality*. Moreover it is an issue extensively covered in Larmore C., Reanut A., *Débat sur l'Éthique. Idéalisme ou réalisme*, Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2004. See also Larmore C., *Dare Ragioni*, pp.69-71.

[42] Larmore C., *The Autonomy of Morality*, p.111.

consists in the appreciation of a certain dimension of reality, rather than founding our own reasons for action apart from the empirical dimension (as Kantian Ethics typically entail). This is why Larmore wants to shift our attention from the Kantian *Ethics of Autonomy* (the morality of self-legislation) to the *Autonomy of Morality* (a morality that cannot be recognized merely within the moral agent). Briefly:

"*The* ethics of autonomy *needs to be jettisoned, and in its stead belongs what I have called the* autonomy of morality – *by which I mean, obviously enough, not that morality is self-legislating (that would be nonsensical), but that morality forms an autonomous, irreducible domain of value, into which we cannot reason ourselves from without, but which we must simply acknowledge)*"[43].

As it appears clear, the whole idea of morality that Larmore offers is deeply grounded on a more general issue: the criticism of naturalism. Indeed, the conception of Reason as responsive to reasons, the idea of reasons as normative facts and the critique of Kantian Autonomy all rely on a clear metaphysical point: reality is wider than the totality of physical and psychological facts, it is not normatively mute and, as such, it cannot be understood as naturalism does. Only the understanding of reality as having a normative dimension (different from the physical and psychological one) makes possible a conception of Reason as responsiveness to reasons. This faculty intends moral reasons as something that needs to be acknowledged in the normative dimension of reality, rather than being grounded on the self-legislation of an agent.

Naturalism, the metaphysical position that has dominated the modern thought, is the major responsible for a morality that does not allow any conception of moral reasons as part of the real world. A broader conception of reality, a reality that takes into consideration its normative dimension is ultimately

---

[43] Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.122.

capable of affirming the autonomy of morality. Nevertheless, the normative dimension (the dimension of reasons), being concerned with the relation ("counting in favor of") between some facts of the world and the possible acts of the agent, greatly depends on the other dimensions. Without the physical and the psychological dimension, there would not be a normative dimension either. If outside it is not raining, there would be no reason for me to bring an umbrella. There would be, instead, a reason not to bring an umbrella. The normative dimension is then strictly dependent on how the facts are in the other two dimensions. Nevertheless, the fact that reasons are present, whether the agent recognizes them or not, leaves no doubt that they are part of a non-naturalistic conception of reality. The fact that I do not realize that outside is raining it does not mean that I do not have a reason to take an umbrella. Reality is broader than what we are naturalistically aware of and this comprehensive understanding of reality includes the normative dimension of reasons, reasons that are there independently from the agent.

Finally, this meta-ethical background is functional to the definition of what the moral point of view is in general. Larmore identifies the moral point of view as the ability of seeing in another's good in itself a reason for action[44]. Morality means acting for the good of another without any interest other than the fact that it is his/her good. The interest for another's good becomes so basic (as in the case of my own personal good) that it does not require any further justification. Thus, the moral point of view brings about the following understanding of morality:

"*Morality consists in seeing in another's good a demand on our attention that is as direct, as unmediated by ulterior considerations, as the concern we naturally feel for our own. The*

---

[44] Larmore C., *The Autonomy of Morality*, pp.73-74 and pp.88-89; Larmore C., *Dare Ragioni*, p.28 and pp.65-66; Larmore C., *Reflection and Morality*, in "Social Philosophy and Policy" 27(2010), no.2, p.8ff.

*ability to look beyond our own interests, whatever they may be,
and to take an interest in another's good simply because it is his
or hers – that is the essence of moral thinking*"[45].

Larmore points out that the biblical maxim "*Love thy neighbor
as thyself*"[46] expresses well this moral attitude towards the
others. The reason why this maxim becomes important for a
moral point of view of this kind is its unmediated character and
its spontaneity in pursuing the good of another. This fact is a
sufficient reason to act morally and, most importantly, this is
not something we can understand from an outer standpoint.
Indeed, we do not come to appreciate others' good thanks to a
sound argumentation in favor of it (from the outside of a moral
perspective, so to say). Morality directly places its demands on
an agent that acknowledges the importance of others' good,
apart from her personal interests and desires. In this sense,
"*morality speaks for itself*" and the moral point of view appears
clear and unmediated[47]. Once we recognize a moral reason for
action, we are already reflecting from the moral point of view.

Now that we have delineated the bigger meta-ethical picture,
we can analyze Larmore's position about the nature of a
normative system. Specifically, how does this metaethical
background manage at a normative level the Moral Complexity
we have seen to be typical of our moral experience? In his
Patterns of Moral Complexity[48] he has offered an interesting

---

[45] Larmore C., *The Autonomy of Morality*, p.73-74.

[46] *Leviticus* 19:18, *Matthew* 19:19, 22:39, *Mark* 12:31, *James* 2:8. Larmore,
rightly underlines that this maxim is quite different from the well know
Golden Rule ("*treat the others as you would like the others to treat yourself*").
This, in fact, entails a sort of reciprocity between the agent and the subject
of her actions. Larmore's critique of the Hobbesian approach attacks this
aspect as an untenable moral perspective. Larmore C., *ibidem*, pp.76-79.

[47] "*When we acknowledge the authority of moral claims, despite the allure of
contrary desires and independently of appeals to our own interests, we are
commonly said to be listening to our conscience. The call of conscience is in
this sense none other than morality speaking for itself, and that is why it
stands in need of no higher validation*" Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.105.

[48] Larmore C., *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, Cambridge University Press,
1987.

interpretation of a moral system and, ultimately, of how moral reasoning works. As I have tried to highlight in Chapter 1, moral experience is characterized by a multitude of sources and dynamics further complicated by the circumstances in which the action takes place. Larmore, while acknowledging this fact, does not give up the very possibility of moral theorizing as other authors have done in the past[49]. In this book, he highlights three understandings of *Moral Complexity*, that is, three aspects in which morality (and consequently political philosophy) needs to exceed the traditional and inappropriate theoretical oversimplifications[50]: a) the essential role of moral judgment for the exercise of virtue b) the liberal ideal of political neutrality c) the heterogeneity of the sources of morality. I now want to focus on the third dimension[51].

Morality, it has been said, speaks for itself in showing its intrinsic authority and importance. Additionally (and more importantly) "*If morality speaks for itself, it does not always speak with a single voice*"[52]. This is an important truth to be recognized: morality is a realm of irreducible values coming from different sources. This is the reason why they eventually come into conflict generating the so-called moral dilemmas. Larmore has highlighted three different principles that characterize our moral experience and make morality essentially complex. A moral principle is a tool for deciding what the morally good thing to do is, a tool that guides our action accordingly. Moreover, a moral principle gains its authority as long as: a) it is rational, that is, we have good reasons (recognized by the faculty of Reason) to endorse and accept it[53]; b) it reflects a specific and irreducible way of moral reasoning[54].

---

[49] For example, see Williams B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Routledge, 2011.
[50] Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.151.
[51] I will deal with the other constitutively moral issue (the fundamental role of moral judgment) in the next section of this chapter.
[52] Larmore C., *The Autonomy of Morality*, p.88.
[53] Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.109.
[54] Larmore C., *Dare Ragioni*, p.37.

The three principles of morality, in virtue of these two aspects, are identified from the moral point of view, that is, they constitute what we, as moral agents, take to be morally relevant. If we look at our moral experience, we realize how these principles are equally important and irreducible one into another. Specifically, we distinguish[55]:

a) *The principle of partiality*, points out those obligations that arise from the respect for an agent's particular desires or special relations with others;
b) *The principle of consequentialism*, requires that we do whatever will produce the most good or the least evil overall;
c) *The principle of deontology*, demands that we never do things of a certain sort to others.

These three principles are primarily different in kind. The first principle is clearly concerned with the empirically relevant aspects of an agent's moral life. If a friend of mine were in need of my help, I would feel that I ought to act in a certain way, specifically so in virtue of our relationship. This sort of partiality constitutes this kind of obligations. On the other hand, the principles of consequentialism and that of deontology are universalistic (or *impartial* we might say), that is, they support *categorical* obligations. A categorical obligation is one that applies independently from empirically conditioned desires.

Furthermore, in order to highlight their differences, it would be helpful to refer to a terminological distinction I have introduced in the first chapter: *methodological pluralism* and *axiological pluralism*. It appears clear how different the three principles are in terms of *how* they determine what the morally right thing to do is. They are methodologically different. The principle of partiality takes care of our specific affections, the principle of consequentialism looks at the outcome of our acts

---

[55] Larmore C., *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, p.132-134; Larmore C. *Dare Ragioni*, p.37.

and the principle of deontology is concerned with the nature of the acts. When it comes to explain why we have specifically three principles, Larmore points out that they express three different and irreducible kinds of moral reasoning. An interesting explanation of this picture of how morality works is that they reflect three different kinds of relations in which we possibly stand with the others[56]. *Partiality* is based on the special relationships that we have with those who share interests, commitments, affections with us. This sort of relation generates a series of sui generis moral requirements. Think, for example, of the moral dimension of parenthood and friendship. These obligations are such in virtue of the fact that my friend Bob is exactly Bob. These relations are not *special* because they are necessarily better, from a moral point of view, than other kinds of relation. They are *special* because they are not established with anybody else. Differently, some other moral relations are not based on the fact that we relate *with her\him*, but because we relate with a fellow human being as such. This way of treating others impartially can be expressed in two ways: *consequentialist* and *deontological*. Once we acknowledge that the others have their own good that deserves to be pursued, we ought to treat them in a consequentialist way, says Larmore, trying to bring about the most good (or least evil) possible. Nevertheless, this is not the only way of treating others in virtue of the respect for their own good. We would act, at the same time, as they would never be treated or not treated in a certain way. This typically deontological way of behaving means caring for the others' *rights* to be regarded in certain way by us. In virtue of the respect for others' good as such, a moral agent has some obligations (generated by the correspondence with certain rights) that ought to be respected. Another famous distinction between consequentialism and deontology explained in terms of relations is that introduced by Thomas Nagel and Derek

---

[56] Larmore C., *Dare Ragioni*, p.38.

Parfit[57]. While deontology is understood as providing *agent relative* reasons (where the reference to the agent is fundamental), consequentialism provides *agent neutral* reasons (which are true besides any reference to the agent). However, according to Larmore, the distinction put in these terms fails to recognize that consequentialism too entails a certain reference to the agent of the act. Namely, "*Just as I have a (deontological) duty to give you the book if I promised to do so, so I have a (consequentialist) duty to relieve your pain if I am the one best able to do so*"[58]. Relativity of the agent, rather than being what distinguishes the two approaches, is what assimilates them. Both of them point out the importance of seeing the others' good as valuable in itself and as related to the agent. This is an essential feature of the moral point of view.

This is what Larmore intends by *heterogeneity of morality*, the fact that moral reasoning is not uniform, but fundamentally various. Moreover, he claims that this heterogeneity is not governed by a precise order or strick priority of a principle over the other (as a sort of Rawlsian *lexical order*). This is what makes Larmore a moral pluralist to the full extent: moral sources, while heterogeneous, cannot be ordered *a priori*, they gain their priority according to the situation. Obviously, this does not exclude the possibility that different sources lead to different directions. Indeed, as pluralist systems usually entail, moral conflict is possible in virtue of the multiplicity of the sources and their non-prioritization. We might add that a moral dilemma, within the Larmorian understanding of a moral system, is the conflict between two ways of moral reasoning. It is easy to find examples of the clashing between the principle of consequentialism and the principle of deontology in our everyday life. A first way of facing such conflicts is the *suspension of judgment*, waiting for further information that

---

[57]See footnote 29. For an analysis of the difference between the two impartial ways of morally treating others see Larmore C., *The Patterns of Moral Complexity*, p.144-150.
[58]Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.146.

might explain away the conflict. If this is not possible or it is simply not the case, it will underline the potential non-eliminability of moral dilemmas. This fact reveals an interesting truth of morality:

"*So when we find that heeding both sorts of ultimate moral commitments is at odds with the way the world is, when we cannot do what they tell us we ought to do, we cannot entertain revising their authority or suspending judgment. We have to live with the fact that we have obligations we cannot honor. Our possibilities in the world are then too narrow for what we know we ought to do*"[59].

What I have called *methodological pluralism* is Larmore's main concern when it comes to explain the *heterogeneity of morality*. Morality is characterized by three different sorts of moral reasoning, all of them equally valid, important and irreducible one into the other. Nonetheless, I think we can underline some further aspects of Moral Complexity in terms of what I have defined *axiological pluralism*. That is, the sources of morality, not only differ for *how* they arrive to determine what is the right thing to do, but also they differ on *why*, they do so. A typically consequentialist approach, for example, is concerned with the general outcome of our acting in virtue of the caring for *human flourishing*. Humanity as whole deserves to live well (live *happy* according to certain traditions) and acting morally means improving this status. Deontology, on the other hand, claims that certain acts can never be performed (or omitted) out of the respect for others' *freedom*[60]. This means

---

[59] Larmore C., *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, p.150.
[60] In a certain sense, this means to respect others' *autonomy*. I am not referring to the Kantian notion of the self-legislation of Moral Reason (*Autonomie*) as criticized by Larmore. The contemporary wide spread understanding of the *autonomy* of the moral agent refers to the fact that she has the chance to deliberate free from any influence from others (be it an institution, an ideology or another person). *Autonomy*, in this sense, means that a moral agent is free to deliberate and to form her moral choices.

that acting morally means caring for the status of a fellow human being as such. Differently, the principle of partiality underlines the moral relevance of our special affections with others and the particularistic desires. As such, it works in virtue of the importance that *individual flourishing* has. In sum, the three principles are concerned with different morally relevant aspects of our moral life. Claiming that all three are valid and indispensable part of our life means, at the same time, claiming that the good is represented by a variety of values that we cannot but acknowledge. In virtue of all this, two Larmorian mottos appear clear and incisive: "morality is *heterogeneous*" and "morality does not speak in a single voice". Nevertheless heterogeneity might be a misleading term[61] if it is to be understood as to undermine the unity of morality. Indeed, morality is expressed in different ways, while it remains one and unified. Although there is no doubt that a Larmorian system of morality is a clear example of moral pluralism, a further characterization needs to be highlighted. In fact, this pluralistic system and the three principles of morality all reflect a common and unique attitude: the morally good thing springs from the unique moral point of view. That is, they are all different and equally plausible ways of seeing in another's good a reason for action. While the morally right thing to do can be achieved through different paths, the morally good thing is unique. Normatively this system is characterized by the *pluralism of the right* and a sort of *monism of the good*. The different moral sources share the starting point, the consideration of the others' good from the moral point of view. In this sense, Larmore's pluralism is more precisely the heterogeneity of the sources of a single good rather than a specific pluralism of values. While it is true that morality does not speak in a single voice, the speaker is always the same one. While the sources of the good are manifold and different in kind, they all ground the

---

Larmore's criticism does not involve this second understanding of *autonomy*.
See Larmore C., *Dare Ragioni*, pp.69-70.
[61] Larmore C., *Reflection and Morality*, p.25, footnote no.21.

same good. It is in virtue of all this that Lamore affirms that the biggest mistake of monistic theories has been that of believing in their exclusivity on the level of the right (a claim that I fully share). Contrary, instead of believing in the exclusive validity of a single principle, we need to acknowledge the existence of different kinds of moral reasoning. This dimension of Moral Complexity at a normative level is well summarized by this passage:

"*Finally, instead of supposing that the structure of morality must be in the end either deontological or consequentialist, and instead of assuming that either all or none of our moral obligations are categorical, we should recognize that the ultimate sources of moral value are not one, but many*"[62].

Morality, it has been said, does not speak in a single voice.

3. Facing Complexity with Less Hardship: The Role of Moral Judgment in Moral Justification

First of all, some terminological distinctions are required. As we have seen, Practical Reason is the faculty that acknowledges the reasons there are to act in a certain way. However, morality is not straightforwardly the mere acknowledgment of what rules and principles point out (as some of the monistic traditions tend to claim). While it might happen that a principle or a rule tells us exactly what to do according to what we have reasons to do, most of the times this is simply not the case. Morality is much more than a hard science whose results are precise and reproducible. It is a subject that requires a certain degree of interpretation and reflection for a proper application and this sort of operations is where the faculty of moral judgment comes in. One thing is to know and acknowledge that we have reasons to do *x* (the role of practical Reason), another is to know how to bring about *x* (the role of moral judgment). Sometimes the given

---

[62] Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.151.

circumstances require almost no need of judgment, as when, for example, you have promised to buy your child an ice cream and you are in front of an ice cream parlor. However, some other cases are much more complex than this. Think for example of a case where your friends have been so kind to organize a surprise birthday party for you. You certainly acknowledge that you have good reasons to show gratitude, but the question is to understand how to do so adequately. Should you simply say "thank you" or should you buy everybody a round? Cases where we ought to express gratitude, courage, generosity and similar moral virtues require a certain degree of moral judgment. Moral judgment, then, does not have the same role of practical Reason. Aristotle has been the ancestor of this understanding of moral judgment (φρόνησις)[63]. Whoever expresses mastery in the use of moral judgment is considered *wise*. In book VI of the Nicomachean Ethics, we read:

"*On the subject of wisdom, we may get what we need once we have considered who it is that we call 'wise'. Well, it is thought characteristic of a wise person to be able to deliberate well about the things that are good and advantageous to himself, not in specific contexts, e.g. what sorts of things conduce to health, or to physical strength, but what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general. An indication of this is that we also call those in a specific field wise if they succeed in calculating well towards some specific worthy end on matters where no exact technique applies. So in fact the description 'wise' belongs in general to the person who is good at deliberation.*"[64]

---

[63] I here consider the translation of *φρόνησις* as 'moral judgment', although it has been also translated as 'practical wisdom' or 'prudence'. I prefer 'judgment' because it better entails the deliberation process typical of *φρόνησις*.

[64] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a24-a33. I here refer to the translation given by Christopher Rowe in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translation, introduction and commentary by Broadie S. and Rowe C., Oxford University Press, 2002.

Moreover, moral judgment is different from *systematic knowledge* (such as the hard sciences) or *technical expertise* (such as craftsmanship):

"*it remains therefore for it* [φρόνησις] *to be a true disposition accompanied by rational prescription, relating to action in the sphere of what is good and bad for human beings*"[65].

In virtue of this understanding of the role of moral judgment, we can conclude that it plays a major role in moral justification, i.e. the actualization and the application of a moral reason to action. Judgment is not necessarily the source of the justification in itself, since practical Reason is the faculty that highlights the moral reasons there are. Nevertheless, as we have underlined in the previous section, morality does not speak in a single voice and listening to it might be puzzling and disheartening at times. Moral judgment plays here a fundamental role in the definition of which of the available sources of morality is responsible for the identification of moral reasons. Moreover, moral judgment is responsible of the application of reasons to action. In general, moral judgment (φρόνησις) is the faculty of moral interpretation, be it the comprehension of how to apply a reason to action or be it the discernment between conflicting moral sources. As I will point out later, in a complex moral system the latter feature is especially important.

At the present point, I have already sketched three fundamental features of moral judgment: a) moral judgment is always placed into a particular moral experience[66]; b) moral judgment deals with the interpretation of moral principles or, generally, of moral reasons; c) moral judgment is essential to

---

[65] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b5-b7.
[66] It does not need to be the actual or present situation. When we reflect on what to do morally, we picture ourselves into some potential scenario so to understand what we would do. In this regard, in the first chapter, we have talked about Mandelbaum's *removed* moral judgments.

the identification of the relevant moral source and to its application (*Moral Justification*). Let us analyze these three features in some further detail.

Moral Judgment is a faculty that necessarily needs to be exercised within experience. This claim is fully in line with the Aristotelian understanding of φρόνησις. Moral agency is given in the experience of our moral lives, as such moral judgment is the faculty entitled to reconsider each particular case in order to deliberate what is the right thing to do. Moral agency cannot be determined a priori once and for all[67]. This feature of morality has often been neglected by many philosophical traditions and, for this reason, it represents one of the aspects in which Larmore highlights the need of a more complex vision. Since morality is inevitably characterized by experience, we need to reassign the leading role of practical Reason and moral judgment. Larmore's 'soft Platonism' about the nature of moral reasons underlines the non-eliminability of experience from any talk about the nature of morality. Reason is the faculty that acknowledges reasons from how things are in a non-naturalistic conception of reality. As such, Reason reads experience. Similarly, moral judgment is a faculty that is exercised in the experience and developed through the practice within experience[68]. This is the 'Aristotelian insight' of the first dimension of moral complexity: we need to reestablish the centrality of moral judgment as it responds to the peculiarities of the given situation[69].

---

[67] "[...] *things in the sphere of action and things that bring advantage have nothing stable about them, any more than things that bring health. But if what one says universally is like this, what one says about particulars is even more lacking in precision; for it does not fall either under any expertise or under any set of rules – the agents themselves have to consider the circumstances relating the occasion, just as happens in the case of medicine, too, and of navigation.*" in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104a5-a10.

[68] Remember that for Aristotle moral judgment is a faculty that it is not given, but rather developed through education and examples from the community of the *polis*. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b30f.

[69] "*Reacting against what he perceived to be Plato's belief that virtue consists solely in the knowledge of general principles, Aristotle protested that moral*

What is the role of moral judgment? I have briefly underlined that another relevant feature of this faculty is that it deals with moral principles and, more generally, with moral reasons. Nevertheless, it would be reducing to talk of judgment as the faculty that merely *sees* what rules and principles point out[70]. Although sometimes rules and principles suffice to themselves to pinpoint what it is the right thing to do, most of the cases present a much more complex scenario. We have already analyzed how cases such as being grateful might confront the agent with a scenario that requires much more than the acknowledgement of the moral reasons there are to show gratitude. Even if the agent recognizes to have reasons to be grateful, how is this gratitude to be realized successfully? Judgment is thus the faculty that deals with rules, principles and, generally, moral reasons and it is concerned with their satisfactory application[71]. As Larmore underlined, this is the centrality of moral judgment that we need to reestablish if we want to take into account the complexity of our moral experience. In a clear Aristotelic spirit, taking care of the application of a rule means being aware that the expression of virtue consists in avoiding any excess and deficiency of behavior[72]. This sort of operation requires an understanding of moral judgment (φρόνησις), as the faculty that manages the application of moral reasons. It is interesting to note how this understanding of judgment resembles the concept of *fittingness*

---

action depends on the exercise of judgment in applying these principles to particular circumstances. Judgment itself, he stressed, is not an activity governed by general rules; instead it must always respond to the peculiarities of the given situation" in Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, p.15.

[70] The main philosophical traditions in moral philosophy have had the tendency to reduce the role of judgment to a mere auxiliary of rules and principles. See Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.5.

[71] Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.7.

[72] An operation that requires some adjustments *"This much, then, shows that the intermediate disposition is to be praised in all circumstances, but that one should sometimes incline towards excess, sometimes towards deficiency; for in this way we shall most easily hit upon what is intermediate, and good in practice"* Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109b24-27.

so central to the phenomenological view of Maurice Mandelbaum. As analyzed in the first chapter, *fittingness* is the relation between an appropriate course of action and the end that the agent is pursuing[73]. The ability to bring about this sort of relation is precisely, I believe, the role of the faculty of judgment. If I recognize that I have a reason to do *x* and this reason does not come with enough evidence of what I have to do in order to fulfil it, moral judgment comes in and tries to establish a relation of *fittingness* between what I have to do and the course of action that would satisfy this need. I here want to underline again how moral judgment is the faculty of moral interpretation, i.e. it is responsible of interpreting the situation and understanding which course of action *fits* it according to the moral reasons the agent has. In this sense, the activity of judgment goes beyond what rules and principles strictly tell us, trying to understand how to adjust them and make them effective in the given circumstances[74].

Finally, a further feature of the moral judgment that needs be underlined is an aspect particularly relevant when we consider the moral justification of an act (and especially so within a complex moral system). It appears clear how the role of moral judgment in a complex system is at least twofold. I have previously underlined the first one: once practical Reason has done its job by acknowledging the moral reason there are, moral judgment is in charge of applying them to the situation. This application might require a greater or lesser role of judgment according to how much the reasons are explicit about what to do. However, in a pluralist system, the agent might happen to have more than a single reason to act and, on top of that, these reasons might eventually enter into conflict. I think that we can here identify a second role of moral judgment in the situation of a conflict between reasons: adjudicating which of the different sources of morality has to be finally considered. Larmore himself acknowledges this further role of judgment:

---

[73] Mandelbaum M., *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, p.64.
[74] Larmore C., *ibidem*, pp.8-9.

"*Of course, we do possess higher-order moral principles such as utility, or Kantian universalizability, one of whose tasks is to adjudicate moral conflicts. But many times the verdicts rendered by these higher-order principles for a particular case diverge, and then – because there are no higher rules to be invoked and because no* absolute *ranking of these principles is plausible – judgment may have to direct us how to choose*"[75].

This understanding of moral judgment guarantees that, even if the situation becomes increasingly complex and conflicting, we do not need to give up the chance to grasp a reasonable decision. Once we abandon the idea of a monistic structure of morality in favor of a pluralistic framework, moral conflict is a recurring phenomenon in our moral experience. Although not all conflicts are solvable, moral judgment can guide us through the heterogeneous world of morality[76].

