

# WHY PROXIMITY MATTERS FOR THE CONCEPT OF SUPEREROGATION

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of supererogation is strictly *correlated* with duty, since its peculiar value is defined by acts that go beyond our regular obligations. This paper highlights the importance of *proximity* (relational closeness) in allowing the proper theoretical space to supererogation. As a matter of fact if we broaden our sense of duty, the possibility to perform supererogatory acts correspondingly decreases. *Special obligations* emphasize how difficult acts of supererogation are to perform if we stand in some morally-relevant special position with the recipient of our acts. Thus, we can conclude that the relationship between the agent and the recipient of the act (*proximity*) plays an important role both for our sense of duty (generating *special obligations*) and for the possibility of performing supererogatory acts. Furthermore, this analysis brings attention to the fact that whenever an act is *supererogatory*, it cannot, at the same time, be a *special obligation* (and vice versa). As a consequence, if *proximity* plays such a role, an objection to the possibility of self-regarding supererogation can be made.

## KEYWORDS

Supererogation, special obligations, proximity, intimacy, self-regarding supererogation

“But he, desiring to justify himself, asked Jesus, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ ”

The Parable of the Good Samaritan; Luke 10, 29

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, I will try to show how moral concepts such as *supererogation* and *special obligations* can mutually limit their possible actualization. Only a deeper understanding of how they interact will support a better definition of what they are and how we have to think about them. Both the concepts share the fact of being considered atypical moral concepts (or at least less common ones) when compared to

typical (and more common) ones such as *regular obligations*. Both *special obligations* and *supererogation* require specific circumstances to be performed and their definitions are strictly characterized by such requirements. As I will argue *proximity* needs to be acknowledged to be one of them. Moreover, they are both recognized to have moral relevance according to common sense morality. As such, all moral theories have tried either to accommodate some space to them or to reduce them to some other category.

Intuitively we can broadly define *supererogation* as what goes *beyond the call of duty*, or better, morally relevant acts that are *good* but not required<sup>1</sup>. In the same intuitive way, we do feel to have *special obligations* to persons who are, in different ways, closely related to us. It seems that one's sense of duty is higher or more requiring towards, for example, one's own daughter or friends, than it is with strangers. Generally, our relationships with others can alter our sense of duty<sup>2</sup>. What happens, then, if we try to bring about an instance of supererogation when we are closely related to the beneficiary of our act? Is it possible to act in a supererogatory way in order to benefit one's own friends? Is one able to go beyond the call of duty for one's own children? In what follows, I will try to answer these questions, claiming that this is, if not impossible, then at least very difficult.

## 2. WHY THE NEAR AND DEAR OBJECTION IS RELEVANT FOR SUPEREROGATION

The so-called *near and dear* objection (also known as the *proximity* objection) is a criticism commonly leveled against Utilitarianism (and more generally to Consequentialism) in many of its arrangements<sup>3</sup>. Roughly speaking the objection claims that Utilitarianism does not take into account the proximity of the beneficiary

<sup>1</sup> David Heyd has given a more detailed definition of such acts in Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p.115. Here the first of the four conditions of the definition, settles the fundamental logical requirement of the concept: "It is neither obligatory nor forbidden".

<sup>2</sup> Actually, some relationships can do more than simply affect our sense of duty. They can even alter our conception of the *good* as St. Thomas Aquinas underlined: "[...] a judge has a good will, in willing a thief to be put to death, because this is just; while the will of another for example, the thief's wife or son, who wishes him not to be put to death, in so far as killing is a natural evil, is also good" in St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologiae of Saint Thomas Aquinas translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province revised by Daniel J. Sullivan*, Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952, vol. I, p.710. What is interesting in such an example is that we are not facing a case of moral relativism. The judge and the wife do not stand in the same position and simply diverge on their moral belief. They stand in different positions and this affects their moral beliefs in a way that makes them appear to be relatively different. What makes their moral beliefs opposite are not their beliefs in themselves (as would be in the case of moral relativism), but rather their relationships with the subjects involved in their evaluations.

<sup>3</sup> Jeske D., Fumerton R., 'Relatives and Relativism', *Philosophical Studies* 87 (1997), pp.143–157.

