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SUPEREROGATION, WRONGDOING, AND VICE:
ON THE AUTONOMY OF THE ETHICS OF VIRTUE*

IT is agreed by most philosophers that an adequate ethical theory must include both a theory of right conduct and a theory of virtue. Yet there has been surprisingly little discussion of what forms the connections between these two theories may take. In this paper I will try to show that the fit between the two may be fairly loose. In particular, I will try to show that there need be no close relationship between views about what motives are vicious and views about what conduct is wrong.¹

I first establish that judgments of the viciousness of particular motives do not necessarily presuppose judgments of the wrongness of particular acts. Then I turn to a discussion of the general looseness of fit between standards of vice and principles of wrongdoing. Here I suggest a contrast between the intimate and personal nature of vice, on the one hand, and the public and social nature of wrongdoing, on the other. Taken as a whole, I hope that this paper will help to encourage a fuller discussion of the complex relations between the theory of the right and the theory of virtue.

I will approach the issue of the relation between wrongdoing and vice indirectly, via a discussion of supererogation and its connections with virtue and vice.

I

It might be thought that the contrast between those acts which are obligatory and those which are supererogatory, or good to do but not required, could be drawn roughly in the following way:

- (O) An obligatory act is an act whose performance is required and whose omission is forbidden.
- (S) A supererogatory act is an act whose performance is recommended but not required and whose omission is permitted rather than forbidden.

* I would like to thank Susan Wolf, Gerald Postema, Thomas E. Hill, Jr., and Arne Gray for very helpful discussion on this and related topics. I am grateful to Laurence Thomas for suggesting to me the need for the comments at the beginning of section IV. Finally, I would like to thank Stephanie Talbott, without whose contributions this paper would not have been written.

¹ For want of a better term, I will use 'vicious' as the contrary of 'virtuous', as 'vice' is the contrary of 'virtue'. As I emphasize below in section III, not every shortcoming in motivation is so great as to be vicious, any more than every shortcoming in character is so great as to be a vice.

Now, given such *deontic* characterizations, it is plausible to think that blame for failure to perform is appropriate only when the act in question is obligatory and not when it is merely supererogatory.² It is also plausible to think that there is an essential connection between *blame* and *excuse* of roughly this sort: excuses function essentially to deflect blame for failure to perform. Given these assumptions, it follows that excuses are never appropriately made for failure to perform a supererogatory act. They are inappropriate because no excuse is ever necessary for omitting to do what is merely good to do but not required.

II

There is a certain phenomenon in our shared, common-sense morality which seems puzzling in light of this conclusion. I will describe it and then show how the puzzle may be resolved. This puzzle is of interest primarily because its resolution allows us, first, to identify and explore some of the deeper connections between supererogation and vice, overlooked by the purely deontic characterizations, and, second, because its resolution then encourages us to examine more carefully the relation between wrongdoing and vice.

Sometimes we are challenged to perform acts that are good to do but not required, by individuals who plainly are already committed to performing them. Challenges to join in the support of a charitable enterprise are often of this sort: "Would you help us with the telethon this year?" or, "Would you join us in a march against birth defects?" More dramatic challenges, challenges to take up the life of commitment to others, may also be of this sort: "Why don't you join the Peace Corps with me?" or "Join the Lincoln Brigade with me, and we'll fight the Fascists together."

Although the line between supererogation and obligation in common-sense morality is vague and imprecise, I assume that none of these actions is such that morality would ordinarily be said to require its performance and forbid its omission. Instead, these actions are commonly regarded as supererogatory.

However, even though what we are challenged to do is supererogatory, we frequently respond by offering what seem to be *excuses*: "Sorry, I'm busy that day," "I'm afraid I don't have any cash on me," "I'm already tied down to a job." We seem often to feel uncomfortable or even ashamed that we are unwilling to do more than is re-

² I do not claim that if an act is obligatory then it must always be appropriate publicly to *express* blame for failure to perform it. Who has a right to express blame, and when, is a distinct moral question.

quired of us, to “go the extra mile.” So much so, in fact, that we often make one of the above excuses even when it isn’t true.

But if what we are challenged to do is supererogatory, it would suffice to say, politely, “No thanks, I’m not in the mood” or “No thanks, I’m interested in saving up for a new tennis racket” or “No thanks, I like my current job too much.” Yet these replies seem somehow infelicitous.

