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Introduction: The agents, acts and attitudes of supererogation

Q1 CHRISTOPHER COWLE 

I confess to finding the term ‘supererogation’ ugly and unpronounceable. I am also generally suspicious of technical terms in moral philosophy, since they are vulnerable to self-serving definition and counter-definition, to the point of obscuring whether there is a single phenomenon about which to disagree. It was surely not accidental that J.O. Urmson, in his classic 1958 article that launched the contemporary Anglophone debate, eschewed the technical term in favour of the more familiar concepts of saints and heroes. Since then, however, the term Supererogation has bedded down to encompass a number of more or less clear-cut philosophical debates, one of which concerns precisely the extent to which saintliness and heroism exhaust the supererogatory. And it has to be admitted that the word ‘saint’ has certain theological connotations that might be misleading in a secular philosophical discussion (in this volume, only Wynn and Drummond-Young invoke theological ideas), while the word ‘hero’ has potentially limiting associations with knights and soldiers and other forms of testosterone-driven accomplishment.

There already exist two excellent encyclopaedia survey articles on the subject: Gregory Trianosky’s *Routledge Encyclopaedia* entry (1996) and David Heyd’s more recent *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry (2011), so there is little point in duplicating those efforts in this Introduction. The two most important book-length treatments in English are by David Heyd (1982) and Gregory Mellema (1991), and these are especially useful to understand the historical use of the term in Catholic thought, since I will not be touching on that here either.

What I think would be more useful is to discuss some of the central examples used in the recent literature, as useful provocation of the reader’s intuitions. In addition, however, I ~~also~~ want to make a modest substantive criticism of some of the existing debates for focusing too much on *actions* and not enough on *attitudes*. Finally, I will briefly summarise the diverse contributions. Most of these contributions began life at the Royal Institute of Philosophy annual conference in June 2014, held at University College Dublin, and I am

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44 grateful to all those who agreed to present on that lively occasion and
45 then to submit their papers to this volume.
46

47 **Going beyond the call of duty** 48

49
50 As a starting point, most philosophers seem to agree on the basic defini-
51 tion of a supererogatory act as a morally admirable act that in some
52 way goes “beyond the call of duty.” Inherent in this definition are two
53 key terms: (i) the recognisable *moral duty* placed upon a given agent in
54 a given situation, to perform a certain (kind of) action – on the
55 assumption that the agent is capable of **perform** the action, of
56 course; and (ii) the *going beyond*, that is, the ‘supererogatory’ action
57 that is somehow more good than the dutiful action. So, in crude
58 quantifiable terms, if I have a collegial duty to give £10 **into** the
59 boss’s leaving present, then giving £20 would be giving more than
60 owed. The contrast can be mirrored in the legitimate expectations
61 of observers or beneficiaries: the dutiful tenner can be legitimately ex-
62 pected by my colleagues, but not the supererogatory second tenner –
63 which might be an expression of my special affection or gratitude.

64 Shifting our attention to the responses of others then gives rise to a
65 second general definition found in the literature, according to which a
66 supererogatory action is *praiseworthy* (or at least admirable) if per-
67 formed, but *not blameworthy* if omitted. Whether this response-
68 focused definition is parasitic on the act-focused definition, or vice
69 versa, is itself a question for debate.¹

70 The traditional ‘problem of supererogation’ begins when we look at
71 the goodness of the actions in question. If an action is good (either in
72 itself, or because it is likely to generate good consequences), then
73 already it *ought to be* performed – and that sounds like a universal
74 duty. If, in our schematic example above, the supererogatory
75 twenty is (or does) more good than the dutiful tenner, this would
76 suggest that there would be a *greater* duty to give the twenty, and
77 everyone therefore ought to do it. In this way supererogation has
78 been understood as problematic for Aquinas, for Kant, and for
79 Mill, tying in to the general “demandingness problem” of morality.
80 This problem admits of various answers in the literature: the obliga-
81 tion to give the twenty is only *prima facie*, but may be out-weighed by
82

83 ¹ The debate about which definition is foundational and which is para-
84 sitic is similar to the debate surrounding Peter Strawson’s famous 1962
85 attempt to ground freedom in our “reactive attitudes” rather than in some
86 metaphysical account.

87 the likely costs, sacrifices, or risks incurred by the agent; perhaps the
 88 obligation is only to do “enough,” howsoever defined; perhaps the
 89 ‘obligation’ in question corresponds to no more than a reasonable
 90 expectation from others, one that takes into account the reality of
 91 ordinary human frailty and vice; perhaps the moral obligation is out-
 92 weighed by the agent’s moral entitlement, if she is to lead a life of any
 93 sort of complexity, to look after her own identity-conferring projects
 94 and relationships (see Williams 1981).

95 There are four other elements to this basic definition that might
 96 seem obvious, but are worth spelling out since they will be challenged
 97 in some of the contributions. First, if the supererogator ~~is~~ chooses to
 98 spend the £20, then this was a free and deliberate choice, and she was
 99 free to refrain from giving anything; and she knows that she would
 100 not have been blamed for giving only the tenner. Second, she is moti-
 101 vated by the good, and not by enlightened self-interest, e.g. she does
 102 not think of the extra tenner ~~either as a repayment or~~ as an investment.
 103 Third, the extra tenner is a sacrifice for the supererogator, it com-
 104 prises something that the supererogator would have been glad to
 105 spend on other things. (That is, she is not so rich as to be indifferent
 106 between £10 and £20.) Fourth, there is an open question about
 107 whether a successful supererogatory act that goes *far* beyond the
 108 call of duty and knowingly incurs *major* costs nevertheless remains
 109 admirable, or on the contrary might become an object of bafflement,
 110 pity, or psychotherapy.

111 In choosing to give the £20, is the supererogator being *charitable*,
 112 or *generous* – or more generally *virtuous*? If so, then what is the rela-
 113 tionship between virtue and supererogation? Stout’s contribution
 114 to this volume (Ch. 8) takes the virtue of generosity as essentially
 115 involving supererogatory acts. However, as Heyd explains (ch. 2), a
 116 more Aristotelian conception of virtue would speak of the situation
 117 generating a requirement to be courageous, such that a neglect of
 118 this requirement would indeed be blameworthy, and so virtuous
 119 action would not be supererogatory. There is also an important disa-
 120 nalogy between supererogation and virtue, in that the latter involves a
 121 much more complex account of correct *motivation*, as well as correct
 122 perception, deliberation, emotional response, and action, whereas
 123 supererogation is usually only concerned with the act, subject to
 124 the four other definitional elements defined above. If the hero
 125 admits that she performed a heroic act mainly out of a desire for
 126 fame, this might take away from her virtuous status, but would not
 127 make her act any less praiseworthy – or any less supererogatory.
 128 Whether supererogation *should* concern more than the act is
 129

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130 something that I will be considering, below, and which several of the
131 contributors consider.

