

What's the use of non-moral supererogation?

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Abstract: While moral philosophers have paid significant attention to the concept of moral supererogation, far less attention has been paid to the possibility that supererogation may also exist in other areas of normativity. Recently, though, philosophers have begun to consider the possible existence of prudential, epistemic, aesthetic and sporting supererogation. These discussions tend to focus on aspects of our practices in these areas of normativity that suggest an implicit acceptance of the existence of supererogation. In this chapter, I will offer a different kind of defense of non-moral supererogation. I will begin by considering a particular kind of argument made in support of moral supererogation. According to this line of argument, we should accept the existence of moral supererogation because a moral code which makes room for supererogation is likely to be more effective at promoting morally desirable behavior than a moral code which leaves no room for the supererogatory. I will begin by outlining this argument. I will then develop a similar line of argument for prudential, epistemic, aesthetic, and sporting norms.

Keywords: supererogation; aesthetic supererogation; epistemic supererogation; non-moral supererogation; sporting supererogation.

Introduction

Many moral philosophers accept the existence of acts of supererogation.¹ Those who give up their lives to save the life of another, dedicate their lives to serving the needy, or who simply go out of their way to help others when they have no special reason to do so, all seem to be acting in ways that go beyond their moral duties. While the concept of moral supererogation has been extensively explored by philosophers², non-moral forms of supererogation have only recently started to receive philosophical attention. The basic idea driving these investigations is that if morality allows for the possibility of acts that are beyond the call of duty, then perhaps other forms of normativity do so as well. This guiding idea has led philosophers to explore whether supererogation exists in relation to prudential (Benn & Bales 2020; McElwee 2017), etiquette (McElwee 2017), epistemic (Hedberg 2014; Li 2018; McElwee 2017), aesthetic (Archer & Ware 2017), and sporting (Archer 2017) norms.

Those seeking to defend the existence of non-moral supererogation typically do so in one of two ways. The first way is to point to features of the normative practices associated with these domains of normativity that suggest that these are domains in which supererogation exists. Brian McElwee (2017; see also McElwee's contribution to this volume), for example, has argued that two features need to be present in order for supererogation to exist in any given normative domain. First, that domain must include an evaluative scale for actions which ranks the actions from better for worse. Second, that domain must involve a deontic categorization of acts into the obligatory, the

¹ Though it is worth noting that some moral philosophers deny the existence of supererogatory acts. See Hale (1991), Baron (2016), and Fitts & Miller (2020).

² See for example Grigoletto (2019), Heyd (1982) and Mellema (1991) for monographs dedicated to the topic. For overviews of the literature on moral supererogation see Heyd (2011) and Archer (2018a).

permissible, and the forbidden, where the notion of obligation does not simply equate to an act being top of the evaluative scale. McElwee then argues that the domains of prudence, etiquette, and the epistemic meet both conditions and so we should accept that supererogation exists in these normative domains.³ Similarly, Claire Benn and Adam Bales (2020) argue that just as it would be too demanding to require perfection in the moral domain, so too would it be too demanding to demand perfection in the domain of prudence.

The second, related, way in which people have defended the existence of non-moral supererogation is to point to cases that intuitively appear to be praiseworthy in relation to the domain of normativity but would not be fitting subjects of blame had they not acted in that way. Trevor Hedberg (2014), for example, argues for the existence of epistemic supererogation by presenting a series of cases where an act appears to be epistemically praiseworthy but does not seem to be epistemically required of them. I have presented a similar kind of argument in support of sporting supererogation (Archer 2017).⁴

In this chapter, I will offer a different kind of defense of non-moral supererogation. I will begin by considering a particular kind of argument made in support of moral supererogation. According to this line of argument, we should accept the existence of moral supererogation because a moral code which makes room for supererogation is likely to be more effective at promoting morally desirable behavior than a moral code which leaves no room for the supererogatory. I will begin, in Section One, by outlining this argument. In the sections that follow I will then develop a similar line of argument for prudential (Section Two), epistemic (Section Three), aesthetic (Section Four) and sporting (Section Five) norms.

1. Moral Supererogation

In J.O. Urmson's (1958) influential essay 'Saints and Heroes', he provides several different kinds of argument in support of supererogation. He begins by making the case that our intuitive reactions to some of the exceptional deeds performed by saints and heroes are incompatible with viewing these actions as morally required. For example, a soldier who dives onto a grenade and sacrifices his life to save the lives of his comrades performs an act that is praiseworthy. However, the soldier would not be blameworthy if he had not dived on the grenade, and no one could reasonably demand that he act in this way. If we think that a moral duty is the kind of act which we can demand of each other and which people can be blamed for failing to perform, then we should accept that the soldier's act was not obligatory. This means that the soldier's act is morally praiseworthy but not morally required.⁵ In other words, it is beyond the call of duty.