of an act as something morally relevant. In doing so, these kinds of theories are unable to accommodate the *special obligations* that, according to common sense morality, we feel we have to our children, friends, teammates, etc. A utilitarian approach (widely speaking) leads to an impartial understanding of others and thus it does not take into account people's relationships as something that can alter the status of one's actions<sup>4</sup>. Utilitarians have always been aware of this objection and tried in many ways to give a proper answer to it. Henry Sidgwick's attempt to resolve the *near and dear* objection states as follows: "[...] each man will obviously promote the general happiness best by rendering services to a limited number, and to some more than others [...]"<sup>5</sup>. What he is trying to say by '*some more than others*' is that according to Utilitarianism a moral agent should take advantage of her proximity to the beneficiary of the act in order to better pursue the maximization of general utility. A specific agent has better tools than anyone else to promote specific goods, say her daughter's flourishing, and this can be very helpful in the attempt to maximize the good. While this answer to the objection seems to be true in most everyday life situations (generally we are the ones who know what would better promote the happiness of our beloved ones), it appears to be problematic if we face harsh circumstances of choice to benefit a closely related subject rather than a stranger (or vice versa). Cases like the one analyzed by Diane Jeske and Richard Fumerton, in which we are faced with the choice of rescuing either one's own drowning daughter or two unknown children in the same condition<sup>6</sup> show how Utilitarianism falls short of explaining why one should save her daughter rather than the strangers<sup>7</sup>. In fact, according to Utilitarianism (and its aim at an impartial and universal benevolence), in order to maximize the good, one should rescue two children rather than just one, even if that one is my daughter. This claim clashes straight away with our moral intuitions that are in great disagreement with a classical utilitarian maximization. Nevertheless, we could appeal to a parent's great pain at the loss of a child in order to get a utilitarian justification of her choice to save her own child rather than the other two children. Still, this is a mere fact of contingency and as such, we can easily adjust the case in a way such that letting the two other children drown will cause someone else a greater deal of pain than the loss of one's own.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Sidgwick was well aware of this general objection to Utilitarianism: "For Utilitarianism is sometimes said to resolve all virtue into universal and impartial Benevolence: it does not, however, prescribe that we should love all men equally, but that we should aim at Happiness generally as our ultimate end, and so consider the happiness of any one individual as equally important with the equal happiness, as an element of this total [...]" in Sidgwick H., *The Methods of Ethics*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1981, p.241.

<sup>5</sup> Sidgwick H., *The Methods of Ethics*, p.242.

<sup>6</sup> Jeske D., Fumerton R., *Relatives and Relativism*, p.146.

<sup>7</sup> One could also claim that morality as a whole should play no role in cases like this and that acting in accordance with morality would be, borrowing Williams's famous line, to have "one thought too many".

Appealing to contingences will not resolve the conflict between utilitarian claims and our intuitions about *special obligations*<sup>8</sup>.

Many authors have underlined how our relation (*proximity*) with beneficiary subjects plays a relevant role on our moral evaluations. Aristotle clearly shared this assumption: ‘*And to relatives, fellow members of one’s tribe, fellow citizens, and all the rest one should always attempt to assign what belongs to them, and to compare the standing of each in terms of closeness to us, and excellence, or usefulness.*’<sup>9</sup>. In criticizing Utilitarianism, Ross states that *special obligations* are *pro tanto* duties: my neighbours ‘*may also stand to me in the relation of promise to promiser, of creditor to debtor, of wife to husband, of child to parent, of friend to friend, of fellow countryman to fellow countryman, and the like; and each of these relations is the foundation of a prima facie duty, which is more or less incumbent on me according to the circumstances of the case*’<sup>10</sup>. What happens to our *sense of duty* in cases of special relationship is that it is broadened in a way that it generates new *pro tanto* duties that we do not feel we have towards strangers. Closeness to the beneficiary subject seems to be a morally relevant feature and this is confirmed by what common sense morality suggests. In fact, let us suppose that we are spectators at a kids’ basketball game. One of them looks to have some troubles to run properly due to his very frayed shoes. If this kid were our son we would immediately feel a duty to provide him with a new pair of shoes as soon as possible. This sort of duty would stand as a duty with a considerable requiring strength. However, if this were somebody else’s son, we would not feel the same duty. In the first place, we would encourage his parents to buy him new shoes; that is, we would recognize that they have a duty to care for their son’s basic needs. Only in a second stage, we would possibly offer to buy new shoes for the kid (performing a *supererogatory* act). The difference in terms of *requiring strength* of the two acts (buying new shoes for our son or buying new shoes for another kid) is the fact that *proximity* (intended as relational closeness) to the beneficiary of the act directly influences our *sense of duty*, producing new and distinct duties that we would not otherwise have.

Why, then, is this feature relevant for the concept of *supererogation*? The answer is that supererogation is deeply connected with the *sense of duty*, and then, whatever could alter the latter, will consequently have an influence on the former as well. David Heyd rightly underlined how such a relation is ruled by the two standards: *continuity* and *correlativity*<sup>11</sup>. The former means that acts of supererogation, being morally good, have to be understood under the same notions that make obligatory acts good; in this sense there is a logical and moral *continuity* between the obligatory (*within* the sense of duty) and the supererogatory (*beyond the call of duty*). The

<sup>8</sup> Jeske D., Fumerton R., *Relatives and Relativism*, p.149.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1164b 23–1165a 35.

<sup>10</sup> Ross D. W., *The Right and the Good*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.19.

<sup>11</sup> Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p.5.

latter, *correlativity*, means that supererogation is logically correlated to the obligatory as its peculiar value can only be understood in relation, or better in correlation, to the sense of duty it surpasses. Without a clear definition of the duties of the agent (the minimum morally required), it would be impossible to define supererogation as something *beyond* what is morally required. Therefore, in the case where *proximity* influences our sense of duty and our duties become more demanding, it turns out to be harder to go *beyond* what is required and perform acts of supererogation. What is more, if *proximity* to the beneficiary is of a high degree, acts of supererogation turn out to be extremely unlikely, if not impossible. As *proximity* broadens our sense of duty generating *special obligations*, the possibility of supererogation decreases to a point where *correlativity* is hardly definable and *continuity* is useless. *Special obligations* are considered ‘special’ in part because they are not owed to everyone, but also because they are greater obligations having a specific requiring strength. As my duties become more demanding, how could this not also affect my ability to go beyond them? Given that *proximity* is a relevant feature for *regular obligations*<sup>12</sup>, it should be noted that it consequently is a relevant feature for supererogatory acts (being the two categories strictly connected). The *near and dear* objection to Utilitarianism highlights how all the features that can possibly influence our sense of duty will consequently affect those acts that lie *beyond the call of duty*.