The puzzle is simply that, on the assumptions I made in section I, excuses of the former, more felicitous sort must be inappropriate because unnecessary. Yet they seem perfectly in order. How can this be?

There are of course a number of ways of discounting this putatively puzzling phenomenon, but none of them seems entirely convincing. For example, one might insist that these excuses are in fact appropriate because the acts we are challenged to do are instances of *imperfect* duties. The excuses described above thus serve to show that nothing can be inferred from this failure to act about whether I will on sufficiently many other occasions act charitably. But the same sort of puzzle arises when the agent has obviously done even more than is necessary to fulfill the common-sense requirements of imperfect duty. Perhaps the neighborhood “organizer” challenges me, knowing full well how much volunteer work I’m doing already. Yet “I gave last week” or “I’m too tired” or even “I’ve already done all I’m required to do” still may seem inadequate and infelicitous as replies. One may still feel embarrassed to use them, and be inclined to offer the other, more felicitous “excuses” I have described instead. This is especially true when the challenger himself is plainly going beyond the call of duty.

In short, we seem often to be concerned that morally significant others not disapprove or think less well of us. The “excuses” I have described thus do seem to function, at least in part, as excuses: they seem to serve, paradoxically, as attempts to deflect imputations of blame for failure to act.

III

I conclude that the phenomenon I have described is indeed puzzling. In this section I propose a resolution of the puzzle which will serve ultimately to reveal the looseness of some of the connections between wrongdoing and vice.

There are at least two types of negative moral judgments that take persons as their objects: negative *deontic* judgments of the person and negative *aretaic* judgments of the person. The former logically presuppose judgments about the wrongness of some particular act of the agent’s. Judgments of blameworthiness are paradigm examples: they

logically presuppose a judgment of the wrongness of the act for which the agent is held blameworthy. Judgments of culpability, fault, or negligence, and judgments of responsibility for reparations, are also deontic judgments of the person.

Negative aretaic judgments of the person presuppose a judgment about the viciousness of some conative or affective state of the agent's. They are of two kinds: those which presuppose judgments about the viciousness of standing traits or dispositions, and those which presuppose judgments about the viciousness of occurrent motives or states. Judgments about what a bad person someone is, or about how cowardly or dishonest a person he is, are aretaic judgments of the first sort. Judgments about how inconsiderate someone was on a certain occasion or about how insensitive, dishonest, or cowardly it was *of him* to do what he did are aretaic judgments of the person of the second sort. A judgment about the viciousness of some standing trait is a judgment about a vice, or a general flaw in the agent's moral *character*. A judgment about the viciousness of some occurrent motive is a judgment only about a flaw in what I call the agent's *motivational structure* on some particular occasion.³

The judgment that there are vicious elements in an agent's motivational structure on a given occasion of course does not imply that his character is vicious in some respect. One may act insensitively on a given occasion (when under great stress, for example) and yet be acting entirely out of character. In what follows, I will focus primarily on those aretaic judgments of the person which presuppose attributions of viciousness to the agent's motivational structure on a given occasion; and I will use phrases like 'aretaic judgments', or 'judgments of vice' to refer only to these. It is an interesting question, which I will not discuss here, to what extent my conclusions can be generalized to aretaic judgments about traits and the judgments of the person based on these.

Now it is easy to resolve the puzzle. If an act is supererogatory, then, I suppose, no negative *deontic* judgments can appropriately be made of the person who fails to perform it. In particular, the agent cannot appropriately be blamed. But it does not follow that no negative *aretaic* judgment can appropriately be made; for the agent may still have acted from a less-than-virtuous motive or, it seems, even a

³ A description of the agent's moral *character* includes a description of the agent's standing traits or dispositions to choose, act, and feel in various ways. A description of the agent's *motivational structure* on a given occasion is a description of what occurrent motives, feelings, etc. were at work in the agent on that occasion, what their relative strengths were, and how they were related to each other. I will sometimes use 'motives' as shorthand for 'motives, feelings, attitudes, etc.'.

vicious motive. In the cases of "excuse" making I have described above, for example, we seem to be concerned that we not appear to lack a certain moral seriousness: we do not want to appear to be acting frivolously, insensitively, or callously. The felicitous "excuses" I have described function to deflect such negative judgments about our motives and the aretaic judgments of the person grounded in them, rather than to deflect blame or other deontic judgments of the person.⁴