The question of moral justification is a focal one for a pluralist system. The issue becomes even more pressing when it comes to the resolution of moral conflicts (something that pluralist systems frequently face). As I have underlined in the first chapter, the difficulty of a clear-cut procedure for moral justification represents the major criticism that supporters of moral monism raise against pluralists. The claim is the following: if we have to abandon the unique moral standard that makes moral commensurability possible, how do we adjudicate conflicts? The best answer to this problem is, I believe, that of broadening our idea of reasonable solution of a conflict. When no further consideration can be drawn from our moral reasons in order to solve the conflict, it does not necessarily mean that what we decide to do[77] is irrational or arbitrary. Moral judgment, once we arrive to the point of a moral conflict, can still provide a reasonable choice about what to do. However, the

---

[75] Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.9.
[76] Larmore C., *ibidem*, pp.10-11.
[77] Granted that we ultimately need to act and that we cannot benefit from the suspension of judgment.

only way to accommodate this point is to broaden our idea of what makes a moral act the outcome of a reasonable deliberation. In this terms, moral deliberation cannot be the mere outcome of moral reasons (as they can conflict), but, further, moral judgment plays here a fundamental role. Thomas Nagel shares this idea of the reasonable solution of moral conflicts:

"*The fact that one cannot say why a certain decision is the correct one, given a particular balance of conflicting reasons, does not mean that the claim to correctness is meaningless.* [...] *What makes this possible is* judgment – *essentially the faculty Aristotle described as practical wisdom, which reveals itself over time in individual decisions rather than in the enunciation of general principles. It will not always yield a solution: there are true practical dilemmas that have no solution, and there are also conflicts so complex that judgment cannot operate confidently. But in many cases it can be relied on to take up the slack that remains beyond the limits of explicit rational argument*"[78].

We need to push rational deliberation as far as possible, but once we get to a moral conflict we do not need to give up the possibility of identifying a reasonable thing to do. In these cases, judgment is the only viable option left to get a reasonable decision when the situation makes trade-offs between different moral sources complicated.

The peculiar thing about judgment is that it is a faculty that needs to be developed through time and experience. That is why Aristotle underlined the importance of education and habituation of the youngsters, who needs to live in a society that nurtures their moral character[79]. With experience, we use to say, we become wiser and it becomes easier for us to find a moral justification of our acts. The complexity of morality might

---

[78] Nagel T., *The Fragmentation of Value*, in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp.134-135.
[79] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b30f.

be discouraging at times, but judgment makes it easier (but not necessarily easy) to face it. This is what allow us to manage complexity with less hardship, the work of a qualified and experienced moral judgment can guide the agent through the adversities of moral experience.

In sum, moral justification in a complex moral system is granted by the combined work of two faculties (practical Reason and moral judgment) in a three steps process: 1. Practical Reason acknowledges the moral reasons there are from the moral point of view; 2. Moral judgment picks the most relevant source of morality by interpreting the situation; 3. Moral judgement defines the most efficient application of the reasons to the given circumstances. While the work of acknowledgement of moral reasons delivered by practical Reason is obligatory (otherwise we would not be able to reflect from the moral point of view), the dual role of judgment is not. Moral reasons can sometimes be straightforwardly clear about what to do and why to do so, thus, there is no further need of the moral interpretation provided by judgment. In the same way, if moral reasons happen to be clear about the course of action that needs be undertaken, there would be no conflict between the sources of morality and the interpretive role of judgment would not be necessary. To the contrary, sometimes the situation might be so complex that the agent faces a true moral dilemma, making moral judgment useless.

The approach of Moral complexity entails the acknowledgment of how a suitable moral framework requires the centrality of moral judgment in the justificatory process. This approach does not make morality a subject that merely governs human agency with a set of rules deliberated a priori. Morality springs from the combined work of different faculties and the interpretation of the various and heterogeneous sources of morality. This process is something that cannot but take place in our everyday moral experience.

PART II:

SUPEREROGATION IN
NORMATIVE ETHICS:
DEFINITION,
JUSTIFICATION
AND NEW PERSPECTIVES

SUPEREROGATION: WHY, WHAT, AND HOW

1. *Why* Supererogation?

In this second part, I will focus primarily on the analysis of some of the major problems related to the concept of supererogation. As it will hopefully become clear at the end, the reason of this shift in the argument is that supererogation exemplifies well the complexity typical of morality. In this way, I will define supererogation as a *complex* concept that can be successfully supported by a *complex* system. As such, in the present work, supererogation and moral complex systems stand on an interdependent and mutual relation. I take supererogation as a good expression of the ultimately complex nature of moral thought and, at the same time, a moral complex system as the moral framework that better satisfies the necessities of the justification of the concept of supererogation. Most importantly however, both the concept and the system rely on a preliminary assumption: moral complexity is something given in the phenomenological analysis of our moral experience. From the phenomenological perspective, the moral life of the regular agent appears heterogeneous and fragmented. Consequently, pluralism appears to be the normative structure that better acknowledges this complexity. Likewise, supererogation represents a complex concept that further expresses such complexity.

I have already dedicated the first part of the work to the analysis of the need of a complex moral system. It is now worthwhile spending a few words on the necessity of having a moral category such as supererogation. For now, it will be enough to broadly conceive a supererogatory act as one that is morally good, but not required. Supererogation, then, is that category of the good that stands above (or beyond) the category of the morally obligatory. So, why would we need such a

category? Susan Wolf argued in her well-known article[1] that moral perfection is not the proper ultimate moral goal. Perfection in the moral sphere (or *moral sainthood* as Wolf calls it) prevents the agent from benefitting of several other valuable things in life. This is, briefly, the main argument: if one dedicates her entire life to morality, it will be impossible for her to appreciate many other valuable non-moral things in life. Morality, if taken to the extreme, prevents the agent from living a valuable life because it annihilates the possibilities of benefitting of other goods. For example, someone who devotes his time entirely to the feeding of the hungry, surely it will not spend much time learning how to play the piano or reading an enjoyable novel[2]. This limitation of the other non-moral aspects of life can affect negatively the overall consideration of what it is to live a good life. The life of a moral saint will lack many non-moral valuable aspects that, according to common sense, constitute a life lived well. It is not simply the fact that a moral saint would miss some important aspects of a well-rounded life; the point is that those lacks would concern something valuable (although not from a moral point of view), the moral saint would lack in some valuable aspect of life[3]. Moreover, according to Wolf, there is something particularly problematic with this constitutively *moral* extremism. She claims that, while every sort of idealistic extremism might comport some sacrifice in other aspects of life, the moral saint represents a case where this lacks are brought about in a questionable way. One might think that someone who devotes an entire life to become the greatest pianist on earth or to break the record on the 100 meters would incur in the same sort of lacks in several valuable aspects of her life. Accordingly, *any* sort of extremism of a single value would appear to be as problematic as the case of the moral saint[4]. However, Wolf underlines how the most problematic features of value extremism are typical of the moral

---

[1] Wolf S., *Moral Saints*, in "The Journal of Philosophy" 79(1982), no.8, pp.418-439.
[2] Wolf S., *ibidem*, p.421.
[3] Wolf S., *ibidem*, p.426.
[4] Wolf S., *ibidem*, p.423.

saint[5]: a) differently from other sorts of extremisms, the moral saint seem to be giving up many valuable things not in virtue of a *personal choice* (such as in the case of the musician or the Olympic athlete), but rather in virtue of a moral *imperative*; b) the aspects of life that the moral saint gives up are not neglected as a result of a trade-off, but rather because it seems that the saint lacks some sort of ability to perceive and recognize their value. Let me further explain these two points. Wolf thinks that if our ultimate concern is always moral, it will result in the loss of value (or incapability of recognizing it) of any non-moral good. As such, picking always the moral good over the other non-moral goods is not the consequence of a trade-off between fully recognized values. All non-moral values (in virtue of the espousal of moral perfection as the ultimate standard) are ultimately not values. Then, the moral saint is not someone who *chooses* what to do, but someone who listens to an *imperative* (the only kind of value allowed) about what one needs to do. As such, the moral saint is an undesirable perspective. In this specific problem of the moral saint, I disagree with Wolf. I believe that the relevant objection to moral perfection is that *any* extreme of a single value (be it moral or non-moral) will generate a loss in the achievement of other values and it will, thus, jeopardize the well-roundedness of the single person. It might be true that the exclusive evaluation from the moral point will fail to consider many valuable things in life. But, for example, the same applies to the professional athlete who considers all the aspects of her life from the "athletic" point of view, which considers valuable only the things that are functional to a better athletic performance. As a matter of fact, this is what leads to cases where athletes use performance-enhancing drugs. These athletes simply fail to consider the value of things other than those that appear relevant from the "athletic" point of view. Accordingly, the use performance-enhancing substances appears permissible as long as it improves their abilities or speeds up the achievement of certain goals. The real problem of this course of action is that this athlete fails to consider other kinds of point of view (such as the

---

[5] Wolf S., *ibidem,* pp.423-424.

moral one). It seems to me that the exclusive consideration of *any* point of view might lead to the same problematic failure of appreciating other values important for the flourishing of our well-roundedness. This does not seem to be a constitutive *moral* problem. Any extreme might turn out to have bad side effects, although it is not the exalted value to be bad in itself. The real problematic fact that derives from these attitudes is the loss of the well-roundedness so important to the common sense understanding of a life lived well. It is interesting to note here that this idea of well-roundedness of a life lived well resembles the Aristotelian conception of a virtuous life. Virtue is for Aristotle the mean between scarcity and excess of the expression of a value:

"[Moral virtue] *is a mean between two vices, the one involving excess and the other deficiency, and that it is so because it is such as to aim at what is midway in emotions and in actions, has been sufficiently stated. That is why it is no easy task to be virtuous. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle*"[6].

A life characterized by some kind of excess (or deficiency) is a life that seems to be missing something valuable. In this respect, I share the central point of Wolf's argument: the extreme of a value (or its maximization at all costs) cannot be taken as the ultimate standard for a moral theory.

It is important to underline, however, that Wolf does not think that moral sainthood is a bad thing in itself; moral saints are extremely praiseworthy for the way they conduct their lives. Claiming that moral perfection cannot be considered the standard to which we need to conform, it is not to limit the possibilities of bringing about the good[7]. Saying that moral perfection is not the most efficient ideal for a life lived well does not mean that, from the moral point of view, moral sainthood cannot be eventually considered praiseworthy. This possibility of evaluation can be explained by the adoption of multiple points of view. The moral point of view is not the only point of

---

[6] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109a21-26. I have here used the translation contained in Barnes J., Kenny A. (ed. by), *Aristotle's Ethics. Writings From the Complete Works*, Princeton University Press, 2014.
[7] Wolf S., *ibidem*, p.432.

view from which the agent evaluates. According to Wolf, there is the *point of view of individual perfection* from which we decide what it means to live a good life. From this point of view, morality constitutes a valuable, but limited feature of our lives. In this terms, morality has no priority over other kinds of evaluation, the idea of living a life well is shaped by the *perfectionist* point of view and, as such, from outside the moral perspective[8]. The moral point of view is not the ultimate evaluative standard and this is what makes it possible for a person to be "*perfectly wonderful without being perfectly moral*"[9].

Although, as I have said, I completely agree with Wolf on the inadequateness of moral perfection as the ultimate moral standard, I believe that she did not give a satisfactory account of how supererogation needs to be conceived. The adoption of two different points of view fails to acknowledge how supererogation has to be understood as the "moral beyond" essentially from within the moral perspective and not merely from without. Let me explain this point. Wolf thinks that, if one follows all the way through the moral point of view, one cannot but aim at moral sainthood. If we do not want to incur in this problematic situation, we need to let the moral point of view go and evaluate from some other alternative all-things-considered point of view. Thus, accordingly, *always* following the moral point of view becomes the supererogatory thing. However, it is seems to me that this misses the point or rather it leaves halfway done the task of playing down the reach of morality on our lives (a task, I believe, for which supererogation has been introduced). I think that we need to understand supererogation from *within* morality, in order to redefine the limits of the morally obligatory[10]. Deciding how to live a life well is the ultimate task of the moral perspective, there is no need to assign this task to some other point of view[11]. What Wolf says

---

[8] Wolf S., *ibidem*, p.437-438.
[9] Wolf S., *ibidem*, p.436.
[10] A task that I will directly try to accomplish only in Chapter V.
[11] This is not to say that points of view different from the moral do not exist. The point at issue here is that the moral perspective in sufficient to a

is that the supererogatory trait is evaluating *always* from the moral point of view. This is her argument for limiting the reach of morality. However, the category of supererogatory acts, tries to highlight how this task can be achieved *within* the moral point of view. What we really need to do is to find a way to limit the demands of bringing about the good within the limits of the right. Indeed, the attitude of the "as much good as possible" is not the most efficient theory of the *right* (while it might be an effective approach to a theory of the *good*).

A similar attack to Wolf's conception of supererogation as based on two distinct points of view (a moral one and a non-moral one) is that presented by Jonathan Dancy. Wolf's supererogation is a misunderstanding of what this peculiar moral concept should represent:

"*It is not that there can be actions which have the highest moral value but which are morally permitted not to perform. Wolf is not a strong supererogationist.* [...] *For her, the supererogatory action is one we are morally required to perform, but this requirement is not visible from the point of view of individual perfection*"[12].

In these terms, a non-saint turns out to be a defective moral agent from the moral point of view. However, this is exactly what misunderstands the role of the concept of supererogation, which, conversely, wants to acknowledge the fact that someone who is not a saint is not *morally* defective either. Supererogation is the moral category of the morally good, but *morally optional.* Wolf thinks that the optionality relies in the espousal of the moral point of view. The supererogatory act, instead, is something whose optionality needs to be understood *within* the moral sphere. There is no need to draw upon the existence of two different points of view, one inside and one outside morality. As Dancy puts it, there is no need to accept a perspective *other than that of morality* to recognize that our moral theories do not necessarily aim at the moral ideal life[13].

---

satisfactory interpretation of supererogation and, most of all, of what it means to live a life lived well.

[12] Dancy J., *Moral Reasons*, Blackwell, 1992, p.135.

[13] Dancy J., *ibidem*, p.137.

In conclusion, I believe that the concept of supererogation is important because it gives to our moral theories the theoretical depth that would be problematic to deny. David Heyd beautifully claimed that "*the good is open-ended in a way that the bad is not*"[14] and I think that to take into account this feature of morality means, first and foremost, setting the proper space to supererogation. If the morally good has no limits (*open-ended*) and morality places no boundaries to which extend we are obligated to bring about moral goodness, our moral systems would always be condemned to set never-reaching goals. The concept of supererogation works as to prevent this to happen. Moreover, note that I am talking about the undesirableness of moral goodness (to its full extent) as a possible moral requirement, a remark that is quite different from saying that morality sets some ideals to which one should aspire as much as possible (which seems to be a plausible inclination instead). In my opinion, the point at issue is the rather popular idea that the good *needs* to be maximized. As a matter of fact, if we take moral requirements to be dealing with the maximization of the good, the life of the moral agent would be frustrating at best. If the morally good is open-ended and we are required to maximize the good, morality will be transformed into an endless run. To avoid this unpleasant scenario it would mean to leave some moral room for the category of supererogation, mitigating, in this way, the reach of our moral obligations. This operation will ultimately mean to clearly distinguish the *morally good* (open-ended) from the *morally right* (morally obligatory). Thus, supererogation lies in the conceptual space granted by the distinction between the morally good and the morally right. A theory that identifies the good with the right would be too narrow and, after all, a truly moralistic one. This is the downside of all those theories that conform to the motto "good-ought tie up". In fact, in order to avoid the problematic scenario where all the good things are at the same time obligatory (rather than simply desirable), we need to limit the reach of moral

---

[14] "*…The extremely good cannot be required, but the extremely bad (vicious) is the prime target of prohibition*" Heyd D., "Supererogation", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 edition), Zalta E. N. (ed. by), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/supererogation/>.

obligations. We need a category of morally good acts that lies beyond duty, otherwise moral perfection will become the standard to which our theories would need to conform. This operation will not, as someone might think, reduce the contribution of morality to the minimalistic standard of the right. In fact, in this way morality will still deal with the broader category of the morally good, but in a different fashion. In these regards, the morally good springs from the agent's gratuitous caring for the others, beyond the mere boundaries of the obligatory. This is the true spirit of the moral act from the moral point of view. Reducing the reach of the morally obligatory will not decrease the purport of morality in our lives. Contrary, a less demanding category of the *right* will open up the possibility for the authentic morally *good*. This is, ultimately, the moral *less is more*. The less demanding the category of the *right* becomes the more possibilities of gratuitously caring for the others are open to the moral agent.

2. *What* is Supererogation? A first definition of the concept

James Urmson was the first contemporary author that recognized a philosophical urgency of giving the proper theoretical space to supererogation. In 1958 he published his seminal article entitled *Saints and Heroes*[15], where he deals with the category that lies "beyond the call of duty" (interestingly enough without even mentioning the word *supererogation*). In these terms, *sainthood* and *heroism* are categories (far from having any intrinsic religious implication) that clearly represent a moral behavior that cannot be strictly required of the moral agent. In particular, Urmson tried to underline how a schematic and rigorous classification of the categories of moral worth of actions[16] in virtue of *moral permissibility* was unable to fit the actions of saints and heroes in. As long as we differentiate between the *obligatory* (what we

---

[15] Urmson J., *Saints and Heroes*, in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, A. Melden (ed. by), University of Washington Press, pp. 198-216.
[16] As particularly characterized by the understanding of the deontic logic of his time. Remember the influential article by Von Wright G. H., *Deontic Logic*, in "Mind", 60(1951), issue 237, pp. 1-15.

ought to do), the *permissible* (or the morally indifferent) and the *forbidden* (what we ought not to do), there is no space for those morally worthy acts well exemplified by saintly and heroic behavior. Supererogation is not morally indifferent, yet not morally obligatory. A three-fold partition of morality, which acknowledges the obligatory as the only category of positive moral worth, cannot but fail to acknowledge the moral relevance of supererogatory acts. Urmson, then, concluded that, given the undeniable existence in our everyday life of acts of this kind, moral theories have to take into account the importance of this category of action and leave it some conceptual space. Along these lines, the issue regarding the theoretical relevance of supererogatory acts evolved and gave rise to the contemporary debate still vivid nowadays.

In the years following Urmson's paper, a worth noting attempt to solve the "problem of supererogation"[17] was that offered by Roderick Chisholm in a series of articles published in the sixties[18]. In order to move on from the original three-folded classification and to support both supererogation's optionality and its moral worth, he suggested expanding the degree of complexity of the conceptual scheme of ethics. Following the example of some authors before him[19], Chisholm offers a scheme that considers both *performance* and *non-performance* of the act (commission and omission). This first feature underlines how supererogation is a moral category that evaluates a specific kind of acts, rather than a certain disposition or behavior of the agent. It is always the specific act

---

[17] These terms usually refer to the impossibility to understand supererogation through the categories of the early deontic logic.

[18] Chisholm R., *Supererogation and Offence: A Conceptual Scheme for Ethics*, in "Ratio" 5(1963), pp.1-14; Chisholm R., *The Ethics of Requirement*, in "American Philosophical Quarterly" 1(1964), no.2, pp.147-153; Chisholm R., Sosa E., *Intrinsic Preferability and the Problem of Supererogation*, in "Synthese", 16(1966), pp.321-331.

[19] In particular, he focused on the similarly aimed work of Alois Höfler, Alexius Meinong and Ernst Schwarz. See Höfler A., in Abhängigkeitsbeziehungen zwischen Abhängigkeitsbeziehungen, *Sitzungsberichte der kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien,* bd. CLXXXI (1917), pp.1-56; Meinong A., *Psychologisch-ethische Untersuchungen zur Wert-theorie*, Graz, 1894; Schwarz E., *Über den Wert, das Soll, und das richtige Werthalten*, Graz, 1934.

that is considered more than duty requires, rather than a certain way the agent is or behaves. Moreover, his classification of moral acts is based on the moral worth of the performance (or non-performance) of the given act. Accordingly, an act can be *good, bad* or morally indifferent (that is *neutral*[20]). Finally, combining this three-fold classification of the value with the *performance* and *non-performance* of the act, gives rise to nine possible descriptions of moral acts. In this way, Chisholm tries to underline what the previous approach of deontic logic failed to acknowledge: the optionality of supererogation and, at the same time, its moral worth. Plainly Chisholm holds the following:

"*I have said that to determine the moral status of any particular act we must decide (a) whether its performance would be good, bad or neither good nor bad, and (b) whether its non-performance would be good, bad or neither good nor bad*"[21].

In order to clarify this point it is helpful using a schematic illustration of the various possibilities[22]:

	P	NP	
1	b	b	Totally offensive
2	b	n	Offence of commission
3	b	g	Forbidden
4	n	b	Offense of omission
5	n	n	Totally indifferent
6	n	g	Supererogatory omission

---

[20] The choice of using the terms *good* and *bad* is not free from possible criticisms as pointed out by Michael Stocker: "*he must not try to define 'good' and 'bad' in terms of each other – or, what is the same thing, in terms of some third concept such as ought to be. Doing so simply collapses the definition of 'obligatory' into that of 'good' and it further allows (requires) the fatal interpretation of 'permitted'* ". In Stocker M., *Professor Chisholm on Supererogation and Offence*, in "Philosophical Studies", 18(1967), p.93.
[21] Chisholm, *Supererogation and Offence: A Conceptual Scheme for Ethics*, p.12.
[22] The moral worth of the act is represented by the letters *g* (good), *b* (bad) and *n* (neutral). On the top of the diagram the P stands for *performance* and *NP* for non-performance. A very similar scheme can be found in Chisholm R., *ibidem*, p.12.

7	g	b	Obligatory
8	g	n	Supererogatory
9	g	g	Totally supererogatory

This scheme points out the full spectrum of moral acts from the point of view of deontic logic. The richest moral theory would be one that is able to accommodate all of them. A defective moral theory would fail to acknowledge the majority of these categories. Specifically acts number six, eight and nine are those dedicated to identify the different ways in which it is possible to go beyond the call of duty. The *totally supererogatory* is an act whose both omission and performance is good. As Chisholm himself referred to them, it is a *state of blessedness*. Correspondingly, *supererogatory commission* and *supererogatory omission* define those acts whose performance (or non-performance) is *good* and whose non-performance (or performance) is *neutral* (morally indifferent). They both share the status of being *optional* (whether it is *optional omission* or *optional commission*) and they both are *morally good* in the case they are carried out (whether it is *good omission* or *good commission*). This classification saves supererogation from being considered morally indifferent, assigning its performance (or non-performance) to the more adequate category of the *morally neutral* (i.e. optional).

Interestingly enough, this schematization highlights the existence of an antithetical category to supererogation: *offence*[23]. As such, this concerns those acts whose commission (or omission) is bad and whose omission (or commission) is morally optional. Alleged examples of these kinds of act are, for instance, taking too long to leave the table at the restaurant knowing that someone is waiting or refusing to tell your friend where she can buy that jacket she has been strongly looking for.

---

[23] Later referred to as "suberogatory". See Driver J. *The Suberogatory*, in "Australasian Journal of Philosophy", 70(1992), pp.286-295; McNamara P., *Supererogation, Inside and Out: Toward an Adequate Scheme for Common-Sense Morality*, in Timmons M. (ed. by), Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics (Vol. 1), Oxford University Press, 2011, pp.202-235.

While this scheme of ethics is appealing for its logical symmetry and its explicative power, it is worth asking whether it goes too far in the delineating some apparently unusual moral categories. Particularly, this applies to the categories that describe the so-called *offences*. Is it ever the case that we can bring about some venial bad thing without being, at the same time, morally reprehensible (i.e. morally blameworthy but not morally forbidden)? It seems that, morally speaking, the categories of the good and the bad do not work in a symmetrical way. While, as we have seen in the previous section, it makes sense to conceive a category of the good that does not limitlessly require the agent to promote the good, the same cannot be said of the category of the bad. The avoidance of actively bringing about some instance of the bad is obligatory, that is, the bad is forbidden to any degree. The way morality appears to work is that of negatively forbidding the bad and positively promoting the good. In these terms, the promotion of the good is not something that *necessarily* enters the sphere of requirement (as the concept of supererogation testifies). Contrary the negative prohibition of the bad ('do not do *x*', 'it is never the case to bring about *y*', etc.) always belongs to the sphere of moral requirements. This feature of morality explains why we struggle so much in finding convincing examples of *offences* intended as the morally blameworthy, but not morally forbidden. If we keep in mind that these categories explicitly deal with the evaluation of acts, there seems to be nothing of intrinsic moral disvalue that should not be morally reprehensible at the same time. It is difficult to conceive an example of a morally bad act that is *per se* excusable. Commonly the achievement of morally bad acts might become excusable in virtue of the performance of some other proportionally bigger morally good act. In this case, then, the offence is just side effect of some other morally good act[24] and never a moral act excusable *per se*. Taking too long at leaving the table at the restaurant is always morally forbidden

---

[24] In this regard I refer to the interesting doctrine (or principle) of Double Effect. See McIntyre A., *Doctrine of Double Effect*, in "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy" (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/double-effect/.

if deliberately done for no good reason. The same can be excused only in virtue of some other moral act that it is judged proportionally bigger. Think for example of a case where I am chatting at the table with my best friend who I have not seen in ten years. A proportionate delay in leaving the table, while negative for those waiting in line, might be excused. It seems to me that, the fact that offence can be conceived at best as a side effect of some other good act undermines whatever conception of offence as an independent category of act, which is considered *per se* morally optional despite its morally bad connotation[25].