In addition to this argument, Urmson also argues that moral codes that make room for the supererogatory will be preferable to those that do not. Urmson provides five reasons in support of this claim, though I will focus only on two of these.⁶ The first argument Urmson makes is the following:

³ Archer & Ware (2017) use the same strategy to argue for the existence of aesthetic supererogation.

⁴ Though see Borge (2021) for a critical reply to this argument.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this argument see Archer (2016).

⁶ See Crisp (2013) for a critical discussion of Urmson's argument.

It is important to give a special status of urgency, and to exert exceptional pressure, in those matters in which compliance with the demands of morality by all is essential [...] while life in a world without saints and heroes would be impoverished, it would only be poor and not necessarily brutish or short, as when basic duties are neglected. (1958: 70)

Urmson's point is that there is a certain level performance that is needed for society to function. For example, if people harmed other people whenever they wanted to, then we would have to live under the constant threat of being attacked by others. It is important, then, to do what we can to ensure that people perform these basic acts. An important way of ensuring this is to give these actions the special status of duties and to exert pressure on everyone to act in fulfil these duties. There are other morally worthy acts that improve our lives but are not essential to societal functioning. A society in which no one dedicated their lives to helping others would certainly be less desirable than one in which some people do act in this way. However, a society with no saints would still be capable of functioning in an adequate way.

The upshot of this is that a distinction between acts of duty and acts of supererogation can help to ensure that a special effort is made to ensure that they perform those acts needed for society to function. The concept of a moral duty which includes the idea that people are required to act in certain ways and can be legitimately targeted with demands and blame in order to ensure they do so gives these acts this special urgency. These are then distinguished from supererogatory moral acts which can be praised and admired but for which demands and blame are inappropriate. A society which includes the distinction between duty and supererogation will, then, be better placed to ensure that people perform the most basic and essential moral acts.⁷

The next reason Urmson offers for the superiority of moral codes that make room for supererogation is the following⁸:

If we were to represent the heroic act of sacrificing one's life for one's comrades as a basic duty, the effect would be to lower the degree of urgency and stringency that the notion of duty does in fact possess. The basic moral code must not be in part too far beyond the capacity of the ordinary men on ordinary occasions, or a general breakdown of compliance with the moral code would be an inevitable consequence; duty would seem to be something high and unattainable, and not for 'the likes of us'. (1958: 70)

The point here is that a moral code according to which the morally best act is always the act we are morally required to perform will be one in which moral criticism and moral demands lose their force. With such a code in place, most people will regularly violate their moral obligations. When most people get used to violating their obligations, they will become accustomed to ignoring the moral rules. As a result, the general level of moral behaviour will be lower than it would be under a moral code in which duties are less demanding.

In support of this claim Urmson gives the following example:

⁷ John Stuart Mill (2001: 59) offers a similar argument claiming that "Justice is a name for certain classes of moral rules which concern the essentials of human well-being more nearly, and are therefore of more absolute obligation, than any other rules for the guidance of life." In other words, we a set of basic moral rules that people will comply to in order to secure the most essential conditions for well-being. These rules can be enforced with punishment and blame. Other moral actions are good but not "absolute obligations" in the same way.

⁸ The discussion of this part of Urmson's argument closely follows Archer (2018b).

The prohibition laws asked too much of the American people and were consequently broken systematically; and as people got used to breaking the law a general lowering of respect for the law naturally followed; it no longer seemed that a law was something that everybody could be expected to obey. (1958: 70)

While this is an example of a legal rather than a moral rule, Urmson takes this to show the danger that arises from imposing unrealistic rules on people. When people find that obeying the law is too difficult, then they get used to breaking the law. This erodes the respect that they have for the law and makes it more likely that they will break other laws as well. This means that overly demanding legal rules may lead to behaviour that is further away from what the behaviour that the legislators are aiming for than rules requiring less demanding but more achievable standards of behaviour. Urmson claims that the same is true for moral rules. If the standards for moral duty are too high so that most people will fail to fulfil their duties, then people become accustomed to violating their moral duties. This, then, would lead to a lower average level of moral behaviour than a less demanding and more realistic set of moral duties. It is preferable, then, for moral duties to be set at a level that is lower than moral perfection and when moral duties do not require moral perfection there will be room for acts that are morally better than what morality demands.

