

UNTYING A KNOT FROM THE INSIDE OUT:
REFLECTIONS ON THE “PARADOX”
OF SUPEREROGATION*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In his seminal essay, “Saints and Heroes” (1958), J. O. Urmson argued that the then-dominant tripartite deontic scheme of classifying actions—as exclusively either obligatory, or optional in the sense of being morally indifferent, or wrong—ought to be expanded to include the category of the supererogatory.¹ Colloquially, this category includes actions that are “beyond the call of duty” (beyond what is obligatory) and, hence, actions that one has no duty or obligation to perform. The title of Urmson’s essay indicates (by reference to character types) some of the main types of action—saintly and heroic—that are supposed to belong in this category. But it is a controversial category. Anti-supererogationists either deny the coherence of the concept, or, granting its coherence, argue that the corresponding category is empty. Pro-supererogationists argue that the category is not empty, and that therefore the corresponding concept is coherent, although the pro-supererogationists often disagree about the conceptual contours of the category. The apparent conceptual tension regarding supererogation, sometimes referred to as the “paradox of supererogation,” has been a main focus of philosophical discussions of the topic. Roughly speaking, the paradox is that, on the one hand, supererogatory actions are notable because they are morally good, indeed morally best, actions. But then, on the other hand, if they are morally best, why aren’t they morally required, contrary to the assumption that they are morally optional? In short, how can an action that is morally best to perform fail to be what one is morally required to do?

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¹ J. O. Urmson, “Saints and Heroes,” in A. I. Melden, ed., *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1958), 198–216.

The source of this alleged paradox has been dubbed the “good-ought tie-up.”

In what follows, we plan to address this alleged paradox by first making a phenomenological case for the reality of instances of genuine supererogatory actions, and then reflecting on the relevant phenomenology, explaining why there is no genuine paradox. We set for ourselves four tasks. Because the issues regarding supererogation are complicated, our first task is to set up the rest of the essay by: (i) clarifying various elements that figure in the concept of supererogation, as well as (ii) clarifying the paradox just mentioned. This task is taken up in Sections II and III. Our second task, which we address in Section IV, is to motivate our phenomenological approach to the putative paradox—approaching it “from the inside,” as it were. One reason for dwelling on the relevant phenomenology is that it can serve as a guide for making good theoretical sense of supererogation. Moreover, a good theory about such matters will accommodate the actual phenomenology and will treat it as appropriate rather than somehow erroneous. Our third task (addressed in Section V) is to examine some of the details of moral experience—its phenomenology—contrasting experiences of moral obligation with experiences of supererogation. Our fourth task is to address the paradox of supererogation, which we do in Sections VI and VII. In Section VI, we argue that one can make sense of supererogation by recognizing what we call a “merit-conferring” role that moral reasons can play. We describe this sort of role partly by contrasting it with two other roles that practical reasons can play: what Joshua Gert calls a “requiring” role and a “justifying” role.² If one recognizes the multiple roles that a moral reason can play (inspired by reflection on the phenomenology of supererogation), one has the conceptual resources to untie the good-ought knot and thereby make sense of supererogation—to untie a philosophical knot starting “from the inside.” In Section VII, we briefly compare our view with two proposals that are like ours in recognizing that moral reasons can play more than one role. Section VIII is our conclusion.

II. TERMINOLOGY

We begin with some remarks about how we understand various terms of moral evaluation (and the concepts they express) that play a role in discussions of supererogation.

² See the works by Gert cited in note 37 below. Practical reasons concern all sorts of considerations that (as reasons) bear on choice and actions, and thus include nonmoral as well as moral reasons. Gert introduces the requiring/justifying distinction with respect to roles bearing on the rationality of action, and hence with regard to practical reasons generally. Moral reasons too, as a species of practical reasons, may play either a requiring or a justifying role. In Sections VI and VII, we explain and illustrate the idea of roles that practical reasons in general, and moral reasons in particular, may play.

Supererogation. We will use ‘supererogation’ (and its cognates) in what we take to be the common-sense usage of the term, and thus as capturing the colloquial idea of actions whose performance is “beyond the call of duty.” Being beyond the call of duty (moral obligation), supererogatory actions are not morally required (obligatory or one’s duty). Nonetheless, such actions possess a kind of moral value in virtue of which their performance, when properly motivated, is morally meritorious. Since the concept of supererogation is a primary source of philosophical contention, let us list what we take to be its essential elements, involving both deontic and evaluative concepts, and related aspects having to do with reactive attitudes.³

Deontic elements: Supererogatory actions are

- (D1) neither all-things-considered (all-in, for short) morally required, nor *prima facie* morally required,⁴
- (D2) nor are they morally wrong, and in most cases not even *prima facie* wrong,⁵
- (D3) and so (given the standard interpretation of basic deontic concepts) such actions are morally optional. But they are not morally indifferent, because of their evaluative significance.

Evaluative elements: In addition, then, supererogatory actions are

- (E1) actions that realize, or are intended to realize, (more or less) moral value or goodness having to do with benefits to others (persons other than the agent), and are such that when performed because of the moral value or goodness in question, they are (more or less) morally meritorious,
- (E2) but their nonperformance is not demeritorious.

³ Deontic concepts are used to morally evaluate actions and practices, and such concepts are expressed in English by such terms as ‘duty’, ‘obligation’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’, and ‘optional’. Evaluative concepts used with moral significance are expressed by such English terms as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and are applied not only to actions but to persons and states of affairs. Reactive attitudes (of moral significance) have to do with such responses as praise and blame, guilt and indignation—attitudes that are appropriate responses to morally significant actions, practices, and persons in light of whatever moral significance they possess.