The conceptual symmetry between supererogation and offence might be broken when we realize that there is no 'offensive' counterpart of the heroic or saintly kind of supererogation. While supererogation's optionality and value is well exemplified by acts that greatly exceed the demands of moral laws, the same cannot be said of the antithetical category of those acts that while greatly bad are morally excusable[26]. This point underlines the typical asymmetry of morality. To this regard let me recall once again the illuminating passage from Heyd:

"*By its nature, a moral system does not leave patently bad action as morally permissible. In that respect, good and bad, the virtuous and the vicious, are* not *symmetrical from the deontic point of view: the good is open-ended in a way that the bad is not. The extremely good cannot be required, but the extremely bad (vicious) is the prime target of prohibition*"[27].

---

[25] Another interesting explanation of the fact of offence has been offered by the introduction of the idea of *inconsiderateness*. See Ullmann-Margalit E., *Considerateness*, in "Iyyun" 60(2011), pp.205-244.

[26] Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p.128.

[27] Heyd D., "Supererogation", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 edition), Zalta E. N. (ed. by), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/supererogation/>. I acknowledge that the issue of *suberogation* would require a much deeper analysis than these few lines. I leave this task to a future and more specific work.

Upon a deeper reflection on the categories proposed by the broader approach of deontic logic proposed by Chisholm, the same category of the *totally supererogatory* (as its *offensive* counterpart) appears to be less plausible. Similarly to offences, it seems problematic to find a satisfying example of a supererogatory act whose both performance and non-performance would be good[28]. In these terms, the two categories would be logically possible, but factually empty. Moreover, it has been claimed that the *totally supererogatory* is problematic because it would coincide with the morally indifferent, since it is indifferent (to the achievement of a supererogatory outcome) if the agent does *x* or *y*. I do not think (as Heyd does[29]) that this is the real point at issue. In fact, the so-called *totally supererogatory* acts are not *morally* indifferent, since they will bring about some *moral* good indeed (either *x* or *y*). Rather, the aspect of these acts that is characterized by (non-moral) indifference is which, among the options, the agents decides to perform. Again, it is indifferent if she does *x* or *y*, since this will have equally good consequences no matter what she decides. I think that the real problem with this category of supererogatory acts (other than their factual emptiness) is that they fail to be actual instances of supererogation. Specifically, an act of supererogation is characterized by the fact that the agent might freely decide *not* to bring about *any* instance of the good. Cases of totally supererogatory acts seems to have lost this freedom of performance (and omission), given that the agent will somehow bring about some good (she is "condemned to the good" so to say). These acts (which we might call *blessed* acts in lack of a better denomination) fully lose their optionality and so, as we will later see with a fuller definition of the concept, they lose the special moral connotation that assigns their moral value.

At a more general level, the problem of supererogation and deontic logic reveals an interesting truth. Deontic logic was

---

[28] The fact that Chisholm himself can do without the two extreme categories of the totally supererogatory and the totally offensive in a later article written with Ernest Sosa is an indication of their theoretical uselessness. See Chisholm R., Sosa E., *Intrinsic Preferability and the Problem of Supererogation*, in "Synthese", 16(1966), pp.329-330.

[29] Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.123n.

conceived, from the outset, as a system based on *permission* and, as such, it was concerned with rights and duties. I this regard, Millard Schumaker published a compelling remark about the *problem of supererogation*[30]. It has been assign to deontic logic too wide a scope, since it cannot give an account of the whole range of acts relevant to morality. The fact that it cannot differentiate between supererogation and the morally indifferent is a clear example of this. The reason for this limit is that from the standpoint of permission, these two categories *cannot* be distinguished. The morally relevant cannot be reduced or subsumed to what is relevant to the deontic schematization of acts. We can avoid this by acknowledging that morality is much more than a subject based on *permission.* Therefore:

"[…] *deontic logic is not the logic of morality; it is instead the logic of rights and duties, the logic of right conduct; and that is neither required nor forbidden is therefore shown to be indifferent only with respect to rights and duties; it is not necessarily indifferent to morality itself. The fact of supererogation, then, reveals that there is more to morality than right conduct* […]"[31].

This explains why every definition of supererogation that tries to define it along with the categories of deontic logic, fails to acknowledge its moral status together with its moral optionality.

The most important and, at the same time, fascinating aspect of the concept of supererogation is that it is a phenomenon that reminds us how the good exceeds the right in many ways and degrees. This fact is particularly important since it focuses on a fundamental theoretical distinction for the vast majority of the moral theories: the *axiological* level and the *deontic* level. These are 'the two faces of morality': the one that refers to goodness, ideals and virtues and the one that refers to rights, duties and obligations. As I have underlined above, the former is open-ended in a way that the latter is not and this explains

---

[30] Schumaker M., *Deontic Morality and the Problem of Supererogation*, in "Philosophical Studies", 23(1972), pp.427-428.
[31] Schumaker M., *ibidem*, p.428.

the possibility to go beyond the sphere of requirements in pursuing moral goodness. The relevance of these two levels of morality give sometimes rise to a terminology that distinguish between the minimal standard of ethics (*minimal ethics*) and some other ideal or broader category (*maximal ethics*). It would be wrong, however, to consider these two categories as separate subjects; one more rigorous and notably identifiable with a legalistic conception of morality and the other dedicated to the promotion of goodness and the aspiration to achieve moral ideals. They simply represents the two faces of the same moral subject or, in other terms, they represent the different degrees of achievement of the normative dimension of our lives. The former is the level of the moral requirement, which is *expected* by all moral agents. The latter is the level of moral goodness, which is simply *desirable* of all moral agents. Ultimately, morality cannot be merely reduced to its deontic aspects; the *good* is vastly broader than the *right* and the fact of supererogation reminds us of this.

In what follows, I will present the definition of supererogation given by David Heyd in his *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*[32]. While it would certainly be possible to improve the definition in different ways, I take this to be most exhaustive interpretation of the relevant aspects of the concept. Specifically, according to Heyd, four features define supererogation as follows:

"*an act is supererogatory if and only if (1) It is neither obligatory nor forbidden; (2) Its omission is not wrong, and does not deserve sanction or criticism – either formal or informal; (3) It is morally good, both by virtue of its (intended) consequences and by virtue of its intrinsic value (being beyond the call of duty); (4) It is done voluntarily for the sake of someone else's good, and is thus meritorious*"[33]

These four conditions all highlight relevant aspects of supererogation. In sum, they are: optionality, the moral non-

---

[32] Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1982.
[33] Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.115.

imputability in case of omission, the value of the consequences and its intrinsically good status and the altruistic character of the act. The present definition presents the first two conditions in negative terms (defining what supererogation is not), while the latter two are formulated in positive terms (stating what supererogation is).

At this point, it is important to underline that from this definition we can derive how supererogation is a moral concept primarily concerned with acts, rather than with agents, traits of character or other morally relevant aspects of moral experience[34]. Moreover, the composite nature of this definition expands the reach and overcomes the limits of those definition that define the concept limitedly by the asymmetrical opposition of two terms. That is, 'a supererogatory act is…to do, but…not to do'[35]. Expanding the definition in this way allows coming out of the dimension of deontic logic and taking care of the non-deontic aspects of supererogation (for example, the altruistic character of these acts).

Let us analyze more specifically the four conditions of supererogation. The first condition tries to underline the *optionality* of such acts according to the category of permission. As such, we remain within the conceptual framework of deontic logic, where when we consider the *obligatory* as opposed to the *forbidden*, supererogation finds its collocation right in between them, into what is permissible. This, however, it is not enough if we want to avoid the reduction of the supererogatory to the permissible, a category that includes, primarily, the *morally indifferent*. Clearly enough, supererogation, while maintaining the condition of being permissible, is not *morally neutral*. Deciding to walk back home on street *a* rather than on street *b*, is morally permissible and, at the same time, *per se* morally indifferent. Contrary, letting someone jump the line at the supermarket because he has very few items to pay is morally permissible and, at the same time, being an act of kindness, intrinsically morally valuable. Supererogation entails that not conceding one's own position in line is *morally permissible* as well. Supererogatory acts are peculiar *permissible* acts since,

---

[34] Heyd D., *ibidem.*
[35] Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.117.

contrary to some other kind of acts in their class, they maintain a certain degree of moral value (possibly a very significant one).

In order avoid the reduction of supererogation to the morally indifferent, it is important to further define supererogation's permissibility. Hence, the second condition underlines how supererogation is ultimately morally *optional*[36] and thus, its omission does not deserve any sort of moral criticism or reproach. The terminological shift from *permissible* to *optional* makes a huge conceptual difference since it allows that the moral value of these act does not lose its importance. Moreover, a further sort of the asymmetry of morality is revealed in this aspect of supererogation. The great praiseworthiness that is attributed to the performance of these acts is not paired by a similar degree of blameworthiness in the case the agent refrains from doing it[37]. Being supererogation what lies *'beyond the call duty'* means that it can consequently be considered *'beyond the reproachable'*.

The third condition deals with the moral status of supererogatory acts, assigning to them a special moral value. As the definition states, this value originates from two different sources: the *intended* consequences and the fact of being *beyond* what is required. The *intended* consequences must bring about some good, but, since it would be inaccurate to reduce supererogation to a merely consequential concept, this is not enough. Additionally, supererogation has an intrinsic

---

[36] The term *optional* (contrary to *permissible*) entails that the act *x* is not necessarily deprived of its moral value. Thus, "[...] *while according to (1) supererogatory acts are permissible, (2) makes them optional* [...]*an act is permissible if despite its negative value (bad, wrong, undesirable) or because of its neutral value, it is not forbidden. On the other hand, an act is more naturally described as optional if despite its positive value (good, right, desirable) or because of its neutral value, it is not compulsory*" in Heyd D., *ibidem,* p.116.

[37] This feature of supererogation, it has been noted, reminds the characterization of Christian evangelical *counsels* in the fact that their omission is not blameworthy as long as one respects the *precepts*. Briefly: "[...] *one ought to follow the counsels only if one seeks certain goals or ideals. But these ideals, thought highly praised, are not obligatory, and failure to adopt them is by no means wrong*" in Heyd D., *ibidem,* p.130. For an example of this aspect see the parable of the young rich man in *Matthew* 19:16-22 and *Luke* 10:17-22.

value due to its *optionality*, i.e. going *beyond the call of duty*. Since the willingness to do the supererogatory means aiming at some *extra* good, it follows that the given supererogatory act *x* is *per se* worth some degree of moral value. Thus, this particular aspect grants the peculiar meritorious nature of supererogatory acts: the willingness to achieve some extra (*optional*) good in virtue of its *consequences*. This reveals that the value of supererogation relies on the combination of two moral features. In other terms, the combined nature of supererogation's value blends *deontological* and *axiological* elements[38]. As Heyd himself acknowledges, the dual nature of the moral value of supererogation is heterogeneous and thus:

"*this dual source of moral value explains why supererogation requires a theory which blends both axiological and deontological elements. Neither utilitarianism nor Kantianism alone is sufficient to account for supererogation* [...]"[39].

Moreover, we need to specify some further important features of these two sources of moral value. Specifically, the consequences that assign a moral value to the act need to be *intended*. This rules out from the assignment of moral praise all those optional well-doings unforeseen by the agent. If I decline a job offer in virtue of accepting a more interesting one, I am not to be praised if the job offer I refused will benefit another. The same scenario greatly changes if I decline the job offer because I *want* someone else to benefit from it (whether I am considering another job offer or not). Intention in the performance of the act plays a crucial role for its praiseworthiness. Furthermore, this also means that the failure of satisfactorily performing an act of supererogation does not necessarily affect its moral status. For example, if someone jumps into the water in order to save a drowning stranger and in the attempt of doing so she drowns herself, the failure of bringing about the actual supererogatory act (saving the

---

[38] As it starts to appear clear, this fundamental element will be particularly relevant for the following part of the present work where I will try to give an account of supererogation in virtue of moral pluralist system. See Chapter V.

[39] Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.131.

stranger) does not undermine the value of what she has done. As long as the agent intended the good desired consequences[40], the act maintains its moral value.

Furthermore, if a supererogatory act gains part of its moral value from being *optional*, i.e. more that duty requires, this means that there is logical dependence between supererogation and duty. In order to explain this fact Heyd introduced two conditions that specify the relation between these two moral categories: *correlativity* and *continuity*[41]. The former emphasizes the fact that we cannot have the concept supererogation without the *correlation* to some kind of duty that is opportunely surpassed by the performance of optional well doings. If there is no level of requirement, it is logically impossible to conceive a category that is *beyond* requirement[42]. The latter concept, that of *continuity*, remarks that, although supererogatory acts are differentiated from duties in their being *beyond*, they still share with obligations the same kind of moral value. That is, the *morally* good that gives value to supererogation is the same morally good that we attach to the performance of a moral duty. In other terms, supererogatory acts and moral obligations are both evaluated from the same moral point of view, the only difference being the degree of moral requirement. That is to say that "*there is a common and continuous scale of values shared by supererogation and duty*"[43]. The relations of *correlativity* and *continuity* logically entangle supererogation and duty. Nevertheless, it seems to me that this relation is asymmetrical in kind. Duties can be conceptually conceived even without a proper classification of supererogatory acts. Although if we endorse such an anti-supererogationist theory we could incur in extremely demanding duties, it would be hard to argue that duties cannot exist in such a theoretical framework. Contrary, any theory of supererogation cannot but be grounded on a proper concept of duty. Supererogation without a qualified

---

[40] Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.133.
[41] Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.5.
[42] "*Correlativity means that acts of supererogation derive their special value from being 'more than duty requires'; i.e. they have meaning only relatively to obligatory action*" in Heyd D., *ibidem*.
[43] Heyd D., *ibidem*.

relation to duty cannot conceptually exist, while duty is conceptually self-sufficient.

In conclusion, the fourth condition brings in two more features fundamental to the definition of a supererogatory act: *voluntariness* and *altruistic character*. These features give an additional connotation to the kind of moral worth which supererogation typically involves. If supererogatory acts are performed accordingly, moral merit ought to be assigned to their agent. This reveals how, differently from the third condition where the moral status of the act was the main focus, this condition underlines the aspects that make the agent morally meritorious[44].

First of all, a supererogatory act, in order to originate moral merit, needs to be performed voluntarily by the agent. This means that she is free from any kind of pressure to act accordingly and free from any concern to refrain from doing so. Contrary, if this would not be the case it would undermine the moral goodness of the act's *optionality* (its being *beyond* as we have seen in the third condition) and, ultimately, the merit of the agent. The freedom to perform or not the supererogatory act *x* is functional both to the moral status of the act and to the agent herself. Furthermore, the agent has to act *altruistically*; i.e the outcome of her act must primarily benefit someone other than herself[45]. This feature further specifies the character of the consequences mentioned in the third condition. The benefitting

---

[44] Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.136 and p.139.

[45] At this point, it is important to underline how the required altruistic character of supererogation is far from being given for granted in the contemporary debate. In particular see Mellema G., *Beyond the Call of Duty: Supererogation, Obligation and Offence*, State University of New York Press, 1991, pp.19-20; Kawall J., *Self-Regarding Supererogatory Actions*, in "Journal of Social Philosophy" 34(2003), no.3, pp.487-498; Archer A., *Supererogation and Intentions of the Agent*, in "Philosophia" 41(2013), pp.447-462. A deeper analysis of this point will unfortunately take us off-topic in the present work. I here just assume that the altruistic character of supererogation (following Heyd's position) is the most accurate description of these acts. I have dedicate some space to the issue elsewhere. See Grigoletto S., *Why* Proximity *Matters for the Concept of Supererogation?*, manuscript.

consequences must be *other-regarding*[46]. As such, as long as these two elements (voluntariness and altruistic character) are respected, the fourth condition claims that the agent deserves to be considered morally meritorious[47].

At this point, it is worth specifying an important distinction that Heyd introduces in order to clarify the status of the agent, that between *motive* and *intention*. Supererogation, as we have underlined, requires altruistic intentions, which is different from requiring altruistic motives. In fact, the agent might find a self-interested motive to act to benefit others. This, however, does not prevent the act from having all the features that make supererogation morally good. A self-interested motive to behave in a particular way is not, in this context, problematic for the status of the act. As Heyd highlights:

"*One may act heroically in order to gain fame, to soothe one's conscience (haunted by guilt feelings), or out of moral self-indulgence. High-minded motives are not a necessary condition for supererogatory action as so many theorists tend to believe. Although the motives of supererogatory acts may be self-regarding, the intention must be other-regarding*"[48].

As long as selfish motives do not affect the moral-goodness-conferring elements (optionality, good intended consequences, voluntariness and altruistic character), there is no reason to require high-minded motives for supererogatory acts.

Finally, the *altruistic* qualification of supererogation rules out any possible utilitarian evaluation of the outcome of the act. Indeed, the good altruistic consequences are not necessarily the *best* consequences. The foreseen sacrifice of the agent (typical of this kind of act) might involve a loss in terms of the general amount of happiness. Nevertheless this is, as we have seen,

---

[46] Supererogatory acts typically (even if not necessarily) involve some sort of sacrifice by the agent. The act, then, might have some non-benefitting consequences that primarily affect the agent herself.

[47] "*An act is said to be meritorious only if it earns merit for its agent. Unlike the attributes of permissibility and moral goodness, which apply to acts independently of their agents, 'meritorious' is conceptually linked to persons (like 'intentional' or 'benevolent')*" in Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.139.

[48] Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.137.

what makes supererogation of special moral value[49]. This necessity of *altruistic* intentions, introduced with the fourth condition, makes supererogation's value not utilitarian in kind.

Much more could be said to further specify and refine the aspects of this definition of the concept. Nevertheless, I explicitly want to the limit this analysis to a plain exposition of Heyd's definition. I think that at this point it is already possible to show those aspects of supererogation that will become functional, in the following chapters, to the positive argumentation in favor of a foundation of the concept. In particular, let me recall the fact that supererogatory acts deeply rely on the theoretical acknowledgment of the different levels that constitute the structure of ethics. It has been underlined in the present section how morality has two fundamental levels of understanding. We can refer to the two 'faces' of morality in different ways, the *deontic* and the *axiological*, *minimal ethics* and *maximal ethics*, the *right* and the *good*. The concept of supererogation is a conceptual consequence of this important distinction and, as such, it can serve as a proof of that. Similarly, the entire first part of this work aimed at pointing out how the very nature of moral experience (when it comes to moral decision-making) is far from being a unitary matter. These expressions of the complexity typical of morality should serve as a reminder of the necessity of acknowledging the actual nature of the moral domain.

3. *How* is Supererogation Possible? The Acknowledgment Of Moral Complexity

In the present work the embracement of a complex approach to morality aims at recreating, on a philosophical level, the theoretical depth that gave rise to the concept of supererogation. The etymological origins of supererogation are to be found within the Christian tradition and go as far back as the parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel according to St. Luke[50]. More precisely, though, the theoretical background

---

[49] Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.132.
[50] *Luke* 10:25-37. The Vulgate version of the Bible translates as follows the lines of the dialogue between the Samaritan and the innkeeper (line 35): "[...]

that makes sense of supererogation as a concept derives from the later distinction between *precepts* and *evangelical counsels* as outlined by Catholic theology. I will now dedicate some pages to a brief sketch of the theological background that originated this concept.

Traditionally, the distinction between precepts and counsels refers to a well-known passage of the Gospel: the parable of the young rich man[51]. Here Jesus, when asked how to live aiming at the eternal life, distinguishes between two paths to salvation. A first path is that concerned with the precepts of the Decalogue, whose Jesus recalled five of them (Mt 19:18-19), plus the so-called rule of love (*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*). These are expected from anyone that has Christian charity as the fundamental value of a life lived well. The young rich man acknowledged to have lived according to all of these precepts and nevertheless he further asks "*What do I still lack?*". The young man, then, was looking for an additional way of achieving a virtuous existence according to the Christian doctrine. Jesus, thus, answers by introducing the way of perfection to salvation, a route that is not require of everyone[52], the path of the *evangelical counsels*.

The distinction introduced in these pages of the Gospel will later fit the classical and fundamental Christian distinction between the Old Law and the New Law as later outlined in the theological tradition. As it appears especially clear from the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas, such a distinction is particularly relevant for the Catholic doctrine of a life lived well. Briefly, according to Aquinas the law is divided into five

---

et quodcumque supererogaveris ego cum rediero reddam tibi [...]". Strangely enough though, the etymological origin of the word has nothing to do with the passages that describe the Samaritan's decision to stop and rescue the stranger (the actual supererogatory act). Actions like this represent the typical act of supererogation, acts that are sometimes referred to as *Good Samaritanism*.

[51] *Matthew* 19:16-22. The distinction is also explicit in a passage of the Pauline epistles (I Corinthians 7:25).

[52] The way of living of the *counsels* has to be understood within the sphere of optionality. Jesus introduced it with an *if* clause: "*If you would be perfect* [...]" in Mt 19:21.

different kinds[53]. One of them is the *Divine Law,* which, combined with the *Divine Grace,* aims at leading us towards the *virtues* and the goodness. Oppositely, *Temptations* influence us to perform sins in accordance with the *vices.* Within this general schema, *precepts* and *counsels* are what constitutes the *Divine Law,* as outlined in the Scriptures. In particular, the Old Testament transmits the *Old Law* by means of the Decalogue of Moses, which prescribes us what to do in the form of *precepts.* On the other hand, the New Testament is the bearer of the *New Law,* by means of the teachings and the life of Jesus Christ, whose message brought us the *counsels.* St. Thomas highlights this distinction very clearly, underlining the difference between the two notions:

"*the difference between a counsel and a commandment is that a commandment implies necessity, while a counsel is left to the choice of the one to whom it is given. Consequently in the New Law, which is the law of liberty, counsels are added to the commandments, and not in the Old Law, which is the law of bondage. We must therefore understand the commandments of the New Law to have been given about matters that are necessary to gain the hand of eternal Happiness, to which end the New Law brings us immediately, but that the counsels are about matters that render the gaining of this end more assured and expeditious*"[54]

So, the *commandments* are binding and prescribe us clearly what to do (i.e. *honor your father and mother*) and what not to do (i.e. *thou shalt not kill*). On the other hand, *counsels* do not prescribe anything in particular other that the achievement of some extra good and thus, their performance is to be considered optional and left to the will of the performer. Generally, counsels rely on the avoidance of three things: external wealth, carnal pleasures, and honors.

---

[53] See the *Summa Theologica,* I-II, q.91.

[54] St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica,* I-II, q.108, a.4. In particular, this English translation can be found in *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province revised by Daniel J. Sullivan,* Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago, 1952, vol.II, p.336.

Notably, St. Thomas points out that the most important thing for a Christian is having God as the main end in life. Accordingly, this will lead the virtuous believer on the road of *charity* towards Christian perfection. This is the main point of a Christian life, aiming at God by expressing a *charitable* behavior[55]. This is what justifies the obligatoriness of the *precepts* (or commandments), the fact that their observance leads to the true Christian existence by expressing that *charity* typical of however is directed towards the love of God. Failing to follow the commandments means failing to appreciate the true Christian existence and, ultimately, it means not to be headed towards God. Differently, the purpose of the *counsels* is not to set an *obligation* to refuse all the material goods in order to gain eternal life. This would certainly be a valuable way of living a Christian life, but it remains *optional* and left to a free choice of the single individual. The most important thing is keeping God as the primary end of a life lived well. Since the abandonment of material goods could facilitate this task, it is a desirable, but discretional achievement[56]. The *counsels* do not prevent us from committing sins (being this the direct purpose of commandments), but facilitate the path to Christian perfection by avoiding those circumstances where walking on the road of *charity* becomes more difficult (while not impossible). This explains how the fact that *counsels* leads us to perfection '*more speedily*' does not mean that they better do what *precepts* do 'more slowly'. Instead, this means that if we follow the *counsels* we can walk more easily on the road of

---

[55] "[...] *in itself and essentially the perfection of the Christian life consists in charity, principally as to the love of God, secondarily as to the love of our neighbor, both of which are the matter of the chief commandments of the Divine* law" in St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica,* II-II, q.184, a.3, *ibidem,* p.631.

[56] "*Nevertheless, for man to gain the above mentioned end, he does not need to renounce the things of the world attain to eternal happiness, provided he does not place his end in them; but he will attain more speedily to that end by giving up the goods of this world entirely. And so the evangelical counsels are given for this purpose*" in St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, I-II, q.108, a.4, *ibidem*, p.336. See also Vecchio S., *Precetti e consigli nella teologia medievale* in Bacin S., *Etiche Antiche, Etiche moderne,* il Mulino, Bologna, 2010, pp.223-242.

charity towards the love of God and our neighbors. The difference between *precepts* and *counsels* relies on the fact that the former help us avoiding all those behavior that are contrary to charity, while the latter simply facilitates this task[57]. This explains also why *counsels* are not strictly required: having an easier path to God is a desirable, but free choice. As we have seen above, this is the same free choice that Jesus gives to the rich young rich man:

"*if you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me*"[58]

Here, contrary to what I have just outlined, it seems that perfection is gained only by the repudiation of material goods and so by the following of a *counsel*. Aquinas clarified this argument accurately; the focal point that constitutes the perfection of the life of the young man is *following* the Lord (i.e. having God as the primary end) and this is something that the *precepts* make possible. The *counsel* of selling all the material goods is the path that more easily leads men to the loving of God and so on the road of *charity*[59]. In this circumstance, selling the material goods is a way of redirecting one's own life toward God more easily, away from those goods that might prevent to do this by misdirecting one's life to material

---

[57] "*In other words, the precepts are intended to remove things which are contrary to charity, while the counsels are meant to remove things that* hinder *acts of charity*" in Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p.21.

