**Heroic Supererogation**

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**Introduction**

Suppose someone is walking part a burning building and, hearing cries for help from inside puts their life at great risk to save those trapped inside. While many morally praiseworthy actions appear to be morally required, there are some acts of heroism, like this one, that seem to be supererogatory. In other words, there seem to be actions that are morally praiseworthy but are beyond the call of duty. These actions create several puzzles for moral philosophy. In this entry I will introduce two such puzzles that relate to the heroic actions and testimony. I will first introduce the basic idea of supererogation and why some heroic actions give us reason to accept the existence of supererogatory actions. I will then introduce the problem that supererogation raises for moral theory and explain the main responses that have been offered to this problem. I will then explain two related problems that arise from the way that heroes describe their actions and explore how moral philosophers might respond to these problems.

1. **Supererogation: The Basic Idea**

J. O. Urmson began the contemporary discussion of supererogation with his influential essay ‘Saints and Heroes’ (Urmson 1958). Moral theory, according to Urmson, traditionally divides moral actions into moral requirements or duties, moral wrongs and actions that are morally indifferent. A moral duty is an action that we morally ought to perform, such as paying one’s taxes or fulfilling one’s promises. A moral wrong is an action that we ought not to perform, such as lying or murder. A morally indifferent action is one for which it simply does not matter from the moral point of view whether we perform or not, such as the decision to eat mint rather than vanilla flavored ice-cream.

Some heroic actions can be easily accommodated in the existing three-fold division. A doctor who stays by his patients in a plague-ridden city, where most other doctors would flee from fear. The doctor is doing his duty here but counts as heroic as he does his duty in circumstances in which most others would would fail to do so because of fear or weakness of will (Urmson 1958, p.61). There are other heroic actions, though, that cannot be accommodated in the three-fold classification of actions. Urmson describes one such action as follows:

We may imagine a squad of soldiers to be practicing the throwing of live hand grenades; a grenade slips from the hand of one of them and rolls on the ground near the squad; one of them sacrifices his life by throwing himself on the grenade and protecting his comrades with his own body. (Urmson 1958, p.63).

The soldier’s action in this example is morally good and worthy of moral admiration and praise. However, it cannot be classed as a moral duty. Urmson (1958, p.63) gives two reasons for this. First, this action is not one that anyone could reasonably demand from the soldier, while moral duties are actions that we can demand that people perform (See Archer 2016a, p.183; Darwall 2006, p.96; Mill 2001, p.69 for further support of this claim). Second, this action is not one for which the soldier would be blameworthy for failing to perform, while moral duties are actions for which we can be rightly blamed when we fail to perform them (See Archer 2016a, p.184; Darwall 2006, p.98) for further support of this claim). This action then is not morally required. Clearly, it is also neither morally wrong nor morally indifferent, as it is a morally praiseworthy and admirable action. We need the category of the supererogatory, or acts that are beyond the call of duty, to be able to accommodate acts like this.

If we accept the need to make room for supererogation, then this raises the question of how to define it. Many different definitions of supererogation have been offered in the philosophical literature, with some authors even questioning whether it is possible to offer a strict, formal definition of the concept (Heyd 2019). Nevertheless, there is an emerging consensus in the recent literature on supererogation around two basic features of supererogation. First, supererogatory acts are *morally optional* which means that it is morally permissible to perform or to omit such actions (Archer 2016b: 240; Ferry 2013; Horgan and Timmons 2010: 37, Portmore 2011: 91; McElwee 2017: 506). Second, supererogatory acts should be defined as being *morally better* than the minimum that morality demands. For example, Michael Ferry (2013, p.574) claims that a supererogatory action is one that “is better than the minimally permissible act” (Similar definitions are given by Archer 2016c, p.334; Benn 2014, p.59; Heyd 1982, p.5; Portmore 2011, p.248). The point here is not that all supererogatory acts are better than all moral duties, as sometimes we can be morally required to save a life while at other times a small favor may count as supererogatory. Instead, supererogatory acts are morally better than the non-supererogatory actions available to the agent at that particular time.