⁴ To say that an action is *prima facie* morally required is to say that there are reasons for performing the action which, if not outweighed by reasons favoring an alternative action, suffice to make the action in question all-things-considered (all-in) morally required.

⁵ Arguably, there can be cases of supererogation in which one must violate a *prima facie* duty (either to others or to oneself) in order to perform the action. If I have agreed to meet you for an appointment, I have a *prima facie* duty to keep it. But if, on the way to the appointment, I stop to help someone whose car has run out of gas, my action can still qualify as supererogatory even though (in the circumstances) my fulfilling my *prima facie* duty to you implies that I have a *prima facie* duty not to stop. In what follows, we set such cases aside and focus on “pure” cases of supererogation, in which the supererogatory action is completely optional in the sense that it is neither *prima facie* required nor *prima facie* wrong.

Reactive attitudes: In light of these evaluative facts, supererogatory actions

- (R1) are morally (more or less) praiseworthy,
 (R2) but their nonperformance is not morally blameworthy.⁶

There are three general remarks we wish to make about our characterization. First, the types of actions that are generally recognized as paradigm instances of supererogatory actions include: (1) acts of heroism and saintliness;⁷ (2) beneficence (including, e.g., acts of charity, generosity, and gift-giving); (3) favors; (4) volunteering; (5) forbearances (as when, out of compassion, one demands from another less than what one is due); and (6) forgiveness (including acts of mercy and pardons).⁸ Obviously, the level of merit that is realized by actions of these various types can vary greatly: small favors and other commonly performed acts of supererogation are far less morally notable than the actions of saints and heroes (indicated in the above characterization by the “more or less” qualifiers).

Second, what we have just described is sometimes called “unqualified” or “strong” supererogation, in order to contrast it with “qualified” or “weak” supererogation. This latter notion differs from the former in denying that failures to supererogate are *completely* morally optional (that is, the latter notion allows that such failures require justification).⁹ Therefore, what some call unqualified or strong supererogation, we call ‘superero-

⁶ We are not proposing these elements as a hard and fast definition. For instance, some authors deny that genuine altruistic motivation is a necessary component of the supererogatory. We focus on cases of supererogation that fit our description because they seem to be the sorts of cases that Urmson and others writing on the topic have tended to focus upon. For an excellent discussion of the contentious nature of this concept, see David Heyd, *Supererogation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Heyd, “Supererogation,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2006. See also Gregory Mellema, *Beyond the Call of Duty: Supererogation, Obligation, and Offense* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), chap. 2.

⁷ Andrew M. Flescher, *Heroes, Saints, and Ordinary Morality* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 172–91, characterizes heroes as those whose heroic actions are triggered by what he calls “reactive altruism,” while saints, who make helping others a vocation, engage in what he calls “proactive altruism.”

⁸ We take our list from Heyd, *Supererogation*, chap. 7. Cf. Millard Schumaker, *Supererogation: An Analysis and Bibliography* (Edmonton: St. Stephen’s College, 1977), chap. 2.

⁹ Heyd introduced the unqualified/qualified terminology in his *Supererogation*; and Jonathan Dancy distinguishes strong from weak supererogation in “Supererogation and Moral Realism,” in J. Dancy, J. Moravcsik, and C. C. W. Taylor, eds., *Human Agency—Language, Duty, and Value: Philosophical Essays in Honor of J. O. Urmson* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988); and Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 130–31. These pairs of terms (as they are used by those who have introduced them) are extensionally equivalent. According to unqualified/strong conceptions, (a) supererogatory actions have an intrinsic value, but (b) being “completely” or “purely” optional (in the sense that they are not even *prima facie* required, and hence failing to perform them is not *prima facie* wrong), they are not moral duties or obligations of any kind, nor are they requirements of rationality. Qualified/weak conceptions accept (a), reject (b), and then go on to claim that so-called supererogatory actions are either moral requirements which agents are excused from having to fulfill, or perhaps actions which, while being *prima facie* morally required, are not all-in morally required.

gation', and we prefer the term 'quasi-supererogation' for what others refer to by talk of 'qualified' or 'weak' supererogation.¹⁰

Third, our characterization above (in particular E1) is meant to capture what we may call *meritorious* supererogation, to be distinguished from *nonmeritorious* supererogation. The difference concerns an agent's primary reason for performing an action that goes beyond duty. Someone who risks his life to save someone in peril, but whose main motive is to make the evening news, does count (according to contemporary usage)¹¹ as doing something supererogatory. But the action is not morally praiseworthy, because it is not morally meritorious. By contrast, someone who, in going beyond the call of duty, risks her life from purely altruistic motives performs a meritorious act of supererogation worthy of praise. In the literature on supererogation, one often finds characterizations that build into the very definition of supererogation the idea that such actions are (owing to motive) morally meritorious.¹² Such characterizations are, strictly speaking, too narrow to capture the range of cases to which the concept is ordinarily applied. But these cases of supererogation are of particular interest to moral philosophers because of the special moral value they possess in virtue of being meritorious.¹³ In what follows, then, we will focus exclusively on cases of meritorious supererogation.

¹⁰ Mellema, *Beyond the Call of Duty*, chap. 5, uses the term 'quasi-supererogation' more narrowly than we do, to refer to nonobligatory actions whose performance is praiseworthy, but whose nonperformance is blameworthy. Our use of the term subsumes Mellema's.