This resolution indicates that the deontic characterization of supererogatory action may be both misleading and incomplete. It is misleading if it is taken (together with the two assumptions I mentioned at the end of part I) to imply that no negative judgment of the person of any sort can be grounded on the omission of a supererogatory act. Negative aretaic judgments may be quite in order, as I have suggested.⁵

The deontic characterization of *obligation* is at least complete in this respect: it is possible to see how failure to do what is obligatory, on this characterization, may provide grounds for some critical judgment of the person, viz., a deontic judgment. The deontic character-

⁴ Aretaic excuses seem to function differently from deontic excuses in some respects. Generally a deontic excuse functions to deflect blame by disrupting the inference from the wrongness of the *act* to the blameworthiness of the agent. One way in which this may be done is by claiming that the act was radically out of character: the agent was too upset, or too angry, or under too much stress, perhaps, to appreciate what he was doing. He would never have done such a thing had he "been himself," we say.

If aretaic excuses were to function in a parallel fashion, they would generally function to deflect an attribution of viciousness to the person by disrupting the inference from the viciousness of his *motive* to the viciousness of the agent. But, as I indicate below in my discussion of the liberal model (sec. v), the connection between a person's motives and his self is generally too close to make such a disruption very plausible. We do not seem to think that it was any the less vicious, insensitive, or cruel of the agent to do what he did just because he was too upset or too angry to think clearly about it. (Such excuses may, however, function to block the rather different inference, from a vicious motivational structure on a given occasion to a general flaw of character.)

There is another strategy which may work equally well in both cases: redescribing the object of the original judgment (act or motive) so that it is no longer reasonable to regard it as wrong or vicious. If we become convinced that the agent acted or spoke in ignorance, for example, we may withdraw the judgment that his act was wrong, or that his motive was vicious. Here the judgment of the person is deflected because the very judgment of act or motive on which it was grounded is defeated.

⁵ Even in the privacy of our own conscience, we are sometimes hesitant to refrain from what is supererogatory because of what we think that choice would say to *ourselves* about the depth and sincerity of our moral commitment. Notice that this hesitation comes from a concern with character and motive, and not just from a concern over the act, conceived independently of motive, and our culpability for it. This issue requires much more discussion. See, for example, Thomas E. Hill, Jr.'s very interesting paper, "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments," *Environmental Ethics*, v (Fall 1983): 211-224.

ization of supererogatory action, on the other hand, provides no such connection with judgments of the person. It is incomplete, as any deontic characterization of such acts must be, precisely because it disregards the way in which negative aretaic judgment is connected with failure to do what is supererogatory.

Moral saints and moral heroes are typically people who are always willing to help those in need, even at great risk or inconvenience to themselves. They are responsive to moral considerations in general, and usually to altruistic considerations in particular, even when they don't have to be. They are always willing to go the extra mile.

We may think of such noble and selfless individuals as more or less faithful renditions of an ideal type, which I will call *the fully virtuous person*. The fully virtuous person is willing to do both what morality requires and what it only recommends, and has whatever supporting traits are sufficient to maintain this commitment in human beings.⁶

Now, on this characterization, there is a straightforward connection between supererogation and virtue, since the fully virtuous person is always willing to do more than just what's required. It is the deeper connections between vice and failure to do what is supererogatory to which I wish to draw attention.

To begin with, it seems clear that the deliberate omission of a supererogatory act on a given occasion entails that the agent's motivational structure on that occasion falls short of that which the ideal, fully virtuous person would display. I will say that such an omission reveals a *shortcoming* in the agent's motivational structure on that occasion. Not every shortcoming is actually vicious, however.

Moreover, if my earlier account of excuses was correct, then whether a shortcoming is so great as to constitute a genuine *defect*, a vicious flaw in motivation, depends in large part on the sorts of reasons the agent has for omission. The more felicitous excuses I have described above seem to be those which, if true, serve to deflect the imputation of a vicious or genuinely defective motive. The more infelicitous excuses that we are embarrassed to give are precisely

⁶ Such traits might include: self-discipline, strength of will, optimism in the face of difficulties, and resilience in the face of failure. I should note that it may well not be possible to do *all* that morality recommends. The fully virtuous person, I take it, is willing to perform some maximally compossible subset of all such acts. I will ignore this qualification in what follows.

