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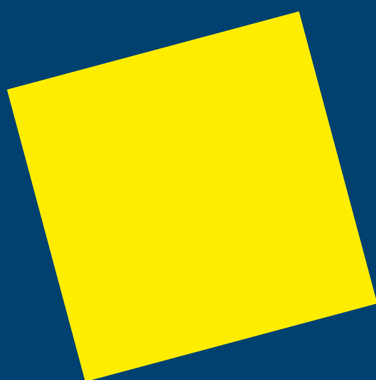
Simone Grigoletto

Only Through Complexity

Morality and the Case of Supererogation



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ONLY THROUGH COMPLEXITY

MORALITY AND THE CASE OF SUPEREROGATION

Simone Grigoletto

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To Edoardo Maria

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INTRODUCTION: MAPPING MORAL COMPLEXITY

> Interrogator [I]: "Could machines ever think as human beings do?"
> Alan Turing [A.T.]: "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 from the movie, *The Imitation Game*, that Alan Turing is imagined as explaining to the police officer the nature of thinking regarding artificial machines[1]. The grounding argument has great philosophical appeal; just because there are different ways of thinking, it does not mean that they are not all part of what we consider *thinking*. If we apply this idea to the moral domain, we can further appreciate the intuitive allure of this point. The almost infinite number of variables that a moral agent faces in everyday life and the diversity of moral deliberations by different agents give us a glimpse of the typical complexity of moral experience. Not only do we acknowledge complexity, but we might also consider it problematic as we also face the large number of conflicts among values, opinions, and rules

[1] A topic introduced in his famous essay, A.M. Turing, *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, «Mind», LIX (236), 1950, pp. 433–460.

of conduct that arise. However, for this reason, we should not lose faith in finding a unifying feature among the different expressions of what we call morality. I believe that the answer to the rather specific question of *how we deliberate morally* can help us cast some light on the troublesome (and more general) question of what it means to live a good life. If we take these questions seriously, we cannot help but acknowledge that human beings can make their moral choices differently. Again, 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. Rather than trying to figure out which of these ways has to be preferred, understanding *how* and *why* this is the case seems to be a preferable way to strive for desirable moral progress.

In the very beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines morality as the achievement of an end[2] (*τέλος*), and this end is humans' greatest good—happiness[3] (*ευδαιμονία*). Notice that conceiving morality as a 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 others) can be achieved in many different ways, not only by paying attention to the consequences of our acts. Following the Aristotelian starting point, I believe that to grasp what our ultimate end is, understanding *how* we make our moral choices is essential. The present work has been carried out with the belief that interpreting our moral capacities will help us 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 take different things as valuable in themselves. These are the two 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 different values to which we assign ultimate importance)[4]. If we analyze the first-person moral experience, such a variety of means and ends appears evident even in the same moral agent. In the present work, I focus on the complexity typical of the moral domain; as moral agents, we neither deliberate in a unique way nor always according to the same moral end. I might want to

[2] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a.

[3] *Ivi*, 1097b.

[4] I have already introduced this distinction in S. Grigoletto, *Facing Moral Complexity. The Role of Moral Excellence in Guiding Moral Judgment*, «Teoria», XXXIX (2), 2019, pp. 239–258.

help a friend because I have promised her to do so (and I believe in the importance of promise keeping per se); at the same time, I might decide to divide my birthday cake equally because it is the act that maximizes a certain moral good. We are willing to concede that an agent, such as myself in this hypothetical case, would not be considered schizophrenic. 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. In this book, the moral approach expressed by the well-known works of W. D. Ross, while not explicitly addressed, has always been taken as a source of inspiration from the outset[5]. The idea of a pluralistic morality that distinguishes between the realm of obligations and duties (the right) and a broader category of intrinsic moral values (the good) is a theoretical prerequisite of the moral concepts taken into account in the present work. In other words, this distinction is a decisive feature of the soundness of the arguments that attempt to ground these concepts. A complex approach to morality primarily means acknowledging this distinction, one that finds its intuitive appeal in the analysis of the first-person moral experience.

My first more general claim about this book's content is the fact that I place supererogatory acts under a favored category to analyze moral complexity. As I shall attempt to show, the concept of supererogation springing from the theoretical distinction between the right and the good is the reason why I have decided to analyze this peculiar category of acts. My second general claim is that moral complexity and supererogation are only apparently two separated issues. I think that once we realize how the former grounds the latter and thus, how supererogation is an expression of moral complexity, we will be able to appreciate the correlation between these two questions of ethics. I take the questions about moral complexity as metaethical questions about the structure of morality[6], and I consider the debate on supererogation a consequence, at the normative level, of the endorsement of a complex system. My present work thus has a twofold aim. First, I shall try to show how the two subjects are mutually dependent to a point where we cannot

[5] See W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1930; W.D. Ross, *The Foundations of Ethics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1939.
[6] Alternatively, using more obscure terminology, I consider them metatheoretical issues.

make sense of supererogation without the endorsement of a complex moral system. Consequently, if we are willing to concede the existence of acts that are good but not morally required, we can only acknowledge the complexity typical of morality. Second, if this relation really makes sense, I will have undertaken 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) about the peculiar nature of supererogatory acts. More specifically, the advocacy of a complex and pluralist system of morality to ground supererogation has been a desired contribution to the philosophical debate about this concept since the late 1950s. If this secondary achievement is sound, I think that we will understand what this category of acts needs to be grounded and why the most widespread moral systems have struggled to acknowledge it.

In Chapter I, I highlight the reasons and the importance of a phenomenological approach to morality. These premises will focus on Maurice Mandelbaum's overlooked work, *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, and its more recent development by Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons. They hold that morality is a subject that deals with human agency in everyday experience. As such, the analysis of such first-person experience is the preferred starting point. I believe that this attitude toward the study of morality discloses *moral complexity*.

In Chapter II, I then attempt to define *moral complexity*, claiming that this feature is primarily the acknowledgment of a multilevel structure of morality. I explain the normative consequences of this approach by focusing on the position offered by Charles Larmore in *Patterns of Moral Complexity* and expanded 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, however, another Aristotelian insight will help us understand how to deal specifically with the moral justification of an act within a system so understood. Taken as the faculty of moral interpretation, moral judgment will suffice to play the role of facing complexity with less hardship.

In Chapter III, I introduce the concept of supererogation by explaining why I adopt this category of acts to explore moral complexity. As I have briefly highlighted above, supererogation is considered a complex concept that requires a complex system to be justified. In light of this remark, I define the concept by following the widespread connotation presented by David Heyd in *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*. I 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. As developed by Christian theologians, the distinction between precepts and counsels represents the reason why a "secular" account of supererogation requires a multilevel system of morality that clearly distinguishes between the right and the good.

In Chapter IV, I intend to show how the account of supererogation will become problematic if we fail to acknowledge the complexity of morality. I discuss how this argument can be generally raised against monist theories, as they fail to distinguish among 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 speaking, both utilitarianism and Kantian ethics express this same attitude (even if in different forms). It is then not surprising 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. Far from being a specific criticism against any system, this point aims to show a common deficiency of monism regarding supererogatory acts.

In Chapter V, I address the deficiencies underlined by the argument against monist accounts of morality by proposing a pluralistic account of supererogation. If we conceive a moral system that allows for different sources of the good, these will serve as the different levels of moral achievement that make it possible to go "beyond the call of duty". In other words, the complexity that is necessary to account for supererogation will be granted by the plurality of the sources. In particular, one source will represent the level of obligation, while another will show the way to exceed the obligatory—what I call the *multiple sources dynamics*. Furthermore, this will tell us something about the specific phenomenology that supererogatory acts entail.

Generally speaking, this work aims to deal with some of the major issues in contemporary moral philosophy. The metaethical aspects of the main thesis deal with both the structure of a moral system and the importance of a phenomenological attitude toward the moral subject. From this starting point, further questions (typically addressed in normative ethics) arise, as follows: "How does moral deliberation work?" "How is moral justification possible?" "What is moral pluralism?" "How do we give an account of supererogatory acts?" Regarding all these questions, I have tried to answer, *only through*

complexity. This entails the belief that a life lived well is richer if we endorse a moral system that denies theoretical oversimplifications and favors the abundance of the constraints of moral obligations. As such, the overall goal of my work involves mapping and recognizing different instances of *moral complexity*. This acknowledgment comes with several assumptions. Only through complexity can we make sense of what lies beyond the call of duty. Only through complexity can we give an account of how morality works from the first-person perspective. Only through complexity can we better promote the pursuit of a flourishing life.

PART I:
COMPLEXITY AS THE REQUIRED BACKGROUND OF MORALITY

CHAPTER I
PRELIMINARY CLAIMS: A MATTER OF APPROACH

1.1 Why a Phenomenological Approach to Morality?

In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle provides one of the first definitions of *practical* philosophy, 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)[7].

Clearly, from the very beginning, the study of practical acts (τα ἔργα[8]) was conceived as the study of things collocated in and relative to a time and a space (*πρός τι κάι νῦν*[9]). In other words, the agent's *moral experience* is the sphere in which moral acts occur; thus, actions need to be studied accordingly. Only through an analysis of moral experience can we examine those acts that are distinctively practical. Immanence (the collocation within a space and a 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.* For this reason, a certain understanding of the phenomenological approach will guide us through the present work. It should gradually become clear why moral phenomenology is the methodology that best fits my analysis. Nevertheless, let me try to clarify this point by answering another question first: what exactly is *moral phenomenology*?

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[7] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, a 2, 993 b 19–23, W.D. Ross (trans.), in R. McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, New York, Random House, 1941, p. 712.

[8] *Ivi*, a 2, 993 b 21.

[9] *Ivi*, a 2, 993 b 22.

It has been pointed out that *phenomenology* is an ambiguous term[10]. Accordingly, with moral phenomenology, we can refer either to the moral philosophy of the phenomenological tradition led 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 preconceptual understanding of the world) to the realm of moral values. Within this phenomenological tradition, the author whose work takes on this challenge is Max Scheler. He claims that the cognition of moral values primarily begins with emotions and affects as they shape our experience of the world[11], as stated in the very first lines of his essay *Ordo Amoris*:

> 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[12].

For Scheler, the *ethos* needs to be understood through the proper appreciation of the inner emotional states in order to find the classification according to which this system of values has been outlined. Scheler's response to this issue is that everything is ordered by the degree of *love* and *hate* that reality presents[13]. Understanding the order of love will ultimately mean understanding human beings in themselves. The reason is that once we understand the model through which we characterize our understanding of the world, we also comprehend how human beings work, how we structure the reality within which it is possible to think, act, choose, will, and so on. The investigation of the model therefore leads to the understanding of

[10] U. Kriegel, *Moral Phenomenology: Foundational Issues*, «Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences», VII (1), 2008, p. 1.
[11] U. Kriegel, *ivi*, p. 3.
[12] M. Scheler, *Ordo Amoris*, in M. Scheler, *Selected Philosophical Essays*, D. Lachterman (trans.), Evanston IL, Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp. 98–99.
[13] M. Scheler, *ivi*, p. 99.

the origin of such a model[14]. Phenomenology, so conceived, represents the favored methodology to understand the human being.

The second author that draws from the phenomenological tradition with a more ethics-oriented approach is Emanuel Levinas. Levinas refocuses the aim of the phenomenological project toward a discipline that identifies the core of the matter in the relationship with other subjects. He claims that this is the best way to find answers to the questions raised by the first philosophy. In *Totality and Infinity*, he defines ethics as the primary way to grasp the metaphysical truth[15]. This is because the *other*, and the subject's relationship 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. For this reason, this particular approach is relevant to the understanding of the metaphysical truth. Levinas is not primarily interested in ethics as a system of value or as a value theory. Instead, he is concerned with ethics mostly as the essential way to answer the metaphysical questions through the methodology outlined by the phenomenological tradition before him.

The phenomenological approach to morality can be understood in various ways. A different approach from those mentioned above 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 words, this approach tries to analyze "what it is like to do x". An author who clearly expresses this approach (whose work has been mainly overlooked) is Maurice Mandelbaum, who published his book, The Phenomenology of Moral Experience, in 1955. Mandelbaum outlines a phenomenological approach that applies to the experience that an agent undergoes when she is confronted with a morally relevant situation[16]. Thus

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[14] «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 far as one possibly can. He sees before him the constantly simple and basic lines of his heart», in M. Scheler, *ivi*, p. 100.

[15] «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 E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Pittsburgh, PA, Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 29.

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

understood, phenomenology is not a direct outcome of the phenomenological tradition influenced by Husserl[17]. 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[18].

I think that from this quote, we can gather the two fundamental presuppositions of Mandelbaum's project: a) an adequate moral theory must originate from a proper analysis of moral experience[19],b) the moral experience of the agent corresponds to all the various moral judgments she forms[20].

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 is that such an approach should serve as a starting point for an adequate moral investigation. Once we have endorsed such an approach 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[21], that is, other philosophical kinds of inquiries or other social sciences (such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology).

To understand the second presupposition, it is important to consider which aspects of a judgment are relevant to Mandelbaum's phenomenological

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[17] 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 M. Mandelbaum, *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, Glencoe, IL, The Free Press, 1955, fn. 18, p. 313.

[18] *Ivi*, p. 31.

[19] *Ivi*, p. 35.

[20] *Ivi*, p. 40.

[21] *Ivi*, pp. 31–32.

approach and how he discriminates among different kinds of judgment. The reason why Mandelbaum focuses on moral judgments is not to revealed in their content[22]. He is not specifically concerned with what different agents deliberate (or at least not primarily) but *how* they form their judgments. Agents can eventually diverge a lot on the specific content of their judgments according to what they consider morally valuable. At the same time, a pure *attitudinal* approach that is abstracted completely from the content would end up being arbitrary and unconvincing[23]. What he attempts to propose is an approach that draws some relevant points from both approaches (*contentual* and *attitudinal*) and opens up for a third new way—a *structural* approach. The object of the study is then the peculiar relationship among the content of the judgment, the attitude of the agent, and the situation that confronts the agent who makes the judgment[24]. This allows us to determine the common features of our moral judgments and thus to study them accordingly. Stated in these terms, ethics can only be considered 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 outline the essential framework of Mandelbaum's project. The three central chapters of his work are dedicated to a phenomenological analysis of the different ways that an agent judges from the moral perspective. Briefly, he draws a major distinction between *direct* and *removed* moral judgments. In the former judgment, the agent is directly involved in the situation, the one who makes the judgment and lives the moral experience from *within*. In the latter judgment, the one who is evaluating has no first-hand experience of the judgmental process. This means that the relationships among the relevant elements (*content*, *attitude*, and *situation*) are evaluated from *without*. We deal with judgments of this kind when we consider 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 also talk of *removed* moral judgments when dealing with judgments of *moral worth*. This other subclass of *removed*

[22] *Ivi*, pp. 35ff.
[23] *Ivi*, p. 40.
[24] «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*.

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[25].

From his analysis, Mandelbaum draws the interesting conclusion that all these judgments share a feature that combines them into the same *genus*[26]. This is the relation that is established between the agent and the situation in which he or she lives. 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[27]. In the case of a *direct* moral judgment, for example, it then constitutes a moral obligation to act accordingly. This reveals what Mandelbaum calls *reflexive demand.* Once we comprehend the fittingness (or unfittingness) of a certain act, that act demands to be performed (or avoided). Besides, this *demand* is perceived as coming from outside of us, which makes it constitutively moral. In fact, other kinds of demands are generally perceived as coming from within us; for example, when we are hungry, we feel a demand to pursue a course of action that would feed us as delightfully as possible. The content and the manner of our delight are matters of personal preference. This feature distinguishes moral from non-moral choices; the former are urged by an *objective* demand, the latter by a *subjective* demand[28]. More specifically, the sort of claim that moral judgments generate stands as a demand that is felt as coming from outside of us. This grounds the perception of objectivity that typically characterizes moral performance.

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

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[25] «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 is made by the agent in the situation, there are differences between them», in M. Mandelbaum, *ivi*, p. 95.
[26] *Ivi*, p. 181.
[27] *Ivi*, p. 64.
[28] *Ivi*, pp. 54–55.

Two authors who have attempted to give new life to Mandelbaum's work are Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons. In recent years, they have produced several articles that deal directly with Mandelbaum's work and emphasize the importance of his thought. This attention appears to be especially relevant today, when we observe a progressing opening of philosophical research to other branches of sciences that study the human being from a different perspective. Mandelbaum himself was an opponent of that philosophical trend that tried to exclude from philosophical inquiry the influence of other social sciences, such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology[29]. His phenomenological approach could regain interest in light of the recent development undertaken in philosophy by appealing to a more empirically grounded subject. As such, this might be the first answer to the question posed in this section's title, that is, a phenomenological approach to morality can be justified by the possibility to cooperate and research together with other subjects of scientific inquiry.

Moreover, the phenomenological approach, as Horgan and Timmons underline[30], gives rise to many fundamental questions regarding moral theorizing. I now present the two questions that I consider more pressing for the present work, questions about *motivation* and *potential payoff*, respectively.

> 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)[31].

Both these questions are further specifications 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 I will make clearer in the second part of the present work, a

[29] T. Horgan, M. Timmons, *Mandelbaum on Moral Phenomenology and Realism*, in I. Verstegen (ed.), *Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 106.

[30] T. Horgan, M. Timmons, *Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory*, «Philosophical Issues», XV, 2005, pp. 56–77.

[31] *Ivi*, p. 57.

phenomenological analysis of some ethical issues is able to bring about some progress in moral research[32]. 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), that is, one that deals with the fulfillment (or unfulfillment) of actions with reference to a given idea of the good. Moral experience represents the setting where this process occurs. A study that takes care of understanding the relations between how actions are brought about and the context in which they are achieved seems to be of great importance (if not fundamental). Thus, moral experience does not only represent the setting of the moral life but also the place where the ultimate proof of the effectiveness of our theories can be found. These two features ground the motivation to pursue a phenomenological analysis. Moral experience is the setting of our moral life and the sphere where we can inspect the legitimacy of the moral progress for which we argue. A moral philosophy that does not consider these two aspects (which I take as implicit in its normativity) risks being disoriented and meaningless. This is the reason why a phenomenological approach (influenced to a certain degree by Mandelbaum's work) characterizes the present work.

1.2 Moral Experience Expanded

Now that I have briefly sketched some features of phenomenological approaches, Mandelbaum's in particular, I want to challenge one of its presuppositions, as underlined above. Specifically, the second presupposition of 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[33].

I believe that Mandelbaum is certainly right in identifying the prominent role of moral judgment in our moral experience. Our everyday moral life is

[32] Another insight that supports such methodology can be found (other than in Mandelbaum's work itself) in Horgan, Timmons, *Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory*, pp. 72ff.
[33] M. Mandelbaum, *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, p. 40.

characterized by manifold judgmental acts. Mandelbaum claims that they fully express our moral experience because judgments better express the normativity peculiar to the ethical domain[34]. 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 can be found «within the realm of human judgments»; thus, he focuses on the normative judgments that agents make. This leads him to claim that moral experience fully corresponds to a judgmental act.

At the same time, it seems to me too superficial 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). Additionally, this can occur, consciously or unconsciously. The former means that the agent is actively deliberating; he or she is aware of the ongoing process. The latter means that the agent is passively deliberating; he or she is unaware of the ongoing process, for example, when a certain judgment has become a habit, so the agent does *x* without actually considering the reasons for it. Nevertheless, if asked, the agent would be able to respond why he or she is doing *x* (be able to give an account of the relevant reasons for *x*). Mandelbaum seems aware of something very similar to this when he highlights the distinction between *willed* and *spontaneous* actions[35]. Willed actions are all those actions for which the agent feels responsible or better, where the agent acts according to an envisioned goal that he or she wishes to accomplish. In this way, the sense of responsibility for the act arises since the agent feels that these are *his or her* actions. The fact that the agent is acting by virtue of an end makes it possible for him or her to give reasons for acting in such manner. This is what distinguishes these actions from spontaneous actions, which instead are performed for no other reason than the fact that the agent did them. Besides, spontaneous actions are all those actions where the agent does not feel that he or she is acting in the first person. These can be of two kinds: *reflex* or *habitual action.* A reflex is when the action "happens"

[34] *Ivi*, pp. 41ff.
[35] *Ivi*, pp. 46–50.

to an agent instead of being consciously brought about by him or 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, which include all those situations where the agent does *x* without consciously governing the action. For example, upon waking up, I follow a particular sequence in dressing, where I have no particular awareness of every single step. Again, no clear sense of responsibility is involved in this case, since the agent is unaware of the envisioned goal and the reasons for his or her acting. It is important to note at this stage that Mandelbaum points out that direct moral judgments (contrary to removed moral judgments) deal exclusively with willed actions[36]. Mandelbaum's reason is that it is fundamental for a phenomenological analysis that the agent perceives the actions as his or hers. For Mandelbaum, only willed actions express the sense of responsibility that makes the phenomenological analysis possible. It is then clear why a reflex cannot count as a moral action from this point of view. It does not originate from 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, it seems less clear why all habitual actions cannot be considered in the same light. It is one thing to consider habitual actions that constitute our everyday routine (e.g., brushing our teeth or preparing breakfast). It is another matter to claim that *all* habitual acts lack the sense of responsibility or the moral demand that willed actions impose on us. For example, think of someone who has made a small donation to the same organization every month for 25 years. The very first time, he or she experienced both demand and a sense of responsibility, but then, as time goes by, this action becomes a habit in the same way as brushing his or her teeth. Responsibility and demand may hide in the agent's unconsciousness, but this does not mean that he or she cannot recall his or her reasons for making the donation. It is difficult to hold that an action such as a long-lasting regular donation cannot be considered 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 objects of a phenomenological study (whether direct or removed). Mandelbaum states that some actions, such as grasping

[36] *Ivi*, p. 47.

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 that confronts him or her, unaware of the self that originates the act. Rather than actions, "reactions" or "responses" are elicited, so they do not impose on the agent the sense of responsibility and the moral demand that make the phenomenological analysis possible. If so, such moral phenomenology would exclude a relevant and common part of our moral experiences. From the moral perspective, we happen to praise many instances of helping behavior even if they result from habitual behavior[37].

My contention is that we can go even further with the line of argumentation 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 judgments play no role. In other words, a process that involves the performance of some act is not necessary to trigger an experience that we would call *moral*. The point is that we can live a moral experience even when we are not engaging in any moral deliberation and consequently, not performing an act. To explain this assertion, I propose three situations or cases in which the formation of a judgment is not necessary to constitute a proper moral experience.

The first situation is meant to highlight a case of no-judgmental moral experience within Mandelbaum's framework. Recall that for him, the first-person moral experience begins with the demand (peculiar to moral choices) that the situation casts on the agent. We can argue that the perception of such a demand is already in itself a sort of moral experience even if no judgment takes place then (say because I am morally lazy or 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

[37] I will talk about this issue later in the present work when dealing with acts of supererogation, which, while originated by a certain degree of spontaneity, deserve a proper moral phenomenology. See pp. 160-165.

in 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 placed on me to work on my long-delayed paper and remember the upcoming deadlines. Nevertheless, I try not to think about it and to 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. To express it better, I refuse to bring about the proper moral judgment by deliberately incurring 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 with an act).

The 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 currently seems widespread conceives it (in very general terms) as the ability to feel the same way as others do. 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*[38]. In particular, authors such as Adam Smith (and also David Hume) used to assign a proper role to *sympathy* in their moral accounts. The very first lines of Smith's 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[39].

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[38] 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. See M. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, P. Heath (trans.), North Haven, CT, Archon Books, 1970.

[39] A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, D.D. Raphael, A.L. Macfie (ed.), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, p. 9.

More specifically, he continues:

> 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[40].

As Smith underlines, the empathic relation represents a fundamental and substantial kind of moral relation. More recently, many other authors have emphasized its relevance regarding moral motivation and more specifically, in caring-for-others situations[41]. Nevertheless, to understand my point, it is not necessary to grant to empathy such a major role in morality. 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[42]. In fact, it seems to me that empathy represents a particular way of relating with others, which does not necessarily involve a judgmental act. Most of the time, the way we perceive how the others feel is not a direct result of a deliberation but an immediate outcome. Nonetheless (as Mandelbaum argues), it would be hard to contend that we need to put empathy off the radar of moral experience for its lack of judgmental activity. When I understand how a friend feels after she has been affected by an injustice, it is not a matter of judgment; rather, I just experience it immediately by virtue of our long-established relationship. This is already a proper moral experience before I form any judgment on why the deeds that have afflicted her are wrong or before I consider how I could effectively provide some help. The point here is that moral experience begins before (and is not instrumental 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 way to expand moral experience beyond what it is merely as an expression of a judgmental act. In the preceding case, I have highlighted how when I empathize with a friend, I am living a proper moral experience. I would add here that as the agent,

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[40] *Ivi*, p. 10.

[41] In both these regards, see the work of the psychologist Daniel Batson, who has introduced the so-called empathy-altruism hypothesis. See C.D. Batson, *Altruism in Humans*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011. For further remarks on this topic in relation to acts of supererogation, see pp. 164-165 of the present volume.

[42] I am aware that this claim would require a much larger project. Take these lines as hints that are strictly functional for my discussion of moral experience.

I am not the only one who is doing so; the beneficiary of my act is living a moral experience, too. I hold that a proper first-person moral experience is such not only when I am the subject who performs 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 undergo a relevant moral experience even if a judgmental process does not necessarily originate this experience. This happens when I perceive myself as the beneficiary of something morally valuable (or even the target of a morally blameworthy deed). I do not think it is possible to explain this sort of moral experience within Mandelbaum's theoretical framework, as he conceives moral experience as being fully judgmental. We might claim that it is possible to account for this sort of experience of the beneficiary under the category of removed moral judgments of moral worth. However, this is not a case where the beneficiary judges from outside the situation (i.e., removed from it). She is living it from within and is directly affected by it. It is true that she considers valuable what the other does for her, but she is not doing this by living outside the situation. She is directly experiencing the value of what it is going on between her and her benefactor. In other words, being the beneficiary 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 makes the judgment about what to do. My claim is that Mandelbaum seems to have missed accounting for this possible moral experience.

Moreover, this case holds true if the agent benefits the subject of his or her acts by virtue of both a direct moral judgment and the empathic character of their relationship (in an immediate way, so to speak). If the latter is the case, undergoing a proper moral experience requires no judgmental act from either the agent or the beneficiary. This is so because the performer of the act does so *immediately*, and the beneficiary perceives this as immediately as the agent does it. I believe that we cannot fail to recognize that this is an actual moral experience. For example, think of the case of a terminal patient in a state where he or she is able to perceive the outer world but is unable to communicate. The patient is constantly the object of the treatment of the doctors (who do this because they judge on moral grounds that it is good to carry out their job) and also benefits from the care of his or her loved ones (who do this likely because they are in an empathic relationship with the patient). I believe that the doctors, the relatives, and the patient

himself or herself are all living a proper moral experience[43] even if for different reasons—the doctors because of their direct moral judgment, the relatives because of their empathic caring, and the patient because he or she is broadly benefiting from the moral good brought about by the others. While these are all different instances of the moral domain, I claim that all three qualify as proper moral experience.