Claire Benn (2018) offers a similar argument in defence of the practical value of the distinction between the obligatory and the supererogatory. According to Benn, overly high standards for moral duty would create large psychological costs:

[B]eing required to do the best takes a psychological toll. Knowing that even the smallest deviation from a particular course of action will lead to the legitimating of sanctions is likely to have an effect on an agent. Even if you are motivated to do what is right, having a moral gun to the head (so to speak) can make doing so much more difficult psychologically speaking. (Benn 2018: 343)

In support of this claim Benn draws a parallel to psychological perfectionism. Psychological perfectionists set overly high standards for themselves and subject themselves to excessive self-blame when they fail to meet these standards. This can have a paralyzing psychological effect, as a fear of failing to live up to these standards often leads to anxiety and even depression. This, in turn, often leads to avoidant behaviour, such as procrastination, abandoning tasks before they are finished, or a failure to begin tasks in the first place. The upshot is that demanding perfection from oneself is often counter-productive. People would achieve more if they demanded less from themselves. As the saying goes, the perfect can often be “the enemy of the good” (Benn 2018).

Benn argues that views that hold that we are always required to do what is morally best are forms of moral perfectionism. These views then are also likely to be counter-productive in the same way that perfectionism more generally is counter-productive. Those who hold themselves to maximally demanding moral duties are likely to avoid situations where they may be able to act morally, for fear of failing to meet their overly demanding moral standards. This means that if we want people to be morally good, we should not demand that they be morally perfect. Instead, we should accept a less demanding set of moral duties, which is not set at the level of moral perfection. Such a set of moral duties will leave room for supererogation by allowing that people can perform acts that are morally better than what is required to merely fulfil these duties.

In summary, one approach that some philosophers have taken to defending the existence of moral supererogation is to point out that a moral code which leaves room for acts of supererogation will be morally preferable to one which does not. The reason for this is that it is important to have

ensure that as many people as possible reach some basic minimum level of moral performance to secure the pre-conditions for a functioning society. Moral duties which are enforceable through demands and punishment help to ensure that people succeed in meeting this basic level. If these duties were to demand too much of people, especially if they were demand that people be morally perfect, then they would be less effective, and the average level of moral achievement would be lowered. While several criticisms have been made to this line of argument,⁹ my primary aim here will not be in evaluating it but rather in showing that this same argumentative strategy can be employed to support the practical value of *non-moral* supererogation.¹⁰

2. Prudential Supererogation

The first form of non-moral supererogation that I will consider is prudential supererogation. I understand prudence as the area of normativity concerned with self-interest. The prudentially best act will be the act that is best from the point of view of promoting an agent's self-interest. As McElwee (2017: 509) points out, we often use deontic terms when discussing prudential normativity. We say that people really ought to take better care of their health, that they ought to exercise more, or that they ought to take their studies more seriously. We also use distinctive forms of criticism when people fail to act in these ways, describing them as "foolish" or "imprudent" (McElwee 2017: 509).¹¹ As McElwee points out, though, these forms of criticism tend not to be used whenever someone fails to act in the best way possible from the point of view of self-interest. Rather, they are reserved for those who to those who fall below a basic level of prudential behavior. This means that there is room for acts of prudential supererogation, actions that exceed this basic level.

McElwee's argument is designed to show that our prudential practices implicitly allow room for prudential supererogation. My interest here is not in evaluating whether we are implicitly committed to the existence of prudential supererogation but rather to argue that an approach to prudence that makes room for supererogation will be better at promoting prudential behavior than an approach that leaves no room for the prudentially supererogatory.

The starting point for this argument is Urmson's claim that it is useful to have a set of moral norms that help to ensure that we perform the most essential moral acts. A set of basic moral duties which can be enforced through demands and blame helps to ensure that people perform the actions that are needed to allow the basic functioning of society. In the same way, it is useful to have a set of prudential norms to help to ensure that people perform the most essential prudential actions. These will be the acts for which people will seriously threaten their self-interest when they fail to perform them. For example, we might think that is prudentially required for those with an adequate but

⁹ Eg. Baron (2016), Crisp (2013), Hale (1981). It is also worth noting that this is not the only kind of consideration offered in favor of the value of a moral code that leaves room for the supererogatory. David Heyd (1982: 178-181), for example, argues that moral codes should leave room for supererogation to allow room for acts of voluntary altruism which help to promote social cohesion.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that the origins of the concept of supererogation lie in Catholic Theology where a distinction is made between precepts (commandments) and counsels (recommendations) see Heyd (1982 Ch.1). This theological distinction could also be justified in similar terms, as a way of effectively ensuring people perform their most essential religious duties.

¹¹ McElwee (2017: 509) argues that this special form of disapproval gives us reason to distinguish prudential duties from self-regarding moral duties. See Muñoz (2020) for a discussion of self-regarding moral duties. For a discussion of self-regarding acts of moral supererogation see Kawall (2003).

modest salary to prioritize one's spending in such a way that one will have enough money to pay for the basic essentials of life, such as food, throughout the month. Spending all of one's salary on expensive clothes and whisky so that one no longer has enough money left over for food at the end of the month would violate this prudential requirement. On the other hand, saving as much money as possible each month to make wise future investments may count as prudentially supererogatory. Similarly, for those in a position to do so, making sure that one is eating a reasonably healthy diet may count as a prudential requirement. However, to spend hours each week tracking nutritional details to ensure one is eating the healthiest diet possible would be prudentially supererogatory in the case where it really does advance one's interests or foolish or silly if it does not do so.