[58] *Matthew,* 19:21. This passage in the words of "*Then come, follow me*" has been widely considered the origin of the doctrines of a Consecrated life. While before the council Vatican II the understanding of this particular religious experience was considered as being a *better* Christian existence and a *faster* way of salvation, things have greatly changed since the publication of the council's decree on the adaptation and renewal of religious life (*Perfectae Caritatis*). As St. Thomas Aquinas had already underlined, both the way of living a Christian life (consecrated and not) are perfectly capable of leading to the Eternal Salvation.

[59] "*In this saying of our Lord something is indicated as being the way to perfection by the words,* Go, sell all thou hast, and give to the poor*; and something else is added in which consists perfection, when He said,* And follow Me." St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, II-II, q.184, a.3, *ibidem*, p.631-632.

attainments. Almost a millennium before, the words of Clement of Alexandria underline, once again, this aspect of the ultimate end of the Christian life:

" *'Sell what belongs to thee.' And what is this? It is not what some hastily take it to be, a command to fling away the substance that belongs to him and to part with his riches, but to banish from the soul its opinions about riches, its attachment to them, its excessive desire, its morbid excitement over them, its anxious cares, the thorns of our earthly existence which choke the seed of the true life*"[60]

The material goods represent a problem if someone misunderstands the place and the importance they ought to have in a Christian Life. External wealth is not something bad *per se*, but since it might distance oneself from a life lived according to *charity* it is preferable to follow the counsel of poverty.

As the work of S. Thomas Aquinas reveals, the 13th century was vivaciously animated by a theological debate on these particular issues. In particular, the questions about a life lived according to humility, poverty, chastity and obedience was one of the major points at issue due to the emerging clerical class of Mendicant Orders. The nature of these expressions of Consecrated life is deeply based on the distinction between precepts and counsels. It is in this precise time that the concept of supererogation finds its most substantial theorizations in the theological sphere. The members of the newborn orders of friars were called upon to give an account of the *way of perfection* according to which they dedicated their religious existence against the charges of the rest of the clergy. Within this scenario, the words of Saint Bonaventure, member of the Franciscan order, explain the degrees of charity that can constitute the life of a Christian. In particular, in his *Apologia pauperum contra calumniatorem* he makes ample use of the concept of supererogation, pointing out how strictly following the *counsels* (as it is typical of the Mendicant Orders) is a

---

[60] Clement of Alexandria, *The Rich Man's Salvation,* 11-2 in *Clement of Alexandria with an English translation by G.W. Butterworth,* W. Heinemann-Harvard University Press, London, 1953, pp.291-293.

supererogatory (optional we would say) choice[61]. Precepts and counsels represent two distinct degrees of achieving a life in the light of *charity*. While both lead to eternal salvation, the latter is known as the way of perfection, a perfection expected only from those who decide to live a life beyond the merely required.

It is not surprising that, within this moral framework of a Christian conception of a life lived well, we can find a multitude of fascinating examples of supererogation. Think for example of the life lived by the Blessed Teresa of Calcutta and the saintly act of Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe. Cases like these clearly represent the implementation of a life lived according to the evangelical counsels, exemplifying the acts of an agent who goes 'beyond the call of precepts' so to say. In particular, it is this aspect of the Christian conception of a life lived well that inspires and theoretically supports the practice of the indulgences much criticized by Protestant movements in the Reformation era. According to this doctrine, the *extraordinary* well-doings of the saints can be redirected to the forgiveness of the sins of other believers. As Pope Paul VI has underlined in the Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*:

"*There reigns among men, by the hidden and benign mystery of the divine will, a supernatural solidarity whereby the sin of one harms the others just as the holiness of one also benefits the others. Thus the Christian faithful give each other mutual aid to attain their supernatural aim*"[62]

Holy behavior (that which lies beyond ordinary required practices) can be shared for the beneficence of the people of God. It appears clear how such a practice relies on a theoretical specification of the many levels of achievement of morality within the Christian tradition. Someone who has

---

[61] "*Scientium est igitur, quod radix, forma, finis complementum et vinculum perfectionis caritas est* [...] *Ipsa vero caritas triplicem habet statum: unum quidem infimum, in observantia mandatorum legalium; secundum vero medium, qui constat in adimpletione spiritualium consiliorum; tertium autem supremum, in perfruitione sempiternalium iucunditatum.* [...] *Secunda est perfectio supererogationis* [...]" in St. Bonaventure, *Apologia pauperum contra calumniatorem*, cap.III, no.2.
[62] Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, 1967, no.4.

underperformed or underachieved in certain regards can benefit from the overachievement of the others.

A first important conclusion to be drawn from this analysis of the theological origins of the concept of supererogation has to do with the necessity of a morally complex approach. Moral complexity intended as an approach that grants the multileveled nature of morality, is fundamental in order to give an account of these theological conceptual distinctions that represented the fertile background that introduced the concept of supererogation in its original theoretical framework. As such, we can refer to the distinction between *precepts* and *counsels* (and not just this one) as a sort of *Catholic Complexity*[63], where the grounding idea is that of a system based on multiple levels of understanding, normativity and possible achievements. If we do not give an account of this aspect in "secular" morality as well, there is no way we can properly justify the concept of supererogation. Moral complexity, then, is the acknowledgement of the two necessary levels of normativity that constitute the essence of morality, the *axiological* and the *deontic.* The adoption of a complex moral system is a promising answer to the question of *how* we can give an account of supererogation in a moral system. The absence of such a complex approach to morality can lead to the undesirable identification of the *axiological* level with the *deontic* one. The flattening of the levels of morality results in a moral theory that aims at the maximization of the good, where every good act is, at the same time, required of the agent. Consequently, such a system (as I will further highlight in the following chapter) will

---

[63] It might be inappropriate to call it *'Christian' Complexity* given different understanding of the moral sphere that the Protestant tradition has offered. The strong opposition in time of Reformation to the theory of supererogation (and to the doctrine of indulgences that is grounded on it) was the occasion to draw a clear distinction between the ethics of the two different traditions. David Heyd, referring to the thought of Martin Luther summarized the Protestant opposition to supererogation as follows: "*No human being, not even a saint, can do all that is strictly required by duty, let alone hope to go beyond that. The way to salvation is not through 'works' but through divine grace alone. Even the most dramatic acts of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, which served the Catholics as paradigm examples of supererogation, are strictly speaking obligatory*" in Heyd D., *ibidem.*

not leave any theoretical space for the concept of supererogation.

However, while the distinction of the many levels of morality is a necessary condition of supererogation, is not in itself a sufficient one. Complexity is the metaethical background condition of a process that takes place at the normative level. I have previously defined the structure of morality as being better represented by the imagine of a web of interrelated levels, rather than that of an ordinated pyramid that culminates in a precise value or ideal. As I will further analyze in Chapter V, supererogation springs from the normative pulls originated by the interaction between two levels of the moral web. Most of the times this phenomenon is brought about by the cooperation between the *axiological* level and the *deontic* level. In virtue of this necessity of a complex system, supererogation can rightly be considered a *complex* moral concept, that is, one that requires more than a single moral dimension in order to be justified. If we oppose to *complex* concept *simple* ones, we realize how the simple\complex distinction somehow resembles the difference between *thin* and *thick* concepts. A thick concept is a concept (such as 'courageous') that has both *evaluative* and *descriptive* elements[64]. Its nature is grounded upon two relevant aspects of morality. Differently, a thin concept is one that concerns a single aspect of morality. Similarly to this distinction, I generally define *complex concepts* as those that are concerned with more than one aspect of morality. Supererogation, far from being the only one, is a clear example of a *complex* moral concept. As we have seen above, this category of acts springs from the interaction of the *axiological* and the *deontic* level. As such, supererogation requires this theoretical complexity and, consequently, cannot but be conceived as a *complex* concept.

In conclusion, given the characteristics of the theological framework that originated the concept in the Christian tradition, I believe that a complex moral system is the answer to the questions on *how* we can give an account of supererogation. The challenge, widely expressed by the tone of

---

[64] Kirchin S. (ed. by), *Thick Concepts*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

the contemporary debate on the concept, is that of understanding if the existing moral theories can grant the degree of complexity that supererogatory acts require.

WHY MONIST THEORIES STRUGGLE WITH THE JUSTIFICATION OF THE CONCEPT?

If we consider the normative ethics debate on the justification of supererogatory acts, we can infer that monist theories of different sorts generally struggle in this specific regard. As it has been already suggested in the previous chapters this difficulty has to do with a loss of complexity that makes supererogation conceptually impossible. Heyd's definition of the concept underlines the dual moral source of supererogatory acts (the *intended* consequences and its optionality) and, as such, they show the inadequateness of single-guided theories:

"*This dual source of value explains why supererogation requires a theory which blends both axiological and deontological elements. Neither utilitarianism nor Kantianism alone is sufficient to account for supererogation* [...]"[1].

Along these lines, this chapter aims at showing this general inadequateness of monist moral theories. So to say, this chapter represents the *pars destruens* of the work, being concerned with a negative argumentation on what interferes with the justification of supererogation. In particular, I will give an account of the main problematic aspects of the justification of supererogation as follows: a) The *General Argument* about the impossibility for a monist approach to morality; b) The relation between maximizing duties and supererogation, c) Once these elements will be clarified, it will be possible to analyze in some finer detail the problems of specific normative systems. Specifically I will try to explain why both Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics fail to give an account of the concept.

---

[1] Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p.131.

1. The *General Argument*

An argument for the inadequateness of a monist theory needs to start from a clear definition of what is intended for *monism* in normative ethics. Generally, a monist theory is a theory that considers a unique, consistent and ultimate source of morality. This role is usually played by a value, an ideal or principle. The good is then identified according to a single and unique way of reasoning. Well-known examples of this approach are Kantian Ethics which aims at *freedom* (intended as *autonomy*) and Utilitarianism (here intended without further specification) which aims at the greatest *happiness*. Monist theories like these, then, suppose that we act according to a single guiding principle that will tell us what is the morally good thing we ought to do (*moral obligations*). Respectively, Kant's Categorical Imperative and Mill's Principle of Utility represent a way of moral reasoning that grants that our actions are directed at the promotion of the ultimate value. Traditionally this approach is opposed to *moral pluralism*, the idea that morality deals with a heterogeneous (yet limited) set of value and principles[2].

Furthermore, it is helpful to outline a synthetic definition of the concept of supererogation. Supererogatory acts, broadly considered, are morally good but not morally required[3]. As we have seen, this concept entails a distinction between the axiological level of morality (moral goodness) and the deontic one (moral rightness). Supererogatory acts are those acts that exceed the requirements of the deontic in order to bring about some *extra*-ordinary goodness. The failure of acknowledging

---

[2] In the second chapter I have discussed the issue of moral pluralism at length. For a general overlook, see Mason E., *Value Pluralism*, in "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy" (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed. by), URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/value-pluralism/, Gaut B., *Moral Pluralism*, in "Philosophical Papers", 22(1993), no.1, pp.17-40.

[3] There is no doubt that Heyd's definition as outlined in the previous chapter is far more adequate than this classification. Nevertheless, I believe that, for the present argument, a simpler and less detailed definition will be enough for understanding the point at issue.

this distinction between different levels of the moral discourse consequently brings the failure of appreciating the special and peculiar value of supererogation.

The *General Argument* aims at underlining how the problems of monists with supererogation derive from the difficulty of keeping the axiological and the deontic level well distinguished. In this regard, the embracement of a single principle of morality that outlines the moral *ought* might prevent from appreciating the constitutive heterogeneous nature of morality by smoothing over every aspect of it into the deontic sphere. It is not surprising that strong monists are usually anti-supererogationists, as they include this category of acts within the realm of moral obligation.

Specifically, the *General Argument* reads as follows:

P.1	*Moral Monism* is the theoretical approach that considers a single ultimate moral source and a single way of moral reasoning.
P.2	Supererogatory acts are morally good while not morally required.
P.3	The nature of supererogation entails the existence and the distinction between the *axiological* (the Good) and the *deontic* level (the Right). This explains why not all good acts are also required (contra 'the good-ought tie up' thesis).
C.1	It is problematic to hold that the same moral source can give an account of the different levels of morality. We simply cannot conceive a moral principle (a way of reasoning from the moral point of view) that sets both the agent's duty and tells the agent how to go beyond this same duty.
C.2	The multileveled structure of morality entailed by supererogation requires a double (at least) source of morality. The *axiological* and the *deontic*.
C.3	*Moral monism* is the inadequate moral structure to give an account of supererogation.

The first conclusion (C.1) requires a further careful comment. The main point it raises is that we cannot use the same

principle both for setting moral obligations and for understanding how to go beyond them. If we allow theories driven by a single principle to justify both acts that are "going beyond duty" and the duties that those acts surpass we might be saying two things. First, that the principle already points out the different levels of moral goodness. Or, second, that the principle can work in two different ways revealing different degrees of good acts, some morally obligatory and some other beyond this class of requirements. Both options seem to be hard to hold. A moral principle is a way of reasoning that provides reasons for action. At the same time, we have good reasons to adopt such a principle if we aim at promoting the given ultimate value *x*. Indeed, a principle (here understood as the *tool* of morality), when adopted, fulfills the achievement of a specific value. For example, the categorical imperative helps the agent to fulfil the ultimate moral value of freedom (in the case of Kantian Ethics[4]). When freedom is taken to be the only ultimate moral value, the adoption of the categorical imperative is what makes an act morally worthy. The problem for such a monistic system is leaving some space to those acts that, while not obligatory, are morally good according to that same ultimate moral value that animates the adopted principle. Hence the problems raised by C.1 start here to arise more clearly. How is it possible to say that a principle has fulfilled *enough* a given end, in order to leave that *extra* space needed by supererogation? It seems that in this regard a single principle is not able to grant the different levels of morality. Moreover, how is it possible to understand how to go beyond requirements, when our theory envisions only one way of reasoning (principle) and that way of reasoning is fully concerned with moral obligation? A single way of reasoning animated by a single ultimate value seems incapable of leading the agent into two different "moral realms" so to say.

The second conclusion is a risky one as, according to the idea on the structure of morality one has, C.2 can be misunderstood. My point can be understood if we identify the two faces of

---

[4] Since this argument intends to be critical of monist theories in general, it is implicit that I take it to be working against other form of monism such as Utilitarianism.

morality in a way that the *deontic* coincides with the morally right and the *axiological* coincides with the morally good. Generally, monistic theories seems to be excessively concerned with the *deontic* aspect of morality by pointing out what is the right thing to do. Although this is an essential dimension of morality, it is not the only one. Supererogatory acts belong to that category of acts that are morally good in a way that exceeds the dimension of primary concern for monism[5]. Supererogation (and morality in general) reminds us that human flourishing has to do with many moral aspects and ways of behaving. These instances of the good can exceed the binding dimension of the morally obligatory in many surprising ways.

The third conclusion states that the loss of moral complexity that supererogation requires makes monism the inadequate structure of morality for a proper justification of these peculiar moral acts. As we will see in some further detail in the following sections and in the next chapter, supererogation struggles to find its place in those systems that are not able to recreate the same complexity that gave origin to the concept in the Christian tradition.

2. Maximizing Duties and the Space of Supererogation

In order to highlight a possible failure to assign the proper space to supererogatory acts, we need to consider the relation between supererogation and duty. In this regard it helpful to recall Heyd's conditions of *continuity* and *correlativity* between these two moral categories[6]. Supererogation and duty stand on a *continuous* scale of value and are both evaluated accordingly. Moreover, they are logically *correlated* since the former exists

---

[5] This passage might give the impression that I am saying that supererogatory acts can be defined as "morally good, but not morally right". This, I believe, would be a misunderstanding of the relation between the good and the right. *Good* and *Right* are not opposed categories. Rather, the Good fully includes the Right. The Right is a subset of the morally Good and, as such, while not all the good acts are part of the right (i.e. supererogation), all right acts are morally good. These two categories are not opposed, but part of a continuous scale of moral evaluation.

[6] See Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.5. See also chapter III of the present work, pp.106-107.

only by being *beyond* the latter. Nevertheless, there is a specific kind of duties that represents a problem for both conditions, *maximizing duties*. A maximizing duty is a moral mandate of the sort 'you ought to bring about x as much as possible', where x is usually a value or ideal that the given theory aims at promoting. This is usually the case of consequentialist theories, which are structured around a certain value (utility, happiness, pleasure, etc.) considered to be morally good to maximize. Accordingly, a moral act is evaluated in regards of how much x it brings about. If act A is the one that brings about the most x, then A is obligatory.

In the case of supererogation, this kind of duties becomes particularly problematic as it undermines the existence of supererogatory acts and also, as a side effect, both the conditions of *correlativity* and *continuity*. Since maximizing duties aim at the maximization of the good, the distinction necessary for supererogation between the right and the good vanishes. Maximizing duties (and consequently maximizing theories) have a tendency to fill the entire gamut of moral acts, leaving no space to some non-obligatory instances of the good. An act A that would bring about the best outcome, cannot but be obligatory under a 'maximizing' conception of morality, no matter if it would generally be considered beyond one's duty according to common-sense morality. For example, sacrificing oneself in order to save many is considered a duty as long as the surviving of many is a morally better outcome than the surviving of myself. It is in these terms that maximizing duties cut off any possibility of a space for supererogation. The denial of the category of supererogatory acts makes its relations with duty useless and unnecessary. More generally, my claim is that a maximizing approach to morality does not take into account the distinction between the two levels of morality that, as I have underlined so far, are necessary to the concept of supererogation. This denial of the concept might serve as a general argument against the validity of a maximizing approach to morality[7] since it would cut off a relevant and significant part of our moral experience.

---

[7] Note that I am specifically referring to the *moral* point of view. I am not here claiming that 'maximizing' cannot be the proper approach to other

It is interesting to note that supererogation is not the only moral category negatively affected by a maximizing approach to morality. A similar criticism has been raised in relation to another (and more important) aspect of morality: *moral integrity.* Indeed, Bernard William's 'moral integrity' argument is implicitly directed against the *maximizing* feature of Act-utilitarianism[8]. Roughly, the argument reads as follows: (P.1) Act-utilitarianism is that moral theory that tells us what to do by evaluating an act according to the maximization of overall utility; (P.2) The overall utility is evaluated from the impartial point of view; (P.3) It is often the case that such an evaluation goes against one's personal projects and ideals; (C.1) Act-utilitarianism is a misunderstanding of true moral agency, since it provides the agent with acts that are not *her* acts; (C.2) Act-utilitarianism undermines the agent's *integrity* (identification with one's own acts). Thus, Williams' argument is explicitly against the *kind* of impartiality that Utilitarianism requires. This moral theory expects an impartial and cold-blooded agent who is ready to give up her most essential ideals in virtue of the moral dictate that comes from the "*point of view of the universe*"[9]. We can go on this line of argumentation and say that this misunderstanding of moral agency provides an indebted maximization, one that is not appropriately grounded on the agent's personal beliefs. Implicitly, then, Williams is against a sort of *moral* maximization that is purely moral (in the sense has nothing to do with the agent's inner beliefs)[10]. In his own words:

---

aspects of life. Think for example of maximizing one's own physical condition in view of an athletic competition or maximizing one's own financial condition in view of providing the proper education to one's own children.

[8] The first formulation of the argument can be found in Williams B., *Integrity*, in Smart J. J. C., Williams B., *Utilitarianism: for and against,* Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp.108-118.

[9] This famous expression is taken from one of the most influential utilitarians, Henry Sidgwick. See Sidgwick H., *The Method of Ethics,* Macmillan, 1874. Williams, with the 'moral integrity argument' intends to attack specifically this impersonal understanding of moral agency.

[10] The debate around Williams' integrity argument is quite articulated. For a good hint of it see Chappell S. G., *Bernard Williams*, in "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy" (Spring 2015 Edition), Zalta E. N. (ed. by), URL

"*It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions. It is to make him into a channel between the input of everyone's projects, including his own, and an output of optimific decision; but this is to neglect the extent to which his projects and his decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified. It is thus, in the most literal sense, an attack on his integrity*"[11].

Such an understanding of morality as being the result of an external point of view gives rise to an indebted authority over the agent. In a similar way, I believe that the failure to recognize a category of the supererogatory within a maximizing system is the result of an *indebted* maximization. The reason why I claim this is that a maximizing approach misses to focus on the distinction between the right and the good, and it fails to recognize that, rather than the good, it is the right that needs to be maximized. The good is too open-ended to be required of all moral agents as it includes, among the others, all those acts that are performed out of gratuity, self-sacrifice and benevolence that find in the evasion from the boundaries of the obligatory their morally praiseworthy nature. This is the main feature of the acts typically considered as supererogatory. Making this special category of acts obligatory (in virtue of their morally desirable consequences) will undermine its intrinsic value. Moreover, considering supererogatory acts obligatory would mean to conceive them as universalizable and expected from all moral agents. Quite interestingly, the phenomenology of these acts reveals how their agents aim at some extra-good when they *personally* endorse a given end[12]. Agents of this sort do not necessarily think to have performed the right thing (whose performance would be considered wrong), but they have simply aimed at something considered *extra*. The only way of

---

= http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/williams-bernard/. See also Cox D., La Caze M., Levine M., *Integrity*, in "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy" (Spring 2015 Edition), Zalta E. N. (ed. by), URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/integrity/.
[11] Smart J. J. C., Williams B., *ibidem*, p.116-117.
[12] See Chapter V, pp.129-130.

making sense of supererogation, then, is to outline an approach to morality that aims at the *maximizing the right*, rather than the good. All that lies beyond the boundary of the moral right is the moral good that would be good to bring about, but not wrong to omit.

This understanding of morality, far from being free from possible criticism, relies on the conceptual distinction between *maximizing* and *satisficing*. This specification, particularly interesting for ethical theory, distinguishes between two levels of achievement of a given good. Roughly speaking, *maximizing* means, as we have seen, 'doing as much *x* as possible', while *satisficing* means 'doing *x* up to a satisfactory point'. This distinction becomes particularly important when it comes to explaining the way supererogation works. As we have seen above, a *maximizing* understanding of morality does not allow any space to the concept, rather, as I will outline now, a *satisficing* understanding of morality is what makes supererogation theoretically conceivable. To this regard, Jamie Dreier's paper on the issue is particularly helpful[13]. Dreier tries to show how the rational and the ethical domain differ in regards to the question of whether or not to maximize the outcome of a given act. It seems that they differ in a way that ethical satisficing makes sense, while rational satisficing does not. The reason why it seems that ethical satisficing does make sense is the intuitive plausibility of acts of supererogation. Here we are presented with the so-called paradox of supererogation: if supererogatory acts are morally better, why is that they are not obligatory? In other terms, why does it seem plausible to allow a satisficing account of morality? One that aims at certain level of satisfactory achievement and does not require to go on and foster the morally best? One way to explain this is to say that we might have moral reasons to do the morally best, but at the same time, we hold stronger non-moral reasons that

---

[13] Dreier J., *Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't* in Byron M. (ed. by), *Satisficing and Maximizing: Moral Theories on Practical Reason*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.131-154. I will further talk about Dreier's account of supererogation in the following chapter when I will try to outline my own account of supererogatory acts. See pp.171-172.

outweigh the others. This excuses the omission of the supererogatory. However, this justification misses an important point of supererogatory acts: in this way, supererogation would only be optional from the all-things-considered (rational) point of view, but not from a moral point of view. If this were true, the agent who refrains from doing some supererogatory act would be considered to be doing something wrong from the moral point of view[14]. Nonetheless, what intuitively strikes about this kind of acts is that they are *morally* excusable. This conclusion seems counterintuitive and we are apparently led back to face the paradox.

The way Dreier tries to avoid this is by appealing to the existence of two (at least) different moral points of view: the point of view of *beneficence* and the point of view of *justice*[15]. The former is a more ambitious moral point of view that ranks every act on a scale in terms of the morally worse and morally better. Accordingly, there are good reasons to always do the best act. In a sense, it is a point of view that maximizes the good. The latter moral point of view, that of *justice*, evaluates moral acts in terms of their moral wrongness and avoids that the agent brings about something morally wrong. Following the above terminology, we could add that this is a moral point of view that grants a satisfactory level of the right. Most importantly, then, Dreier underlines that, normally, reasons derived from the point of view of justice are particularly stringent and strong, as it is difficult for an agent to do something plainly unjust. On the other hand, reasons that spring from the point of view of beneficence appear less forceful and binding, as it might be reasonable (given some relevant opposing non-moral reasons) not to do the morally best thing (i.e. the supererogatory)[16]. What Dreier explicitly leaves as an open question it is why is that the point of view of *justice* happens to be in this favored position over the other moral point of view. My take on this important issue is that reasons of justice disclose a stronger influence because it would be impossible to live in a society that openly allows instances of

---

[14] Dreier J., *ibidem*, p.149.
[15] Dreier J., *ibidem*.
[16] Dreier J., *ibidem*, p.150.

moral wrongness. This appears as the minimal standard required for conceiving the social dimension of human beings that want to live together. Differently it is possible (even if undesirable) to think of a society that lives without any actualization of moral beneficence. One that is less (if not at all) concerned with living according to better moral standards than those strictly required by sufficient coexistence with the others. This is what makes the moral point of view of beneficence less stringent than the moral point of view of justice.