Finally, we have seen how the first-person phenomenological approach proposed by Mandelbaum could be broadened to provide a more exhaustive account of our moral experience[44]. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily a major downfall or something that would undermine the effectiveness of Mandelbaum's 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 the aspects that predominantly constitute our moral experience (i.e., moral judgments). The focus of this field of research has to remain on all those deliberations that lead an agent to act in a certain way by referring to an idea of right and wrong. At this stage, we need to acknowledge 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 that appears more promising as a starting point for moral theorizing.

1.3 Moral Phenomenology Discloses the Complexity of Moral Life

I now introduce some considerations about the features of our moral life that a phenomenological approach reveals. Consider the following example:

> Mary has a good friend named John, who lives nearby. She promised John that she would help him move out of his current apartment and bring all his belongings to his 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, so Juliet invites Mary to go out for coffee. If Mary goes out with Juliet, she will not have time to help John that afternoon. Therefore, even

[43] Probably, at least in the case of the patient's relatives, it is an experience that is much more than a merely moral one.
[44] Another interesting and similar attempt to broaden Mandelbaum's conception of moral experience can be seen in T. Horgan, M. Timmons, *Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory*, «Philosophical Issues», XV, 2005, pp. 61ff.

> if she is filled with regret and 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 believes that keeping it is the right thing to do.
>
> Later that day, Mary is at John's new place, which happens to be much smaller than his former apartment. John struggles to make everything fit in the new place, so he decides to donate much of his belongings that are not necessary anymore. John's friend Mark has a much larger house, which would have plenty of space for John's furniture. John had previously promised Mark that he would receive all the surplus items from the move. However, Mary suggests that a fairer choice would be giving everything to the local prosocial organization in order to have all the goods redistributed to some people who have less. She believes that giving to those who have less in order to maximize the benefits of the donation is the right thing to do.

Situations such as these are common in our everyday lives. We happen to make moral judgments in different contexts, according to diverse backgrounds, and with various aims. As such, we recognize a plurality of variables regarding how we make moral deliberations. If we examine our moral experience through a phenomenological approach, we realize how complex[45] our moral life is. Understanding the phenomenology of our common moral judgments reveals the manifold essence of morality. Moral experience ultimately discloses that the agent's moral life, if considered as a whole and not specifically involving a single case, appears 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 analyzing 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 in the given circumstances. What I mean by axiological pluralism is the fact that our judgments are based on values[46] that vary their relevance from time to time. In other words, our judgments vary in their specific content. In the above-cited example, Mary decides to keep her promise, grounding her judgment on her respect for the promisee[47]. Respect (or

[45] I use "complex" as a non-technical term for now, meaning composite, heterogeneous, and manifold. I will provide more detailed specifications of this term in Chapter II.

[46] This term will likely be misunderstood. What I mean here is simply that different fundamental ideals of morality might happen to be relevant in the particular case.

[47] A Kantian line of argumentation could be even more specific, claiming that a promise needs

the autonomy of other moral agents) happens to be the value that appears especially important to Mary, given the circumstances. In that particular scenario, that value trumps all the others, assigning a prominent importance to keeping a promise. In contrast, when she suggests how to donate fairly, her focus changes. She is mainly concerned with the moral value of equality (or a certain understanding of utility, one might say). In this second situation, a different value takes priority over the others. This example shows how, in real-life situations, different moral values (one irreducible to the other) can vary in their moral relevance for the agent. My contention here is simple; the moral phenomenology of the moral agent highlights a plurality of moral values that happen to have variable moral priority. Moral experience is characterized by a pluralism of values, suggesting that we are not necessarily required to pick one of them as having a constant priority over the others. This idea aligns with the standard definition of moral pluralism as a framework of multiple, potentially ultimate moral ends that express a *pro tanto* priority over the others.

The second way of understanding the heterogeneity of morality is recognizing that we do not make all our moral judgments by following a unique and coherent methodology. There are different (at least two) ways in which we make moral deliberations, and their priority varies from time to time. What I call methodological pluralism is the fact that our judgments do not always follow the same path to provide a moral deliberation. Again, in the above-cited example, Mary decides to keep her promise by virtue of a moral claim derived from a deontological approach. At the same time, once she is confronted with the issue of a fair donation, she morally deliberates according to a consequentialist approach. Cases such as this reveal that according to the situation, one methodology for moral deliberation might trump another that is considered less efficient in dealing with the situation faced by the agent. The consequentialist approach might appear more apt for what is morally at stake in cases such as the fair donation of one's belongings. Conversely, there happens to be cases, such as keeping a promise, where grounding our deliberation on a deontological framework appears to fit the circumstances better[48]. This is not to say that in a particular situation, the

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to be kept because of the respect for the autonomy of all other rational agents. Arguably, we might deduce from this argument that Kant's ultimate moral end is individual freedom.

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

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 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. In one of the influential papers co-authored by Joshua Greene, he and his colleagues have made a claim similar to the present one[49]. Through an experimental inquiry, they have tried to show that a moral deliberation by the same agent is a combination of rational and emotional engagement. Moral judgment can be either impersonal or personal, according to which of the two elements is more influential. These 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 different moral dilemmas compared with what they revealed in cases of non-moral choices. What Greene and colleagues' study shows is primarily the fact that our moral judgment is a combination of different factors (rational and emotive) and further confirms how it is ultimately complex. Moreover, their analysis has underlined how judgments, considered distinctively moral, can be of two kinds (at least) and how this is true even at the cerebral level. This conclusion resembles what I have defined here as methodological pluralism. However, my classification of pluralism aims at giving an account of a philosophical distinction (deontology and consequentialism in the above-cited example) rather than a distinction between psychological and cerebral activities.

My claim is that moral pluralism is structured (at least) at two levels: value-related and methodological levels. Amartya Sen implicitly alludes to a similar point when focusing on the idea of justice in cases of just allocation of resources[50]. 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 receive a flute about which they are quarreling. The first child is the only one who can actually play the flute. The second child is clearly the poorest and the one who has no toys to play with (the other two being clearly richer children). The third child is the

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articulate this specific issue.

[49] J. Greene et al., *An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment*, «Science», CCXCIII, 2001, pp. 2105–2108. The main claim of this paper and Greene's subsequent works is that emotions play a major role in moral deliberation.

[50] A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press, 2009, pp. 12–15.

one who has made the flute after many months of work. Who should receive the flute if we have to make a just decision? This scenario points out that this question has no clear answer. Of course, different theories of justice would straightforwardly identify which one of the children ought to receive the flute[51], but which of the three ways of deliberation we should 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 [...], 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[52].

The problem here is not only which of the moral values at stake takes priority over the others (be it hedonistic utility, economic equality, or autonomy). We also face the problem of which of the theoretical frameworks (granted that all three provide impartial results in their own ways) needs to be espoused to make the just choice. The phenomenology of cases such as this reveals the double layer of moral pluralism. Both axiological and methodological pluralism play a role in our everyday choices and as such, need to be considered when we analyze our moral choices.

Nevertheless, it is worth asking whether this pluralism revealed by a phenomenological approach is only apparent or substantial. Mandelbaum attempts to show that it is just apparent, arguing in favor of deontological monism instead. In fact, he straightforwardly dismisses consequentialism by identifying it as a moral approach that is hardly feasible when we are directly confronted with a situation that requires a moral deliberation. He claims that 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)[53].

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[51] As Sen underlines, the economic egalitarian would assign the flute to the poorest, the libertarian would offer it to the flute maker, and the utilitarian hedonist would give it to the person who can actually play the flute.

[52] A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, pp. 14–15.

[53] T. Horgan, M. Timmons, *Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory*, pp. 72–73.

Briefly, he is not convinced that all cases of moral obligation rely on the calculus of consequences; rather, they are grounded on a certain feeling of incompleteness that the agent would perceive in cases of performance (or omission) of certain acts. Mandelbaum's claim is particularly clear if we keep in mind that he is concerned with a phenomenological analysis of the moral experience. This leads him to focus on the perception of the relation of the fittingness of the performance (or the omission) of the act, rather than the considerations proposed by teleological approaches.

In the present work, the point of major interest is Mandelbaum confronting Ross' pluralism with his own theory. His interest in dealing with a theory such as Rossian deontological pluralism reveals Mandelbaum's own awareness of the possible pluralist outcome that a phenomenological analysis could bring about. Nevertheless, he thinks (contra pluralism) that some sort of normative unity among different judgments can be found, and thus, Rossian pluralism needs to be rejected. In fact, Ross proposes a theory with a precise set of obligations that have a tendency to be binding on us (*prima facie*). However, no ordering principle or rule of thumb discriminates 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 variable stringency and compares it to fittingness, stating that this kind of relation 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[54].

Instead, what Mandelbaum finds problematic is the idea of *prima facie* obligations intended as the "tendency to be binding". For Mandelbaum (being a monist), there exists one and only one obligation that binds us to the performance (or the omission) of the related act, namely the obligation 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 various duties' "tendency to be binding". Thus, it makes no sense to talk about *prima facie* duties; the only duty is the actual one, that is, the one that fits the situation[55]. It has been pointed out that the main difference

[54] M. Mandelbaum, *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, p. 76.

[55] «In my opinion, a strictly phenomenological description reveals that what we take to be

between Ross and Mandelbaum in this regard is that the former thinks that other *prima facie* duties are outweighed by the actual duty, while the latter believes that the alternatives are "silenced"[56] (they lose all their bindingness).

The key to Mandelbaum's argument against the existence of a variety of duties (such as in Ross' contention) 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 that have been abandoned by virtue of the actual duty generate a form of regret. According to Mandelbaum, we feel regret when we contemplate something of disvalue that our act has brought about, whereas remorse is our feeling toward something that should not have been done[57]. 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, 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 with an obligation might be considered sound in cases of relatively simple moral choices. We can recognize how his understanding of an obligation (as 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 and provides the reasons that ultimately 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, we might wonder if this is still the case for much more complex moral choices. Let us think

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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», *ivi*, p. 80.

[56] T. Horgan, M. Timmons, *Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory*, p. 73.

[57] M. Mandelbaum, *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, p. 80.

of true moral dilemmas, for example[58]. 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 to the situation (given that the reason why it is so is not due to some sort of epistemic lack by the agent). In fact, both options seem to fit the situation adequately, and thus, 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 and that the other option loses all its bindingness. It is then not surprising that the agent who finally decides somehow (even randomly) what to do feels a certain moral loss for not having chosen the other course of action. I believe that this feeling 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 is no longer valid.

Furthermore, we could argue that duties are not grounded merely on fittingness. Some moral obligations are true for an agent even if he or she does not adequately experience their fittingness to the situation. For example, think of the negligent schoolchild who does not want to do his homework. Does he recognize the fittingness of studying to 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 in order to study. Think also of the relentless tax evader, who has a moral obligation (and not only that) to pay taxes even if she fails to appreciate the fittingness and the bindingness of such an obligation. Cases like these hint at the fact that fittingness is sometimes insufficient to lead agents to a certain action. Something similar is expressed in cases where we as agents ignore our obligations. For example, ignorance might affect our obligations and consequently our moral judgments[59]. Sometimes, we have obligations that we do not know of, and this does not allow us to perceive the fittingness that is proper to the situation. Even if unknown, the obligation remains. It should not be surprising that our moral experience is affected by our knowledge of

[58] I refer here to cases such as the one famously proposed by Sartre. This is a dilemma where a youngster does not genuinely know the right thing to do—whether to join the army to commemorate his brother who has been killed by the Nazis or to stay at home in order to take care of his ill mother.

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

the situation. However, it is more problematic to claim that an agent does not have a certain obligation (as in the case of the ignorant agent who does not perceive the fittingness of the situation) due to a lack of knowledge. The case of the ignorant agent (similar to the negligent agent exemplified by the tax evader) reveals how the relation of fittingness is necessary albeit not sufficient to bring about a moral obligation successfully.

All these cases reveal that obligations are not grounded exclusively on the relation of fittingness to the situation. This kind of relation is essential to a proper experience of direct moral judgments when it comes to motivating the agent to act (or refrain from acting). Nevertheless, it is not fully accurate to claim that the actual duty is exclusively identified by the perception of what fits the situation. Some more complex situations might express a scenario that does not align 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 thinks that (as in the case of direct moral judgments) all judgmental acts express normative unity by virtue of all being based on the relation of fittingness. However, this 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 develop the feeling of fittingness (the normative approach that triggers our moral deliberation). In fact, both the content of different judgments (which grounds the fittingness relation) and the methodology of the moral decision (which generates the fittingness) could vastly differ from one judgment to another. Horgan and 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[60].

My claim is that we do not have to underestimate the fact that (as shown in the example above) reasons could be grounded on different values (axiological pluralism) and can be provided by different methodologies

[60] T. Horgan, M. Timmons, *Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory*, p. 67.

(methodological pluralism). Even if all judgments originate a certain feeling of fittingness perceived by the agent, claiming that they do so consistently with moral monism seems to be an inappropriate reduction. Regarding the question, «Assuming that experiences of fittingness are what unifies our moral experiences, how interesting is this sort of unity? »[61], we could answer that fittingness certainly expresses a sort of unity among different moral experiences. This unity is nevertheless limited to the phenomenological level. Once we try to delve deeper into the explanation of our moral decisions, we see that we lose that unity by virtue of the diversity of the contents that ground our experiences and the variety of methods of deliberation that set the perception of fittingness. For this reason, I believe that a phenomenological analysis is consistent with the claim that the complexity of the moral life is expressed at two levels: a) as the pluralism regarding the content of our judgments (values) and b) as the pluralism about the method through which we formulate our judgments. The very essence of morality appears to be manifold and heterogeneous, which is why I refer to it as moral complexity[62]. For now, this is the relevant preliminary claim of this work; the phenomenological approach discloses a moral experience characterized by some sort of moral pluralism[63].

The approach of moral complexity underlines that we need to acknowledge the fact that our moral lives are much more manifold and diverse 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 moral lives. The awareness of this feature should point out why there is no need to oversimplify our moral theories in search of an ultimate and unified end. If our moral experience does not appear simple, there seems to be no good reason to think that our theories need to be such. This is especially

[61] *Ibidem.*

[62] I leave this claim unwarranted for now. The entire Chapter II is dedicated to providing a better understanding of this issue.

[63] «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 T. Horgan, M. Timmons, *Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory*, p. 66.

true for the inquiry in moral philosophy, which needs to focus on the agent who deliberates how to act morally, rather than on the theory to which the agent should conform oneself. 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[64].

Borrowing this distinction from Schopenhauer, we could say that the approach of moral complexity reminds us of 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.

1.4 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 words, pluralism is the moral approach that considers more than a single ultimate moral end. Moreover, pluralists hold that these ultimate ends might come into conflict, generating what we call a "moral conflict" or eventually, where a preferable outcome does not seem possible, a "moral dilemma"[65]. Pluralism has to be

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

[65] 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.

distinguished from the approach called “moral prioritism”[66], 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[67]. Finally, to complete this rough sketch of moral frameworks, we can distinguish (at the two opposite ends of the moral gamut) between “moral particularism” and “moral monism”. Particularists claim that there are no apt moral principles 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[68]. In contrast, monists hold that morality can be ruled by principles[69], which occurs due to a unique principle or source or an ultimate end that coherently manages to outline our moral dimension. 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[70]. 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. In other words, these differences exclusively draw on the structure of moral theories. Nothing has been said about the differences in the content of the principles or in the methodology that animates the principles. For example, two pluralist theories, while structurally identical, might vary in what they take to be part of the set of relevant moral principles. Likewise, two monist theories, while structurally identical, might vary in how the single principle should work[71]. The following

[66] In the breakdown of the taxonomy of different moral frameworks I refer to B. Gaut, *Moral Pluralism*, «Philosophical Papers», XXII, 1993, pp. 17–40.

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

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

[69] Pluralists and prioritists share this claim, too. Together with monists, they all belong to the group of moral generalists, believing in the possibility to generalize from the particular situation a set of moral principles (or a single one). Clearly, generalists stand jointly in opposition to particularists.

[70] The influential and dominant moral theories developed in the 18th century can all be ascribable to moral monism. As part of this group, Kantian ethics and utilitarianism have probably generated the broadest and most articulated debate in the normative ethics of the last couple of centuries.

[71] Think of the well-known distinction between deontology (adherence to one’s duties)

table shows how we can summarize different moral approaches based on their identification of the relevant moral sources[72].

Moral Structures	
Theory	**Description**
Particularism	No moral principles at all
Pluralism	A set of moral sources that can come into conflict, generating moral conflicts
Prioritism	A set of moral principles that never come into conflict due to a precise ordering system
Monism	A single and unique moral source

I 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. As defined by John Rawls, pluralism is consistent 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[73].

First, remember that Rawls refers here to pluralism by the name of intuitionism, using the term with a broader understanding than usual[74]. The

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and consequentialism (consideration of the act's consequences). In this regard, another interesting methodological distinction is that between the agent-relative theory and the agent-neutral theory introduced by D. Parfit and T. Nagel. See p. 75 of the present volume.

[72] It would be inappropriate to distinguish them by their acknowledgment 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 principle or duty, certainly does have sources of morality (reasons).

[73] J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition*, p. 34.

[74] *Ibidem.*

reason for this is an issue related to the "priority problem". In fact, Rawls defends the prioritist view and criticizes pluralist theories for dealing with the choice among the many principles by mere intuition. He holds that this is the only way that pluralists can pick one of the competing principles rather than another. Thus, he tries to undermine the plausibility of moral pluralism by claiming that a way of prioritizing principles not only exists but is also 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 is available, given the existence of a variety of them. Rawls believes that we can rank them according to the notion of the so-called lexical order, which entails that the agent always 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[75]. However, it could be pointed out that a strict serial order of the principles of this kind, even if it would go well with the majority of cases, could eventually produce counterintuitive results. If this were the case, a prioritist view of this kind would lose its original advantages over pluralism. Berys Gaut, who claims that prioritism might allow suspicious and unreasonable outcomes, makes a similar point. For example, think of a case where, in order to comply with the respect for someone's liberty (such as the right to participate in a specific governmental decision), a society gives up a major economic benefit for a large number of people[76]. 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 into the claim that the lack of a priority rule would allow principles to be confronted by virtue of particular interests (as Rawls seems to believe). Pluralists can easily argue that adequate discrimination between principles does not have to reflect particular interests and inequalities of power and this does not need to be done by mere intuition. They can apply the same principle that prioritists do without thinking that it is always the case. What differs from one approach

[75] «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», *ivi*, p. 43.
[76] B. Gaut, *Moral Pluralism*, p. 22.

to another is the belief that a certain priority rule is comprehensively true of all moral deliberations[77]. Thus, pluralism still holds some advantages when following a priority rule would give rise to particularly counterintuitive results. In such a situation, a pluralist system might simply establish that a given priority rule does not apply in the relevant circumstances.

It has been pointed out that pluralism brings about some advantages that are consistent with a widespread version of commonsense morality. Gaut expressly highlights these advantages, as follows[78]: a) 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 than arbitrary move. b) 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. c) Pluralism gives an account of the fact that we, as moral agents, do not perceive our role as unitary. We can arrive at morally relevant reasons by virtue of our role in society, in our family, or in a group of relatives or generally, by many different facts about ourselves. This heterogeneity of the moral life is better explained by moral pluralism while being quite consistently in accord with common-sense morality. This appears important because any inquiry in the field of morality does not start from a blank page. We are, without exception, already influenced by a variety of moral values originating from different traditions that we freely choose and inherit. 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 for a variety of principles to make sense of moral experience, prioritist theories represent the most tempting alternatives to moral pluralism. However, as shown, pluralism still holds some advantages over those theories (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 highlighted moral frameworks: particularism and monism.

Although particularism would be in accord with the heterogeneity of moral experience, it would leave some theoretical gaps, which will make us prefer pluralism. In fact, particularists argue that the morally relevant properties are many (as pluralists do). However, they also claim that moral

[77] *Ivi*, p. 28.
[78] B. Gaut, *ivi*, pp. 35ff.

principles are not useful tools of morality; rather, they can misguide our judgments since they are generalizations that do not take care of particular cases. As such, moral principles have to be thought of as crutches, which can help us in walking but can also lead us into error. My claim is that in the case of pluralism, principles are more similar to running shoes than to crutches. They make us proceed faster in moral matters even if we do not recognize their benefits or do not realize that we benefit from them. In contrast, particularism is all about recognizing the moral reasons that the specific situation offers, regardless of 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. While this allows pluralism to avoid the counterintuitive results of a generalist theory, it still permits 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 than his or 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 to 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.

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 in 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 well with what commonsense morality holds about the different moral roles and moral sources that the same agent has[79]. c) Pluralism (unlike monism) can explain the existence

[79] To a certain degree, this refers to the preexistence of rules, values, traditions, and teachings

and the phenomenology of moral conflicts and dilemmas[80]. d) Monism struggles to make sense of complex moral concepts in a way that pluralism does not[81]. All these elements particularly favor pluralism over monism (and generally over all other theoretical options). These claims have much in common with the thought of Isaiah Berlin, who states that the belief of realizing an "ultimate harmony" in the field of morality is a fallacy. Although ethics is essentially complex, we can only try to soften the collision between its elements by looking for compromises and establishing contingent and temporary priorities[82].

In conclusion, moral pluralism is important because it represents the theoretical framework that better addresses the explanatory needs required by the complexity of our moral lives. This is the most compelling 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 acknowledges how proponents of moral pluralism take their theory as the answer to the complexity of moral life[83]. This answer is necessary to make sense of our moral experiences and to aid the decisional processes that challenge all moral agents. A complex (plural) moral approach is the answer that we seek when reflecting on how to explain the dynamics involved in the decisional process, as observed from the first-person moral standpoint. Even better, this moral framework is relatively similar to a widespread version of commonsense morality. In brief, pluralism entails the idea that from a moral perspective, a subject cannot be considered a single, coherent, and unitary agent. The different roles we fulfill and the various sources of morality that can influence us bring about a moral life that is ultimately complex. Even from a theoretical standpoint, we need to take on this explanatory challenge, which is what I call "the need

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that already characterize our moral lives before any theoretical framework applies.

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

[81] 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.

[82] I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 17–18.

[83] «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, as when one settles everything by the principle of utility», in J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition*, p. 39.

for moral complexity". Our moral lives require such theoretical depth 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[84].

[84] B. Gaut, *Moral Pluralism*, p. 36.

CHAPTER II
WHAT IS MORAL COMPLEXITY?

2.1 Moral Complexity: A Matter of Structure

In the first place, moral complexity is neither a new theoretical framework of morality nor a new moral theory. Rather, moral complexity is intended to be a moral approach originating from the analysis of the heterogeneous sources of morality, as revealed by moral phenomenology. As such, morality is a complex subject composed of complex elements. Only through the analysis of this complexity can we grasp 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 it is committed to the recognition of how our moral reasoning works in ordinary life. As far as it is relevant for practical philosophy, this matter needs to be concerned with how things are from the moral agent's perspective. A theorization that tries to affect our moral experience through the oversimplification of how things appear is contrary to this approach. Such an approach that ensures the complexity of morality is widely shared by pluralists, as 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 [...][85].

[85] W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 19.

As far as it is intended as the study of what ought to be done, moral philosophy needs to maintain the priority of life over concepts. Thus, in the present chapter, I focus on outlining the structural features that make our moral life so authentically complex. However, it will not be surprising if this study will be of some help in highlighting the content, rather than just the mere structure, of what is of ultimate moral relevance.

The first step toward understanding moral complexity is to take the difficulties that characterize our moral life (roughly tough 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 remind 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 manifold moral experience—this (as I have underlined in the previous chapter) should lead to the acknowledgment of pluralism.

In 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 by 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 works of Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham, 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 be in conflict, while holding their incommensurability, is perceived 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 belief shared by 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[86].

I think that these claims make it possible 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[87], 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:

Monism, Pluralism and commonsense morality		
	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 to justify a certain course of action in cases of moral conflict.
Pluralism	Dilemmas exist. They are expressions of the multiple sources of morality.	No single principle can consistently discriminate between conflicting options.
■ Shared by commonsense morality		

I believe that the game between monism and pluralism has to be played primarily on these two issues. While according to commonsense morality, it appears as a 1–1 draw, research on moral philosophy needs to find a tiebreaker on this matter. On one hand, as long as monism would be able to give a satisfactory account of the phenomenology of moral dilemmas, it would affirm its superiority[88]. On the other hand, if pluralism would be able to provide a satisfactory procedure for moral justification, it would fully take care of the moral complexity of our moral experience.

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[86] M.B. Gill, *Humean Moral Pluralism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 130.
[87] Gill agrees with this claim. See *ivi*, p. 131 and p. 138.
[88] I have briefly underlined in Chapter I why this is not the case.

Monism is right in claiming that generally, moral justification requires the appeal to a single source of morality[89]. This is the reason why this claim is so appealing to commonsense morality. However, it would be wrong 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 takes priority over the others. Although this provisional priority is only applicable to the present situation, it still 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. While it might happen to be complicated, this process represents the real advantage of pluralism over monism in the area of moral justification. Pluralism (contra monism) claims that we are not required to always use the same moral source, which is important for two reasons: a) It avoids counterintuitive results[90]. b) It offers the agent the possibility to adjust to the situation. These two claims represent the first step toward 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[91]. This appears clear when we consider John Stuart Mill's preliminary assertions in his work, *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

[89] However, this is not always the case. Think of those cases where we do x by virtue of two independent non-conflicting reasons. For example, I make a donation because I want to reduce injustice, and it makes me feel better. I would call this a case of conjunctive justification. Moreover, in other cases, the performance of x, while justified by a certain principle a, would also be justified by another principle b. For example, I could keep a promise out of respect for the other agent or because it is better to keep promises for the convenience of society. In this case as well (which 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.

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

[91] To examine this issue in more depth, see Chapter 7, Formal Monism, in M. Gill, *Humean Moral Pluralism*, pp. 128–139.

> 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 [92].

