

## **Supererogation, Sacrifice and The Limits of Duty**

**Abstract:** It is often claimed that all acts of supererogation involve sacrifice. This claim is made because it is thought that it is the level of sacrifice involved that prevents these acts from being morally required. In this paper, I will argue against this claim. I will start by making a distinction between two ways of understanding the claim that all acts of supererogation involve sacrifice. I will then examine some purported counter-examples to the view that supererogation always involves sacrifice and examine their limitation. Next, I will examine how this view might be defended, building on comments by Dale Dorsey and Henry Sidgwick. I will then argue that the view and the argument in favor of it should be rejected. I will finish by showing how an alternative explanation for the limits of moral obligation avoids the problems facing The Sacrifice View.

### **Introduction**

Shortly after witnessing a horrific terrorist bombing outside a mosque in Beirut, Adel Termos noticed a second suicide bomber heading toward a crowd of people. Termos tackled the man to the ground, causing the bomb to detonate before the bomber reached the crowd. Termos died in the explosion but his actions saved the lives of many others. Indeed as the Beirut blogger and physician Elie Fares commented: "There are many many families, hundreds of families probably, who owe their completeness to his sacrifice."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hackell (2015).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to these necessary conditions, some claim that only praiseworthy acts are supererogatory (Eg. McNamara (2011 p.203), Mellema (1991 p.17) and Montague (1989 p.102)) while David Heyd claims that only acts performed with altruistic intentions can be supererogatory (1982 p.115). See Archer (Forthcoming a) for an argument against the first view and Archer (2013) for an argument against the second.

<sup>3</sup> This claim is endorsed by Ferry (2013), Horgan and Timmons (2010 p.37),

A commonly accepted feature of commonsense morality is that some acts, like Termos', are supererogatory or beyond the call of duty. As J. O. Urmson noted, acts like these are clearly morally good but go beyond what we would consider to be morally obligatory. Not all supererogatory acts need be so dramatic. Suppose Simon helps his neighbor carry his shopping home. This might be a good thing to do but we would be unwilling to say that Simon's act was morally required, at least in the absence of any special reason. We might not describe these acts as beyond the call of duty but we would want to say that Simon did not have to do what he did.

While there is no general consensus on exactly how to define the concept<sup>2</sup>, there is a general agreement that supererogation involves the following necessary conditions:

*Morally Optional:* If an act  $\phi$  is supererogatory then  $\phi$ -ing is neither morally forbidden nor morally required.<sup>3</sup>

*Morally Better:* If an act  $\phi$  is supererogatory then  $\phi$ -ing is morally better than the minimum that morality demands in that situation.<sup>4</sup>

A noticeable feature of Termos' heroic act is that, as Fares' comment highlights, Termos seems to have sacrificed his own interests for the interests of others. It is often

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to these necessary conditions, some claim that only praiseworthy acts are supererogatory (Eg. McNamara (2011 p.203), Mellema (1991 p.17) and Montague (1989 p.102)) while David Heyd claims that only acts performed with altruistic intentions can be supererogatory (1982 p.115). See Archer (Forthcoming a) for an argument against the first view and Archer (2013) for an argument against the second.

<sup>3</sup> This claim is endorsed by Ferry (2013), Horgan and Timmons (2010 p.37), Portmore (2011 p.91), Rawls (1971 p.117).

<sup>4</sup> Though not all use the term 'morally better', the following seem to endorse the claim that supererogatory acts are morally better than non-supererogatory acts: Dancy (1993 p.127), Ferry (2013 p.574), Heyd (1982 p.5), Portmore (2011 p.92). As McNamara points out, we need to appeal to the concept of 'The Minimum that Morality Demands' in order to make sense of this (1996 p.427).

claimed that all supererogatory acts involve sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Nagel seems to make this claim when he says that, “supererogatory virtue is shown by acts of exceptional sacrifice for the benefits of others.”<sup>6</sup> Patricia McGoldrick goes further, describing sacrifice or the risk of sacrifice as, “The distinguishing feature of a supererogatory act.”<sup>7</sup> Like many who associate supererogation with sacrifice, the reasoning behind McGoldrick’s claim is that what prevents acts of supererogation from being obligatory is the level of sacrifice required from the agent. However, this claim is rarely explicitly defended and it is often unclear exactly what is meant by sacrifice in this context. This is unfortunate, as this claim has important consequences.

First, how we respond to this issue will have consequences for what can count as an acceptable solution to ‘The Puzzle of The Good Ought Tie Up’.<sup>8</sup> The puzzle arises when attempting to reconcile the claim that acts of supererogation are morally optional with the claim that they are morally better than the non-supererogatory alternatives. Second, this issue will have consequences for attempts to reconcile the possibility of supererogation with normative ethical theories. Third, how we settle this issue will have implications for whether certain acts are classed as obligatory or supererogatory, which in turn may influence how we should respond to these actions.

It is worth pointing out at the start of this discussion that my aim in this paper is not to investigate how to reconcile the existence of acts of supererogation with any particular ethical view. Rather, my aim is to investigate the plausibility of the proposed

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<sup>5</sup> Those who make this claim include Dancy (1993 p. 138), Feinberg (1961 p.281), Fishkin (1982), Harwood (2003 p.182), Jackson (1986 p.289, 1988), Jacobs (1987 p.101), McGoldrick (1984) and Mellema (1991 p.179) and Sikora (1979). Dorsey (2013 p.358) claims that there might be good reason to support this view, without explicitly endorsing it. Rawls (1971 p.117) claims that most acts of supererogation involve sacrifice.