Furthermore, the moral points of view have to be confronted within the bigger picture of the point of view of *all-thigs-considered*. In this regard, the agents considers the relevance and the stringency of all the moral reasons together with the non-moral reasons there are for acting in way or another. This is ultimately the *rational* point of view; the one that envisions and combines all the pulls for action to which the agent withstands. Since the rational point of view *is* the all-things-considered point of view, it would be impossible to claim that we do not always identify the rationally best thing. Regardless to fact that we actually perform that act, it would impossible to claim that we approach the rational point of view in a satisficing way. It is in this situation, however, that reasons for supererogation can be silenced and outweigh by some more rationally stringent non-moral reason for its omission. For example, it would be the morally best option to jump into a burning car trying to rescue the people trapped inside, but, at the same time, it might not be the case that John puts his life in great danger given that his wife and his five children all rely on his job to scrape out a living. But what if John finally does jump into the burning car? Would his action be considered irrational, since the non-moral reasons that originally outweighed the reasons for supererogation are just left unheard? I believe so. While supererogatory acts are always morally praiseworthy, sometimes they are not *rationally* justified. It remains an open question if it is specifically this willingness to pursue that extra-good no matter what that assigns to these actions their special value.

An interesting example of the problematic nature of maximizing duties is that provided by the case of *special*

obligations. These are those peculiar obligations that we usually have in virtue of our relationship with the beneficiary of our acts. In this sense, the relational *proximity* to the beneficiary of the act grounds specific duties[17]. Take for example the parent\children relationship: I am required to do as much as possible to care for my daughter's needs in a way that is completely different from my caring for the needs of a stranger. This reveals that a certain degree of relational *proximity* can involve maximizing duties. If this is the case, then, the possibility of performing a supererogatory act is affected and eventually undermined by the presence of such special obligations. The bigger conceptual space maximizing duties take, the smaller is left to supererogatory acts[18].

Summing up again Dreier's position, we can highlight how the existence of the two moral points of view is what makes supererogation possible and not paradoxical. Dreier's strategy (which seems to me fully plausible) is to show that the only way to solve the paradox of supererogation is to acknowledge (at least) the two necessary levels of morality that, as I have highlighted above, happen to be fundamental to the concept. As a matter of fact, this distinction stands for the two faces of morality: the *evaluative* dimension and the *deontic* dimension or, according to my understanding of them, that between the Good and the Right. Committing to a unidimensional understanding of morality results in the loss of the typical complexity of this human domain. One of the consequences of this choice would be that of denying any space to the concept of supererogation.

3. Utilitarianism and the Denial of Supererogation

Following the conclusion of the General Argument against the accountability of supererogation in monist theories, I will try to highlight more specifically how the most famous moral approaches might fail to accommodate the concept. In this

---

[17] See Jeske D., Fumerton R., *Relatives and Relativism,* in "Philosophical Studies", 87(1997), pp.143–157.
[18] I have dedicated some more in pages to this issue in Grigoletto S., *Why* Proximity *Matters for the Concept of Supererogation?,* manuscript.

section I will deal with consequentialism mostly in the specification offered by Act-utilitarianism. Traditionally Utilitarianism has been specified in many different ways, each of which tries to answer to a particular criticism that has been raised against the classic version of the theory. It is mostly to the classic (and less artificial) version of Act-utilitarianism that I will here refer[19]. Roughly, this (original) version of Utilitarianism is the theory that, evaluating the agent's act by its consequences claims that the morally right thing to do is the one that brings about the most happiness overall (generally conceived as the promotion of pleasure and the absence of pain). Using the famous words of Jeremy Bentham we can sum up this position we the motto "*the greatest good for the greatest number*", also known as *the principle of utility*[20].

As it appears clear from these words, classical Utilitarianism aims at the *maximization* of the good. Bentham claimed that the *right* act, the one that ought to be performed, is the act that represents the optimal promotion of happiness of those interested by the act. I think that we can already acknowledge from this claim how keeping the two levels of morality well distinguished becomes more problematic in such a moral structure. From a utilitarian point of view the right (what ought to be done) is intended as the morally best action available, the one that maximizes the good. As underlined in the previous sections this represents a major problem for supererogation, a problem that James O. Urmson, in his seminal article on the status of supererogatory acts, was already well aware of:

---

[19] It is interesting to see how different versions of consequentialism can greatly differ in dealing with the concept of supererogation. For good examples of this matter see Vessel J. P., *Supererogation For Utilitarianism*, in "American Philosophical Quarterly", 47(2010), no.4, pp.299-319.

[20] While Bentham is acknowledged to be the father of this expression, conceptually he has been greatly influenced by the previous work of Francis Hutcheson, David Hume and Cesare Beccaria. Beccaria himself claimed: "*La massima felicità divisa nel maggior numero*" in Beccaria C., *Dei delitti e delle pene*, Francioni G. (ed. by), Mediobanca, 1984, p.23. See Bentham J., *An Introduction to The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Hafner Press, 1948. In particular refer to Chapter I.

"*If for Moore, and for most utilitarians, any action is a duty that will produce the greatest possible good in the circumstances, for them the most heroic self-sacrifice or saintly self-forgetfulness will be duties on all fours with truth-telling and promise-keeping*"[21].

This is the main problem of Utilitarianism: the maximization of the good elevates the right to the highest standard, a standard that is intuitively unreasonable to ask of everyone. Consequently, a moral approach of this kind ends up holding an open denial of the class of supererogatory acts. If the alleged act of supererogation is the one that brings about the best outcome, then it makes no sense not to consider it a moral requirement. This denial of the two faces of morality and of its multileveled nature is well expressed by the motto "*good ought tie up*". What is good needs to be done[22]. Nevertheless, this criticism only works with the specific interpretation of *ought* as *personal* and *prescriptive*. The former of these two connotations refers to a use of ought as in '*you* ought to do *x*', different from the impersonal use, as in '*x* ought to be done'. This *personal* understanding of *ought* is troublesome because it casts a requirement directly on a specific agent to do something no matter how costly the performance of the act is. However, I think that the aspect of *ought* that tends to generate the most substantial ambiguity is the *commendatory* versus the *prescriptive* use of *ought*. 'You ought to see that movie if you want to spend an enjoyable night' does not necessarily entail a requirement, but a suggestion to do something given the fact

---

[21] Urmson J. O., *Saints and Heroes*, in Melden A. I. (ed. by), *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, University of Washington Press, 1958, p.206. It is interesting to note, however, that the second part of Urmson's paper reveals a strong belief in the possibility that Utilitarianism, upon some refinement, would be able to accommodate the concept.

[22] "*The denial of supererogation is basically associated with the rejection of the idea of the two faces of morality. Normativity is one and cannot be split into two levels, that of the good (the desirable, the ideal, the recommended) and that of the required (the obligatory, the prescribed). What 'ought to be the case' also 'ought to be done'*" in Heyd D., *Supererogation*, in "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy" (Winter 2015 Edition), Zalta E. N. (ed. by), *forthcoming*, URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/supererogation/>.

that there are *some* reasons to act accordingly. Contrary, the *prescriptive* use of *ought* generally entails a strong requirement to do *x* given some alleged decisive reason to do it[23]. 'You ought to finish your homework if you want go out and play with your friends' says the mother to her child. In this second understanding of *ought* the very idea of supererogation is denied since any good, as long as it is the best option, requires performance. The reason for this denial is a 'good-ought tie up' conception of ethics.

A criticism of the concept of supererogation that follows this conception of ethics is that given by Christopher New[24]. He holds that we need to abandon the intuitive belief that supererogatory acts exist, rather than rejecting the founding idea of Utilitarianism that whatever maximizes the good needs to be done. New recognizes a sort of distinction between basic duties (those necessary for a tolerable civilized life) and non-basic ones (those that enrich our everyday life) and he holds that both categories are part of one's moral requirements. He directly addresses Urmson's attack of Utilitarianism when he points out how morality would become high and unattainable for most moral agents if the duty of maximizing the good were true. To this New answers that morality is regulated by the 'ought implies can' principle, thus duties are commensurate to the agent's capacities. If a particular agent would be perfectly able to perform a saintly or heroic act we cannot fail to consider it one of her duties. It is here, I believe, that his argument against the existence of supererogation becomes faulty:

"*It may be retorted that the alcoholic and the kleptomaniac […] have at least a duty to* try *to be temperate and honest. But this argument can be applied to saintliness and heroism too – have we not all a duty to* try *to become saintly and heroic, to resist the pull of selfishness and fear as much as we can?*"[25].

---

[23] Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p.79.
[24] New C., *Saints, Heroes and Utilitarians*, in "Philosophy", 49(1974), pp.179-189.
[25] New C., *ibidem*, p.181.

In order to confute this position we need to point out how sometimes supererogatory acts put the agent in front of a clear-cut decision. Think for example of the case of a stranger who is drowning into rushing white waters. The best thing to do in that situation would be jumping into the water and try to save the stranger. Still, due to the conditions of the water, there is no certainty of a successful rescue. First, if I cannot swim very well the 'ought implies can' principle prevents me from having this action among the options that can be performed. There is no non-basic duty to "at least *try*" to save the stranger. Either I can (and *ought* to) do it or not. Second, what if I am a good swimmer indeed? What kind of *ought* is that presented in this moral pull? I think it remains a *commendatory* use of ought rather than a *prescriptive* ought. Given the high risk of the operation that would lead to the best outcome in terms of happiness, the performance of the supererogatory act maintains its optionality, no matter the fact that it represents the act that would generate the best outcome. Moreover, in real life it is plenty of cases where the calculus of utility is far from being easy to achieve. Uncertainty about the success of the act undermines the status of a duty, no matter how good its consequences are. The same can be said when the act entails a possible self-sacrifice by the agent. It is usually the case that supererogatory acts, even if they let imagine the best possible outcome, they are far from giving the certainty of achieving these desirable results. This, I believe, undermines the status of their alleged obligatoriness even from a utilitarian perspective. Claiming that they would be obligatory, no matter any evaluation of their consequences, leads to an idea of morality that tends to freely violate the agent's autonomy. This, I believe, is not the happy society where it would be desirable to live. In order to avoid this, I think that the optionality of performance of these peculiar acts takes the precedence over the theoretical needs of a given theory; the choice to always perform the *morally best* is left to the commitment of the individual agent of bringing about the good.

Cases like this show how one thing is to think of beneficence and altruism as something highly desirable that needs to be promoted as much as possible, another is to consider this sort of maximization mandatory at any cost. The "higher flies of

morality"[26] cannot be considered altogether duties. As I have underlined above, the concept of supererogation benefits from the fact that the categories of the *good* and the *bad* are not perfectly symmetrical within a reasonable moral system. While the rejection and the prevention of the bad is the first object of moral theorizing, the good is desirable and open-ended. While there if often a precise prescription of how not to bring about the bad, the opposite is not true when it comes to the performance of the good. Negative theorizing (of the kind of 'do not do *x*', 'never forget to *x*', etc.) is what grounds the level of the morally right. The reason for this is the necessity of laying down that minimum level of morality that makes civilized life possible and enjoyable for everyone. Thus, it makes no sense, as New does, to say that the kleptomaniac is not doing something wrong as long as he *tries* not to steal and be honest. Using New's terminology[27], it is very different to fail to act in compliance with a basic duty than failing in regards to a non-basic one. Basic duties ultimately *are* what grounds the civilized life of a society and, as such, they have a different degree of obligatoriness. Anyone should be able to live according to basic duties and that is what makes them of a different moral character. The same cannot be said of what New calls "non-basic duties": moral agents greatly differ in the way they can contribute to the establishment of a better world and this difference explains why it makes no sense to consider beneficence a duty in a *specific* way. The achievement of the good is desirable and needs to be promoted by any moral agent. The specific way to do it, though, is left to the moral imagination of every single self. New's general argument for the obligatoriness of supererogatory acts misses this important aspect of morality. His argument says roughly the following: P1. We do not want a civilized life for its own sake, but because it is a happy life to live, thus it is reasonable to want a civilized life as happy as possible; P.2 Basic duties are obligatory because they increase the happiness of life; C.1 Since alleged supererogatory acts greatly increase happiness too, they are

---

[26] As Urmson calls the performance of acts beyond the call of duty.

[27] A terminology that I nevertheless refuse to accept given the fact that morality goes far beyond the basic and non-basic distinction of duties.

obligatory indeed. This argument, as it appears clear, fails to consider any non-utilitarian consideration of morality[28]. As a consequence the only moral purpose is the maximization of the good even at the expenses of the agent's autonomy. Moreover, New claims that, according to the general argument, if someone has the capacity to perform a heroic or saintly act she has duty to do so. I think it would be very unlikely (if not impossible) to discern the morally relevant capacities of an agent and infer the degree of duty she is expected to conform to. Again, this is what discriminates the obligatory from the non-obligatory: the obligatory can regularly be required of any moral agent, the non-obligatory cannot. Many cases of supererogatory acts (as that of the rescue of the drowning stranger) are acts that it would be irrational to ask of anyone no matter the degree of self-sacrifice involved. The concept of supererogation traditionally refers to the 'higher flies of morality' and even if it is true that some moral agents are perfectly capable of these desirable achievements, it is preferable to maintain their optional moral status. A society that allows the requirement of sacrificing someone to benefit the others in virtue of the calculus of utility would not ultimately be the expression of the civilized life that New holds dear. A society of this sort, while morally perfect for utilitarian standards, would not be a desirable one. According to Heyd, New's anti-supererogationism originates from the misunderstanding of the *commendatory* use of *ought* with the *prescriptive*[29]. It is true that sometimes we tend to promote the performance of supererogatory acts, but if we keep in mind the *commendatory* use of ought, we realize how this promotion of the good does not necessarily entail a moral requirement. In these terms, Utilitarianism, in its less articulated versions[30], introduces an indebted oversimplification of morality.

---

[28] Heyd D., *ibidem*, p.79.

[29] Heyd D., *ibidem*.

[30] A criticism of this sort does not necessarily apply to other more articulated versions of Utilitarianism. See Vessel J. P., *Supererogation for Utilitarianism*, in 'American Philosophical Quarterly', 47(2010), pp.299-317.

It is nevertheless true that these other forms of Utilitarianism present other related problems for accounting the concept of supererogation. Non-maximizing or satisficing versions of Utilitarianism tend to struggle to

Generally, classical Act-utilitarianism seems to fail to consider those supererogatory acts, which, while maintaining a high moral status, do not necessarily increase the general amount of utility. For example, think of the self-sacrifice of two parents, who are trying to save their only child. Losing two lives in order to save one might be considered a loss in terms of the calculus of utility. Still, we do not fail to appreciate from the moral point of view what they have done. Many supererogatory acts that involve self-sacrifice are considered morally good no matter the result in terms of utility[31]. As I have underlined in the previous chapter, what really assigns the moral value to this particular category of acts is its optionality and its altruistic nature. Both of these features are not concerned with the maximization of any given good and this is something in open disagreement with the utilitarian doctrine. These lines by John Stuart Mill reveal how cases of non-maximizing self-sacrifice are not considered morally worthy:

"*The utilitarian morality does recognize in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase or tend to increase the sum total of happiness, it considers as wasted. The only self-renunciation which it applauds is devotion to the happiness, or to some of the means of happiness, of others, either mankind collectively or of individuals within the limits imposed by the collective interests of mankind*"[32].

Utilitarianism is usually widely influenced by a line of argumentation of this sort.

---

identify the level of the "*good enough*" that can be surpassed by supererogatory acts.

[31] In truth, even the failure of performance of a supererogatory act does not affect its moral status. I have already dedicated some pages to this matter here, see pp.105-106. See Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Moral Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p.133. I concede, however, that the agent of a supererogatory act needs at least to aim at some good consequences (even if not necessarily the best ones).

[32] Mill J. S., *Utilitarianism*, Hackett Publishing Company, 2001, pp.16-17.

The evaluation of the entire moral gamut according to a single and unique scale that goes from the morally worst to the morally best[33] is a moral approach that presents an indisputable theoretical loss. In this way, the morally right simply identifies with the morally good and the deontic level of morality becomes the same thing as the evaluative one. In other terms, the role of the deontic is delegated to the evaluative. Everything that is evaluated as morally good is, at the same time, morally required. Moreover, according to the maximizing conception of morality, something is morally good only as long as there is no other morally better option. This, in light of the importance of Moral Complexity underlined in the first part of the present work, represents the loss of an important dimension of morality in favor of a theoretical oversimplification that does not take into account the complexity of our moral life. As a consequence, the utilitarian "good-ought tie up" conception of morality leads to the denial of the concept of the supererogation. The very existence of the concept relies on the distinction of the multiple levels of morality. If we deny this, we deny the concept altogether. Then, Utilitarianism, in its maximizing and less articulated versions implicates the following:

$$(Evaluative \rightarrow Deontic) \Rightarrow \neg Supererogation$$
$$\text{in other terms}$$
$$(Good \rightarrow Right) \Rightarrow \neg Supererogation$$

If the good and the right are domains that do not maintain a certain degree of independence, we will lose the possibility of explaining those aspects of morality that appear so intuitively agreeable (and supererogatory acts are clearly of this sort). Deriving one level entirely from the other will make lose that theoretical complexity that makes the concept of supererogation explicable. The utilitarian denial of supererogation is a consequence of considering obligatory everything that is morally good ("good-ought tie up"). As we will

---

[33] And remember that it is a morally best that ultimately becomes the morally obligatory.

see in the following section, a very similar (even if not identical) claim can be said of Kantian Ethics.

4. Kantian Ethics and the Denial of Supererogation

In the contemporary debate, the classification of "Kantian Ethics" has different understandings. First, we could refer with that name to the moral philosophy explicitly developed by Immanuel Kant in the later part of the eighteenth century. In these terms Kantian Ethics is precisely Kant's ethics. At the same time, Kantian Ethics might refer to a sort of ethics that, while not attributable to Kant himself, has been developed under an evident Kantian insight. The contemporary debate is plenty of examples of this latter understanding of the term. Nonetheless, the present section aims at showing the denial of supererogation according to the former understanding of Kantian Ethics. I will try to refer, as much as possible, to Kant's original position[34]. As it will become clear the sort of criticism that I intend to raise against the possibility of a Kantian account of supererogation is similar (while not identical) to the one raised against Utilitarianism. I hold that, both these criticisms are directly derived from the *General Argument* as expressed above.

Generally, the argument for the denial of supererogation within the Kantian moral theory follows this pattern: P.1 For Kant the moral good of an act directly derives from its being motivated by the *moral law*; P.2 Alleged acts of supererogation are morally good, while merely optional and thus neither universalizable nor derived from duty; C.1 For Kant there cannot be some moral goodness beyond the call of duty, therefore, supererogatory acts do not exist. However, as we will see in what follows, this argument cannot be taken as the Kantian position *par excellence* without further qualifications.

---

[34] This leaves as an open question whether or not a Kantian Ethics (intended in its second understanding) might be able to account for the concept of supererogation. Possibly, a good example of an attempt to interpret Kant's theory and expand it in order to fit new questions is Hill T., *Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation*, in 'Kant-Studien', 62(1971), pp.55-76. In particular, see pp.71ff.

A study of Kant's moral theory cannot fail to acknowledge that the entire Kantian production of ethical writings does not represent a unitary and coherent position. It has been often underlined how Kant's claims in his earlier works on morality (namely the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*) slightly differ from those in his later works (most notably *The Metaphysics of Morals*). A study of a possible account of supererogation clearly shows these differences within Kant's production[35]. Let us analyze, then, some passages of Kant's works that might cast some light on the question of supererogation within his moral theory.

The less rigorous position contained in the *Metaphysics of Moral* seems to allow for some space to the category of supererogatory acts. Specifically, when Kant talks about the distiction between *perfect* and *imperfect* duties[36] he seems to offer that understanding of morality, as characterized by different levels of accomplishment, that makes supererogation possible. A *perfect* duty is a rigorous and strict moral duty (such as 'do not kill'). An *imperfect* duty is a moral duty that allows for a certain freedom of choice in regards of how and when to be performed (i.e. 'be generous with the others'). As it is usually underlined, *imperfect* duties leaves a sort of play-room (*latitudo[37]*) to the agent, whose role is to understand how and when to fulfill them. In regards to the wider and less demanding category of imperfect duties Kant claims the following:

"*Imperfect duties are, accordingly, only duties of virtue. Fulfillment of them is merit (meritum) =+a; but failure to fullfil them is not in itself* culpability *(demeritum) =-a, but rather mere* deficiency in moral worth =0, *unless the subject should make it his principle not to comply with such duties. It is only the strenght of one's resolution, in the first case, that is properly called* virtue (virtus); *one's weakness, in the second case, is not so much* vice

[35] For a more detailed analysis of this sort see chapter III in Heyd's *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, pp.49-72.
[36] A distinction he had already introduced earlier in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.
[37] Kant I., *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Gregor M. (ed. by), Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.153

*(*vitium*) as rather mere* want of virtue, *lack of moral strenght (*defectus moralis*)"*[38]

Passages as this one make us think that supererogation is, at least, logically possible within the Kantian system. An imperfect duty so explained is almost identical to the contemporary idea of supererogation. An act whose performance is good and whose non-performance does not constitute a moral loss[39]. Whether or not Kant himself had in mind something like the concept of supererogation (a term that he never adopted) is hard to tell. Less rigorous interpretations of what an *imperfect duty* is for Kant tend to highlight this similarity between supererogation and this kind of duties. The focal point at issue is the permissibility to refrain from doing what a given imperfect duty tells me to do. If we would be able to do this without further qualification, supererogation and imperfect duties will finally be the same thing. The problem is that for Kant we cannot dismiss a duty without qualification, as this passage clearly highlights:

"[...] *but a wide duty is not to be taken as permission to make exceptions to the maxim of actions, but only as permission to limit one maxim of duty by another (e.g. love of one's neighbor in general by love of one's parents), by which in fact the field for the practice of virtue is widened*"[40]

A wide duty cannot be dismissed for no reasons (for an inclination not to do so we might say), but only insofar as there is another wide duty that undermines its demandingness. I

---

[38] Kant I., *ibidem.*

[39] Similarly, other passages seem to make an implicit reference to the idea of supererogation: "*That man is worthy of positive honour, whose actions are meritorious, and contain more than they are due to contain*" in Kant I., *Lecture on Ethics*, Heath P., Schneewind J. B. (ed. by), Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.75. Also: "*If someone does* more *in the way of duty than he can be constrained by law to do, what he does is* meritorious *(*meritum*); if what he does is just exactly what the law* requires, *he does* what is owed *(*debitum*); finally, if what he does is* less *than the law requires, it is morally* culpable *(*demeritum*)*" in Kant I., *The Metaphysics of Morals*, p.19. As Heyd pointed out, when Kant deals with these subjects, he is apparently using 'the language of supererogation', Heyd, *ibidem*, p.65.

[40] Kant I., *ibidem.*

believe that this highlights the major difference between wide
duties and supererogation and thus it rules out any possible
identification of one with the other. Supererogatory acts can be
abandoned without qualification and permission. This is what
grounds their optionality and what assings great value to their
potential performance. No matter how 'wide' our understanding
of Kant's imperfect duties, they will never match that level of
optionality typical of supererogatory acts.

Another interesting attempt to accommodate supererogatory
acts within a Kantian framework is that of the *conjunctive*
performance of *imperfect* duties[41]. Roughly, this is what
happens when the agent has the possibility of fulfilling an
imperfect duty by *either x* or *y* and decides to do *both*. In other
terms, this means that imperfect duties, in a Kantian sense,
entail the performance of at least one of the possible options
that would fulfil the duty (call this a *disjunctive* fulfillment). In
the case of supererogatory performance instead, the agent,
rather than picking one of the alternatives that would fulfil a
given imperfect duty, decides to go beyond the morally required
(given that she has the possibility to do so) by performing more
than one satisficing option[42] (call this *conjunctive* performance
of imperfect duties). If the duty of beneficence might be fulfilled
either by donating money to a charitable organization or by
donating 2 hours of my free time to the same organization and
I decide to do both, I am exceeding the requirements of the
imperfect duty in the given circumstances. The freedom of
choice that Kant allows for the fulfillment of the imperfect duty
in one way or the other is the same freedom of choice that allows
for the agent to perform both of them, when possible.
Nonetheless, even if this understanding of *imperfect* duties
pairs the performance of the good that is expected of a
supererogatory act, I believe that it fails to match another
important aspect of supererogation: its permissible non-

---

[41] It remains an open question whether this attempt is faithful to Kant's
original doctrine or it relies on the second understanding of Kantian Ethics
intended as a moral approach that shares the original spirit of Kant's Ethics
while looking to revise it in some regards.
[42] Thomas Hill has suggested a possibility of a category of supererogation of
this sort. See Hill T., *ibidem*, p.71.

performance. Let me sum up the *conjunctive* performance of imperfect duties that allude to a possibility for explaining supererogation in Kantian terms[43]:

   a) *Imperfect* duty: $O(a \lor b)$
   b) Supererogatory act: $(a \land b)$
   c) Supererogatory omissibility: $\neg O(a \land b)$

It follows from c) that the omission of a supererogatory act can be expressed as $P\neg(a \land b)$. From this I derive[44] $P(\neg a \lor \neg b)$. This claim can be true in the following cases:

   d) $(a \land \neg b)$
   e) $(\neg a \land b)$
   f) $\neg(a \land b)$

However, claim f) seems to be a case of omission of supererogatory act that Kantian Ethics fails to account. Specifically claim f) $\neg(a \land b)$ contradicts the Kantian definition of an imperfect duty as in claim a) $O(a \lor b)$. A theory of supererogation, instead, has no difficulties of considering claim f) as morally permissible. The optionality of supererogatory acts makes it perfectly acceptable to entirely refrain from the performance of that extra good. The same cannot be said of a typically Kantian theory where, in regards to imperfect duties, claim f) is not morally permissible (or, in other terms, it is considered morally bad). While there is a certain *latitudo* in terms of how to fulfil the imperfect duty, not fulfilling that duty at all is simply morally wrong. Claim f) represents the case of the omission of a supererogatory act (or series of acts) that entails the infringement of an *imperfect* duty. In other terms claim f) represents a case where supererogation and imperfect duties ultimately differ, since a theory of supererogation would be perfectly ok with this sort of omission, while the Kantian

---

[43] For the mere explicative purposes I adopt here the terminology of Deontic Logic. Take O as obligatory and P as permissible. It is implicit in the use of "*a*" as a given act that we refer to the "*performance of a*".