Mill's argument is based on the need for a single principle to make moral justification feasible. Formally[93], a moral theory has to be grounded on a unique principle to make it possible to outline the right course of action. Mill claims that otherwise, it would be impossible to understand which act is the right one. However, as I have already emphasized, the fact that a theory allows many principles 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 is actually the relevant one, but this is a question of priority rather than justification. The concern of monists is that pluralists would bring about this task with a certain degree of arbitrariness[94]. This is the main reason why Mill has introduced the principle of utility, and here is where the need for formal monism seeks a substantial answer. As moral agents, we all need a standard that helps us discriminate among 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 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[95].

[92] J.S. Mill, *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive*, New York, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1904, pp. 657–658.
[93] 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 M. Gill, *Humean Moral Pluralism*, p. 128.
[94] Later, I will further discuss how pluralism can handle this task. See Section 2.3.
[95] J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing, 2001, p. 26.

As Mill argues, to have a single principle, it 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, that is, pleasure and absence of pain. Now, to determine the right course of action once we, as agents, are confronted with a situation of conflicting obligations, we 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 kinds of pleasures? It seems to me that this procedure would require the same degree of moral sensibility (or arbitrariness as the case may be) as pluralism requires. It is a mistaken belief that moral justification is much more reliable and less arbitrary under a single general principle than under a variety of sources or a set of principles. 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 a particular case. This leads a monist theory such as utilitarianism to be subjected to the same criticism of arbitrariness that it tries to avoid. I believe that this fact undermines the argument that moral justification would require the greatest happiness principle. Moreover, it would cast some doubts on the idea that morality would formally require only a single principle.

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

> 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[96].

He reiterates:

> 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

[96] I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 7.

> 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[97].

The argument implicitly states that since the only thing required by the categorical imperative is to universalize the maxim of the action, there can only be a single objective principle. To be moral then, a subjective principle (the maxim of the action) should conform to the only objective principle (the categorical imperative). However, it has been argued how such a feature of Kantian ethics might leave open the possibility of a pluralistic interpretation of the theory[98]. Thomas Hill claims that to admit such Kantian pluralism, we first need to recognize some common features shared by all pluralisms: a) the presence of many principles[99], b) the incommensurability of values[100], c) the right that is independent of the good[101], and d) the theory's undogmatic and permissive character[102]. Does Kant's theory possess any of these features? Briefly, Hill states the following points: a) Kant's ethics does not admit dilemmas, holding that the categorical imperative is the higher-order principle that would help solve them. b) Kant thinks that rational moral agents have an inherent 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 the right are derived from rational reflection rather than any reflection on goodness. d) While Kant seems dogmatic on a personal level, his theory reveals the opposite attitude; since it starts with the rational agent's abstraction from the particular dimension, the theory sets aside the matter of what particular values are preferable. According to Hill, points b) and d) especially represent the features that lend a possible pluralist character to Kant's theory. The fact that all agents have an intrinsic dignity (point b) gives rise to the fact

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[97] *Ivi*, pp. 33–34.
[98] This interpretation does not apply to those ethical theories that are traditionally classified as pluralism with a strong Kantian influence. The works of John Rawls and Robert Nozick fall under this category, although it might be emphasized how it would be more accurate to further specify their degree of pluralism (for example, Rawls can be considered a prioritist rather than a pluralist).
[99] T.E. Hill, *Kantian Pluralism*, «Ethics», CII (4), 1992, p. 743.
[100] *Ivi*, p. 747.
[101] *Ivi*, p. 748.
[102] *Ivi*, p. 749.

that they are incommensurable[103]. The incommensurability of values (as we have seen) is a typically pluralist feature. Moreover, Kant's standpoint on formality of the moral law prevents him (at least on a theoretical level) from any moralistic constraint of the content of maxims (point d). After all, the categorical imperative requires only the universality of the maxim. According to this understanding, 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 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[104].

Although these features represent an interesting pluralistic insight and align 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 includes only one of the four features emphasized by Hill 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 necessarily comprises to be considered pluralistic. As such, Kantian ethics falls short in many basic elements of pluralism and thus cannot properly be conceived as a pluralistic theory. Consequently, Kant's theory shares with other monistic theories all the shortcomings I have highlighted regarding the recognition of the phenomenology of moral dilemmas, the acknowledgment of the multiplicity of the sources of morality, and the explanation of the nature of moral complexities.

These 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, the attention to moral complexity leads to the unveiling of and the focus on the structure of moral thought. It is helpful to resort to some images in order to understand this point. Generally, moral monism thinks of morality as having a pyramidal

[103] *Ivi*, p. 756.
[104] *Ivi*, p. 760.

structure[105]. All moral decisions are made according to a framework that draws value entirely from a single and ultimate source of morality. In contrast, pluralism presents a much more complex picture. The many sources of morality require us to think of it as a network of interrelated points. Principles, norms, values, special obligations, and so on, all play roles in our moral lives when we make 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 comprise 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 to some degree by the change in another. For example, if I decide to foster beneficence as the primary moral value in the situation I am facing, this will accordingly result in a different set of moral recommendations. This is ultimately the understanding of morality that I call moral complexity—the idea that morality is composed of a variety of sources that come into different relations according to the given situation. As such, based on the relational status of the relevant elements of morality, it might be easier for hard choices (or even moral dilemmas) to arise. The contingent situation thus redefines the balance of the whole structure. However, this is not the only factor that plays such a role. Social context, tradition, education, and exemplary figures all affect the balance and the relations among the elements of our moral system. In a system of this kind, making a moral choice is supported by the ability to understand the different priorities that the elements gain in the contingent case. Accordingly, the agent acknowledges what has the overriding moral relevance and understands the adequate course of action. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to think of this process as the varying precedence of a single element over the others. This would entail that one of the elements would play the provisional role of overriding the others, recalling a *pro tanto* pyramidal structure. Unfortunately, while this might occur, it is not always the case. Our moral experience often appears more complex than this. Sometimes, more sources claim their relevance[106], and it is hard to find a balance. Most of the times, indeed, a moral choice

[105] To a certain degree, the same can be said of prioritism, too.
[106] This feature will become extremely helpful in the second part of this work, where I will address the explanation of complex moral concepts, such as that of supererogation.

springs from what appears to be the right compromise among all the sources involved. In these terms, the image of the *pro tanto* pyramidal structure is not representative of the balance among the sources of the moral network that we constantly seek.

As anticipated above, the evidence of such a structure of morality can be appraised in a peculiar case of moral choice—the moral dilemma. Bernard Williams holds a famous position in this regard, which seems to me extremely relevant for the present work. The existence of moral dilemmas is displayed in the phenomenological analysis of the moral experience of the agent who faces a choice between conflicting obligations. Williams claims that the fact that the agent experiences regret (as a form of moral residue) for the moral loss generated by the option that he or she has disregarded is a confirmation of the existence of true moral dilemmas[107]. Accordingly, the role of an ethical theory is not necessarily that of trying to smooth conflicts and attenuate uncertainties. Moral conflicts should neither be considered pathological[108] nor perceived as a malfunctioning of our moral framework. Acknowledging this aspect is the first step toward the acceptance of moral complexity. Along with Williams' position, I would additionally claim that moral dilemmas are not only real and undeniable, but they also ultimately reveal the complex structure of morality. Without the multiplicity of the sources of morality, such phenomenological evidence of dilemmas would not be explicable. A pyramidal structure of morality would require us to generalize up to the point where the dilemma simply recedes. The phenomenological approach 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. I suggest that this could be taken as a hint of the actual structure of morality. I believe that if we understand morality as a network of many 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 single 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

[107] See B. Williams, *Ethical Consistency*, in B. Williams, *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973.

[108] B. Williams, *Conflict of Values*, in B. Williams, *Moral Luck*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 80–81.

want us to concede. The approach of moral complexity aims at understanding and taking care of such a distinctive structural feature of morality.

2.2 Toward an Understanding of Complexity: Charles Larmore

It is difficult to establish the precise origins of what can be considered the approach of moral complexity. Certainly, the debate of the English-speaking philosophical tradition in the twentieth century is characterized by a multitude of authors who have tried to address this issue. Among them, David Ross, Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, and Charles Larmore stand out. All these authors have the common inclination to emphasize that the agent's moral experience is ultimately complex, and as such, it cannot be oversimplified in favor of whatever moral framework. The approach of moral complexity is thus the belief that we, as moral agents, are not required to conform to the moral theories that have greatly characterized (and partly still do) moral philosophy over the last three centuries[109]. The opposite theoretical move seems more adequate; it is theory that has to conform to our moral experience. As we have seen in Chapter I, some phenomenological features that characterize a moral agent lead to the espousal of a pluralistic (complex) system of morality. The endorsement of a pluralistic structure of morality is, to a certain degree, another feature that combines the thought of these authors. This is what I have called the "need" for a theoretical framework that acknowledges moral complexity. Therefore, this need can be satisfied by the appeal to the degree of theoretical depth that pluralism can extensively grant. Different moral sources can eventually clash with one another, but rather than being a problem to solve, it 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. Isaiah Berlin's words forcefully remind us of 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

[109] I implicitly refer to the rise of the great monistic traditions from the 18th century to the present days.

> 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[110].

If a study of morality wants to give an account of how human beings are, it needs to reconstruct complexity adequately. In contrast, if this acknowledgment fails, moral agents will try to conform to a morality that is simply imposed on 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 on which moral complexity is grounded is the heterogeneity of the sources of morality. As such, morality is complex because it comprises sources of different kinds, which play various roles and are effective on different levels. As I have emphasized, morality is a network of sources, rather than an ordered pyramid. This means that the fact that the sources differ in kind explains why they can eventually come into conflict. Thomas Nagel argues in favor of this thesis[111]. He claims that we have five fundamental kinds of value, and as such, value appears "fragmented"[112]. By value, Nagel means a source of morality, that is, values are sources of moral reasons to act. It would be problematic to place these sources in an absolute order where a certain value *x* is always more stringent than value *y*. Nagel's point is that moral reasons are constitutively different in kind, which 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 the

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

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

[112] «Obligations, rights, utility, perfectionist ends, and private commitments – these values enter into our decisions constantly, and conflicts among them, and within them, arise in 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?», *ivi*, p. 131.

kinds of reasons that Nagel reexplores. On one hand, reasons can be agent-centered (or personal) when they deal with who the agent is. Reasons of this kind include special obligations and private commitments. On the other hand, outcome-centered (or impersonal) reasons deal with what generally occurs[113]. Reasons of this kind include utility and perfectionist ends. Roughly, we can understand these two classes of reasons as springing from diverse points of view[114], which makes them ultimately different. Thus, value appears fragmented and gives rise to possible moral conflicts. For example, think 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, and you are not able to save both. Whom would you save? If we look at this case through the two classes of reasons that Nagel distinguishes, we face a possible moral conflict: a) We certainly have an agent-centered and personal reason to save whoever is in a special relationship with us. b) Likewise, we have an outcome-centered and impersonal reason to save the higher number of possible victims[115]. Cases of this kind show how it is possible to be affected by different kinds of reasons that can eventually come into conflict. As Nagel argues, from the perspective of moral complexity, value is fragmented.

It is then worth asking the following questions: Is it possible to systematize the many heterogeneous sources of the good? If so, how do we actually deal with them? In his works, Charles Larmore has offered some insightful answers and at the same time, an interesting 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 that are present. He claims, «Rationality is the capacity to reason,

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[113] While in this article, Nagel refers to these kinds of reasons as *agent-centered* and *outcome-centered*, the distinction has been drawn based on a different terminology elsewhere. In a previous book, Nagel himself discusses subjective/objective reasons (see T. Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism,* Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1970). Derek Parfit is the one who introduced the now-popular and widespread distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons (see D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984).
[114] This reference to the different points of view will later be extremely relevant for the explanation of the concept of supererogation. Something similar can be found in J. Dreier, *Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't*, in M. Byron (ed.), *Satisficing Maximizing: Moral Theories on Practical Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 131–154.
[115] Note that outcome-centered reasons become increasingly pressing if you add a large number of possible victims to be overlooked in favor of the partner.

and reasoning consists in responding to reasons»[116]. Reason thus involves «receptivity to reasons»[117], which ultimately motivates the agent to act. 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 an action)[118]. These two elements make possible a conception of the moral experience based on a moral agent who reflects on the given situation to acknowledge the 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 exist. Motivation thus (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 it is raining, I have a good reason to take an umbrella, whether or not I desire to do so. As such, beliefs are not motivationally inert; thus, moral judgments are, after all, beliefs about the existing reasons for action[119]. It is interesting to note at this point how the Kantian distinction between theoretical and practical Reason is fundamentally unnecessary; according to Larmore, «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»[120]. 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.

Morality therefore involves attending to the moral reasons that the agent recognizes in a particular situation. To make sense, this practice needs to be grounded on a moral realist framework that considers moral reasons as relational, normative, and real facts. Indeed, moral reasons consist of a certain relation (counting in favor of *x*) between some features of the world and a certain possible course of action (or belief)[121]. Reasons are not physical (like a chair and a table are); rather, they might be based on some features

[116] C. Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 135.
[117] *Ivi*, p. 109.
[118] This lexical explanation of the terms can be found in C. Larmore, *Dare Ragioni. Il soggetto, l''etica, la politica*, Turin, Rosenberg & Sellier, 2008, p. 69.
[119] C. Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, pp. 78–79. This is not to say that beliefs are the only motivationally capable aspects of human agency. Desires can also play a motivational role.
[120] *Ibidem.*
[121] C. Larmore, *Dare Ragioni*, p. 71; C. Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, p. 128.

of the physical world. Rain gives rise to a reason that counts in favor of bringing an umbrella, but rain, while it grounds the latter, 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 it is not raining, there is no reason for me to use it. Nonetheless, reasons are real. Precisely, they are the links between some features of the physical or the psychological world and the possible actions of an agent. This is why Larmore defines this peculiar relation as normative in kind, or better, reasons are not considered physical or psychological but normative facts[122]. As we have seen, it is a sort of fact that entails a certain course of action. If I have a reason to pay someone 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 who agrees with Bernard Williams' understanding that "*there is a reason for A to φ"* as external rather than the opposing internal view that "*A has a reason to φ*"[123]. It is thus not surprising 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 of the forms, he in fact claims that «[reasons] constitute an intrinsically normative order of reality, irreducible to the physical or psychological facts»[124]. Reasons form a peculiar part of reality (one that is often neglected)—the normative domain.

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, these are a) a critique of the Kantian understanding of the ethics of autonomy and b) a critique of naturalism, the metaphysical position that limits reality to what natural sciences study.

What Larmore criticizes about a typically Kantian approach to ethics is the conception of human freedom intended as the self-legislation of Reason[125].

[122] C. Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, *ibidem*.
[123] See *ivi*, p. 126.
[124] *Ivi*, p. 129.
[125] 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 C. Larmore, A. Reanut, *Débat sur l'"Éthique. Idéalisme ou réalisme*, Paris, Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2004. See also C. Larmore, *Dare Ragioni*, pp. 69–71.

Reason is not a faculty that constitutes its own reasons for action and that involves a moral agent who ought to conform to the moral law by virtue of this self-legislation (as Kant believes). Rather, Reason is the faculty that performs the role of recognizing those reasons that we consider good and exist apart from the agent. In this sense, morality is something autonomous, and its authority is not granted by the agent's self-legislation. This does not mean that Larmore criticizes the understanding of autonomy intended as the necessity for a moral agent to recognize moral reasons apart from any influence from the other agents or from an institution[126]. What he claims is that the foundation of ethics is not necessarily the self-legislating Reason; 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 and that makes sense in its own terms and speaks for itself once we are confronted with it. Morality constitutes 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 can only be recognized as the domain of the moral agent). Briefly, Larmore states:

> 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[127].

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. Specifically, reality is broader than the totality of physical and psychological facts, it is not normatively mute, and as such, it cannot be understood as naturalism is. Only the understanding of reality as having a normative dimension (different from the physical and the psychological ones) makes possible a conception of Reason as responsiveness to reasons. This faculty intends that a moral reason be something that needs to be

[126] C. Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, p. 111.
[127] *Ivi*, p. 122.

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 modern thought, is the major view responsible for a morality that does not allow any conception of moral reasons as part of the real world. A broader conception of reality that takes into consideration its normative dimension is ultimately 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 dimensions, there would be no normative dimension, either. If it is not raining, I would have no reason to bring an umbrella but a reason *not* to do so. The normative dimension then strictly depends on how the facts are in the other two dimensions. Nevertheless, the fact that reasons are present, whether or not the agent recognizes them, leaves no doubt about their being part of a non-naturalistic conception of reality. The fact that I do not realize that it is raining 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 that exist independently of the agent.

Finally, this metaethical background is functional in the definition of the moral perspective in general. Larmore identifies the moral standpoint as the ability of seeing another's good in itself as a reason for action[128]. Morality means acting for the good of another without any interest other than this fact. The interest in 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 perspective 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 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[129].

[128] C. Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, pp. 73–74 and pp. 88–89; C. Larmore, *Dare Ragioni*, p. 28 and pp. 65–66; C. Larmore, *Reflection and Morality*, «Social Philosophy and Policy», XXVII (2), 2010, pp. 8ff.

[129] C. Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, pp. 73–74.

Larmore points out that the biblical maxim "love thy neighbor as thyself"[130] expresses well this moral attitude toward others. The reason why this maxim becomes important for a moral perspective of this kind is its unmediated character and spontaneity in pursuing the good of another. This fact is a sufficient reason to act morally, and most importantly, not something we can understand from an external standpoint. Indeed, we do not come to appreciate the others' good due to a sound argumentation in its favor (from outside a moral perspective, so to say). Morality directly places its demands on an agent who acknowledges the importance of others' good, apart from his or her personal interests and desires. In this sense, "morality speaks for itself"; the moral point of view also appears clear and unmediated[131]. Once we recognize a moral reason for action, we are already reflecting from the moral perspective.

Now that I have delineated the bigger metaethical picture, I can analyze Larmore's position about the structure of a normative system. Specifically, how does this metaethical background manage at a normative level the moral complexity that we have seen as typical of our moral experience? In *Patterns of Moral Complexity*[132], Larmore offers an interesting 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 that are further complicated by the circumstances in which the action takes place. While acknowledging this fact, Larmore does not give up the very possibility of moral theorizing, as other authors have done in the past[133]. 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

[130] *Leviticus* 19:18; *Matthew* 19:19, 22:39; *Mark* 12:31; *James* 2:8. Larmore rightly stresses that this maxim is quite different from the well-known golden rule ("Treat the others as you would like the others to treat yourself"). In fact, this entails a sort of reciprocity between the agent and the subject of his or her actions. Larmore's critique of the Hobbesian approach attacks this aspect as an untenable moral perspective. C. Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, pp. 76–79.

[131] «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», *ivi*, p. 105.

[132] C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

[133] For example, see B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011.

theoretical oversimplifications[134]: a) the essential role of moral judgment in the exercise of virtue, b) the liberal ideal of political neutrality, and c) the heterogeneity of the sources of morality. I now want to focus on the third dimension[135].

It has been said that morality 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»[136]. This is an important truth to be recognized; morality comprises 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 highlights three different principles that characterize our moral experience and make morality essentially complex. A moral principle is a tool for deciding on the morally good thing to do, which 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[137], and b) it reflects a specific and irreducible way of moral reasoning[138]. By virtue of these two aspects, the three principles of morality are identified from the moral standpoint; 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 to one another. Specifically, we distinguish[139] among the following aspects:

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 primarily differ 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

[134] C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, p. 151.
[135] I will deal with the other constitutively moral issue (the fundamental role of moral judgment) in the next section of this chapter.
[136] C. Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, p. 88.
[137] *Ivi*, p. 109.
[138] C. Larmore, *Dare Ragioni*, p. 37.
[139] C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, pp. 132–134; C. Larmore, *Dare Ragioni*, p. 37.

in a certain way, specifically so by virtue of our relationship. This sort of partiality constitutes this kind of obligation. In contrast, the principles of consequentialism and deontology are universal (or "impartial"), that is, they support categorical obligations. A categorical obligation is one that applies independently from empirically conditioned desires.

Furthermore, to highlight their differences, it would be helpful to refer to a terminological distinction that I have introduced in Chapter I—methodological pluralism and axiological pluralism. It appears clear how the three principles differ in the ways that they determine the morally right thing to do. They are methodologically different. The principle of partiality takes care of our specific affections, the principle of consequentialism examines the outcome of our acts, and the principle of deontology is concerned with the nature of our acts. In explaining 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 others[140]. Partiality is based on our special relationships with those who share our interests, commitments, and affections. This sort of relation generates a series of sui generis moral requirements. For example, think of the moral dimension of parenthood and friendship. These obligations are such by virtue of the fact that my friend Bob is exactly Bob. These relations are not special because they are necessarily better, from a moral perspective, than other kinds of relations. They are special because they are not established with anybody else. Differently, other moral relations are not based on the fact that we relate with particular individuals but because we relate with fellow human beings as such. This way of treating others impartially can be expressed in two ways: by consequentialist and deontological means. According to Larmore, once we acknowledge that the others have their own good, which deserves to be pursued, we ought to treat them in a consequentialist way, trying to bring about the most good (or least evil) possible. Nevertheless, this is not the only way of treating others by virtue of our respect for their own good. At the same time, we would act in such a way that we would treat or never treat them in a certain manner. This typically deontological way of behaving means caring for the others' rights that we would regard in a certain way. By virtue of the respect for others' good as such, a moral agent has some obligations (generated by

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

the correspondence with certain rights) that ought to be respected. Another famous distinction between consequentialism and deontology, explained in terms of relations, is introduced by Thomas Nagel and Derek Parfit[141]. 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 expressed in these terms fails to recognize that consequentialism also 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»[142]. The relativity of the agent, rather than distinguishing between the two approaches, is what assimilates them. Both 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 the "heterogeneity of morality"—the fact that moral reasoning is not uniform but fundamentally varies. Moreover, he claims that this heterogeneity is not governed by a precise order or a strict priority of a principle over another (as a sort of Rawlsian lexical order). This makes Larmore a moral pluralist to the full extent; moral sources, while heterogeneous, cannot be ordered a priori but 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 by virtue of the multiplicity of the sources and their non-prioritization. We might add that a moral dilemma, in the Larmorian understanding of a moral system, is the conflict between two ways of moral reasoning. It is easy to find examples of the clash between the principles of consequentialism and deontology in our everyday life. The first way of facing such conflicts is the suspension of judgment, waiting for further information that might explain away the conflict. If this is not possible or is simply not the case, it will highlight 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

[141]See footnote 29. For an analysis of the difference between the two impartial ways of morally treating others, see C. Larmore, *The Patterns of Moral Complexity*, pp. 144–150.
[142]*Ivi*, p. 146.

> 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[143].

What I have called methodological pluralism is Larmore's main concern when explaining the heterogeneity of morality. Morality is characterized by three different sorts of moral reasoning, all equally valid, important, and irreducible to one another. Nonetheless, I think that we can emphasize some further aspects of moral complexity in terms of what I have named axiological pluralism. In other words, the sources of morality not only differ in how they arrive at determining the right thing to do, but they also differ in why they do so. For example, a typically consequentialist approach is concerned with the general outcome of acting by virtue of caring for human flourishing. Humanity as a whole deserves to live well (live happily according to certain traditions), and acting morally means improving this status. In contrast, deontology claims that certain acts can never be performed (or omitted) out of respect for others' freedom[144]. This means 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 toward others and our particularistic desires. As such, this principle works by virtue of the importance of individual flourishing. In sum, the three principles are concerned with different morally relevant aspects of our lives. At the same time, claiming that all three are valid and indispensable parts of our lives means that the good is represented by a variety of values that we have to acknowledge. By virtue of all these, two Larmorian mottos appear decisive and incisive: "morality is heterogeneous", and "morality does not speak in a single voice". Nevertheless, heterogeneity might be a misleading term[145] if understood as undermining the unity of morality. Indeed, while morality is expressed in different ways, it remains

[143] *Ivi*, p. 150.
[144] In a certain sense, this means respecting others' autonomy. I do not refer to the Kantian notion of the self-legislation of moral Reason (*Autonomie*) as criticized by Larmore. The contemporary widespread understanding of the autonomy of the moral agent refers to the fact that he or she has the opportunity to deliberate, free from any influence of others (whether an institution, an ideology, or another person). In this sense, autonomy means that a moral agent is free to deliberate and to make his or her moral choices. Larmore's criticism does not involve this second understanding of autonomy. See C. Larmore, *Dare Ragioni*, pp. 69–70.
[145] C. Larmore, *Reflection and Morality*, p. 25.

one and unified. Although undoubtedly, 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 related principles of morality reflect a distinct attitude; moral goodness springs from a unique moral standpoint. In other words, 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, moral goodness 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 same starting point, the consideration of the others' good from the moral point of view. In this sense, Larmore's pluralism can be more precisely identified as 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 form the basis of the same good. By virtue of all these aspects, Larmore affirms that the greatest mistake of monistic theories has been the belief of being exclusive, at the level of the right (a claim that I fully share). On the contrary, instead of believing in the exclusive validity of a single principle, we need to acknowledge the existence of different kinds of moral reasoning. At a normative level, this approach of moral complexity 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[146].

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

2.3 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 existing reasons 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

[146] C. Larmore, *The Patterns of Moral Complexity*, p. 151.

monistic traditions tend to claim). While it might happen that a principle or a rule tells us exactly what to do according to the underlying reasons, 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 involves the faculty of moral judgment. It is one thing to know and acknowledge that we have reasons to do *x* (the role of practical Reason); it is another matter to know how to bring about *x* (the role of moral judgment). Sometimes, the given circumstances require almost no need for judgment; for example, you have promised to buy your child ice cream, and you are now in front of an ice cream parlor. Other cases are much more complex than this. For instance, think of a case where your friends have been so kind as 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 buy everybody a round of drinks? The cases where we ought to express gratitude, courage, generosity, and similar moral virtues require a certain degree of moral judgment. Thus, moral judgment does not have the same role as that of practical Reason. Aristotle has been the forerunner of this understanding of moral judgment (*φρόνησις*)[147]. 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[148].

Moreover, moral judgment differs from systematic knowledge (e.g., the hard sciences) or technical expertise (e.g., craftsmanship):

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

[148] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140 a24–a33, in S. Broadie (ed.), C. Rowe (ed. and trans.), Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

> 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[149].

By virtue of this understanding of the function of moral judgment, we can conclude that it plays a major role in moral justification, that is, 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 existing moral reasons. Nevertheless, as I have emphasized in the previous section, morality does not speak in a single voice, and listening to it might be puzzling and disheartening at times. Here, moral judgment plays a fundamental role in determining 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 is the faculty of moral interpretation, whether it is the comprehension of how to apply a reason to action or the discernment between conflicting moral sources. As I will point out later, in a complex moral system, the latter feature is especially important.