<sup>6</sup> (1986 p.203).

<sup>7</sup> (1984 p.525)

<sup>8</sup> As named by Heyd (1982 p. 4).

connection between supererogation and sacrifice. This will put us in a better position to evaluate the comparative merits of competing attempts to accommodate the supererogatory.

I will start my discussion, in §1, by examining different ways of understanding this claim. In §2 I will examine some purported counter-examples that have been proposed to this view and explain their limitations. I will then, in §3, develop an argument in favor of the view based on brief remarks by Dale Dorsey. In §4, I will argue that the view and the argument in favor of it, should be rejected. Finally, in §5, I will propose an alternative justification for the limits of duty that avoids the problems facing The Sacrifice View.

### **1. Two Kinds of Sacrifice Connection**

There has been little attempt by those who claim that supererogation always involves sacrifice to explain exactly what they mean by sacrifice in this context. In this section, I will clarify what those who endorse this claim are committed to.

The first point to note is that those who claim that supererogation always involves sacrifice are appealing to a notion of sacrifice that is less rich than the everyday use of the term. Sacrifice in this context is restricted to a cost to the agent performing the act. Jonathan Dancy, for example, defines sacrifice as a “cost to the agent”.<sup>9</sup> We might think that the everyday meaning of the term ‘sacrifice’ involves some further conditions, such as being performed intentionally or voluntarily.<sup>10</sup> I take it, though, that whatever else we mean by ‘sacrifice’, in order for an act to count as a sacrifice it must involve some cost to the agent’s interests. Given that my aim is to deny that acts

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<sup>9</sup> (1993 p.118).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Overvold (1980 pp. 113-114).

of supererogation always involve sacrifice it will be enough for my purposes to show that acts of supererogation do not always satisfy this necessary condition of sacrifice.

The next point to make is that sacrifice is a comparative concept. As I have argued elsewhere, when an act involves a sacrifice it makes the agent worse off in some way.<sup>11</sup>

There are two possible objects of comparison here. One option is that the relevant cost to an agent's interests is in comparison to her position before performing the act.

The alternative is that we take the relevant comparison to be the position the agent would be in if she performed one of the other acts available to her. Clearly it is the second, counter-factual, option that picks out the relevant form of cost.<sup>12</sup> Cases of 'cutting one's losses', where an agent chooses the least costly option from a range of costly alternatives, should not count as cases of sacrifice.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, cases where the agent forgoes a greater benefit for herself in favor of a lesser benefit for herself and greater benefits for others should count as a sacrifice.

The most obvious way of understanding the sacrifice connection is as a claim about the overall cost to the agent. This view of sacrifice has the following necessary condition:

*Self-Sacrifice:* An act involves self-sacrifice only if it has an overall negative impact on the agent's welfare compared to some available alternative act.

However, as Vanessa Carbonell argues, often we use the term 'sacrifice' to mean something weaker.<sup>14</sup> Carbonell argues that we make a sacrifice when we endure a loss that is not compensated for, where this is understood as one that is not directly

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<sup>11</sup> Archer (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Lee Whittington for helpful discussion here.

<sup>13</sup> Overvold (1980 p.108) makes this point. I argue for this point in more detail Archer (2015).

<sup>14</sup> Carbonell (2012 p.237).

replaced without loss. Take the footballer Lionel Messi, who left his native Argentina at the age of twelve in order to sign for F. C. Barcelona's youth team. Messi described this decision in the following way: "I always knew [...] that I'd have to make a lot of sacrifices. I made sacrifices by leaving Argentina, leaving my family to start a new life."<sup>15</sup> Messi's use of 'sacrifice' makes sense even if we assume that his decision to leave Argentina had an overall positive impact on his well-being. This notion fits well with a theory of well-being that holds different sources of well-being to be incommensurable. For example, an 'Objective List' theory of well-being holds that there are different sources of well-being.<sup>16</sup> On such a view it is clear how an act that involves a net gain may involve a loss that is not directly compensated for. It may increase overall welfare but involve a loss to one source of well-being that is not directly made up for or replaced without loss. Carbonell's gymnast, for example, sacrifices one source of well-being, friendship, for another, achievement. However, while this is a legitimate use of the term 'sacrifice', I take it that it would be inappropriate to describe this as a case of 'self-sacrifice'. We would not say that people who make sacrifices in this sense perform acts of self-sacrifice. The gymnast has not sacrificed her own interests for those of other people. Rather, she sacrifices some sources of well-being in order to further others.

The relevant necessary condition for this weaker version of sacrifice is the following:

*Sacrifice:* An act involves sacrifice only if it makes the agent worse off *in some respect* than she would be if she performed some available alternative act.

Although, this notion of sacrifice fits well with an Objective List Theory of well-being we might think that it fits less comfortably with alternative theories of well-being.

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<sup>15</sup> Ghosh (2012).

<sup>16</sup> This theory is named and defended by Parfit (1984 p.499).