[44] According to the De Morgan's Law the negation of a conjunction is the disjunction of the negations. As such, the omission (or non-performance) of supererogation can be expressed as: $(\neg a \lor \neg b)$. Claims *d, e, f* represent the three ways in which $P(\neg a \lor \neg b)$ can be true.

theory of imperfect duties does not allow the same omission. This, I believe, reveals how a Kantian account of supererogation in terms of a *conjunctive* use of imperfect duties, fails to give a *complete* account of the optionality typical of supererogation. The case of the omission of imperfect duties reveals how these duties are notwithstanding duties and, as such, they entail some degree of moral loss in at least one specific case of non-performance. This, I believe, is the primary difference with the concept of supererogation understood in non-Kantian terms[45]. The impossibility to account for supererogation in Kantian Ethics relies on to the fact that no matter which interpretation we provide of *imperfect* duties, they essentially remain duties[46]. As I have briefly claimed above, supererogation represents a category of acts that can be omitted without qualification and with no occurrence of moral loss. The same cannot always be said of the widest imperfect duty as expressed by Kant. This difference suggests that supererogation and imperfect duties differ in a way that makes it problematic to consider this as a viable way for a Kantian account of supererogation.

---

[45] It has also been noted that wide imperfect duties do not always offer such a clear-cut distinction between the viable options. This means that the analogy between wide imperfect duties and disjunctive duties is not always possible, as an account of supererogation would require. See Guevara D., *The Impossibility of Supererogation in Kant's Moral Theory*, in 'Philosophy and Phenomenological Research', 59(1999), no.3, pp.601-603. Others have underlined how this possibility of drawing a line in the fulfillment of imperfect duties is 'alien' to Kant's ethics. If so, this makes impossible a conjunctive understanding of supererogation in Kantian terms: if there are no degrees of fulfillments, it is impossible to go beyond a certain moral requirement. "*This is all quite alien to Kant's ethics. There is no clear line of demarcation between what I must do, morally, and what is nice but morally optional. Nor does Kant attempt to trace such a line of demarcation. To do so he would have to give up a central thesis: that we have a duty to strive to perfect ourselves morally*" see Baron M., *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology*, Cornell University Press, 1995, p.41.

[46] According to Hill this claim relies on a too rigorous interpretation of the Kantian use of the word 'duty'. Although this term is an 'old label' that Kant derives from a legalistic (and hence reductionist) conception of morality, the passages from the *Metaphysics of Morals* reveals how he was well aware of the fact that morality goes far beyond the legalistic level of the morally right. See Hill T., *ibidem*, p.74.

This leaves us with the only option to accept the rigorous theory within Kant's production and, as such, to deny the possibility of proper supererogation in his moral system. In particular, some passages of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* seem to rule out the possibility of non duty-based and morally good acts. For example:

"*To be beneficent where one can is one's duty, and besides there are many souls so attuned to compassion that, even without another motivating ground of vanity, or self-interest, they find an inner gratification in spreading joy around them, and can relish the contentment of others, in so far as it is their work. But I assert that in such a case an action of this kind – however much it conforms with duty, however amiable it may be – still has no true moral worth, but stands on the same footing as other inclinations, e.g. the inclination to honor, which if it fortunately lights upon what is in fact in the general interest and in comformity with duty, and hence honorable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not high esteem; for the maxim lacks moral content, namely to do such actions not from inclination, but* from duty"[47]

The main problem that these claims represent for supererogation is that, no matter the content of one's acts, the only thing that makes acts *moral* is their being motivated by duty. The reason of Kant's attachement to duty is that he wanted to distinguish the moral realm from that of inclinations. We can concede to Kant that supererogation (and in general the category of the optional) relies on the agent's inclination to pursue the good of others more than one is required to do. As such, the willingness to go go beyond the call of duty might be temporary, fleeting or driven by the circumstances. While all these features are compatible with a theory of supererogation, they are stanger to Kant's moral philosphy, whose intent was that of developing a rational, a priori and universalizable theory for practical action. One time an agent might be willing to sacrife a certain good for the others and another she might be

---

[47] Kant I., *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Gregor M., Timmermann J. (ed. by), *Cambridge University Press*, 2012, pp.13-14.

unwilling to do the same. This, from a Kantian perspective, undermines the moral character of these acts. It is not surprising, then, that any instance of supererogaton would fail the universalizability test of the Categorical Imperative in all its versions. Since supererogatory acts spring from an *inclination* to bring about some extra-good (while supporters of supererogation consider it a specifically *moral* inclination), for Kant this makes them no different from choosing strawberry over vanilla ice cream (i.e. they lose their moral character). Certainly, as Kant would be willing to concede, the content of a supererogatory act and that of choosing ice-cream tastes greatly diverges (with the supererogatory one being distinctively praiseworthy). Still both of them lack the true moral character given by the acting in conformity with the moral law. The 'duty as a motive' feature of a moral act within the Kantian framework is what ultimately grounds the other hallmarks of this theory: the universalizability of the maxim and the obligatoriness of a moral act[48]. All these three features are incompatible with the intuitively appealing definition of supererogatory acts as 'morally good, but not required'.

It is important to underline how Kant was well aware of the existence of acts of heroism. However, his understanding of heroism greatly differs from what the contemporary debate on supererogation takes as paradigmatic examples of it. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant offers the following example:

"*But I do wish that educators would spare their pupils examples of so-called* noble *(supermeritorious) actions, with which our sentimental writings so abound, and would expose them all only to duty and to the worth that a human being can and must give himself in his own eyes by consciousness of not having transgressed it; for, whatever runs up into empty wishes and longings for inaccessible perfection produces more heroes of*

---

[48] Although Heyd does not ground, as I do, universalizability and obligatoriness in the "duty as a motive" feature of Kantian Ethics, his analysis of a Kantian anti-supererogationism is almost identical to mine. See Heyd, D., *ibidem*, p.53. Nevertheless, Heyd seems to be more willing to concede a peculiar understanding of the Kantian theory that leaves room to some instances of supererogation. See Heyd, D., *ibidem*, p.54f.

romance who, while they pride themselves on their feeling for extravagant greatness, release themselves in return from the observance of common and everyday obligation, which then seems to them insignificant and petty"[49]

In the passage that follows this quotation, Kant considers the example of an honest man who is ordered by a powerful lord to commit an immoral deed. No matter the degree of the threats of the lord against the unfortunate powerless man, he decides to adhere firmly to his moral obligations at the cost of his life. This is the sort of noble acts that can inspire the youngsters and provide them a glimpse of what a moral character really is.

The attention to this particular example of heroism explains why Kant was generally suspicious about this category of acts. He was worried that within the 'high flies of morality' can hide an implicit approval of sentimental acting based on a temporary and evanescent inclination. Actual heroism, for Kant, is something very different (if not opposite) to these sentimental 'high flies' of morality. In fact, it corresponds to the strict adherence to a *perfect* duty in cases where acting morally would entail a big sacrifice. It is the ultimate triumph of the sense of duty in cases where the circumstances would suggest to the negligent agent to discharge her strict moral obligations. Heroism is for Kant a further occasion to talk about the adherence to the sense of duty, rather than a case to investigate what lies beyond duty[50]. Taken in Kantian terms, heroism is much more similar to the deeds of the rescuer of the victims of 9\11 tragedy than to those of the bighearted volunteer. Think of the clear examples of heroism expressed by the firefighters who adhered to their duty to rescue people no matter how costly such a rescue would have been. This is the sort of moral integrity that Kant holds dear; their being motivated by duty is what made them heroes in a morally relevant way (and specifically so in Kantian terms). Passages of this sort in the Kantian work make us think that he was less inclined to

---

[49] Kant I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, Gregor M. (ed. by), Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.127-128, [5:155].
[50] Guevara D., *ibidem*, p.609. Similar remarks about these passages of the Critique of Practical Reason have been made by Baron M., *ibidem*, p.36f.

concede a moral status to the instances of heroism that are taken as paradigmatic examples in the contemporary debate on supererogation. Kantian heroism differs from heroism broadly conceived as it takes the sense of duty (rather than mere optionality) as a starting point. Kant was highly suspicious of any form of moral sentimentalism as this might make us lose sight of the ordinary dimension of morality. Rather than taking the *supermeritorious* (*überverdienstlicher*) as a paradigmatic example of morality, we need to keep to the focus on the aspects of an ordinary moral life. This, as Kant believes, cannot but be the attention on the sense of duty.

It should be clear from this brief analysis of a possible Kantian account of supererogation that followers of Kant's theory cannot but endorse an anti-supererogationist orientation. However, as Marcia Baron has underlined, this does not mean that Kantians cannot give an account of the *phenomenon* of supererogation[51]. Claiming that there is no theoretical category of supererogation does not mean that those acts that supererogationists try to explain cannot be accounted otherwise. According to Baron, Kantians have no theoretical need of this category of acts. Specifically, a Kantian should rely on the more efficient category of *imperfect* duties and on some further evaluation of the virtuous character of the agent. According to this view, morally exceptional acts cannot be evaluated in themselves without a further evaluation of the moral status of the character of the agent[52]. Open-ended duties (such as *imperfect* ones) leave plenty of room to the expression of a good character given the more or less ample fulfillment of the relevant duty. The example of Mother Teresa's abundant fulfillment of the *imperfect* duty of beneficence well explains the sort of appreciation of moral character that a fulfillment of this kind entails. We consider her a moral saint because of the virtue of character she expresses by her commitment to the

---

[51] "*The absence of a special category for the supererogatory poses no serious problem, given his understanding of 'duty' and his category of imperfect duties*" in Baron M., *ibidem*, p.23.
[52] Baron M., *ibidem*, p.57-58.

fulfillment of the *imperfect* duty of beneficence[53]. This way of explaining alleged acts of supererogation within the realm of moral obligations involves a bigger explanatory role for the category of duty. Duty in typical Kantian terms is the sole indicator of moral worth of acts. Moreover, note that Baron's point relies on a different question than mere anti-supererogationism: it is not that she is against supererogation in itself. Rather, she asks whether or not we theoretically need a category of supererogation to explain the phenomenon it is intended to define. It is not a critique of the existence of supererogatory acts; it is a critique of the authentic necessity of having a dedicated category to give an account of them. In other terms, those acts that can be accounted by the category of the supererogatory should be accounted by some other less problematic moral category[54].

Generally, due to the different levels of understanding that the Kantian theory offers, it is hard to have a clear opinion on the possibility of supererogation in this system. My take on this particular question is that Kant was not directly concerned to give an account of the concept. The reason for this is that if we take seriously Kant's aversion for moral inclination and his attention for the moral law, we derive that the concept of supererogation, which, by definition, exceeds the constrains of the law, is not a coherent theoretical option. As such, from the impossibility of recognizing the moral worth of acts that are not derived by the sense of duty follows that a supererogatory act cannot be considered morally worthy. Contrary to the case of Utilitarianism, this means identifying the evaluative level with the deontic one. Better, this moral framework assigns to the deontic level of morality also the role typical of the evaluative one (the interpretation of what constitutes the moral goodness of an act). From this we obtain the following denial of

---

[53] Baron M., *ibidem*, p.53-54. Quite similarly to Kant's example of the moral integrity of the powerless man threatened by the lord, the moral value of Mother Teresa relies on her extraordinary ability to follow an obligation no matter the sacrifice it involves.

[54] I have already tried to explain the necessity of such a category of moral acts in the third chapter. See pp.87-94.

supererogation within Kantian Ethics (at least in its original understanding):

$$(Deontic \rightarrow Evaluative) \Rightarrow \neg Supererogation$$

in other terms

$$(Right \rightarrow Good) \Rightarrow \neg Supererogation$$

The Kantian denial of supererogation relies on the fact that something can be morally good only insofar as it is the result of a duty. Similarly to the case of the Utilitarian denial, deriving one level of morality entirely from the other will make lose that theoretical complexity that makes the concept of supererogation explicable. In this sense the Kantian and the Utilitarian denial of supererogation do not differ in the general structure of their arguments (although, as we have seen, the content of their arguments is opposite). This acknowledgement is already expressed, in more general terms, in Heyd's work:

"*One implication of this basic difference is that while deontology tends to be too strict in its definition of 'moral' (considering only obligatory actions as having moral value), utilitarianism is inclined to provide a definition of 'moral' which is too wide (taking every 'useful' action as morally good). Both theories – in their pure but crude forms – are, therefore, anti-supererogationist, but for opposite reasons: in a deontological doctrine no action which is beyond duty can be morally good. In a utilitarian doctrine no action which is morally good can be non-obligatory*"[55].

5. What to Learn from Anti-supererogationism

There is no question that an analysis of the contrast between anti-supererogationism and our intuitive assertions about acts of supererogation can provide both an improvement of our moral systems and a refinement of our moral intuitions. As usual, revision and improvement comes with new questions. Does a phenomenological approach to morality reveal a too vast and manifold moral panorama to be handle by our moral theories? Is moral monism apt for this task? Part of the contemporary debate answers to this latter question with a

---

[55] Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p.73.

negative answer[56]. I think that acts of supererogation exactly represent that overabundance of the moral gamut that theories have failed to account. On the other hand, anti-supererogationists claim that we need to refine our intuitions instead. They claim that, although acts of supererogation express a strong intuitive appeal, we can explain them away without the use of a special and dedicate moral category. Depending on which side of the debate we uphold, it is worth asking then: is it ever possible to give an exhaustive theoretical account of all moral phenomenon? Are moral intuitions always to be trustworthy? Although I think I will fail in the present work to give an adequate answer to either question, I do not want to fail to recognize the importance of, at least, trying to provide such an answer. If moral philosophy wants to remain faithful to its original task of being the subject that investigates how to conduct a life lived well, these questions acquire a fundamental role.

The side I will embrace in the following chapter is that of the supporters, in this given subject, of the relevance of our moral intuitions. In particular, I will try to theorize positively in favor of an autonomous category of supererogatory acts. As I have tried to underline in the present chapter, the problems of justification of the concept generally arise as the manifestation of the loss of that moral complexity that makes supererogation possible. Both Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics share the same maximizing impulse that makes supererogation harder to theorize. Utilitarianism generally aims at the maximization of the Good; similarly, Kantian Ethics is grounded on the duty to strive for the moral perfection of the self (a sort of maximization of the Right). Consequently, the category of supererogatory acts is ignored by moral systems driven by a maximizing inclination. In the third chapter I have underlined how the concept of supererogation has been originated in a complex system, which recognized a somewhat clear distinction between the realm of the Right (characterized by moral requirements) and that of the Good (the broader domain of the possible ways of fulfilling our moral ideals and values). This distinction opens up for the

---

[56] In this regard see the interesting reconstruction provided in Gill M., *Humean Moral Pluralism*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

possibility to pursue certain courses of action that cannot be induced by the mere adherence to our moral requirements (pace Kant). The concept of supererogation identifies those acts that pursue the morally good that lies beyond the morally right.

In order to maintain this complex structure intact I will propose the endorsement of a moral theory characterized by a pluralist (non-monistic) and satisfycing (non-maximizing) structure. Analyzing the nature of moral complexity in the second chapter, I have tried to identify two sorts of pluralism: pluralism of values (*axiological pluralism*) and pluralism of the ways of moral deliberation (*methodological pluralism*). As the contemporary debate shows, it appears clear to many authors that, in the moral domain, we deal with a set of incommensurable values, which eventually come into conflict. As some other authors have underlined we do not obtain moral justification for our acts by following a unique and fixed moral principle[57]. There is not only a plurality of values, but also a plurality of ways in which we deliberate morally[58]. If this claim is correct, when moral conflicts arise, rather than trying to confute one of the opposing positions, it becomes more fruitful to consider which of the moral principles involved and which of the moral values at issue has the precedence over the other. Morality, taken in these terms, rather than being concerned with the morally correct and incorrect, becomes the realm of the varying relevance of principles and values according to the given circumstances. A moral structure that allows for different levels and ways of actualization can describe the phenomenologically evident *complex* status of moral experience. Moreover, I believe that both these categorizations of pluralism will become functional to give an account of those

---

[57] I consider a principle as a way of reasoning in order to bring about a given end, to ground a certain duty or to fulfil the aspiration towards a preferred value.

[58] Let me recall, once again, the words of Charles Larmore: "*Finally, instead of supposing that the structure of morality must be in the end either deontological or consequentialist, and instead of assuming that either all or none of our moral obligations are categorical, we should recognize that the ultimate sources of moral value are not one, but many*" in Larmore C., *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.151.

different levels of moral achievement that make supererogation theoretically conceivable.

It is for these reasons that I will try to endorse a pluralist system of morality in order to explain the phenomenon of supererogation. The widespread diffusion of the major deontological and consequentialist theories in the ethical debate glimpses the plausibility of both systems[59]. Their equally convincing theoretical status suggests that we need to focus on the given situation in order to understand what the priority to grant to the systems is. Therefore, if this analysis is correct, a double conclusion will be obtained. Both supererogation and moral experience can be better explained by a pluralist system that allows multiple sources of the good and different levels of achievement. In particular, being supererogation a *complex* concept (one that requires more than a single level of the moral framework in order to be explained), pluralism seems to be the system that best satisfies the theoretical needs of the concept. The next chapter, then, will try to deal with the decision-making process (the normative level) that leads to a supererogatory act. The tentative conclusion would be the following: supererogation is better accounted by a pluralist moral system that provides, at the normative stage, a clear distinction between the Good and Right.

---

[59] Such a plausibility is testified by their large diffusion indeed. I exclude from this remark the (somehow) classic third member of the major systems of morality: Virtue Ethics (see Baron M., Petit P., Slote M., *Three Methods of Ethics*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1997). The main reason for excluding it is that Virtue Ethics deals primarily with the agent's character and only at a later stage with moral acts. Being the debate on supererogation a debate on a peculiar category of acts, it addresses directly the other two moral systems. Nevertheless, I do not want to rule out the possibility of an account of supererogation within this system. For a detailed treatise of this issue see Heyd D., *Can Virtue Ethics Account for Supererogation?*, in Cowley C. (ed. by), *Supererogation*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 77, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

CHAPTER V:

A NEW PERSPECTIVE:
A PLURALISTIC ACCOUNT OF SUPEREROGATION

This chapter represents an attempt to answer the issues regarding the justification of the concept of supererogation by endorsing a pluralist moral system. This attempt of justification will be valuable, I think, regardless of the fact that monistic theories can somehow give an account of the concept or not. In fact, even if we allow monist theories to provide a possible explanation of the concept (not without major revisions of the original positions in my opinion), I hope that the pluralist take will appear a more suitable and straightforward option for accounting supererogatory acts. Pluralism is a kind of moral theory that allows for multiple (but not infinite) sources of the good. The following tentative resolution of the problem of supererogation relies on the conviction that supererogatory acts spring from the interaction of different sources of the good. This is what I mean by *Multiple Sources Dynamics* (MSD): the phenomenon that allows for a plurality of sources among which the agents identifies (at least) two relevant ones. Namely, one that fulfills a moral obligation relevant to the contest and the other that expresses how to go beyond such obligation. This second source of value, if fulfilled by the performance of an optional act, is the supererogatory achievement. The grounding belief of the chapter is that a pluralist system is the one that can better satisfy the theoretical needs of this dynamics.

1. The *Multiple Sources Dynamics*

I have so far analyzed the question of moral pluralism and that of the concept of supererogation as apparently separated issues. While, as I have claimed, they are both expressions of the Moral

Complexity that characterizes our moral experiences, the two issues have never been so far part of the same problem. The *Multiple Sources Dynamics* (MSD) is exactly this: the possibility of going beyond what is morally required by dealing with multiple sources of the good. Usually, the different sources of the good are promoted by use of a specific moral principle. Relatively to this contest, I take a moral principle to be a way of moral reasoning. As I have sketched in the second chapter, according to Charles Larmore, one understanding of Moral Complexity is acknowledging that we have three different moral principles, which provide the agent with moral reasons to act accordingly[1]. These three principles favor three independent sources of moral value, which introduce independent claims upon the moral agent[2]. According to the given circumstances, one principle can gain priority over the others. In particular, we can distinguish the following principles[3]:

a) The principle of partiality outlines *particularistic* duties, i.e. obligations that arise in virtue of some "*empirically conditioned desire*" or of some special relation we have with the beneficiary of our act;

b) The principle of consequentialism, as traditionally intended, focuses on the consequences of our acts so as they will bring about the most good overall (or the "least evil", as taken in the negative form);

---

[1] This is a suitable expression of what I have earlier called *methodological pluralism*: a variety of way of moral reasoning. Larmore's understanding of a moral principle is almost identical to mine: "*If we think of a principle of practical reason as a rule for organizing and ranking particular desires or courses of action in the light of some general kind of practical value, then we seem to find ourselves subject to not one, but three such principles, and these principles seem to make contrary demands of us in various situations*" in Larmore C., *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp.131-132.

[2] Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.133.

[3] Larmore C.*, ibidem*, p.132.

c) The principle of deontology requires that we never break certain moral guidelines no matter the consequences.

All three principles, says Larmore, express their conflicting authority when it comes to moral decisions. They provide moral reasons of different sort and *independent* one from the other. Taken in this term, Larmore's *methodological pluralism* (since we are not referring to the content of these reasons yet) is a consistent example of moral pluralism. It provides multiple, yet not infinite, ways of being engaged in a moral decision. Moreover, it is important to remind his distinction between *partial* and *impartial* principles. The principle of consequentialism and the principle of deontology are both principles of the latter sort. They are considered *impartial* (or *categorical*), that is, they offer binding reasons for action independently from empirical facts about the agent (her desires and relationships)[4]. On the contrary, the principle of partiality is not, by definition, compatible with this category of reasons. Rather, such a principle is always *partial*, or related to the particular agent, being it concerned with personal commitments that produce reasons for action accordingly. This also explains why we experience the greatest degree of moral complexity in the personal (first-person) dimension of moral agency, where *partial* commitments can be eventually overcome by *impartial* ones (deontology and consequentialism). In the political and public sphere, this is never the case; *impartial* commitments take always precedence over particular ones[5].

Let us return now to the original task of this chapter. How is a supererogatory act possible within this theoretical framework? I have extensively underlined so far how supererogation benefits from a moral structure that acknowledges different levels of

---

[4] This is different from saying that *categorical* reasons for action do not consider any empirical fact about the situation. Think, for example, of the consequentialist consideration on which course of action brings about the best outcome. I am thankful for this specific comment to Charles Larmore.

[5] Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.133.

achievement. In these terms, a clear distinction between the Right and the Good is necessary to explain why something can be morally praiseworthy and, at the same time, morally optional (i.e. it does not produce blame in case of its omission). My suggestion is that a pluralist system that endorses a variety of moral principles is favored to provide the multileved structure that makes supererogation possible. The prevailing principle in the given circumstances sets the moral obligation that the agent has. Nevertheless, it might be the case that once the agent has fulfilled these binding reasons, she is able to recognize additional ways of bringing about some good. From a pluralist perspective, the particularly virtuous agent is able, once she has fulfilled the prevailing reasons for action, to concede that something more can be done. Choosing to follow the prevailing reasons for action means, also, to let it go some other (less binding) options to bring about the good. Supererogation means deciding to follow these discarded options. Although non-prevailing principles have lost their priority in favor of the prevailing principle, they are nonetheless able to provide reasons for bringing about some extra good. When this extra good is compatible with the agent's obligations, the possibility to perform a supererogatory act arises. Clearly, the possibility of supererogation is not available as long as the agent has not fulfilled her obligations. Following a non-prevailing reason in spite of the prevailing reasons one has is simply immoral. Following a non-prevailing reason when one has already fulfilled her obligations is supererogatory. Making an economic donation when you do not have enough money to buy food for your child is not only immoral, but also an irrational sacrifice. Making a donation, when you have enough money to provide for the basic needs of your family, is supererogatory. The supererogatory option arises only when you have fulfilled the prevailing binding reasons you have.

Specifically, once we allow the coexistence of multiple principles we will have the tools both for setting our moral obligations and for understanding how to pursue the good that lies beyond them, namely, supererogatory acts. Allowing a variety

of principles of morality also means to be willing to acknowledge the existence of multiple ways of fostering the good other than the way that merely fulfils moral obligation. MSD is the phenomenon that originates supererogatory acts in a pluralist system. It entails that according to some particular interactions of the three principles, we can have two different ways of performing supererogatory acts: 1. the interaction between two *impartial* principles; 2. the *impartial* use of a *partial* principle. Let us refer to these two possible occurrences of supererogation as the *exceeding instance* (supererogation by the exceeding of an *impersonal* principle over another *impersonal* principle) and the *proximity instance* (supererogation by considering proximate a moral stranger). In what follows I will try to explain in some detail this two possible ways of bringing about a supererogatory act through a Multiple Sources Dynamics.