132 133 134 **Some central examples**

135
136 A number of examples return again and again in the literature, and it
137 is worth setting them out in one place. In doing so I am following
138 Heyd's (1982 Ch. 7) practice of discussing paradigm cases. Indeed,
139 when one looks at the examples all together, one becomes aware
140 that supererogation is a rather heterogeneous concept, depending
141 on the type of duty, type of action, type of 'going beyond', type of
142 goodness, type of risk or sacrifice, and type of agent. Another
143 reason for looking at the examples all together is to highlight one
144 aspect that I think has been unfairly neglected in other philosophers'
145 discussions ~~of them~~: the supererogator's particular *perspective* on the
146 given example. Too often, the agent's judgement (about the duty,
147 about the act, about the sacrifice, etc.), made from within her per-
148 spective, is taken to be either irrelevant to the moral value of the
149 act, or discountable as emotional distortion or false modesty, or as
150 merely coinciding with the admiring observer's judgement about a
151 singular objective state of affairs. Instead, I suggest that the objective
152 meaning of the act partly depends on the way the supererogator comes
153 to think about it. By this I'm not referring to the cases of enlightened
154 self-interest, which I have already eliminated; I'm talking about
155 genuinely supererogatory acts that can admit of different understand-
156 ings within the agent's mind. And the way that the supererogator
157 thinks about the act will itself depend on contingent features of her
158 perspective, e.g. ways of advertng, ways of understanding, ways of
159 spontaneously responding; and these will further depend on the
160 supererogator's biography and on the particular roles and relation-
161 ships that she finds herself in vis-à-vis other particular people,
162 groups, projects, and ideals, together with the supererogator's own
163 understanding of those roles and relationships.

164 So, to take a more complex example than the boss's leaving do,
165 doctors are often considered heroic. But being a doctor might mean
166 different things to two different doctors: one sees her role as just
167 another service to customers whom she can leave at the end of her
168 shift; the other sees his role as something he occupies outside of the
169 formal shift. If both doctors, while off-duty (as defined by their
170 employment contract), hear a radio report about a large traffic pile-
171 up on a busy motorway nearby, and *both* go out to lend a hand, the
172 first doctor might see what she does as beyond the call of duty,

173 while the second might see his act as no more than his duty. Their
174 respective acts, which many would be tempted to call equally super-
175 erogatory, admit of different objective meanings in virtue of how the
176 acts – contemplated and then performed – fit into their lives, which is
177 part of the larger story of how medicine fits into their lives.

178 My attention to the agent’s perspective introduces some elements
179 of wider meta-ethical and moral-psychological discussions about
180 the proper place of moral particularism, special obligations, and nar-
181 rative conceptions of interpersonal ethics, but I will not have the
182 space to consider those here.

183 184 185 *The grenade-jumper* 186

187 Urmson (1958 p. 202) offers the drastic example of a soldier who
188 throws himself on a live grenade, thereby fatally absorbing the blast
189 with his body, but saving the lives of his nearby comrades. One’s
190 first reaction to such an example would have to be wonder at the sol-
191 dier’s sheer spontaneous goodness and selfless concern. Certainly the
192 quantity of sacrifice involved tempts one to accord it the highest
193 praise. However, upon further reflection there are a number of
194 factors that complicate the example, and while such factors ~~do~~ not
195 reduce the goodness of the act, they may undermine its claim to
196 supererogatory status.

197 In one sense, clearly the soldier has paid the highest cost. In
198 another sense, however, it is not clear that what he has incurred is a
199 cost, given that he does not live to *experience it as a cost*. Real costs
200 always involve some sort of comparison, both before and after
201 choice. If I am asked to coach the girls’ football team, then I weigh
202 the effort and time of my weekends against the other activities I
203 might need or like to do on those same weekends. If I agree to the
204 coaching, then I will go on to ‘feel’ the opportunity costs whenever
205 I lack the time or energy to fix the roof or head out to the pub.
206 Essential to the revealed felt cost of the coaching is the possibility
207 of regretting the choice, and a new deliberation about whether to
208 reduce or reject my commitment.

209 Now the grenade-jumper story described by Urmson is ambigu-
210 ous; it is not clear whether the jumper believes that he would be
211 killed by the grenade *anyway*. If he does believe this, then he also be-
212 lieves he has nothing to lose and he may as well try to save his com-
213 rades. Without a thought to costs, it is no longer clear that the act
214 was supererogatory. But let’s assume that the soldier believed he
215 could save himself, and so he really is sacrificing his life for his

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216 comrades. This would seem to involve the notion of cost in compar-
217 ing alternative futures, but of course it would not allow for post hoc
218 felt costs, let alone the possibility of regret. In addition to that, there is
219 the old philosophical question of whether death is a sufficiently
220 meaningful alternative to be even contemplated, since it is unlike any-
221 thing we have ever experienced. In some rare situations of extraordi-
222 nary pain or despair, anything might be preferable to continued life;
223 but the jumper did not have that problem. As such it is not clear
224 that he could make a meaningful enough comparison between the
225 two alternative futures for his act to be admirably supererogatory in
226 the full sense.

227 In fact there probably was no time for comparison or for deliber-
228 ation. The grenade-jumping example is thus also potentially mislead-
229 ing in comprising a spontaneous act, and this starts to undermine the
230 freedom which I took to be necessary for the act to be supererogatory
231 and admirable. We can still admire the man for doing it, but here we
232 are admiring him for being the type of person to react in this particu-
233 lar spontaneous way, rather than admiring the chosen *act*. All in all, I
234 am not sure the example is as useful as Urmson thinks it is. As it turns
235 out, I will soon be challenging the freedom criterion even in cases
236 with enough time for deliberation.