### 3. HOW PROXIMITY CAN AFFECT THE CONCEPTUAL STATUS OF SUPEREROGATION AND SPECIAL OBLIGATIONS

In order to better understand how *proximity* can affect the distinction between *supererogation* and *special obligations*, consider the two following cases:

- Juliet is the mother of her beloved son Paul. She loves him as much as a mother can do. Unfortunately, Paul suddenly discovers his life is in danger due to a cancerous tumor and the only way for him to be saved is to have a kidney transplant. Juliet, with no hesitation, offers herself to be the donor for the transplant, even if this will affect the quality of her life;
- Mary is reading the newspaper and she finds an interesting article about the quality of the health care system in a poor country of Africa. The article talks about the possibility of helping actively the non-profit organizations that are working in that country in order to benefit those whose lives are in danger due

<sup>12</sup> I call here *regular obligations* all those obligations that derive from our regular *sense of duty*. On the other hand, *special obligations* are all those obligations that originate from a specific alteration of our sense of duty (being this for the *proximity* to the beneficiary). Similarly, we could also understand *supererogation* as being considered *special* because it goes beyond what is *regularly* required.

and with severe medical needs. Mary voluntarily decides to contact one of those organizations and she offers herself for a kidney transplant. Her willingness is immediately welcomed and so she flies to Africa where she can benefit a complete stranger that is in need of a transplant.

From a mere factual standpoint, both Juliet and Mary are undergoing the same kind of kidney transplant. However, it is interesting to highlight that only Mary's transplant is known as the *Samaritan Donation*<sup>13</sup>. So, why is that? *Proximity* to the beneficiaries of their acts is the key. We can easily think of Juliet as feeling compelled to go through the transplant because she felt it was her duty to help her beloved son. In philosophical terms, she recognized to have a *special obligation* that required her to act accordingly. As I will try to explain below, even if her act is highly praiseworthy, we can understand it according to a duty generated by the mother/son relationship. In contrast, we can imagine a similar case of a necessary kidney transplant where the mother of the person in need refuses to undergo the transplant, even if in good health and compatible with the son. In a scenario like this, we would hardly refrain from criticizing her choice by appealing to some degree of compelling sense of duty that she must recognize to have (i.e. a *special obligation*). Given that we understand *supererogation* as something whose omission is not blameworthy<sup>14</sup>, the fact that we would be unable to refrain from moral criticisms for her omission highlights an important aspect of the act. This particular case of kidney transplant shows how the transplant between a mother and a son cannot be easily considered a case of supererogation<sup>15</sup>. Parental love maximizes the demandingness of duty making it harder (or impossible, as in this particular case) to go *beyond* the sense of duty, even if the agent is sacrificing herself in an act of benevolence. In general, my claim is that this case shows how *proximate* relationships increase what it takes to go beyond the call of duty and perform a supererogatory act. On the other hand, Mary in case *b* is performing a clear act of *supererogation*, as her action is optional (that is, not inspired by any form of *obligation* be it regular or special), extremely praiseworthy and not forbidden. There is no kind of relationship between the benefactor and the beneficiary of the transplant, that is, *proximity* does not play any role in this case. This makes it possible to go beyond *regular obligations* and perform an act of supererogation.

<sup>13</sup> For a good example of how this process works see Morrissey P. E., et al., 'Good Samaritan Kidney Donation', *Transplantation* 80, n. 10 (2005), pp.1369–1373.

<sup>14</sup> See David Heyd's definition of *supererogation*, in particular the second condition: "Its omission is not wrong, and does not deserve sanction or criticism - either formal or informal" in Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> There might be cases where the transplant will considerably affect the quality of life of the donor. This aspect, I believe, can affect the moral consideration I have made here.

