

Is supererogation more than just costly sacrifice?

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I begin by examining the answer to a traditional puzzle concerning supererogatory acts: if they are good to do, why are they not required? The answer often given is that they are optional acts because they cost the agent too much. This view has parallels with the traditional view of religious sacrifice, which involves offering up something or someone valuable as a gift or victim and experiencing a 'cost' as part of the ritual. There are problems with the idea that costs justify the optional nature of supererogatory acts, however, and I suggest that these problems mirror the tensions that are found in Christian theology when a traditional view of sacrifice is adopted.

I then refer to another puzzling feature of supererogation, which I call the perspectival problem. It is a common feature of supererogatory acts that there is a different judgement about the deontic status of the act, according to the perspective taken. There is a dual aspect to this.

Firstly, there is the spectator's perspective: an observer of a supererogatory act might consider that act to be supererogatory, in that it is a very good act but optional, and he might also consider it extraordinary in a number of ways. Secondly, there is the agent's perspective. There is room for variation of course, according to the act and the agent, but one common feature is that the agent may regard the same supererogatory act as a normal dutiful act, which he was bound to perform. He might even say that another person would have done the same in his place, but he is unlikely to feel confident enough about the dutifulness of the act to say that he would have commanded another to perform it. This dual perspective on the act, whereby the spectator sees the act as optional but the agent has a less clear picture about its deontic status, conflicts with the idea that rules for moral action should be universal. The suggestion that there are actions which have moral resonance and pressure for the agent alone has something in common with a sub-section of morality, namely the morality of love and friendship. A second-order universalism does apply in this area of course, where it can be held that all mothers have certain duties to their own children, for example.

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Nonetheless, love is personal and particular and makes demands which are not all quantifiable in standard moral theories.

I link these two puzzles, the traditional and the perspectival, by building on this connection with love and by referring to a new interpretation of Christian sacrifice, which emphasises voluntary acts of love rather than the giving up of something precious. Whilst the optional nature of supererogation remains difficult to account for even using an account of love, I conclude that interpreting supererogatory acts in this light, rather than emphasising cost and sacrifice, better reflects some of the perspectival aspects of such acts.

1. Do costs justify the optional nature of supererogatory acts?

J.O.Urmson's famous example of a soldier throwing himself on a grenade to save his comrades is a paradigm supererogatory act.¹ The normal definition of a supererogatory act is that it is an act which is of moral worth, better than an alternative permissible act but, puzzlingly, optional. Urmson notes the 'dual perspective' of such acts, which I outlined above. He acknowledges that the soldier who jumped on the grenade might have considered himself obliged to do so. If he had survived the action, however, only an excessive amount of modesty would lead him to consider that he had done his duty and nothing more, Urmson concludes.² Even if the soldier had come to this conclusion in respect of his own obligations, Urmson considers that he would never have described the act to someone else beforehand in these terms.

In Urmson's example, set in a military context, the quick answer as to why such acts are optional is that there are some acts which are so costly that they are considered to be above and beyond duty and are consequently singled out for award. It is worth noting at this stage that the Victoria Cross, the premier award for valour in the British Army, was initiated in the Crimean War, which was the first war heavily covered by journalists, who were able to witness acts of extreme bravery at close hand.

¹ J.O. Urmson, 'Saints and Heroes', in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. A.I. Melden: University of Washington Press, 1958. Reprinted in *Moral Concepts*, ed. Joel Feinberg, Oxford: Oxford University Press Year 1969 60–73.

² Ibid.61.

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The idea that supererogatory acts are duties which are particularly costly and risky are optional on this account is popular with many philosophers. For example, John Rawls says:

‘Supererogatory acts are not required, though normally they would be were it not for the loss or risk involved for the agent himself For while we have a natural duty to bring about a great good, say, if we can do so relatively easily, we are released from this duty when the cost to ourselves is considerable.’³

Rawls’ view is widespread and intuitively appealing. ‘It would all be too much’ is considered adequate justification for the failure to perform a supererogatory act.