While it is valuable to have a set of basic prudential requirements to ensure that we are performing the most essential prudential actions, it is also important that these prudential requirements are not set at too high a level. There are two reasons for this. First, it may undermine the important role that these prudential requirements are supposed to play. We have all sorts of prudential reasons to perform all sorts of actions. Having a basic set of prudential requirements, though, can ensure that we feel a special force to perform the most essential actions, those that are needed to secure a basic level of well-being. If we were to view every act that we have most prudential reason to do as prudentially required, then these prudential requirements would lose their force. In such a situation, most people would quickly find themselves regularly violating their prudential requirements. This in turn, would lead to a lowering of respect for these prudential rules, as people no longer feel any special compunction to ensure they act in line with these requirements. This would be likely to bring about a lower level of prudential performance as people fail to ensure that they are performing the actions needed to secure the most basic level of self-interest.

The second worry with viewing ourselves as subject to excessively demanding prudential demands is that someone who demands of herself that she always do what is best from the prudential point of view is a clear example of a perfectionist. Such a person will face demands that she always perform as well as possible in her job, has a maximally nutritional diet, a perfect exercise regime, spends the exactly right amount of time with her friends and no more, and has exactly the right number and selection of hobbies. As we saw in the previous section, perfectionism of this kind has a damaging psychological impact. It often leads to a fear of failure, which in turn motivates avoidant behavior such as procrastination, abandoning tasks before they are completed, and avoiding tasks altogether (Benn 2018; Shafran et al 2002). This clearly has a negative impact on our self-interest.

Prudential requirements, then, have an important role to play in our lives but setting these requirements too high may lead them to fail to perform this function and lead to damaging forms of perfectionism. As a result, if we want to promote our self-interest then we should not make excessive prudential demands of ourselves. Rather, we should accept a set of less demanding prudential requirements that secure our basic self-interest. That does not mean that we should aim only to achieve this basic level, we can and should aspire to do more than simply fulfil our prudential duties. However, we should not view ourselves as having a prudential requirement to always do what is perfect from the prudential point of view. Accepting this gives us a view of prudential requirements which makes room for the prudentially supererogatory. Prudential requirements help to secure a basic level of self-interest but there will generally be many ways to go beyond these requirements and perform an act that is prudentially better than what is prudentially required..

3. Epistemic Supererogation

The second form of non-moral supererogation that I will consider is *epistemic* supererogation. This is an area of normativity concerned with what we ought to believe. A belief is good from the epistemic point of view insofar as it tracks the truth. Those who form beliefs in a responsible way may be praised by others, while those who fail to do so are likely to be blamed by others.¹²

Consider a trivial example, suppose a group of friends are going to the cinema to see the new Nicholas Cage film. Dave confidently tells the group that he knows that the local arthouse cinema will be showing the film. The group walk to the cinema only to discover that the film is not being shown there. The group turn to Dave and ask him why he was so confident the film would be showing there. He replies that he knew they showed the previous Nicholas Cage film, so he assumed that they would be showing this one as well. The group roundly criticize him for making such a confident assertion based on so little evidence and for wasting everyone's time.¹³

This example seems to show that we do engage in blame when someone fails to form their beliefs in a reasonable and trustworthy way.¹⁴ As McElwee (2017: 513) argues, when someone forms beliefs in an irresponsible way, as Dave did, it can be appropriate to blame them and perhaps even exclude her from the group of people whose testimony we are willing to trust. The next time the group of friends is looking for a cinema showing a film they want to see, it would be reasonable for them not to listen to Dave's claims about where it is showing, or at least to ask him to explain how he formed this belief. There seems good reason, then, to think that there exist epistemic duties that people may rightly be blamed for failing to fulfil.

However, as several philosophers have argued, the epistemic duties to which we hold each other do not require epistemic perfection (Hedberg 2014; Li 2018; McElwee 2017).¹⁵ While we might reasonably expect Dave to check the cinema's online schedule before asserting that he knows the film is showing there, it would go beyond the call of duty for Dave to also phone the cinema to check that their online schedule is correct. Taking this extra step to make sure his belief is justified is praiseworthy but is not required and Dave would not be blamed if he simply relied on the cinema's online schedule.¹⁶ There seems good reason, then, to think that our epistemic practices implicitly make room for epistemic supererogation.

¹² See Boulton (2021) for an overview of the literature on epistemic blame.

¹³ This example may be thought to involve both a moral and an epistemic wrong. Dave deserves criticism not only for his belief forming process but also for ruining his friends' plans. Importantly, though, even if he is a fitting target of moral criticism in this case, he is also a target of epistemic criticism. He should be criticized not only for ruining his friends' plans but also for the way in which he forms beliefs and for his willingness to confidently make factual assertions for which he has so little evidence.