At this point, I have already sketched three fundamental features of moral judgment: a) It is always rendered in the context of a particular moral experience[150]. b) It deals with the interpretation of moral principles or generally, of moral reasons. c) It is essential for the identification of the relevant moral source and for its application (moral justification). Let us analyze these three features in further detail.

Moral judgment is a faculty that needs to be exercised in experience. This claim is fully in line with the Aristotelian understanding of *φρόνησις*. Moral agency is undertaken in the experience of our moral lives; as such, moral judgment is the faculty entitled to reconsider each particular case in order to deliberate on the right thing to do. Moral agency cannot be determined *a priori* once and for all[151]. This feature of morality has often been

[149] *Ivi*, 1140 b5–b7.

[150] It does not need to be the actual or present situation. When we reflect on what to do morally, we picture ourselves in some potential scenario to understand what we would do. In this regard, in Chapter I, I have discussed Mandelbaum's removed moral judgments.

[151] «[...] 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 to the occasion, just as happens in the case of medicine, too, and

neglected by many philosophical traditions; for this reason, it represents one of the aspects where Larmore highlights the need for 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 discussion about the nature of morality. Reason is the faculty that acknowledges reasons from how matters stand in a non-naturalistic conception of reality (not limited to the attention of natural sciences). As such, Reason reads experience. Similarly, moral judgment is a faculty that is exercised in the experience and developed through practice in the experience[152]. 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[153].

What is the role of moral judgment? I have briefly highlighted that another relevant feature of this faculty is that it deals with moral principles and more generally, with moral reasons. Nevertheless, it would be reductive to talk of judgment as the faculty that merely identifies what rules and principles point out[154]. Although sometimes, rules and principles suffice by themselves to pinpoint 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 acknowledgment of the moral reasons for showing gratitude. Even if the agent recognizes the reasons to be grateful, how shall gratitude 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[155]. As Larmore emphasizes, this is the centrality of moral judgment that we need to reestablish if we want to take into account

of navigation», Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104 a5–a10.

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

[153] «Reacting against what he perceived to be Plato's belief that virtue consists solely in the knowledge of general principles, Aristotle protested that moral 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», C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, p. 15.

[154] 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 *ivi*, p. 5.

[155] *Ivi*, p. 7.

the complexity of our moral experience. In a clear Aristotelian spirit, taking care of the application of a rule means being aware that the expression of virtue consists of avoiding any excessive or deficient behavior[156]. 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 that is central to Mandelbaum's phenomenological view. As analyzed in Chapter I, fittingness is the relation between an appropriate course of action and the end that the agent is pursuing[157]. I believe that the ability to bring about this sort of relation is precisely 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 to fulfill 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. Here, I want to highlight again how moral judgment is the faculty of moral interpretation, that is, it is responsible for interpreting the situation and understanding which course of action fits it, according to the agent's moral reasons. In this sense, the activity of judgment goes beyond what rules and principles strictly tell us by trying to understand how to adjust them and make them effective in the given circumstances[158].

Finally, a further feature of moral judgment that needs to be underlined is a particularly relevant aspect when we consider the moral justification of an act (especially within a complex moral system). It appears clear how moral judgment in a complex system plays at least a twofold role. I have previously stressed the first one; once practical Reason has done its job by acknowledging the existing moral reasons, 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 come into conflict. I think that in the situation of a conflict

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[156] This is 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*, 1109 b24–27.

[157] M. Mandelbaum, *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, p. 64.

[158] C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, pp. 8–9.

between reasons, we can identify the second role of moral judgment—adjudicating which of the different sources of morality has to be finally considered. Larmore himself acknowledges this further role of judgment:

> 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[159].

This understanding of moral judgment guarantees that even if the situation becomes increasingly complex and conflicting, we do not need to give up the opportunity to grasp a reasonable decision. Once we abandon the idea of a monistic structure of morality in favor of a pluralistic framework, we realize that moral conflict is a recurring phenomenon in our moral experience. Although not all conflicts are solvable (some become dilemmatic indeed), moral judgment can guide us through the heterogeneous world of morality[160].

The question of moral justification is a focal one for a pluralist system. The issue becomes even more pressing in the resolution of moral conflicts (something that pluralist systems frequently face). As I have underlined in Chapter I, the difficulty of a clear-cut procedure for moral justification represents the major criticism that supporters of moral monism raise against pluralists. The argument is if we have to abandon the unique moral standard that makes moral commensurability possible, how do we adjudicate conflicts? I believe that the best answer to this problem is broadening our idea of the reasonable resolution of a conflict. When no further consideration can be drawn from our moral reasons in order to resolve the conflict, it does not necessarily mean that what we decide to do[161] is irrational or arbitrary. Once we arrive at the point of a moral conflict, moral judgment can still provide a reasonable choice about what to do. However, the 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 strictly conceived as the outcome of moral reasons because sometimes, this is not possible due to their coming into conflict. When this occurs, moral judgment

[159] *Ivi*, p. 9.
[160] *Ivi*, pp. 10–11.
[161] This applies granted that we ultimately need to act and cannot benefit from the suspension of judgment.

plays a fundamental role. Nagel shares this idea of the reasonable resolution 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[162].

We need to push rational deliberation as far as possible, but once we become involved in a moral conflict, we do not need to give up the possibility of identifying a reasonable course of action. In these cases, judgment is the only viable option left to arrive at a reasonable decision when the situation complicates the tradeoffs between different moral sources.

The peculiar aspect of judgment is that it is a faculty that needs to be developed through time and experience. For this reason, Aristotle underlines the importance of education and habituation of the youth, who need to live in a society that nurtures their moral character[163]. We are used to saying that with experience, we become wiser and it becomes easier for us to find a moral justification of our acts. The complexity of morality might be discouraging at times, but judgment facilitates facing it but does not necessarily make it easy. This allows us to manage complexity with less hardship; the work of a qualified and experienced faculty of moral judgment can guide the agent through the adversities of moral experience[164].

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-step process: 1) Practical Reason acknowledges the existing moral reasons from the moral perspective. 2) Moral judgment picks the

[162] T. Nagel, *The Fragmentation of Value*, pp. 134–135.

[163] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179 b30f.

[164] In this regard, I think that we can find many interesting insights in moral exemplarism. In particular, the work of Linda Zagzebski appears very promising to me. See L.T. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017. I have focused on the role of moral exemplarism in our moral judgment in S. Grigoletto, *Facing Moral Complexity. The Role of Moral Excellence in Guiding Moral Judgment*, «Teoria», XXXIX (2), 2019, pp. 239–258.

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 acknowledgment of moral reasons delivered by practical Reason is obligatory (otherwise, we would be unable to reflect from the moral standpoint), the dual role of judgment is optional. Moral reasons can sometimes be straightforwardly clear about what to do and why it should be done; thus, there is no further need for the moral interpretation provided by judgment. In the same way, if moral reasons happen to be clear about the course of action that needs to be undertaken, there would be no conflict among the sources of morality, and the interpretive role of judgment would be unnecessary. On the contrary, sometimes, the situation might be so complex that the agent would face 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 heterogeneous sources of morality. This process is something that necessarily takes place in our everyday moral experience.

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

CHAPTER III
SUPEREROGATION: WHY, WHAT, AND HOW

3.1 Why Supererogation?

In this second part, I 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 for this shift in the argument is that supererogation exemplifies well the complexity typical of morality. In this way, I 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 framework that better satisfies the requirements of the justification of the concept of supererogation. Most importantly, 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 this work to the analysis of the need for a complex moral system. It is now worthwhile to briefly explain the necessity of a moral category such as supererogation. For now, it is enough to broadly conceive a supererogatory act as morally good but not morally required. Supererogation is thus the category of the good that stands above (or beyond) the category of the morally obligatory. Therefore, why would

we need such a category? In her well-known article[165], Susan Wolf argues 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 benefiting from several other valuable things in life. Briefly, this is the main argument: if a woman dedicates her entire existence to morality, it will be impossible for her to appreciate many other valuable non-moral things in life. If taken to the extreme, morality prevents the agent from living a valuable life because it annihilates the possibilities of benefiting from other goods. For example, a man who devotes his time entirely to feeding the hungry will surely not spend much time learning how to play the piano or reading an enjoyable novel[166]. This limitation of the other non-moral aspects of life can negatively affect the overall consideration of what living a good life is. 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 will miss some important aspects of a well-rounded life. The point is that those deprivations will concern something valuable (although not from a moral point of view); the moral saint will be deficient in some valuable aspect of life[167]. Moreover, according to Wolf, something is particularly problematic with this constitutively moral extremism. She claims that while every sort of idealistic extremism might entail some sacrifice in other aspects of life, the moral saint represents a case where these deprivations are brought about in a questionable way. We might think that someone who devotes his or her entire life to becoming the greatest pianist on earth or to breaking the world record on the 100-meter dash would incur the same sort of deficits in several valuable aspects of his or her life. Accordingly, any sort of extremism of a single value would appear to be as problematic as the case of the moral saint[168]. However, Wolf emphasizes how the most problematic features of value extremism are typical of the moral saint[169]: a) Different from other sorts of extremisms, the moral saint seems to give up many valuable things, not by virtue of a personal choice (such as in the case of the musician or the Olympic athlete) but by virtue of a moral imperative (and thus perceived as an external constraint). b) The aspects of life that the moral saint gives up are not neglected as a

[165] S. Wolf, *Moral Saints*, «The Journal of Philosophy», LXXIX (8), 1982, pp. 418–439.
[166] *Ivi*, p. 421.
[167] *Ivi*, p. 426.
[168] *Ivi*, p. 423.
[169] *Ivi*, pp. 423–424.

result of a tradeoff but 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 the incapability of recognizing it) of any non-moral good. As such, always picking the moral good over the other non-moral goods is not the consequence of a tradeoff between fully recognized values. All non-moral values (by virtue of the espousal of moral perfection as the ultimate standard) are not values in the end. 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's perspective is undesirable. 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 will thus jeopardize the well-roundedness of the single person. It might be true that the exclusive evaluation from the moral standpoint would fail to consider many valuable things in life. However, the same applies to the professional athlete who considers all the aspects of his or her life from the "athletic" point of view, which deems valuable only the things that are functional for a better athletic performance. In fact, this 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" standpoint. Since this specific point of view is the only one that matters, the use of performance-enhancing substances appears permissible as long as it improves their abilities or speeds up their achievement of certain goals. The real problem of this course of action is that such athletes fail to consider other points of view (such as the 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 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 is derived from these attitudes is the loss of the well-roundedness that is 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. For Aristotle, the expression of a virtue is the mean between scarcity and excess of a certain valuable aspect:

> [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[170].

A life characterized by some kind of excess (or deficiency) seems to miss 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 of a moral theory.

However, it is important to emphasize 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 does not limit the possibilities of bringing about the good[171]. 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 one 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 standpoint, morality constitutes a valuable but non-comprehensive feature of our lives. In these 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[172]. The moral point of view is not the ultimate evaluative standard, which makes it possible for a person to be «perfectly wonderful without being perfectly moral»[173].

As I have stated, although 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" 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

[170] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109 a21-26, in J. Barnes, A. Kenny (ed.), *Aristotle's Ethics. Writings from the Complete Works*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2014.
[171] S. Wolf, *Moral Saints*, p. 432.
[172] *Ivi*, pp. 437–438.
[173] *Ivi*, p. 436.

view, one can only aim at moral sainthood. If we do not want to be in this problematic situation, we need to set aside the moral and evaluate from some other alternative all-things-considered point of view. Accordingly, always following the moral standpoint becomes the supererogatory thing. However, it seems to me that this misses the point, or rather, it leaves halfway done the task of playing down the reach of morality in our lives (a task 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[174]. Deciding how to live a life well is the ultimate task from the moral perspective; there is no need to assign this task to some other point of view[175]. In these terms, we also understand why morality is not an external source of constraints (an understanding of morality that would betray its nature) but a personal endorsement that leads us to live a good and enjoyable life. What Wolf states is that supererogation consists of always evaluating from the moral point. This consideration is aimed at limiting the reach of morality (at least according to her understanding of the moral point of view). However, the proper understanding of the category of supererogatory acts tries to highlight how this task can be achieved within the moral domain. The moral point of view does not require us to go all the way up to moral perfectionism. This would be supererogatory, indeed. This concept stands as the very limitation of the forces of bringing about as much good as possible. While this would be a praiseworthy course of action, it cannot be considered an obligatory one, which is true even from the moral point of view.

Jonathan Dancy presents a similar attack to Wolf's conception of supererogation as based on two distinct points of view (moral and non-moral). 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[176].

[174] This is a task that I will directly try to accomplish in Chapter V.
[175] This is not to say that viewpoints that differ from the moral perspective do not exist. The point at issue here is that the moral perspective is sufficient for a satisfactory interpretation of supererogation and most of all, of what it means to live a life lived well.
[176] J. Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, Hoboken, NJ, Blackwell, 1992, p. 135.

In these terms, someone who is not on the way to moral sainthood turns out to be a defective moral agent from the moral point of view. However, this is a major misunderstanding of the role of the concept of supererogation, which conversely, wants to acknowledge the fact that someone who is not a saint is not necessarily morally defective. Supererogation is the moral category of the morally good but optional. Wolf thinks that the optionality relies on the espousal of the moral point of view. The supererogatory act is instead something whose optionality needs to be understood within the moral sphere. There is no need to draw on 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 perfect life[177].

In conclusion, I believe that the concept of supererogation is important because it provides our moral theories with a theoretical depth that would be problematic to miss. David Heyd beautifully claims that «the good is open-ended in a way that the bad is not»[178], and I think that taking into account this feature of morality means, first and foremost, setting the proper space for supererogation. If the morally good has no limits (open-ended) and morality places no boundaries to which extent we are obliged to bring about moral goodness, our moral systems would always be condemned to set never-reaching goals. The concept of supererogation works to prevent this from happening. Moral goodness can be approached in (at least) two ways. It is one thing to claim that we are required to aim for moral goodness to its full extent. This appears as an undesirable outcome of morality. It is another matter to hold that morality sets some ideals for which we should aspire as much as possible. This seems to be a plausible inclination instead. At this point, it should be clear that the issue is the rather popular idea that the good needs to be maximized. In fact, if we take moral requirements as 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, we need to leave some moral room for the category of supererogation, thus mitigating the reach of our moral

[177] *Ivi*, p. 137.

[178] «[...] the extremely good cannot be required, but the extremely bad (vicious) is the prime target of prohibition», in D. Heyd, *Supererogation*, E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (winter 2019 edition), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/supererogation/>.

obligations. This operation will ultimately mean clearly distinguishing the morally good (open-ended) from the morally right (morally obligatory). Thus, supererogation is grounded on 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, to avoid the problematic scenario where all good things are at the same time obligatory (rather than simply desirable), we need to limit the reach of moral 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. As someone may think, this operation will not 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 this regard, moral excellence springs from the agent's gratuitous caring for others, beyond the mere boundaries of the obligatory. This is the true spirit of a moral act as perceived from the moral point of view. Reducing the reach of the morally obligatory will not decrease the purport of morality in our lives. On the contrary, a less demanding category of the right will open up the possibility for the genuinely praiseworthy moral good that lies beyond. This is ultimately the moral "less is more". The less demanding the category of the right is (the limitation of moral obligations), the more possibilities of gratuitously caring for others become open to the moral agent (the possibility of supererogation).

3.2 *What* is Supererogation? The History of a Definition

The concept of supererogation has a rather recent history in the course of philosophical inquiry. James Urmson was the first contemporary author who recognized the philosophical urgency of giving the proper theoretical space to this concept. In his seminal article entitled *Saints and Heroes*[179] (published in 1958), he deals with the category that lies "beyond the call of duty" (interestingly enough, he does not even mention the word "supererogation"). In these terms, sainthood and heroism are categories (far from having any intrinsic religious implication) that clearly represent

[179] J. Urmson, *Saints and Heroes*, in A. Melden (ed.), *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, pp. 198–216.

a moral behavior that cannot be strictly required of the moral agent. In particular, Urmson tries to underline how a schematic and rigorous classification of the categories of the moral worth of actions (as characterized by the understanding of the deontic logic of his time)[180], according to the broader category of moral permissibility, is unable to give an account of the actions of saints and heroes. He emphasizes that as long as we differentiate among the obligatory (what we ought to do), the permissible (or the morally indifferent), and the forbidden (what we should not 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, will certainly fail to acknowledge the moral relevance of supererogatory acts. Urmson then concludes that, given the undeniable existence of acts of this kind in our everyday lives, 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 has evolved and given rise to the contemporary debate that remains lively.

In the years following Urmson's paper, a noteworthy attempt to solve the "problem of supererogation"[181] has been offered by Roderick Chisholm in a series of articles published in the 1960s[182]. To move on from the original three-fold classification of moral acts and to support both the optionality and the moral worth of supererogation, he suggests expanding the degree of complexity of the conceptual scheme of ethics. Following the example of some authors before him[183], Chisholm offers a scheme that considers both the performance and the non-performance of an act (commission and omission). This first feature underlines how supererogation is a moral category that

[180] Remember the influential article by G.H. Von Wright, *Deontic Logic*, «Mind», LX (237), 1951, pp. 1–15.

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

[182] R. Chisholm, *Supererogation and Offence: A Conceptual Scheme for Ethics*, «Ratio», V, 1963, pp. 1–14; R. Chisholm, *The Ethics of Requirement*, «American Philosophical Quarterly», I (2), 1964, pp. 147–153; R. Chisholm, E. Sosa, *Intrinsic Preferability and the Problem of Supererogation*, «Synthese», LVI, 1966, pp. 321–331.

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

evaluates a specific kind of act, rather than a certain disposition or behavior of the agent. It is always the specific act 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 the non-performance) of the given act. Accordingly, an act can be good, bad, or morally indifferent (that is, neutral[184]). Finally, combining this three-fold classification of the value with the performance or the non-performance of the act gives rise to nine possible descriptions of moral acts. In this way, Chisholm tries to highlight 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[185].

To clarify this point, it is helpful to use a schematic illustration of the various possibilities. See the following table[186]:

	P	**NP**	***Kinds of acts***
1	bad	bad	Totally offensive
2	bad	neutral	Offense of commission
3	bad	good	Forbidden
4	neutral	bad	Offense of omission
5	neutral	neutral	Totally indifferent
6	neutral	good	Supererogatory omission
7	good	bad	Obligatory
8	good	neutral	Supererogatory commission
9	good	good	Totally supererogatory

[184] 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”», M. Stocker, *Professor Chisholm on Supererogation and Offence*, «Philosophical Studies», XVIII, 1967, p. 93.

[185] R. Chisholm, *Supererogation and Offence: A Conceptual Scheme for Ethics*, p. 12.

[186] Bad, neutral and good refer to the moral worth of the act. On the top of the diagram, P stands for performance, and NP denotes non-performance. This scheme can be found in *ivi*, p. 12.

This scheme points out the full spectrum of moral acts from the perspective of deontic logic. The richest moral theory would be the one that would be able to accommodate all of them. A defective moral theory would fail to acknowledge the majority of these categories. Specifically, acts 6, 8, and 9 are those dedicated to identifying the different ways that make it possible to go beyond the call of duty. The totally supererogatory act is one whose omission and commission are both good. Chisholm himself refers to it as a «state of blessedness»[187]. 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 omission or commission) and morally good in case they are carried out (whether omission or commission). This more refined 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 a category that is antithetical to supererogation—offense[188]. 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 acts are taking too long to leave a restaurant table, knowing that someone is waiting, or refusing to tell a friend where he or she can buy that jacket that he or she has been urgently looking for.

While this scheme of ethics is appealing for its logical symmetry and explicative power, it is worth asking whether it goes too far in delineating some apparently unusual moral categories. Particularly, this applies to the categories that describe the so-called offenses. Is it ever the case that we can bring about some venial bad thing without being 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 symmetrically. As we have seen in the previous section, while 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,

[187] *Ivi*, p. 11.
[188] This is later referred to as "suberogatory". See J. Driver, *The Suberogatory*, «Australasian Journal of Philosophy», LXX, 1992, pp. 286–295; P. McNamara, *Supererogation, Inside and Out: Toward an Adequate Scheme for Common-Sense Morality*, in M. Timmons (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics (Vol. 1)*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 202–235.

the bad is forbidden to any degree. The way that morality appears to work is that of negatively forbidding the bad and positively promoting the good. In these terms, the promotion of the good does not necessarily enter the sphere of requirements (as the concept of supererogation testifies). On the 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 to find convincing examples of offenses intended as 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 commission of morally bad acts might become excusable by virtue of the performance of some other proportionally greater morally good act. In this case, the offense is just a side effect of some other morally good act[189] and never a moral act that is excusable *per se*. Taking too long in leaving a restaurant table is always morally forbidden if deliberately done for no good reason. The same can be excused only by virtue of some other moral act that is judged as proportionally greater. For example, think of a case where I am chatting at the table with my best friend whom 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 this offense can be conceived at best as a side effect of some other good act undermines whatever conception of offense as an independent category of an act, which is considered *per se* morally optional despite its morally bad connotation[190].

The conceptual symmetry between supererogation and offense might be broken when we realize that there is no "offensive" counterpart of the heroic or the saintly kind of supererogation. While supererogation's optionality and value are 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

[189] In this regard, I refer to the interesting doctrine (or principle) of the double effect. See A. McIntyre, *Doctrine of Double Effect*, in E.N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (spring 2019 edition), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/double-effect/>.

[190] Another interesting explanation of offense has been offered by the introduction to the idea of inconsiderateness. See E. Ullmann-Margalit, *Considerateness*, «Iyyun», LX, 2011, pp. 205–244.

while exceptionally bad, are morally excusable[191]. This point underlines the typical asymmetry of morality. In this regard, let me recall this 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[192].

Upon a deeper reflection on the categories proposed by the broader approach of deontic logic suggested by Chisholm, the same category of the totally supererogatory (as its offensive counterpart) appears less plausible. Similar to offenses, it seems problematic to find a satisfying example of a supererogatory act whose performance and non-performance would be both good[193]. 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) to whether the agent does *x* or *y*. I do not think (as Heyd does[194]) 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 one, among the options, the agent decides to perform. Again, it is indifferent to whether he or she does *x* or *y* since this will have equally good consequences no matter what he or she decides. I think that the real problem with this category of supererogatory acts (other than their factual emptiness) is their failure to be actual instances of supererogation. Specifically, an act of supererogation is characterized by

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

[192] D. Heyd, *Supererogation*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (winter 2019 edition), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/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.

[193] 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 that they can be overlooked. See R. Chisholm, E. Sosa, *Intrinsic Preferability and the Problem of Supererogation*, «Synthese», LVI, 1966, pp. 329–330.

[194] D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 123n.

the fact that the agent might freely decide not to bring about any instance of the good. Cases of totally supererogatory acts seem to have lost this freedom of performance (and non-performance), given that the agent will somehow bring about some good (he or she is "condemned to the good", so to speak). These acts (which we might call blessed acts for lack of a better term) fully lose their optionality, so (as I will later show with a fuller definition of the concept) they lose the special moral connotation that assigns a moral value to them.

At a more general level, the problem of supererogation and deontic logic reveals an interesting truth. From the outset, deontic logic was conceived as a system based on permission, and as such, it was concerned with rights and duties. In this regard, Millard Schumaker has made a compelling remark about the problem of supererogation[195]. It has been assigned too wide a scope to deontic logic 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 [...][196].

This explains why every definition of supererogation that tries to define it along with the categories of deontic logic of that time, 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 its being 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

[195] M. Schumaker, *Deontic Morality and the Problem of Supererogation*, «Philosophical Studies», XXXIII, 1972, pp. 427–428.
[196] *Ivi*, p. 428.

vast majority of the moral theories: the axiological level and the deontic level. These are "the two faces of morality": one refers to goodness, ideals, and virtues; the other 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 the possibility to go beyond the sphere of requirements in pursuing moral goodness. The relevance of these two levels of morality gives rise to terminologies that distinguish between the minimal standard of ethics (minimal ethics) and some other ideal or broader category (maximal ethics). However, it would be wrong 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 for moral ideals. They simply represent the two faces of the same moral subject; in other words, they signify 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 concept of supererogation reminds us of this.

In the following paragraphs, I present David Heyd's definition of supererogation[197]. While it would certainly be possible to improve the definition in different ways, I take this to be the most exhaustive interpretation of the relevant aspects of the concept. Specifically, according to Heyd, supererogation is defined by four features, 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[198].

These four conditions all highlight relevant aspects of supererogation. In sum, they are optionality, the moral non-imputability in case of omission, the value of the act's consequences and its intrinsically good status, and the altruistic character of the act. The definition presents the first two conditions

[197] D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982.
[198] *Ivi,* p. 115.

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 stress that from this definition, we can derive how supererogation is a moral concept primarily concerned with acts, rather than with agents, character traits, or other morally relevant aspects of moral experience[199]. Moreover, the composite nature of this definition expands the reach and overcomes the limits of those definitions that describe the concept in a restricted way by the asymmetrical opposition of two terms, that is, "a supererogatory act is…to do, but…not to do"[200]. Expanding the definition in this way allows departing from the dimension of deontic logic and taking care of the non-deontic aspects of supererogation (e.g., 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, it remains within the conceptual framework of deontic logic; here, when the obligatory as opposed to the forbidden is considered, supererogation finds its collocation right in between them, in what is permissible. However, this is not enough if we want to avoid reducing the supererogatory to the permissible, a category that primarily includes the morally indifferent. Clearly enough, while maintaining the condition of being permissible, supererogation 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, morally indifferent *per se*. In contrast, letting someone go ahead in the line at the supermarket because he or she has very few items is morally permissible and, at the same time, 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, contrary to some other kind of acts in their class, they maintain a certain degree of moral value (possibly a very significant one).

To avoid reducing 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[201]; thus, its omission does not deserve any sort of moral criticism

[199] *Ibidem.*
[200] *Ivi*, p. 117.
[201] The term optional (contrary to permissible) denotes that act x is not necessarily deprived of its moral value. Thus, «[…] while according to (1) supererogatory acts are permissible,

or reproach. The terminological shift from permissible to optional makes a huge conceptual difference since it allows the moral value of these acts to not lose its importance. A further sort of 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 with a similar degree of blameworthiness in case the agent refrains from doing them[202]. Supererogation being 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 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 value due to its optionality (i.e., going beyond the call of duty). Since the willingness to do the supererogatory act 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 by virtue of its consequences. This reveals that the value of supererogation relies on the combination of two moral features. In other words, the combined nature of supererogation's value blends deontological and axiological elements[203]. 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.

(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», *ivi*, p. 116.

