

# Self-Regarding Supererogatory Actions

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Many philosophers, in discussing supererogation, maintain that supererogatory actions must be done for the benefit of others (among other conditions). Most others, while not explicitly embracing such a requirement, typically use examples which involve agents risking their own well-being (or indeed sacrificing their own well-being) for the sake of others. On the other hand, some have allowed that agents can perform supererogatory actions without a concern for good consequences for others, if the agents are acting out of a concern for moral duty or principle.

Here I wish to argue that there can be self-regarding supererogatory actions. That is, there are cases in which the primary (or sole) intended beneficiary of a supererogatory action is the agent herself, and she need not be acting out of a concern for moral principle. I first present several characterizations of the supererogatory which would seem to rule this out, or which do not explicitly embrace the possibility. I then present several cases of self-regarding supererogatory actions and consider potential objections. Finally, I discuss whether self-regarding supererogatory actions are always worthy of moral praise.

## I. Characterizations of the Supererogatory

We can begin by considering various characterizations of the supererogatory that would not allow for self-regarding acts of supererogation. David Heyd presents the following definition of a supererogatory act in his *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*:

An act is supererogatory if and only if

- (1) It is neither obligatory nor forbidden.
- (2) Its omission is not wrong, and does not deserve sanction or criticism—either formal or informal.
- (3) It is morally good, both by virtue of its (intended) consequences and by virtue of its intrinsic value (being beyond duty).
- (4) It is done voluntarily for the sake of someone else's good, and is thus meritorious.<sup>1</sup>

Heyd explicitly requires that supererogatory actions benefit others (or at least be expected to do so). Somewhat surprisingly, he does not hold that a supererogatory act must be motivated by a desire to benefit others. Rather, an agent simply needs to be aware that the action will help others and con-

ceive it as such (regardless of her ultimate motivation). Thus, an agent could be motivated to act heroically by a desire for fame, but she must at least understand this action to be one which will help others, in order for it to qualify as supererogatory. Heyd's position is thus not as straightforward as it may initially appear.<sup>2</sup> Still, the key point for our current purposes is that Heyd requires an action to be conceived of as benefiting others (by the agent) in order to be supererogatory.

In a recent paper in this journal, Nancy A. Stanlick also characterizes the supererogatory in terms of actions performed for the benefit of others:

They [supererogatory actions] are actions such that the agent promotes the good of others either at the expense of herself or without regard for her own interests.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, she holds that oftentimes such actions involve great risk taking on the part of the agent (though she does not include this latter as a necessary condition).<sup>4</sup> In her "Duties to Oneself: An Ethical Basis for Self-Liberation?"<sup>5</sup> Joan Straumanis wishes to secure women against traditional societies which demand too many sacrifices of them. Still, she also attempts to save the "common-sense notion that it is obviously a good to devote oneself to others or to sacrifice one's own interests—to supererogate."<sup>6</sup> Thus, Straumanis views supererogation in terms of benefiting others.

Others hold that, in addition to being performed for the benefit of others, an act must involve significant or even extreme self-sacrifice (or risk of such sacrifice) in order to qualify as supererogatory (a stronger condition than those maintained by Stanlick or Straumanis). Thus, Russell A. Jacobs suggests that

Supererogatory actions, are by definition, acts that are morally good or morally praiseworthy, but not the agent's duty to perform. They are 'above and beyond duty,' in that they exceed, in self-sacrifice or risk of self-sacrifice, what can be morally demanded of the agent.<sup>7</sup>

Jacobs seems to require (or at least assume) that the sacrifice is for the sake of others. For example, in marking off cases of demanding obligation from cases of supererogation, he claims that

In some cases, our obligations will resist override by cost [to the agent], and then, indeed, we ought to be brave enough to fulfil them; in other cases the cost will override our obligations, and then it is *not* the case that we ought to make large sacrifices for others.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout his paper Jacobs maintains this emphasis on sacrifices for others. Patricia M. McGoldrick similarly claims that

The distinguishing feature of a supererogatory act is that it is performed at extreme risk to one's own life and well-being. . . . The hero who goes behind enemy lines, the saint who devotes his life to the service of the

poor, the man who chooses imprisonment over silence in the face of an unjust regime, all serve others at considerable cost to themselves.<sup>9</sup>