¹¹ For instance, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, compact edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3159, entry for 'supererogation' includes the following two senses: 1. "The performance of good works beyond that which God commands or requires, which are held to constitute a store of merit which the church may dispense to others to make up for their deficiencies," and 2. "Performance of more than duty or circumstances require; doing more than is needed." The first sense reflects the Roman Catholic doctrine of Indulgences (instituted during the Crusades, ca. 1080–1300), according to which (roughly) sinners could withdraw merit for a fee from what was called the Spiritual Treasury of the Church (that had been built up by the good works of Jesus and the Saints) and then could apply that merit toward their own salvation. Unlike the first sense, the second sense makes no mention of supererogatory actions being meritorious. Other dictionaries—including *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2d ed., ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 890; the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/supererogation>; and the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002), 1384—feature definitions that are very similar to the second of the two senses just quoted. Heyd, *Supererogation*, chap. 6, defines 'supererogation' partly in terms of merit, thus preserving what he argues is an important element in the traditional Christian understanding of the term. Again, along with many other philosophers who write about supererogation, we are particularly interested in those instances of supererogatory actions that are praiseworthy because of how the agent was motivated. Hence, we focus on meritorious supererogation.

¹² See, for example, Heyd, *Supererogation*, chap. 6. In any case, with respect to nonmeritorious supererogation, the paradox arises because such actions are still good in virtue of what they bring about (or are intended to bring about), yet they are morally optional. So the solution to the paradox we propose below in Section VI will apply to all cases of genuine supererogation—both meritorious and nonmeritorious.

¹³ We thank Holly Smith, Tom Hurka, and Doug Portmore for prompting this particular clarification.

Obligation and duty. We propose to use the terms ‘obligation’ and ‘duty’ interchangeably¹⁴ to indicate actions that one is morally required (either *prima facie* or all-in) to perform. We prefer talk of moral requirement, a term that perhaps carries less unwanted baggage than do the other two, though it is also convenient in some contexts to use the terms ‘duty’ and ‘obligation’ (for example, see the discussion of perfect and imperfect obligation later in this section).

Ought. The term ‘ought’ is used in various ways in contexts of moral evaluation, and some of these ways contribute to confusion, particularly in connection with supererogation. For instance, one should distinguish between (i) ‘S (morally) ought to do A’ and (ii) ‘S has a moral obligation to do A’, where the former is often used in a much broader way than the latter. When used broadly, it may be said that a supererogatory act is one an agent ‘ought’ to perform (because such an act is morally good and perhaps the morally best act open to an agent on some occasion), even though it is false that the agent has a moral obligation (even *prima facie*) to perform that action.¹⁵ So, to avoid confusion, in what follows we avoid use of ‘ought’ as a term of moral evaluation. The same goes for ‘should’.

Perfect/imperfect obligations. We distinguish ‘perfect’ or ‘narrow’ obligation from ‘imperfect’ or ‘wide’ obligation mainly in terms of the so-called latitude one is afforded in fulfilling obligations of these types, which in turn depends on the degree of specificity with respect to what one is required to do.¹⁶ The distinction drawn in this way is complicated because there are the following dimensions along which an obligation may be more or less perfect:

Recipients: Assuming we are discussing obligations to others, one may have an obligation to specified individuals (e.g., a debtor) or to unspecified individuals (e.g., some persons who are in need).

¹⁴ Although there are some differences in the ordinary uses of the concepts of moral duty and moral obligation—the former having more to do with specific jobs, roles, and stations; the latter having more to do with agreements and benefactions—we will, following what is fairly standard usage in contemporary moral philosophy, use these terms interchangeably. However, for reasons noted in the next paragraph in the text, we depart from what we take to be common philosophical usage in not using these terms interchangeably with ‘ought’ (even in cases where ‘ought’ is used for moral evaluation). For a discussion of these concepts and their interrelations, see R. B. Brandt, “The Concepts of Obligation and Duty,” *Mind* 73 (1964): 374–93.

¹⁵ On this point, see Heyd, *Supererogation*, 171, who distinguishes the broader “commendatory” sense of ‘ought’, which may be properly applied to supererogatory actions, from what he calls the “prescriptive, personal” sense of the term, which may not be so used.

¹⁶ There are other ways in which the perfect/imperfect obligation distinction is drawn, including one where the distinction hinges on whether, corresponding to an obligation to do or refrain from some action, others have corresponding rights that one perform or refrain from the action in question. See T. D. Campbell, “Perfect and Imperfect Obligations,” *The Modern Schoolman* 52 (1975): 285–94, who finds five distinct contrasts that this pair of terms has been used to indicate. See also Millard Schumaker, *Sharing without Reckoning* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), chap. 1, for further discussion.

Act type: An obligation may require the performance of a relatively specific act type (e.g., repaying a \$20 loan in U.S. currency), but other obligations, such as helping the needy, may be fulfilled by a wide range of types of charitable action (e.g., donating money, volunteering one's skills, etc.).

Occasion: An obligation may require the performance of an action on some fairly specific occasion (e.g., to repay a debt tomorrow), or fulfillment of the obligation may be wide open as to the occasion (e.g., to perform some charitable action at some time or other).

Notice that the latitude afforded by each of these dimensions of obligation can vary independently of the others, so that some duties are narrow with respect to, say, recipients (e.g., the obligations of parents to care for their children), but wide with respect to many of the ways in which this obligation can be fulfilled.