238 239 *The Good Samaritan*

240
241 According to Luke (10:29–37), a Jew had been robbed and lay
242 wounded at the side of the road. Both a priest and a Levite passed
243 by on the other side, but a Samaritan stopped to help him. Not
244 only did he tend his wounds and accompany him to the nearby
245 town, he then paid a hotelkeeper to allow the Jew to stay there and
246 recover, ~~at the Samaritan's expense~~. I have distinguished these two
247 phases of the Samaritan's actions because, as Heyd points out
248 (1982 p. 17), one could plausibly see the provision of emergency
249 assistance to a proximate and obviously needy victim at manageable
250 cost to oneself as a matter of obligation rather than supererogation,
251 and so the real supererogatory act was the subsequent payment for
252 the hotel room. (On this understanding, the priest's and the
253 Levite's omission would therefore become blameworthy neglect of
254 an objective 'duty of rescue'.)

255 One might avoid Heyd's redescription by adjusting the example so
256 that the cost and risk of intervention become higher, and the victim
257 becomes less proximate. Let's say, for example, that the Jew is
258 crying for help in a turbulent river. (The Priest and the Levite

259 would then be blameless for not jumping in – although they would
 260 still have a duty to call for help.) With this adjustment, however, it
 261 is still philosophically interesting to distinguish two new phases:
 262 the Samaritan’s *spontaneous* supererogatory decision to jump in the
 263 river, followed by his *deliberative* supererogatory decision to then
 264 take the soaking wet, penniless Samaritan to a hotel.

265 Now we have the same problem with spontaneity as we did with the
 266 grenade-jumper. The Samaritan’s spontaneous jump might seem like
 267 an unfree gut response to the situation, and therefore less praise-
 268 worthy – at least as an act; (but the Samaritan would remain praise-
 269 worthy as an individual with such good dispositions.) Unlike the
 270 grenade-jumper, however, the spontaneous water-jumping
 271 Samaritan survives to experience the cost to his own comfort and
 272 projects.

273 In addition, it is also revealing to imagine how he would answer a
 274 question from a CNN reporter about his heroic jump in the river.
 275 One plausible answer would be “I couldn’t just leave him to
 276 drown.” I think it is philosophically important to take this self-
 277 description seriously, that is, not as a matter of false modesty.
 278 From within the agent’s perspective, this is a statement of
 279 a genuine moral incapacity (“I couldn’t”) – I am using Bernard
 280 Williams’s term² – and this would lend further support to the
 281 thought that this was indeed not a free decision. And so we must con-
 282 clude that either freedom is not a necessary condition for supereroga-
 283 tory action, or that the action in question is supererogatory in a
 284 different, perhaps lesser way. As Archer points out in his contribu-
 285 tion to this volume (Ch. 6), such an incapacity undermines the
 286 claim that the Samaritan was actually sacrificing something. For a
 287 sacrifice, in order to be *my* sacrifice rather than an unchosen experi-
 288 ence of hardship, has to involve a choice, motivated by the good,
 289 between alternatives with a view to relative costs. Yet the Samaritan
 290 had no appreciation of the costs either before or after the rescue.

291 What is interesting about the interview with the Samaritan,
 292 however, is that he might very well refer to the same incapacity
 293 when describing the *second* phase of action as well. Recall that this
 294 second phase involved deliberation and decision, and thus seems
 295 like a better candidate for an essentially free supererogatory action.
 296 But the Samaritan might say: “Once I’d rescued him I couldn’t
 297 just abandon him.” Again, I claim that these words can be taken at
 298 their face value. We have to distinguish between physical and
 299

300 ² Williams (1995). For a further discussion of the first-personal experi-
 301 ence of necessity, see the contributions by Archer and Levy in this volume.

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302 available options. When I am standing at the top of a cliff, jumping to
303 my death is a physical option but, unless I'm suicidal, it is not an
304 available option – that is, available *to me*, within my perspective.
305 You might point out that I have the physical option, and I
306 wouldn't deny it, but that by itself would not persuade me to contem-
307 plate the physical option as an available option. So even if the
308 Samaritan had the physical option to abandon the Jew after rescuing
309 him, he did not *contemplate* such an option seriously, and so effective-
310 ly he did not have that option. On the other hand, we could imagine
311 another adjustment to the example whereby the Jew, once on land,
312 says "Thanks very much, I'll be fine now, I've got a friend who
313 lives just down the road," and only then does the Samaritan
314 become aware of the physical options he had all along.

315 So I would conclude that the element of choice is not essential to a
316 supererogatory act. There is one last comment worth making about
317 the Good Samaritan. Let us assume that he rescued the Jew from
318 the turbulent waters, and handed him over to a waiting ambulance
319 at the side of the river. Now if he explains to the CNN reporter
320 that "he couldn't just leave him there," he is being careful to make
321 a statement only about himself, with no implications for what
322 anybody else ought to have done. However, another kind of
323 Samaritan might have said something pointing in a different direc-
324 tion: "I did what anyone else would do." Again, assuming that he
325 is speaking sincerely, what are we to make of this? On one level, he
326 must know that other people would not do what he did – after all,
327 he saw the priest and the Levite walk by without jumping in. But
328 this does not necessarily ~~make~~ his modesty ~~is false~~. It might be
329 that, linked to his heroically good disposition, is an equally heroic
330 good disposition to *think well of others*. In this case, he might
331 assume that the priest and the Levite did not jump in because they
332 had very good reasons for not doing so (they couldn't swim, they
333 were on their way to something much more important etc.); or he
334 might be assuming that in the future, most people would in fact
335 jump in to save the Jew in just such circumstances, regardless of
336 their performance to date. I will have more to say later on about
337 such supererogatory *attitudes*.

338 339 340 *The firefighter*

341
342 Another character in the supererogation debates is the firefighter. He
343 rushes into the burning building, saves the baby, and is celebrated as
344 the hero. Some firefighters relish the adrenaline, the machismo, and

345 have no problem with boasting about it afterwards. Such boasting
346 would not undermine the admirability or praiseworthiness of the
347 acts. So far, so supererogatory. But consider the firefighter who,
348 when asked by the same CNN reporter to comment on the events,
349 merely says “I just did my job.” Once again, these words could be
350 ignored as false modesty, but I think they could be taken seriously.
351 Surely it is possible that he sees himself as having volunteered for a
352 role, a role with certain explicit and implicit obligations attached to
353 it – including an obligation to take certain life-threatening risks for
354 the sake of others – and until he either resigns or is fired, then he
355 “just” (an important word) has a job to do. This idea of a role distin-
356 guishes him from the Good Samaritan, although ~~it has to be said that~~
357 the Samaritan might have seen himself as occupying the wider ‘role’
358 of neighbour.