On pain of circularity, my characterization of this ideal type does presuppose that supererogatory and obligatory actions may be identified without reference to what a fully virtuous person would do. This seems plausible as an assumption about common-sense morality. [But see John Kekes, "Moral Sensitivity," *Philosophy*, LIX, 227 (January 1984): 3–19.] I do not claim that this characterization constitutes a complete account of the common-sense conception of a fully virtuous person, however.

those which would reveal such a defect in motivation on the occasion in question.

IV

I have argued that there is a deeper, negative connection between supererogation, on the one hand, and virtue and vice, on the other: The choice to refrain from doing what is good but not required may reveal not merely a shortcoming but a genuine defect, a vicious shortcoming, in the agent's motivational structure on the relevant occasion. My first claim about the looseness of fit between wrongdoing and vice follows directly: a particular motive may be vicious even though the action to which it gives rise is entirely permissible. Not every judgment of viciousness presupposes a judgment that the agent has done wrong; and not every negative aretaic judgment of the person need also be a negative deontic judgment of the person.

Now it might be thought that this first claim about the looseness of fit between wrongdoing and vice was trivial. After all, it might be said, it has always been obvious that one could do the right things for the wrong reasons. I may intend to ruin Ralph's reputation by telling others of his sordid past, for example, and succeed only in procuring him their sympathy and support. Or Mayor Daley may donate money to an orphanage, intending only to manipulate public opinion before the upcoming election. Or again, by my refusal to rush into a burning building to save a child, I may reveal that, on this occasion, anyway, I place my own welfare above that of the helpless victims of ill fortune.

In point of fact, however, none of these standard cases of "doing the right thing for the wrong reasons" provides any support for my claim at all.

This is clearest in the third case. I claim that a permissible act may reveal a *vice*. But my refusal to save the child shows not a genuine *defect* in my motivational structure, but only a shortcoming. I have failed to do what the fully virtuous person would do; and so, more or less trivially, my motivation falls short of the ideal. But my priorities are still not *viciously* ordered.

In the other two cases there is still a connection below the surface between the vicious motive and some wrongful act. In the first case, the viciousness of the motive seems plainly to be borrowed from the wrongness of the act *intended*, even if, through no fault of the agent's, so to speak, this intended act is never completed. In the second case, the agent does what is permissible (donating money) as a means to performing some wrongful action (deceiving the public about his virtue, or, perhaps, manipulating public opinion). I suggest that virtually all the standard cases of doing the right thing for the wrong reason are cases in which the viciousness of the motive (if it really is

vicious and not just short of perfect) is borrowed in some such way from the wrongness of some action the agent does or intends. In the standard cases, therefore, the incongruity between the positive deontic status of the action and the negative aretaic status of the motive is only apparent. The existence of such cases does not help to establish my first claim.

What would cases look like which did support my claim, cases in which there was no direct connection at all between vice and wrongdoing? Cases of one sort I have already mentioned: I may refuse to join in some charitable effort, giving as my reason a complete lack of interest in the particular cause in question, or perhaps my concern to pursue some comparatively trivial personal desire instead. Or, I may refuse brusquely or rudely, slamming the door in your face. In such cases as these, you may well judge that my *motive* for choosing not to help is vicious—a callous, insensitive, and uncaring attitude toward those in need; and indeed that it was callous, insensitive, and uncaring *of me* to refrain for the reasons I did. Yet by hypothesis my choice not to help out was permissible.

Of course it may be that rudely *expressing* my refusal to help is wrong. Indeed, perhaps any public statement, however polite, of my true, selfishly trivial reasons for not helping is wrong because it is belittling or offensive to my challenger.⁷ But my refusal to help is itself permissible; and the crucial point here about my public statement (wrongful or not) is what it reveals about my motives for the entirely permissible choice not to help in the first place. Your judgment about my viciousness in publicly stating my refusal may be a deontic judgment of the person; but your judgment about my viciousness in choosing not to help in the first place, is not. The motive that gave rise to my negative choice is vicious, even though *the choice itself* is not wrong, intended to be wrong, a means to what is wrong, etc.