The importance here of characterizing imperfect obligation is to distinguish this category from that of supererogation. These categories share two common features. First, part of the idea of imperfect obligation is that (in general) specific actions that fulfill such obligations on some occasion are not, qua acts of some specific type performed on that occasion, morally *required*. They are, taken as specific actions, strictly optional, even though in performing them, one contributes to one's fulfilling an obligation. And, of course, acts of supererogation are also morally optional. Second, one main type of imperfect duty is a duty of beneficence: a duty, with significant latitude, to help others. Actions one performs that fulfill this duty thus serve (if successful) to help others. Supererogatory acts are also actions that (if successful) serve to benefit others in some way.

Nonetheless, supererogatory actions can be distinguished from actions that merely fulfill an imperfect duty of beneficence. The duty of beneficence, properly understood, is the duty to perform, from time to time, actions (such as donating one's time or money) that benefit those in serious need of help, where one's doing so does not involve great self-sacrifice. Actions that in some way benefit those who are not in serious need of help (e.g., acts of small kindness), or actions that would require great self-sacrifice in order to benefit others (e.g., acts of heroism), are not actions that are called for by the duty of beneficence. And if they are not called for by the duty of beneficence, then in performing them one is not performing actions that fulfill this duty. Such actions may, however, be acts of meritorious supererogation.

Furthermore, it is possible to go beyond the mere fulfillment of an imperfect duty of beneficence. Clearly, one can do too little by way of fulfilling one's imperfect obligation of beneficence even if, once in a great while, one does something to benefit some of those who are in need. Granted, it is perhaps never clear how much in the way of help-

ing others is enough to fulfill the imperfect duty of beneficence over the course of a certain period of time. But surely it is possible for one to do far more in the way of helping others in need than anyone could reasonably expect, and, in so doing, one would be going beyond the call of duty. Such beneficent actions are in excess of what it takes to fulfill one's imperfect obligation and thus are not properly described as merely fulfilling that obligation.

III. THE KNOT

The so-called paradox of supererogation involves a tension between the presumption that there are (or even could be) acts of supererogation, and a line of argument concerning the relation between deontic and evaluative concepts that leads to the conclusion that there *cannot* be such actions. Here the tension is conceptual, and we think it can be set forth as follows.

Begin with what we take to be a fairly widespread common-sense assumption:

- (S) Some persons have (or could have) performed, or might perform, supererogatory actions,

which entails the following conceptual claim:

- (Sc) The concept of supererogation (and thus the category of actions it picks out) is coherent.

This conceptual claim and thus (S) are threatened by the following line of argument (Argument A):

- (1) A supererogatory action¹⁷ is one whose performance is (or would be) morally good and meritorious, but whose performance is not all-in or prima facie morally required.
- (2) If an action is (or would be) morally good and meritorious (and it is the only such action in the circumstances), then there are good moral reasons that favor performing it, reasons that are better than any competing moral reasons that favor doing something else (call these 'morally best reasons').
- (3) If there are morally best reasons that favor performing an action that one is in a position to perform, then one is at least prima facie morally required to perform that action, and one is perhaps all-in required to perform that action.¹⁸

¹⁷ Here, and throughout, we are referring to meritorious supererogation.

¹⁸ If there are morally best reasons to perform some action A, why does it not follow automatically that one is all-in required, and not just prima facie *morally* required, to per-

Thus,

- (4) In cases where one is in a position to perform a supererogatory action, one is at least *prima facie* morally required to perform that action, and one is perhaps all-in required to perform that action.

But the conclusion contradicts the very notion of (meritorious) supererogation that is expressed in premise (1). We are then driven to the conclusion that the very concept of supererogation is incoherent ($\sim Sc$), and thus that there never have been and could never be genuine acts of supererogation ($\sim S$)!

The connection in this argument among the various moral concepts it features is sometimes referred to as the “good-ought tie-up”: moral goodness allegedly is conceptually connected via reasons (in the case of this particular version of the argument) to obligation, and thus moral goodness of action allegedly entails obligation.¹⁹ But, of course, the very concept of supererogation requires a conceptual disconnect between moral goodness and obligation.

One kind of response to this alleged conceptual tension is to revise (replace?) the concept by admitting that the sorts of actions typically classified as supererogatory are not really deontically optional. Rather, they are at least presumptively morally required, but owing to various mitigating factors, one is justified in failing to perform them (or perhaps excused from performing them), and thus failure to perform them does not call for the sorts of negative reactive attitudes that are appropriate for unjustified or unexcused cases of wrongdoing. This revised concept is what we call ‘quasi-supererogation’.

Clearly, this revisionist response to Argument A gives up on the idea that a morally meritorious action can be *beyond the call* of duty, and so gives up on the concept of supererogation (despite appropriating the corresponding term). We ourselves are preservationists, not revisionists, so we understand the challenge presented above as one of finding an error in Argument A. Our attempt to meet this challenge begins in the next section.

This completes our first task, that of articulating and clarifying the main conceptual contours of the concept of supererogation and explain-

form that action? It does not follow automatically because, as argued by Douglas W. Portmore, “Are Moral Reasons Morally Overriding?” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11 (2008): 369–88, the inference in question assumes that (i) nonmoral reasons are not relevant in determining the overall deontic status of an action, and (ii) moral reasons always override competing nonmoral reasons. Portmore argues that these assumptions, while often taken for granted by moral philosophers, are false. So the premise in question is stated in a manner that allows for the possibility that (i) and (ii) are false.