359 Now maybe the firefighter’s job description is vague when it comes
360 to the precise *amount* (i.e. probability or quantity) of life-threatening
361 risk that ought to be taken, according to established norms. Presumably
362 there are some risks that would be stupid for any fire-
363 fighter to take, given their understanding of the situation. However,
364 within the maximum and minimum permissible risks, there would be
365 room for some variation: one firefighter might take a greater risk
366 than another. So while it remains true that both of them are “just
367 doing their job,” some firefighters could in fact be more heroic than
368 others. Usually, however, we are inclined to admire *all* firefighters,
369 whether or not they merely meet or exceed the minimum standards
370 of the job. Certainly the job is demanding, and only certain people
371 will have the physical abilities and judgement and courage to meet
372 the standards. So it is perhaps easy to see why I, very much a non-
373 firefighter cowering in safety outside the burning building, would
374 admire all firefighters for their courage. However, our man continues
375 to deflect the praise, repeating “I just did my job;” in other words
376 he did what he was obligated to do by his employment contract and
377 the inherent norms of risk-taking. But this is odd, because it seems
378 to shift the locus of admiration: instead of the firefighter’s actions
379 here and now, what we praise is effectively his past supererogatory
380 decision to apply for the job in the first place, rather than for a less
381 heroic job. But then there is the problem of mixed motivation: in
382 applying for the job, he might well have been more interested in
383 the machismo and prestige of the job than in the welfare of the
384 future beneficiaries. (There is something unseemly about longing to
385 be a hero.)

386 While the firefighters’ heroism has a lot to do with the physical
387 risks they take, it is important to recognise a whole host of jobs that

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388 we would describe as heroic despite very low physical risks: the
389 'caring professions' of doctor, nurse, social worker, psychotherapist,
390 primary school teacher. Obviously there will be rewarding success
391 stories in these jobs, but our admiration focuses more on their cap-
392 acity to deal, day in day out, with the grinding, messy unrelievable
393 physical and mental suffering of their patients and clients and
394 pupils, and to deal with the limits of their own skills and knowledge.
395 Perhaps a secondary admiration focuses on those who are able to
396 maintain a heroic good humour throughout, and who manage to
397 resist sliding into despair on the one hand, or into compassion
398 fatigue on the other. And teachers have to deal with the additional
399 burden of their pupils' open contempt and the state's reluctance to
400 resource the sector properly.

The saint

402
403
404
405 Of Urmsom's two eponymous categories, the saint raises special com-
406 plications not only because of her religious beliefs, but also of her
407 conception of morality in religious terms; it is not clear that the
408 saint can distinguish the dutiful from the admirably optional if
409 both kinds of action ultimately serve a perfectly good God. Perhaps
410 she might even say that she, too, is "just doing her job."

411 There are at least two famous discussions of saints in the
412 Anglophone philosophical literature. First, there is Susan Wolf's
413 'Moral Saints' (1982), which defined the secularized ideal as "a
414 person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person,
415 that is, who is as morally worthy as can be" (p. 419). In addition,
416 the saint has to be "very, very nice. It is important that he not be
417 offensive" (p. 422). Notoriously, she argues that moral perfection,
418 in the sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of per-
419 sonal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or
420 good or desirable for a human being to strive. (p. 419)

421 While such sainthood might remain supererogatory in going
422 beyond the call of duty, it would not be admirable. The gist of
423 Wolf's argument is that such sainthood would not be an appealing
424 property in a *friend*; what I look for in a friend is a person with the
425 same sorts of imperfections as I have, and therefore with the capacity
426 to understand and sympathise with me. In addition, I want my friend
427 to give me priority and preference in her life, rather than to apportion
428 her efforts to the most morally deserving causes.

429 Her argument was thus not targeted against the great saints from
430 history, but rather to a certain kind of self-righteous moral

431 perfectionism, allied with a stoic ideal of detachment from ‘corrupt-
432 ing’ relationships. But I don’t quite share Wolf’s intuitions here. Part
433 of what I admire in my friend is precisely her effort to do good in the
434 world, however modestly or ambitiously; and my admiration helps
435 me improve as well, in order to earn her friendship. In this respect
436 I admire her supererogatory achievements rather than her merely
437 dutiful ones. And I do not at all agree that a saint has to be very,
438 very nice: part of the saint’s job is to fight evil and vice and moral
439 weakness in all its guises, and this will often involve being quite
440 nasty – again, however, my friend’s willingness to go beyond her
441 duty to fight for goodness is precisely something I admire about her.

442 A more serious discussion of secular sainthood is to be found in
443 Raimond Gaita’s book *A Common Humanity* (p. 150 ff).³ Gaita
444 relates a story from Primo Levi’s *If This Is A Man* (1987). While
445 Levi was working at the ‘hospital barracks’ in Auschwitz, he wit-
446 nessed the remarkable actions of a man called Lakmaker in attending
447 to the suffering of a fellow inmate. There was little that Lakmaker
448 could do in a practical sense, not only because the inmate had ad-
449 vanced typhus, but mainly because of his own physical weakness
450 and the terrible conditions in all areas of the camp, including these
451 barracks. Gaita’s point, however, was Lakmaker’s saintly capacity
452 for tenderness, a tenderness that had the power to illuminate the
453 inmate’s humanity in these darkest of conditions. While the tradi-
454 tional discussion of supererogation focuses on *action* that is beyond
455 the call of duty, here were circumstances in which action was highly
456 limited and ineffective; what was far more important was the *attitude*
457 of tenderness that Lakmaker showed, far beyond anything that could
458 be reasonably expected of him in the circumstances.

459 It might be objected that attitude is a passive phenomenon, and too
460 far away from the choice that Heyd and others see as essential to
461 supererogation. And yet surely an attitude can be chosen indirectly:
462 one chooses to attend to certain circumstances of the scene, one
463 chooses to remind oneself of certain ideals (religious or other), one
464 may even invoke the Golden Rule. Importantly, the Lakmaker
465 example differs from that of the Good Samaritan in that the
466 former’s circumstances greatly impeded the possibility of effective
467 action, and Lakmaker the individual had to overcome many more
468

469 ³ Those who know Gaita’s work will recognise the profound influence
470 he has had on many of the thoughts in this Introduction. In the same book
471 (p. 17ff), Gaita also discusses a nun working in a psychiatric hospital.
472 Sympathetic criticism of this latter example can be found in Hamilton
473 (2008).

