

# 'Saints and Heroes'

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In his article 'Saints and Heroes',<sup>1</sup> Urmson argues that traditional moral theories allow at most for a threefold classification of actions in terms of their worth, and that they are therefore unsatisfactory. Since the conclusion of his argument has led to the widespread use of the term 'acts of supererogation', and since I do not believe that such acts exist, I propose to argue that the actions with which he is concerned not only can, but should, be contained within the traditional classification.

Although Urmson argues in some detail that an adequate theory of morality should allow for 'acts of supererogation', it is possible to express his basic position fairly concisely. Traditional theories of morality, he argues, allow for three classifications of actions, as duties, as permissible, and as wrong. But there are certain facts which cannot be adequately dealt with by such a theory. These facts are that there are some people (describable as saints or heroes) who perform actions which go 'beyond the bounds of duty', and which are saintly or heroic. Urmson's usage of the terms 'saint' and 'hero' may be explained as follows. A person is called a saint if he performs actions far beyond the limits of duty, either by control of contrary inclinations and interest, or effortlessly, and a hero if he performs actions beyond the bounds of duty either by controlling natural fear, or effortlessly. A man would be a saint in this sense if he volunteered to give medical aid in a plague-ridden city. He would be a hero in this sense if he sacrificed his life to save others by throwing himself on a live grenade.

Now, what Urmson thinks is significant about these actions is that, although the agent may consider himself morally bound to perform the action, it is not the case that the action is a duty. We could not tell other soldiers present that they should have acted as the hero did. We could not reproach doctors for failing to go to plague-ridden cities. But, Urmson contends, although such actions are not duties, they are clearly not wrong, and, more significantly, it is inadequate to describe them as permissible, since anyone who performs such actions is worthy of moral praise. If they are worthy of moral praise, however, a moral classification of types of action must include them, and as they do not fall into the traditional three categories, we must add another, that of 'acts of supererogation', actions which are gracious, and inspired by a positive ideal, whereas duty is a

<sup>1</sup> J. O. Urmson, 'Saints and Heroes', in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, A. I. Melden (ed.) (University of Washington Press, 1958).

minimum requirement for living together, and can be exacted as a debt. We should, he concludes, distinguish between two realms of morality, one of duty, which is expressible in rules and can be exacted from all, and a higher realm, where moral assessment of actions is possible, but where those actions cannot be said to be duties.

These, then, are the basic points which Urmson wishes to make. It would be possible to give a detailed criticism of his argument,<sup>2</sup> but this would require also a detailed account of what he says. Consequently, I shall not dwell on what I consider to be a failure on Urmson's part to deal adequately with the moral assessment of motives and agents, as well as actions, nor with what I suspect to be a confusion between *moral* duty and other types of duty. The latter, e.g. duties of a role, of a member of society, and so on, may be readily codifiable. But the much more nebulous set of obligations which we have as people, or moral agents, do not seem to be codifiable in this way. Instead, I shall concentrate on a more positive discussion of commendation, or judgment and action, and of virtues, in an attempt to show that we neither need nor should introduce a higher morality of aspiration (and with it, of course, a lower morality of duty).

### Commendation

According to Urmson's argument, we commend saints and heroes. This commendation could, on different views, be moral or non-moral. If it is non-moral, there is no problem, since the facts Urmson is dealing with concern, in that case, actions which are worthwhile, but not morally so. Perhaps they are aesthetically pleasing. But let us suppose, as Urmson does (correctly), that our commendation is moral. If I endorse someone's behaviour, and regard him as a saint or hero, by which I mean a *morally* good man of a special sort, then what am I saying or doing in commending him? I would suggest that if my commendation *is* genuinely moral, then my genuine act of commendation does commit me to saying that this really is how man ought to be. But if I do have a genuine *moral* view that this is how people ought to be, then I must think that I, and others, ought to live up to this, and regard those who do not as falling short of the moral standard. This does not imply, as Urmson seems to think, that I should go

<sup>2</sup> For instance, I would object to his cursory dismissal of Kant as unable to do justice to the facts. The moral law is imposed upon the agent by his own reason, and any action which the agent holds himself categorically bound to perform is consequently one which is demanded by the moral law and presented through the activity of pure practical reason to the agent, and thus as obligatory not only for him but for all rational agents.

round telling them so, or demanding that they act in heroic or saintly ways. Most of us do not go around demanding that people fulfil Urmson's basic duties such as honesty, even though most of us do believe honesty to be morally required, and dishonesty morally bad. Holding a particular moral view does not have to commit one to preaching it, or to telling others what to do, though of course we often make silent judgments about people. It does, on the other hand, commit one at least to trying to live up to the standards accepted.

This leads to my more detailed consideration of the claim I am defending that we should resist the view that there is a realm of moral aspiration beyond duty (or obligation).