However, a Desire-Fulfillment Theorist, someone who holds that the fulfillment of desires is the only source of well-being, could hold that the fulfillment of one desire cannot directly make up or replace another being unfulfilled. Admittedly, it will be harder for hedonists, those who think that pleasure is the only source of well-being, to make sense of this kind of sacrifice. Given that I will be arguing against the claim that supererogation always involves sacrifice, I will set this issue to one side. Since this is controversial and I aim to argue against all forms of The Sacrifice View, I will work with the assumption that this notion of sacrifice does make sense.

We can use these two kinds of sacrifice to define two ways of making the claim that supererogation always involves sacrifice.

*The Self-Sacrifice View:* If an act  $\phi$  is supererogatory then  $\phi$ -ing has an overall negative impact on the agent's welfare compared to some other available act.

*The Weak Sacrifice View:* If an act  $\phi$  is supererogatory then  $\phi$ -ing makes the agent worse off in some respect than she would be if she performed some other available act.<sup>17</sup>

The Self-Sacrifice View is one that is endorsed by a number of authors writing on supererogation. For instance, James S. Fishkin explicitly endorses this in the following:

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<sup>17</sup>For the most part, it is unclear whether those who endorse some version of The Sacrifice View hold that this is a necessary truth or a claim about the extension of the concept. Dorsey (2013 p.358) notes this lack of clarity. One exception to this is Feinberg (1961 p.281) who states explicitly that this is a necessary truth. For my purposes, though, this issue is unimportant, as my argument against the view will be effective against both interpretations.

There are limits to the sacrifice which can be demanded of any individual as a matter of duty or obligation. Beyond these limits, an action is heroic [...] And the presumption is that such heroic behavior must be classified as supererogatory, not obligatory. By ‘sacrifice’ in this definition I mean a reversal or harm to an agent’s interests.<sup>18</sup>

Samuel Scheffler’s defence of agent-centered prerogatives shows that he is also committed to The Self-Sacrifice View. In his words:

The answer to the question of whether an agent was required to promote the best overall outcome in a given situation would depend on the amount of good he could thereby produce (or evil he could thereby avert), and on the size of the sacrifice he would have to make in order to achieve the optimal outcome.<sup>19</sup>

Jason Kawall endorses the weaker view. He argues that cases where an agent suffers some sacrifice to improve her own position can count as supererogatory.<sup>20</sup> Clearly this only makes sense if we take Kawall to be using the weaker notion of sacrifice.

It is worth noting at this point that these two views do not exhaust the ways in which supererogation has been linked to sacrifice. As we have already seen, McGoldrick’s view is that it is sacrifice or *the risk of sacrifice* that are distinctive of supererogation.<sup>21</sup> A reasonable assumption to make is that we need to make room for additional views that are concerned with the risk of sacrifice rather than or in addition to sacrifice itself.<sup>22</sup>

However, for my purposes this difference between these views is not important. What these views point out is that it is not clear whether the loss mentioned in these

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<sup>18</sup> (1982 pp.14-15).

<sup>19</sup> (1994 p.20).

<sup>20</sup> (2003).

<sup>21</sup> (1984 p.525).

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to Alan T. Wilson for raising this objection.

definitions refers to an actual loss, the agent's beliefs about loss or what it would be rational for the agent to believe about loss. There is little reason to view these as giving independent accounts of the connection between supererogation and sacrifice. This is because I intend to remain silent about the issue of whether we should have an objective, subjective or prospective view of moral obligations. Objectivism, at least Consequentialist Objectivism, is the view that it is facts about what the actual consequences of performing some act would be that determine whether or not an act is morally obligatory.<sup>23</sup> Prospectivists, on the other hand, hold that moral obligations are not determined by the *actual* consequences of an action but *what it would be rational for an agent to believe* the consequences will be, given her epistemic limitations.<sup>24</sup> Finally, Subjectivism is the view that it is the agent's beliefs that determine her obligations.<sup>25</sup> Plausibly, if we think that it is sacrifice that separates supererogation from moral obligation then our view of the relevant kind of loss will be determined by which view of moral obligation we hold. This means that when we are assessing the two sacrifice views given above we must ensure that the arguments given are effective against all three of these views of the relevant form of loss.

## **2. The Sacrifice Views: Initial Assessments**

In this section I will examine some purported counter examples to The Sacrifice Views and explain their limitations. As we have already seen, Kawall's defence of self-regarding acts of supererogation involves the rejection of The Self-Sacrifice View.<sup>26</sup> Of course, we might take Kawall's claims about the possibility of self-regarding supererogation to be sufficient evidence that we should reject The Self-Sacrifice View.

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<sup>23</sup> For a defence of this view see Graham (2010).

<sup>24</sup> For a defence of this view about 'moral rightness' see Mason (2013).

<sup>25</sup> For a defence of this view see Smith (2010).

<sup>26</sup> (2003).

I take it, though, that those sympathetic to The Self-Sacrifice View are unlikely to find this persuasive. Even those who find Kawall's claims persuasive might concede that self-regarding supererogatory acts are not paradigmatic examples of supererogation that any acceptable account ought to be able to accommodate.