474 internal difficulties in deciding to get out of his own bed to attend his
475 fellow.

476
477
478 *The forgiver*
479

480 The final example I want to consider in this section is that of the
481 victim who forgives her wrongdoer. This is one of Heyd's "para-
482 digm" examples (1982 p. 154), and is also discussed by Hamilton,
483 Stout and Levy in this volume. Forgiveness can be loosely defined
484 as the victim's elective forswearing of justified resentment against
485 the wrongdoer for a wrongdoing;⁴ insofar as the resentment is justi-
486 fied, then the elective forswearing is supererogatory. Indeed, the
487 very etymology of forgiveness is to "give in abundance." As an
488 example of supererogation it is interesting because it involves not
489 an act so much as a forbearance, as Heyd puts it.

490 Forgiveness has seen a sustained recent interest in Anglo-American
491 philosophy, and the most systematic recent treatment has been
492 offered by Charles Griswold in 2007. There is a debate about the *con-*
493 *ditionality* of the forgiveness; while one person can forgive another, it
494 only becomes admirable, writes Griswold, when the victim waits for
495 the wrongdoer to fulfil certain conditions (above all repentance, but
496 also apology, compensation, and commitment to non-recidivism).
497 Without such conditions, and without a sensitivity to antecedent
498 power structures between wrongdoer and victim, there is too much
499 of a risk that forgiveness will express the victim's self-denigration
500 and the tacit condonation of the wrong: one should consider, first,
501 the example of the battered wife who 'forgives' her husband over
502 and over again, and second, certain monumental crimes that have
503 been plausibly described as 'unforgivable'.

504 On the other hand, conditionality is also seen as removing the elec-
505 tivity of loving forgiveness and thereby as bringing it too close to a
506 transaction, such that the 'properly' repentant wrongdoer can then
507 reasonably expect, even demand the victim's *non*-supererogatory for-
508 giveness (Gerrard and McNaughton 2003).⁵

509 A separate debate concerns the role of *understanding* in forgiveness.
510 On the one hand, we have the spirit of 'Tout comprendre, ç'est tout
511

512 ⁴ This definition seems acceptable to the vast majority of recent
513 Anglophone philosophers working on forgiveness. But note Blustein's so-
514 phisticated critique of this definition in Ch. 2 of his (2014).

515 ⁵ Gamlund (2010) tries to have it both ways by distinguishing two kinds
516 of forgiveness, with the supererogatory kind requiring unconditionality.

517 pardonner'. However, understanding a wrongdoing would attenuate
518 resentment through a process of appropriate (non-supererogatory)
519 *excusing* rather than forgiving: the question of whether to forgive
520 (supererogatorily) only comes into play when the victim cannot
521 understand the wrongdoer, even after the latter's sincere attempts
522 to explain the origins of the wrong. Importantly, a ~~difference~~
523 response to the failure to understand would simply be to ignore,
524 and to try to forget; perhaps the great proportion of minor wrongs
525 are processed in just this fashion among people who otherwise have
526 strong reasons to remain in one another's company. However, ignor-
527 ing is not forgiving because it does not involve the admirable and
528 elective change of heart.

529 The worry is then that unconditional, uncomprehending forgive-
530 ~~ness is not sufficiently anchored in the behaviour of the wrongdoer~~
531 ~~that it~~ becomes effectively unilateral, as if the victim were simply
532 coming to terms with a natural disaster rather than forgiving the
533 wrongdoer for the wrongdoing. Certainly the tone of a lot of self-
534 help literature is unilateral in this sense: what they call 'forgiveness'
535 often amounts to no more than the attempt to let go of the resent-
536 ment, as far as possible, for self-oriented reasons of psychic health.
537 The second worry about unconditional, uncomprehending forgive-
538 ness, insofar as it can be sufficiently aimed at the wrongdoer, is that
539 ~~it~~ does not seem to admit of *reasons* to forgive; and without reasons, for-
540 giveness seems capricious in a way that would take away from its
541 moral admirability.

542 Dealing with these two problems requires thinking of forgiveness
543 *not* as an act (an outer object, as it were) like any other act that can
544 be contemplated by weighing reasons for and against; *nor* is it a
545 matter of deciding on the best mental *strategy* for manipulating a cor-
546 rosive resentment (an inner object). Instead, forgiveness begins as an
547 attempt to *see* the wrongdoer in a new light. Such a new light is not a
548 matter of adverting to the fulfilment of behavioural or situational
549 conditions, but rather of coming to see something – perhaps the
550 humanity – in the wrongdoer. Such a coming-to-see ~~is best~~
551 as love, and I will consider this in the next section. But the important
552 point about forgiveness for any discussion of supererogation is that
553 we have moved from acts to attitudes.

554 555 **Supererogatory attitudes**

556
557
558 The attitude of forgiveness is somewhat complex, and I do not have
559 the space to describe it more. Within the limits of this Introduction I

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560 want to make a more general point about a ‘supererogatory attitudes’:
561 it can mean something much simpler: giving the benefit of the doubt,
562 thinking the best of someone, thinking generously or magnanimously
563 about another, trusting someone, hoping for the best, making the best
564 of something, and above all, love. These attitudes are supererogatory,
565 not because they go beyond the call of *moral* duty, but because they go
566 beyond the epistemic duty to apportion belief to available evidence.
567 In the supererogation literature the emphasis has been very much
568 on supererogatory acts rather than attitudes, and the latter deserve
569 equal attention.

571 *Trust and hope*

572
573
574 In a great number of ordinary situations, of course, we have to trust
575 others, and insofar as we have to, then such an attitude cannot be super-
576 erogatory. We trust the neighbour, the bus driver, the ~~barman~~, the
577 bank teller, the university lecturer. Here it is only the deeply paranoid
578 person who would show ~~the~~ failure of reason in insisting on bulletproof
579 evidence before making ~~himself~~ vulnerable to the others whose goods
580 and services ~~he~~ needs.