There are, however, three main problems with what I term ‘the appeal to cost.’⁴ The first two problems are well-known and can be dealt with swiftly. Firstly, there are duties which are hard to perform because they too are costly or risky, so why should cost provide an excuse not to perform a supererogatory act? One possible answer is that difficult acts which are duties sometimes, perhaps often, arise as a result of making a promise to perform such acts and this turns what might have been considered an optional act into a duty; this is particularly the case where role duties such as military service are concerned. The appeal to cost might claim that costly acts which arise from promising to perform a duty are a ‘special case’; agents have a choice as to whether they make that promise or not, whether to enlist in the army or not, say, and so the optional nature of the act comes in at that level. In any event, the appeal to cost might add, award structures, such as military medals, seem to recognise that even when such promises have been made there are certain acts which may be marked out as optional and thus supererogatory. Of course, there is room for debate about the limit of duty in such cases and it is worth noting that awarding the Victoria Cross to British soldiers for valour was controversial and not clear cut; the Cameron Highlanders, a Scottish regiment, refused to accept the award on the basis that any action of valour which was carried out by their soldiers was merely their duty.⁵

The second problem for the appeal to cost is the prevalence of low-cost favours and other small supererogatory acts. We may go

³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971) 100.

⁴ A term borrowed from Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

⁵ Diana Henderson, *The Scottish Regiments*, Glasgow 1993, 136.

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out of our way only very slightly to direct a lost tourist in a friendly manner. It costs only a little more effort to visit our elderly relative than settle for another form of communication. Such acts appear to cost nothing or little and yet are regarded as optional in the manner of Kantian imperfect duties. The applier to cost can perhaps claim that the latitude of such acts is demanding; I might not have to perform any one particular act, but I might have to perform quite a few of them to achieve a satisfactory moral standing and demanding yet more of me could eat significantly into my time and the possibility of pursuing other projects. Without some form of supererogatory limit to even low or no-cost single acts, there would be no moral holiday.

Although hard duties and small favours do tell against cost as a justification of the optional character of supererogatory acts, I think the third problem faced by an applier to cost presents a much more powerful argument against his position. This problem is that those who perform even significant supererogatory acts sometimes do not consider that they have paid any costs at all. This is despite the fact that observers may consider the same act as very costly indeed. Part of the problem here is the 'catch-all' term cost, which, because of its latitude, allows for differing views on what might count as cost on any one occasion. For example, Shelly Kagan offers the following definition of cost in the case of a demanding moral act:

'Money, time, effort and life itself can be consumed in the course of my reacting in an optimal manner.'⁶

This wide-ranging formula allows for the possibility that observers of an act may count as cost material which is not considered costly by performers of the act. And, indeed, the reverse may be true, and not just in cases of moral backsliding as the following example shows.

Consider the case of Annalena Tonelli.⁷ As a well-qualified lawyer and teacher with the option of a comfortable way of life in Europe open to her, she went to do pioneering health work in Somalia instead, where she supported victims of tuberculosis and social rejects amongst nomadic peoples. She worked alone without formal

⁶ Ibid. 232 Kagan means to include all form of cost here, including second-order costs such as opportunity costs or the effect on me of costs to others. As a strict utilitarian he asks us to perform the sum of what will count toward the 'overall good' as the method for determining the moral worth of the act.

⁷ Reported in "The Tablet" magazine, 11 October 2003 in an article 'For the Love of Africa' by Maggie Black.

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support and with only the friendship of those she helped. Her life was always in danger because those she helped were stigmatised. She was shot dead after 30 years of such work. A heroic life and tragic death, it seems. Yet it was reported that Annalena saw her life as involving no sacrifice at all. Had she been forced to give up her life in Somalia and return to Europe, say as a human rights lawyer, she would doubtless have experienced high emotional costs in giving up her chosen path in life. Would we have seen *that* action as supererogatory?⁸ If what counts as cost is as wide as Kagan suggests, then an appeal to cost might be challenged to classify it as such, despite intuitions to the contrary.