Similarly, Michael Ferry also seems to reject The Self-Sacrifice View.<sup>27</sup> Ferry claims that it is not the case that acts of supererogation always involve *significant* sacrifice to the agent. He supports this claim by giving the following example:

*Gift for Friend:* You see a book on sale and decide to buy it for a friend. If you buy the book it will bring joy to your friend and the pleasure of giving an unexpected gift will also bring joy to you.<sup>28</sup>

Ferry takes this case to show that not all acts of supererogation involve *significant sacrifice*. Unfortunately, Ferry says nothing to defend this claim beyond this appeal to intuition. In addition, as the example stands we do not have enough information to enable us to say whether this case involves sacrifice or not. Remember that making a sacrifice involves performing an act that has an overall negative impact, or at least makes the agent worse off in some respect, compared to some other permissible act. All we are told about this act, though, is that it does not make you worse off than you were before performing the act. To make this a case of supererogation that does not involve sacrifice we must stipulate that there is no alternative act that you could perform that would make you better off either overall or in some respect.

At best, this example only undermines The Self-Sacrifice View, buying the book still involves a financial cost that is not directly compensated for by the pleasure of giving

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<sup>27</sup> (2013 p.579). Horgan and Timmons also reject The Self-Sacrifice View, in passing, by appealing to a similar example (2010 p.54).

<sup>28</sup> This is a paraphrased version of the example given by Ferry (2013 p.580).

the book. However, we might think that a modified example can raise problems for The Weak Sacrifice View. Consider the following case:

*Free Gift For Friend:* You see a book on sale and decide to buy it. At the counter you notice a promotional offer where buying one copy of the book allows you to receive a free second copy. You decide to pick up a second copy to give to your friend.

Perhaps this example gives us sufficient reason to reject The Weak Sacrifice View as well. Of course, a supporter of The Weak Sacrifice View may claim that there are non-monetary costs involved in this case. The burden of having to carry an extra book around is a cost that presumably will not be replaced without loss. Some may wish to insist that once we remove these costs, perhaps by saying that the offer is for a free e-book and so involves no extra carrying, then we should view this act as obligatory. At the very least we might worry that it is hard to generate clear intuitions in cases where the benefits are fairly trivial.

Alternatively, others might accept that these examples are acts of supererogation but retain some version of The Sacrifice View by claiming that the view is true for a subset of supererogatory acts. Of course, if any acts of supererogation involve sacrifice then it is trivially true that some subset of supererogatory acts do involve sacrifice.

However, in order for this view to be interesting the subset has to be one with independently significant features. It is worth noting that in both of these examples the acts of supererogation secure fairly trivial moral goods. These are the kind of acts we might be unwilling to describe as 'beyond the call of duty' though we would say that there is no requirement to buy the book in these cases. This might lead some to think that there are two sorts of supererogatory act, those that are fairly trivial and those that are of great moral significance. The former may not involve sacrifice but the

latter must involve sacrifice, as this is what is preventing these acts from being obligatory. This division is endorsed by both Portmore and Horgan and Timmons.<sup>29</sup>

This would give us the following view:

*The Restricted Sacrifice View:* If an act  $\phi$  is a *morally significant* act of supererogation then  $\phi$ -ing involves an overall (or not directly compensated for) loss to the agent.

Of course, the phrase ‘morally significant’ is somewhat vague but the thought it is trying to capture is familiar enough. The point is that if the moral value an act of supererogation is *non-trivial*, then that act must have involved agential sacrifice. The question, then, is whether there is some reason to reject The Sacrifice View that does not rely on cases such as *Gift For Friend* where the benefits are of little moral significance. If there are then this will serve as a response both to the worry that these cases may be obligatory after all and the retreat to The Restricted Sacrifice View.

A final objection that has been raised against The Sacrifice View is that it is committed to the claim that those who perform supererogatory acts always had an alternative option available to them. Elsewhere, I have argued that the testimony of many moral exemplars casts doubt upon this claim, as many claim to have been unable to act otherwise.<sup>30</sup> However, for the purposes of this paper I will set this worry to one side and argue that The Sacrifice View is implausible even if we grant its supporters the claim that people who perform supererogatory acts do have alternative acts available to them.

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<sup>29</sup> See Portmore (2011 p.135 fn.22) and Horgan and Timmons (2010 p.62). This seems to be the case if we take morally significant acts to be ones supported by moral reasons with requiring force.

<sup>30</sup> Archer (2015).

In this section we have looked at some putative counter examples that have been raised against The Self-Sacrifice View. We then looked at how we might modify one of these examples to be effective against The Weak Sacrifice View. We might take this to signal the end of the discussion; The Sacrifice Views get the wrong results in these cases, therefore we ought to reject them. However, we saw that there is reason to worry about the force of these examples, as there appear to be resources for defenders of The Sacrifice View to respond to these counter examples. Moreover, as we shall see in the next section, there is an intuitively compelling argument that can be given in defense of either version of The Sacrifice View. This means that a convincing argument against The Sacrifice View should do more than simply appeal to these examples.

### **3. How to Argue For The Sacrifice Views**

Despite the frequency with which The Sacrifice View is endorsed, it is seldom seen as a claim that needs to be supported. The closest attempt to give an argument in support of this connection is given by Dale Dorsey. In this section, I will develop Dorsey's brief remarks into an argument in support of the view.