581 However, there are more interesting questions of trust. Consider a
582 famous example from the philosophical literature on self-deception.
583 A “gullible” husband who “deceives himself” about the significance
584 of the growing evidence of his wife’s infidelity: she comes home from
585 work later and later, her clothes are dishevelled, there are flirty mes-
586 sages on the answering machine etc.. Nevertheless he refuses ~~think~~
587 she might be unfaithful, refuses to challenge her, and this is allegedly
588 because of an understandable but ultimately reprehensible self-
589 deception driven by fear and cowardice.

590 However, I think another reading of the gullible husband is avail-
591 able, one in which the husband *trusts* his wife – indeed, he *resolves* to
592 trust his wife (rather than finding himself, willy-nilly, in a situation of
593 trusting his wife). Such a trust can of course be rationally imprudent,
594 and his close friends have warned him about it; but nevertheless it can
595 also be courageous and ethically admirable. When the husband
596 married the wife he made a vow, and here his vow is being tested:
597 the evidence presents itself, evidence that would incline the impartial
598 enquirer toward certain conclusions that at the very least merit
599 further investigation. And he refuses to entertain either the conclu-
600 sions or the need for investigation. If he found himself suspecting
601 her, he would consider this to amount to a betrayal on his part, as if
602 it were he who was abandoning the marriage, not she. His

603 imprudence might mean that he is utterly unprepared for her leaving
604 him one day – but so be it. He will tell himself that he is entirely com-
605 mitted to the marriage right up until she leaves, and not a moment
606 earlier.

607 It might be objected that there is nothing heroic about misplaced
608 or unearned trust, and that it comes too close to servility and self-
609 denigration. (In both respects it would be like unearned forgiveness
610 under the ‘conditional’ account.) ~~It is true that we~~ might feel differ-
611 ently if the roles were reversed, and it was the wife who was trusting
612 ‘too much’ – but part of this, as I suggested above, would be due to
613 the implied power imbalance. ~~But in~~ the unfaithful wife example,
614 the husband has a more-or-less dignified ‘exit option’ that he
615 refuses to use.

616 Hope is similar to trust in drawing positive conclusions about the
617 future that are not rationally warranted by available evidence. Again,
618 a normal inductive confidence that the future will resemble the past
619 will not be supererogatory if such a confidence is required to lead a
620 life of any sort of normal complexity. However, there are some
621 people who might be justified in considering their lives to be *blighted*
622 by misfortune, and yet they retain an admirable capacity to hope,
623 not only that fortune will eventually smile on them, but also that
624 other people will be good to them when so many have been so cruel
625 (one thinks of Hardy’s Tess, for example). It is tempting to reduce
626 such unwarranted hope to the status of an adaptive survival mechan-
627 ism, but this would not do justice to two essential parts of the phenom-
628 enology: first, the capacity to resolve to hope and to resist the
629 temptation to despair; second, to the way we observers can be moved
630 by such hope (even when it does not avert further misfortune).

632 *Love*

633 I’m using the word ‘love’ as a fairly broad place-holder, and I do not
634 want to get bogged down in definitions. Whether the Samaritan
635 showed love or compassion or care or charity is not important for
636 the point I want to make. Love is interesting in that, unlike the exam-
637 ples described above, it can be meaningfully shown toward various
638 different kinds of objects: individual people, but also abstractly-
639 defined groups (e.g. ethnic or national), institutions, geographical
640 areas, and even ideas or ideals. As before, there is a question of
641 whether proper love has to be ‘earned’ or not; but I will avoid this
642 by pointing out that there was no question whether the wounded
643 Jew deserved the Samaritan’s love.
644
645

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646 Of course we could just say that insofar as love motivates one to act
647 beyond the call of duty, then love is a supererogatory attitude. But not
648 only do I believe that love can be supererogatory even when it does
649 not motivate actions beyond duty, I also believe that the relationship
650 between love and duty (or rather: between the experience of love and
651 the experience of duty) is not at all straightforward. Consider the
652 example of a father of a young infant. At three in the morning, the
653 father is woken by the infant's piercing cry from the room next
654 door. Since he is 'on duty' while his partner sleeps, he rises and
655 attends to the infant until it falls asleep again. One question here is
656 whether such an act is supererogatory, and the answer may well
657 invoke many of the discussions above. But before that we have to
658 ask: why exactly does the father get up at all?

659 At the basic level, it is clear that he does not *want* to get up: his
660 greatest preference at that moment would be to continue sleeping.
661 It is also true that the father has no loving *feelings* for the "little
662 brat" (his words, not mine!) at that moment: quite the opposite. So
663 it is tempting to think that he rises out of parental *duty*. But, as
664 Harry Frankfurt has argued (1998 p. 8), this would be to interpose
665 an object, as it were, in between the father and the infant: as if
666 the father has to first ask himself what his duty is and *then* rise in ad-
667 herence of that duty, with no explicit thought of the beneficiary. And yet
668 this is false to the phenomenology: the father rises *because of the*
669 *infant*. It is a direct response to a perceived claim of need. The
670 father's perspective is 'primed' to hear the infant, to hear *his* infant,
671 and to respond directly. This is a similar point as that made in my dis-
672 cussion of the Good Samaritan, above; but in the father-infant
673 context it is obscured by the widespread thought that a parental
674 *duty* is meant to pick up the slack when the spontaneous loving feel-
675 ings are absent. However, it is better to understand the father's
676 experience of the infant's claim of need as an expression of his love
677 for her – a love that is not essentially about feelings, but about a
678 whole long-term orientation toward the infant, informed by his
679 own resolve to be a good father in accordance with his understanding
680 of an ideal of fatherhood he has inherited from his family and from
681 wider society. Such a love goes very far beyond the call of duty;
682 one can imagine a hired nanny performing her duties immaculately
683 but without the orientation of love.

684 While love is often manifest in action, it is also important to con-
685 sider those cases involving no action, or no change of standing behav-
686 ioural dispositions. Iris Murdoch (1970 p. 17) offers the famous
687 example of M and D to show that an admirable loving attitude –
688 beyond the call of familial duty – can be cultivated without any

689 noticeable change in action. M's son has just married D, and M's
690 spontaneous attitude is one of disapproval, and yet she behaves
691 impeccably to D throughout. With imaginative effort and love, M
692 brings herself, partly by acknowledging her own jealousy, to see D
693 in a better light; ~~where~~ such a change in seeing is genuine, and not
694 merely a matter of 'making the best'.