¹⁴ Though see Matheson & Milam (2021) for an argument against the existence of non-moral blame.

¹⁵ See Li (2019) and Siscoe (2022) for a discussion of whether epistemic supererogation can provide support for epistemic permissivism, the view that there can be more than one rationally permissible belief which one may hold in relation to some body of evidence.

¹⁶ Those unconvinced by this example may consider the following example suggested by Nado (2019): "[S]uppose that I check ten separate sources before resting content with my belief that Mogadishu is the capital of Somalia. It seems obvious that I did not need to do that; surely one or two would have been enough (indeed, in actual fact I only checked one while writing this paragraph). But it also seems obvious that I have improved my epistemic position at least a little by the additional checking - though, all things considered, my time might have been better spent in other ways. The epistemic action of decuple-checking was epistemically supererogatory."

My interest, though, is in arguing that a set of epistemic norms that make room for epistemic supererogation will do a better job at advancing our epistemic goals than one that requires epistemic perfection. I will do so by applying Urmson's argument once more, this time to epistemic normativity.

The reason that a set of epistemic norms that makes room for supererogation is preferable to one that does not is that it is likely to do a better job of ensuring that people meet an essential, basic epistemic standard in their belief-forming processes. A set of basic epistemic duties which can be enforced through demands and blame helps to ensure that people form their beliefs in a way that meets basic epistemic standards. For our epistemic practices of relying on testimony and social deliberation to be effective, we need to make sure that people are forming their beliefs in a reasonably responsible way. For example, someone who is never willing to reconsider their beliefs in the light of reasonable criticism, fails to form their beliefs in a responsible way (Hedberg 2014). If we were to continue to trust this person's testimony, then we would run a high risk of accepting beliefs that are not justified and that are likely to be false. By blaming such a person for their belief forming processes we can hope to discourage them and others from forming beliefs in this way in the future. In this way, they will hopefully change their behavior and begin to reevaluate their beliefs when facing reasonable criticism. If they do not do so, then we may have to respond in a more drastic way by excluding them from the group of people we are willing to trust and whose testimony we will depend upon.

While it is important to ensure that people are meeting basic epistemic standards in their belief forming processes, it is also important that these epistemic requirements do not demand too much from people. If these requirements were too demanding, then they may undermine the important role that these requirements are supposed to play in promoting epistemic values, such as the discovery (or acquisition) of truth. Most of the time, there will be a whole host of actions we could take to make our beliefs more justified. To return to the cinema example, as well as double-checking the cinema times by phoning the box office, Dave could triple-check by looking up the times in the local newspaper. He could also ask people he knows if they have ever heard of the cinema making a mistake in their schedule. While taking each of these steps may increase the justification Dave has for believing that the cinema will show the film, it would go beyond what we could reasonably expect from people to ensure that they try to achieve this level of justification for all their beliefs. A set of epistemic norms that were this demanding would quickly lose their force. In such a situation, most people would soon become accustomed to violating their epistemic requirements and would lose their respect for the norms. This in turn would lead to a lower level of epistemic performance as people begin to ignore the most essential steps that they need to take to form beliefs responsibly. By having a less demanding set of epistemic requirements, we can help to protect the special force of the most essential epistemic norms that need to be followed to ensure that our epistemic practices can continue to function.

A maximally demanding set of epistemic norms may also lead to problems of perfectionism. Someone who strives always to ensure that their beliefs are as well-supported as possible will face a very difficult life. They will have to double and triple check their beliefs whenever they make any factual claims to others or even rely on such beliefs in their own reasoning processes. They will spend so much time checking their beliefs that they are unlikely to ever have much time for anything

else. This form of perfectionism may also likely have a similarly damaging psychological impact to the other forms of perfectionism we have considered so far. Epistemic perfectionism is likely to lead to a fear of being found to hold a false or unjustified belief, to procrastination in relation to evidence gathering, and perhaps even to the avoidance of forming beliefs altogether, where possible. While it is important to ensure that people meet some basic epistemic norms when forming their beliefs, it would be counter-productive to make these norms too demanding.

That is not to say that we will only ever demand from people that they meet these most basic norms. Some roles that people hold may be accompanied by a more demanding set of epistemic duties. Those serving on a jury in a legal trial, for example, may be expected to take greater care than normal about the extent to which their beliefs are justified. Similarly, people who are regarded as experts by others or whose testimony is likely to have a large audience, might reasonably be expected to be more careful in the ensuring that any factual statements that they make in public are well-justified. This, though, is fully compatible with the argument I have made which holds that it is useful for there to be a set of epistemic requirements that ensure people meet some basic standards (which may be higher for some people than others) in their belief forming processes. For the purposes of promoting epistemic values, though, it is also important to ensure that these standards are not too demanding. It is desirable, then, for our epistemic norms to leave room for epistemic supererogation.