¹⁹ A particularly clear presentation of the paradox in terms of reasons for action is to be found in Joseph Raz, “Permissions and Supererogation,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 12 (1975): 164.

ing the associated paradox. We now proceed to our second task, that of motivating our phenomenological approach.

IV. STRATEGY MATTERS

In his essay “Normative Guidance” (2006), Peter Railton usefully contrasts two strategies for doing moral philosophy. One approach proceeds, as it were, from the outside of agents in attempting to construct a system of ethics, while the other proceeds from the inside of agents in addressing this same constructive endeavor. Here is how Railton explains the contrast.

I sometimes feel that those of us who hanker after system in ethics tend to opt unconsciously for the first [outside] approach, tracing the outlines of moral practice from outside and setting it into a coordinate system and unified perspective external to the agents themselves. We should probably try more often to work from the inside of agents, from their centers of mass as agents and moral beings. From such an approach, questions of normative guidance become questions about how normative guidance occurs within the agent, what gives norms their life, and how they enter into the shape and meaning of the agent’s experience, thought, feeling, and action.²⁰

Railton’s recommendation that one work from the “inside” of agents in addressing questions of interest to moral philosophers is, we think, a good one and one that we plan to follow in connection with supererogation beginning in the next section. Specifically, we plan to focus on the first-person phenomenology characteristic of experiences of supererogation, and we will do so partly by contrasting such experiences with those of perfect as well as imperfect obligation. We have three related reasons for engaging in this sort of “phenomenology-first” approach.

First, since the very existence of supererogatory actions is put into question by the anti-supererogationists, it seems especially appropriate to describe cases of concrete moral experiences of (allegedly) supererogatory action in order to experientially anchor a *prima facie* case in favor of such actions. This will, we think, go some way toward placing the burden of proof on the backs of the anti-supererogationists. After all, a philosophical theory that accommodates a relevant range of people’s moral experiences is (all else equal) more plausible than a competing theory that does not. We think it is fairly common that people sometimes experience what they do as (in effect) supererogatory, and we think that a philosoph-

²⁰ Peter Railton, “Normative Guidance,” in R. Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

ical theory that allows that such experiences are not illusory is, *ceteris paribus*, more plausible than one that does not.²¹

Second, since some anti-supererogationists argue that alleged cases of supererogation can be subsumed under the category of imperfect obligation, we spend some time in the next section describing experiences of both perfect and imperfect obligation that will help put into relief experiences as of supererogation.²² This puts some pressure on moral theories that would attempt to absorb alleged cases of supererogation in this way.

Third, examining the phenomenology of supererogation and contrasting it with other types of moral experience will suggest *how* to accommodate such phenomenology and do so in a way that treats it as appropriate, rather than somehow the product of irrationality, confusion, or clouded emotions.

In implementing our phenomenology-first methodology, we plan to focus exclusively on mundane, everyday experiences of supererogation. Doing so is important for two reasons. First, as noted in Section II, there is a broad range of types of action that count as supererogatory (assuming that any actions so count), ranging from the remarkable deeds of saints and heroes to rather unremarkable, but nevertheless supererogatory, acts of kindness. It is the latter kinds of cases which, assuming there are acts of supererogation, are by far the most common such acts. And we think it is good philosophical methodology (at least for purposes of addressing an apparent paradox that threatens the very category in question) to pay close attention to ordinary cases. Furthermore (and this is our second point), cases of saints and heroes, at least those cases that have been documented and studied by social scientists and historians, raise the following well-known problem of interpretation which makes them particularly contentious. When interviewed, people who perform saintly or heroic acts consistently make claims much like the following, which is excerpted from an interview with

²¹ Another articulation of the general methodological point being embraced here is what Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) calls the Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism, according to which "it is reasonable to assume that things are the way they appear" (99).

In committing ourselves to the claim that, in some cases, people nonerroneously experience what they do as being beyond the call of duty, we take no stand on metaphysical issues concerning whether there is some property, *being supererogatory*, of the sort that a moral realist would countenance. We ourselves favor a version of metaethical expressivism, which denies the metaphysical claims of the moral realist, but allows for the idea that moral judgments (including those about the supererogatory) are subject to being true or false.

²² The expression 'experiences as of supererogation' is being used here (and elsewhere) instead of the expression 'experiences of supererogation' in order to remain neutral in our characterization of such experiences with respect to whether, on a particular occasion, there is a genuine act of supererogation that is the object of one's experience. Thus, to describe an experience being an experience as of supererogation allows that one's experience may not have as its object a genuine supererogatory action. That there are genuine instances of supererogatory actions is a claim we go on to defend against the anti-supererogationists. Similarly, the expression 'experience as of obligation' is used in contexts where it is important to remain neutral with respect to the question of whether the action being experienced is a genuine obligatory action.

one of the so-called righteous gentiles who, during the 1930s and 1940s, risked their lives to hide Jews from Nazis:

I don't think I did anything that special. I think what I did is what everybody normally should be doing. We all should help one another. It's common sense and common caring for people.²³

Many of the pro-supererogationists who want to hold up saintly and heroic actions as exemplars of supererogation must say one of two things (or both) about saints and heroes who offer such testimonies. First, they may say that some, if not all, of these people (perhaps because they misremember or because they are being overly modest) are misdescribing their experiences, which really were experiences as of supererogation. Or they may say that while some, if not all, of these people are accurately describing their experiences, their experiences as of being obligated are erroneous and the actions being described really are (or were) supererogatory.²⁴ By contrast, some anti-supererogationists attempt to make use of such testimonies in arguing against supererogation.²⁵

Because of the controversy over the testimonies of saints and heroes (about which we remain officially neutral), it seems to us that the almost exclusive focus on saintly and heroic actions as primary cases of supererogation has been unfortunate, distracting attention from cases that are far less contentious (even if not wholly uncontentious). As we have been saying, then, in examining conceptual questions about supererogation, one is well advised to focus on the common and comparatively uncontentious examples of what are putative cases of supererogation.