2. The lure of 'the appeal to cost' and a parallel with religious 'sacrifice' vocabulary

Once the relationship between the cost of performing an act and its deontic status has taken hold, it can be hard to shake off. The simple idea that costs can justify the failure to perform supererogatory acts can be combined with the motivational aspect of moral performance I have just noted. Liam Murphy tries out the following example.⁹ You are to imagine that you are the only person in a position to prevent a nuclear accident that would kill many thousands of strangers. If you do what is needed, you will receive a painless but fatal dose of radiation. Your alternative is to escape in the helicopter, which is conveniently available, leaving many thousands to die, or stay and do what is necessary to save others' lives whilst, ultimately but not immediately, sacrificing your life.

Murphy's answer to this challenge is that by changing the motivational aspect of the act and making the self-sacrifice less immediately fearsome, the deontic status of the act will change. He thinks that in many cases which would call for extreme sacrifice, it is motivationally very hard for us to bring ourselves to perform the necessary actions. If we remove the immediacy of the motivational difficulty, as in the

⁸ Does the strangeness of this counter-example come about because supererogation does not really apply to a life, but only to acts? To pursue a 'supererogatory lifestyle' might seem to be a choice of a different sort from the choice involved in performing a supererogatory act. I think it is a distinction which deserves further consideration, but that it does not affect the point at issue.

⁹ From L Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 99.

delayed death by radiation above, then he suggests that 'it is not implausible, much less absurd, to say that you are required to sacrifice your life in this case.'¹⁰

Murphy is proposing that if he gets rid of the immediate impact of the cost of an act which he does here by introducing a delay to the death sentence for the agent, then that will move the act from the supererogatory category to the required. Agents will no longer 'feel the pain' and will see what would otherwise have been a supererogatory act as a duty. Murphy bases the deontic status of the act entirely on the feature of cost or perceived cost by the agent. This would clearly have an impact on the judgement of the life of Annalena: her actions during her time in Somalia would not be supererogatory, because although others saw a significant element of sacrifice in what she did, she did not and therefore felt bound to live her life in that way. Whilst Murphy's example is another indicator of how pervasive the notion of cost is in determining the deontic status of acts, it also serves to point up the perspectival problem of supererogatory acts. Murphy's concern is with getting the agent to do the right thing and making it easier for him to do so, but I think it is difficult to decide about whether the agent's action in his example is supererogatory or not. Although death may come much later and make it easier for the agent to perform the necessary action to save others' lives, many observers will consider that the act is supererogatory and still optional, just as they did when commenting on Annalena's life and death.

Murphy's suggestion of manipulating the motivational levers for supererogatory action finds a mirror image in a suggestion from Kagan. In Kagan's case, he wants people to become more acutely aware of the suffering of others, so that they are motivated to give up more in their own lives to mitigate that suffering. People could be encouraged to perform acts which require them to make major sacrifices if they experienced with 'vivid belief' the sufferings of those who would be relieved by their actions, he proposes. Kagan introduces this suggestion of inculcating vivid belief of the suffering of others into moral agents because he is strongly against the idea that cost can justify the optional nature of supererogatory acts.

Kagan does not want to allow for moral optionality of this sort; the right act is the one which is indicated by the balance of reasons. As he points out, even if the appeal to cost is on the right track and heavy costs may indeed be used as a reason not to have to perform what would otherwise be the right act, but which instead will be optional

¹⁰ Ibid. 100.