Though Dorsey does not commit himself to the claim that all acts of supererogation must meet this connection, he suggests a reason why we might in the following:

If I am in a position to donate half my yearly salary to Oxfam International, but only at significant cost to my own well-being, doing so is supererogatory. If my donations fail to affect my well-being, or affects it only trivially, making these donations is morally required.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Dorsey (2013 p.358). In this paper Dorsey defends a novel view of supererogation that rejects both *Morally Optional* and *Morally Better*. This though, does not effect his

Dorsey's claim is that the reason that an act is supererogatory is because it involves an overall cost to the welfare of the agent. Without this cost, the act would be obligatory. The basic thought that Dorsey is appealing to here is that if we can help others without negatively impacting on our own well-being, then we are morally required to do so. Likewise, Henry Sidgwick claims that it is part of common sense morality that people have, "a positive duty to render, when occasion offers, such services as require either no sacrifice on our part, or at least one very much less in importance than the service rendered."<sup>32</sup> We can formalize this thought in the following way:

*The No Cost Principle:* If an available act,  $\phi$ , is morally better than some available alternative act  $\psi$  that would otherwise be the minimum that morality demands and  $\phi$ -ing involves no extra cost to the agent than  $\psi$ -ing then  $\psi$  is morally forbidden.<sup>33</sup>

This is an intuitively appealing principle. After all, if we can perform a morally better act at no cost to ourselves then it seems reasonable to think that this is what we ought to do, unless of course an alternative, equally good act is also available in which case it is permissible to perform either. This also seems like a principle that demands very little of the agent performing the act, as it only applies in situations where doing the morally better act involves no cost to the agent.

If we apply this principle, then all morally optional acts that are morally better than the minimum morality requires will involve a cost to the agent's well-being that the minimum morality requires does not. Given that acts of supererogation are those that are better than the minimum required by morality, it follows that all acts of

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argument in favor of the sacrifice view, which can be accepted by those who endorse the traditional view of supererogation. For an argument against Dorsey's view of the supererogatory see Archer (Forthcoming b).

<sup>32</sup> (1907 p.253).

<sup>33</sup> Thanks for Ben Davies for helpful discussion about how to formulate this principle.

supererogation will involve sacrifice. It is worth noting that this argument remains quiet on whether the sacrifice is the stronger overall sacrifice or the weaker version. This argument, then, can be used to support either version of The Sacrifice View, so long as we understand The No Cost Principle to involve the relevant form of cost.

#### **4. Against The No Cost Principle And The Sacrifice Views**

In the previous section, we looked at how The Sacrifice Views can be defended. In this section I will give an argument against The No Cost Principle and all versions of The Sacrifice View.

I will begin with the observation that many people who perform acts that seem like paradigmatic examples of supererogation report that it was in their self-interest to act as they did. Consider the following real-life case:

*Free Help Guy*: An anonymous London man known as ‘The Free Help Guy’ (henceforth ‘Guy’) uses the Internet to offer free help to those that get in touch. His acts of kindness include helping a man find his estranged father, helping a man to do DIY and helping several people find jobs. He says that he does it because he enjoys helping people saying, “I wouldn't call this altruism because I think I've got more out of this than anyone else.”<sup>34</sup>

In this case the agent performs what appear to be paradigmatic examples of acts of supererogation. However, if we take Guy’s comments at face value then it seems that he believed that his acts would have an overall positive impact on his own well-being compared to the alternatives and hence not involve self-sacrifice.

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<sup>34</sup> Osborne (2013).

Is this claim plausible? We might think that this claim is plausible if we hold a subjective view of well-being but less so if we accept a more objective understanding of welfare. A subjectivist about well-being holds that  $\phi$  is intrinsically good for an agent if and only if  $\phi$  is valued under the proper conditions by the agent. An objectivist, on the other hand, holds that there are facts about any person's well-being that are independent of her evaluative perspective. If we accept a subjectivist view and we think that the conditions under which moral exemplars possess their desires to perform morally valuable acts are 'proper', then we seem pushed to accept that Guy's helpful acts really do increase his well-being.

The point is perhaps less clear for Objectivism, as on an objective view the differences between these two agents could not be fully reducible to the agents' preferences.

However, other features of agents will have an important role to play. Suppose Stuart derives great pleasure from cycling and none from watching football. Laura, on the other hand, derives great pleasure from watching her favourite football team and none from cycling. Even if we have an objectivist view it seems reasonable to think that if both had to choose between cycling or watching football, Laura's level of well-being will be enhanced to a greater extent if she watches football while Stuart would be better off cycling. This is consistent with there being some preferences the fulfillment of which will not improve an agent's level of well-being.

In fact in order to be at all plausible an objectivist view of the type of costs relevant to determining the limits of moral duty must allow that an act that involves a cost for one agent may involve no cost at all for some other agent. To see why suppose that Laura and Stuart have both offered to help Polly move house. We might think that, as a result, both are morally obliged to help. Unfortunately, it turns out that the day Polly needs help is the same day that Laura's favourite football team is playing in a cup

final. In this case it seems reasonable to think that this would make it permissible for Laura not to help but the same would not be true for Stuart. Even those who do not agree would presumably accept that missing the cup final would count as a *cost* for Laura and not for Stuart. Of course, this view can remain fully objective, as we could, for example, claim that the reason that missing the match counts as a cost for Laura and not for Stuart is not a result of either's evaluative perspective but rather the actual level of pleasure they will each derive from this activity. Note that this particular example works even if we do not accept a purely hedonist form of Objectivism, one that views well-being as determined by pleasure. After all, Objective List Theories typically include pleasure on the list of things that contribute to an agent's welfare.<sup>35</sup> The point I wish to make, though, is the more general one that any acceptable objectivist view of the type of costs that are relevant in determining the limits of moral duty will allow features of the agent's condition to play a role.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, we could accept this and yet think that The Free Help Guy's preferences do not fit with what would actually be in his best interests. This may or may not be true. What is important for our purposes, though, is not to consider whether in the *actual* case Guy's welfare was best promoted by acting as he did but whether it is conceivable that it *could* have been. Unfortunately for supporters of The Sacrifice View, it seems hard to deny that this is conceivable. After all, many people who perform acts we think of as supererogatory claim that they would have been unable to forgive themselves if they had not acted as they did. Samuel and Pearl Oliner's study of those who helped Jews escape the Nazis in The Second World War found that many made this claim.<sup>37</sup> In addition, many reported feeling a rewarding sense of inner

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<sup>35</sup> See Parfit (1984 p.502).

