

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OBLIGATIONS AND IDEALS?

In this lesson, you'll be learning to:

1. Distinguish between morally neutral, morally obligatory, and supererogatory actions, and give examples of each.
2. Describe the moral ideals of moral saintliness and moral heroism, and discuss their importance in moral life.

GOING BEYOND WHAT'S REQUIRED: SAINTS AND HEROES

So far, we have primarily been discussing **moral obligations**—that is, the sorts of moral norms that morally good people are *required* to adhere to, and the sorts of virtues that *all of us* ought to try and develop. By contrast, **moral ideals** involve actions and attitudes that are morally admirable, but are NOT required. These ideals are closely linked to **supererogatory actions** that

- (1) are neither forbidden nor required by common morality (e.g., it is neither required nor forbidden by the common morality that one donate bone marrow to a stranger),
- (2) exceeds what the common morality requires of us (e.g., common morality might require that we donate bone marrow to help a sibling or child; donating to a stranger *exceeds* this requirement),
- (3) done intentionally to help other people (e.g., you are donating bone marrow *in order to* help a stranger), and
- (4) are morally commendable in and of themselves (e.g., since donating bone marrow really does help others, a donor has done *more* than merely “shown how much they care” or “shown a willingness to sacrifice”).

In many cases, supererogatory actions would be morally required, except for the effort, risk, money, time, or pain involved. Because of this, it's perfectly possible that actions that are supererogatory for some people (e.g., *I'm* not morally obligated to jump in front of a train to save a baby) might be morally obligatory for other people (e.g., *Superman*, if he existed, might be morally required to save the baby). This suggests something like the following “scale” of moral obligation and supererogation¹:

Type	Subtype	Example
Morally Neutral	Doesn't matter	“I'm going to order soup instead of salad.”
Obligation	Strict Obligation	“I am strongly obligated not to throw my hot soup at the wait staff.”
	Weak Obligation	“When I receive good service at a restaurant I am weakly obligated to leave a tip.”
Supererogation	Ideals Beyond the Obligatory	“It would be morally ideal if I took the time to fill out an evaluation praising the waiter's or waitress's excellent service, since I know this will help him or her.”
	Saintly and Heroic Ideals	“It would be saintly if I gave all my money (except the bare minimum needed to live) to fight world hunger, and thus never ate a restaurant again.” “It would be heroic if I ran back into the burning building in an attempt to save the small child who is stuck.”

Moral saintliness requires “regular fulfillment of duty and realization of ideals over time; it demands consistency and constancy.” In the context of medicine, moral saints might plausibly include people who *regularly* take large risks (choosing to spend their lives work with victims of highly contagious infectious disease) or undergo very high costs (moving to the poorest areas of the world) in order to serve their patients. By contrast, **moral heroism** involves a single exceptional action (such as risking death in order to achieve a professional or personal moral ideal). Examples of moral heroes relevant to medicine might include people responding to attacks or natural disasters (when there is still a fair amount of danger), those who take on specific cases despite the risks/costs, or donating large amount of time/money at some particular time or place. Heroes need not be saintlike; all that is required is that, in this moment, they went above and beyond.

WHAT IS MORAL EXCELLENCE? WHY DOES IT MATTER FOR “ORDINARY” PEOPLE?

In the previous section, we suggested that we are NOT *morally obligated* to act heroically, or to live like moral saints. This observation raises another question, however: “If we aren't obligated to act like heroes or saints, what's the point in even thinking about them? Why should I care about moral excellence?” Here are a few reasons:

- **It provides “moral education.”** Focusing on what is morally *best* (and not just on what is morally *required*) can help us lead better personal and professional lives, and will strengthen important relationships (with friends and family, patients, and with other humans

¹ For a detailed introduction to supererogation (and the philosophical debates around it), see David Heyd, “Supererogation,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/supererogation/>. For more on the psychology of moral heroism, see Ervin Staub, “Moral Courage, Heroism and Heroic Rescue,” *Psychology Today*, accessed May 28, 2019, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/in-the-garden-good-and-evil/201203/moral-courage-heroism-and-heroic-rescue>. Finally, for a *skeptical* take on the value of aiming at heroism, see Daniel Callcut, “Why It Is Better Not to Aim at Being Morally Perfect,” *Aeon*, accessed May 28, 2019, <https://aeon.co/essays/why-it-is-better-not-to-aim-at-being-morally-perfect>.

and animals). People who aim for excellence (even if they never achieve it!) improve both their own lives, and the lives of those around them.