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and supererogatory on the appellant's view, then using the balance of reasons as a determinant of right action will mean that an alternative act with fewer costs is the right act to perform and the so called supererogatory act is just plain wrong. If it is too costly for the soldier to jump on the grenade – the battalion doesn't want to be one man down – then jumping on the grenade is wrong, not supererogatory. Costs do not generate options, only illegitimate excuses, according to Kagan. As a welfarist utilitarian, however, he wants there to be no cost-fuelled excuses available to the agent; he sees morality as necessarily demanding in an imperfect world. Kagan's mouthpiece in his major work in this area is a character labelled "the Extremist", who sees acts which would normally be considered supererogatory as obligatory, whatever the cost. The Moderate, a character cast in the role of the ordinary moralist and in conversation with the Extremist, squeals and appeals whenever the cost of performing the right act becomes too great. The Moderate reflects views such as those of Rawls, in which supererogatory acts are understood as of the same nature as duties, but they are simply too costly to be obligatory.

There is something of a religious overtone to the debate between the Extremist and the Moderate. The Moderate complains that morality is over-demanding and that it fails to take account of frail human nature, yet acknowledges its demands nonetheless; the superhuman, the saints and heroes, can go on to perform the costly acts which the rest of us will duly admire, but we do not consider that we have to perform them. We can recast the Moderate as the pragmatic religious worshipper, prepared to buy the story that sacrifice is desirable and sometimes necessary to achieve what is right, but knowing that, as an imperfect moral performer, he is not always prepared to pay the price personally. The Extremist often agrees with the Moderate about the heavy price which must be paid to perform the right act – perhaps one might even have to sacrifice one's child in the course of promoting the overall good, for example. Yet in the manner of a righteous preacher, the Extremist demands that the right must be done, whilst at the same time acknowledging the associated costs and suggesting that they be paid 'with reluctance and regret.' The Extremist doesn't play down the costs to the agent of performing the right act; on the contrary, in his acknowledgement of the pain that the costs will cause, the Extremist lets it be known that he recognises something of value is being given up in favour of the good, even if it is not enough to provide countervailing moral reasons.

The idea that something beyond ourselves (in Kagan's case, it is the promotion of the overall good) must on occasion be appeased by the

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sacrifice of something we value, underlies the views of both the Moderate and the Extremist. Those who belong to either camp are not disagreeing over whether cost is an important factor in pursuing the overall good. Both sides accept that sometimes it is very costly to do the right thing. The disagreement is only over whether cost may be allowed to function as an excuse or not. With their emphasis on the cost as a key component in moral action, The Moderate and the Extremist are all of a piece, I suggest. Expanding on their similarities to religious stereotypes, I now draw a parallel between this cost-driven type of approach to morality and a similar approach to sacrifice in the history of religion.

3. The history of sacrifice and its relation to cost

In early societies, sacrifice was seen as an appeasement of the god or gods. Something or someone of value to the worshippers had to be sacrificed for the sacrifice to be effective. Underlying the religious practice, there was also an economic exchange going on. In return for a valuable sacrifice, the deity would deliver good weather, health, crops, babies or whatever. Whilst in ancient times the language of sacrifice was reserved entirely for religious occasions, it began to seep into secular language, so that we now have a fully blown secular sacrificial vocabulary. Robert Daly suggests that the modern religious Christian, and in particular Catholic, understanding of sacrifice has been infected by both the ancient religious vocabulary for sacrifice and the secular vocabulary, such that an understanding of the Christian faith is distorted.¹¹

The origins of this distortion can be traced back to the discussions in the early Christian Church which seek to understand why God sent Jesus to die for humanity's sins – discussion about the proper interpretation of a theory of atonement, in other words. Daly thinks that much of the language involved in these discussions was borrowed from the Bible, which in many instances preserved left over traces of the ancient pre-Christian rituals of sacrifice. For example, there is the importance of the sensory qualities of the sacrifice – that it should smell sweet and taste good. More important are the legal, transaction and commercial metaphors which creep into the discussion of sacrifice – the idea that Jesus was 'ransomed' for our sins being just one example. Daly's theory is that these ideas

¹¹ R. Daly S.J. *Sacrifice Unveiled – The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice*, T&T Clark International, London, 2009.