[202] It has been noted that this feature of supererogation reminds us of the characterization of Christian evangelical counsels by the fact that their omission is not blameworthy as long as the agent respects the precepts. Briefly, «[...] one ought to follow the counsels only if one seeks certain goals or ideals. But these ideals, though highly praised, are not obligatory, and failure to adopt them is by no means wrong», *ivi*, p. 130. For an example of this aspect, see the episode about the rich young man in *Matthew* 19:16–22 and *Luke* 10:17–22.

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

> Neither utilitarianism nor Kantianism alone is sufficient to account for supererogation [...][204].

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 all those optional good deeds unforeseen by the agent from the assignment of moral praise. If I decline a job offer by virtue of accepting a more interesting one, I do not have to be praised if the job offer I refuse will benefit another person. The same scenario greatly changes if I decline the job offer because I want someone else to benefit from it (whether or not I am considering another job offer). The intention behind the performance of the act plays a crucial role in its praiseworthiness. This also means that the failure to satisfactorily perform an act of supererogation does not necessarily affect its moral status. For example, if someone jumps into the water to save a drowning stranger and in the attempt, drowns oneself, the failure to bring about the actual supererogatory act (saving the stranger) does not undermine the value of what one has done. As long as the agent intends the desired good consequences[205], the act maintains its moral value.

Furthermore, if a supererogatory act gains part of its moral value from being *optional* (i.e., more than duty requires), this means that there is a logical dependence between supererogation and duty. To explain this fact, Heyd has introduced correlativity and continuity as the two conditions that specify the relation between these two moral categories[206]. The former emphasizes that we cannot have the concept of supererogation without the correlation to some kind of duty that is opportunely surpassed by the performance of optional good deeds. If there is no level of requirement, it is logically impossible to conceive a category that is beyond any requirement[207]. The latter concept, continuity, states that although supererogatory acts are differentiated from duties in their being beyond them, they still share with obligations the same kind of moral value. Specifically, the morally good that gives value to supererogation is the same one that we attach to the

[204] D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 131.
[205] *Ivi*, p. 133.
[206] *Ivi*, p. 5.
[207] «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», *ibidem*.

performance of a moral duty. In other words, supererogatory acts and moral obligations are both evaluated from the same moral point of view, the only difference being the degree of moral requirement. Expressed another way, «there is a common and continuous scale of values shared by supererogation and duty»[208]. 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, it could cause an agent to take on extremely demanding duties, it would be hard to argue that duties cannot exist in such a theoretical framework. On the contrary, any theory of supererogation can only be grounded on a proper concept of duty. Supererogation without a qualified 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 provide an additional connotation to the kind of moral worth that supererogation typically involves. If supererogatory acts are performed accordingly, moral merit ought to be assigned to their agent. This reveals how this condition underlines the aspects that make the agent morally meritorious (different from the third condition whose main focus is the moral status of the act)[209].

First of all, to generate moral merit, a supererogatory act needs to be performed voluntarily by the agent. This means that the agent is free from any kind of pressure to act accordingly and free from any concern to refrain from doing so. In contrast, if this would not be the case, it would undermine the moral goodness of the act's optionality (its being beyond the call of duty, as shown in the third condition) and ultimately, the merit of the agent. The freedom to perform or not perform the supererogatory act x is functional for both the moral status of the act and the agent himself or herself. Furthermore, the agent has to act altruistically, that is, the outcome of one's act must primarily benefit someone other than oneself[210]. This

[208] *Ibidem.*

[209] *Ivi*, p. 136 and p. 139.

[210] At this point, it is important to stress how the required altruistic character of supererogation is far from being taken for granted in the contemporary debate. In particular, see G. Mellema, *Beyond the Call of Duty: Supererogation, Obligation and Offence*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1991, pp. 19–20; J. Kawall, *Self-Regarding Supererogatory*

feature further specifies the character of the consequences mentioned in the third condition. The beneficial consequences must be other-regarding[211]. 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[212].

At this point, it is worth specifying an important distinction that Heyd introduces to clarify the status of the agent, that between motive and intention[213]. As I have emphasized, supererogation requires altruistic intentions, which differ from requiring altruistic motives. In fact, the agent might find a self-interested motive to act to benefit others. However, this does not prevent the act from having all the features that make supererogation morally good. In this context, a self-interested motive to behave in a particular way is not 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[214].

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

Actions, «Journal of Social Philosophy» 34 (3), 2003, pp. 487–498; A. Archer, *Supererogation and Intentions of the Agent*, «Philosophia», XLI, 2013, pp. 447–462. A deeper analysis of this point will unfortunately take me off-topic in the present work. Here, I just assume that the altruistic character of supererogation (following Heyd's position) is the most accurate description of its acts. I have dedicated some space to the issue elsewhere. See S. Grigoletto, *Why Proximity Matters for the Concept of Supererogation*, «Ethics & Politics», XIX (1), 2017, pp. 291–307.

[211] Supererogatory acts typically (even if not necessarily) involve some sort of sacrifice by the agent. The act might thus have some non-beneficial consequences that primarily affect the agent himself or herself.

[212] «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")», D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 139.

[213] For clarification it is important to provide a brief, but finer distinction between these two terms. Being thirsty justifies the act of drinking. This is what *motivates* this course of action. The act of drinking is then specifically *intended* at grabbing a glass of water and bringing it up to your mouth.

[214] *Ivi*, p. 137.

Finally, the altruistic qualification of supererogation rules out any possible utilitarian evaluation of the act's outcome. Indeed, the good altruistic consequences are not necessarily the best ones. The foreseen sacrifice of the agent (typical of this kind of act) might involve a loss in terms of the general degree of happiness. Nevertheless, this is (as we have seen) what makes supererogation of special moral value[215]. 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 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, for the argumentation in favor of a normative foundation of the concept. In particular, recall that supererogatory acts deeply rely on the theoretical acknowledgment of the different levels that constitute the structure of ethics. In the present section, I have emphasized 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, or the right and the good. Supererogation is a conceptual consequence of this important distinction, and as such, it can serve as a proof of that. Similarly, in the entire first part of this work, I have aimed to point out how the very nature of moral experience (in moral decision making) is far from being a unitary matter. These expressions of the complexity typical of morality should serve as reminders of the necessity of acknowledging the actual nature of the moral domain.

3.3 *How* is Supererogation Possible? The Acknowledgment of Moral Complexity

In this section, I focus on the theological origin of the concept to pay attention to those theoretical elements that have grounded the concept from its genesis. In the present work, embracing a complex approach to morality aims at recreating, on a philosophical level, the theoretical depth that has given rise to the concept of supererogation. The etymology of supererogation is found in the Christian tradition and goes as far back as the parable of

[215] *Ivi*, p. 132.

the good Samaritan in the Gospel according to St. Luke[216]. More precisely, the theoretical background that makes sense of supererogation as a concept is derived from the later distinction between precepts and evangelical counsels, as outlined by Christian theology. I now dedicate some pages to a brief sketch of this theological background.

Traditionally, the distinction between precepts and counsels refers to a well-known passage of the Gospel: the narrative about the rich young man's encounter with Jesus [217]. Here, when asked how to live by aiming at eternal life, Jesus distinguishes between two paths to salvation. The first path is concerned with the precepts of the Decalogue, of which Jesus recalls five[218], plus the so-called rule of love («You shall love your neighbor as yourself»). These are expected from anyone who has Christian charity as the fundamental value of a life lived well. The rich young man acknowledges having lived according to all of these precepts; nevertheless, he further asks, «What do I still lack?» The young man is then 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 required of everyone[219], 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 St. 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 different kinds[220]. One is the Divine Law, which, combined with the Divine Grace, aims at leading us toward virtues and goodness. Oppositely, temptations influence us to

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[216] *Luke* 10:25–37. The Vulgate version of the Bible translates a line of the dialogue between the Samaritan and the innkeeper (line 35) as follows: «[…] *et quodcumque supererogaveris ego cum rediero reddam tibi* […]». Strangely enough, 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 such as this represent the typical act of supererogation, sometimes referred to as "good Samaritanism".

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

[218] *Matthew* 19:18–19.

[219] The way of living the *counsels* has to be understood within the sphere of optionality. Jesus introduces it with an "if" clause: «If you would be perfect […]», *Matthew* 19:21.

[220] See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 91, *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province revised by Daniel J. Sullivan*, Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952.

commit sins in accordance with vices. Within this general schema, precepts and counsels constitute the Divine Law, as outlined in the Scriptures. In particular, on one hand, the Old Testament transmits the Old Law by means of the Decalogue of Moses, which prescribes 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. Aquinas clearly highlights this distinction, 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[221].

Therefore, the commandments are binding and clearly prescribe what to do (e.g., «Honor thy father and thy mother») and what not to do (e.g., «Thou shalt not kill»). In contrast, counsels do not prescribe anything in particular other than the achievement of some extra good; thus, their performance is considered optional and left to the will of the agent. Generally, counsels rely on the avoidance of three things: external wealth, carnal pleasures, and honors.

Notably, Aquinas points out that the most important thing for a Christian is having God as the main end in life. Accordingly, this leads the virtuous believer to the road of charity toward Christian perfection. This is the main point of a Christian life, aiming at God by expressing charitable behavior[222]. 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 whatever is directed toward the love of God. Failing to follow the commandments means failing to appreciate the

[221] T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 108, a. 4, *ivi*, p. 336.

[222] «[...] 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», T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II, q. 184, a. 3, *ivi*, p. 631.

true Christian existence, and ultimately, it means not heading toward God. Differently, the purpose of the counsels is not to impose an obligation to refuse all material goods, for example, 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 the free choice of the 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[223]. The counsels do not prevent us from committing sins (this being the direct purpose of the 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 lead us to perfection "more speedily" does not mean that they do better than what precepts do "more slowly". Instead, this means that if we follow the counsels, we can walk more easily on the road of charity toward the love of God and our neighbors. The difference between precepts and counsels relies on the fact that the former helps us avoid all those behaviors that are contrary to charity, while the latter simply facilitates this task[224]. This also explains 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 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[225].

Here, contrary to what I have just outlined, it seems that perfection is gained only by the repudiation of material goods and thus by following a counsel.

[223] «Nevertheless, for man to gain the above-mentioned end, he does not need to renounce the things of the world to 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», T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 108, a. 4, *ivi*, p. 336. See also S. Vecchio, *Precetti e consigli nella teologia medievale*, in S. Bacin, *Etiche Antiche, Etiche moderne*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2010, pp. 223–242.

[224] «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», D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 21.

[225] *Matthew* 19:21. This passage, specifically «Then come, follow me», has been widely considered the origin of the doctrine of a consecrated life. While before the Vatican II Council, the understanding of this particular religious experience was considered a better Christian existence and a faster way to 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 has already emphasized, both ways of living a Christian life (consecrated or not) are perfectly capable of leading to eternal salvation.

Aquinas clarifies this argument accurately. The focal point that constitutes the perfection of the young man's life 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 our material goods and giving the proceeds to the poor is the path that more easily leads us to loving God and thus on the road of charity[226]. In this circumstance, selling our material goods is a way of redirecting our own lives toward God more easily, away from those goods that might prevent us from doing this by misdirecting our lives to material attachments. Almost a millennium ago, 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[227].

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 Aquinas' work reveals, the 13th century was 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. At this precise time, 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. In this scenario, the words of St. Bonaventure, a member of the Franciscan order,

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[226] «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», T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 184, a. 3, ivi, pp. 631–632.

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

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 (typical of the mendicant orders) is a supererogatory (optional, we would say) choice[228]. 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, expected only from those who decide to live a life beyond the merely required.

Unsurprisingly, within this moral framework of a Christian conception of a life lived well, we can find a multitude of fascinating examples of supererogation. For example, think of the life lived by St. Teresa of Calcutta and the saintly act of St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe. Cases such as these clearly represent a life lived according to the evangelical counsels, exemplifying the acts of an agent who goes "beyond the call of precepts", so to speak. 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 that were much criticized by Protestant movements in the Reformation era. According to this doctrine, the extraordinary good deeds of the saints can be redirected to the forgiveness of the sins of others. 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[229].

Holy behavior (that lies beyond ordinary required practices) can be shared for the benefit 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 underperformed or underachieved in certain regards can benefit from the overachievement of others.

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[228] «*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.

[229] Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, 1967, no. 4.

The first important conclusion to be drawn from this analysis of the theological origins of the concept of supererogation is related to the necessity of a morally complex approach. Moral complexity, intended as an approach that grants the multilevel 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"[230], 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 that we can properly justify the concept of supererogation. Moral complexity is thus the acknowledgment 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 further highlight in the next chapter) will not leave any theoretical space for the concept of supererogation.

While the distinction among the many levels of morality is a necessary condition of supererogation, it 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

[230] It might be inappropriate to call it "Christian" complexity, given a different understanding of the moral sphere that the Protestant tradition has offered. During the Reformation, the strong opposition 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. Referring to the thought of Martin Luther, David Heyd summarizes 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», D. Heyd, *Supererogation*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (winter 2019 edition),
URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/supererogation/>.

being better represented by an imagined web of interrelated levels, rather than that of an ordinated pyramid that culminates in a precise value or ideal. As I further analyze in Chapter V, supererogation springs from the normative pulls originating from the interaction between two levels of the moral web. Most of the time, this phenomenon is brought about by the interaction between the axiological and the deontic levels. By 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 to be justified. If we oppose complex concepts to simple ones, we realize how the simple versus complex distinction somehow resembles the difference between thin and thick concepts. A thick concept (e.g., "courageous") has both evaluative and descriptive elements[231]. Its nature is grounded on two relevant aspects of morality. In contrast, a thin concept concerns a single aspect of morality. Similar to this distinction, I generally define complex concepts as those 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 levels. As such, supererogation requires this theoretical complexity and consequently, can only 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 question of how we can give an account of supererogation. The challenge, widely expressed by 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.

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

CHAPTER IV
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 already suggested in the previous chapters, this difficulty is related to the loss of complexity that makes supererogation conceptually impossible. Heyd's definition of the concept underlines the dual moral source of supererogatory acts (their intended consequences and optionality); as such, they show the inadequacy 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 [...][232].

Along these lines, in this chapter, I aim to show this general inadequacy of monist moral theories. Roughly, 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 give an account of the main problematic aspects of the justification of supererogation, as follows: a) I provide a general argument about the impossibility of a monist approach to morality. b) I focus on the relation between maximizing duties and supererogation. c) When these elements are clarified, it is possible to analyze in some finer detail the problems of specific normative systems. Specifically, I try to explain why both utilitarianism and Kantian ethics fail to give an account of the concept[233]. Once these criticisms about the

[232] D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 131.
[233] This can be summarized with the claim that both moral traditions seem to demand our

justification of the concept are emphasized, it will be possible in the next chapter to take on the challenge of grounding supererogation according to moral complexity.

4.1 The General Argument

An argument for the inadequacy of a monist theory needs to start from a clear definition of what is intended for monism in normative ethics. Generally, a monist theory considers a unique, consistent, and ultimate source of morality. This role is usually played by a value, an ideal, or a 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, such as these, thus assume that we act according to a single guiding principle that informs us about the morally good thing we ought to do (moral obligation). In this respect, Kant's categorical imperative and Mill's principle of utility represent ways of moral reasoning that require 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 values and principles[234].

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[235]. 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 exceed the requirements of the deontic level to bring about some extraordinary goodness. The failure to acknowledge this distinction between different levels of the moral discourse

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very best. This has been emphasized by Michael Ferry in M. Ferry, *Does Morality Demand Our Very Best? On Moral Prescriptions and the Line of Duty*, «Philosophical Studies», CLXIII (2), 2013, pp. 573–589. See pp. 172–173 for a more detailed description of Ferry's argument.

[234] In Chapter II, I have discussed the issue of moral pluralism at length. For an overview, see E. Mason, *Value Pluralism*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (spring 2018 edition), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/value-pluralism/>; B. Gaut, *Moral Pluralism*, «Philosophical Papers», XXII (1), 1993, pp. 17–40.

[235] Undoubtedly, 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 is enough for understanding the point at issue.

consequently brings about the failure to appreciate the special and peculiar value of supererogation.

The general argument aims at underlining how the problems of monists with supererogation are derived from the difficulty in maintaining the fine distinction between the axiological and the deontic levels. In this regard, embracing a single principle of morality that outlines the moral *ought* might prevent us from appreciating the constitutive heterogeneous nature of morality by smoothing over every aspect of it into the deontic sphere. Unsurprisingly, strong monists are usually anti-supererogationists, as they include this category of acts within the realm of moral obligation.

Specifically, the general argument is outlined in the following table.

The General Argument for the impossibility of a monist account of supererogation	
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 of and the distinction between the axiological (the good) and the deontic levels (the right). While all the right acts are also morally good (and obligatory), supererogation shows that 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 standpoint) that both sets the agent's duty and tells the agent how to go beyond this same duty.
C.2	The multilevel structure of morality entailed by supererogation requires a double (at least) source of morality. There is a need for moral complexity.
C.3	Moral monism is a moral structure that fails to give an adequate account of supererogation.
	P - premise *C* - conclusion

The first conclusion (C.1) requires a further careful comment. Its main point is that we cannot use the same principle for both setting moral obligations and understanding how to go beyond them. If we allow theories driven by a single principle to justify both the acts that "go beyond duty" and the duties that those acts surpass, we might be saying two things. First, the principle already points out the different levels of moral goodness. Second,

the principle can work in two ways, revealing different degrees of good acts, some morally obligatory and others beyond this class of requirements. Both options seem difficult to hold. A moral principle is a way of reasoning that provides reasons that count in favor of 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, when adopted, a principle (here understood as the "tool" of morality) fulfills the achievement of a specific value. For example, the categorical imperative helps the agent fulfill the ultimate moral value of freedom (in the case of Kantian ethics[236]). 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 with such a monistic system is in 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. Thus, the problems raised by C.1 start to arise more clearly. How is it possible to say that a principle has sufficiently fulfilled a given end in order to leave that extra space needed by supererogation? It seems that in this regard, a single principle is unable 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) that 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", roughly speaking.

The second conclusion (C.2), according to a person's idea of the structure of morality, can be misunderstood. My point can be understood if we identify the two faces of morality in a way that the deontic coincides with the morally right and the axiological coincides with the morally good. Generally, monistic theories seem excessively concerned with the deontic aspect of morality by pointing out the right thing to do. Although this is an essential dimension of morality, it is not the only one. Supererogatory acts define the category of acts that are morally good in a way that exceeds the dimension of primary concern for monism[237]. Supererogation (and morality

[236] Since this argument intends to be critical of monist theories in general, it is implicit that I take it to work against other forms of monism, such as utilitarianism.

[237] This passage might give the impression that I am saying that supererogatory acts can be defined as "morally good but not morally right". I believe that this would be a misunderstanding of the relation between the good and the right, which are not opposed categories. Rather, the good fully includes the right. The right is a subset of the morally good; as such, while not all good acts are part of the right (i.e., supererogation), all right acts are

in general) reminds us that human flourishing involves 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 (C.3) states that the loss of moral complexity that supererogation requires makes monism an inadequate structure of morality for a proper justification of these peculiar moral acts. As we will see in further detail in the following sections and in the next chapter, supererogation struggles to find its place in those systems that are unable to recreate the same complexity that originated the concept in the Christian tradition.

4.2 Maximizing Duties and the Space of Supererogation

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 is helpful to recall Heyd's conditions of continuity and correlativity[238]. Supererogation and duty stand on a continuous scale of value and are both evaluated accordingly. Moreover, they are logically correlated since the former exists only by being beyond the latter. Nevertheless, a specific kind of duty (i.e., maximizing duty) represents a problem for both conditions. 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 an 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 based on 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 duty 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 for some non-obligatory

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morally good. These two categories are not opposed but part of a continuous scale of moral evaluation.

[238] D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 5. See also Chapter III of the present work, pp. 103–104.

instances of the good. Act A would bring about the best outcome and can only be obligatory under a maximizing conception of morality, regardless of whether it would generally be considered beyond one's duty according to common-sense morality. For example, sacrificing oneself to save many is considered a duty as long as the survival of many is a morally better outcome than the survival of oneself. In these terms, 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) is necessary for the concept of supererogation. This denial of the concept might serve as a general argument against the validity of a maximizing approach to morality[239] since it would cut off a relevant and significant part of our moral experience.

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 Williams' "moral integrity" argument is implicitly directed against the maximizing feature of act-utilitarianism[240]. Roughly, the argument is as follows: (P.1) Act-utilitarianism is the 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 "his or 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 his or her most essential ideals by virtue of the moral dictate that

[239] Note that I specifically refer to the moral perspective. Here, I do not claim that "maximizing" cannot be the proper approach to other aspects of life. For example, think of maximizing one's own physical condition in view of an athletic competition or maximizing one's own financial situation in view of providing proper education to one's own children.
[240] The first formulation of the argument can be found in B. Williams, *Integrity*, in J.J. Smart, B. Williams (ed.), *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 108–118.

comes from the «point of view of the universe»[241]. We can go on with 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, Williams is thus against a sort of moral maximization that is purely moral (in the sense that has nothing to do with the agent's inner beliefs)[242]. In his own words:

> 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[243].

Such an understanding of morality as 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 focusing 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 others, all those acts that are performed out of gratuity, self-sacrifice, and benevolence that find their morally praiseworthy nature by exceeding the boundaries of the obligatory. This is the main feature of the acts that are typically considered supererogatory. Making this special category of acts obligatory (by virtue of their morally desirable consequences) would undermine its intrinsic value. Moreover, deeming supererogatory acts as

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

[242] The debate around Williams' integrity argument is quite articulated. For a good hint of it, see S.G. Chappell, N. Smyth, *Bernard Williams*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* (fall 2018 edition), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/williams-bernard/>. See also D. Cox, M. La Caze, M. Levine, *Integrity*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (spring 2017 edition), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/integrity/>.

[243] J.J. Smart, B. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, pp. 116–117.

obligatory would mean conceiving 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[244]. Agents of this sort do not necessarily think that they have performed the right thing (whose non-performance would be considered wrong), but they have simply aimed at something considered *extra*. The only way of making sense of supererogation is thus to outline an approach to morality that aims at 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. Particularly interesting for ethical theory, this specification 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 in 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 now outline, a satisficing understanding of morality is what makes supererogation theoretically conceivable. Jamie Dreier's paper on the issue is particularly helpful[245]. Dreier tries to show how the rational and the ethical domains differ regarding 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 for the former is the intuitive plausibility of supererogatory acts. Here we are presented with the so-called paradox of supererogation. If supererogatory acts are morally better, why are they not obligatory? In other words, why does it seem plausible to allow a satisficing account of morality that aims at a certain level of satisfactory achievement and does not require going on and fostering the morally best? One way to explain this is that we might have moral reasons to do the morally best, but at the same time, we hold stronger non-moral reasons that outweigh the others. This excuses

[244] See Chapter V, pp. 160f.

[245] J. Dreier, *Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't*, in M. Byron (ed.), *Satisficing and Maximizing: Moral Theories on Practical Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 131–154. I will further discuss Dreier's account of supererogation in the following chapter, when I will outline my own account of supererogatory acts. See pp. 158–159.

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) standpoint but not from a moral point of view. If this were true, the agent who refrains from doing some supererogatory act would be considered doing something wrong from the moral point of view[246]. Nonetheless, what intuitively strikes us about this kind of act is that it is morally excusable. This conclusion seems counterintuitive, and we are apparently led back to face the paradox.

The way that Dreier tries to avoid this is by appealing to the existence of two (at least) different moral points of view: that of beneficence and that of justice[247]. The former is a more ambitious moral point of view that ranks every act on a scale in terms of the morally worse and the 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 perspective, that of justice, evaluates moral acts in terms of their moral wrongness and prevents the agent from bringing 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 emphasizes 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. In contrast, reasons that spring from the standpoint 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 act)[248]. What Dreier explicitly leaves as an open question is why 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 moral wrongness. This appears as the minimal standard required for conceiving the social dimension of human beings who 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 others. This is what makes the moral standpoint of beneficence less stringent than the moral perspective of justice.

[246] J. Dreier, *Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't*, p. 149.
[247] *Ibidem.*
[248] *Ivi*, p. 150.

Furthermore, the moral points of view have to be confronted within the bigger picture of the point of view of the all-things-considered. In this regard, the agent considers the relevance and the stringency of all the moral reasons together with the non-moral reasons for acting in one way or another. This is ultimately the rational point of view, the one that envisions and combines all the pulls for action that the agent withstands. Since the rational point of view is the all-things-considered perspective, it would be impossible to claim that we do not always identify the rationally best thing. Regardless of the fact that we actually perform that act, it would be impossible to claim that we approach the rational point of view in a satisficing way. However, it is in this situation that reasons for supererogation can be silenced and outweighed by other more rationally stringent non-moral reasons for its omission. For example, it would be the morally better option to jump into a burning car in trying to rescue the people trapped inside, but it might not be the case that John would put his life in great danger given that his wife and his five children all rely on him as the breadwinner of the family. What if John finally jumps 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, regardless of the consequences, hat 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 peculiar obligations that we usually have by 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[249]. Take the parent–children relationship: I am required to do as much as possible to care for my son's needs in a way that is completely different from my caring for a stranger's needs. 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 larger the conceptual space taken by maximizing duties, the smaller is left to supererogatory acts[250].

[249] See D. Jeske, R. Fumerton, *Relatives and Relativism*, «Philosophical Studies», LXXXVII, 1997, pp. 143–157.

[250] I have dedicated some more pages to this issue in S. Grigoletto, *Why* Proximity *Matters for*

Summing up Dreier's position again, I 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. In fact, this distinction stands for the two faces of morality—the evaluative and the deontic dimensions 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 domain. One of the consequences of this choice would be that of denying a space to the concept of supererogation.

4.3 Utilitarianism and the Denial of Supererogation

Following the conclusion of the general argument against the accountability of supererogation in monist theories, I now try to highlight more specifically how the most famous moral approaches might fail to accommodate the concept. In this section, I deal with consequentialism, mostly in the specification offered by act-utilitarianism. Traditionally, utilitarianism has been specified in many different ways, each attempting to respond to a particular criticism that has been raised against the classic version of the theory. Here, I mostly refer to the classic (and less artificial) version of act-utilitarianism[251]. 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 with the motto "the greatest good for the greatest number", also known as the principle of utility[252].

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the Concept of Supererogation, «Ethics & Politics», XIX (1), 2017, pp. 291–307.

[251] It is interesting to see how different versions of consequentialism can greatly vary in dealing with the concept of supererogation. For good examples of this matter, see J.P. Vessel, *Supererogation for Utilitarianism*, «American Philosophical Quarterly», XLVII (4), 2010, pp. 299–319. I will focus more precisely on this work on footnote 347.