Having completed our second task—that of presenting our reasons for delving into matters of moral phenomenology, and explaining why we shall focus in particular on ordinary, mundane cases of supererogation—let us turn now to our third task, which involves offering phenomenological descriptions of types of moral experience.

²³ This quotation is to be found in Kristin R. Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 104. This sort of reaction among righteous gentiles is robust. For instance, Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York: Harper, 1979) relates part of an interview with Magda Trocmé, one of the righteous gentiles in the southern French village of Le Chambon who protected Jews from Nazis:

Madame Trocmé was not the only citizen of Le Chambon who scoffed at words that express moral praise. In almost every interview I had with a Chambonnais or a Chambonnaise there came a moment when he or she pulled back from me but looked firmly into my eyes and said: "How can you call us 'good'? We were doing what had to be done. Who else could help them?" (20).

²⁴ Urmson, "Saints and Heroes," 103–4, is among the pro-supererogationists who take the first tack, while Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 141–42, is among those who take the second tack.

²⁵ See, for instance, S. C. Hale, "Against Supererogation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1991): 273–85.

V. MORAL PHENOMENOLOGY

‘Moral phenomenology’ has two related uses. The term is often used to refer to one’s concrete moral experiences. Those experiences are said to have a phenomenology—a what-it-is-like-ness—and so to talk about one’s moral phenomenology is to talk about the what-it-is-like-ness of one’s moral experiences. But ‘moral phenomenology’ is also used to refer to the largely descriptive first-person enterprise of observing one’s own moral experiences with the aim of describing them and comparing them with first-person descriptions that others offer of their moral experiences. The latter usage has to do with a particular descriptive and comparative practice whose subject matter is indicated by the first usage. (There is also a third usage, which we do not discuss, that refers to doing moral philosophy in the phenomenological tradition initiated by Edmund Husserl and that characterizes the work in ethics of such philosophers as Max Scheler and Emmanuel Levinas.)²⁶

In a series of recently published essays,²⁷ we have discussed the phenomenology of what Maurice Mandelbaum called “direct experiences of moral obligation,” where one is presently confronting a situation in which one “feels” morally required to perform or refrain from performing some action. Mandelbaum, in his book *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* (1955), contrasts cases of direct moral experience with what he calls “removed” moral experiences.²⁸ Removed moral experiences comprise two sorts of cases. First, there are those experiences in which one judges either of one’s past self or of another person that a particular action performed (or not performed) by that individual was or is morally required. Second, there are those cases where one’s experience includes a value judgment about

²⁶ For a helpful introductory discussion of this third usage and its relation to the discipline/subject-matter usages, see Uriah Kriegel, “Moral Phenomenology: Foundational Issues,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 7 (2008): 1–19. For a thorough treatment of the phenomenological tradition, see Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, 2d ed., vols. 1 and 2 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969). See especially chap. 14 in vol. 2, “The Essentials of the Phenomenological Movement.”

²⁷ See, for instance, Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, “What Does Moral Phenomenology Tell Us about Moral Objectivity?” in Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and Jeffrey Paul, eds., *Objectivism, Subjectivism, and Relativism in Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 267–300; Horgan and Timmons, “Prolegomena to a Future Phenomenology of Morals,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 7 (2008): 115–31; Horgan and Timmons, “Morphological Rationalism: Making Room for Moral Principles,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10 (2007): 279–95; Horgan and Timmons, “Moorean Moral Phenomenology,” in S. Nuccetelli and G. Seay, eds., *Moorean Themes in Epistemology and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 203–26; Horgan and Timmons, “Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory,” *Philosophical Issues* 15 (2005): 56–77; and Horgan and Timmons, “Mandelbaum on Moral Phenomenology and Moral Realism,” in Ian Versteegen, ed., *Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism* (London: Routledge, 2010). See also Horgan and Timmons, “The Phenomenology of Virtue,” in *Moral Twin Earth and Beyond* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

²⁸ Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1955; reprinted, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 127.

the overall goodness or badness of some individual (oneself or another) or of some individual character trait possessed by oneself or another. One of the essential differences (according to Mandelbaum) between direct and removed moral experiences is that judgments included in experiences of the former type are those of an *agent* confronting a personal moral decision, while those of the latter type are made from the perspective of a *spectator*.²⁹ Since our focus here is on the experience of an agent making a morally significant choice in circumstances that the agent is presently confronting, we shall restrict our attention to direct moral experiences.