<sup>36</sup> This point is accepted by Hooker (2000 p.43) and Scanlon (1998 p.120).

<sup>37</sup> (1988 p.168). A similar observation is made by Monroe (1991 p.404).

satisfaction as a result of their actions.<sup>38</sup> This suggests that many people who perform supererogatory acts may be acting in line with their own self-interest. This is not to suggest that it is this that is motivating these agents to perform these acts.<sup>39</sup> Nor is this meant to suggest that there are not many occasions where agents incur significant costs as a result of performing supererogatory acts. The claim is rather that someone who performs supererogatory acts, even when doing so from benevolence, may also be acting in a way that happens to promote her own interests to a greater degree than the other available options.

Accepting this allows us to say that whether we accept Subjectivism or any plausible objectivist account we must accept that when someone who enjoys acting morally performs helpful acts it will, all else being equal, promote her own welfare to a greater extent than it would promote the welfare of someone who derives less pleasure from acting in this way. This is bad news for The No Cost Principle. When this principle is applied, those with more morally developed emotional reactions will be subject to higher moral standards than the rest of the moral community. This seems unacceptable. There would be something deeply unfair about holding those who experience higher levels of psychological discomfort in response to acting in less than morally optimal ways to higher moral standards than other people. To see why imagine two people in a position to help rescue Jews from the Nazis. One has more developed moral sensibilities than the other. If we accept The No Cost Principle then we are committed to saying that the person with the more developed moral

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<sup>38</sup> Oliner and Oliner (1988 pp. 169,177, and 220), Monroe et al. (1990 p.110). Of course this does not mean that these acts did not involve any sacrifice. What these cases show is that it is plausible to think that people can enhance their own well-being by acting in morally worthwhile ways. Thanks to Tom Parr for suggesting this clarification.

<sup>39</sup> Though see Badhwar (1993) for a defense of the view that these agents were motivated by self-interest.

consciences is subject to more demanding obligations. Moreover, the reason she has these more demanding obligations is *because* she has a more developed moral conscience. Effectively, then, the other's less developed moral conscience gets her off the hook from these more demanding obligations. This, though, is simply not the kind of consideration that should prevent someone from facing a moral obligation.

Similarly, imagine someone who finds helping people boring rather than pleasurable. Let's call this person No Help Nigel (henceforth 'Nigel'). Both Guy and Nigel are in a position where they could spend the afternoon helping someone. It seems implausible to think that Guy will be subject to more demanding moral obligations than Nigel simply because he has more developed moral conscience. Again, though, this is what we are committed to saying if we accept The No Cost Principle.

There are three reasons why this commitment of The No Cost Principle is implausible.<sup>40</sup> First, this commitment creates implausibly demanding obligations for Guy, who now is morally required to spend his free afternoons helping people. Second, this commitment may lead to a situation where archetypal moral saints are unable to perform supererogatory acts. Moral saints seem to be people for whom moral concerns are integrated into their character, so that by promoting their moral interests they also promote their own well-being.<sup>41</sup> The No Cost Principle seems to suggest that such a person would never be able to perform a supererogatory act, as the promotion of moral interests might never involve a sacrifice for such a person. This is problematic, as intuitively moral saints perform *more* acts of supererogation than other people but The No Cost Principle suggests that a true moral saint could *never* perform

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<sup>40</sup> Thanks to Felix Pinkert for encouraging me to spell out more explicitly what is implausible about this commitment.

<sup>41</sup> For a defense of this claim about moral sainthood see Archer and Ridge (2015) and Archer (Forthcoming c).

a supererogatory act. Finally, whether or not Guy finds helping people to be boring seems like the wrong kind of input to consider when we are asking whether he is morally required to help. This just does not seem like the sort of consideration that can serve to make an act morally required for one person but morally obligatory for another.

We might think that this argument only works if we are dealing with an overall sense of cost that is referred to by The Self-Sacrifice View, rather than the weaker sense explored in The Weak Sacrifice View. However, we can avoid this problem if we stipulate that the alternative act available to both Guy and Nigel is a boring afternoon spent watching daytime television. For Guy, then, performing the helpful act will not involve any loss that is uncompensated for. Nigel, on the other hand, finds helping people to be even more boring than watching TV. As a result, The No Cost Principle would generate a duty for Guy but not for Nigel.

So far I have argued that The No Cost Principle is implausible because it would generate less demanding obligations for those with less developed moral consciences. We might wonder whether we could accept this argument but hold on to some version of The Sacrifice View. We could, of course, accept that Guy's act satisfies Morally Optional and Morally Better but insist that it cannot be supererogatory precisely because it does not involve sacrifice. In other words, while Guy's act is not morally required it is not supererogatory either, as sacrifice is a necessary condition of supererogation.