Parenthetically it is worth pointing out that, if this defect in motivational structure reflects a standing trait, then the agent may well also be guilty of a certain *hypocrisy*. Imagine that his concern for the well-being of others regularly vanishes when his obligations come to an end, to be replaced by a disposition to coldly calculated self-interest. Then we may reasonably suspect that what altruistic concern he seems to display in fulfilling his obligations is itself really a sham. In all likelihood, real concern for others is not defined by the same boundaries that define our obligations. Conscientious such an agent may be. But, we suspect, he is conscientious as the Pharisees described in the

⁷ I am grateful to Stephen Darwall for pointing this out.

New Testament were conscientious. He swerves not one jot from what the law requires, but has no real human concern in his heart. This hypocrisy is also a vice, a genuine defect of *character*, which might be revealed in—and perhaps only in—the consistent refusal to do what is beyond duty. On the other hand, if the agent continues to exhibit altruistic concern (e.g., in the form of expressions of sympathy or feelings of regret) despite regular refusals to do what is supererogatory, we may suspect that his concern, though genuine, is weak or superficial, insufficient to move him to action without the additional spur of moral obligation. This superficiality seems to me also to be something we commonly regard as a vice, primarily displayed in the failure to do what is supererogatory.

Yet another sort of case that supports the divorce of vice from wrongdoing is the case in which I stand on my rights. I take it that when I say, “I had every right to act as I did,” or, “I was within my rights,” what I say is true only if what I have done was not forbidden, and so only if what I might have done instead was not obligatory.⁸ Nonetheless, when our moral obligations are highly conventionalized, such assertions may function to deflect moral criticism. Suppose, for example, that I refuse to forgive you a debt, even though I know you need the money a good bit more than I do; or suppose that I decide to sell my house to the highest bidder rather than to the people who need it most, when their bid is only a few thousand dollars less. Our shared moral convictions indicate that these are surely permissible choices. In response to criticism, I might correctly point out, “I had every right to do what I did.”

Here, as in section II above, however, I suggest that such a response blocks only negative *deontic* judgment of the person and his motivational structure. If I really am within my rights to do these things, you cannot correctly say of me what you can say of Shylock: that what he proposes to do is really wrong, but that he has chosen to ignore his real obligations when his desire for revenge is thereby served; or, perhaps, that he is twisting the moral rules to serve his own impermissible ends. What is objectionable in the two cases I mentioned above is that the agent expresses a narrowly legalistic attitude toward morality by asserting his rights in such cases. It is not that what he *does* is wrong, considered independently of its motive; for our

⁸ The quoted claims are in one respect ambiguous: they mean, “I was not obligated to do anything else,” or they may mean, “Others were obligated not to interfere with my doing as I did.” Meant in the former way, such claims entail that I was morally permitted to do as I did. Meant in the latter way, they probably do not. I suggest that, when these claims are made defensively, in response to moral criticism of what was done, they are meant in the former way. The agent seeks to deflect criticism by saying, in effect, “I don’t *have* to do that if I don’t want to.”

common-sense principles of moral obligation *are* narrow and legalistic here. Nevertheless, the agent reveals a genuinely vicious motivation in his coldly calculated insistence on what is rightfully his.⁹

This particular defect in the agent's motivational structure, again, is especially striking because it can be revealed *only* in a refusal to do what is supererogatory. The agent I have in mind reveals a vicious or defective motivational structure precisely because he is willing on the occasion in question to do only what morality requires him to do, and no more. If he is challenged to do any more on that occasion, he stands on his rights.

In the cases I have described, the incongruity between deontic and aretaic judgments is deep. There is no underlying connection here between the viciousness of the agent's motive and the wrongness of any act that he performs or intends, now or in the future.

v

Thus far I have argued only that there is a fairly loose fit between particular aretaic judgments of motive and judgments about the wrongness of particular acts. Perhaps there is still a general but indirect connection between wrongdoing and vice. Perhaps what makes a motive vicious is that it is the *type* of trait which either involves or tends to produce acts that are wrong. This view, after all, is compatible with my claim that in a particular case a vicious motive may manifest itself in a permissible act. A certain degree of insensitivity may motivate me to refuse to go beyond my duty. But, on the view at hand, insensitivity of that degree may actually be a vice only if in general it is also connected with doing wrong, and not merely with omitting to do what is supererogatory. This view allows, of course, that mere shortcomings in motivation need have no special connection with wrongdoing. What it insists on is that no shortcoming may be so objectionable as to be vicious unless it has some general if indirect connection with wrongdoing.¹⁰