Beyond these areas of widespread consensus, there is disagreement about how exactly to formulate the moral optionality and moral betterness claims (Eg. Hansson 2015; McNamara 2011), whether supererogatory actions must be performed with altruistic intentions (See Archer 2013; Benn 2019 and Heyd 1982, p.115) and whether supererogatory actions are always praiseworthy (See Archer 2016b; Kawall 2003 and Mellema 1991). For my purposes here, though, the basic idea that supererogatory acts are those that are morally optional and morally better than the non-supererogatory alternatives will suffice.

1. **The Problem of Supererogation**

The existence of acts of supererogation creates a problem for ethic theorists. This problem arises for individual theories of normative ethics such as consequentialism (Portmore 2011), deontology (Baron 2016) and virtue ethics (Stangl 2016; Vaccarezza 2019). However, in this entry I will focus on the general problem the existence of supererogation creates for attempts to explain the connection between moral reasons, goodness or value on the one hand and moral obligation on the other.

The problem arises when we try and explain what the connection is between moral value and moral duty. The most obvious way to explain the connection would be to say that the action that we are morally required to perform is the one that is most morally valuable. This connection, though, is incompatible with the existence of acts that are morally better than the minimum that morality requires of us in any given situation, as the morally required act would be the morally best act available meaning that no morally better act is possible. The most straightforward way to account for the connection between moral value and moral obligation leaves no room for the existence of acts of supererogation. This problem is called the paradox of supererogation (Horgan and Timmons 2010) or the problem of the good-ought tie-up (Heyd 1982, p.4).

Given this problem, those who want to make sense of supererogation must provide some other way of explaining the connection between moral value and moral obligation. The most popular alternative explanation that has been offered is that moral value does not fully determine whether an act is morally required. Instead, an agent’s self-interest can constrain the reach of moral requirements and make it morally permissible to perform an act that is not morally optimal (Scheffler 1992; Portmore 2008 though Portmore later defends a more complicated account of this connection in Portmore 2011). The basic idea here is that there is a limit to the sacrifices that morality can demand from people. If someone can save someone’ life at no cost to their own then we might think that they have a duty to do so. However, like with Urmson’s soldier, saving the lives of others involves sacrificing one’s own life then there is good reason to think that this act will be supererogatory rather than obligatory.

This is not the only response that has been offered to the problem. Some have argued instead that not all kinds of moral reasons are capable of generating moral requirements and that some reasons count in favor of performing a particular act without creating a duty to perform the act (Horgan and Timmons 2010). Others accept a hybrid account according to which some acts of supererogation are supererogatory due to the level of sacrifice involved and others because they are supported by reasons that favor but do not generate moral requirements (Archer 2016d; Portmore 2011; Tucker 2022). Another approach entirely is to connect moral requirements not to the moral value of an action but the value of holding people to account for their action (Ferry 2013). It may be that the actions that it is best to demand that people perform can come apart from the actions that it would be morally best to perform. One reason for this may be that when we demand too much from people, we run the risk of the perfect becoming the enemy of the good and higher demands leading to lower levels of moral performance (Benn 2018).

While there may be something to each of these accounts, I will focus on what I call The Sacrifice View, according to which what prevents a supererogatory action from being morally required is the level of sacrifice or risk of sacrifice involved for the person performing the action. My reason for this is not that I think this is the most plausible general account of supererogation (for reasons I explain in Archer 2015; 2016c; 2016d). Rather, this account appears to be best placed to accommodate *heroic* supererogatory actions. As Urmson has explained, heroic actions are those that most people would not perform due to the level of risk or sacrifice involved. These actions, though, typically would be required were it not for the sacrifice or risk of sacrifice involved. If, for example, Urmson’s soldier could save the lives without risking himself in any way then it seems plausible to think that he would be required to do so (Portmore 2011, Ch.5; Tucker 2022, p.376). When it comes to this kind of supererogatory act, there seems good reason to think that it is the cost to the agent’s self-interest that prevents the act from being morally required.