However, there is no benefit to be had in stipulating that we should define supererogation in this way. After all, Guy's act seems like a paradigm example of an act that we would describe as being supererogatory. In addition, this stipulation

creates the need for a new deontic category to accommodate acts that satisfy Morally Optional and Morally Better but do not involve self-sacrifice. Making this stipulation would, then, bring about a less parsimonious division of the deontic field without bringing about any obvious theoretical benefits. If we accept this argument against The No Cost Principle then we should also reject The Sacrifice View. Note that retreating to The Restricted Sacrifice View will not help here, as at least the case of helping a man find his estranged father seems like it brings about a non-trivial moral good. As a result it must count as a morally significant act of supererogation.

Another way in which we might be tempted to respond to this argument is by claiming that the fact that acting in line with the extra moral obligations that exemplars would face is in line with their self-interest means that they are not subject to more demanding obligations. It might be thought that if performing an act is in line with an agent's self-interest then there is nothing demanding about making it obligatory.

However, this objection is misguided for two reasons. First, the fact that an act is in someone's self-interest is no guarantee that she will perform it. On this account, when someone with a more developed moral conscience fails to perform an act that is both in line with her self-interest and morally good then she has violated a moral obligation, even though she would not have done so had she had a less developed moral conscience. This is demanding then, as it makes slip-ups such as these morally blameworthy for the morally developed agent.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, this objection ignores the fact that there may be two or more acts that are equally in line with an agent's self-interest. To make the morally better act morally required in cases like this is to limit

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<sup>42</sup> At least it does so if we accept the popular view that it is always blameworthy to perform a morally wrong act unless one has an excuse. For a defence of this view see Darwall (2006 p.97).

the range of permissible acts that are in line with an agent's self-interest. The point here is that there is more than one way in which a moral view can be demanding. As Claire Benn points out, a moral theory might be seen as demanding because it demands that an agent sacrifice too much. However, a moral theory might also be too demanding if it limits the range of permissible options. As Benn puts the point, such a theory is demanding because, "We are *confined* in terms of what we can permissibly do."<sup>43</sup> The fact that The No Cost Principle would not require that exemplars endure greater sacrifices than a theory that lacks this principles does not then show that it would not create a more demanding moral theory.

A final response the supporter of The Sacrifice View might give is to bite the bullet and say that those with more developed moral consciences *should* face more demanding moral obligations. Andrew Flescher after all, has defended a similar view independently of this discussion. In his words:

Heroes ought not to be seen as supererogatory agents. They do not in their actions exceed their moral duty. Rather, they are agents who have an expanded, and continually expanding, sense of duty relative to ordinary persons.<sup>44</sup>

According to Flescher, moral exemplars face more demanding duties than ordinary moral agents because of their expanded sense of duty. Supporters of The Sacrifice View need only agree with Flescher for the objection that their view creates more demanding duties for moral exemplars than for other moral agents to lose its force.

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<sup>43</sup> (2016 p.77). Brian McElwee (2016) points out that difficulty might be another form of demandingness that is not reducible to cost.

<sup>44</sup> (2003 p.115).

The problem for supporters of The Sacrifice View is that this response does not address the structural problems facing their view. The objection to The Sacrifice View is that those whose own well-being is improved when they perform morally admirable actions will face more demanding obligations than those whose well-being is not improved or improved to a lesser extent when they perform such actions. The point about moral exemplars is simply that many moral exemplars are people who do benefit in this way. However, it seems perfectly possible to imagine exemplars that *do not* benefit in this way. Take Susan Wolf's example of The Rational Saint.<sup>45</sup> This is someone who gets no pleasure from doing the right thing but through strength of will consistently manages to perform morally admirable actions. Wolf compares this kind of saint to The Loving Saint whose happiness lies in the happiness of others. If we accept Flescher's line of argument, then both kinds of saint should be held to higher standards of duty than other people, as both have an expanded sense of duty relative to other people. However, according to The Sacrifice View, only loving saints would be held to higher moral standards than other people, as only they would face less sacrifices in performing morally admirable actions.

Things get even worse for The Sacrifice View when we consider people who would benefit from performing admirable acts but are not exemplars. Imagine a warm-hearted *akratic* person, who gets a happy warm glow whenever she does the right thing but whose weakness of will often prevents her from performing the acts that would bring her this warm glow. According to The Sacrifice View, this person will also face higher standards of obligation than ordinary people. In fact, she will also face higher standards of obligation than The Rational Saint. This seems like the wrong result. After all, it is The Rational Saint who has the more expanded sense of duty. If anyone

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<sup>45</sup> (1982 p.420).

is to be held to higher levels of obligation it should be her, not the warm hearted *akratic*. Supporters of The Sacrifice View then, cannot avoid the objection I have raised by arguing that it is right to hold moral exemplars to higher moral standards than other people.

### **5. An Alternative Explanation**

In this section I will show how an alternative explanation for the limits on moral obligations avoids the problems facing The Sacrifice View. In §2 we saw that the reason that many endorse The Sacrifice View is due to the thought that there is a limit to the amount of sacrifice that agents are morally required to make. However, as we saw in the previous section, this explanation has implausible implications. What we want, then, is to find a way of explaining the existence of supererogatory acts that avoids these implausible implications.