[252] While Bentham is acknowledged as the father of this expression, conceptually, he has been greatly influenced by the previous works of Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Cesare Beccaria. Beccaria himself claims, «*La massima felicità divisa nel maggior numero*», [«The greatest happiness divided by the majority» (my translation)], C. Beccaria, *Dei delitti e delle pene*, in G. Francioni (ed.), Milano, Mediobanca, 1984, p. 23. See J. Bentham, *An Introduction*

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

> 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[253].

This is the main problem of utilitarianism; the maximization of the good elevates the right to the highest standard that is intuitively unreasonable to ask of everyone. Consequently, a moral approach of this kind ends up openly denying 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 multilevel nature is well expressed by the motto "good–ought tie-up". Plainly, what is good needs to be done[254]. 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 imposes a

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to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, New York, Hafner Press, 1948. In particular, refer to Chapter I.

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

[254] «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"», D. Heyd, *Supererogation*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (winter 2019 edition),
URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/supererogation/>.

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" is not necessarily a requirement but a suggestion, given the fact that there are *some* reasons to act accordingly. In contrast, the prescriptive use of ought generally entails a strong requirement to do *x*, given some alleged decisive reason to do it[255]. "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.

Christopher New criticizes the concept of supererogation that follows this conception of ethics[256]. He argues 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 everyday life), and he holds that both categories are part of a person's moral requirements. He directly addresses Urmson's attack on 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. New responds 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 could not fail to consider it one of his or her duties. I believe that in this case, 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?[257].

To confute this position, we need to point out how sometimes, supererogatory acts place the agent in front of a clear-cut decision. For example, think of

[255] D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 79.

[256] C. New, *Saints, Heroes and Utilitarians*, «Philosophy», XLIX, 1974, pp. 179–189.

[257] C. New, *ivi*, p. 181.

the case of a stranger who is drowning in rushing waters. The best thing to do in that situation would be to jump 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 taking this action among the options that can be performed. There is no 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 presented in this moral pull? I think that it remains a commendatory rather than a prescriptive use of 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, regardless of the fact that it represents the act that would generate the best outcome. Moreover, in real life, there are 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 us imagine the best possible outcome, are far from providing the certainty of achieving these desirable results. I believe that this undermines the status of their alleged obligatoriness, even from a utilitarian perspective. Claiming that they would be obligatory, regardless of any evaluation of their consequences, leads to the idea of morality that tends to freely violate the agent's autonomy. I believe that this is not the happy society where it would be desirable to live. To avoid this, I think that the optionality of performing these peculiar acts takes precedence over the theoretical needs of a given moral account; the choice to always perform the "morally best" deed is left to the individual agent's commitment to bring about the good.

Cases such as this show how it is one thing to think of beneficence and altruism as qualities that are highly desirable and should be promoted as much as possible and another matter to consider this sort of maximization mandatory at any cost. The "higher flies of morality"[258] cannot be considered altogether duties. As I have emphasized 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 or the prevention of the bad is the first object of moral theorizing, the good is desirable and open-ended. While there is often a precise prescription of

[258] This is how Urmson refers to the performance of acts beyond the call of duty.

how not to bring about the bad, the opposite is true in 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 setting 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 a kleptomaniac is not doing something wrong as long as he or she tries not to steal and be honest. Using New's terminology[259], failing to act in compliance with a basic duty is very different from failing with regard to a non-basic one. Basic duties are ultimately what grounds the civilized life of a society and as such, have a different degree of obligatoriness. Anyone should be able to live according to basic duties, which 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 ways they can contribute to the establishment of a better world, which 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. However, the specific way to do it 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 states roughly the following: P.1) 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 to be as happy as possible. P.2) Basic duties are obligatory because they increase the happiness of life. C.1) Since alleged supererogatory acts also greatly increase happiness, they are obligatory indeed. It is apparent that this argument fails to consider any non-utilitarian consideration of morality[260]. As a consequence, the only moral purpose is the maximization of the good even at the expense of the agent's autonomy. Moreover, New claims that according to the general argument, if someone has the capacity to perform a heroic or a saintly act, one has a duty to do so. I think that it would be very unlikely (if not impossible) to discern the morally relevant capacities of an agent and infer the degree of duty to which he or she is expected to conform. Again, this is what distinguishes the obligatory from the non-obligatory; the former can regularly be required of any moral agent, whereas the latter cannot. In many cases of supererogatory acts (e.g., the

[259] Nevertheless, I refuse to accept this terminology, given the fact that morality goes far beyond the basic and the non-basic distinction of duties.
[260] D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 79.

rescue of the drowning stranger), it would be irrational to ask anyone to do them no matter what 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 others by 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 confusion between the commendatory use and the prescriptive use of ought [261]. 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[262], introduces an indebted oversimplification of morality.

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 to save one might be considered a loss in terms of the calculus of utility. Still, from the moral standpoint, we do not fail to appreciate what they have done. Many supererogatory acts that involve self-sacrifice are considered morally good, no matter what the result in terms of utility[263]. As I have emphasized in the previous chapter, what really assigns the moral value to this particular category of acts is its optionality and altruistic nature. Both of these features are not concerned with the maximization of any given

[261] *Ibidem.*

[262] A criticism of this sort does not necessarily apply to other more articulated versions of utilitarianism. See J.P. Vessel, *Supererogation for Utilitarianism*, «American Philosophical Quarterly», XLVII, 2010, pp. 299–317. It is nevertheless true that these other forms of utilitarianism present other related problems for accounting for the concept of supererogation. Non-maximizing or satisficing versions of utilitarianism tend to struggle to identify the level of the "good enough" that can be surpassed by supererogatory acts.

[263] In truth, even the failure in the performance of a supererogatory act does not affect its moral status. I have already dedicated some pages to this matter (see p. 103). See also D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 133. However, I concede that the agent of a supererogatory act should at least aim at some good consequences (even if not necessarily the best ones).

good, which is 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[264].

Utilitarianism is usually widely influenced by a line of argumentation of this sort. The evaluation of the entire moral gamut according to a single and unique scale that ranges from the morally worst to the morally best[265] 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 words, the role of the deontic is delegated to the evaluative. Everything that is evaluated as morally good is morally required at the same time. Moreover, according to the maximizing conception of morality, something is morally good (and thus also right) only as long as there is no other morally better option. In the light of the importance of moral complexity highlighted in the first part of this book, this 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 supererogation. The very existence of the concept relies on the distinction among the multiple levels of morality. If we deny this, we deny the concept altogether. Then, in its maximizing and less articulated versions, utilitarianism implies the following:

$$(\text{Evaluative} \leftrightarrow \text{Deontic}) \rightarrow \neg\text{Supererogation}$$

in other terms

$$(\text{Good} \leftrightarrow \text{Right}) \rightarrow \neg\text{Supererogation}$$

[264] J.M. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 2001, pp. 16–17.

[265] Remember that such "morally best" ultimately becomes morally obligatory.

If the good and the right are domains that do not maintain a certain degree of distinctiveness, 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 us 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 shown in the following section, a very similar (even if not identical) claim can be said of Kantian ethics.

4.4 Kantian Ethics and the Denial of Supererogation

In the contemporary debate, the classification of "Kantian ethics" is interpreted in different ways First, that name could refer to the moral philosophy explicitly developed by Immanuel Kant in the latter part of the 18th century. In this context, Kantian ethics is precisely Kant's ethics. Kantian ethics might also pertain to a sort of ethics that, while not attributable to Kant himself, has been developed under an evident Kantian insight. The contemporary debate provides plenty of examples of this latter understanding of the term. Nonetheless, in this section, I aim to show the denial of supererogation according to the former understanding of Kantian ethics. As much as possible, I will try to refer to Kant's original position[266]. 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 in Section 1 of this chapter.

Generally, the argument for the denial of supererogation in the Kantian moral theory follows this pattern: P.1) For Kant, the moral good of an act is directly derived from its being motivated by the moral law. P.2) Alleged acts of supererogation are morally good yet merely optional and thus, neither universalizable nor derived from duty. C.1) For Kant, there cannot be some

[266] This leaves as an open question whether or not 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 T. Hill, *Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation*, «Kant-Studien», LXII, 1971, pp. 55–76. In particular, see pp. 71ff.

moral goodness beyond the call of duty; therefore, supererogatory acts do not exist. However, as I will show in the following discussion, this argument cannot be taken as the Kantian position *par excellence* without further qualifications.

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 often been 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 among Kant's writings[267]. Let us then analyze some passages from Kant's works that might cast some light on the question of supererogation within his moral theory.

The less rigorous position presented in the *Metaphysics of Morals* seems to allow some space for the category of supererogatory acts. Specifically, when Kant discusses the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties[268], he seems to offer an understanding of morality characterized by different levels of accomplishment that would make supererogation possible. A perfect duty is a strict moral duty (e.g., "do not kill"). An imperfect duty allows a certain freedom of choice of how and when a moral duty is performed (e.g., "be generous with the others"). As usually emphasized, imperfect duties leave a sort of playroom (*latitudo*[269]) to the agent, whose role is to understand how and when to fulfill them. Regarding the broader 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 fulfill 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 strength 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 (vitium) as rather mere want of virtue, lack of moral strength (defectus moralis)[270].

[267] For a more detailed analysis of this sort, see Chapter III in D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, pp. 49–72.

[268] He has already introduced this distinction earlier in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

[269] I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in M. Gregor (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 153.

[270] *Ibidem*.

Passages such 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[271]. It is hard to tell whether or not Kant himself had in mind something similar to the concept of supererogation (a term that he never adopted). Less rigorous interpretations of what an imperfect duty is for Kant tend to highlight this similarity between supererogation and this kind of duty. The focal point at issue is the permissibility to refrain from doing what a given imperfect duty tells an agent 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[272].

A wide duty cannot be dismissed for no reason (for an inclination not to do so, we might say) but only insofar as another wide duty undermines its demandingness. I believe that this highlights the major difference between wide duties and supererogation; 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 assigns 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

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[271] Similarly, other passages seem to make an implicit reference to the idea of supererogation, such as the following: «That man is worthy of positive honour, whose actions are meritorious, and contain more than they are due to contain» I. Kant, *Lecture on Ethics*, in P. Heath, J.B. Schneewind (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 75. «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*)», I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 19. As Heyd points out, when Kant deals with these subjects, he apparently uses "the language of supererogation", D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 65.

[272] I. Kant, The Metaphysics of Morals, p. 19.

a Kantian framework is that of the conjunctive performance of imperfect duties[273]. Roughly, this occurs when the agent has the possibility of fulfilling an imperfect duty by either doing x or y and decides to do both. In other words, this means that an imperfect duty, in a Kantian sense, entails the performance of at least one of the possible options that would fulfill the duty (call this a disjunctive fulfillment). In the case of supererogatory performance, rather than picking one of the alternatives that would fulfill a given imperfect duty, the agent decides to go beyond the morally required (given that he or she has the possibility to do so) by performing more than one satisficing option[274] (call this conjunctive performance of imperfect duties). If the duty of beneficence might be fulfilled by donating either money to a charitable organization or two hours of the agent's free time to the same organization, and the agent decides to do both, he or she exceeds 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 the agent to perform both of them when possible. Nonetheless, even if this understanding of imperfect duties is paired with 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-performance. Let me sum up the conjunctive performance of imperfect duties that alludes to the possibility of explaining supererogation in Kantian terms[275]:

a) Imperfect duty: $O\ (a \vee b)$
b) Supererogatory act in Kantian terms: $O\ (a \vee b) \wedge (a \wedge b)$
c) Omissibility of supererogation in non-Kantian terms: $\neg O\ (a \wedge b)$.

It follows from c) that the omission of a supererogatory act can be expressed as $P\neg\ (a \vee b)$. From this, I derive[276] $P\ (\neg a \vee \neg b)$. This claim can be true in the

[273] It remains an open question whether this attempt is faithful to Kant's original doctrine or relies on the second understanding of Kantian ethics, intended as a moral approach that shares the original spirit of Kant's ethics, while seeking to revise it in some aspects.
[274] Thomas Hill has suggested the possibility of a category of supererogation of this sort. See T. Hill, Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation, p. 71.
[275] For mere explicative purposes, I adopt here the syntax of standard deontic logic. Take "O" as obligatory and "P" as permissible. Moreover, "a" and "b" each stand for a given act. "Oa" can be read as "it is obligatory to perform a", and "$a \wedge b$" can be read as "a and b are performed". For simplicity, I focus on a case with only two available options.
[276] According to De Morgan's law, the negation of a conjunction is the disjunction of the negations. As such, the omission (or the non-performance) of supererogation can be expressed as: $(\neg a \vee \neg b)$. Claims *d*, *e*, and *f* represent the three ways in which $P\ (\neg a \vee \neg b)$ can be true.

following cases:

a) P (¬ b)
b) P (¬ a)
c) P (¬ *a* ∧ ¬ *b*).

However, claim f) seems to be a case of omission of a supererogatory act that Kantian ethics fails to account for. Specifically, the claim "P (¬ *a* ∧ ¬ *b*)" contradicts the Kantian definition of an imperfect duty, as in claim a) "O (*a* ∨ *b*)". Instead, a theory of supererogation has no difficulties in 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 (regarding imperfect duties) claim f) is not morally permissible (in other words, considered morally bad). While there is a certain *latitudo* in how to fulfill 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 involves the infringement of an imperfect duty. In other words, claim f) represents a case where supererogation and imperfect duties ultimately differ, since a theory of supererogation would be perfectly fine with this sort of omission, while the Kantian theory of imperfect duties does not allow the same omission. I believe that this 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 as considered in non-Kantian terms. The case of the omission of imperfect duties reveals how these duties are nonetheless duties, and as such, they incur some degree of moral loss in at least one specific instance of non-performance. I believe that this is the primary difference from the concept of supererogation understood in non-Kantian terms[277]. The impossibility

[277] 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 D. Guevara, *The Impossibility of Supererogation in Kant's Moral Theory*, «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», LIX (3), 1999, pp. 601–603. Other scholars have highlighted how this possibility of drawing a line in the fulfillment of imperfect duties is "alien" to Kant's ethics. If so, this makes a conjunctive understanding of supererogation in Kantian terms impossible; if there are no degrees of fulfillment, 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», M. Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology*, Ithaca, NJ, Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 41.

to account for actual supererogation in Kantian ethics relies on the fact that no matter which interpretation of imperfect duties we provide, they essentially remain duties[278]. 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 vary in a way that makes it problematic to consider this a viable way for a Kantian account of supererogation.

This leaves us with t no other option but to accept the rigorous theory proposed in Kant's writings and as such, to deny the possibility of proper supererogation in his moral system. In particular, some passages from 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 conformity 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[279].

The main problem that these claims represent for supererogation is that regardless of the content of an agent's acts, the only thing that makes them moral is their being motivated by duty. The reason for Kant's attachment to duty is his desire to distinguish the moral realm from that of inclination. 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

[278] 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* reveal how he is well aware of the fact that morality goes far beyond the legalistic level of the morally right. See T. Hill, *Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation*, p. 74.

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

than one is required to do. As such, the willingness to 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 stranger to the moral philosophy of Kant, whose intent is to develop a rational, *a priori*, and universalizable theory for practical action. At one time, an agent might be willing to sacrifice a certain good for the sake of others, and on another occasion, he or she might be unwilling to do the same. From the Kantian perspective, this undermines the moral character of these acts. It is thus not surprising that any instance of supererogation 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 an ice cream flavor greatly diverge (with the supererogatory one being distinctively praiseworthy). Nonetheless, both of them lack the true moral character bestowed by 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[280]. 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 is well aware of the existence of heroic acts. 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

[280] Although Heyd does not ground (as I do) universalizability and obligatoriness on the "duty as a motive" feature of Kantian ethics, his analysis of a Kantian anti-supererogationism is almost identical to mine. See D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 53. Nevertheless, Heyd seems more willing to concede a peculiar understanding of the Kantian theory that leaves room for some instances of supererogation. *Ivi*, pp. 54ff.

> more heroes of 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[281].

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. Regardless of the degree of the lord's threats against the unfortunate powerless man, the latter decides to adhere firmly to his moral obligations at the cost of his life. This is the sort of noble act that can inspire the youth and offer them a glimpse of what a moral character really is.

The attention to this particular example of heroism explains why Kant is generally suspicious of this category of acts. He is worried that the "high flies of morality" can hide an implicit approval of sentimental acting based on a temporary and evanescent inclination. For Kant, actual heroism is very different (if not opposite to) from 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 huge sacrifice. It is the ultimate triumph of the sense of duty in cases where the circumstances would suggest to the negligent agent to discharge his or her strict moral obligations. For Kant, heroism provides a further occasion to talk about adherence to the sense of duty, rather than a case to investigate what lies beyond duty[282]. Taken in Kantian terms, heroism is much more similar to the deeds of the rescuer of the victims of the 9\11 terroristic attack than to the acts of the big-hearted volunteer. Think of the clear examples of heroism demonstrated 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; the firefighters being motivated by duty is what makes 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 is less inclined to concede a moral status to the instances of heroism taken as paradigmatic examples in the contemporary debate on supererogation. Kantian heroism differs from the broadly conceived heroism as it takes the sense of duty (rather than mere optionality) as a starting point. Kant is highly suspicious of any

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[281] I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in M. Gregor (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 127–128.

[282] D. Guevara, *The Impossibility of Supererogation in Kant's Moral Theory*, p. 609. Similar remarks about these passages from the *Critique of Practical Reason* have been made by M. Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology*, pp. 36ff.

form of moral sentimentalism because 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 the focus on the aspects of an ordinary moral life. As Kant believes, this can solely be the attention to the sense of duty.

From this brief analysis of a possible Kantian account of supererogation, it should be clear that followers of Kant's theory can only endorse an anti-supererogationist orientation. However, as Marcia Baron emphasizes, this does not mean that Kantians cannot give an account of the phenomenon of supererogation[283]. Claiming that there is no theoretical category of supererogation does not mean that the acts that supererogationists try to explain cannot be accounted for otherwise. According to Baron, Kantians have no theoretical need for this category of acts. Specifically, Kantians should rely on the more efficient category of imperfect duties and on some further evaluation of an agent's virtuous character. According to this view, morally exceptional acts cannot be evaluated in themselves without a further evaluation of the moral status of the agent's character[284]. Open-ended duties (e.g., imperfect ones) leave plenty of room for 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 expressed by her commitment to the fulfillment of the imperfect duty of beneficence[285]. This way of explaining alleged acts of supererogation within the realm of moral obligations involves a greater explanatory role for the category of duty. In typical Kantian terms, duty is the sole indicator of the 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 that it is intended to define. It is not a critique of the existence of acts that are generally considered supererogatory; it is a critique of the authentic

[283] «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 *ivi*, p. 23.

[284] *Ivi*, pp. 57–58.

[285] *Ivi*, pp. 53–54. Quite similar 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 fulfill an obligation, no matter what the sacrifice it involves.

necessity of having a dedicated category to give an account of them. In other words, those acts that can be accounted for by the supererogatory category should be accounted for by some other less problematic moral category[286].

Generally, due to the different levels of understanding that the Kantian theory offers, it is difficult to have a clear opinion on the possibility of supererogation in this system. My assumption on this particular question is that Kant is not directly concerned about giving an account of the concept. The reason for this is that if we take seriously Kant's aversion to moral inclination and his attention to the moral law, what we derive from it is that the concept of supererogation (which by definition, exceeds the constraints 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 from the sense of duty, it 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 still, this moral framework assigns to the deontic level of morality a typical evaluative role as well (the interpretation of what constitutes the moral goodness of an act). From this, we obtain the denial of supererogation in Kantian ethics (at least in its original understanding), which can be summarized as follows:

$$(\text{Deontic} \leftrightarrow \text{Evaluative}) \rightarrow \neg\text{Supererogation}$$

in other terms

$$(\text{Right} \leftrightarrow \text{Good}) \rightarrow \neg\text{Supererogation}$$

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. Similar to the case of the utilitarian denial, deriving one level of morality entirely from the other leads to the loss of the 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 contents of their arguments are opposite). This acknowledgment 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

[286] I have already tried to explain the necessity of such a category of moral acts in Chapter III. See pp. 87–93.

> 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[287].

4.5 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 come with new questions. Does a phenomenological approach to morality reveal a too vast and manifold moral panorama to be handled by our moral theories? Is moral monism apt for this task? Part of the contemporary debate has a negative answer to this latter question[288]. I think that acts of supererogation represent that overabundance of the moral gamut that theories have failed to account for. In contrast, anti-supererogationists claim that we need to refine our intuitions instead. They argue that although acts of supererogation express a strong intuitive appeal, we can explain them away without the use of a special and dedicated moral category. Depending on which side of the debate we uphold, it is thus worth asking whether it is possible at all to provide an exhaustive theoretical account of all moral phenomena. Are moral intuitions always trustworthy? Although it would be too ambitious to think of answering these questions in the present work, it would be worthwhile if I can provide some initial insights. 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.

In the following chapter, I embrace the side of the supporters in this given subject of the relevance of our moral intuitions. In particular, I shall try to theorize positively in favor of an autonomous category of supererogatory acts. As I have tried to stress in the present chapter, the problems with the

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

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

justification of the concept generally arise as manifestations of the loss of the moral complexity that makes supererogation possible. Both utilitarianism and Kantian ethics share the same maximizing impulse that makes supererogation more difficult to be theorized. 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 hardly acknowledged by moral systems driven by a maximizing inclination. In Chapter III, I have emphasized how the concept of supererogation has originated in a complex system, which has 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 the 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.

To maintain this complex structure intact, I propose the endorsement of a moral theory characterized by a pluralist (non-monistic) and satisficing (non-maximizing) structure. Analyzing the nature of moral complexity in Chapter II, I have tried to identify two sorts of pluralism: that of values (axiological) and that of the ways of moral deliberation (methodological). 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[289]. As other authors have emphasized, we do not obtain moral justification for our acts by following a unique and fixed moral principle[290] (as for Larmore). There is not only a plurality of values but also a plurality of ways in which we deliberate morally[291]. 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

[289] As emphasized in Chapter II when I addressed moral complexity.

[290] I consider a principle as a way of reasoning to bring about a given end, to ground a certain duty, or to fulfill the aspiration toward a preferred value.

[291] Once again, let me recall 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», C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 151.

principles involved and which of the moral values at issue take precedence over the others. Taken in these terms, rather than being concerned with the morally correct and incorrect, morality becomes the realm of the varying relevance of principles and values according to the given circumstances. A moral structure that allows 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 in giving an account of those different levels of moral achievement that make supererogation theoretically conceivable.

For these reasons, I shall attempt 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 presented in the ethical debate offers a glimpse of the plausibility of both systems[292]. Their equally convincing theoretical status suggests that we need to focus on the given situation in order to understand the priority to grant to the systems. Therefore, if this analysis is correct, a dual conclusion will be drawn. A pluralist system that allows multiple sources of the good and different levels of achievement will better explain both supererogation and moral experience. In particular, with supererogation being a "complex" concept (requiring 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. In the next chapter, I shall thus try to deal with the decision-making process (the normative level) that leads to a supererogatory act. The tentative conclusion would be that supererogation is better accounted for by a pluralist moral system that provides, at the normative stage, a clear distinction between the good and the right.

[292] 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 M. Baron, P. Petit, M. Slote, *Three Methods of Ethics*, Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell, 1997). The main reason for excluding this approach is that virtue ethics deals primarily with the agent's character and, only at a later stage, with moral acts. The debate on supererogation being about a peculiar category of acts, it directly addresses 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 on this issue, see D. Heyd, *Can Virtue Ethics Account for Supererogation?*, in C. Cowley (ed.), *Supererogation*, «Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement», LXXVII, 2015.

CHAPTER V
A NEW PERSPECTIVE:
A PLURALISTIC ACCOUNT OF SUPEREROGATION

This chapter represents my attempt to address the issues regarding the justification of the concept of supererogation. I will do this by endorsing a pluralist moral system. I think that this attempt at justification will be valuable, regardless of whether or not monist theories can somehow give an account of the concept. In fact, even if we allow monist theories to provide a possible explanation of the concept (with major revisions of the original positions, in my opinion), I hope that the pluralist account will show as a more suitable and straightforward option for accounting for supererogatory acts. Pluralism is a kind of moral theory that allows 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 a plurality of sources, among which an agent identifies (at least) two relevant ones, that is, one that fulfills a moral obligation relevant to the given situation and the other that expresses how to go beyond such obligation. If fulfilled by the performance of an optional act, the second source of value is the supererogatory achievement. In this chapter, I present the grounding belief that a pluralist system is the one that can better satisfy the theoretical needs of MSD.

5.1 The Multiple Sources Dynamics (MSD)

I have so far analyzed the question of moral pluralism and that of the concept of supererogation as apparently separated issues. As I have claimed,

they are both expressions of the moral complexity that characterizes our moral experiences. However, so far in the present work, the two issues have not been explicitly part of the same problem. The MSD is precisely 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 addressed by using a specific moral principle. Relative to this argument, I take a moral principle as a way of moral reasoning. As I have sketched in Chapter II, according to Charles Larmore, one understanding of moral complexity is acknowledging three different moral principles, which provide the agent with moral reasons to act accordingly[293]. These three principles favor three independent sources of moral value, which introduce independent claims on the moral agent[294]. According to the given circumstances, one principle can gain priority over the others. In particular, we can distinguish the following principles[295]:

a) The principle of partiality outlines particularistic duties, that is, obligations that arise by virtue of some "empirically conditioned desire" or our special relation with the beneficiary of our act.

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

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

According to Larmore, all three principles express their conflicting authority over moral decisions. They provide moral reasons of different sorts, independent from one another. Taken in this sense, Larmore's methodological pluralism (since I do not refer 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 remember his distinction between partial and impartial principles. The principle of consequentialism and the principle of deontology are both

[293] This is a suitable expression of what I have earlier called methodological pluralism, that is, a variety of ways 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», C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 131–132.

[294] *Ivi*, p. 133.

[295] *Ivi*, p. 132.

considered impartial (or categorical), that is, they offer binding reasons for action, independently from empirical facts about an agent (his or her desires and relationships)[296]. On the contrary, by definition, the principle of partiality is incompatible with this category of reasons. Rather, such a principle is always partial or related to the particular agent, being 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 eventually be overcome by impartial ones (deontology and consequentialism). In the political and the public spheres, this is never the case; impartial commitments always take precedence over particular ones[297].