While our primary focus here is on the possibility of self-regarding supererogatory actions, it is worth noting that an emphasis on extreme self-sacrifice is too narrow to capture all instances of supererogation. For example, consider an agent who is late for an appointment but who still holds a door open for a person carrying several packages, or a person who repays a loan to a friend much sooner than she said she would (and while still a bit short of funds). These are not saintly or heroic actions, but they do seem to go beyond our basic moral requirements and are at least mildly praiseworthy. We can go beyond demanding duties, but we can also go beyond relatively minor, nondemanding duties; there is no obvious reason to limit the supererogatory to extreme cases.<sup>10</sup>

Gregory Mellema rejects the requirement that supererogatory actions must produce (or be intended to produce) good consequences for others. He presents the following counterexample:

Suppose a man is held prisoner by political terrorists. He is commanded to swear allegiance to the leader of the terrorists and to renounce allegiance to his own government. The prisoner knows that a refusal to cooperate will result only in bad consequences. He will be beaten, and the angered terrorists will only stiffen their resolve to eradicate all opposition to their cause. Moreover, no one but the terrorists will ever know if he refuses. Nevertheless, the man is willing to endure these bad consequences. As a man of high principle, he is simply unwilling to renounce allegiance to his own government.<sup>11</sup>

Mellema's prisoner acts in a supererogatory fashion and does not intend to benefit others (and indeed, his actions won't benefit others). This prisoner is acting out of a concern for morality, but of a deontological rather than consequentialist variety. As Mellema describes him, he is "a man of high principle." Later, Mellema clarifies his position:

I have attempted to show that an act of supererogation can be performed in such a manner that intended good consequences or benefits to others play no role whatsoever. *One can act in accord with an awareness of principle and have no regard for the good consequences of one's act or the benefits which will accrue to others.*<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Mellema allows that supererogatory actions need not create benefits for others (or be intended to create such benefits); it would also be sufficient that an action be done out of a concern for morality or principle. While Mellema goes beyond the range of cases typically considered supererogatory, he does not explicitly consider the possibility of self-regarding supererogatory actions. Such actions would, in fact, be compatible with his construal of supererogatory actions.<sup>13</sup> Still, he focuses on cases in which actions are performed for the sake of moral principle.

## II. Self-Regarding Supererogatory Actions

Consider the following two examples of supererogatory actions in which the agent herself is the primary (indeed sole) intended beneficiary of the actions and the actions are not motivated by a concern with moral principle or duty:<sup>14</sup>

1. A farmer is held prisoner in a fascist state. She has committed no crimes and was simply one of scores of innocents rounded up by military police to set an example for possible dissidents in the region. Life in the prison is hard, and there is no indication that she will be released or even receive a trial. Still, she is adequately fed and has at least some interaction with other humans—her situation is not entirely nightmarish. She notices that there are loose bars on the windows of her cell (she is kept alone in this cell most of the time) and that she could crawl out. There are many guards outside and she knows that they have been ordered to kill anyone who attempts to escape. She decides to risk her life and attempt to escape. I would suggest that her action is supererogatory.
2. A single, middle-aged man working as a waiter has always dreamed of going to university. He finally gathers up his courage and decides to enroll at the local school. To meet the cost of tuition, etc., he also takes on a second job. He is thus returning to classes after more than twenty years, studying, and working two jobs in order to do this. He forgoes many small pleasures, makes do with as little sleep as he can, and so on. I would suggest that his actions are supererogatory.

The intended nature of the scenarios is to illustrate cases in which the agent performs an action that goes beyond any self-regarding duty, in a supererogatory fashion. Thus, while the prisoner is in a difficult position, I'm attempting to describe a situation in which there is not a duty to herself to attempt to escape; conditions are not sufficiently bad, and she would not be blameworthy for not risking her life to escape.<sup>15</sup> Rather, she is taking a severe risk in order to escape a bad situation and to significantly improve her own well-being. She need not be concerned with any moral duties in the case at all (unlike in the cases proposed by Mellema). But I would still suggest that her actions are morally praiseworthy, possibly heroic, and supererogatory.<sup>16</sup>

The prisoner and student are intended to correspond to heroic and saintly characters, respectively. But we can also allow for small acts of self-regarding supererogation. A person exercising may push herself to run an extra mile. This results in temporary discomfort but will help her to achieve her personal goal of long-term health. This additional exercise is hardly saintly or heroic, but it does go beyond any self-regarding duty (simply exercising would be enough to satisfy a demand to maintain one's health) and is at least slightly praiseworthy, and we certainly would not blame her for not running the additional mile.<sup>17</sup>