To find the right explanation for the limits on moral obligation we should think back to the examples that were problematic for The Sacrifice View. For The Free Help Guy, the pursuit of moral goals is a central part of his life. We were reluctant, though, to say that he is morally required to pursue these goals, even if doing so was in line with his self-interest. It would have been permissible for him to spend his time pursuing other projects instead. Guy would not have violated a moral obligation if he had spent his free time writing a novel or collecting stamps instead of helping people.

What this suggests is that the motivation for the thought that there are limits on moral obligation is that we need to be given the space to choose and pursue our own projects. In order to live meaningful lives we need to have the space to choose what we want to prioritize, at least to some extent and operating within some moral constraints. Moral requirements then, should not be so extensive as to prevent us from

having the space to make these choices. A number of theorists explicitly defend this explanation for the limits of moral obligation,<sup>46</sup> while others seem to implicitly appeal to this thought.<sup>47</sup> On this account, supererogatory acts are ones that are morally better than the alternatives but that are not morally required because this would involve a removal of the space to choose one's own projects.

This explanation provides an independently plausible account of the limits of obligation. Violetta Ignaski motivates this view by pointing out that our duty to aid others is not limited to ensuring that their basic needs are met. We must also provide people with the opportunity to lead meaningful lives, ones in which they have the space to pursue life-enhancing projects. However, if this is part of what grounds our moral obligations to help those in need, then it must be morally permissible for us to pursue our own life-enhancing projects. Ignaski supports this claim by arguing that, "having the moral space to choose our ends and pursue them is essential to respecting our agency and treating ourselves as ends."<sup>48</sup> For Ignaski then, we need to be given the freedom to determine the shape of our lives and it is this that places limits on our duties to aid others.

Importantly for our purposes, Ignaski is not claiming that people must be given permission to act in a morally sub-optimal way in order to pursue a way of life that is optimal from the self-interested point of view. Rather, her claim is that people need to be given the *freedom* and the *space* to pursue their own projects. These projects may or may not be the projects that it would be prudentially best for the agent to pursue.

Accepting this view of the limits of duty then, means that we are no longer committed to the claim that those with more developed moral sensibilities will face more

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<sup>46</sup> Heyd (1982 pp.172-175) and Ignaski (2008).

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Wolf (1982).

<sup>48</sup> (2008 p.433).

demanding moral obligations. Those with more developed consciences will, like everyone else, be given the space to choose and pursue their own projects. There is no requirement for these projects to be as morally good as possible, nor as morally good as possible before it has a negative effect on the agent's well-being. This explanation then, allows for acts of supererogation that do not involve sacrifice.

It is worth noting, though, that this explanation is not committed to the claim that moral exemplars would *never* face more exacting standards of duty than other people. This justification for the limits of duty is consistent with the claim that moral exemplars may be held to higher standards of duty than other people as a result of a more expanded sense of duty. Importantly, though, this justification is not committed to the implausible view that The Rational Saint should be held to higher standards of duty than the warm-hearted *akratic*. Moreover, this account has the advantage of not being committed to making the claim that moral exemplars should face higher standards of duty than other people. Unlike The Sacrifice View, my account can allow this question to be investigated independently. This is as it should be. The question of whether moral exemplars should face higher moral standards than other people is both interesting and complicated. We should prefer an account of the limits of duty that does not provide a simple response to this difficult issue.

We might wonder why so many have thought that it is sacrifice that prevents a supererogatory act from being obligatory. However, the explanation I have given in this section is consistent with several ways of explaining why people might have been tempted to make this connection. Most obviously, although not all acts of supererogation involve sacrifice, many do. Those who considered only those supererogatory acts that do involve sacrifice may have been tempted to assume that this would be true for all acts of supererogation. Moreover, as most people are not

moral exemplars they may also be unaware that there is good reason to think that many exemplars that perform supererogatory acts are acting in line with their self-interest. This confusion is particularly unsurprising when we consider that the psychological studies of moral exemplars are relatively new and the results have yet to be widely appreciated by moral philosophers.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I have argued that we should reject The Sacrifice View, as it is committed to the implausible view that those with more developed moral sensibilities are subject to more demanding moral duties than other people. Instead, I have argued that we should explain the limits of our moral obligations by appealing to the need for people to have space to pursue their own projects.

This discussion has important implications for how we should evaluate competing solutions to The Puzzle of The Good Ought Tie Up. If we accept that not all acts of supererogation involve sacrifice then this is going to be problematic for solutions to the paradox that rely on the balance of the agent's self-interested reasons counting against performing the act.<sup>49</sup> Given that we also rejected The Restricted Sacrifice View, this discussion will also be problematic for solutions that appeal to this sort of explanation for a subset of supererogatory acts.<sup>50</sup>

This discussion also has implications for how we might accommodate these acts within existing normative ethical theories. Strategies that seek to accommodate the possibility of supererogation by appealing to a clash between what is best for the agent and what is best overall will be unable to explain this kind of supererogatory act. For

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<sup>49</sup> Eg. Dorsey (2013).

<sup>50</sup> As both Portmore (2011 p.135 fn.22) and Horgan and Timmons (2010 p.62) do.

example, utilitarians who attempt to accommodate the supererogatory by appealing to a permission to increase one's own utility over overall utility in certain situations,<sup>51</sup> will be unable to allow for acts of supererogation that it is in the agent's interest to perform.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Vessel (2010).

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