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'became embedded in Western ideas of sacrifice and hence also inseparable from ideas about 'the Sacrifice of the Mass'.¹²

'The Sacrifice of the Mass' to which Daly refers here relates to the part of the Catholic Mass where the bread and wine are consecrated and become the Body and Blood of Jesus. The words of consecration are taken from the Last Supper in which Jesus shared bread and wine with his apostles and whilst doing so, refers to the fact the bread and wine are his body and blood, which will be sacrificed so that humanity is redeemed from its sins.¹³ Daly notes that as a result of the seeping of the secular pre-Christian sacrificial vocabulary back into Christian liturgy, this has become the 'central' part of the Mass, according to tradition, and he thinks bad theology has resulted from this. One example of the bad theology is that false power has been attributed to priests, who in the popular imagination were (or indeed still are) seen to be the ones who effect the consecration. This is not the case. It is of course the Holy Spirit, one of the three divine persons in the Trinity, who accomplishes this. More importantly as far as Daly is concerned, the Christian message and meaning of the Mass is lost if the focus is entirely on the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins. Christianity becomes like the old-style religions, with the emphasis on sacrificing something of value (Jesus' life) in exchange for something else (our redemption from original sin). The idea of exchange and transaction taking central place starts to look peculiar when, on the Christian view, God is no longer seen as an exactor of sacrifices in return for favours, as in the old religions, but instead as the source of unconditional love.

Whilst noting the apparent tension between an all-powerful God who exacts a price for our sins and a God who loves unconditionally and in attempting to derive an interpretation from the latter, as Daly does, we should not underestimate the appeal of the idea that we must atone for our guilt by sacrificing something of great value to an all-powerful God who demands that we make this sacrifice. It is not a matter of mere misinterpretation which is at stake here; rather it seems that the existence of the old style sacrificial view gives an outlet for a dispositional need on the part of some to feel and express their awareness of their own and others' imperfections by being seen to pay a cost, in the way in which Jesus paid with his life, if not always to the same degree. There is a similarity between this dispositional need and that which generates the appeal to cost view of supererogatory acts in secular morality, I suggest. The

¹² Ibid. 141.

¹³ Holy Bible Authorised Version, Luke 22: 19–20.

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background to the dispositional need is too much a matter of psychological conjecture to assess here, but it is something along the lines of 'good can only come about if humans are prepared to acknowledge their feeble nature and give up those things which they have acquired as a result of their natural selfishness.'

Of course, Daly does not want to deny the central fact that Jesus came to earth and died to redeem humanity from its sins. But he thinks that it needs a new interpretation; one based on love, not on the commerce of sacrifice. So he proposes an understanding of the event which is based on seeing the Holy Trinity of God The Father, God The Son and God The Holy Ghost as a family and seeing the relationship between them as a series of loving interactions between them and humanity. According to Daly, God sent his Son to earth as a 'self-offering, self-giving, self-communicating gift'. The Son responds by giving his life for humanity, but also responds to the Father by accepting that he will freely do his will by dying on the cross and acknowledging the power of the Holy Ghost. After the resurrection of Jesus, he assures the disciples of his continued presence with them by sending the Holy Ghost to them.¹⁴

Without going into the difficult theological Trinitarian aspects of Daly's suggestion, the spirit of what he proposes is clear. God sent Jesus to earth as a gift of love – it was a gift of the divine self too, of course, because of the divine nature of Jesus as a person in the Trinity. Jesus' gift to humanity was not simply his death on the cross to redeem sins, but most importantly his ministry, expanded worldwide with the aid of the Holy Ghost, and which involved many acts of healing and love as well as teaching, together with his commandment that we should love one another.

There are three key components of Daly's interpretation which are relevant to a new interpretation of supererogatory acts. First, that the incarnation was a gift. Much has been made in recent Catholic writings of the theology of the gift.¹⁵ The idea is that we perceive ourselves as a gift from God, but since a gift always carries something of the giver in it, we are motivated by the spark of divinity to give to others without consideration of their merit and without expecting a return. This is always contrasted sharply with the notion of exchange. Secondly, it was an interpersonal event between the

¹⁴ Daly, *ibid.* 228–229.