Let us now return 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 achievement. In these terms, a clear distinction between the right and the good is necessary to explain why something can be morally praiseworthy while being morally optional (i.e., it does not produce blame in case of omission). I suggest favoring a pluralist system that endorses a variety of moral principles to provide the multilevel structure that makes supererogation possible. The prevailing principle in the given circumstances sets the agent's moral obligation. Nevertheless, it might be the case that once the agent has fulfilled the demands these binding reasons, he or she is able to recognize additional ways of bringing about some good. From a pluralist perspective, once the particularly virtuous agent has fulfilled the demands of the prevailing reasons for action, he or she is able to concede that something more can be done. Choosing to follow the prevailing reasons for action also means letting 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 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

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

[297] *Ivi*, p. 133.

arises. Clearly, supererogation is not possible as long as the agent has not fulfilled his or her obligations. Following a non-prevailing reason despite the prevailing reasons is simply immoral. Following a non-prevailing reason when the agent has already fulfilled his or her obligations is supererogatory. Making a financial donation when the agent lacks enough money to buy food for his or her child is not only immoral but also an irrational sacrifice. Making a donation is supererogatory when the agent has enough money to provide for the basic needs of his or her family. The supererogatory option arises only when the agent has fulfilled his or her prevailing binding reasons.

Specifically, once we allow the coexistence of multiple principles, we will be equipped with the tools for both setting our moral obligations and understanding how to pursue the good that lies beyond them, namely supererogatory acts. Allowing a variety of principles of morality also means being willing to acknowledge the existence of multiple ways of fostering the good other than the way that merely fulfills moral obligations. MSD originates supererogatory acts in a pluralist system. It entails that according to some particular interactions of the three principles, we can have two ways of performing supererogatory acts: a) the interaction between two impartial principles and b) the impartial use of a partial principle. Let us refer to these two possible occurrences of supererogation as the exceeding instance (supererogation by making an impersonal principle exceed another impersonal principle) and the proximity instance (supererogation by considering proximate a moral stranger), respectively. In the following sections, I shall try to explain in some detail these two possible ways of bringing about a supererogatory act through MSD.

5.2 The Exceeding Instance of MSD

The exceeding instance of MSD attempts to explain the performance of a supererogatory act through the interaction of two impartial principles. Accordingly, supererogation originates from the fact that the moral requirements set by a given impartial principle can be surpassed by the optional performance of an act based on another impartial principle. A pluralistic moral account allows many principles, which in a given circumstance, compete to gain priority over the others by offering compelling reasons to act in a certain way. In the following discussion, I call the prevailing principle the "active" principle (i.e., the one that offers

the most compelling reasons). The others are then indicated as the inactive principles. In this view of supererogation, it is important to note that for a principle to be inactive, it does not mean losing its ability to provide reasons for bringing about some instance of the good. Generally, the reasons provided by inactive principles are considered less compelling than those provided by active principles. In other words, the active principles provide the prevailing reasons (having priority over the others) and the inactive principles provide the non-prevailing reasons (less compelling). I believe that one way to account for supererogation in a pluralist framework can be conceived as the performance of the course of action that arises by following both kinds of reasons (given that the circumstances allow this superabundant attainment of the good). This is what I call MSD; it means following the reasons provided by different sources in the same situation. This plentiful achievement is what I consider supererogatory.

To clarify this point, let me analyze more detailed examples of this interaction between principles. In particular, since I have decided to take Larmore's account as a starting point, we can distinguish between two different impartial principles. Consequently, we will have two possible interactions that can generate a supererogatory act: a) the principle of deontology (active) overtaken by the principle of consequentialism (inactive) and b) the principle of consequentialism (active) overtaken by the principle of deontology (inactive). I start by analyzing the first kind of interaction. In this regard, it is helpful 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. A tourist 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, 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 until you arrive 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 is just asking for directions), you decide to accompany her to her desired destination.

In this scenario, the moral obligation is to truthfully respond to the request for directions. At this point, as the agent, you would have already fulfilled your sole moral obligations to the tourist. By endorsing a pluralist system, you are not necessarily required to accompany the stranger, knowing that orientation can be troublesome. You can rightfully consider a truthful answer to the tourist's question enough to satisfy your moral requirement. After all, given the circumstances, these are the most compelling moral reasons. Nevertheless, if you acknowledge that accompanying the stranger can be a morally better option, nothing prevents you from doing so. This is a clear example of a supererogatory act, since you would be doing something morally good that exceeds what 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) and the further application of a maximizing principle (such as the principle of consequentialism) that exceeds the former. The principle of deontology is the active principle, which states the moral obligation. For the purpose of supererogation, this moral ought is supplemented by the performance guided by the inactive principle of consequentialism. Not only do you decide to truthfully tell the tourist where the cathedral is (moral requirement), but you also decide to accompany her to the place (supererogatory act). What if you are late for a professional appointment when the tourist stops you, 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 priority over the others, it defines the level of moral requirement that could optionally be exceeded by the further application of an inactive principle (and a maximizing one in this case). The inactive principle plays a necessary but insufficient role in the performance of the supererogatory act. The active principle takes priority over the others in identifying the moral requirement. Nevertheless, it also plays an essential role in the performance of supererogation; the active principle defines the level of moral requirement that can be exceeded[298]. Furthermore,

[298] Generally, the moral source that constitutes the level of obligation is always one. Differently, a supererogatory act may be suggested by more than a single secondary moral source. After all, given a specific moral requirement, an agent can perform many different supererogatory acts. When I give you back the money that I borrowed from you, I might

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 supererogatory instead, according to our moral intuitions[299]. The same demandingness of maximizing principles can be true in pluralist systems as well. However, in this scenario, the maximizing principle makes the achievement of the praiseworthy extra good possible despite its being allegedly demanding. The difference lies in the fact that you do not feel it as too demanding since you have voluntarily chosen to pursue it rather than considering it a requirement. Only the interaction with a non-maximizing principle that limits the moral requirement allows a maximizing principle 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 performance of the principle of deontology. At first sight, this is a more difficult one to explain. Difficulties arise because consequentialism is usually understood as a maximizing principle. Therefore, before giving an example of this interaction, it is worthwhile to wonder if supererogatory acts are even possible when 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»[300]. Apparently, the principle, so understood, tends to maximize the good, 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 takes priority over the rest, it tends to leave no room for supererogation[301]. At this point, this question arises: is it even

decide to express my gratitude simply by saying thank you, by buying you a present, by giving you back more than I owed, and so on. Nevertheless, the necessary and sufficient condition for the performance of a supererogatory act remains the existence of at least two moral levels (the moral requirement and what lies beyond it).

[299] This is the case raised by the demandingness objection to act-utilitarianism. See T. Mulgan, *The Demands of Consequentialism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 25. I have dedicated some pages to the question of maximizing duties in a previous chapter. See pp. 123–130.

[300] C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, p. 132.

[301] See pp. 129–130 of the present work. See also S. Grigoletto, *Why* Proximity *Matters for the Concept of Supererogation*, «Ethics & Politics», XIX (1), 2017, pp. 291–307.

possible to exceed the requirements of consequentialist reasons when they take priority over the others? One tentative answer might be the case of the dutiful hero so dear to Kant[302]. In this regard, we might suggest that the heroic deeds of the rescuers (who were mostly professionals) in the 9\11 terroristic attack are acts of supererogation by fulfilling the principle of deontology (in particular, "one professionally ought to do his or her job"), exceeding the requirement of the principle of consequentialism[303]. Still, I would maintain that their deeds do not represent the sort of heroism that springs from an instance of supererogation. Dutiful heroism derives its praiseworthiness[304] from being an example of moral integrity. Such integrity is expressed by the ability to adhere to one's own duty, rather one's capacity to go beyond duty. Recall that in Kantian terms, the sort of heroism demonstrated by the 9\11 rescuers is an especially praiseworthy example of perfect duty. Dutiful heroism is closely related to the concept of duty; thus, its praiseworthiness might not be derived from its being beyond the call of duty. Claiming that this sort of heroism is not a proper example of supererogation does not mean that it is not equally praiseworthy. Nevertheless, I concede that there happens to be cases whose circumstances make it perfectly reasonable for an agent to withdraw from his or her duties. In this case, the agent achieves a praiseworthy extra good by deciding to adhere to his or her duties and perform a certain act no matter how costly the consequences are. Notice that the harsh circumstances have substantially affected the status of the agent's duties to the point that deciding not to perform them is perfectly reasonable. It is indeed an open question if we can still properly call them the agent's duties.

Let us return to the question of how to perform a supererogatory act when the principle of consequentialism gains priority over the others. How is it then possible to overtake a maximizing principle (such as consequentialism) in order to perform a supererogatory act? I think that a tentative answer might be the conjunctive performance of acts that are derived from non-conflicting values. To explain this point, let me recall

[302] In the previous chapter (p. 147), I have already analyzed the case of the man who refuses to lie at all costs. See I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in M. Gregor (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 128.
[303] In fact, we might imagine 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.
[304] Such praiseworthiness is no less important than that demonstrated by supererogatory heroism.

the second understanding of pluralism that I have sketched in Chapter I. Axiological pluralism holds that we try to live a good life according to a set of incommensurable values that we recognize as all equally valid. To use Nagel's expression, values have a "fragmented" nature[305]. Moreover, I have claimed that moral principles are different ways of moral reasoning. We might add that principles always endorse and bear specific moral values. For example, the 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 for moral agents' autonomy, and so on. In such a scenario, 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 acts that are derived from 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, the agent recognizes that he or she has the possibility to foster the given value *b* by doing something else. If the agent is able to do both *a* (requirement) and *b* (optional), she performs a supererogatory act. Notice that this is not always possible, since we need to be in a situation where the observance of two non-conflicting values is possible. On the contrary, in the case of the performance of acts grounded on two conflicting values, the agent will possibly undermine the fulfillment of the moral requirement by performing the supererogatory act. This option is not only problematic but also morally impermissible[306].

To explain this second kind of the exceeding instance of MSD, let me cite the following example:

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

[306] A reader might wonder what differentiates this from Hill's suggested conjunctive performance of two imperfect duties, analyzed in the previous chapter (p. 134f). Note that here, differently from Hill's case, we have a precise priority of the moral requirement originated by the active principle. Only then is the performance of the supererogatory act possible. Remember that my criticism of the supererogatory conjunctive performance of imperfect duties relies on the possibility to refrain from performing both duties. This criticism does not apply to the scenario explained above, since one of the two conjuncts is clearly obligatory, and the other is clearly not required.

Example #2: It is Mary's birthday, and she is organizing a birthday party at her home. She is inviting friends for dinner and 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 make a choice between the two. Considering that she really wants to make her guests happy, she decides, "I will buy them both!".

A case such as this presents a clear requirement. If Mary wants to make her guests happy and be a good host, she needs to provide a birthday cake for them. Obviously, she can fulfill the guests' wish by buying either a strawberry cake or a chocolate cake. It is equally clear that if she buys both, she achieves more than she ought to have done. This superabundant achievement of the good is then supererogatory and is brought about by the performance of two equally reasonable (and non-conflicting) ways to fulfill the given requirement.

The conjunctive observance 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 the agent is in the presence of at least two sources of value and cannot satisfy either of them without incurring a moral loss. In contrast, supererogatory acts are possible when the agent has multiple sources of the good (at least two) and can satisfy all (or both) of them, leading to a superabundant moral achievement. In other words, supererogation means following secondary moral reasons (the moral requirement being grounded on the primary and prevailing reasons). The most decisive moral reasons represent the level of obligation, but once the agent decides to follow some other non-decisive (secondary) reasons for action, he or she enters the sphere of the supererogatory. From all these assertions, it appears clear how supererogation is a phenomenon that represents the distinctively dual nature of morality as divided between the right and the good.

I now offer another example of supererogation 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 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. Considering that she really wants to be a good host, Mary gives 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 typical consequentialist moral requirement as it deals with the maximization of the happiness of the beneficiaries who are equally capable of enjoying the good. Still, the interesting aspect of Mary's act is that she gives up her share of the good (something that would be her right, considering that it is her birthday) by virtue of some other kind of moral reason. Specifically, she really wants to be a good host, and this entails her readiness to sacrifice a little part of her own good to benefit another person. In this case, the morally right thing has a consequentialist connotation, while the way that the moral agent decides to exceed the level of the right has a deontological nature. Mary acts according to a commendatory understanding[307] 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 act has been performed by exceeding a moral requirement of a certain kind by an act originated by a secondary moral reason of a different kind. I take this to be another good example of how the exceeding instance of MSD works.

Let me 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 over 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 over the others, it does not mean losing its ability to find possible ways to achieve the good. If the principle without priority is compatible with the one that has priority and the agent decides to apply both, she produces an extra good. Nonetheless, supererogation is not an option that is always available. Sometimes, the moral pulls of the

[307] See pp. 126–127 for an explanation of the "commendatory" versus the "prescriptive" use of "ought".

different principles are simply not compatible, so the interactions that we have previously analyzed are not feasible. For example, regarding urgent consequentialist reasons to relieve someone of a consistent amount of pain, there seems to be no room left for supererogation. In cases such as 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, a car accident occurs in front of an agent, who has a moral requirement to provide first aid to someone who has been injured[308]. Cases such as this, granted that the agent does not incur 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 the agent can do to make it morally better.

It is important to note that, according to my account, supererogation is a moral phenomenon that relies on many different factors: a) a moral system that provides different sources of the good, b) the compatibility of the different reasons for action, and c) the circumstances that allow the possible achievement of the extra good. All these features primarily focus on the relevant aspects of supererogation as a moral act. Much more can be said about the sort of character traits that the virtuous agent demonstrates when she performs this specific sort of moral act. Nevertheless, in this 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 attempted to highlight the role that both methodological pluralism and axiological pluralism play in providing theoretical space for the concept. Without the two levels of morality, supererogation is inconceivable.

5.3 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 grounds particularistic duties and reasons for action as part of our particular desires or commitments toward those who are relationally proximate to us. Usually, specific relationships or goals in life are associated with the so-

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

called special obligations. If I want to climb Monte Bianco, I will have to train consistently. If I care about my son's future, I will provide him with all that is necessary for his education. It appears clear how these reasons for action rely on proximity. This is not intended as mere physical closeness but as relational closeness[309]. For this reason, 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 words, this happens when the agent impersonally uses the principle of partiality to benefit a stranger in a supererogatory way. For example, acting in a way as though it is a special obligation, even if it is not so, leads the agent to perform an optional and morally good act. Let me cite another example to explain this point:

Example #4: Let us suppose that your little daughter is playing basketball in the school's team. You know that by 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 watching one of her games, you realize that one of her teammates need new basketball shoes. You also know that this teammate belongs to a very poor family that probably could not afford to purchase new basketball shoes for her. Motivated by your willingness to help this family, you decide to buy the shoes for your daughter's teammate as if she was your own daughter.

I consider this a relevant and consistent instance of supererogation. Providing basketball shoes for 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 (after all, she is not your daughter). 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 evading any moral requirement that tells you to do otherwise. Specifically, you are neither taking care of someone's basic needs nor relieving her of pain (so there is no principle of consequentialism that provides reasons for you to

[309] See p. 124 of the present work. On the issue of *proximity* as the basis for special obligations, see D. Jeske, R. Fumerton, *Relatives and Relativism*, «Philosophical Studies», LXXXVII, 1997, pp. 143–157.

do so). You are simply 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. No principle of partiality justifies your act, but still, you decide to act as if there was one. This is why you are doing something supererogatory. The way you realize how to bring about the supererogatory act is by applying the principle of partiality to someone who is not supposed to benefit from your particularistic duties. Morally speaking, treating a stranger as if she was your daughter is an act of supererogation. This is why I call this the proximity instance of MSD; it means acting to benefit another person by expanding the reach of your particularistic duties in a way that makes them supererogatory. We might also add that the agent who performs this sort of supererogatory act makes an unconventional use of a moral source. A special obligation, which is conventionally undertaken for the welfare of those "near and dear", is here carried out 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 that are necessary for this category of acts are here expressed by two "areas of competence" in the same duties: a) the proper understanding of particularistic duties toward those who are relationally proximate to the agent and b) a broadening of the reach of particularistic duties toward those who are not relationally proximate to the agent. When the agent decides to go beyond the first understanding, aiming for a broader way to benefit others, she performs a supererogatory act. It means setting a moral ought when the agent does not necessarily have conclusive and decisive reasons to do so. It is thus not surprising that Jamie Dreier has proposed a similar explanation of the concept of supererogation[310]. Specifically, as I have emphasized in the previous chapter, he argues that supererogation is possible as long as we consider the existence of two moral perspectives: the point of view of beneficence (which analyzes everything in terms of the morally better and worse) and that of justice (which focuses on the moral wrongness of an act)[311]. 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

[310] J. Dreier, *Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't*, in M. Byron (ed.), *Satisficing and Maximizing: Moral Theories on Practical Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 131–154.
[311] *Ivi*, p. 149.

we are not in a situation of providing 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[312]. 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, which is the role of the point of view of justice. Sadly enough, for this reason, the standpoint 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 words, 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 of the interaction of two impartial principles, we can say that this distinction is granted as long as we use a principle to determine the right thing to do and 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 through the impartial use of a partial principle, we aim 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 thus summarize 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.

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

5.4 The Phenomenology of Supererogation

In this final section, I return to the issue with which I have started this work—the phenomenological aspects of a moral experience. In particular, I focus on "how it is like" to experience the performance of a supererogatory act. It can be helpful to recall Mandelbaum's considerations regarding the experience of a moral obligation, which mainly focuses on its phenomenology, as outlined in Chapter I. . It would constitute a mere supposition to sketch a possible understanding of supererogation within his system. Nevertheless, I draw some useful terminology from his work to explain the phenomenon of supererogation. Mandelbaum's account of the phenomenological analysis of moral judgments[313] refers to the relation of the fittingness of a certain course of action in order to determine whether it leads to its intended outcome [314]. The experience of this relation is particularly important for the fulfillment of a moral obligation. If I have promised to return the book I borrowed from you, the fact that we will meet tonight counts in favor of (or is a reason that favors) bringing your book with me and giving it back to you. Bringing the book with me fits the moral demands that the situation imposes on me, fulfilling the related moral obligation (I ought to keep my word). In this regard, we realize how supererogation deals with a different sort of fittingness. Undoubtedly, the given situation plays a role in defining what the agent can do to achieve some extra good. In other words, the situation indicates what course of action fits the agent's willingness to do the supererogatory act. Nevertheless, this sort of fittingness is not derived from a moral demand, as in the case of moral obligation. Still, from a phenomenological standpoint, even supererogation presumes that the agent performs a specific given act. If I want to be kind to you while we are chatting in a bar, I will recognize that buying you coffee fits my desire to be friendly. From a phenomenological perspective, the performance of a supererogatory act means accepting a new moral task with all the conditions it entails. The achievement of the supererogatory act calls for the endorsement of an

[313] Remember that these judgments are divided between direct and removed ones. The former identifies those judgments that we make in the first person when we actually face the given moral scenario. They have to be distinguished from the latter kind of moral judgments, those that we make from a perspective that is *removed* from the situation, considering past or future situations.
[314] M. Mandelbaum, *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, Glencoe, IL, The Free Press, 1955, p. 64.

additional set of acts that can bring about the extra good. While this further set of acts does not originate a moral requirement (or a moral demand), the same teleological character of a moral obligation 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.

Once again, the reference to the rich young man's encounter with Jesus can help us understand this point. When the young man asks what he needs to do, other than the observance of the Decalogue, in order to gain eternal life, Jesus answers 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[315].

It is interesting to note that the Gospel of Matthew (different from Mark's) reports this answer as an if-then clause. We can interpret this as the fact that the way of moral perfection entails the endorsement of a new set of acts that fits the new moral scenario. If the young man wants to achieve moral perfection (not just moral righteousness), selling all his goods would fit the condition of achievement of the supererogatory end. From a phenomenological perspective, the performance of supererogation is able to recreate, at another level, the same relation of fittingness of Mandelbaum's understanding of moral obligations[316]. However, it has been emphasized that what differentiates the two is the fact that in the case of a moral obligation, the relation of fittingness is grounded on a "felt demand" to act in a certain way[317]. The same cannot be said of supererogation, where fittingness is grounded on the agent's espousal of the supererogatory end rather than on some external moral demand[318]. 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 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 act does not

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[315] *Matthew*, 19:21.
[316] T. Horgan, M. Timmons, *Untying a Knot from the Inside Out: Reflections on the "Paradox" of Supererogation*, «Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation», XXVII (2), 2010, pp. 48–49.
[317] *Ivi*, p. 44.
[318] "External" here means that this sort of moral demand holds true regardless of the agent's particularistic desires. *Ivi*, p. 45.

bring about the same reactive attitude. For example, if I happen to be very late for a business appointment, I simply do not have time to stop and buy lunch for the very good friend of mine whom I have just run into. This kind of non-performance explains the sort of regret that an agent might feel when he or she fails to do the extra good. The agent might regret (at most) a situation where he or she recognizes the possibility to do some extra good but simply could not abide by 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 others or by the agent himself or herself. In fact, this is not the case in the non-performance of a moral obligation. The failure to conform to a perfect duty usually generates guilty feelings and blame[319]. Conversely, in the case of the non-performance of an act that would fulfill an imperfect duty, the agent will generally feel shame or some sort of disappointment in oneself[320]. It is very important for the definition of supererogation that we do not confuse the possible regret regarding the non-performance of a supererogatory act with any sort of moral criticism against 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 standpoint, the most convincing accounts of supererogation rely on the acknowledgment of the different levels of morality[321]. I hold that supererogation can be accounted for only by means of the acknowledgment of moral complexity. It is thus reasonable to think that the very phenomenological experience of a supererogatory act needs to be similarly complex. Once we recognize the need for complexity on a theoretical level, we can only 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:

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[319] *Ivi*, p. 46.

[320] W. Sinnot-Amstrong, *You Ought to Be Ashamed of Yourself (When You Violate an Imperfect Obligation)*, «Philosophical Issues», XV, 2005, pp. 192–208.

[321] This account is based on outlining different moral standpoints (e.g., J. Dreier, *Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't*) or specifying the different roles of moral reasons (e.g., D. Portmore, *Are Moral Reasons Morally Overriding?*, «Ethical Theory and Moral Practice», XI, 2008, pp. 369–388; T. Horgan, M. Timmons, *Untying a Knot from the Inside Out: Reflections on the "Paradox" of Supererogation* (or more implicitly, J. Gert, *Requiring and Justifying: Two Dimensions of Normative Strength*, «Erkenntnis», LIX, 2003, pp. 5–36).

Example #5: Mary enters a bar and asks for coffee at the bar counter. While she is there, another person enters and asks for coffee. He appears to be in a hurry and right after having gulped down the coffee, he asks the bartender for his bill. The stranger suddenly looks very embarrassed as he realizes that he forgot his wallet in the car. Motivated by her altruistic and virtuous character, Mary intervenes in the conversation between the bartender and the stranger and offers to pay for the latter's coffee. Surprised by Mary's behavior, the stranger expresses gratitude and runs out of the bar to the business meeting that he has to attend.

What is it like to be in Mary's shoes in this situation? What sort of phenomenological experience has she undergone? Certainly, she has decided to do the good deed because she has recognized 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, especially for the benefit of 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 trigger any sort of criticism in the case of omission. In the above example, if Mary has decided to refrain from doing her altruistic act, we cannot imagine any sort of moral consequence. For her, after all, consider the following: a) The person whom she has benefited is a complete stranger, so she is not bound by any special obligation by virtue of her relationship with him. b) The bartender would probably have 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, as consequentialist reasons would require her to act. All these circumstances allow that, from a phenomenological perspective, she is experiencing a situation where her act 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 an 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. The omission of a supererogatory act would cause, at best, regret of the agent who has missed the opportunity

to act accordingly. Moreover, supererogation phenomenologically differs from duties as it entails the combination of two experiences: a) the possibility to bring about some instance of the good and b) the prediction that the possible omission will not trigger any actual moral criticism or reactive attitude by others. This second feature explains why this category of acts differs from perfect and imperfect duties; its omission generates a different phenomenological experience. In fact, supererogatory acts are characterized by such a double and compound experience. In other words, supererogation entails a complex phenomenological experience. However, this should not be a surprising conclusion, since (as we have seen in the previous chapters) from a theoretical standpoint, supererogation is a complex concept. It is a moral category that requires more than a single level of morality to be justified.

This brief phenomenological analysis of the concept not only alludes to the experience in performing a supererogatory act but also reveals some characteristics of the moral agent who performs it. The phenomenology of the first-person experience discloses what makes supererogation possible from the agent's point of view. In other words, it explains what sort of psychological state the agent experiences in the performance of a supererogatory act. As I have tried to show in the previous chapters[322], I hold that supererogation entails an altruistic behavior that aims at benefiting others. How is it then possible to do so? The influential work by moral psychologist Daniel Batson introduces the so-called "empathy-altruism hypothesis"[323]. Briefly, this thesis holds that empathic concern (other-oriented emotions originated by the agent's perception of someone else in need[324]) gives rise to an altruistic motivation (having as its ultimate goal that of caring for another's welfare[325]). The more empathic concern a given agent feels, the more he or she would be willing to bring about the state of affairs that would meet the need of the related subject or group of subjects[326]. A moral agent's empathic capacity is helpful in understanding 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 cost-benefit analysis that guides the instances of supererogation. Moreover, feeling concerned for those in need will also justify those cases

322 See Chapter III, pp. 104–106.
323 D. Batson, *Altruism in Humans*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.
324 *Ivi*, pp. 11ff.
325 *Ivi*, pp. 20ff.
326 *Ivi*, p. 29.

where a supererogatory act entails a considerable degree of self-sacrifice[327]. If I am eating a sandwich on a bench shared by a starving stranger, I would be willing to give him my entire sandwich or part of it (depending on the degree of perception of his hunger). I will take this psychological evidence of altruistic behavior as a further demonstration of what is the relevant understanding of the moral point of view in regarding this category of acts. From a phenomenological perspective, what makes supererogation possible is the ability to take somebody else's good as a reason for action in itself. Larmore's understanding of the moral point of view suits the explanatory needs of this specific consideration of supererogatory acts and morality in general:

> 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[328].

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 dealing with supererogatory acts. In this regard, morality is a matter of understanding others and embracing the task of benefiting them.

[327] However, remember that self-sacrifice is not a necessary condition for a consistent actualization of a supererogatory act. See A. Archer, *Supererogation, Sacrifice, and the Limits of Duty*, «Southern Journal of Philosophy», LIV (3), 2016, pp. 333–354.

[328] Larmore C., *The Autonomy of Morality*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 73–74.

Conclusion.
Acknowledging the Need for Moral Complexity

6.1 A Brief Summary of the Many Dimensions of Moral Complexity

The dimensions of moral complexity are many, and they can be noticed on different levels of the moral domain. Certainly, the present work cannot represent a comprehensive and exhaustive treatise of complexity. Therefore, I have focused primarily on two aspects of moral complexity, and I have explained how morality holds true in both aspects: the nature of the moral experience and the possible account of supererogation.