Before moving on it is important to highlight an important aspect to understand the two cases above: the distinction between the praiseworthy and the supererogatory. An act of supererogation is always praiseworthy, but not all praiseworthy acts are also supererogatory. It is important to keep in mind that even if we cannot consider Juliet's act a case of supererogation, this does not mean we cannot consider it highly praiseworthy from the moral point of view<sup>16</sup>. An agent can perform an extremely meritorious act even by strictly following her duties. Think, for example, of all those cases where sticking to one's own duties, while facing harsh and dangerous circumstances, represents a remarkable case of *moral integrity*. The adherence to duty does not undermine the praiseworthiness of an act. Immanuel Kant, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, gives an example that can help us understand this point. Within a deontological approach such as Kantian Ethics, duties can get very demanding, to the point that we would intuitively consider them to be supererogatory. Moreover, Kantian moral worth is such only if it is derived from the sense of duty and refraining from any other inclination<sup>17</sup>. As further proof of this, Kant illustrates the case of a man that has been asked by his king to choose between the death penalty and lying in order to achieve some very cruel end. The man, striving for moral integrity, decides to tell the truth, no matter how much he has to sacrifice for the cause<sup>18</sup>. What is interesting in Kant's position is that he underlines this example as a case of a particularly meritorious act pursued by adhering to the Moral Law. In contrast with the theory of supererogation, heroism in Kant does not mean going beyond duty in any way but, contrarily, means following duty in those cases where it is harder to pursue what duty (the Moral Law) demands me to do. Daniel Guevara, commenting on Kant's example, says "In sum, Kant offers the example of heroically holding out against the king as an example of perfect duty, and thus as an example of the worth which is in virtue of the accomplishment of duty, and not as indicating any supererogatory worth"<sup>19</sup>. As a further proof of this point, I believe that we can think about the heroic deeds of 9/11 firefighters as a case that shows how heroism can be achieved even within our sense of duty and not only when we go beyond it. Supererogation and praiseworthiness are not the same thing and this is particularly clear in case *a*, where, even if we cannot hold Juliet's act to be supererogatory, we cannot deny its praiseworthiness either. After all, the value of supererogation is not merely grounded on praiseworthiness, but rather it is defined

<sup>16</sup> Given the supererogatory nature of the second case, it is much easier to recognize the moral praiseworthiness of Mary's act.

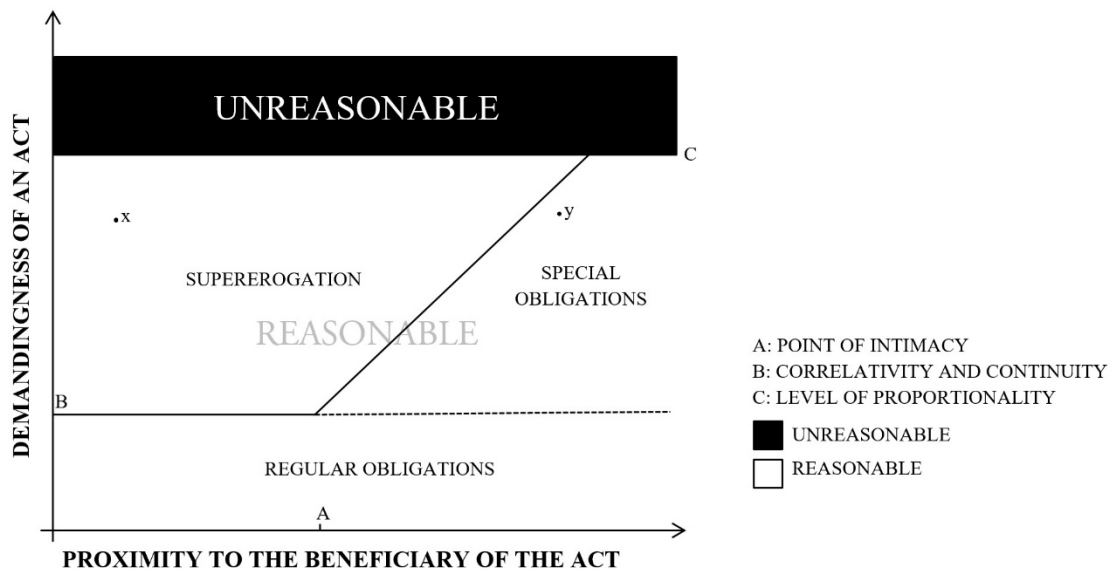
<sup>17</sup> Within a moral approach of this kind, the very possibility of supererogation as a category of acts that is beyond duty and still morally valuable is inconceivable. See Guevara D., 'The impossibility of Supererogation in Kant's Moral Theory', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59, n.3 (1999), pp.593-624.

<sup>18</sup> Kant I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, Gregor M. (edited by), Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp.27-28.

<sup>19</sup> Guevara D., *The impossibility of Supererogation in Kant's Moral Theory*, p.610.

by being more than duties require<sup>20</sup>. Moral value (and the praiseworthiness that comes with it) can be particularly significant and this is true regardless of the conceptual status of the act. This is what allows us to claim that Juliet's donation is still praiseworthy. Nevertheless, what makes it praiseworthy is not supererogation, but the fact of fulfilling a demanding moral duty displaying the *moral integrity* that Kant holds dear. Case *a* represents an example of praiseworthiness based on *moral integrity*. On the other hand, in the second case, supererogation is exactly what makes Mary's donation praiseworthy.

Notably, what the two cases are showing is how *proximity* affects the conceptual status of our acts, outlining the distinction between supererogation and special obligations. Hence, a different level of *proximity* in regards to the beneficiary of the act can play the role of altering the conceptual nature of the same act (i.e. kidney transplant). Accordingly, the same act can be considered either a case of supererogation or a special obligation. The following diagram should help us understand the point:



In this diagram, we can see how the concepts are related and how, according to the variation of some factors, an act can fall within a category or another<sup>21</sup>. On the x-axis, we find the *proximity* to the beneficiary of the act, namely how closely related we are to her. It is worthwhile to point out that even when we relate to a complete stranger (and *proximity* is close to zero) we still have *regular obligations* (i.e. the duty of not causing intended harm). Further, on this axis, I call the *point of intimacy* (A) the point beyond which we feel we have some special obligation to someone. It is far

<sup>20</sup> Again, if we go back to Heyd's definition of the concept, the third condition is saying exactly this of supererogation: "It is morally good, both by virtue of its (intended) consequences and by virtue of its intrinsic (being beyond duty)" in Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p. 115.