Why might we deny that there can be self-regarding supererogatory actions? It is difficult to find explicit arguments for this claim, even among those who make it. Mark A. Michael suggests that many people have been

misled by J. O. Urmson's emphasis on saintly and heroic actions in his classic 1958 paper ("Saints and Heroes") into thinking that supererogation always involves great personal sacrifice or risk.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, I suspect that many people have been misled by Urmson's exclusive focus on instances in which a person makes a sacrifice for others (rather than for herself).<sup>19</sup> Thus, it may be simple oversight that has led to the denial of, or lack of attention to, self-regarding supererogatory actions.

Still, something like the following argument also might be at work in some of the writers we have considered, at least implicitly:

1. Supererogatory actions require some degree of self-sacrifice (or potential for such self-sacrifice).
2. But self-regarding supererogatory actions would primarily benefit (or be intended to benefit) the agent herself.
3. As such, there would be no self-sacrifice (or potential for such self-sacrifice) involved.
4. Therefore, there cannot be self-regarding supererogatory actions.

But the response to this argument becomes clear in reflecting upon the examples just given. The prisoner still risks great harm to her well-being (indeed, she risks death), but she does so in order to secure greater long-term well-being for herself. The returning student is forced to work an additional job, give up many small pleasures, and so on. He is obviously making sacrifices. But he does this out of a strong commitment to a project he has established for himself. Thus, we can clearly make suitable sorts of sacrifices, even with respect to self-regarding duties.

A further objection to our proposed cases of self-regarding supererogatory actions can be drawn from Barry Curtis's "The Supererogatory, The Foolish, and the Morally Required," in which he embraces

our ordinary and quite sensible belief that it is possible to go so far in self-sacrifice, even for the sake of a morally good end, as to be foolish. Aristotle taught us that foolish acts of morally inspired self-sacrifice are not morally good, however noble the motives of the agent may be. For an action to deserve such honorifics as "generous," "honorable," or "brave," it must not only be done for the sake of a morally good end, but for the sake of an end which is significant enough to justify the cost or risk to the agent. Otherwise the action deserves no moral praise. For we do not praise from the moral point of view what we condemn as foolish or unwise.<sup>20</sup>

The worry applies perhaps most clearly to the case of the prisoner. Does risking her life to escape from the prison really amount to a supererogatory action, or is it instead foolhardy and misguided? Is she risking too much, even if escaping from the prison would be a good end?

In responding to this worry, it might be helpful to consider a related case. Suppose that the farmer herself has not been imprisoned, but rather a close friend of hers. She is now trying to decide whether to risk helping him to

escape. Compare the following variations. First, imagine that the prison conditions are terrible, with dreadful torture a commonplace and with no hope of being released. Further, imagine (what is perhaps improbable) that freeing her friend would be quite easy and risk-free; there is an unguarded room with a switch that will open all of the prison doors, and there are only one or two guards who are armed only with batons (and who constantly sleep at their posts). Even if caught, she would face little more than a hand slapping (the guards would not take the efforts of a “mere” woman to rescue a man from their prison seriously). If they succeed, the farmer and her friend would be able to escape easily into a friendly neighboring country. The guards would want to keep the news of the escape quiet and so would not change their treatment of the remaining prisoners (that is, we need not worry that remaining prisoners will bear new costs if the one prisoner escapes). Under such conditions, it seems plausible to hold that the farmer has a duty to free her innocent friend; the prison is terrible, and the risks involved in freeing her friend are minimal. To refuse to help her friend under such conditions (given that she is aware of them) would be blameworthy.

Consider a second variation. Here, conditions in the prison are not bad. Indeed, the farmer’s friend eats better than he did at home, he has several friends with whom he is allowed to spend much time, the guards are friendly and sympathetic, and a fair trial is guaranteed within a month. On the other hand, the prison is heavily guarded, and the guards are under orders to shoot to kill. Escaping would require elaborate plans and a great deal of time and money and would have only a very small chance of succeeding. If the farmer or her friend were caught (as is highly likely), they would most likely be executed. Under such circumstances any attempt by the farmer to free her friend would clearly be foolish and misguided (given that she is aware of these conditions). Such an attempt would not be a duty, nor would it be supererogatory. The costs and risks are far too high relative to the end of freeing the innocent prisoner. If anything, an effort to free her friend under such conditions would be blameworthy.