697 **The contributions to this volume**

699 The papers are quite diverse, and reflect the surprising and fruitful
700 breadth of philosophical issues under the concept of supererogation.
701 At one extreme is abstract deontic logic (Wessels), at the other a sus-
702 tained examination of a particular historical example (Hamilton);
703 some are optimistic about the usefulness of the concept (Heyd),
704 others more pessimistic (Levy); some explore the theological rele-
705 vance (Wynn), others some developments in the Continental trad-
706 ition (Ansell-Pearson).

708 **David Heyd** wrote the first book-length treatment (1982) as well as
709 the Stanford Encyclopedia entry (2011), and so it is only fitting that
710 he open our volume. While there has been enough attention ~~trying to~~
711 ~~accommodate~~ supererogation, with more or less success, within
712 Kantian and consequentialist structures, Heyd focuses on the at-
713 tempts of virtue theorists. As we have noted above, the virtues them-
714 selves already seem supererogatory, in the sense that the courageous
715 person already does more than what an ordinary person would do,
716 and the latter (not yet a coward) is not blameworthy for the omission.
717 Heyd, however, argues that the virtues cannot accommodate superer-
718 ogation – but he is careful to preserve supererogation as a meaning-
719 ful ethical category. Part of the problem in confusing the two comes
720 from the original (Christian-based) association with heroism and
721 saintliness, and Heyd argues that the modern concept should be de-
722 tached from it.

723 If supererogation is difficult to accommodate in the three main-
724 stream normative theories, **Michael Ferry** suggests it also poses a
725 serious problem for theories of moral reasoning. This problem
726 results, in part, from our taking too narrow a view of the reasons
727 that can influence an act's deontic status: we tend to focus primarily
728 on those reasons that count directly for and against an act's perform-
729 ance. To adequately account for supererogation, Ferry argues we
730 should consider also those reasons that govern (i) the attitudes we
731 express in response to moral *acts* as well as those that govern (ii)

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our practices of issuing demands and of seeking justification in the case of omissions. Attending to these sorts of reasons allows us to distinguish prescriptive moral oughts from moral obligations and in turn, to accept that, while the supererogatory omission does involve a moral failure of sorts, it does not involve a failure of obligation. In this way, Ferry hopes that we can account for our intuitions regarding supererogation (and so allow for options in the face of admitted value) while avoiding what he calls the problem of explaining how it can be permissible to omit the supererogatory act and to perform (what we take to be) a morally worse act instead.

Matthias Brinkman develops a ‘duty-plus’ approach to supererogation based on a simple intuition: if I am required to do *x* or *y*, doing *x* and *y* is a candidate for (though not necessarily) supererogation. This is an appealing view to take, located midway between two extreme positions: (i) supererogationism holds that “there are supererogatory actions, and that *all* (or at least, *some*) are *outside* duty: i.e., neither required by perfect duty, nor the overfulfilment of some imperfect duty;” (ii) rigorism holds that “there are *no* supererogatory actions, at least not in any strong sense of the word: all seemingly supererogatory actions are demanded by perfect duties or by open-ended imperfect duties.” Brinkman gives a precise statement of the view through the notion of disjunctive duties, and discusses the commitments a duty-plus theorist should make, independent from the Kantian context in which this position is often discussed. He also advocates the novel claim that we should take supererogation as a property of sets of actions, rather than single actions.

Ulla Wessels wrote a 2003 monograph entitled *Die Gute Samariterin: Zur Struktur Der Supererogation*, and her contribution draws from that book and responds to some criticisms addressed at it since then. Most theories of supererogation are informed by the “threshold model.” According to the threshold model, there is an amount of good we are obliged to do in a given context, and by doing something that goes beyond this threshold, we are going beyond the call of duty. Wessels tries to show that the threshold model for supererogation is not only incomplete in content, but also inadequate in form. Some of the problems can be revealed with the following example. If I find myself in a situation where I am obliged to donate €50 to a charity, and thereby reliably save 1 person’s life, then donating anything more than this threshold would appear to be supererogatory. And yet, such are the contingencies of this particular situation that two further options present

775 themselves: (i) I could donate €100 and reliably save 2 lives, or (ii) I
 776 could donate €101 and save 10 lives. If I am lucky enough to be
 777 able to afford to donate €100, then I can certainly afford to donate
 778 €101 – and therefore it becomes the case I *ought to* donate the €101;
 779 that donation is not supererogatory, even though it is more than the
 780 original obligatory sum of €50. To deal with such “supererogatory
 781 holes,” Wessels proposes an alternative to the threshold model,
 782 which she calls the “Format,” which is not a complete theory of super-
 783 erogation, but merely a framework for such theories. The Format does
 784 justice to the fact that there are actions that do not deserve to be called
 785 supererogatory even though they are morally better than some that do.
 786

787 **Alfred Archer** discusses the a paradigm case of a hero, Raoul
 788 Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who helped to save thousands of
 789 Hungarian Jews from deportation and death by providing them
 790 with Swedish identity papers. He then uses the example to challenge
 791 two widely-shared intuitions about supererogation: first, that it must
 792 be a matter of free choice; and second, that it must involve some sort
 793 of sacrifice to the supererogator. Archer claims that Wallenberg (and
 794 paradigm heroes) would have used the expression “I couldn’t” when
 795 describing their action, which is to suggest that he felt he did *not* have
 796 a choice. Archer invokes Bernard Williams’s idea of ‘moral incap-
 797 acity’ to explore this phenomenon. Moreover, because his actions
 798 were not chosen, they did not involve a sacrifice in the normal
 799 sense of the term. This is because a sacrifice is not something that
 800 merely makes an agent worse off; it is something that makes an
 801 agent worse off than she would – and could – otherwise conceive
 802 herself as being. Since the agent did not have the moral capacity to
 803 do otherwise, the risks and costs that she runs are absolute disvalues
 804 (similar to unchosen illnesses befalling the agent) rather than sacri-
 805 fices.
 806

807 **Elizabeth Drummond Young** continues the examination of sacri-
 808 fice. She argues, first, that the expected costs cannot ground the
 809 optionality of supererogatory acts within normative theory; and sec-
 810 ondly, that even if costs can ground optionality, any focus on costs
 811 impoverishes the characterisation of supererogation as a whole.
 812 Both the intuitive attraction of the ‘appeal to costs’ account of super-
 813 erogation and the arguments against it have much in common with
 814 attitudes towards religious sacrifice, as traditionally conceived,
 815 where the emphasis is on giving up something or someone of value.
 816 Drummond Young proposes a new interpretation of Christian sacri-
 817 fice, following an account by Robert Daly, S.J. If this interpretation