⁹ One might be inclined to say that the agent ought not assert his rights in such a case. This raises some difficult issues. It seems to me that this may just be a way of saying that only a viciously motivated person would do so. If this is right, then if there is a judgment of wrongdoing here, it is itself derivative from a prior judgment of vice, rather than the converse. I think the same point may be made, *mutatis mutandis*, about a possibility suggested to me by Gerald Postema: that what is impermissible here is something like "doing-what-one-has-a-right-to-do-for-cold-hearted-reasons." I have discussed the notion of derivative judgments of wrongdoing, in my "Virtue, Action, and the Good Life: Toward a Theory of the Virtues," unpublished.

¹⁰ In what follows I am adopting a relatively "fine-grained" criterion for individuating motives, so that different degrees of, e.g., insensitivity or cruelty count as qualitatively distinct motives. This sort of criterion is the most useful in the present context, given my characterizations of the fully virtuous person, the fully virtuous motivational structure, and the relevant continua.

In this section I will argue that the view I have just described is mistaken. There is in fact an important looseness in the general fit between standards of vice and principles of wrongdoing as well.

I assume that there are various motivational structures that a given agent might display on a certain occasion of choice. I assume further that these structures can be arranged in rough order along a continuum, beginning with the fully virtuous motivational structure, and proceeding down through structures with ever greater shortcomings.¹¹ A *standard of vice* then indicates for a broad range of occasions at what points along these continua that agent's shortcomings become so great as to become genuine defects, vicious motivational flaws.

Now intuitively it seems as though with the description of a given set of fully virtuous motivational structures and the corresponding continua of shortcomings there could be associated any one of a number of standards of vice, ranging from the harsh and demanding to the tolerant, if not lax. A harsh standard of vice might insist that almost any shortcoming, however slight, was vicious. A tolerant standard might hold that only very substantial shortcomings, far along the continua, were vicious.

Principles of wrongdoing indicate what sorts of action under what sorts of circumstance are wrong, forbidden by morality. Now it also seems plausible to think that principles of wrongdoing may vary in degree of harshness, and so some will require what others merely recommend; but I will not pursue this more complex matter here. What I want to show is rather that *standards of vice may legitimately vary in degree of harshness even if principles of wrongdoing remain fixed.*

Consider what I will call a *liberal model* of social morality. On this model, valid deontic principles must all be public and conventional; but valid standards of vice are to a large extent private or personal.¹² More precisely, this model endorses the following principles:

(1) Conventionalism with respect to the deontic realm. On the liberal model of social morality I have in mind, an act is wrong only if the conventions of the relevant society identify its performance as

¹¹ The description of the set of all possible fully virtuous motivational structures for a given agent can for our purposes be regarded as identical with the description of the fully virtuous person which is relevant for that agent. If there are many ways to fall short of the relevant ideal, then there will be many such continua for any given agent and occasion; and the standard of vice will correspondingly be multi-branched.

¹² So far as I can see, nothing in my discussion of the liberal model turns on whether it is interpreted as involving an actual-conventionalist view or an ideal-conventionalist view like ideal rule utilitarianism. So long as the model maintains that valid deontic principles must be social or conventional, but that valid standards of vice need not be, it won't matter for my argument whether it maintains that the relevant conventions must be actual or that they must be ideal.

blameworthy. An act is supererogatory only if those conventions exempt failure to perform it from blame. Deontic principles of wrongdoing, other deontic principles of action, and the standards for deontic judgments of the person are, on this model of social morality, all conventional in analogous ways.

(2) Liberalism with respect to the aretaic realm. On the liberal model, the ideal of the fully virtuous person and the related ideal of a fully virtuous motivational structure are both fixed by deontic principles in the manner described above, and shortcomings in motivation are to be arranged along suitable continua. Within these broad, socially established parameters, however, individuals are free to accept harsh or tolerant standards of vice for themselves, as they see fit. The ideal of virtue is public, on this model, but the standard of vice is largely private.