We now have two extreme cases—one in which there is a clear duty to rescue the friend, and another in which any attempt to rescue the friend would be misguided and blameworthy. There will, of course, be less extreme cases in which it is a duty to help free the innocent friend, and less extreme cases in which it would still be foolish and morally blameworthy to attempt an escape. But somewhere between these cases it seems plausible to suppose that there will be cases in which it would be supererogatory for the farmer to help her friend escape. These will be cases in which the prison conditions are harsh (but not so harsh as to create a duty) and in which significant self-sacrifice will be required<sup>21</sup> of the farmer (where this sacrifice is not foolish, relative to the conditions suffered by her friend). Furthermore, it seems that there will be potential supererogatory actions in which there is a chance that the farmer could lose her life. After all, we typically admire actions of great self-sacrifice for the sake of friends—so long as the sacrifice is not made foolishly. And surely we can imagine cases in which prison conditions are sufficiently harsh that such a sacrifice by the farmer is admirable, beyond the requirements of duty, yet not misguided or foolish.

We can now return to the original case, in which the farmer herself is the prisoner. Here we will have cases analogous to those just discussed. There will be cases in which conditions in the prison are so harsh and the risks in escaping so slight that the farmer would have a duty to herself to try to escape. On the other hand, there will be cases in which prison conditions are comparatively quite good, and the costs in trying to escape very high; to attempt an escape in such conditions would be foolish and blameworthy. Between these extremes we will find cases of supererogation. We can admire a person who risks her life to save a friend from terrible circumstances (where this is not a duty). So similarly, it seems there will be cases in which we ought to admire a person who risks her own life to save herself from the same sorts of circumstances (where this is not simply a duty to herself).

It could be argued that there is a significant disanalogy: in one case the agent is making a sacrifice for a friend—another person—and this can be morally admirable; but in the other case the person is simply taking risks to improve her own lot, which is mere self-interest, and not morally admirable. In response, note that in both cases the agent will be taking the same significant risk in order to assist a person with whom the agent has a special relationship, facing the same harsh conditions. If the balance of risk to the agent compared to the suffering of the prisoner is sufficient to make an escape attempt supererogatory in one case, then it seems that it should be supererogatory in the other case.<sup>22</sup> The mere fact that the prisoner whom the farmer would save would be herself is not in itself adequate to show that such an escape would not be supererogatory.

Nor need an attempted escape be seen as an easy act of *mere* self-interest. The farmer's (attempted) escaping would presumably also reflect such virtues as courage, integrity, and self-respect.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, these virtuous motives and ways of acting would be employed for a morally important end (rescuing a person from dreadful conditions). Thus, in the case of the farmer attempting to escape, we find virtuous behavior, even if the primary beneficiary of these actions is the farmer herself.

An alternative approach to responding to the general objection we have been considering (that the farmer's risking of her life would be foolish, and not praiseworthy) could focus more directly on Curtis's approach. Roughly, Curtis maintains that actions are supererogatory in those cases in which the relative costs to an agent in performing an action are equal to the moral benefits that would result from the action (and the agent performs the action).<sup>24</sup>

Our response here draws on the perhaps controversial intuition that there can be fates worse than death. In the present case, many of us can imagine conditions in the prison so terrible that even death would be preferable (consider decades of vicious, near-constant torture, both physical and psychological). In such circumstances we would have a duty to ourselves to attempt to escape. The moral benefit of saving ourselves from such circumstances would outweigh the costs or risks that we faced.<sup>25</sup> To respond to the Curtis-inspired objection, we can gradually improve conditions in the prison to the point at which the cost of risking one's life would roughly balance out the value of escaping (and being able to lead a much better life, with integrity, happiness,

and so on). At this point, escaping would seem to qualify on Curtis's account as an act of supererogation.

We can consider a final objection. It could be argued that while there are instances in which an agent is herself the primary beneficiary (or potential beneficiary) of her own supererogatory action, such actions will be supererogatory *only if* they are motivated by a desire to act in accordance with moral principle. Thus, while it might be supererogatory for the farmer to attempt to escape from the prison, this will be the case only if she is attempting to act on a moral principle of self-respect, or perhaps applying an impartial standard of justice which would declare that she ought to free anyone (including herself) in such circumstances. In the case of the waiter returning to school, he might need to be thinking in terms of impartial demands of integrity that would apply to all agents, or perhaps an imperfect moral duty of self-improvement. If there is not such an explicit concern with moral principle in the agent's deliberations, then the action which results cannot be morally admirable.