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818 is transferred to morality, it means that we can re-interpret super-
819 erogatory acts as voluntary acts of self-offering love, rather than
820 seeing them as the costly overcoming of frail human nature by a
821 few heroes and saints.
822

823 **Rowland Stout** concentrates on the narrower examples of generosity
824 and presumptuousness to explore the nature of supererogation. Stout
825 begins by pointing out that generosity is not the same thing as kind-
826 ness or self-sacrifice, for presumptuousness is incompatible with gen-
827 erosity, but not with kindness or self-sacrifice. He considers a kind
828 but interfering neighbour who inappropriately takes over the role
829 of mother to his daughter; her behaviour is not generous. So pre-
830 sumptuousness is the improper exercise of a disposition to adopt a
831 role that one does not have. With this in mind Stout then explores
832 the idea that generosity is the proper exercise of the disposition to
833 adopt a role that one does not have. It is a mean between meanness
834 on the one hand (where that disposition is not exercised when it
835 should be) and presumptuousness on the other hand (where that dis-
836 position is exercised when it should not be). Adopting a role is being
837 motivated by the considerations that should motivate someone who
838 actually has that role. The disposition to adopt roles you do not
839 have is important in social situations where there is a need for a role
840 that nobody is filling. It is also the basis of developing relationships
841 like friendship; you have to act as if you are a friend before you
842 become a friend. This model fits the parable of the Good Samaritan
843 in an obvious way. Finally, Stout argues that the model also explains
844 forgiveness, and its relationship within love. Forgiveness is demanded
845 by a certain relationship – call it love. What makes forgiveness optional
846 after someone has wronged you is that love itself may be optional after
847 someone has wronged you. There is nothing generous about forgiving
848 someone you love, though loving them may be generous. Forgiveness
849 only counts as generous when you don't love the person, and even
850 then it can fail to be generous if it is presumptuous.
851

852 **Mark Wynn** considers the fruitfulness of the notion of supereroga-
853 tion for an understanding of the relationship between religious and
854 secular ethics. He approaches this theme in three ways. First, he
855 notes a contrast between the virtues of neighbour love and infused
856 temperance, as they are represented in the work of Thomas
857 Aquinas: in the first case, but not the second, appeal to religious
858 context changes the status of an action, so that it is now obligatory
859 when it would otherwise have been supererogatory. He considers
860 how we might explain this difference, and what it indicates about

861 the distinctive character of a ‘religious ethic’. Next, Wynn considers
862 the account of the spiritual life offered by John of the Cross, a six-
863 teenth century Spanish Carmelite friar, and a key figure in the
864 history of Christian spirituality. While tracking Aquinas’s discussion
865 on certain points, John invites a more radical revision of the distinc-
866 tion between obligation and supererogation. Finally, and briefly,
867 Wynn argues that these reflections throw new light on a puzzle that
868 is posed by some attempts to ground religious commitments in
869 moral commitments. In all of these ways, the notion of supereroga-
870 tion turns out to be key for an appreciation of the distinctive character
871 of a religious vision of human life.

872
873 **Christopher Hamilton** explores a striking ~~case~~ of forgiveness ~~in the~~
874 ~~hope of bringing attention to, and illuminating, a specific case of~~
875 ~~supererogation~~. In her autobiography, Maïti Girtanner describes
876 herself as a young woman working for the resistance in Nazi-occupied
877 France. She was caught by the Gestapo and tortured, leaving her with
878 permanent injuries. Forty years later, her torturer Léo turned up at
879 her door, announced that he had been diagnosed with terminal
880 cancer, and that he was seeking her forgiveness.⁶ Hamilton relates
881 this case to a number of issues in the philosophy of religion and
882 ethics, specifically some of those that concern an understanding of
883 our humanity. The aim is less to arrive at specific conclusions con-
884 cerning how we ought to understand supererogation than to open
885 up a conceptual space for a deepened appreciation of the conceptual,
886 psychological and philosophical complexities ~~that his discussion~~
887 ~~around this and related concepts invokes~~.

888
889 **Keith Ansell-Pearson** explores the ideas of the neglected modern
890 French philosopher, Jean-Marie Guyau (1854–88) as they concern
891 conceiving an ethics beyond obligation and duty. Ansell-Pearson ap-
892 proaches Guyau as part of a French tradition of an ethics of generosity
893 and whose most famous exponent is Bergson. Ansell-Pearson aims to
894 highlight Guyau’s principal concerns and the novelty of his insights,
895 as well as illuminate his attempt to ground ethics within a thinking of
896 ‘life’. He deals with three main topics: the criticism of a Kantian
897

898
899 ⁶ A similar story is told by Eric Lomax in *The Railway Man*, Vintage
900 1995. Lomax was a British officer in Singapore when it was captured by
901 the Japanese in 1941, and worked nearly to death in a brutal POW camp,
902 with intermittent torture. Fifty years later, he went to visit the Japanese
903 translator who had been present at many of the torture sessions, and who
had himself become deeply troubled by his complicity.

904 ethics of duty; the criticism of an ethics based on hedonism; and the
905 rapport that can be established between Guyau and Nietzsche. His
906 main focus, however, is on bringing to light the novel character of
907 Guyau's approach to an ethics beyond duty and evaluating it.

908 In the final piece, **D.K. Levy** tries to "assimilate" the phenomenon
909 of supererogation into moral philosophy. What makes supererogation
910 traditionally problematic for moral theorists, he argues, is their
911 underlying conception of action and motivation. If one understands
912 action, as most moral theorists seem to, as justifiable with reference to
913 the combined effect of reasons, then it is not clear how (i) there can be
914 overriding reasons to perform a particular good action, while (ii)
915 observers, with access to the same reasons, need not expect such
916 performance. Instead, Levy develops an account of the agent "con-
917 senting to his responsibility for acting." He then re-describes the
918 supererogatory act as one for which no observer can reasonably
919 hold the agent responsible for performing – it is only the agent who
920 holds herself responsible in the relevant way. However, while
921 holding oneself responsible in this way is similar to the experience
922 of an obligation, it should not be confused with the reliable percep-
923 tion of an impersonal, universal duty, since that would bring us
924 back to the reasons account.

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