The liberal model I am describing supports these views by making the following two assumptions:

(A) Outward action is public. The question of how to treat outward actions, the model claims, is a social question. Outward actions are in principle and usually in practice public. Hence the question can always be raised of how others should react to them: are they to blame the agent for what has been done? encourage him? say to him and to each other that he has only done what can in reason be expected? tolerate what he has done? condemn it? praise it? adopt an indifferent attitude toward it?¹³

(B) Inward motives are private. Judgments of viciousness (and the aretaic judgments of the person grounded on them), it is supposed, have a peculiarly intimate character which judgments of wrongdoing (and the deontic judgment of the person based on them) lack. Judgments of vice are not simply judgments about *what one does*, publicly; so aretaic judgments of the person are not grounded simply on judgments of one's public behavior. Judgments of viciousness and the attendant judgments of the person are, unavoidably, deeper judgments about *what one is*.

This assumption seems plausible. After all, it may be possible to discover or create a distance between veridical deontic judgments, based as they are on outward action, and one's conception of one's "true self." Then judgments of wrongdoing or even of blameworthiness won't necessarily reflect badly on what one "truly is," inwardly. "That's only how I am on the outside," one may say to oneself.¹⁴

¹³ Some of these are questions to be settled by reference to deontic principles (e.g., principles of wrongdoing or of supererogation), whereas others can be settled only by reference to standards for deontic judgments of the person.

¹⁴ Cf. B. F. Skinner's discussion of "the inner man" in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Knopf, 1971).

Indeed, it becomes even more plausible if deontic judgments of the person are conceived simply as judgments about one's liability to further social "punishment" or one's obligations to compensate the victims of one's wrongdoing; or perhaps just as expressions of social disapproval of one's unexcused behavior. Judgments of wrongdoing and the attendant deontic judgments of the person thus may indeed fail always to catch hold of "the true self."¹⁵

The case seems quite different on any reasonable view of judgments of viciousness and the consequent aretaic judgments of the person. It would be very difficult for a sane human being systematically to discover or to create any such distance between veridical judgments of these types and his view of his own inner self.

On the liberal model, then, judgments of wrongdoing and blameworthiness are seen as superficial; whereas judgments of viciousness, both of motives and of persons, are seen as typically cutting deep with respect to one's conception of "one's true self".

Given assumption (A), the liberal model asserts, it is plausible to conceive of deontic standards and principles as conventional guides which tell us how to respond to the overt behavior of others. Likewise, given assumption (B), the liberal model conceives of judgments and standards of vice as by and large too intimate a matter for public scrutiny.¹⁶ In a society that instantiated this model, one might say to a close friend, "What you did was certainly within your rights; but I have to say that your motives were far from ideal. You can even call them vicious, if you think that; but it's not for me to judge."¹⁷

¹⁵ However deontic judgments of the person are understood, obviously judgments of blameworthiness must not entail judgments of viciousness if the liberal model is to be coherent. It seems reasonable enough to take this for granted, however, since some of the "excuses" that serve to deflect judgments of viciousness do not necessarily serve also to deflect judgments of blameworthiness. See above, fn 4.

¹⁶ The objection may be raised that, although the mere having of a motive is not necessarily public, its expression in action is. But standards of vice are first and foremost standards for evaluating motives, although (as Hume insisted) they certainly can support derivative judgments of action. Moreover, so long as a relatively complete set of deontic principles is already in place, the actions in which moral or immoral motives are expressed may be judged publicly according to these principles. A single, socially established standard of vice is not necessary *in addition* to public deontic principles in order to settle the question of how it is appropriate to treat behavior that expresses moral motives. Of course a morality that included only such deontically grounded judgments about acts would be highly impoverished, for it would address acts largely without reference to the moral quality of their motives. This was Mill's criticism of Bentham's moral theory in his "Essay on Bentham."

¹⁷ The objection may also be raised that there is no rational basis for choosing one standard of vice over another once these standards are cut loose from principles of wrongdoing. But I suspect that, if legitimate standards of vice are individualized as the liberal model maintains they are, it is a matter of discovery rather than of choice which standard commands one's allegiance. How demanding a standard one holds oneself to,

This is the most extreme liberal model of wrongdoing and vice. There is a more attractive version of the model which is a bit more conservative and yet retains the substance of the liberal notions. This more conservative model assumes, to use the language of the law, that there is an “overriding public interest” in setting a *lower limit* to private standards of vice, such that, at the very least, any trait suitably connected with serious wrongdoing must count as a vice.