4. Aesthetic Supererogation

The next form of non-moral supererogation to consider is *aesthetic* supererogation. While the existence of aesthetic requirements is not universally accepted,¹⁷ several different kinds of example have been offered in support of the claim that these are a recognizable feature of our aesthetic practices.¹⁸ I will focus on three. First, Howard Press (1969: 525) argues that there are obligations to appreciate what is beautiful. We ought, for example, to take the time to appreciate the beauty in the world around. As Archer and Ware (2018: 115) argue, we might think there is something blameworthy about someone who never makes the effort to appreciate the beauty in their local surroundings. For example, if someone lives next to a beautiful forest and has never taken the time to visit for no other reason than they cannot be bothered to do so, we might think that there is something to be criticized in this indifference to aesthetic value (Archer & Ware 2018: 116).

Second, it seems plausible to think that there are obligations not to destroy things that are aesthetically valuable, at least when there is no good reason to do so. As Yuriko Saito (2007: 214) has argued, people who destroy beautiful things, such as the natural environment, are often subject to fierce criticism. To illustrate this kind of case, Archer & Ware (2017: 111) give the real-life example of a local official who responded to the vandalism of a Scottish beauty spot by saying that the vandals “have very ugly minds”. Here again it seems as if a distinctive form of aesthetic blame is being addressed to those who destroy beauty.

Third, there may be aesthetic requirements to meet particular aesthetic standards on certain occasions. Saito (2007: 213) gives the example of the Northwestern University lacrosse team who

¹⁷ For arguments against the existence of aesthetic obligations see Dyck (2021) and Matheson & Milam (2021).

¹⁸ We might also think that the existence of aesthetic obligations follows from other aspects of aesthetic normativity such as the existence of aesthetic dilemmas (Eaton 2008).

were criticized for attending a function at the White House while wearing flip-flops. This, Saito argues, is a clear case where people are deemed blameworthy and disrespectful for violating an aesthetic norm. Similarly, we might think people can be criticized for dressing informally at a wedding or a funeral.

These three kinds of cases are supposed to show that aesthetic requirements are a recognizable feature of our aesthetic practices. As Archer and Ware (2017; 2018) point out, in all these cases the aesthetic requirements are ones that can be surpassed. While someone may be criticized when they make no effort whatsoever to appreciate beauty, most people do not expect others to dedicate their entire lives to the appreciation of beauty (Archer & Ware 2017: 109). Similarly, someone who dedicates their life to the protecting areas of great natural beauty seems to surpass the duty not to engage in the destruction of beauty (Archer & Ware 2018: 120). Finally, while there are certain aesthetic standards for clothing that people expect others to meet on certain occasions, these too can be surpassed. Wearing flip-flops to the White House may violate such standards but someone who spends a large portion of their savings on buying a new outfit for the occasion would likely be seen as going beyond what is required here.

These examples give us reason to think that aesthetic supererogation is presupposed by our aesthetic practices of holding people to certain aesthetic standards.¹⁹ My interest here, though, is in defending the claim that a set of aesthetic norms that makes room for supererogation is preferable to one that does not.

As with the domains of normativity that I have considered so far, it is important to have certain basic aesthetic norms we can demand that people comply with. This point should not be overstated. These basic aesthetic norms do not seem to have the same level of importance as the basic moral or epistemic norms. Urmsen's claim was that society could not function without a basic set of moral duties that people can expect others to comply with. Similarly, I argued that our practices of relying on other people's testimony and social deliberation depend upon people being able to count on others fulfilling certain basic epistemic duties. Nothing quite so serious seems to hold in the aesthetic case. Nevertheless, it is certainly valuable to be able to rely on others to meet some basic standards. We expect that when others invited us round to make food that they have prepared, that they will have made some kind of effort to try and make food that is aesthetically pleasing. Without being able to rely on people to meet this basic aesthetic standards we might be much less willing to accept dinner invitations. Similarly, in many places, areas of natural beauty can be made publicly accessible without a major security presence, as most people can be relied upon not to destroy this beauty. It is also useful to be able to rely on others to comply with aesthetic norms that apply in particular occasions, such as dressing appropriately for weddings, funerals or visits to the president. It is useful to be able to depend on others to make some basic steps to appreciate, promote or protect aesthetic values and aesthetic requirements can enable us to do this.