Before proceeding, there are two preliminary remarks we wish to make. First, although we think Mandelbaum's characterization of direct moral experiences is roughly correct, we plan to modify what he says about this type of experience. Our modifications, which we will explain below, involve both expanding and enriching the category of direct moral experiences. In expanding the category, we will include cases of supererogation, thus not confining direct moral experiences to cases involving judgments of moral obligation. We will enrich the category by including in our phenomenological descriptions certain elements that we think are often part of such experiences but that Mandelbaum does not mention. In particular, Mandelbaum omits from his phenomenological descriptions an agent's often peripheral sense of the psychic cost of failing to perform whatever action he or she experiences as being morally demanded. We think this is an important oversight on Mandelbaum's part, and we shall be appealing to this aspect of moral experience in characterizing the difference between experiences of perfect and imperfect obligation.

Second, Mandelbaum's characterization of direct experiences of obligation features an agent experiencing a felt demand grounded in the agent's sense of an action either fitting or not fitting the circumstances he or she presently confronts. As we shall presently explain, all direct moral experiences, including those of obligation and supererogation, involve an agent's sense of a contemplated action fitting the situation he or she confronts. However, one of the main phenomenological differences between experiences of obligation (on the one hand) and experiences of supererogation (on the other) is that the former, but not the latter, involve an element of felt demand. Let us now proceed, then, to examine some of the phenomenological detail of direct moral experiences, beginning with experiences of obligation.

A. *Direct experiences of obligation*

Valerie's volunteering. In her local newspaper, Valerie reads about the city's need for volunteers to help south-side citizens (whose neighbor-

²⁹ For further differences between direct and removed moral experiences, see Horgan and Timmons, "Mandelbaum on Moral Phenomenology and Moral Realism."

hood has been ravaged by a tornado) do some neighborhood clearing and cleaning up. Valerie calls the contact number and agrees to help this coming Saturday morning. But when Saturday comes along, she is not in the mood to participate; she would much rather take it easy. She considers just not showing up, thinking that because of the many volunteers likely to be involved, her not showing would not make a noticeable dent in the clean-up effort. But she thinks, "Once I get out there, maybe I'll perk up and it won't be so bad, and besides, I did *say* I'd help, so I really *ought* to get ready and just go." With that thought, she looks for her gardening gloves, which she'll need for the job.

Don's donation. Ambitious and successful Don lives comfortably in his upscale Manhattan condo. One day he receives a letter in the mail requesting money on behalf of Doctors without Borders, an international humanitarian aid organization that he has heard of (from listening to National Public Radio), but whose mission he has never thought about. Typically, he automatically throws away such mail, along with grocery store flyers, credit card offers, coupons from Bed, Bath, and Beyond, and other such "junk." But for no particular reason, he opens the donation request letter and reads about the recent and not so recent tragic events from around the world that have left people in desperate need of medical aid. Moved by the reports contained in the letter, he decides to do a bit more exploring by going to the organization's Web site, where he listens to radio broadcasts, watches videos, and reads more about the needs of people across the globe. He hasn't made charitable donations in the past—it never seriously entered his mind—but now he is thinking about it. He thinks about his own well-being and reflects on the kind of good luck he's had throughout his life, compared to the bad luck of people living in hostile circumstances. As he mulls this over, he thinks, "Well, I don't *have* to give to this organization—and besides, don't I pay taxes, and doesn't some of that money go to foreign aid? But I really *should* give something to some organization some time or another. And why not do it now? So that's what I *will* do." Don clicks the "donate" button on the main menu of the Web site, then selects the "donate stock" option and makes a generous stock donation.

These stories include bare psychological sketches of the experiences of the characters they feature; they do not include descriptions of any feelings or other psychological phenomena that Valerie and Don may each experience as they consider whether or not to perform the actions they contemplate, and as they then come to make a choice. In particular, we have omitted mention of any aspects of their occurrent conscious experience that may accompany their moral ought/should judgments as they decide what to do—keep a promise in one case, donate in the other. But these sorts of elements are part of people's everyday moral experiences, and at least some of them are captured in Mandelbaum's nuanced treatment of cases of direct experiences of obligation. According to Mandelbaum, ordinary judgments of direct obligation can be properly described

as involving two “layers” of introspective awareness. Let us take these up in order.³⁰

First, the experience of moral obligation involves a felt demand that itself is experienced as a kind of vector force which, Mandelbaum claims, like all forces, can only be described by referring to its experienced origin and direction:

It is my contention that the demands which we experience when we make a direct moral judgment are always experienced as emanating from “outside” us, and as being directed against us. They are demands which seem to be independent of us and to which we feel that we ought to respond.³¹

For Mandelbaum, the demand that is characteristic of direct moral judgments is “reflexive”—it is directed against the agent making the judgment—and its origin is experienced as independent of the agent. As he goes on to explain, this sense of “independence” is what gives direct moral experiences their “objective feel,” in that the demand appears to come from features of the situation that one confronts and that are themselves independent of one’s desires, preferences, and aversions.

So the first layer of phenomenal description of direct moral experiences is that they involve what the agent (in effect) takes to be objectively grounded reflexive demands. The second, more fundamental, layer concerns what one’s experiences reveal (within their phenomenology) about the *basis* of the felt demand, which Mandelbaum identifies as the experientially-presented relational characteristic of *fittingness* (and its counterpart, *unfittingness*). Note that this relation of fittingness involves as relata: (i) an actual or possible action or attitude of the agent, and (ii) certain considerations which, in the circumstances in question, constitute reasons that favor the action or attitude in question. The fittingness relation, then, is a normative-reasons relationship in which some consideration favors, and thus constitutes a reason for, some action or attitude. In the case of unfittingness, the considerations in question disfavor the action or attitude.