A common theme among virtue ethicists is that morally appropriate (or admirable) action need not be driven by a conscious concern for moral rules or principles. For example, giving a friend a gift out of love seems morally good, even if this gift giving is not guided by explicit adherence to some moral rule governing benevolence.<sup>26</sup> More strongly, in many cases it seems that being motivated to act by moral principle alone is inadequate or flawed; consider a case in which a parent rescues his child from a burning building only (or primarily) because he believes that there is a moral duty for parents in general to protect their children. Surely we would have a higher moral appraisal of this parent and his action if he simply acted directly out of love for his child; to instead be motivated by a concern with moral principle in this case is to have one thought too many.<sup>27</sup>

Turning to the cases of self-regarding supererogation, we can draw on these insights. The waiter returning to school can act in a morally admirable fashion, even if he is not acting based on an explicit consideration of moral principles. His actions reflect his integrity (in the sense that he is willing to make sacrifices in order to achieve those projects or commitments that he holds to strongly), even if he never says to himself, "It is morally required (as an imperfect duty) that one act to achieve one's strongly held projects." We might draw a distinction between having integrity and merely acting in the fashion dictated by a moral rule governing integrity (if there could even be such a rule). If the waiter would only act on his desire to attend college because he felt it was a moral duty, it would seem that he might in fact lack a genuine commitment and integrity. In explicitly following a rule governing integrity, we would only mimic the actions of a person with integrity; we would merely act as if we had the virtue of integrity.

Similar points apply in the case of the farmer escaping. She acts courageously and demonstrates an admirable degree of self-respect in attempting to escape (under appropriate conditions). Surely she does not need to think explicitly in terms of what morality would dictate for her as a suitable degree of self-love. Instead, her very actions can show that she has an appropriate degree of self-love. Any moral rule here would seem to be telling us to act as

a person with self-love would act; for those who in fact possess self-love, it will not be necessary to explicitly act on such a rule.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that it is always inappropriate to act on the basis of moral rules. Rather, I have emphasized that there are at least some cases in which an agent can act in a morally admirable fashion even if she is not explicitly concerned with acting on moral principle. Further, in some such cases it might be better to act directly out of a virtue, rather than acting on a moral rule. Finally, at least some cases of self-regarding supererogatory actions are such that the agents involved need not be explicitly concerned with abiding by moral principles.

### **III. Are All Self-Regarding Supererogatory Actions Morally Praiseworthy?**

We can now briefly turn to a final issue: are all actions that go beyond the call of self-regarding moral requirements praiseworthy? And should all such actions be considered supererogatory, insofar as they go beyond the agent's duties to herself? These questions arise as it seems that such actions might be morally flawed (even while they go beyond the agent's self-regarding duties). For example, what if our student also gave up a range of praiseworthy volunteer activities in order to pursue his dream of attending university? Or might these actions sometimes reflect a narcissistic, excessive self-love?<sup>28</sup> And if so, would we still want to maintain that these self-regarding actions are morally praiseworthy and/or supererogatory?

Some philosophers, including Stanlick and Straumanis, have raised corresponding worries about more standard examples of the (apparently) supererogatory. What are we to make of the selfless actions of a woman whose self-esteem has been crippled by a verbally abusive husband and a traditional society which teaches that women are first and foremost caregivers? Or consider a cult member who does not lack self-esteem but who has placed the cult leader on a high pedestal such that he would do anything (thus going beyond duty) to benefit the leader. Are such actions supererogatory?

One response is to claim that these are indeed supererogatory actions, but that not all supererogatory actions are morally praiseworthy. This is essentially the stance taken by both Stanlick and Straumanis, at least with respect to other-regarding actions. Stanlick states that "a supererogatory action is commendable and good only when the risks are taken by a person who has authored her own character and takes the risks freely."<sup>29</sup> Thus, Stanlick would classify the selfless actions of the aforementioned woman as supererogatory but not good or commendable.