While it is important to ensure that people are meeting basic aesthetic standards, it is also important that these aesthetic requirements do not demand too much from people. If these requirements were too demanding, then they may undermine the role they play in enabling us to depend on others to

¹⁹ See Kubala (2018) for a defense of the claim that some of these obligations can be grounded in a self-directed promise.

make some basic efforts to protect aesthetic value. On most occasions there will be a wide range of actions we can take to promote aesthetic value. People could dedicate their lives to appreciating works of art, preserving natural beauty, or dressing as well as possible. While there would certainly be something aesthetically valuable about these projects, it would not be helpful to demand this level of aesthetic dedication from everyone. Most people are not willing to dedicate their entire lives to these kinds of aesthetic projects and so would find themselves regularly violating their aesthetic duties. Moreover, these various aesthetic projects are likely to be incompatible, so even people wishing to dedicate their lives to aesthetic project are likely to find themselves violating aesthetic demands regularly. A maximally demanding set of aesthetic norms, then, would quickly lose their force, as people become accustomed to violating their aesthetic duties. This would be likely to lead to lower levels of aesthetic performance. An overly demanding set of aesthetic norms may be counterproductive in relation to promoting and protecting aesthetic values.

Maximally demanding aesthetic requirements are also likely to lead to problems of perfectionism. If we demand what is aesthetically best from everyone at all times, then people will quickly find themselves facing an impossible set of tasks. They must make sure that their houses are as beautiful as possible, that they are dressing as well as they possibly can, that they are making as much effort as possible to appreciate art and the aesthetic value of nature, whilst developing whatever aesthetic talents they possess as much as possible. Aesthetic perfectionism is likely to be psychologically damaging in similar ways to the other forms of perfectionism we have considered so far. For one thing, aesthetic perfectionism is likely to lead to procrastination in aesthetic production. Aesthetic perfectionism may lead people to be less willing to take the kinds of risk involved in true artistic creativity or even to avoid artistic creation altogether. While it is useful to be able to depend on others to comply with some basic aesthetic norms, it would be counter-productive to make these norms too demanding.

Another reason to accept a clear distinction between the aesthetically required and the aesthetically supererogatory can be found by looking at how certain aesthetic norms function in sexist societies. Naomi Wolf (1990) famously argued that sexist beauty norms have an oppressive impact on women's freedom. These norms make involve highly demanding aesthetic standards for personal appearance for women but not for men. Archer and Ware (2018) argue that a major problem with these norms is that they treat what should be considered aesthetically supererogatory approaches to aesthetic standards of personal appearance for women as if they were aesthetically required.²⁰ They argue that the concept of aesthetic supererogation can play an important role in highlighting what is going wrong with these demands. By making it clear that aesthetic perfection is not an aesthetic requirement, the concept of aesthetic supererogation can help women resist the pressure to strive for aesthetic perfection in their personal appearance.

5. Sporting Supererogation

The final form of non-moral supererogation that I will consider is sporting supererogation. Elsewhere I have argued that there is good reason to accept the existence of acts of sporting supererogation (Archer 2017). We can see an initial case for this by considering two examples.

²⁰ See Widdows (2018) for an alternative analysis of this problem according to which aesthetic values are transformed into *ethical* demands.

In an English Premier League football match between Arsenal and Liverpool in 1997, the referee awarded a penalty after Liverpool's Robbie Fowler appeared to be fouled by the Arsenal goalkeeper. Surprisingly, Fowler responded by saying that he had not in fact been fouled and so the referee should not award a penalty to his team. While most players would simply have accepted a referee error that benefitted their team, Fowler made the effort to try to persuade the referee to correct the mistake. Fowler was widely praised for his sportsmanship and received a special UEFA, the governing body of European football, for his actions.

A similar case of sportsmanship can be found in another English Premier League football match between West Ham United and Everton in 2000. Everton's goalkeeper, Paul Gerrard collapsed just as West Ham crossed the ball into the Everton box. Paulo Di Canio was left with an open goal and an easy chance to put his side ahead in the match. Rather than shoot at goal, though, Di Canio caught the ball in his hands, pointing to the injured goalkeeper to signal that the match should stop to allow Gerrard to receive treatment. Like Fowler, Di Canio was widely praised for his sportsmanship. In recognition of his act of good sporting behaviour, he received the annual fair play award from FIFA, the World's governing body for football.

These two cases suggest that our sporting practices implicitly make room for acts of sporting supererogation. While Fowler and Di Canio were both widely praised for their acts of fair play, they would not have been widely criticized for taking advantage of the goalscoring situations they were presented with. This contrasts with other acts of fair play that are demanded from athletes. Football players are subject to criticism for deliberately misleading referees by simulating fouls. Golf players would be fiercely criticized for moving their golf balls with their hands to gain an advantage during a match. These acts would not only be criticized but criticized in a way distinctive to sport. These players would be accused of unsporting behavior, having no sense of fair play, and perhaps even of being a disgrace to the game. It appears, then, that there are basic norms of fair play that are demanded of athletes. There are also acts, like Fowler's and Di Canio's, that are praiseworthy from a sporting point of view for which athletes would not be blamed if they chose not to perform. There seems good reason, then, to accept the existence of sporting supererogation.²¹