2. The *Exceeding Instance* of MSD

The *exceeding instance* of the Multiple Sources Dynamics tries to explain the performance of a supererogatory act through the the interaction of two *impartial* principles. Accordingly, supererogation consists in the fact that the moral requirements set by a given *impartial* principle can be surpassed by the optional performance of another *impartial* principle. A pluralistic moral account is the one that allows for many principles, which compete, in a given circumstance, to gain priority over the others by offering compelling reasons to act in certain way. In what follows, I will call the prevailing principle the *active* principle (i.e. the one that offers the most compelling reasons). The other principles will be then indicated as the *inactive* principles. What is important for this view of supererogation is to notice that for a principle to be *inactive* does not mean to lose its ability to provide reasons to bring about some instance of the good. Generally, the reasons provided by *inactive* principles are considered less compelling than those provided by the *active* principles. Recall that the *active* principle is the one providing *prevailing* reasons

(having priority over the others) and the *inactive* principles are those providing *non-prevailing* reasons (less compelling). I believe that supererogation in a pluralist account can be conceived as the performance of the course of actions that can be produced by following *both* kinds of reasons (given that the circumstances allow for this superabundant attainment of the good). This is what I call *Multiple Sources Dynamics*: it means following reasons provided by different sources in the same situation. This plentiful achievement is what I consider supererogatory.

In order to clarify this point, let me analyze some more detailed examples of this interaction between principles. In particular, since I decided to take Larmore's account as a starting point, we can distinguish two different *impartial* principles. Consequently we will have two possible interactions that can generate a supererogatory act: 1. the principle of deontology (*active*) overtaken by the principle of consequentialism (*inactive*); 2. the principle of consequentialism (*active*) overtaken by the principle of deontology (*inactive*). I will start to analyze the first kind of interaction. It is helpful, in this regard, to sketch a brief scenario of the performance of a supererogatory act.

EXAMPLE#1: *Let us suppose that you are walking in the main square of your hometown. The city is a famous destination for tourists due to its many attractions. One of the tourists approaches you asking for directions to the beautiful Cathedral that makes your city so famous. Therefore, you know that telling her a lie and giving her wrong directions would be morally wrong and so you tell her exactly where the Cathedral is. At the same time, you are aware of the fact that getting there could be tricky since the medieval city center makes orientation troublesome. Since you have some free time, you realize that you could bring about the most good overall by walking with the tourist in front of the Cathedral, so as to prevent her from getting lost for the whole afternoon. Even though you are not required to do so (after all she was just asking for directions), you decide to accompany her to where she wants to go.*

It this scenario the moral obligation is to answer truthfully to the request for directions. At this point, the agent would have already fulfilled all her moral obligations in regards to the tourist. By endorsing a pluralist system, we are not necessarily required to accompany the stranger knowing that orientation can be troublesome. We can rightfully consider a truthful answer to the tourist's question enough for satisfying our moral requirements. After all, given the circumstances, these are the most compelling moral reasons. Nevertheless, if I acknowledge that accompanying the stranger can be a morally better option, nothing prevents me from doing so. This is a clear example of a supererogatory act, since I would be doing something morally good that exceeds what it is morally required in the given circumstances. Supererogation so understood (in the *exceeding instance* of MSD) is brought about by the interaction between a principle that defines a satisfactory level of moral requirement (in this case the principle of deontology) that is exceeded by the further application of a maximizing principle (such as the principle of consequentialism). The principle of deontology is the *active* principle, which, for the purpose of supererogation, is supplemented by the performance of an *inactive* principle, the principle of consequentialism. Not only I decide to tell the tourist where the Cathedral is (moral requirement), but also I decide to accompany the tourist to the Cathedral (supererogatory act). What if I am late for a professional appointment when the tourist stops me asking for directions? The moral requirement to answer truthfully remains, but the omission of the supererogatory act will not generate any sort of moral criticism.

What is important to underline here is that the *active* principle plays an essential role since, having a priority over the others, it defines the level of moral requirement that could optionally be exceeded by the further application of an *inactive*[6] principle. The *inactive* principle, plays a necessary, but not sufficient role for the performance of the supererogatory act. The *active* principle

---

[6] And *maximizing* principle in this case.

has a priority over the others when it comes to identify the moral requirement. Nevertheless, it plays an essential role for the performance of supererogation too: the *active* principles defines the level of moral requirement that can be exceeded[7]. Furthermore, it is interesting to recall here how monist consequentialist theories are often criticized for being too demanding. Maximizing principles alone can originate moral obligations so demanding as to be considered, according to our moral intuitions, supererogatory instead[8]. The same demandingness of maximizing principles can be said to be true in pluralist systems as well. However, the maximizing principle is making possible the achievement of the praiseworthy extra-good no matter its possible demandingness. The difference, here, relies on the fact that we do not feel it to be *too* demanding since, rather than considering it a mere requirement, we have voluntarily chosen to pursue it. Only the interaction with a non-maximizing principle that limits moral requirements, allows maximizing principles to bring about a good that is understood as supererogatory without also being considered too exacting. In the present example, we can say that the *active* non-maximizing principle is what limits the reach of the *inactive* maximizing principle.

A second kind of interaction between *impartial* principles is that of the principle of consequentialism exceeded by the further

---

[7] Generally, the moral source that constitutes the level of obligation is always one. Differently, a supererogatory act may be suggested by more than a one secondary moral source. After all, given a specific moral requirement, there are many different supererogatory things than one can do. When I give you back the money that I borrowed from you, I might decide to express gratitude simply by saying thank you or by buying you a present or by giving you back more than you owed and so on. Nevertheless, the necessary and sufficient condition for the performance of a supererogatory act remains the existence of a least two moral levels.

[8] This is the case raised by the *demandingness objection* to Act-Utilitarianism. See Mulgan T., *The Demands of Consequentialism*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p.25. I have dedicate some pages to the question of maximizing duties in a previous chapter. See pp.123-130.

performance of the principle of deontology. At first sight, this is a more difficult one to explain. Difficulties arise because the principle of consequentialism is usually understood to be a maximizing principle. Therefore, before giving an example of this interaction, it is worthwhile wondering if supererogatory acts are ever possible when the principle of consequentialism takes priority as the *active* principle. According to its definition, the principle requires us to:

"[…] *do whatever will produce the most good or the least evil overall, with regard to all those touched by our action*"[9].

Apparently, it seems that the principle so understood tends to maximize the good and so there is no possible way to exceed the level of accomplishment of the good achieved by the endorsement of this principle. When maximizing obligations take priority over the rest, they tend to leave no room for supererogation[10]. At this point, this question arises: is it ever possible to exceed the requirements of consequentialist reasons when they take priority over the others? One tentative answer to problem might be the case of the *dutiful hero* so dear to Immanuel Kant[11]. In this regard, we might suggest that the heroic deeds of the rescuers of 9\11 tragedy (who for the most part were professionals) have performed acts of supererogation by fulfilling the principle of deontology ("one professionally ought to attain his\her job"), exceeding the requirement of the principle of consequentialism[12]. Still, I would maintain that their deeds do not represent the sort of heroism that springs from an instance of supererogation.

---

[9] Larmore C., *ibidem*, p.132.

[10] See pp.129-130 of the present work. See also S. Grigoletto, *Why Proximity Matters For the Concept of Supererogation,* manuscript.

[11] I have already analyzed in the previous chapter (p.147) the case of the man who refuses to lie at all costs. See Kant I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, Gregor M. (ed. by), Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.128, [5:156].

[12] We might imagine, in fact, that in those harsh circumstances the best possible outcome (the most lives saved) would have been obtained by giving up any sort of rescuing operation.

Dutiful heroism derives its praiseworthiness[13] from its being an example of *moral integrity*. Such integrity is expressed by the ability to stick with one's own duty, rather one's capacity to go beyond duty. Recall that, in Kantian terms, the sort of heroism expressed by 9\11 rescuers is an especially praiseworthy example of *perfect* duty. Dutiful heroism has a lot to do with the concept of duty and thus, its praiseworthiness might not derive from its being beyond. This means that claiming that this sort of heroism is not a proper example of supererogation does not entail that it is not equally praiseworthy. Nevertheless, I concede that there happen to cases that present some circumstances that make it perfectly reasonable to withdraw from someone's duties. If in this cases, the agent who decides to stick with her duties and perform a certain act no matter how costly the consequences are, she is achieving a praiseworthy extra good. Notice, however, that the harsh circumstances have greatly affected the status of her duties to the point that deciding not to follow them is perfectly reasonable. It is an open question if we can still properly call them her *duties*.

Let us go back to the question of how to perform a supererogatory act when the principle of consequentialism gains priority over the others. How it is then possible to overtake a *maximizing* principle (such as consequentialism) to perform a supererogatory act? I think that a tentative answer might be the following: the *conjunctive* performance of *non-conflicting* values. To explain this point let me recall the second understanding of pluralism that that I have sketched in the first chapter. *Axiological pluralism* holds that we try to live a good life according to a set of incommensurable values that we recognize to be all equally valid. To use Nagel's expression, the nature of value is 'fragmented'. Moreover, I have claimed that moral principles are different ways of moral reasoning. We might add that principles always endorse and bear a specific moral value. For example, the

---

[13] A praiseworthiness that is no less important than that expressed by supererogatory heroism.

principle of consequentialism usually tries to maximize the good, because it holds that happiness is good; the principle of deontology is usually concerned with the respect of moral agents' autonomy, and so on. In such a scenario then, the maximization of the principle of consequentialism is still the maximization of a *single* value. Moral pluralism entails that we can count on a set of equally important moral values. From this we can conclude that supererogation, in this second instance of MSD, can be brought about by the conjunctive performance of two non-conflicting values. First, the agent recognizes the priority of the principle of consequentialism (the *active* principle) which requires the maximization of the given value *a.* Moreover, she recognizes that she has the possibility to foster the given value *b*, by doing something else. If she is able to do either *a* (requirement) *and b* (optional), she is performing something supererogatory. Notice that this is not always possible, since we need to be in a situation where the performance of two non-conflicting values is possible. Contrary, in the case of the performance of two conflicting values, the agent will possibly undermine the achievement of the moral requirement by performing the supererogatory act. This option is not only problematic, but also morally impermissible[14].

In order to explain this second kind of the *exceeding instance* of MSD, let me introduce the following example:

EXAMPLE#2: *It is Mary's birthday and she is organizing a birthday party at her home. She is inviting friends for dinner and*

---

[14] One might wonder what differentiate this from Hill's *conjunctive* performance of two imperfect duties analyzed in the previous chapter (pp.142-150). Note that here, differently from Hill's case, we have a precise priority of the moral requirement originated by the *active* principle. Only then, the performance of the supererogatory act is possible. Remember that my criticism of the supererogatory conjunctive performance of imperfect duties relies on the possibility to refrain from performing *both* duties. In the scenario explained above this criticism does not apply, since one of the two conjuncts is clearly obligatory and the other is clearly not.

she definitely wants to be a good host. She knows that her guests would greatly enjoy having a birthday cake. Once she enters the pastry shop, she is undecided on whether to buy a strawberry cake or a chocolate cake. After a few minutes, she cannot come up with a choice between the two. Considering that she really wants to make her guests happy, she concludes the following: "I will buy them both!".

A case like this presents us with a clear moral requirement. If you want to make your guests happy and be a good host, you will need to provide a birthday cake for them. Obviously, you can fulfil this requirement by either buying a strawberry cake or a chocolate cake. It is equally clear that, if you buy them both, you achieve more than you ought to have done. This superabundant achievement of the good is then supererogatory and it is brought about by the performance of two equally reasonable (and non-conflicting) ways to fulfil the given moral requirement.

The *conjunctive* performance of non-conflicting values highlights how supererogation is, in a certain sense, the opposite of a moral dilemma. A moral dilemma is a situation where you are in presence of various sources of value and you cannot satisfy either of them without incurring in a moral loss. Supererogatory acts, instead, are possible when you have multiple sources of the good (at least two) and you can satisfy all of them, producing a superabundant moral achievement. In other terms, supererogation means following *secondary* moral reasons (the moral requirement being grounded on the primary and prevailing reasons there are). The most decisive moral reasons represent the level of obligation, but once we decide to follow some other non-decisive (secondary) reasons for action, we enter the sphere of the supererogatory. From all these assertions appears clear how supererogation is a phenomenon that represents the distinctively dual nature of morality as divided between the right and the good.

I want now to offer another example of supererogation. One that clearly presents a case of a consequentialist requirement that is exceeded by typically deontological reasons:

EXAMPLE#3: *It is Mary's birthday and she is organizing a birthday party at her home. She is inviting friends for dinner and she definitely wants to be a good host. After the dinner has been served, it is time for the birthday cake. She knows that she would need to cut the cake in a number of slices equal to the number of her guests plus one for herself. Therefore, she does so. Mike, one of her guests, happens to enjoy the cake very much. Mary, considering that she really wants to be a good host, gives to Mike her slice of the cake.*

I take Mary's act to be supererogatory. Here the situation is the following: if the agent wants to distribute a certain good equally, the morally right thing to do is to divide it by the number of the beneficiaries. I take this to be a moral requirement typically consequentialist in kind as it deals with the maximization of the happiness of beneficiaries equally capable to enjoy the good. Still, the interesting thing about Mary's act is that she gives up her share of the good (something that would be her right to hold considering that it is her birthday), in virtue of some other kind of moral reason. Specifically, she really wants to be a good host and this entails that she might be ready to sacrifice a little part of her own good to benefit the others. In this case, the morally right thing has a consequentialist connotation, while the way the moral agent decides to exceed the level of the right has a deontological nature. Mary acts according to a *commendatory* understanding[15] of the claim "if you want to be a good host you *ought* to act in a way that benefits your guests". Once again, this represents a case where the supererogatory acts has been performed by the exceeding of a moral requirement of certain kind by the performance of an act originated by

---

[15] See pp.132-133 for an explanation of the *commendatory* versus the *prescriptive* use of "ought".

secondary moral reasons of a different kind. I take this to be another good example of how the *exceeding instance* of MSD works.

Let me try to sum up the common features of all these instances of MSD. How can we generally define supererogation within such a moral system? Supererogation means following the reasons provided by the principle that does not obtain priority in the given circumstances without denying the reasons provided by the prevailing principle. The agent applies a principle that has no priority on the others (non-obligatory) in order to generate that extra good that is considered especially praiseworthy (supererogatory). After all, for a principle to have no priority on the others does not mean to lose its ability to see possible ways to achieve the good. If the principle without priority is compatible with the one with priority and the agent decides to apply *both* of them, she produces an extra good. Nonetheless, supererogation is not an option *always* available. Sometimes the moral pulls of the different principles are simply not compatible and so the interactions that we have analyzed before are not feasible. For example, when it comes to urgent consequentialist reasons to relieve someone from a consistent amount of pain, there seems to be no room left for supererogation. In cases like this, doing what is morally required fulfills all the possible goods that can be brought about in that given circumstance, making it impossible to exceed them in order to achieve the extra good. For example, you have a moral requirement to provide first aid to someone who has suffered a car accident in from of your eyes[16]. Cases like this, granted that the agent does not incur in any sort of sacrifice and loss, offer a scenario where the mere moral obligation satisfies all the possible instances of the good. There is simply nothing we can do to make it morally better.

---

[16] Interestingly, it is hard to tell, in my opinion, if this moral obligation is grounded on consequentialist or deontological reasons. It seems to me that both principles would lead to the same moral requirement.

It is important to notice that, according to my account, supererogation is a moral phenomenon that relies on many different factors: 1. a moral system that provides different sources of the good; 2. the compatibility of the different reasons for action; 3. the circumstances that allow for the possible achievement of the extra-good. All these features primarily focus on the relevant aspects of a supererogation as a moral act. Much more can be said about the sort of character traits that the virtuous agent expresses when she performs this specific sort of moral act. Nevertheless, in the present section (and generally in the present work) I have tried to focus on the first point, stressing how moral pluralism can provide a satisfactory explanation of supererogation. I have here tried two highlight the role that both *methodological pluralism* and *axiological pluralism* play in providing theoretical room for the concept. Without the two levels of morality, supererogation is not conceivable. However, I am aware of the fact that much more can be said about the second and the third point.

3. The *Proximity Instance* of MSD

Let me now briefly focus on the instance of supererogation that originates from the interaction of *partial* principles. A partial principle is one that grounds particularistic duties and reasons for action as part of our particular desires or commitments towards those who are close and proximate to us. Usually, specific relationships or goals in life raise what have been also called special obligations. If I want to climb Mount Bianco, I will have to train consistently. Also, if I care about my daughter's future, I will provide her with all the necessary to give her the possibility to study. It appears clear how these reasons for action rely on *proximity*. This is not intended as mere physical

closeness, but as relational closeness[17]. This is why I call this instance of MSD the *proximity instance*. It refers to the performance of a supererogatory act through the *impartial* use of a *partial* principle. In other terms, this happens when the agent uses *impersonally* the principle of partiality so as to benefit a stranger in a supererogatory way. For example, acting in a way that would entail a *special obligation*, even if it is not so, leads the agent to perform an optional and morally good act. Let me sketch another example to explain the point:

EXAMPLE #4: *Let us suppose that your little daughter is playing basketball in the school's team. You know that, in virtue of your caring for your daughter you have a particularistic duty to provide her with new basketball shoes if needed. One day, while you are attending one of your daughter's game, you realize that one of her teammates would need some new basketball shoes. You also know that she belongs to a very poor family that would probably not be able to afford the purchase of new basketball shoes for their kid. Moved by willingness to help this family, you decide to buy the shoes for your daughter's teammate. You do so as if she was your own daughter.*

I consider this a relevant and consistent instance of supererogation. Providing for basketball shoes to somebody else's daughter seems to be something morally good, but not morally required. What defines this special moral status is the absence of the actual special obligation that would morally require buying the new shoes for someone who needs them. Moreover, the absence of the special obligation explains why the omission of this morally praiseworthy act is not morally blameworthy. If you refrain from buying the shoes, you are not breaking any moral requirement that tells you to do otherwise. Specifically, you are not taking care of someone's basic needs, nor you are relieving

---

[17] See pp.129-130 of the present work. On the issue of *proximity* as the ground for special obligations see Jeske D., Fumerton R., *Relatives and Relativism*, in "Philosophical Studies", 87(1997), pp.143–157.

her from pain (so that there is no principle of consequentialism that provides reasons for you to do so). Simply you are acting as if you had a particularistic duty to provide the other family's kid with new shoes, even if you do not have such a duty. There is no principle of partiality that justifies your act, but still you decide to act if there were one. This is why you are doing something supererogatory. The way you realize how to bring about the supererogatory act is by the application of the principle of partiality to someone who is not supposed to benefit from your particularistic duties. Morally speaking, treating a stranger as if she were my daughter or sister is an act of supererogation. This is why I call this the *proximity instance* of MSD: it means acting so as to benefit the others by expanding the reach of our particularistic duties in a way that makes them supererogatory. We might also add that the agent who performs this sort of supererogatory acts makes an *unconventional* use of a moral source. A special obligation, which is conventionally applied to those "near and dear", is here performed so as to benefit a stranger.

The *Proximity Instance* of MSD reveals how supererogation can be possible when we have multiple understandings of the moral source of particularistic duties. The two levels of morality necessary for this category of acts are here expressed by two 'areas of competence' of the same duties: 1. the proper understanding of particularistic duties towards those who are relationally proximate to us; 2. a broadening of the reach of particularistic duties towards those who are *not* relationally proximate to us. When the agent decides to go beyond the first understanding aiming for a broader way to benefit the others, she performs a supererogatory act. In other terms, it means setting a moral *ought* when one does not necessarily have conclusive and decisive reasons to do so. It is not surprising, then, that Jamie Dreier has proposed a similar explanation of the

concept of supererogation[18]. Specifically, as I have underlined in the previous chapter, he argues that supererogation is possible as long as we entail the existence of two moral points of view: the point of view of *beneficence* (which analyzes everything in terms of the morally better and worse) and the point of view of *justice* (which focuses on the moral wrongness of an act)[19]. For example, the particularistic duty to care for one's own child is especially binding because it would be wrong to do otherwise. Caring for the needs of somebody else's child (provided that we are not in a situation of relief from physical pain) is certainly morally better than doing otherwise, but not morally wrong. Buying the basketball shoes for your daughter's teammate means evaluating a particularistic duty from the moral point of view of *beneficence*. It is correct to think that, morally speaking, we would live in a better world if this were the only moral point of view[20]. Still, moral reasons that spring from the point of view of *justice* remain more binding on us because they represent the minimal level of morality that makes living together as human beings possible. It would be impossible to live in a world that does not (at least) blame moral wrongness and this is the role of the point of view of *justice*. Sad enough, for this reason the point of view of *beneficence* will always play a secondary (and optional) role. This entails that the morally best cannot be required of us as the morally right is. In other terms, the point of view of *justice* will always have precedence over the point of view of *beneficence*. Supererogation is a moral category that reminds us to praise all those acts where human beings foster the morally good that lies beyond the morally right.

Generally, as I have already claimed, supererogation is possible because the good is broader than the right. In the case

---

[18] Dreier J., *Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't* in Byron M. (ed. by), *Satisficing and Maximizing: Moral Theories on Practical Reason*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.131-154.

[19] Dreier J., *ibidem*, p.149.

[20] A moral point of view that would bring about many alleged supererogatory acts indeed.

of the interaction of two *impartial* principles, we can say that this distinction is granted as long as we use a principle to determine what is the right thing to do and we use another principle to understand what would be the extra-good (and thus praiseworthy) thing to do. The two levels of morality are grounded on different moral principles. This is what I have defined the *exceeding instance* of MSD. Likewise, in the case of supererogatory acts done by the *impartial* use of a *partial* principle we are aiming at achieving the good beyond the reach of what our particularistic duties require. The two levels of morality are here expressed by different ways of applying the same kind of moral reason. This is what I have defined the *proximity instance* of MSD. We can summarize, then, that performing a supererogatory act requires looking at the bigger moral picture, knowing that the moral domain is not limited to the dimension of requirements. This means being able to pursue the good that we glimpse *beyond* the requirements of the right.

4. The Phenomenology of Supererogation

In this final section, I would like to go back to the issue by which I have started this work: the moral phenomenological aspects of a moral experience. In particular, I want to focus on how it is like to experience the performance of a supererogatory act. It can be helpful to recall here Mandelbaum's considerations in regards to the experience of moral obligation. As I have outlined in the first chapter, Mandelbaum mainly focused on the phenomenology of moral obligations. It would constitute a mere supposition to sketch a possible understanding of supererogation within his system. Nevertheless, I would like to draw from him some useful terminology in order to explain the *phenomenon* of supererogation. Mandelbaum's account of the phenomenological analysis of moral judgments[21] entails the relation of *fittingness* of

---

[21] Remember that these judgments are divided between *direct* and *removed* ones. The former identify those judgments that we make in first person when

a certain course of action in order to achieve a given end[22]. The experience of this relation is particularly important when it comes to the fulfillment of a moral obligation. If I have promised to return the book you borrowed, the fact that we are going to meet tonight counts in favor of (it is a reason that favors we might also say) bringing your book with me and give it back to you. Bringing the book with me *fits* the moral demands that the situation casts upon me, fulfilling the related moral obligation (I ought to keep my word). In these regards, we realize how supererogation deals with a different sort of *fittingness*. Without any doubt, the given situation plays a role in the definition of what the agent can do in order to achieve some extra good. In other terms, the situation tells what course of action *fits* the agent's willingness to do the supererogatory act. Nevertheless, this sort of *fittingness* does not derive from a moral demand as in the case of moral obligation. Still, from a phenomenological point of view, even supererogation presumes that the agent performs a specific given act. If I want to be kind with you while we are chatting at the bar, I will recognize that buying you a coffee *fits* my desire to be friendly. From a phenomenological point of view, the performance of a supererogatory act means accepting a new moral task with all the conditions it entails. The achievement of the supererogatory calls for the endorsement of an additional set of acts that bring about the good. While this further set of acts does not originate a moral requirement (or moral demand), the same teleological character of moral obligations remains. If I want to bring about a certain supererogatory end, I will need to acknowledge those acts that *fit* my willingness to do so. This uncommon and additional moral endorsement is what generates the praiseworthiness typical of these acts.

---

we actually face the given moral scenario. They are to be distinguished from the latter kind of moral judgments, which are those that we make from a perspective *removed* from the situation considering past or future situations.
[22] Mandelbaum M., *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, The Free Press, 1955, p.64.

Once again, the reference to the parable of the Young Rich Man can help us understanding this point. When the young man asks what he needs to do in order to get eternal life other than the fulfilment of the law of the Decalogue, Jesus answered as follows:

"*If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me*"[23].