1. **Problems of Heroic Testimony**

As we have seen, supererogatory actions are those that are morally optional and morally better than the minimum that morality demands. Supererogatory actions present a problem for moral philosophers, as their existence is incompatible with the most straightforward account of the connection between moral value and moral obligation. The most plausible and straightforward solution to this problem, at least when it comes to heroic acts of supererogation, is to accept that it is the level of sacrifice or risk of sacrifice involved for the agent that is preventing these morally valuable acts from being morally required. Heroic supererogatory actions, then, are morally optional, morally better than the minimum that morality demands and involve significant sacrifice or risk of sacrifice for the agent.

However, as I will now explain, when we pay attention to what people who act heroically have to say about their actions, this standard approach to understanding supererogation faces a number of challenges. I will start by explaining how this testimony challenges the idea that these actions are supererogatory. I will then examine challenges that heroic testimony raises to the idea that heroic acts of supererogation involve sacrifice.

*3.1 Challenges to Optionality*

Many people who perform what appear to be clear cases of heroic acts of supererogation claim that their actions were in fact morally required. For example, ‘the subway hero’ Wesley Autrey jumped onto the tracks on the New York Subway to save a man who had fallen from the platform. He managed to maneuver the man and himself into a gap in the tracks as a train came to a stop over their heads. This was an incredibly risky action that put his life at great risk and appears to be a clear case of supererogation. However, when Autrey was asked about it he said, “I don’t feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help […] I did what I felt was right” (Buckley 2007).

Similarly, John Weidner worked for the Dutch resistance during the Second World War, helping Jewish people escape the Nazis. He faced severe beatings from the Gestapo and put his life in great danger. When asked if he though he had acted in an extraordinarily good way he replied, “‘No. Absolutely not. I did my duty. That is all’ (Monroe, 2004, p. 117 Cited in Carbonell 2012, p.230).

Finally, Daniel K. Inouye was a second lieutenant in the US Army in the Second World War. In an operation in San Terenzo (Italy), Inouye crawled by himself to within five yards of a machine gun and threw two grenades to destroy it. Despite being wounded by a sniper’s bullet, he continued to attack the enemy until a grenade shattered his arm. Even then, he continued to direct his troops until the attack was complete, refusing to be evacuated from the battlefield. Inouye downplayed the extraordinary nature of his actions, saying, ‘‘The pain was nothing great, and I had my job, my obligation and my mission to accomplish’’ (Cited in Archer and Ridge 2015, p.1577).

In all these examples, actions that appear to be clear cases of heroic supererogation are performed by people who claim to have only been doing their duty. To observers, these appear to be uncontroversial cases of supererogation but to the agents these actions seem to be required. Vanessa Carbonell describes this phenomenon as “a persistent agent-observer disparity” (Carbonell 2012, p. 231). This disparity puts pressure on the claim that these acts are supererogatory. It is puzzling that those who perform such acts do not take them to be supererogatory. It seems like some kind of explanation is called for as to why people who perform heroic acts of supererogation frequently claim that their actions were in fact morally required.

One such explanation is that those who perform such acts are in fact right about the moral status of their actions. Both Susan Hale (1991) and Stephen Finlay (2007: 144-145) argue that this disparity means that we must decide whether to accept the classification of the heroes performing the actions (who claim they are required) or the observers witnessing the actions (who claim they are supererogatory). In this situation, both Hale and Finlay claim that we have good reason to think that the heroes will have a more accurate moral evaluation than the onlookers. The heroes are likely to have more consistent moral judgements and more developed moral sensibilities than the onlookers (Hale 1991, p.280; Finlay 2007, p.145). Moreover, there is something odd about taking heroes to be exemplars of moral conduct and yet thinking that they are mistaken in this way (Annas 2015, p.7; Finlay 2007, p.144-145). On this explanation, the reason why heroes claim that their acts were required, is that they have a more accurate view of morality than the observers who wrongly classify these acts as supererogatory.