Perhaps there really is an overriding public interest in this close a tie between judgments linked directly to one’s self-concept, and acts of wrongdoing. But even if this is so, defenders of liberal notions may still maintain that whether one is committed to any standard of vice harsher than this minimalist standard, is—and should remain—an entirely private matter.

I do not think that the liberal model is accurate as a *descriptive* model for our current shared morality. Nevertheless, there are certainly liberal strands in our shared moral thought.¹⁸ Indeed, I believe that the liberal model may have significant explanatory power.¹⁹

The liberal model, however, relies essentially on the notion of a private aretaic standard. If this notion seems unacceptable, we can

here as elsewhere in life, probably depends on how invested one is in the projects in question and how tolerant one tends to be of one’s own failings. To the extent that finding a standard of vice for oneself involves choice, therefore, it probably involves the choice to try to modify one’s attitudes toward and investments in morality.

¹⁸ If the liberal model were adopted as a bit of revisionary theory, then of course certain of the aretaic judgments I discussed in earlier sections could appropriately be made only by the agent himself. Although this would complicate my exposition in those sections considerably, I do not believe it would materially affect the points I make there. See above, note 5.

¹⁹ For example, it may explain the asymmetry between the harsh judgments that saintly and heroic people tend to make of their own failures to live up to very high ideals of virtue, on the one hand, and the inclination that the rest of us have respectfully to refrain from judging these failures at all, on the other. There are undoubtedly other explanations for why we are generally reluctant to express or even to make negative aretaic judgments of saintly and heroic people. (Cf., e.g., the higher-order deontic principle suggested by *Matthew* 8: 3, “Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye but considerest not the beam that is in thy own eye?”, and other similar New Testament passages.) But at most these explanations account for only one half of the asymmetry in negative judgments.

Any explanation that accounts for both halves of the phenomenon must show how it is that saints and heroes may legitimately evaluate their motives and conduct by a standard that is plainly harsher than that which the rest of us recognize as legitimate in our own case. It is difficult to see how any explanation can do this without assuming that legitimate moral standards or principles can be private at least some of the time. The liberal model, in its less extreme form, shows, as well as any other I can think of, how and when to draw the line between the public and the private domains in moral judgment. A fuller discussion of the differences between the saintly life and the life of commitment to a merely personal ideal, including some remarks on the continuity between the lives we ordinary people try to lead and the lives saints and heroes try to lead, is contained in my “Supererogation and the Moral ‘Must’,” unpublished.

drop it and still retain the fundamental insight that the liberal model expresses about the looseness of fit between vice and wrongdoing. I will call the model I have in mind here *the moralistic model*; for it insists that not just outward conduct but also inward vice and virtue can appropriately be subjected to public scrutiny. On this model, deontic principles, deontic standards, and standards of vice are all conventional. Nevertheless, the liberal model and the moralistic model agree that fixing the first two does not necessarily fix standards of vice.

On the moralistic model, therefore, these standards may vary in degree of harshness from society to society, while the deontic principles and standards remain unchanged. Using the moralistic model allows us to express the liberal insight in a more general way: principles of wrongdoing and standards of vice may be conceived as serving very different functions. Principles of wrongdoing tell us when we are permitted to disregard the pronouncements of morality and when we are forbidden to do so, and what the social moral consequences of our respecting or ignoring these pronouncements will be. Standards of vice tell us how our motives in doing these things are to be assessed and, by implication, how these motives reflect on what we are. Nor need these functions be related in any simple way, such that, e.g., one's motives are virtuous so long as one is inclined to do only what is permissible, and one's motives are vicious only if one is inclined to do what is wrong. How good one's motives are, and how good it is *of one* to act on them, depends not simply on the deontic status of what one is moved to do, but on what kind of sensitivity to moral considerations one's motives express. On either the liberal model or the moralistic model, therefore, standards of vice and principles of wrongdoing need not fit closely together.

In this paper I have argued that judgments of vice, and perhaps even general standards of vice, may have a life of their own: a life which is to a significant extent independent of the guidelines mapped out by judgments and principles of wrongdoing. It should be clear from my argument that I do not here suggest, as some have, that an ethic of virtue can operate with full autonomy, entirely independent of a theory of the right. Nevertheless, I do claim for virtue and vice at least partial autonomy from such a theory.

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