To the first issue I have dedicated Chapters I and II, beginning with an endorsement of a phenomenological approach to the subject. I chose this approach because morality deals with acts that find their ultimate expression in 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. An analysis of this sort reveals the manifold nature of the moral sphere. This acknowledgement leads to the first theoretical conclusion: the preferable normative theory is a pluralist system. In this regard I have explained how Charles Larmore"s understanding of moral pluralism represents a good starting point for handling moral complexity at the normative level. The adoption of heterogeneous principles of morality (consequentialism, deontology, and partiality) helps us understand how different moral reasons can be disclosed by endorsing different methods of moral reasoning. For this topic, I have illustrated how pluralism is articulated in at least two distinct 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 are expressions of the complexity that characterizes morality. This, to a certain degree, explains the motto contained in the title of this work: "only through moral complexity". In other words, we would be able to understand morality only through a proper appreciation of its complexities.

In the Chapter III, I showed 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 use the concept of supererogation as a clear example. 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 for a category for supererogatory acts. This resembles the distinction between precepts and counsels that gave birth to the concept in the Christian theological tradition. There are different ways to achieve different levels of achievement of the good: this is what makes it possible to conceive of the "higher flies of morality" or, in other words, the morally good that lies beyond the call of duty. It is not surprising, then, that many attempts to solve the "problem of supererogation"[329] rely on the identification of different sources of morality.

The contemporary debate on supererogation involves many examples of this method of illustrating the concept. Think, for example, of the position held by Portmore, Gert, and Dreier[330]. In the present work, I adopt a similar strategy, providing an account of supererogation by endorsing a pluralist moral system. As I demonstrated in Chapter IV, monist theories usually fail (or at least struggle) to properly explain supererogatory acts by 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:

[329] These terms usually refer to the following quandary: if supererogatory acts often represent the morally best option, why is it 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. 119-125.

[330] More on these authors on the following pages.

> 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 [...][331].

The only way to solve the justificatory problem of the concept is to acknowledge the different levels that constitute morality and to provide, accordingly, a normative system that grants the appropriate distinctions. For this reason, in Chapter V, I 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 is not completely identifiable with the level of the good. This important relation between the two constituents of the moral domain recreates the theoretical needs that make supererogation conceivable. In this regard, I explain the performance of a supererogatory act via the multiple sources dynamics (MSD). Supererogation is better explained when the moral agent is able to distinguish different moral sources that make one's own moral requirements clear, on one hand, and on the other, a way to exceed these obligations by aiming for extra good. While this explanation of supererogatory acts is not intended to exclude any possible monist account of supererogation, it clarifies how the pluralist perspective offers some advantages over other justificatory options.

6.2 How Recent Accommodations of Supererogation Acknowledge Moral Complexity

In the following pages, I clarify why acknowledging some degree of complexity is a strategy generally endorsed (either implicitly or explicitly) by more recent accounts of supererogation. As I justified in the previous chapters, the concept of supererogation requires a multi-leveled structure of morality in order to provide a theoretical framework that resembles the one that originated the concept in its theological roots. If we want to make sense of supererogatory acts and prevent their being explained away by other moral concepts (as anti-supererogationists do), we need to grant different degrees of achievement within the moral domain. This is what happens in many accounts of the concept that have characterized the contemporary

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

debate. Briefly, the general claim of the following lines is that the only way to account for supererogation is to grant a multi-leveled structure of morality (a task that I have accomplished through moral pluralism). This is the route that many contemporary accounts of the concept have taken.

One strategy to ground the concept is to allow different degrees of accomplishment within the moral domain. This theoretical challenge has been recognized to be true of different moral accounts:

> This is the challenge of accounting for both the binary and the scalar elements of our moral discourse. That is, it is difficult for a moral theory to account plausibly for either/or concepts like permissible and impermissible on the one hand while also accounting for degreed concepts like better and worse on the other. But supererogation—where the supererogatory act is better than the minimally permissible act—involves both of these sets of concepts. The difficulty this raises for moral theory is clear if we look at the Kantian and utilitarian traditions. Kant gives us an account of duty but no clear grounds for assessing an act as better than what duty requires. Utilitarians give us an account of acts as better and worse but no clear grounds for saying an act is permissible though less than the best[332].

This is a structural problem that any account of supererogation faces. The contemporary debate has seen different attempts to address this problem.

6.3 Structuring Complexity Through Reasons

The "problem of supererogation" is a problem that some have tried to solve by outlining two different sources of morally relevant value. As such, the moral reason for an action plays a fundamental role as the primary element of a moral agent's reflection. Supererogatory acts require us to ground them on reasons that support a level of dedicated moral commitment different from the commitment that originates from moral requirements. The delicate passage is that the optionality of this concept must be characterized in moral terms. This is different than saying that the moral point of view suggests a course of action that maximizes the good (in certain cases a very demanding course of action, such as a supererogatory act that involves a considerable amount of sacrifice), but this course action is trumped by another based on

[332] M. Ferry, *Does Morality Demand Our Very Best? On Moral Prescriptions and the Line of Duty*, «Philosophical Studies», CLXIII (2), 2013, p. 574.

non-moral reasons that prevent us from the performance[333]. An individual who does not try to save a drowning stranger because he or she cannot swim is an example. In this case the failure to perform the supererogatory act is supported by non-moral reasons (the agent's swimming skills) that silence moral demands. Instead, the issue is that supererogation and duty require two different sources that are both ultimately moral in kind. Jamie Dreier suggested that one way to address the issue is to acknowledge (at least) two moral points of view[334]. He emphasizes that we have more stringent and stronger reasons for action that spring from the "moral point of view of justice" and supererogatory (and less compelling) reasons that originate from the "moral point of view of beneficence"[335]. In this way we maintain that both duties and supererogation have a moral connotation, while only the former have more compelling normative strength according to the relative reasons. Another way to arrange the theoretical framework is to focus on the different roles that reasons can have. This is a solution advanced by Joshua Gert, who claims that practical reasons can have a "requiring" role and a "justificatory" role[336]. Some reasons have an explicit requiring strength that, from a moral point of view, constitute a moral duty. An act (or lack of action) such as "do not smoke inside a restaurant" is determined by a moral reason with a requiring role. Some other reasons, less binding, would justify a certain course of action without having the same normative strength. For example, buying your friends a coffee because it would make them happy is an act supported by the justificatory role of the reason. Supererogatory acts, then, spring from this distinction in the roles of reasons:

> For example, it is plausible that I would be rationally justified in risking serious harm by rushing into a burning building by the following reason: that by doing so I might well save a child. But no reasonable person thinks that this reason rationally requires me to do so. So this particular altruistic reason can rationally justify more than it can rationally require[337].

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[333] A line of argument that is well-represented by Susan Wolf's famous position against moral perfectionism. S. Wolf, *Moral Saints*, «The Journal of Philosophy», LXXIX (8), 1982, pp. 418-439. A position that I have addressed at pp. 88–92.

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

[335] *Ivi*, pp. 149-150.

[336] J. Gert, *Requiring and Justifying: Two Dimensions of Normative Strength*, «Erkenntnis», LIX, 2003, pp. 5-36.

[337] J. Gert, *Moral Worth, Supererogation, and the Justifying/Requiring Distinction*, «Philosophical

In line with this is the contribution from Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons[338], who differentiated between a "requiring" reason and a "favoring" reason (the second being less binding)[339]. More specifically than Gert[340], they emphasized the many roles that reasons can play (even contextually) in the moral dimension. In the case of supererogation, the role they introduce is particularly important: "moral merit-conferring role." An act, to be considered supererogatory, does not have to be grounded on reasons that play a requiring role. Obviously, such an act has to be (rationally) justified, as Gert underlined, but it must also derive its moral value by virtue of the moral merit-conferring role played by some reasons. In these terms, the act would be deontically optional and yet morally meritorious[341]. This prevents us from confusing supererogation with other rationally justified (thus not required) but not morally relevant acts. For example, gambling a lot of money is not rationally required, but someone's ability to play poker and the possibility of winning more money than initially invested might rationally justify the act of gambling. However, while rationally justified (and not required), this can hardly be considered an instance of supererogation. It is important that we defend supererogation's moral worth, and the "moral merit-conferring role" of reasons allow us to do so.

With the same focus on moral reasons, Michael Ferry suggests something slightly different[342]. Instead of considering the nature of reasons in relation to acts alone, he claims that we also need to consider reasons in light of the agent's accountability. He derives this (rather overlooked) distinction from the works of Sidgwick and Mill, emphasizing that it is important to distinguish two sets of reasons: reasons that count in favor of a certain act, which are generally addressed; and reasons for and against holding an agent accountable for the given act. The latter, when combined with the former, creates a proper moral obligation: something the agent has more reasons to

Review», CXXI (4), 2012, p. 612.

338 T. Horgan, M. Timmons, *Untying a Knot from the Inside Out: Reflections on the "Paradox" of Supererogation*, «Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation», XXVII (2), 2010, pp. 29-63.

339 *Ivi*, p. 49.

340 At least in Gert's 2003 publication where he seems to be more concerned with practical rationality than with the moral domain.

341 T. Horgan, M. Timmons, *Untying a Knot from the Inside Out: Reflections on the "Paradox" of Supererogation*, p. 63.

342 M. Ferry, *Does Morality Demand Our Very Best? On Moral Prescriptions and the Line of Duty*, «Philosophical Studies», CLXIII (2), 2013, pp. 573-589.

perform and for which he or she is held accountable. This is not always the case, according to Ferry:

> The difference is that an obligation is conceptually tied to accountability and to holding accountable, to what you have got to do; that is, you are not obligated to perform an act unless you can properly be obliged to perform it, or be held accountable for its performance [...]. But it is not the case that we can properly be held accountable for everything that we ought morally to do. And this is because an agent's reasons for performing an act are not the same as our (or even the agent's) reasons for holding the agent accountable for the act's performance[343].

This is particularly important in the explanation of supererogation. While it is true that from the moral point of view we delineate moral reasons that ground moral acts we ought to perform, it is not always the case that those oughts hold for ourselves. It is one thing to recognize the reach of morality, but quite another to claim that this applies to us. Nevertheless, this does not prevent agents from performing acts for which they are not accountable. This opens the possibility for supererogatory acts. It is the ability to endorse a moral demand that is not necessarily our own.

What all these accounts of supererogation share is that by focusing on some characteristic of reasons, they try to grant the multi-leveled theoretical structure that makes this concept possible. By the existence of different moral points of view that provide different reasons (Dreier), different roles of reasons (Gert, Horgan and Timmons), or different sets of reasons (Ferry), all these attempts provide the adequately complex theoretical structure that is needed to make sense of supererogatory acts.

6.4 Structuring Complexity Through Consequences

While some attempts to account for supererogation in neo-Kantian terms exist[344], it is interesting to notice how this category of acts has

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[343] *Ivi*, p. 586.

[344] In particular, I consider the work of Thomas Hill (who tries to explain supererogation through the category of imperfect duties) and Marcia Baron (who claims that Kantian Ethics does not really need the concept of supererogation). See T. Hill, *Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation*, «Kant-Studien», LXII, 1971, pp. 55-76; M. Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1995. I have already addressed in the previous chapters Hill's position at pp. 135f and Baron's at p. 140.

drawn the attention primarily of consequentialists. As I explain in Chapter IV, act-utilitarianism, at least in its classical understanding, struggles with the justification for these acts. Briefly, the problem is it relies on the maximization of the good to a point where no room for supererogation is possible. More recently, other utilitarians have tried to grant the space for supererogation by refining the theoretical framework. One way to do this is to negate the maximizing character of utilitarianism[345]. There are, however, other attempts to explain supererogatory acts within a consequentialist framework. Douglas Portmore presented the first strategy for doing so by highlighting cases where the calculus of consequences delineated two equally worthy acts that maximized the good[346]. For example, say that acts *a* and *b* bring about the same maximization of the good[347]. In consequentialist terms, according to the evaluation of moral reasons, whether to perform either *a* or *b* becomes optional. At the same time, this framework, in order to make sense of supererogation, should consider moral praiseworthiness in terms of how much the agent has to sacrifice in order to perform the act. Accordingly, option *b* is superior to the other for the degree of sacrifice involved. In these terms, *b* would be supererogatory by virtue of being morally optional (granted that moral reasons put it on par with *a*) and morally superior (more praiseworthy). While this peculiar consequentialist account would make sense of supererogatory acts, it does not consider the much more widespread cases where moral praiseworthiness is entailed in

[345] This possibility, among others, has been pursued in M. Slote, *Beyond Optimizing. A Study of Rational Choice*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1989; F. Howard-Snyder, A. Norcross, *A Consequentialist Case for Rejecting the Right*, «Journal of Philosophical Research», XVIII, 1993, pp. 109-125.

[346] This scenario is suggested in D.W. Portmore, *Position-Relative Consequentialism, Agent-Centered Options, and Supererogation*, «Ethics», CXIII (2), 2003, pp. 326-327.

[347] These have also been referred to as “ties at the top situations.” See, for example, J.P. Vessel, *Supererogation for Utilitarianism*, «American Philosophical Quarterly», XLVII (4), 2010, pp. 300-301. This situation deals with a very specific and limited instance of supererogation: «it is only in “ties at the top” cases that supererogation is possible on the classical scheme [of act-utilitarianism]. Supererogation (and “demandingness”) critics claim that there are many more cases of supererogation than those containing ties at the top» *ivi*, p. 302. Generally, what this article by Vessel shows is that utilitarianism will be able to account for supererogatory options only by adjusting to the major criticism of the theory (“self-other asymmetry,” “nearest and dearest,” etc.). This outcome, it has been noted, will produce a version of utilitarianism that would be very hard to hold. See *ivi*, p. 314. Moreover, Vessel’s style of argumentation deals with moral reasoning by analogy to a numerical calculus. This, to me, while allowing a certain degree of clarity, is far from being representative of what it is like to consider what to do from the moral point of view.

moral reasons rather than in other aspects. In other words, is it possible to explain supererogatory acts in consequentialist terms by appealing to moral reason alone as a unique source of moral value (that is, leaving aside cases where moral praiseworthiness is derived elsewhere)? Portmore suggests that this possibility is viable only if we concede that moral reasons are not overriding[348]. This holds true as long as we maintain that moral reasons are only a subset of reasons for action[349]. Non-moral reasons contribute to our all-things-considered evaluations for guiding our agency and thus:

> Moral reasons are not morally overriding—nonmoral reasons can, and sometimes do, prevent moral reasons, even those with considerable moral requiring strength, from generating moral requirements[350].

If I see a stranger who is trapped in a burning car, a consequentialist analysis of the situation would conclude that it is morally better if I save him. However, this strong moral recommendation is outranked by a non-moral (but still morally relevant) consideration about my physical ability to perform the rescue as quickly as required to make it successful. Being unable to run or to open the blocked door would provide a reason preventing me from attempting the rescue. Further, the fact that I could risk my life by attempting the rescue would support the decision to overlook this course of action. This, however, does not make it morally forbidden for me to follow those demanding moral reasons. If I decide to attempt the rescue in spite of the non-moral considerations that discharge me from the accountability for such an act, I will perform something supererogatory. This point made by Portmore opens up the possibility of two different levels of accomplishment: on one hand, the agent has reasons that all-things-considered ground what ought to be done; on the other hand, moral reasons, while not overriding, still keep their moral value and praiseworthiness in case the agent decides to follow them. The claim that "moral reasons are not overriding" delineates a more complex framework that makes the justification of supererogation possible.

Another noteworthy attempt to deal with supererogation was advanced by Dale Dorsey[351]. The core of his argument is that supererogation springs

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[348] D.W. Portmore, *Are Moral Reasons Morally Overriding?*, in «Ethical Theory and Moral Practice», XI (4), 2008, pp. 369-388. See also D.W. Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism. Wherein Morality Meets Rationality*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 124f.

[349] D.W. Portmore, *Are Moral Reasons Morally Overriding?*, p. 376.

[350] *Ivi*, p. 377.

[351] D. Dorsey, *The Supererogatory, and How to Accommodate It*, «Utilitas», XXV (3), 2013, pp.

from the comparison between the demands of morality (the moral point of view) and what we ought to do regarding practical rationality (all-things-considered, that is, evaluating non-moral reasons as well). Surprisingly, he holds that the supererogatory is not what lies beyond the morally required, but instead what lies beyond the rationally required[352]. In order to explain this, we must focus on the notion of practical rationality that Dorsey adopts. For him, an agent who evaluates what to do in a given situation is considering different types of demands. Certainly, moral reasons play a part in this process, but they are not alone. We, as agents, consider different sorts of practical demands, and our ultimate choice is the product of this heterogenous reflection. In this regard, what we aim to do is always the result of this "all-things-considered" point of view, and this is what constitutes our rational requirements. More significantly for the nature of this book, Dorsey recognizes that human agency is characterized by a plurality of inputs:

> To begin, consider the notion of a moral requirement. Moral requirements are, well, just that: if I fail to conform to a moral requirement, this entails that I will have behaved immorally, or in a morally unjustified way. But there are many different sorts of requirements—not just moral—that I face. I face legal requirements, prudential requirements, requirements of etiquette, requirements of my neighborhood association. Sometimes these requirements will conflict. But in cases of conflict, it seems natural to ask ourselves what we ought to do really, or all-things-considered. More generally, in the case of conflicting requirements, how should I live? For the sake of brevity, I will refer to this "all-things-considered" requirement, which is distinct from, e.g., moral, legal or prudential requirements, as the "rational" requirement, or rational "ought"[353].

Claiming that supererogation is morally good but not rationally required (beyond rational requirements) means it is beyond the requirements that spring from the all-things-considered point of view.

From a strictly theoretical point of view, Dorsey's account is not different from the others I have analyzed in these sections. There is an attempt to account for supererogation by structuring a complex moral system. A first level of accomplishment is constituted by practical rationality. Secondly, it is permitted to extend beyond that level by performing what the moral point

355-382.

[352] *Ivi*, p. 373.

[353] *Ivi*, p. 369.

of view suggests. Dorsey's theoretical claim, among other things, restores the possible role of act-utilitarianism for a theory of supererogation[354]. The over-demandingness of the maximizing account of act-utilitarianism is no longer a problem, as the first level of accomplishment (practical rationality) is set in non-moral terms. All that is left to the moral point of view is to suggest the permitted supererogatory accomplishment. Accordingly, we won't be dealing with the over-demandingness of moral requirements (a common objection to act-utilitarianism), but with the demandingness of supererogation. This does not necessarily represent a problem and goes along well with what we commonly think of as supererogatory acts. Dorsey thinks that this account of supererogation has the advantage of rehabilitating act-utilitarianism, even in its standard view[355]. However, this feat does not come without some relevant issues. It is significant that this view does not necessarily explain more than others, and thus, it is not clear why it should be preferred[356]. On the contrary, it has disadvantages. One reason is that maintaining a proper explanation of supererogation within the moral domain means to limit the alleged demandingness of moral claims. Setting practical rationality entirely outside the moral point of view leads to a general problem for non-supererogatory acts. Let me explain this point. According to this account, the moral point of view would delineate a very demanding act that is considered supererogatory (let us imagine a possible considerable donation to a charitable organization). Non-moral considerations (say, for example, prudential reasons) from the all-things-considered point of view of practical rationality prevent us from considering the donation a requirement (i.e., the donation would prevent me from sustaining my family). The problem with Dorsey's account, and generally all those accounts that try to explain supererogation appealing to some feature from outside the moral domain, is that the moral blameworthiness for the omission of morally best action remains. It is true that practical rationality outlines what we ought to do. However, morally speaking (given the maximizing understanding of morality that Dorsey has[357]), we would be missing the performance of an act

[354] *Ivi*, p. 382.

[355] *Ibidem.*

[356] This is especially true for accounts, such as those by Dreier and by Timmons and Horgan, that seem to me to explain more moral phenomena. It remains an open question if the criticism that will follow Dorsey's position by appealing to moral blameworthiness applies to Portmore's account as well.

[357] «Morality, according to act-consequentialism, demands the best», D. Dorsey, *The*

with some relevant moral value, and this shortcoming causes moral blame. One important feature of the traditional view of supererogation is that its omission cannot cause any sort of criticism or moral blame (remember Heyd's second condition[358]). Dorsey's view seems to fail to account for this feature[359]. Even worse, in these terms our practical agency will be generally characterized by moral blame for all those times we do not follow the moral point of view. In other words, non-supererogatory acts, if a supererogatory course of action would be possible (and this is almost always the case), would be considered a moral shortcoming and thus morally blameworthy. I do not think this is a feature that we would be willing to concede to our moral frameworks and in general to any theory of human agency. It is true, Dorsey's account would rehabilitate maximizing act-utilitarianism, but at the expense of all non-supererogatory performance. Allowing this would be conceding that theoretical features have a priority over human agency. I take this sort approach of moral research to be misguided.

My objection to Dorsey's account of supererogation based on moral blameworthiness has been similarly emphasized by Alfred Archer[360]. He highlights how Dorsey's view presents similar problems when it comes to the limitation of moral demands. In fact, holding a maximizing account of act-utilitarianism as the source of our moral claims incurs the well-known problem of moral over-demandingness. Archer emphasizes that the reason why the problems with moral demandingness and moral blame are so important is that these issues are what grounds the necessity of the category of the supererogatory. Establishing agency on practical rationality, as Dorsey does, leaving aside the moral domain, means pretending that moral over-demandingness and moral blameworthiness no longer represent a problem. However, these problems are exactly what inspired the

Supererogatory, and How to Accommodate It, p. 382.

[358] «Its omission is not wrong, and does not deserve sanction or criticism—either formal or informal» D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 115.

[359] I do not think that this criticism holds with the multiple sources dynamics that I expressed in Chapter V to explain how supererogatory acts are brought about within a pluralist system. In that case both levels of accomplishment are constituted within the moral domain.

[360] Our arguments are structured in slightly different ways. While he claims that not considering the limitation of moral blameworthiness leads to the fact that the category of supererogation is no longer needed, I claim that overlooking the reach of moral blame leads to an agency deeply characterized by it. This appears to be an undesirable feature of any theory of moral agency. See A. Archer, *The Supererogatory and How Not to Accommodate It: A Reply to Dorsey*, «Utilitas», XXVIII (2), 2016, pp. 179-188.

debate on supererogation. The omission of the morally best act in certain circumstances (let us imagine a case where the performance requires a considerable sacrifice by the agent) does not seem to deserve moral blame. Conversely, the performance of such an onerous act cannot be demanded. These two claims are widespread in common sense morality, and the concept of supererogation has gained its legitimacy in order to account for them. Dorsey's shift of the foundation of agency to practical rationality has apparently made vanish these two problems. If this holds to be true of his account, then Archer's conclusion seems correct:

> By denying that moral obligations are conceptually linked to blameworthiness and the legitimacy of demands, Dorsey removes the need to make room for any category of the supererogatory and so his proposed account is redundant[361].

I think this problem holds for accounts such as Dorsey's and generally all the accounts that try to explain supererogation from outside the moral dimension.

In sum, the accounts that I have analyzed in this section (similar to those in the previous section) seem to have endorsed a similar strategy. The starting point to account for the concept of supererogation is that of imagining a theoretical framework that allows for different degrees of practical accomplishment. I have tried here to show how the proposals made by Portmore and Dorsey both follow this insight. This acknowledgement is the most relevant point for the present book. Either implicitly or explicitly, these theories present an endorsement of a more complex moral structure. More specific to the actual possibility of accounting for supererogatory acts, though, these two positions present something troublesome (and this is more evident in Dorsey's). If we try to explain supererogation from outside the moral dimension, we are missing important elements of what originated the debate about this peculiar category of acts.

6.5 A Shared Demand of Acknowledgment: «The Need for Complexity»

In these final pages I have highlighted how all the most noteworthy accounts of supererogation allow some degree of what I have addressed as "moral complexity." This concept, while not always being endorsed explicitly,

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[361] *Ivi*, p. 185.

appears to be the only way to make sense of supererogatory acts[362]. That is what I called the "the need for complexity," which is the insight that the performance of this category of acts can only be explained by the possibility of different degrees of moral accomplishment. This is, in the first place, a theoretical effort. What distinguishes my theory of supererogation from the others is that I have provided a multi-leveled moral structure by endorsing moral pluralism. Not only this but also, in the first part of the book, I suggest that pluralism can better explain our moral experience in light of a phenomenological analysis. This reveals how "the need for complexity" is a demand shared by other spheres of ethical research, and its endorsement can become helpful for other explanatory purposes.

It might be clear, at this point, why pluralism is taken to be, in the present work, the key to interpreting both moral experience and supererogation. I hold that pluralism represents a sort of "inference to the best explanation"[363] of many relevant questions of ethics. As I have illustrated, 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[364]. If this normative theory can adequately answer more questions relevant to ethics than other possible alternatives can, it is the moral theory to be preferred. Again, this justifies the adoption of the moral approach I labeled "moral complexity." This approach is primarily concerned with acknowledging the

[362] It has been noticed that the concept of supererogation traditionally refers to the explanation of peculiar acts. This has generally ruled out virtue theories that traditionally focus on character traits. Briefly, since supererogatory acts entangled with the concept of duty and virtue theories lack such a theoretical detail (they hardly take into consideration the concept of duty), supererogation cannot be easily conceived. Attempts to address the issue from the point of view of virtue theories are not missing (see, in particular, D. Heyd, *Can Virtue Ethics Account for Supererogation?*, in C. Cowley [ed.], *Supererogation*, «Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement», LXXVII, 2015), but the issue is not directly addressed by this theoretical approach. One reason for this is that virtue theories discuss moral excellence in a very different way (as in L.T. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017). In fact, excellence is generally considered an ideal or a benchmark for the moral agent. This, however, does not prevent the requests of morality from eventually becoming overdemanding. I have addressed this issue (and the consequent possibility for supererogation) here: S. Grigoletto, *Following the Wrong Example. The Exclusiveness of Heroism and Sanctity*, «Ethics & Politics», XX (2), 2018, pp. 89-108.

[363] G. Harman, *The Inference to the Best Explanation*, «Philosophical Review», LXXV, 1965, pp. 88-95.

[364] 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.

different dimensions of complexity typical of morality: the moral experience of the moral agent, the need for a pluralist moral system, and the existence of complex moral concepts[365]. The founding belief of this approach is the avoidance of any sort of indebted theoretical oversimplification. In addition, moral phenomena have always had precedence over moral theorizing. In this regard the explanatory potential of the pluralist approach ultimately explains the moral structure endorsed in this work. This is why I think that the case of supererogation can be solved "only through moral complexity."

[365] 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.

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ONLY THROUGH COMPLEXITY
MORALITY AND THE CASE OF SUPEREROGATION

Simone Grigoletto

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