An alternative response is to say that it is the heroes whose moral judgements are mistaken and that the observers are right to classify these acts as supererogatory. For this to be plausible, some explanation must be given as to why heroes get things wrong in this way. One explanation is that the heroes are simply being humble or modest when they claim to have been doing their duty (Urmson 1958, p.203). Another explanation is that the heroes possess a distinctive moral virtue that leads them to perform morally better actions but also leads to distinctive mistakes in the classification of their actions. According to Archer and Ridge (2015), this distinctive virtue is a form of *moral depth*, which in this case involves a strong identification of one’s moral goals with one’s self-interested goals. It is a striking feature of many moral exemplars that their moral and non-moral goals are closely identified in this way (Colby and Damon 1992; Frimer et al 2011; Frimer and Walker 2009). This explanation allows us to say that the observers’ judgement that the actions are correct whilst also providing an explanation as to why the more virtuous moral agents may be making a mistake here.

Alternatively, we might respond by saying that the heroes are not actually claiming that their actions were morally required. Instead, we might interpret the heroes’ testimony as reporting an experience of what Bernard Williams (1981: 130) calls a *practical necessity*, a form of necessity grounded in the normative character of the agent (Fruh 2014: 98-99; 2017) or Williams’ (1993) related concept of a *moral incapacity* which are practical necessities that reflect the moral outlook of the agent (Archer 2015). Both practical necessity and moral incapacity are different from moral requirements. Someone who says that they are morally incapable of acting otherwise is not reporting that they have a moral duty to act that way but rather saying that given their moral identity it would be impossible for them to act differently (Williams 1993). If we understand the heroes as reporting a moral incapacity rather than an obligation, then we have an explanation for the agent-observer disparity that endorses the observers’ judgement that the acts are supererogatory without attributing a mistaken moral judgement to the heroes.

Finally, we might respond to this problem by finding a way to say that the observers are right to say that the heroic actions are supererogatory *for the observers* but the heroes are also right to say that *for the heroes* the actions are morally required. This line of response must provide some explanation as to why the duties that heroes face are different from those facing other people One explanation that has been offered here is that moral demands are partially determined by the knowledge an agent possesses and that those with more relevant knowledge may face more demanding obligations than other people (Carbonell 2016). Similarly, Andrew Flescher (2003) argues that heroes face more demanding duties because they have an expanded sense of moral responsibility. While we do not face the same moral duties as heroes, we do have an obligation to attempt to morally improve our characters so that we would then be subject to such duties (Dougherty 2017; Flescher 2003; See also Grigoletto 2018 and Naumann 2017 for related views).

In summary, paying attention to what heroes say about their seemingly supererogatory actions challenges the idea that these actions really are supererogatory. There are several ways to respond to this phenomenon. First, we can accept that the heroes are right and the observers are wrong, and think that we all have duties to act in this way. Second, we can endorse the observers point of view and provide some explanation for the heroes’ mistaken judgement. Third, we can reinterpret the heroes’ claims so that they are not actually making claims about moral duties but rather moral incapacities. Finally, we can find a way to accept that both the hero and the observer are correct about the moral status of the action for them.

*3.2 Challenges to Sacrifice*

Paying attention to the testimony of heroes raises another challenge to conventional thinking on supererogation. As we have seen, heroic acts of supererogation are typically thought to involve sacrifice or the risk of sacrifice for the person performing the action. This means that these acts should make the agent worse off (or at risk of being worse off) than they would have been if they had performed another act available to them at the time. Heroic testimony raises two kinds of challenge to this claim.   
  