### **Judgment and Action, and the Place of Dispositions**

In distinguishing between a morality of duty and a morality of aspiration, Urmson *is* (as his uneasiness suggests) unnecessarily lowering the concept of duty, and he is, strictly speaking, putting his aspirations or ideals outside morality altogether. For if, in commending those who perform certain sorts of acts, we do *not* commit ourselves to the view that those people are the sort of people *we* ought to be, we are not expressing a *moral* point of view at all. I cannot at the same time say that something is a moral ideal, and feel that I have no sort of obligation to pursue it. Saying that something is a moral ideal is saying that it is something we have some obligation to pursue. That is not the same as saying that if I think I have a special obligation then I must also think that everyone has it. The point is that in praising morally someone who does pursue or reach an ideal, I am committed to saying that that ideal is morally worthwhile. This may seem to concede Urmson's point, which is that ideals are morally worthwhile. But it is not to concede his point that they are not obligatory. In *talking* about morality, we can distinguish two aspects, the agent's actions, and the agent's judgments about ends, about what should be done. In *being* moral agents, we cannot make this as a practical distinction. In acting as we think morally, we are acting in accordance with our judgment about what is worthwhile, whether that be the action itself, or something produced by the action. Our judgments about what is worthwhile are essential to our ability to act morally at all. At the same time, it must be remembered that judgments are genuinely moral ones only if they are limited to action, in the sense that we think that a judgment about the value of some end commits us to saying that a worthwhile end is one which requires the expenditure of effort in the attempt to attain it. Judgments unrelated to any belief that there is a relation between judgment and action are not moral judgments at all. If I think that sacrificing one's life

for others is the supreme moral ideal, but fail to connect this with any belief that I, and others, should pursue that ideal, I am confused.

In relating morality to human need in the way that he does, and in insisting that it must be possible to formulate it in codes, to impose it upon people, and to blame people who don't live up to it, Urmson misses the vital point about morality that it is not a set of socially or legally imposed rules, but that it is something which appears to us in the form of a demand that we should not only avoid doing what is wrong (and Urmson's basic rules rapidly become prohibitions), but also that we should realize certain values that we regard as attainable. If we do not regard them as attainable, then they are not *moral* values—we like them, admire them, wish for them and so forth, but we do not see them as related to human action which might bring them about. If we do regard them as both values and attainable, then to say that we recognize them as moral values *is* to say that we recognize a demand (in the Kantian sense, not a social one) to attempt to attain them. Morality is not just a matter of wondering contemplation, nor is it just a matter of keeping things ticking over at a bearable rate. It is a matter of evaluation and action intertwined, such that our evaluations commit us to action, and our performance of actions in a moral spirit is an attempt to bring about what we regard as worthwhile.

To say, therefore, that someone is a saint or hero, and thereby to express a moral judgment, is to say that that person has succeeded in being what we all ought to be. He *is* realizing the worthwhile through his actions. To say that someone is a saint or hero without believing we ought to be like him is not to express a moral judgment.

These are the bones of the argument. But some expansion is necessary in order to avoid an absurdity the avoidance of which concerns Urmson, and leads him to put forward his theory. This is the absurdity of saying that if we morally admire and emulate the heroic doctor, or the eccentric friar,<sup>3</sup> we commit ourselves to the view that we *all* should seek out plague-ridden cities, or give up all our worldly goods and spend our lives preaching. Now this is not, as Urmson supposes, a necessary consequence of denying that there are acts of supererogation which go beyond the call of duty. I have so far referred several times to the idea that in morally praising the saint and the hero, we are committing ourselves to saying that this is how we, and other people, ought to be. By this I do not mean that we should *do* what the saints and heroes do, but that we must recognize that if we consider such actions susceptible of moral praise, we commit ourselves to saying that what leads to the performance of those actions is part of the

<sup>3</sup> He is concerned, for some reason, with St. Francis and his belief that he should preach to the birds. Surely what is important about St. Francis is his dedicated commitment to the following of Christ and his willingness to do *anything* required by that commitment.

equipment of the morally good person which we should all try to be. What I am getting at, therefore, is that in praising the actions we are praising what lies behind the actions, i.e. dispositions, or, more specifically, particular virtues.

But if we *morally* praise a particular virtue, and do so because we think highly of an action which issues from the possession of that virtue, then although we are not committing ourselves to the performance of those specific actions, we do recognize the necessity of performance of actions which spring from the possession of a high degree of the virtue in question, otherwise our praise is insincere, and our admiration not *moral*.

It is obvious that we cannot be suggesting that we all ought to perform the particular actions in question, for various reasons. If everyone threw themselves on the grenade, the action would become pointless, since the object of saving lives would not be achieved. If we all went to plague-ridden cities, the rest of the world would suffer from the loss of all medically-qualified personnel (if we were not medically-qualified, clearly we should not go, since the presence of the whole world-population would be impossible, and that of many of them a hindrance).