There is also good reason to think that a set of sporting norms which allow for supererogation would be preferable to one that does not. There is good reason to want people to follow some basic norms of fair play when engaging in sport. As Bernard Suits has argued, sports are a subclass of games that involve physical skill and exertion. Sports and other games are activities that involve trying to achieve a particular aim, such as putting a ball in a goal or basket, by following rules that constrain what means you can take to achieve that aim. In football for example, outfield players may not touch the ball with their hands, while in basketball players cannot hold the ball and run with it. It is these rules that make the game possible, and they allow athletes to challenge themselves and to test the limits of their physical abilities (Loland 2002: 10; Simon et al 2014: 47). We need to make sure these rules are followed then, in order to make these challenges possible. Referees are introduced to enforce these rules, but players are also expected to meet basic standards of fair play. This involves not only following the official rules of the game but also complying with informal norms such as kicking the ball out of play when a player is injured in football.

²¹ Though see Borge (2021) for a response to these arguments.

We need, then, a set of basic norms of sporting conduct that athletes can be expected to comply with in order to make the valuable challenges of sport possible. However, there is also good reason not to make these norms too demanding. There is good reason, for example, not to make it a norm of football for players to always attempt to change the referee's mind when they believe the referee has made a mistake which favors their team. One problem that would arise from such a norm is that players who are able to look at the game in an impartial way would be more likely to call for the referee to overturn decisions than those who view the game in a more biased way. This norm, then, may undermine the aim it is seeking to promote, namely the fair application of the rules to both teams.

In addition, this norm would also require players to view the game more from the perspective of a referee rather than the perspective of a player. This is a problem, as these are different ways of viewing sport that require different focuses of attention. An official should attend to whether the rules are being broken, while a player should attend to how to how they should respond to the play and what their next move should be. A norm that players should always seek to overturn referee calls in their favor that they disagree with would require players to change their attentional focus so that it incorporates an official's view of the game. In doing so, it may lower the general level of sporting performance. Just as there is good reason to ask athletes to comply with some basic norms of sporting behavior, there is also good reason not to make these norms demand that athletes act in the most sporting way possible.

While there is good reason not to demand that athletes act in a maximally sporting way, there is also good reason to praise those athletes who exceed the basic level of sporting behavior expected of athletes. Asking players to make their own judgement about every referee decision may be damaging for sport, but it is still praiseworthy for players to ask referees to overturn mistakes benefitting their team in the case of particularly clear errors, such as Fowler's case. A set of norms for sporting behavior that leave room for sporting supererogation will then be preferable to a set of norms that leaves no room for the supererogatory.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have examined why a set of non-moral norms that make room for non-moral supererogation may be preferable to norms that require perfection in that normative domain. I began by considering Urmson's and Benn's arguments for the claim that a set of moral norms that leaves room for supererogation will produce better moral results than norms requiring moral perfection. I then argued that similar arguments could be given for a range of non-moral norms. Some basic prudential, epistemic, aesthetic, and sporting norms may also play an important role in our lives but if we want to promote these various kinds of value we have good reason not to require perfection in any of these areas.

Before finishing, it is worth noting the limitations of this line of argument. Urmson's and Benn's arguments rest on somewhat speculative empirical claims. While both provide plausible reasons for thinking that moral norms that require perfection would lead to a lower level of moral performance, this is nevertheless an empirical claim which could turn out to be false. That is not to say that this is an empirical claim that would be easy to test. Perhaps we could examine the effect of more demanding norms in some localized area of life but a wholesale study of the effect of making moral

perfection a moral requirement on a societal level is unlikely to ever be feasible, nor likely to be approved by an ethics committee! The effects of demanding non-moral perfection are also likely to remain uncertain. While I have offered some reasons to think that requiring perfection could be damaging in these areas too, these considerations are a long way from a conclusive proof of the truth of this claim. Nevertheless, they do give us reason to be cautious about making non-moral norms more demanding, as this may frustrate the values that these norms are intended to promote. Moreover, the argument for non-moral supererogation that I have outlined in this chapter is not the only form of argument that may be offered for this position (see, for example, McElwee's contribution to this volume). So even if my argument is found wanting, there may nevertheless be good reason to accept the existence of non-moral supererogation.

Finally, my discussion has focused on forms of non-moral supererogation that have already been discussed in the philosophical literature. It would be interesting for future work to consider whether similar arguments could be made in support of supererogation in other areas, even if these areas do not constitute a separate area of normativity from the moral, prudential, epistemic, or aesthetic. For example, in most workplaces it is useful to have a set of basic norms of conduct that employees can be expected to comply with that help advance the interests of their employers and their co-workers. Making these basic norms too demanding, though, could potentially undermine the values they are designed to promote. Demanding perfection may not be the best way to improve performance.

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