<sup>21</sup> We should keep in mind that the diagram is an oversimplification of how these concepts relate.



from being a clear and exact point, usually in fact, we gradually realize that someone has become a close friend of ours<sup>22</sup>. From a moral point of view, *proximity* is not grounded on mere biological grounds<sup>23</sup> or geographical closeness; rather it is defined by the concept of *intimacy*. *Intimacy* is a shared, voluntary commitment to mutual care in virtue of a long-established relationship between the parties involved<sup>24</sup>. To a high degree of *intimacy* will correspond a proximate relationship (and the related *special obligations*), from a less significant degree of *intimacy* will derive a moral relationship based on *regular obligations*. For the purpose of the diagram, we can conclude, then, that as the *intimacy* with the beneficiary of our acts increases, the level of *proximity* on the x-axis rises, generating, from a certain point on, increasingly demanding *special obligations*<sup>25</sup>. On the y-axis, we find the demandingness of an act, or how demanding our acts are in relation to our sense of duty. As our sense of duty rises, we get more demanding obligations towards the others. This is not, however, an endless rising. We could get to a point where our obligations become too demanding or, as I pointed out in the diagram, they become unreasonably demanding. Another common objection to Utilitarianism, known as the *demandingness* objection, can help us to understand this point. Briefly, the objection claims that Utilitarianism, aiming at the impartial maximization of the good, if the circumstances require us to do so, could broaden our moral duties endlessly, including very demanding acts within the domain of our moral obligations. However, according to our moral intuitions, such acts are so demanding to be considered good but optional (that is *supererogatory*<sup>26</sup>) and, hence, far from being obligations. Or even more dangerously,

<sup>22</sup> The vagueness of this distinction will allow for many borderline cases where we certainly feel to be more committed to someone than to regular strangers, but still our sense of duty is not so high to deny any room for the possibility of supererogation. This is, for example, the case of friendship, where, even if our obligations are stronger than regular ones, we still might be able to see some space for acts of supererogation.

<sup>23</sup> Think of the justification of the relationship between the mother and her adopted son. See Jeske D., 'Family, Friends, and Special Obligations', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 28, no.4 (1998), p. 548.

<sup>24</sup> On the explanation of familial relationships as based on the concept of *intimacy*, see Jeske D., *Family, Friends, and Special Obligations*.

<sup>25</sup> In addition, when we consider a relationship intimate (level of proximity A or higher), it might be hard to tell a clear distinction between *regular* and *special* obligations. That is why the distinction is pictured by a dashed line.

<sup>26</sup> It is clear how the *demandingness* objection, originally raised as a reason to reject Utilitarianism as a whole, could work also as a general objection to the very possibility of *supererogation* within the sphere of Utilitarianism. As I claimed above in the case of *special obligations*, if we broaden our sense of duty, the possibility of supererogation decreases. The same applies to Utilitarianism: if utilitarian claims maximize the demands of our acts towards the attainment of the ultimate good, there would be no space left to supererogation. This was clear from the very beginning of the contemporary debate on supererogation: "If for Moore, and for most utilitarians, any action is a duty that will produce the greatest possible good in the circumstances, for them the most heroic self-sacrifice or saintly self-forgetfulness will be duties on all fours with truth-telling and promise-keeping" in Urmsen J. O., 'Saints and Heroes' in Melden A.I. (edited by), *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, University of Washington Press, 1958, p.206.

they can get unreasonably demanding. Generally, we should not let moral theories lead our sense of duty too far. Regardless of the theoretical approach we embrace, we have to make sure that the demandingness of an act, whatever its status is, stays within the limits of reasonableness (white background on the diagram). The limit between reasonableness and unreasonableness in the diagram is what I call the *level of proportionality* (C). This, again, is not a distinction based upon a clear principle, but rather is the ability (developed throughout the years) to judge when, given certain circumstances, we are giving moral demandingness too much space. What I am saying here is that when we evaluate from a rational point of view, the point of view that takes into account both our moral and non-moral reasons (the all-things-considered perspective), we need to make sure there is the proper balance between the more compelling ones. In other words: “In making such judgments, both the cost or risk to the agent, and the moral value of the end, are taken into account, and are ‘weighed’ against each other with a view toward deciding which is more important”<sup>27</sup>. This is why I call it the *level of proportionality*; we cannot demand too much from ourselves for trifling ends. For example, a businessperson ought not to decide to bankrupt his small company to buy his son a luxury car in order to fulfill the *special obligation* of caring for his beloved son<sup>28</sup>. In summary, our actions can become more demanding than usual, very risky or even entail some degree of self-sacrifice (as it is in the case of *special obligations* and *supererogation*). What is important here is that our moral judgment, according to a certain *level of proportionality*, prevents them from becoming too risky or demanding in regards to the given end, avoiding to bring about something unreasonably demanding. In the case of *special obligations*, for example, it would be irrational to risk one’s life in order to get a birthday present that a friend or loved one greatly desires. Finally, the distinction between *obligations* (be they *special* or *regular*) and *supererogation* is regulated by the notions of *correlativity* and *continuity* (B) in the way we have seen in the previous section.