What these two cases have in common, though, is that the doctor and the soldier are both willing to make great sacrifices, even of their lives, for others. Not everyone may believe this to be a morally good thing. Mill might not. But then if one did not think it good, one would not offer moral praise. One could think it brave but misguided, and the praise would have to be tempered by one's adverse opinion of the agent's judgment. But if we *do* think it morally good for someone to sacrifice himself for others, we must in sincerity believe that we too should be sufficiently courageous to perform sacrificial actions. This need not involve giving one's life for others. Many people are more beneficial to others alive rather than dead. But a point that must be made here is that virtues, and actions springing from them, are often relative to the individual. Take, for example, a priest. Many people admire priests for their acceptance of a rule of celibacy. But if we think about it, we can see that this might not be the greatest sacrifice for all priests. One man may love privacy, and have to give it up to share life in a presbytery with possibly uncongenial companions. Another may be extremely squeamish, yet have to accept visiting the sick as part of his duties. Yet another may be pathologically self-conscious, and be aghast at the prospect of standing in a pulpit to preach. So, in deciding to become a priest, each man is prepared to accept something which for him requires the exercise of great courage in its performance. Now if we are going to praise the courage of the celibate, we must in consistency praise the others too. And we are praising them for precisely the same reasons as we praise the doctor and the soldier, because they have enough courage to accept what is morally required of them. It is the courage to accept, then, that we praise, and it is this courage which we commit ourselves to developing or

exercising when we praise the actions of saints and heroes. Since most of us find different things very difficult to do, and since the many and varied actions morality requires of us will therefore need courage, we should all be willing to be brave enough to do what is morally required of us. But this does not suggest that we should all do the same things, only that we should, *morally* should, commit ourselves to a way of life in which we are willing to use all our courage to meet the moral demands which arise for us.

So, if the act of throwing oneself on a grenade requires all the courage the agent has, then in saying this is morally good we are not suggesting that it is right, or even feasible, for people to make a habit of throwing themselves on grenades, but that if that action is morally good, so are actions of any kind which require all the agent's courage. We should not ask whether the action of throwing oneself on a grenade is beyond the call of duty, but whether actions of a certain sort, viz., very brave ones, are beyond the call of duty. And they are not. Clearly we cannot slide out of doing our duty by saying that we are not brave enough. Sometimes we may be excused for a loss of nerve, but we cannot remain cowards all our lives, and use that as an acceptable excuse for fulfilling only the basic requirements of morality.

Urmson's examples tend to involve courage and perhaps gain some plausibility from that until we realize how the many types of actions which are morally required of people so often require great courage. (The agoraphobe who does an elderly neighbour's shopping is just as brave as the heroic soldier. The agoraphobe might even find the death threatened by the grenade less frightening.) But suppose that we tried to use the same argument of actions involving another virtue such as justice or beneficence. A claim to be exonerated from the requirement to be just on the ground that one was temperamentally inclined to partiality would be scoffed at. We are not all required to be just as a judge is, any more than we are required to be brave as soldiers are. But we are all required to be just in non-legal matters, and to be brave in non-military matters. Equally, selfishness doesn't relieve us of the moral requirement to be willing to do things for other people. Courage, though it may seem at first sight to be different, is just as much a requirement of morality as justice and beneficence, and we do all have a duty to expend as much courage as is necessary to fulfil the demands of morality.

What Urmson seems to miss out of morality is its pervasiveness in life. At any time, we could be morally required to do something. Keeping the basic rules is not enough. Now if being moral is living in a good way, we need the virtues which will enable us to live in that way. To be moral, we must not only perform certain specifiable actions, or refrain from others, we must also be people of a certain sort. When, therefore, I praise the doctor or the soldier for his heroic act, and the praise is moral, I am praising him for being the sort of person who does that sort of thing, and

just as consistency and sincerity require me to universalize my ought-judgments, so they require me to universalize my judgments of moral good, but as judgments of character rather than of actions, since we tend to be different sorts of people and to find ourselves in many and varied sorts of situations. Thus heroism will of course be manifested in different ways by different people. But still we ought all to be heroic, that is to be as brave as it is humanly possible for us to be, and thus to perform actions of the same order (though not the same actions) as those considered by Urmson to be beyond the call of duty.

This may appear to be, and perhaps is, an expression of a particular view of the nature of morality, at least in so far as it is seen as largely positive, and often difficult, but it is also the conclusion of the logical point that I cannot consistently and sincerely regard as morally good an action whose *equivalent* with respect to the related virtue I do not consider I ever could or should perform. It follows too from the relation between judgment and action that must be maintained if we are to be real moral agents, i.e. people who both think and act, base their actions on their judgments, and see their judgments as committing them to actions.

In conclusion, then, Urmson could retain his sort of morality of duty by making the realm of aspiration something outside morality altogether, but this is a course he is properly unwilling to take. (Strawson's argument concerning ideals may seem to do that, but really he is making a different sort of point, I think.) Alternatively, Urmson can retain his morality of aspiration by allowing it to be, as I have argued it is, a matter of obligation because it is one of *moral* aspiration: obligation in the proper sense, relating both to what we ought to do, and to what we ought to be. He cannot, by the argument offered, maintain his dichotomy. Thus the trichotomy he sets out to attack stands.

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