My own preference is to reserve the term "supererogatory" for actions which go beyond duty and which are also morally commendable. Thus, if a person goes beyond the call of a self-regarding duty out of an excessive self-love, then I would maintain that the action goes beyond the call of duty but is not supererogatory. The issue is likely one of linguistic intuition, and mine is that the term "supererogatory" ought to be reserved for actions which are untainted by flawed motives. It seems to me useful to have a term for actions in which everything goes right (in suitably going beyond our basic moral

obligations in a meritorious fashion), and our term “supererogatory” best serves in this role. This seems more appropriate than needing to distinguish between meritorious and flawed supererogatory actions (which sounds odd to most ears).<sup>30</sup>

But I take the terminological point to be peripheral. The crucial point is to acknowledge that there might be problematic cases, and that the mere fact that someone performs an action that goes beyond her (self-regarding) duty is not sufficient to show that this is a praiseworthy action. Clearly the agent’s motivation and respect for other duties will be relevant to appraising such an action’s moral status. Thus, in arguing that there can be self-regarding acts of supererogation, I do not thereby argue that *all* actions which go beyond self-regarding duties are praiseworthy (or supererogatory—depending on how we decide to use the term). More broadly, I have sought only to clarify and secure the possibility of self-regarding supererogatory acts.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>David Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 115.

<sup>2</sup>In explaining the fourth clause, Heyd writes:

The intention [of a supererogatory action] must be *altruistic* meaning that the action must be conceived as benefiting another person (or persons). . . . Altruistic intention should not, however, be confused with altruistic motive. While intention forms part of the description of the act, the motive is only the ‘feeling’ which moves us to do it. . . . The motives for acting supererogatorily are diverse in character and are not always virtuous. One may act heroically in order to gain fame, to soothe one’s conscience (haunted by guilt feelings), or out of moral self-indulgence. (ibid., 137)

<sup>3</sup>Nancy A. Stanlick, “The Nature and Value of Supererogatory Actions,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 30 (1999): 209–22, at 211.

<sup>4</sup>See *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Joan Straumanis, “Duties to Oneself: An Ethical Basis for Self-Liberation?” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 15 (1984): 1–13.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 3. She also states that “to supererogate means to sacrifice something in favor of another [person]” (6).

<sup>7</sup>Russell A. Jacobs, “Obligation, Supererogation and Self-Sacrifice,” *Philosophy* 62 (1985): 96–101, at 97. Jacobs’s paper is responding to an exchange between Elizabeth Pybus and Patricia McGoldrick in which the supererogatory is again treated as requiring sacrifice (or the risk of sacrifice) by the agent, though this condition is not always explicitly stated. See Elizabeth M. Pybus, “Saints and Heroes,” *Philosophy* 57 (1982): 193–99; Patricia M. McGoldrick, “Saints and Heroes: A Plea for the Supererogatory,” *Philosophy* 59 (1984): 523–28; and a later reply, Elizabeth M. Pybus, “A Plea for the Supererogatory: A Reply,” *Philosophy* 61 (1986): 526–31.

<sup>8</sup>Jacobs, “Obligation, Supererogation and Self-Sacrifice,” 101. Another example:

If *some* obligations are overridden by high cost [to the agent], then *those* actions, if performed, are properly ‘above and beyond duty,’ and thus supererogatory. On my account such actions are possible, and hence it rescues the possibility of

supererogatory action, without insisting that we have *no* duty to sacrifice significantly for others. (101)

<sup>9</sup>McGoldrick, "Saints and Heroes," 525.

<sup>10</sup>A recent writer who specifically allows for such minor acts of supererogation is Mark A. Michael, in his "To Swat or Not to Swat: Pesky Flies, Environmental Ethics, and the Supererogatory," *Environmental Ethics* 18 (1996): 165–80. See also J. O. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes," in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. A. I. Melden (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), 198–216; and Roderick M. Chisholm, "Supererogation and Offense: A Conceptual Scheme for Ethics," *Ratio* 5 (1963): 1–14.

<sup>11</sup>Gregory Mellema, *Beyond the Call of Duty: Supererogation, Obligation, and Offense* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 19–20. Susan Hale argues against the possibility of there being truly supererogatory actions. But she, like Mellema, does allow that there could be *apparently* supererogatory actions which are motivated by duty or principle, though not directed toward the benefit of others. See Susan C. Hale, "Against Supererogation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1991): 273–85.

<sup>12</sup>Mellema, *Beyond the Call of Duty*, 22 (emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup>Mellema characterizes supererogatory acts as follows: "(1) The performance of the act fulfils no moral duty or obligation; (2) The performance of the act is morally praiseworthy; and (3) The omission of the act is not morally blameworthy" (*ibid.*, 13).