What is interesting to highlight in this diagram is how much *regular obligations*, *supererogation*, and *special obligations* share. First of all, they all share a limit within the domain of reasonable acting (white background in the diagram). Going too far, for each of them, could not only mean to be unreasonable, but also immoral. Morality, in general, cannot cast unreasonable requests upon the agent and this is true of all the categories taken into account by this study. Moreover, both *supererogation* and *special obligations*, as they possibly share the same amount of demandingness, they also share their being beyond what we consider our *regular*

<sup>27</sup> Curtis B., ‘The Supererogatory, The Foolish and The Morally Required’, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 15, no. 4 (1981), p.314.

<sup>28</sup> Or, in the case of supererogation: “All other things being equal, a soldier who throws himself on a live hand grenade in order to protect government property has done something which is not supererogatory, but foolish. If he performs the same act to save the life of a comrade, however, he has done something which seems not to be foolish, but supererogatory” in Curtis B., ‘The Supererogatory, The Foolish and The Morally Required’, pp.316–317.

*obligations*. The core point of the paper, then, aims at showing how if we raise the level of *proximity*, the same act can be conceptually considered a *special obligation* rather than a supererogatory act (or vice versa if we decrease the level of *proximity*). Think, for example, of the kidney transplant cases I analyzed at the beginning of the section. The same act has a different conceptual status if the relationship between the agents varies. In the diagram, for example, the act of Juliet who benefits her son is represented by act *y*, while the act of Mary who benefits a complete stranger is represented by act *x*. Both acts are very demanding, but the difference of the level of *proximity* affects their conceptual status. Moreover, according to this view, we can derive another way of defining supererogation:

A supererogatory act is the act performed to benefit another as if the agent were required to do so in virtue of a special obligation.

Actual supererogatory acts could be performed by benefiting others pretending to have a *special obligation* to care for them in a peculiar way. In other terms, the act *x* is not grounded on a corresponding duty to do *x*. This means to perform a morally demanding act that is not supported by a corresponding level of *proximity*. Occasionally treating a stranger as if he were my beloved brother seems to be a clear example of supererogation.

#### 4. HOW PROXIMITY DENIES SELF-REGARDING SUPEREROGATION

The majority of authors conceive supererogatory acts as those that are good, optional, and made for the sake of someone else. David Heyd's definition of the concept is very clear on this topic. The fourth condition of his definition states that an act of supererogation '*is done voluntarily for the sake of someone else's good, and thus meritorious*'<sup>29</sup>. Nonetheless, there have been some attempts to ground acts that go beyond the call of duty, in which benefactor and beneficiary of the act coincide. This is the case of *self-regarding supererogation*, first highlighted by Jason Kawall<sup>30</sup>. As we have seen above, since the level of *proximity* could affect the very possibility of supererogation, an objection to self-regarding supererogation rises accordingly. Hence, if I am the one that has the greatest degree of *intimacy* with myself (and thus the greatest degree of *proximity*), I also recognize to have very demanding duties towards myself. So a general challenge to the possibility of self-regarding

<sup>29</sup> Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p.115.

<sup>30</sup> Kawall J., 'Self-Regarding Supererogatory Actions', *Journal of Social Philosophy* 34, no.3 (2003), pp.487-498.

supererogation could be stated as follows: if the sense of duty to oneself is as demanding as an act can reasonably get, how is it possible to go beyond it and act so as to benefit myself?

Let me recall one of the most famous arguments on the debate regarding the existence of the duties to oneself. Arthur Schopenhauer argued against the possibility of duties such as those expressed by Kant in the *Metaphysics of Morals*<sup>31</sup>. Schopenhauer, in fact, recalls how Kant distinguishes duties of two forms; they are either *duties of right* or *duties of love*<sup>32</sup>. The former are impossible to apply to the self, due to the principle *volenti non fit iniuria* (to the willing person injury is not done), since I always do what I am willing to do. The latter kind, that of love, if applied to the self becomes inviolable, redefying the concept of duty to oneself. Schopenhauer writes as follows:

“The impossibility of violating the duty to self-love is already presupposed by the supreme commandment of Christian morals, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”, according to which the love that each cherishes for himself is assumed beforehand as the maximum and the condition of all other love”<sup>33</sup>.

Schopenhauer underlines in the passage how the love for the self is very demanding (the *maximum*) and how, according to the Christian formulation of the golden rule, this is the standard from which we get the inspiration to love and care for others. Then, interestingly, the passage continues as follows:

“In no case, however, is the converse added, namely, “Love thyself as thy neighbor” for everyone would feel that here too little is demanded. Self-love would also be the only duty, whereby an opus supererogationis would be the order of the day”<sup>34</sup>.