First, many heroes describe their actions in ways that suggest that they did not make a sacrifice in acting as they did. For example, in Samuel and Pearl Oliner’s (1988, p.168) study of those who helped Jewish people escape from the Nazi’s in the Second World War, they found that many of those they studied claimed that they would not have been able to forgive themselves if they had acted differently. In addition, many reported feeling a strong sense of inner satisfaction for acting as they did (Oliner and Oliner 1988, pp.169, 177, 220; Munroe et al 1990, p.110). This suggests that these agents may not have been making an overall sacrifice of their own well-being in acting as they did or at least that this sacrifice is less significant than many observers might assume (Archer 2016c; Carbonell 2012).

Second, many heroes describe their actions in ways that suggest that they would have been morally incapable of acting otherwise. For example, Raoul Wallenberg who risked his life saving the lives of Jewish Hungarians in the Second World War said the following about his actions: “It is frightening at times but I have no choice. I have taken upon myself this mission and I’d never be able to go back to Stockholm without knowing that I’ve done everything that stands in a man’s power to rescue as many Jews as possible (Cited in Archer 2015, pp.105-106). Many others who risked their lives saving Jewish people from the Nazis made similar claims. Rescuers in Oliner and Oliner’s study described their actions in the following ways: “I could not stand by and observe the daily misery that was occurring”. “I could not sit there doing nothing” (Oliner and Oliner 1988, p.168). These responses suggest that the alternative actions of not engaging in these dangerous rescues were in an important sense, simply not available to these agents, as they were morally incapable of acting otherwise (Archer 2015).

The idea then that heroic acts of supererogation involve sacrifice faces challenges from two directions. First, it is not clear that these acts really make the heroes worse off than they would have been otherwise. Second, it is not clear that the non-heroic option was really available to these agents, meaning that the action they performed cannot be considered a sacrifice as there was no other action that they could have performed.

If we accept this conclusion, then we are faced with a problem. The idea that supererogatory acts involve sacrifice was supposed to explain why these morally valuable acts are not required. If we accept that these heroic acts did not involve sacrifice, then we appear to be committed to either saying that these actions were not supererogatory or to saying that the level of sacrifice involved is not the reason that supererogatory acts are not required. As we have seen already, some philosophers are happy to take the first option and accept that these heroic and seemingly supererogatory acts are not in fact supererogatory. This may be because no actions are supererogatory (Hale 1991; Finlay 2007) or because whether or not an action is supererogatory is to some extent agent-relative (Carbonell 2016). Other philosophers are happy to reject the idea that supererogatory acts must involve sacrifice and provide some other way to explain why these morally valuable acts are not morally required. This might be because these acts are supported by the kind of reasons that are incapable of generating moral requirements (Horgan and Timmons 2010), because it is important to allow people the freedom and space to develop their own projects (Archer 2016c), or because moral obligations are determined by the moral value of holding people to account for their action rather than the moral value of the action itself (Ferry 2013).

In summary, paying attention to what heroes say about their seemingly supererogatory actions challenges the idea that these actions really involve sacrifice. This should prompt philosophers to either rethink their conception of the connection between supererogation and sacrifice or their view of what acts can be considered supererogatory.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have examined the commonsense idea that many heroic acts are supererogatory. I have explored the problem heroic acts of supererogatory create for attempts to explain the connection between moral value and moral requirements. As we have seen, the standard response to this problem is to claim that the level of agential sacrifice involved in performing a morally valuable action can prevent it from generating a moral requirement. As we have seen, though, paying attention to heroic testimony presents two further challenges to commonsense moral thinking about supererogation. First, many heroes claim that their acts were morally required, putting pressure on the idea that their actions were beyond the call of duty. Second, many heroes suggest that their actions did not involve sacrifice, first because they would not have advanced their wellbeing by acting otherwise and second because they would have been morally incapable of acting differently. While interesting responses have been given to all of these problems, much more work needs to be done to evaluate which provides the most plausible way to respond to the discrepancy between heroic testimony and commonsense moral thought on these issues.

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