<sup>14</sup>Self-regarding supererogation would seem to be compatible with the characterizations of supererogation given by several authors in addition to Mellema, though they also do not discuss the possibility. See, for example, Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 253–54; Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), chap. 8; and Philip Montague, "Acts, Agents, and Supererogation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1989): 101–11.

<sup>15</sup>While I speak of self-regarding duties, I do not mean to endorse any particular account of them. Thus, these duties could be understood according to a wide range of deontological theories. Or we could appeal to standard virtue theories in which agents aim at leading flourishing lives; in order to flourish there will likely be requirements of self-respect, and so on.

<sup>16</sup>How might we understand this on a consequentialist theory? A well-known consequentialist position allows agents certain permissions to pursue their own projects, even at the expense of maximizing overall utility. We could see the cases of the prisoner and the student as ones in which these agents make use of their prerogatives to pursue their own projects, but in ways which create more long-term utility (through themselves) than would be typical or required. In this way, the actions could be seen as supererogatory. See Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

<sup>17</sup>A *ceteris paribus* clause should be understood here. Presumably our exerciser is not an Olympic athlete; nor does she have a sensitive heart condition; etc. Such additions to the basic scenario could obviously change our view of her obligations to herself.

<sup>18</sup>See Michael, "To Swat or Not to Swat," 180. Of course, Urmson himself does allow for minor (nonheroic or saintly) supererogatory actions but does not devote much of his article to such actions. See Urmson, "Saints and Heroes," 205.

<sup>19</sup>Urmson does not discuss the possibility of self-regarding supererogation.

<sup>20</sup>Barry Curtis, "The Supererogatory, the Foolish and the Morally Required," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 15 (1981): 311–18, at 313.

<sup>21</sup>Required in the sense of being a necessary causal condition for helping her friend, not in the sense of being morally required.

<sup>22</sup>Some might hold that agents have stronger duties to themselves than to others, and if so, then while it might be supererogatory to save a friend under certain conditions, it would be obligatory to save oneself under the same conditions. To account for this, we would simply need to increase the potential risk in escaping in the case in which the farmer herself is the prisoner; as we do so, we will reach a stage at which her escape again becomes supererogatory. (Though, of course, we must not increase the risk so greatly that her attempting to escape becomes foolhardy.)

- <sup>23</sup>It might be possible for a person lacking these virtues to act in the same way, just as a person who is not terribly honest can on occasion tell the truth, even in somewhat difficult circumstances. In such a case, we can at least say that the occurrent motives are those that we would expect of a virtuous person (or would be approved of by a virtuous person).
- <sup>24</sup>Curtis, "The Supererogatory, the Foolish, and the Morally Required," 314–15.
- <sup>25</sup>Again, if we believe that it would be an important moral benefit to save someone else from such circumstances, then *prima facie* we should view it as an important moral benefit that we save ourselves from the same circumstances. After all, we too are morally valuable individuals.
- <sup>26</sup>Indeed, it is not even clear that an agent is giving a genuine gift if the agent is doing so simply in order to satisfy a perceived moral duty. At the very least, we typically find giving a gift out of love or generosity to be morally superior to giving a gift simply in order to fulfill a duty.
- <sup>27</sup>For a defense of many of the claims in this and the following paragraphs, see Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 453–66.
- <sup>28</sup>It might even be that an action that goes beyond an agent's duty to herself could be the result of excessively low self-esteem, or even a subconscious self-loathing. The student may see himself (falsely) as a worthless person and force himself to return to college to try to justify himself as a person. Or he might be trying to punish himself (at some level) by removing small pleasures, working excessive hours, etc. His actions wouldn't be blameworthy in such cases, but it is not clear that they would be praiseworthy or supererogatory, given their questionable origins.
- <sup>29</sup>Stanlick, "The Nature and Value of Supererogatory Actions," 211.
- <sup>30</sup>Note, on the other hand, that if we were to countenance nonpraiseworthy supererogatory actions, the possibility of self-regarding supererogatory actions would be still more clear. After all, even if we thought (rather implausibly) that all such actions would reflect an excessive self-love, they could still go beyond an agent's duties to herself and thus qualify as supererogatory on this alternative usage of "supererogatory." Still, I would plump for requiring acts of supererogation to be praiseworthy and unflawed by bad motives.