¹⁵ The theology of the gift was raised by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical 'Caritas in Veritate' (2009) and has been a frequent topic of conversation in French philosophy and theology, notably between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion.

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persons of the Trinity and between them and humanity as I have described above. Thirdly, the effect of the incarnation, when properly understood and when the interpersonal event is witnessed, is that people will follow the pattern of this divine interpersonal event by loving and giving themselves to others. The Mass on Daly's interpretation seeks to commemorate and celebrate all three elements, rather than to provide a place for old-style 'transactional' sacrifice.

4. Re-interpreting supererogatory acts in the light of love

My proposal is that we take this religious analogy as a guide to the interpretation of supererogatory acts. Instead of focussing on costs as a key component of such acts, we can investigate how the three elements above apply to supererogatory acts. With respect to the notion of a gift, the thought that a supererogatory act has a special character because it has been freely given has been noticed before in the literature, but not often pursued. Patricia McGoldrick is one of the few who has stressed the value of supererogatory acts as purely voluntary moral acts:

'such acts...and these are the cases which elicit our admiration and praise, are inspired by something more like unselfish love and benevolence. Acting out of love and unselfishness is itself a virtue, and there is more virtue in doing what is not required of us than there is in doing what is really no more than our duty.'¹⁶

The idea that the moral worth of the act is enhanced when an individual acts out of love has much in common with a Christian view of the world, albeit some philosophers who were Christian, such as Kant, thought that acting from a motive of love rather than duty disqualified the act from morality. More recently, Urmson has repeated this idea in the context of supererogatory action, and in particular heroic acts:

'Let us be clear that we are not now considering cases of natural affection, such as the sacrifice made by a mother for her child; such cases may be said with some justice not to fall under the concept of morality but to be admirable in some different way.'¹⁷

¹⁶ Patricia M. McGoldrick, 'Saints and Heroes: A Plea for the Supererogatory', *Philosophy* 59 (1984) 523–528.

¹⁷ Urmson, *ibid.* 63.

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The resistance to love as a motivating force in the performance of moral acts stems mainly from the thought that love cannot be commanded, whereas the precepts of morality should be accessible to all in whatever emotional state they find themselves and carry some motivational weight, weakness of will notwithstanding. On this view, moral actions are the result of our consulting these precepts and finding an act the right one to do, according to the lights of reason.

Urmson's comments are understandable on the face of it. If he thinks that supererogatory acts are like duties, but just 'more of the same' in the manner of Rawls and many others, then distinguishing them from acts of sacrificial love which differ in character might seem to be an obvious move. But those who think that love underpins morality will have a different interpretation. Urmson's paradigm act of a soldier sacrificing himself for his fellow soldiers could also be explained as an act of love, rather than an extension of a hard duty. They were after all his comrades. Explaining this as both a gift and act of love is easier if there is an obvious interpersonal relationship between the agent and the recipient, as in this instance and in the mother and child case above, but what if it is a supererogatory act for a stranger?

I would argue that there is still room for a gift of love and 'an interpersonal event' as Daly describes it, even where the protagonists are not known to each other. Here is a recent example of a real life rescue by a stranger. Neil Laybourn, who talked Jonny Benjamin down from Waterloo Bridge in 2007 where he was about to commit suicide, explains in a radio interview some years later how he felt about the event:

..I didn't feel it was a big deal, I did what anyone would do. I wasn't trying to fix his problems that day, I just listened. I can honestly say, hand on heart, that Jonny is one of the nicest people I have ever met. He's a great bloke and it's brilliant to see him smiling again. We'll definitely stay in touch.'¹⁸

Pressed in the interview to describe what he was thinking and how he thought he ought to approach the situation of seeing someone poised to jump from the bridge, Neil claimed that he didn't think much; he just did what came naturally. Neil is a very calm person (this was agreed on by both Neil and Jonny) with Jonny citing Neil's calmness

¹⁸ <http://metro.co.uk/2014/01/30finding-mike-jonny-benjamin-reunited-with-the-stranger-who-saved-him-from-suicide-bid-4282482>.