Schopenhauer clearly expresses a common feeling, that love of the self is higher than love for others. Even more, self-love is “the maximum” conceivable and, as such, it inspires all other forms of love. If we would invert the two conditions, letting the love for others be the inspiration for the love of ourselves, we would feel we cared too little for ourselves. While this move would reopen the possibility of *opera supererogationis* towards ourselves, it would intuitively be, as the passage suggests, a

<sup>31</sup> See the first part of the *Doctrine of the Elements of Ethics* called *On duties to oneself as such* in Kant I., *The Metaphysics of Morals* in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp.543–567.

<sup>32</sup> See paragraph 5 called *On the Assumption of Duties to Oneself in Particular* in Schopenhauer A., *On the Basis of Morality*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1995, pp.58–60.

<sup>33</sup> Schopenhauer A., *On the Basis of Morality*, pp.58–59.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p.59.

recurring and inaccurate reduction of morality. However, Schopenhauer's position, amply differs from the one introduced in the previous section of this article. His main aim, in fact, is to claim that moral duties to ourselves are undeniably affected by the role of self-love<sup>35</sup>. Caring for ourselves in virtue of a *moral* obligation would be, for him, a restrictive interpretation: '*But as regards duties of love to ourselves, morality here finds its work already done and comes too late*'<sup>36</sup>.

In regards to self-supererogation, both arguing for and against the existence of self-regarding moral duties will lead to the same conclusion: whether we consider duty to be all-encompassing (as I do here) or we consider love to make moral duties to oneself meaningless (Schopenhauer's view), there is no space left to the possibility for self-regarding supererogation<sup>37</sup>. If duties to oneself include all the possible moral and reasonable acts to benefit oneself, self-supererogation loses its *raison d'être*. On the other hand, if self-love plays the role that we would assign to morality there would be no concept of duty to exceed. It is widely accepted that supererogation requires some concept that provides a minimal level of moral demandingness (*regular obligations*) that could be overstepped in order to achieve the extra good brought about by the supererogatory act. If there is no such a thing as the duties to self, self-supererogation cannot exist either.

In his article, Jason Kawall shows he is aware of the potential objection we are underlining here:

“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 [...]; 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>38</sup>.

As we have seen in the previous section, if duties are extremely requiring, raising the risks (namely, increasing the demandingness of an act), will not necessarily open the field to supererogation, but rather they bring in the possibility of performing foolish acts that are likely to be considered unreasonable, if not immoral. The

<sup>35</sup> Remember that he addresses the Kantian conception of the *duties to oneself* intended as *duties of right*.

<sup>36</sup> Schopenhauer A., *On the Basis of Morality*, p. 58.

<sup>37</sup> I agree that the notion of duties to the self is controversial. The reason why I do not clearly justify the existence of such duties here, is that, whether we argue for their existence or not, the notion of self-regarding supererogatory acts will be similarly affected. This, I think, is the main point to be highlighted here.

<sup>38</sup> Kawall J., *Self-Regarding Supererogatory Actions*, p.497.

possibilities of performing reasonable acts do not extend indefinitely without becoming morally problematic. As I claim here, if the duties to oneself will broaden our sense of duty so to include all the reasonable acts, where is the place for supererogation? If what duties demand coincides with all reasonable acts, going *beyond the call of duty* towards oneself will only mean going *beyond reasonableness*.

Let's analyze one of Kawall's cases of self-supererogation<sup>39</sup>:

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.

It seems to me that all this man is doing is following a very demanding duty of self-flourishing. Namely, he is trying to be the best he can, according to his conception of a good life (which includes obtaining a degree). Promoting his own good as best as possible relies on the sphere of duties to himself, and thus he is not performing an act of supererogation. Again, it is important to recall the distinction between the *praiseworthy* and the supererogatory that we have delineated in the previous section. This distinction will allow us to hold that what he is doing is extremely praiseworthy, but simply not beyond his duties. If his conception of a good life entails the attainment of a degree, working hard in order to accomplish this task is a praiseworthy case of *moral integrity*. Self-flourishing seems to be a never-ending achievement, as in the case, for example, of aiming to be as healthy as possible. I have a duty to care for my health as much as possible and this includes trying to be as fit as possible. If I decide to run an extra kilometer in regards to what I was supposed to run today in order to loose weight<sup>40</sup>, I am not doing more than duty requires, as what duty is really asking me to do is to stay as healthy as possible. The endless process of self-flourishing is what characterizes the content of the duty. Namely, "run 10 kilometers" is not the content of the duty<sup>41</sup>; rather this represents a way of fulfilling the duty of staying as healthy as possible. As I have tried to make

<sup>39</sup> The objection I will raise, could also work for the other case in Kawall's article (p.490); that of the farmer unjustly imprisoned. What is more in this case is the liberty of the agent has unjustifiably been denied, she has a duty to herself to at least try to change her situation, no matter how much we try to articulate the example for explanatory reasons. I cannot see how her attempt to escape (even if risky) is more than what duty to herself requires her to do, if this attempt could somehow help her striving for liberty again.

<sup>40</sup> Kawall J., *Self-Regarding Supererogatory Actions*, p.490.