It is interesting to note that the Gospel of Matthew (differently from Mark) reports this answer as an if-clause. We can interpret this as the fact that the way of moral perfection entails the endorsement of new set of acts that fit the new moral scenario. If the young man wants to achieve moral perfection (and not just moral righteousness), selling all his goods would fit the condition of achievement of the supererogatory. From a phenomenological point of view, the performance of supererogation is able to recreate, at another level, the same relation of *fittingness* of Mandelbaum's understanding of moral obligations[24]. It has been underlined, however, that what differentiate the two is the fact that in the case of moral obligation the relation of fittingness is grounded on a "felt demand" to act in a certain way[25]. The same cannot be said of supererogation. Fittingness, in this case, is grounded on the agent's espousal of the supererogatory end, rather than on some external moral demand[26]. Interestingly, the experience of the *fittingness* of a supererogatory act is provided by the agent's willingness to bring about some extra good. Supererogation grounds the fittingness of the act *internally*

---

[23] *Matthew,* 19:21.
[24] Horgan T. Timmons M., *Untying a Knot From the Inside Out: Reflections on the "Paradox" of Supererogation,* in 'Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation' 27(2010), no.2, p.48-49.
[25]Horgan T. Timmons M., i*bidem,* p.44.
[26] 'External' here means that this sort of moral demand holds true no matter of the agent's particularistic desires. Horgan T. Timmons M., i*bidem,* p.45.

rather than externally. This explains why the non-performance of an act required by a moral obligation generates public blame and criticism, while the non-performance of a supererogatory does not bring about the same reactive attitude. For example, if I happen to be very late at a business appointment, I simply do not have time to stop and buy a lunch for the very good friend of mine I have just run into. This kind of non-performance explains the sort of regret that the agent might feel when she fails to do the extra good. The agent might regret (at most) a situation where she recognizes that there is a possibility to do some extra good, but she simply cannot follow the reasons to act accordingly. Moreover, it is never the case that the non-performance of a supererogatory act generates any sort of moral criticism by the others or by the agent herself. As a matter of fact, this is not the case when it comes to the non-performance of moral obligations. The failure to conform to a *perfect* duty usually generates guilty feelings and blame[27]. Conversely, in the case of the non-performance of an act that would fulfil an *imperfect* duty the agent will generally feel shame or some sort of disappointment in oneself[28]. It is very important for the definition of supererogation that we do not confuse the possible regret that comes with the non-performance of a supererogatory act with any sort of moral criticism to the agent. Otherwise, we would undermine the optionality of this category of acts and consequently affect the source of its moral praiseworthiness.

Before moving on to consider some features of the phenomenology of supererogatory acts, it is worthwhile to recall that, from a theoretical point of view, the most convincing accounts of supererogation rely on the acknowledgement of the different levels of morality[29]. I hold that supererogation can be

---

[27] Horgan T. Timmons M., i*bidem*, p.46.

[28] Sinnot-Amstrong W., *You Ought to Be Ashamed of Yourself (When You Violate an Imperfect Obligation)*, in 'Philosophical Issues', 15(2005), pp.192-208.

[29] Being this account based on the outlining of different moral points of view (as in Dreier J., *Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing*

accounted only by means of the acknowledgment of Moral Complexity. It is reasonable to think, then, that the very phenomenological experience of a supererogatory act needs to be similarly complex. Once we recognize the need of complexity on a theoretical level, we cannot but concede that the phenomenological experience of a supererogatory act entails the combination of different factors. Roughly, it needs to be an equally *complex* experience. Let us focus on the following example to clarify the issue:

Mary enters a bar and asks for a coffee at the bar counter. While she is there, another person enters and asks for a coffee. He looks to be in hurry and right after having gulped down the coffee ask the bartender to pay his bill. The stranger suddenly looks very embarrassed as he realizes that he forgot his wallet in the car. Mary, moved by her altruistic and virtuous character, steps in the conversation between the bartender and the stranger and she offers to buy the coffee for him. The stranger, surprised by Mary's behavior, expresses gratitude and runs out of the bar to the business meeting he has to attend.

What it is like to be in Mary's shoes in this situation? What sort of phenomenological experience has she undergone? Certainly, she decided to do what she has done because she has seen the possibility to bring about some instance of the good. However, this feature is not only typical of supererogatory acts. Moral deeds generally share this phenomenological experience,

---

Doesn't, in Byron M. (ed. by), *Satisficing and Maximizing: Moral Theories on Practical Reason*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.131-154) or by specifying the different roles of moral reasons (as in Portmore D., *Are Moral Reasons Morally Overriding?,* in 'Ethical Theory and Moral Practice' 11(2008), pp.369-388, and Horgan T. Timmons M., *Untying a Knot From the Inside Out: Reflections on the "Paradox" of Supererogation*, in 'Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation', 27(2010), no.2, pp.29-63, or, more implicitly, Gert J., *Requiring and Justifying: Two Dimensions of Normative Strength*, in 'Erkenntnis' 59(2003), pp.5-36).

especially when it comes to benefit the others. What distinguishes supererogation from other moral instances is a further phenomenological experience that accompanies the widespread experience of the achievement of the good that generally characterizes the moral domain. Remember that supererogatory acts are fully optional and do not entail any sort of criticism in the case of omission. In the example above, if Mary decided to omit her altruistic act, we cannot imagine any sort of moral consequence. For her, after all, consider the following: a) the person she has benefitted is a complete stranger, so she is not bound by any special obligation in virtue of her relationship with him; b) the bartender would have probably allowed the customer to go outside to get his wallet in the car; c) she is not facing a situation where someone is experiencing a great amount of pain so as consequentialist reasons would require her to act. From all this derives that, from a phenomenological point of view, she is experiencing a situation where her acting is optional to the point where in case of omission nothing would have happened to her. Consider how this phenomenological experience differs from that of a *perfect* or *imperfect* duty. As I have underlined above, the possible omission of a moral obligation (be it *perfect* or *imperfect*) comes with a related degree of moral disapproval. The omission of a *perfect* duty generates moral blame, while the omission of an *imperfect* duty generates self-reproach. Supererogation phenomenologically differs from this as it entails the combination of two experiences: 1. the possibility to bring about some instance of the good; 2. the prevision that the possible omission will not entail any actual moral criticism or reactive attitude by the others. This second feature explains why this category of acts differs from perfect and imperfect duties; its omission generates a different phenomenological experience. As matter of fact, supererogatory acts are characterized by such a double and compound experience. In other terms, supererogation entails a *complex* phenomenological experience. This, however, should not be a surprising conclusion, since, as we have seen in the previous chapters, supererogation, from a theoretical point of

view, is a *complex* concept. It is a moral category that requires more than a single level of morality in order to be justified.

The phenomenological analysis of the concept not only reveals what it is like to perform a supererogatory act, but also tells us some characteristics of the moral agent who performs it. The phenomenology of the first person experience discloses what makes supererogation possible from the point of view of the agent. In other terms, it explains what sort of psychological state the agent experiences when it comes to perform a supererogatory act. I hold, as I have tried to show in the previous chapters[30], that supererogation entails an altruistic behavior; one that aims at benefitting the others. How is it then possible to do that? The influential work by moral psychologist Daniel Batson introduces the so-called *Empathy-Altruism hypothesis[31]*. Briefly, this thesis holds that empathic concern (other-oriented emotions originated by the perception of someone else in need[32]) gives rise to an altruistic motivation (having as ultimate goal that of increasing another's welfare[33]). The more empathic concern a given agent feels, the more she would be willing to bring about the state of affairs that would reduce the need of the related subject or group of subjects[34]. The empathic capacity of a moral agent is helpful to understand what triggers a supererogatory act. If I were not in an empathic state, it would be impossible to find a motivation to act and to do the costs-benefit analysis that guides the instances of supererogation. Moreover, feeling concerned for those in need will also justify those cases where a supererogatory act entails a considerable degree of self-sacrifice[35]. If I am eating a sandwich

---

[30] See Chapter III, pp.107-109.

[31] Batson D., *Altruism in Humans*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

[32] Batson D., *ibidem*, p.11f.

[33] Batson D., *ibidem*, p.20f.

[34] Batson D., *ibidem*, p.29.

[35] Remember, however, that self-sacrifice is not a necessary condition for a consistent actualization of a supererogatory act. See Archer A., *Supererogation, Sacrifice, and the Limits of Duty*, in "Southern Journal of Philosophy", forthcoming.

on a bench shared by a starving stranger, I would be willing to give him part of or my entire sandwich (depending on the degree of perception of his discomfort). I will take this psychological evidence of altruistic behavior as a further demonstration of what it is the relevant understanding of the moral point of view in regards to this category of acts. From a phenomenological point of view, what makes supererogation possible is the ability to take somebody else's good as a reason for action in itself. Charles Larmore's understanding of the moral point of view suits the explanatory needs of this specific regard of supererogatory acts:

"*Morality consists in seeing in another's good a demand on our attention that is as direct, as unmediated by ulterior considerations, as the concern we naturally feel for our own. The ability to look beyond our own interests, whatever they may be, and to take an interest in another's good simply because it is his or hers – that is the essence of moral thinking.*"[36]

I believe that this understanding of morality is not only functional, but also ultimately fundamental to the achievement of the moral good that lies beyond the call of duty. Moreover, it explains something about the phenomenological experience that the moral agent undergoes when she deals with supererogatory acts. Morality, in this specific regard, is a matter of understanding the others and embracing the task of benefitting them.

---

[36] Larmore C., *The Autonomy of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp.73-74.

CONCLUSION:
THE MANY DIMENSIONS OF MORAL COMPLEXITY

The dimensions of Moral Complexity are many and they can be notice on different levels of the moral domain. Certainly enough, the present work cannot represent a comprehensive and exhaustive treatise of complexity. I have focused on at least two aspects of Moral Complexity and I have tried to show how this feature of morality holds true in both aspects: the nature of moral experience and the possibility to give an account of the concept of supererogation.

To the first issue I have dedicated chapters I and II. The starting point has been that of endorsing a phenomenological approach to the subject. The reason of this choice is the belief that morality deals with acts that find their ultimate expression in the everyday life. The first-person analysis of the moral agent aims at understanding what it is like to do *x,* allowing a more precise appreciation of the moral reasons for action. It appears clear how an analysis of this sort reveals the manifold nature of the moral sphere. This acknowledgement comes with a first theoretical conclusion: the preferable normative theory is a pluralist system. In this regards I have tried to show how the understanding of moral pluralism offered by Charles Larmore represents a good starting point for handling Moral Complexity at a normative level. The adoption of heterogeneous principles of morality (consequentialism, deontology and partiality) helps us understanding how different moral reasons can be disclosed by endorsing different ways of moral reasoning. In this particular regard, I have tried to show how pluralism is articulated in at least two district ways. We can distinguish between a *methodological pluralism* (different and equally valid ways of moral reasoning) and an *axiological pluralism* (different moral values that we consider incommensurable and of ultimate importance). These features of our moral experience (and of the normative system that I take to explain such

experience) are expression of the complexity that characterizes morality. This, in a certain degree, explains the motto contained in the title of the dissertation: *only through moral complexity*. In other terms, we would be able to understand morality only through a proper appreciation of its complexities.

In the third chapter, I have tried to show how these metaethical (or, in a certain sense, meta-theoretical) claims about the nature of morality come with some repercussions on the normative level too. I take the concept of supererogation to be a clear example of this matter. If we want to acknowledge the complex nature of morality, we need to concede the existence of supererogatory acts. This claim requires further specification. Morality, it has often been underlined, has two faces: the Right and the Good. They stand as the two dimensions of the normative level, dimensions to which different authors have referred differently: the deontic and the evaluative, a minimal ethics and a maximal ethics, duties and values and so on. This distinction, which acknowledges the different levels of morality, is the one that gives rise to the theoretical need of a category of supererogatory acts. This resembles the distinction between *precepts* and *counsels* that gave birth to the concept in the Christian tradition. There are different ways and levels of achievement of the good and this is what makes possible to conceive the "higher flies of morality"; the morally good that lies beyond the call of duty. It is not surprising, then, that many attempts to solve the *problem of supererogation*[1] rely on the identification of different sources of morality.

The contemporary debate on the concept of supererogation is plenty of examples of this way of giving an account of the concept. Think, for example, of the position held by Portmore,

---

[1] These terms usually refer to the following quandary: if supererogatory acts often represent the morally best option, why is that they are not morally required? This aspect of supererogation goes against the '*good-ought tie up*' motto, the idea that morality should always prescribe the morally best. See pp.123-130.

Gert and Dreier[2]. In the present work, I adopt a similar strategy, providing an account of supererogation by endorsing a pluralist moral system. As I have tried to show in chapter IV, monist theories usually fail (or at least struggle) to give a proper explanation of supererogatory acts in virtue of their tendency to merge the two faces of morality into one. Therefore, these theories cannot recreate that manifold and multileveled structure that makes supererogation theoretically conceivable. As David Heyd highlights when he underlines what constitutes supererogation's moral value:

"*This dual source of moral value explains why supererogation requires a theory which blends both axiological and deontological elements. Neither utilitarianism nor Kantianism alone is sufficient to account for supererogation* [...]"[3].

The only way to solve the justificatory problem of the concept is to acknowledge the different levels that constitute morality and provide, accordingly, a normative system that grants the appropriate distinctions.

For this reason, in chapter V, I have decided to provide an account of supererogatory acts from a pluralist perspective. A moral system that acknowledges many sources of morality is able to identify a level of the Right that remains well distinguished from the level of the Good. This important distinction recreates the theoretical needs that make supererogation conceivable. In this regard, I have tried to explain the performance of a supererogatory act by the *Multiple Sources Dynamics*. Supererogation is better explained when the

---

[2] Portmore D., *Are Moral Reasons Morally Overriding?,* in "Ethical Theory and Moral Practice", 11(2008), pp.369-388; Gert J., *Moral Worth, Supererogation, and the Justifying/Requiring Distinction,* in "Philosophical Review", 121(2012), no.4, pp.611-618; Dreier J., *Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't,* in Byron M. (ed. by), Satisficing and Maximizing: Moral Theories on Practical Reason, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.131-154.
[3] Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory,* Cambridge University Press, 1982, p.131.

moral agent is able to distinguish different moral sources that make clear, on one hand, one's own moral requirements and, on the other, a way to exceed these obligations by aiming for some extra good. While this explanation of supererogatory acts is not meant in itself to exclude any possible monist account of supererogation, it makes clear how the pluralist's take offers some advantages over the other justificatory options.

Finally, it worth asking why is pluralism taken to be, in the present work, the key to interpret both moral experience and supererogation? I hold that pluralism represents a sort of *inference to the best explanation*[4] of many relevant questions of ethics. As I have tried to show, pluralism can both handle the complexity typical of our moral experience and give an account of the existence of complex moral concepts such as supererogation[5]. If this normative theory can adequately explain more questions relevant to ethics than other possible suitors can, it is the moral theory to be preferred. Again, this justifies the adoption of the moral approach that I have labeled "Moral Complexity". I take this to be an approach that is primarily concerned with the acknowledgement of the different dimensions of the complexity typical of morality: the moral experience of the moral agent, the need of a pluralist moral system and the existence of complex moral concept[6]. The founding belief of this approach is the avoidance of any sort of indebted theoretical oversimplification. Moral phenomenon has always precedence over moral theorizing. The explanatory potential of this approach ultimately explains the title of work: *Only Through Moral Complexity: the Case of Supererogation.*

---

[4] Harman G., *The Inference to the Best Explanation*, in "Philosophical Review", 74(1965), pp.88-95.

[5] Moreover, it is important to highlight that pluralism explains the existence of moral dilemmas (even if it does not necessarily solve them) as the clashing of equally relevant moral sources.

[6] I have defined a *complex* moral concept as one that requires more than a single level of morality in order to be justified. I take supererogation to be a clear example of this sort of moral concept.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Articles and Other Essays

Archer A., *Supererogation and Intentions of the Agent*, in "Philosophia", 41(2013), pp.447-462.

   - *Supererogation, Sacrifice, and the Limits of Duty*, in "Southern Journal of Philosophy", forthcoming.

Chisholm R., Sosa E., *Intrinsic Preferability and the Problem of Supererogation*, in "Synthese", 16(1966), pp.321-331.

Chisholm R., *Supererogation and Offence: A Conceptual Scheme for Ethics*, in "Ratio", 5(1963), pp.1-14.

   - *The Ethics of Requirement*, in "American Philosophical Quarterly", 1(1964), no.2, pp.147-153.

Clement of Alexandria, *The Rich Man's Salvation,* in *Clement of Alexandria with an English translation by G.W. Butterworth*, W. Heinemann-Harvard University Press, London, 1953, pp.291-293.

Dreier J., *Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't*, in Byron M. (ed. by), Satisficing and Maximizing: Moral Theories on Practical Reason, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.131-154.

Driver J. *The Suberogatory*, in "Australasian Journal of Philosophy", 70(1992), pp.286-295.

Gaut B., *Moral Pluralism* in "Philosophical Papers", 22(1993), pp.17-40.

Gert J., *Requiring and Justifying: Two Dimensions of Normative Strength*, in "Erkenntnis", 59(2003), pp.5-36.

- *Moral Worth, Supererogation, and the Justifying/Requiring Distinction*, in "Philosophical Review", 121(2012), no.4, pp.611-618.

Grandi G., *Autonomia ed eteronomia. Appunti per un approccio antropologico a partire dalla lezione di Tommaso D'Aquino*, in "L'Ircocervo", (2010), pp.1-22.

Greene J. et al., *An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment*, in "Science", 293(2001), pp.2105-2108.

Grigoletto S., *Why* Proximity *Matters for the Concept of Supererogation?*, manuscript.

Guevara D., *The Impossibility of Supererogation in Kant's Moral Theory*, in "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research", 59(1999), no.3, pp.601-603.

Harman G., *The Inference to the Best Explanation*, in "Philosophical Review", 74(1965), pp.88-95.

Heyd D., *Can Virtue Ethics Account for Supererogation?*, in Cowley C. (ed. by), *Supererogation*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 77, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Hill T., *Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation*, in "Kant-Studien", 62(1971), pp.55-76.

- *Kantian Pluralism*, in "Ethics", 102(1992), no.4, pp.743-762.

Horgan T., Timmons M., *Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory*, in "Philosophical Issues", 15(2005), pp.56-77.

- *Untying a Knot From the Inside Out: Reflections on the "Paradox" of Supererogation*, in "Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation", 27(2010), no.2, pp.29-63.

- *Mandelbaum on Moral Phenomenology and Realism*, in Verstegen I. (ed. by), *Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism*, Routledge, 2010, pp.105-126.

Jeske D., Fumerton R., *Relatives and Relativism*, in "Philosophical Studies", 87(1997), pp.143–157.

Kant I., *On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy* in Kant I., *Practical Philosophy*, Gregor M. (ed. by), Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp.605-615

Kawall J., *Self-Regarding Supererogatory Actions*, in "Journal of Social Philosophy", 34(2003), no.3, pp.487-498.

Kriegel U., *Moral Phenomenology: Foundational issues*, in "Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences" 7(2008), no.1, pp.1-19.

Larmore C., *Reflection and Morality*, in "Social Philosophy and Policy" 27(2010), no.2, pp.1-28.

McNamara P., *Supererogation, Inside and Out: Toward an Adequate Scheme for Common-Sense Morality*, in Timmons M. (ed. by), Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics (Vol. 1), Oxford University Press, 2011, pp.202-235.

Nagel T., *The Fragmentation of Value*, in Nagel T., *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp.128-141.

New C., *Saints, Heroes and Utilitarians*, in "Philosophy", 49(1974), pp.179-189.

Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, 1967.

Portmore D., *Are Moral Reasons Morally Overriding?*, in "Ethical Theory and Moral Practice", 11(2008), pp.369-388.

Schumaker M., *Deontic Morality and the Problem of Supererogation*, in "Philosophical Studies", 23(1972), pp.427-428.

Sinnot-Amstrong W., *You Ought to Be Ashamed of Yourself (When You Violate an Imperfect Obligation)*, in "Philosophical Issues", 15(2005), pp.192-208.

Stocker M., *Professor Chisholm on Supererogation and Offence*, in "Philosophical Studies", 18(1967), pp.87-94.

Turing A. M., *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, in "Mind" 59(1950), no.236, pp.433-460.

Ullmann-Margalit E., *Considerateness*, in "Iyyun", 60(2011), pp.205-244.

Urmson J., *Saints and Heroes*, in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, A. Melden (ed. by), University of Washington Press, pp.198-216.

Vecchio S., *Precetti e consigli nella teologia medievale* in Bacin S., *Etiche Antiche, Etiche moderne*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2010, pp.223-242.

Vessel J. P., *Supererogation For Utilitarianism*, in "American Philosophical Quarterly", 47(2010), no.4, pp.299-319.

Von Wright G. H., *Deontic Logic*, in "Mind", 60(1951), issue 237, pp.1-15.

Williams B.,

Williams B., *Ethical Consistency*, in Williams B., *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp.166-186.

- *Integrity*, in Smart J. J. C., Williams B., *Utilitarianism: for and against*, Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 108-118.

- *Conflict of Values*, in Williams B., *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp.71-82.

- *Persons, Character and Morality* in Williams B., *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp.1-19.

Wolf S., *Moral Saints*, in "The Journal of Philosophy", 79(1982), no.8, pp.418-439.

Books

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, (trans. by Ross W. D.) in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, McKeon R. (ed. by), Random House, 1941.

- *Nicomachean Ethics*, translation, introduction and commentary by Broadie S. and Rowe C., Oxford University Press, 2002.

- *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Barnes J., Kenny A. (ed. by), *Aristotle's Ethics. Writings From the Complete Works*, Princeton University Press, 2014.

Baron M., *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology*, Cornell University Press, 1995.

Baron M., Petit P., Slote M., *Three Methods of Ethics*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1997.

Batson C. D., *Altruism in Humans*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

Beccaria C., *Dei delitti e delle pene*, Francioni G. (ed. by), Mediobanca, 1984.

Bentham J., *An Introduction to The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Hafner Press, 1948.

Berlin I., *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Princeton University Press, 2013.

Bible, New International Version (ed. by International Bible Society), 1984.

Cowley C. (ed. by), *Supererogation*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 77, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Dancy J., *Moral Reasons*, Blackwell, 1992.

Gill M. B., *Humean Moral Pluralism*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Höfler A., in Abhängigkeitsbeziehungen zwischen Abhängigkeitsbeziehungen, *Sitzungsberichte der kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien,* bd. CLXXXI (1917), pp.1-56.

Kant I., *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Gregor M. (ed. by), Cambridge University Press, 1996.

- *Critique of Practical Reason*, Gregor M. (ed. by), Cambridge University Press, 1997.

- *Lecture on Ethics*, Heath P., Schneewind J. B. (ed. by), Cambridge University Press, 1997.

- *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Gregor M., Timmerman J. (ed. by), Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Kirchin S. (ed. by), *Thick Concepts*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

Köhler W., *The Place of Value in a World of Facts*, Liveright, 1976.

Larmore C., *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

- *Dare Ragioni. Il soggetto, l'etica, la politica*, Rosenberg & Sellier, 2008.

- *The Autonomy of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Larmore C., Reanut A., *Débat sur l'Éthique. Idéalisme ou réalisme,* Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2004.

Levinas E., *Totality and Infinity*, Duquesne University Press, 1969.

Mandelbaum M., *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, The Free Press, 1955.

Meinong A., *Psychologisch-ethische Untersuchungen zur Werttheorie*, Graz, 1894.

Mellema G., *Beyond the Call of Duty: Supererogation, Obligation and Offence*, State University of New York Press, 1991.

Mill J. S., *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1904.

- *Utilitarianism*, Hackett Publishing, 2001.

Mulgan T., *The Demands of Consequentialism*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

Nagel T., *The Possibility of Altruism,* Princeton University Press, 1970.

Parfit D., *Reasons and Persons*, Clarendon Press, 1984.

Rawls J., *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition*, Belknap Press, 1971.

Ross W. D., *The Right and the Good*, Oxford University Press, 1930.

- *The Foundations of Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 1939.

Scheler M., *The Nature of Sympathy*, Heath P. (trans. by), Archon Books, 1970.

- *Ordo Amoris,* in Scheler M., *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. by David Lachterman, Northwestern University Press, 1973.

Schopenhauer A., *Manuscript Remains in Four Volumes: Volume I Early Manuscripts (1804-1818),* Berg, 1988.

Schwarz E., *Über den Wert, das Soll, und das richtige Werthalten*, Graz, 1934.

Sen A., *The Idea of Justice,* Belknap Press, 2009.

Sidgwick H., *The Method of Ethics,* Macmillan, 1874.

Smart J. J. C., Williams B., *Utilitarianism: for and against,* Cambridge University Press, 1973.

Smith A., *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* ed. by Raphael D. D. and Macfie A. L., Clarendon Press, 1976.

St. Bonaventure, *Apologia pauperum contra calumniatorem*

St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica,* in *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province revised by Daniel J. Sullivan,* Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago, 1952.

Williams B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* Routledge, 2011.

Zimmerman M. J., *Ignorance and Moral Obligation,* Oxford University Press, 2014.

Encyclopedia Entries

Chappell S. G., *Bernard Williams,* in "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy" (Spring 2015 Edition), Zalta E. N. (ed. by), URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/williams-bernard/.

Cox D., La Caze M., Levine M., *Integrity,* in "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy" (Spring 2015 Edition), Zalta E. N. (ed. by), URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/integrity/.

Heyd D., "Supererogation", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 edition), Zalta E. N. (ed. by), URL =

http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/super erogation/.

Mason E., *Value Pluralism*, in "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy" (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed. by), URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/valu e-pluralism/

McIntyre A., *Doctrine of Double Effect*, in "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy" (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/doubl e-effect/.