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and willingness to listen to Jonny as one of the key reasons why he didn't go through with his planned suicide.

Many will agree that this was a supererogatory act. Why? Not on account of the high costs to the agent, because it didn't cost Neil very much. A few minutes out of his day and then he was back on his way to work – indeed, he didn't even stop to give details about himself to Jonny or the more formal rescuers, who had arrived by the time Jonny had climbed down from the bridge. (The successful search for his saviour was conducted by Jonny's girlfriend on social media some years after the event.) The act was supererogatory in the eyes of observers because Neil was one of many people who passed Jonny that morning, but he chose to stop and intervene personally, rather than just call the emergency services.

Of course, the stakes were high in a certain sense: had the wrong words been said, Jonny could have jumped, leaving Neil perhaps feeling responsible for his death. Many of us would have taken this into account and perhaps considered that this was a risk not worth taking, but notice that Neil didn't think about this possibility. At this point, we can suggest that Neil's attitude has something in common with the attitude that might have been taken by someone in a special relationship with Jonny. Whilst the average stranger might have worried about the risk of saying the wrong thing, anyone who loved Jonny would have disregarded this risk, or perhaps not even considered it, and thought more about trying to stop Jonny, rather than any future responsibility they might have to shoulder in the event of his jumping. Neil's comments that he didn't think much about himself and that he wanted to concentrate on asking Jonny questions and listening to his answers also ring true of loving relationships, or at least those which are successful.

This apparent emptying of the self¹⁹ in the face of supererogatory acts is often a key characteristic of such acts and one which has an impact on observers of the act. The phenomenon is difficult to describe but seems to be manifested in the fact that the agent considers the act a natural thing to do, where no reflection or calculation is required, but where concentration and focus pours on to the other person or people concerned. There is a lightness and ease about the

¹⁹ The expression 'emptying' of the self is not perhaps quite right. The beneficiary of the supererogatory act might be expected to want a real person to commune with, rather than a shell. Thanks to Chris Cowley for this point. Nonetheless, I'll preserve the term here because it is carried on Daly's theological discussions. A better way of expressing what I mean is well put by Dreyfus and Kelly, below.

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performance of such acts, which is very far removed from the groaning and straining of costly acts, as characterised in an over-demanding morality. Direct, unmediated action is often characteristic of acts of supererogation.

This characteristic of self-emptying love is reminiscent of the Trinitarian love referenced by Daly in his reinterpretation of Christian theology above. Of course, in neither case can the issue of costs be entirely erased. As was seen in the example of Neil and Jonny above, even in relatively simple situations there is always some cost or risk to the agent. Certainly in the Christian story, even Christ himself acknowledges the terrible cost that he must pay through crucifixion and asks God if he may be spared it.²⁰ Nevertheless, it is not the cost or the sacrifice which constitutes the entire value of the act and it is worth investigating what else might contribute to the value of the acts which observers consider supererogatory.

Dreyfus and Kelly have noted additional characteristics of extraordinary acts which have an impact on observers of heroic acts in particular.²¹ They claim that observers experience delight from certain types of acts, such as heroic ones, because they seem fitting and natural. The acts reflect 'what ought to happen', without that meaning that the hero ought to have done the act in a deontic sense. Rather, the 'ought' seems to refer to the fittingness of the act into an acceptable and attractive narrative view of life. There is a sense in which the agent is not reflectively responsible for his action. Instead, they refer to the situation as 'calling the action out of the agent'. This clearly reflects the frequently reported experiences of the agents in heroic action, such as Neil in the above example, who claimed that he didn't think much about his action, but just did what came naturally.