- **It helps us see that “being a better person” really is possible.** It can often seem “impossible” or “superhuman” to aim for moral excellence. However, reflecting on the lives and actions of people we morally admire often shows us that it is perfectly possible to lead a happy, productive life while *also* aiming for moral excellence. For example, many health professionals donate time and effort (and sometimes even their whole careers) to serving vulnerable populations. This means, for example, that they often have to work long hours and accept less pay. However, these people generally report being perfectly happy with their choices, and they can still do things like have families, have a nice meal, enjoy movies and books, and so on. (In fact, most studies have suggested such people are actually *happier* than the rest of us, at least on average).
- **It broadens the scope of “morality” and “ethics.”** When one just focuses on “doing the bare minimum”, it’s easy to think that ethics really isn’t that big a part of our professional and personal lives. Reflecting on moral excellence helps us to see that moral choices are *everywhere*, and that morality can provide a comprehensive framework for thinking about “what really matters” in life.
- **It provides a “measure” by which we can judge ourselves.** It’s sometimes very difficult to evaluate our own actions and lives, especially since given the (relatively narrow) group of people with whom we regularly associate. Consciously considering the actions and motivations of moral saints and heroes can provide us with a concrete “yardstick” for evaluating how well *we* are doing.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Give an example of each of the following types of actions (besides those mentioned above): (a) morally neutral actions, (b) morally obligatory actions, and (c) supererogatory actions, and (d) heroic or saintly ideals.
2. Give an example of a person that you would consider a moral hero or moral saint. Explain your answer.
3. Many medical professionals say that they *distrust* healthy adults who volunteer to donate an organ (such as a kidney) to a complete stranger. Why do you think this is? How do you think that medical professionals *ought* to respond when patients express a desire to do something like this?

CASE STUDY: MCFALL V SHIMP²

“Plaintiff, Robert McFall, suffers from a rare bone marrow disease and the prognosis for his survival is very dim, unless he receives a bone marrow transplant from a compatible donor. Finding a compatible donor is a very difficult task and limited to a selection among close relatives. After a search and certain tests, it has been determined that only defendant [Shimp] is suitable as a donor. Defendant refuses to submit to the necessary transplant, and before the court is a request for a preliminary injunction which seeks to compel defendant to submit to further tests, and, eventually, the bone marrow transplant.

...The question posed by plaintiff is that, in order to save the life of one of its members by the only means available, may society infringe upon one's absolute right to his "bodily security"?

The common law has consistently held to a rule which provides that one human being is under no legal compulsion to give aid or to take action to save another human being or to rescue. A great deal has been written regarding this rule which, on the surface, appears to be revolting in a moral sense. Introspection, however, will demonstrate that the rule is founded upon the very essence of our free society. It is noteworthy that counsel for plaintiff has cited authority which has developed in other societies in support of plaintiff's request in this instance. Our society, contrary to many others, has as its first principle, the respect for the individual, and that society and government exist to protect the individual from being invaded and hurt by another. Many societies adopt a contrary view which has the individual existing to serve the society as a whole. In preserving such a society as we have, it is bound to happen that great moral conflicts will arise and will appear harsh in a given instance. In this case, the chancellor is being asked to force one member of society to undergo a medical procedure which would provide that part of that individual's body would be removed from him and given to another so that the other could live. Morally, this decision rests with defendant, and, in the view of the court, the refusal of defendant is morally indefensible. For our law to compel defendant to submit to an intrusion of his body would change every concept and principle upon which our society is founded. To do so would defeat the sanctity of the individual, and would impose a rule which would know no limits, and one could not imagine where the line would be drawn.

This request is not to be compared with an action at law for damages, but rather is an action in equity before a chancellor, which, in the ultimate, if granted, would require the forceable submission to the medical procedure. For a society which respects the rights of one individual, to sink its teeth into the jugular vein or neck of one of its members and suck from it sustenance for another member, is revolting to our hard-wrought concepts of jurisprudence. Forceable extraction of living body tissue causes revulsion to the judicial mind. Such would raise the spectre of the swastika and the Inquisition, reminiscent of the horrors this portends.”

QUESTIONS

- (1) **The court held that Shimp was not legally required to donate bone marrow to McFall, even if this was the only way of saving McFall's life. Do you agree with the court's decision? Why or why not?**
- (2) **As a matter of personal morality, do you think that Shimp was obligated to donate bone marrow? Why or why not?**

² McFall v. Shimp, 10 Pa. D. & C. 3d 90 (Court of Common Pleas 1978).