<sup>41</sup> If it were, then, running 11 kilometers would be an actual case of self-regarding supererogation.

clear above, I think that we can perform very meritorious acts even by strictly following our duties. The working student, I claim, represents a remarkable and praiseworthy case of *moral integrity*.

Kawall raises further questions about the working student that can help me to strengthen the charge to self-regarding supererogation:

“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? And if so, would we still want to maintain that these self-regarding actions are morally praiseworthy and/or supererogatory?”<sup>42</sup>

The answer to the first of these questions has to do with the definition of supererogatory acts. Volunteering (acting so as to benefit others without having been called upon to do so) is a clear example of supererogation and, as we learn from the definition of the concept, choosing not to do what is optional cannot be considered blameworthy<sup>43</sup>. Thus, we would not be entitled to criticize him for giving up volunteer activities, even though he does this in order to achieve some personal end. The second question requires that we highlight a distinction that will make it possible to avoid the objection of narcissism<sup>44</sup>. It could be helpful, in this regard, to make a distinction between the *motive* of an act and the *intention* of an act. According to David Heyd there could be a discrepancy between how an act of supererogation is brought about (its *motive*) and the aim to the expected outcome of the act (its *intention*). The *motive* of an act of supererogation could be inspired by the self-regarding motives, but what makes it praiseworthy is its being intended for the beneficence of others<sup>45</sup>. The possible charge of narcissism is not what undermines the status of the act of the working student. Rather, it seems that the absence of an altruistic intention will result in the lack of what makes the student the agent of an instance of supererogation. As the beneficent of the act is the agent himself, duties to

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p.495.

<sup>43</sup> See the second condition Heyd’s definition: “Its omission is not wrong, and does not deserve sanction or criticism – either formal or informal” in Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p.115.

<sup>44</sup> After all, we should remember here that even Kant was very skeptical towards heroism, being afraid of the fact that it could hide some kind of narcissism or will to gain public appraisal. Within the sphere of Kantian Ethics, this inclination would undermine the very possibility for the act to have moral value.

<sup>45</sup> “One may act heroically in order to gain fame, to sothe one’s conscience (hantued by guilt feelings), or out of moral self-indulgence. High-minded motives are not a necessary condition for supererogatory action as so many theorists tend to believe. Although the motives of supererogatory acts may be self-regarding, the intention must be other-regarding. And only other-regarding duties can be surpassed supererogatorily” in Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, p.137.

oneself include all the moral possibilities<sup>46</sup>. However, the self-regarding intention (self-perfection) and the high level of demandingness entailed in studying and having two jobs is still worth a significant (and possibly equal) degree of moral praiseworthiness. My answer, then, to Kawall's third question is that, even if self-regarding actions can clearly be praiseworthy (and also extremely so, as in the case of the working student), there is no need to go beyond the duties to the self in order to recognize it.

I have claimed that the relationship with ourselves is characterized by demanding *duties to oneself* grounded on the fact that I am have a high degree of *proximity* towards myself. These duties to oneself represent the most elevated expression of *special obligations*. In these terms, as I have tried to give a definition of supererogation from the perspective of *special obligations* at the end of the previous section, we can comment the famous Christian *Commandment of Love*: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself"<sup>47</sup>. If the intimate relationship with myself is regulated by very demanding duties (the *maximum* as Schopenhauer recognizes), we can ultimately claim that the Christian *Commandment of Love* stands as the uttermost example of the morality of supererogation. From a moral standpoint, setting the demanding duties to oneself as the standard that guides my relationships with the others is considered to be *beyond the call of duty*. The point of view of *unconditioned love* represents a valuable and inspiring ideal that can promote a diffused sense of morality. However, as an everyday paradigm it remains highly demanding and ultimately supererogatory.

## 5. CONCLUSION: THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE ROLE OF PROXIMITY

The main goal of the paper has been to underline the influence that *proximity* (intended as *relational closeness*) can have on moral concepts such as *supererogation* and *special obligations*. This aspect happens to be particularly significant when it comes to the performance of supererogatory acts. I have tried to show how a high degree of *proximity* between the agent and the beneficiary of the act would deepen the sense of duty to a point where there would be little or no place for supererogation. If the demandingness of our sense of duty raises, the possibility of going beyond it decreases. This aspect is particularly clear in the case of the duties to oneself. Here, our sense of duty seems to be all-encompassing in a way that does not leave any room to supererogation.

<sup>46</sup> Or, as Schopenhauer suggests, morality has to step back and recognize the role of self-love.

<sup>47</sup> *Matthew* 22, 39.



I believe that this reveals an important aspect of supererogatory acts: the relationship with the beneficiary of our acts does indeed play a fundamental role. As such, it joins the other well-known features of the concept: these acts are morally good, optional, freely performed and pursued so as to benefit those to whom we do not have particularly demanding special bonds. The moral relevance of intersubjective relationship suggests us to acknowledge *proximity* as one of the fundamental conditions of supererogation, in order to grant the proper theoretical space to the concept<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> For this paper I have benefited of the insightful comments of many philosophers and friends. Their help has been most of the time supererogatory and so I am particularly grateful to them. In particular, I want to thank Antonio Da Re, Charles Larmore, Mary Renaud and Brown University Philosophy graduate students.