Dreyfus and Kelly describe the act of one such hero as:

unflinching, unhesitating, and unwavering, and it has these certain qualities precisely because the activity flows not *from* the agent but *through* him. As a spectator of heroic activity one has the sense of watching something nearly inevitable, as though it is ordained by some force beyond the whim of human self-assertion. It is clear to those present that something superhuman has been achieved.²²

²⁰ Holy Bible Authorised Version Matthew 26:39.

²¹ In H. Dreyfus and S.D. Kelly, *All Things Shining*, Free Press, Simon and Shuster, New York, 2011.

²² *Ibid.*11.

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Ironically, given Daly's criticisms of the place of sacrifice in old religions, Dreyfus and Kelly have analysed the characteristic of heroic acts with a view to encouraging a secular and certainly post-Christian audience to return to an updated version of Greek gods, where there is a divine representative for various types of activity. (They do not advocate sacrifice to the gods, as far as I am aware!) Their suggestion is that the acclaim which meets heroic acts is a recognition of some transcendent back-story to life, which as humans we need to recall in our everyday life if we want to be happy. This acclaim brings people together as they share in a sporting victory or the news of a great heroic event, such as the story of Neil and Jonny. The witnessing of heroic acts which are fuelled by this particular manifestation of selfless love seems to prompt a community spirit which Dreyfus and Kelly consider beneficial to society as well as to individuals. It is very similar to the spirit which Daly imagines will attend Mass goers who understand that they are called upon to love and give themselves to others in the manner of Jesus.

Conclusion

I have explained the lure of the appeal to cost in the characterisation of supererogatory acts and suggested that there is an analogy with a religious view that sacrifice is at the heart of the Christian faith.

I have also suggested that whilst such a view of both morality and the Christian faith might meet the temperamental needs of some, it does little to explain the puzzling nature of supererogatory acts. The appeal to cost certainly seems to explain the optional nature of such acts at first glance, but the concept of cost is hard to pin down and there is the issue that agents and observers have differing views on what comprises cost. I have left open here the question of whether love can help solve the problem of why supererogatory acts are optional. It may well be that we are bound to act out of love (as in the New Commandment given by Jesus that we love one another) and that when we fail to do so, it is not that we are always concerned about costs which we may have to pay, but that we are not fully attuned to the humanity of others and do not understand how to bring ourselves to respond to them in the right way. The issue of how we do this is rather more complicated than merely rejigging the motivational levers so that we do not experience immediate pain (as in the Murphy example) or so that we do experience the immediacy of another's suffering (as in Kagan's 'vivid belief'). It seems to require more in the way of an understanding of the self

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and a release of the self in the face of others before such moral perfection can be attained.

Interpreting supererogatory acts as acts of love does help with the second puzzle of supererogation whereby the observer sees the act as supererogatory, but the agent sees the act as something he is bound to do (but that others are not necessarily so bound). The nature of love is that its burdens are light, even if the costs of action are high. Hence Urmson's dismissive comments about mother love. If it is easy, it can't be moral. Yet in so many cases of supererogatory action, this is the claim made by the agent – that the act was normal or a natural thing to do. Given that the actions that do result from love can have very high worth whilst seeming to cost very little to the agent, the discrepancy between the observer's and the agent's appraisal of the deontic status of the act is understandable.

Can costs be dismissed entirely in the context of supererogation? Surely, it is the sacrifice which compels us to see some acts as supererogatory. In the case of Annalena, even though she did not experience her sacrifice as costly, observers judged it so. What I have tried to suggest here is that there is additional value to the supererogatory act or life which derives from the very fact that some agents are able to do good to others freely and are not aware of the cost that others see in their performance. Observers rarely call acts 'supererogatory' (unless they are philosophers!) Rather, they are acts which are characterised as kind, wonderful and extraordinary. Interpreting supererogation in the light of love, rather than merely cost, seems to make better sense of these sentiments as well as shedding light on the philosophical problem of the dual perspective of saintly and heroic acts.

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