In the case of experiences of obligation, one experiences a demand upon oneself to perform (or refrain from performing) some particular action (on that occasion), and one experiences this demand as itself based on what is presented to one as an objective relation of *fittingness* or *unfittingness* obtaining between such an action and the features of the situation one is confronting. More precisely, one experiences certain features of the environment or situation confronting one as “calling forth” or *requiring*

³⁰ The next two paragraphs are taken from our essay “Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory.”

³¹ Mandelbaum, *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, 54.

some action on one's part. Expressed in the language of reasons, one experiences oneself as being confronted with reasons that have a requiring force to them, giving rise to a felt demand. To illustrate, let us return to our two examples.

In Valerie's case, the relevant situation she confronts comprises such facts as that she made a promise to help with the community project on Saturday, that this is the relevant Saturday, that she is able to keep the promise, and in general that there are no other pressing obligations that compete with the one in question. In contemplating her choice (to go or stay), it is reasonable to suppose (following Mandelbaum) that at one point in her thinking, she feels the pressure of having made a promise as she realizes that the time to keep it is upon her. The pressure is experienced as directed toward her, and coming from the external situation she faces—"external" in the sense that the felt demand to keep the promise is experienced as independent of her desires, inclinations, and preferences. Indeed, in her case she experiences the demand as contrary to what she prefers to do. She would prefer to stay home. At a more precise level of description, one can say that Valerie's feeling a certain pressure to perform a particular series of actions is grounded in her sense of a contemplated relation of fittingness between the series in question and her situation, together with her sense of the unfittingness that would obtain were she not to keep her promise. Again, expressed in the language of reasons, Valerie experiences a felt demand that is grounded in various considerations (reasons) that she experiences as requiring certain actions of her.

Don's case is similar in some respects to Valerie's, but not in all. He confronts the situation of being in a position to help aid distant people in need of medical attention, and he experiences the sort of pressure characteristic of a felt external demand that is presumably grounded in his recognition of the fittingness between his donating and people needing medical aid. However, in Don's case, his situation does not involve having made a promise, nor (arguably) is he under any sort of role obligation that one undertakes as a father, or an organization member, and so forth. Put in terms of traditional moral theory, Valerie has a "perfect" or "narrow" obligation—there is some fairly specific action she is to perform, on a fairly specific occasion, on behalf of a fairly specific group. Don, however, has no such *specific* obligations that bear on the imagined case, even if we assume he has what is called an "imperfect" or "wide" duty of charity. Don thinks that his donating (to this particular cause, on this particular occasion) is, morally speaking, "up to him" and not strictly required. And so we should expect that his overall moral phenomenology would differ somewhat from Valerie's.

Mandelbaum does not discuss whatever phenomenological differences might characterize experiences of imperfect obligation, compared to those of perfect obligation, and here is one place where we think Mandelbaum's

view could benefit from enriching the descriptions of direct experiences of obligation. In cases where one construes a particular contemplated action as fulfilling a perfect duty, one senses that one would appropriately experience guilt and be appropriately subjected to blame were one to refrain from performing the action in question. If such thoughts are not at the forefront of one's conscious awareness (as they may be), then one's phenomenology may well include (however dimly) a "looming threat" of unpleasant feelings—guilt feelings—were one to not perform the action. By contrast, in cases where one experiences an obligation as imperfect (or in a way that reflects the imperfectness of the obligation), one senses (however dimly) that one would appropriately feel shame or perhaps some sort of mild self-directed disappointment—disappointment in oneself—for passing up the opportunity to fulfill an imperfect obligation. There are two thoughts here. First (and for our purposes, most important) is the observation that direct moral experiences of obligation, in addition to including a sense of fittingness, unfittingness, and a resulting felt demand, also involve (at least often enough) the sense that one would be subject to some sort of psychic discomfort as a result of failing to perform the contemplated obligation-fulfilling action.³² As we have noted, this "sense" may vary in the degree to which it is "focal" in one's overall moral experience.³³

The second thought, which we are very tentatively suggesting, is that in typical cases of direct experience involving perfect obligations, one's sense of the psychic cost of nonperformance has to do with being held accountable (by others and by oneself) for a particular wrongdoing. The manifestation of such accountability is in terms of reactive attitudes including guilt and blame. Arguably, in cases where one does not feel obligated

³² Although experiences of both perfect and imperfect obligation involve a felt demand, in the case of imperfect obligations the felt demand attaches to rather unspecific act-types, in contrast with cases of perfect obligation, in which the felt demand attaches to a fairly specific act-type.

³³ Two comments are in order here. First, it is certainly very common to have one's everyday experiences "colored" by an overall mood (e.g., depression) or by some more particular emotion (e.g., fear of missing a deadline). Such occurrent psychological features of one's experience at a time need not be the focus of one's attention, at least in those persons who seem to function quite normally under such conditions, though such features are part of one's overall experience. Second, Mandelbaum treats such emotions as disgust, indignation, admiration, and the like as by-products of removed moral judgments—moral judgments made from a spectator's point of view. If one sticks to Mandelbaum's direct/removed obligation distinction, then what we are proposing is that first-person experiences of being morally obligated typically involve, as a part of the overall experience, viewing one's moral choice from a detached, spectator perspective. This seems plausible in light of the prevalence of the role in direct moral experiences of thoughts associated with such questions as: "What sort of person would I be if I did/didn't do such and such?" and "How would I feel if someone did/didn't do such and such for me?" Viewed this way, it makes sense to characterize different phases of the moral experience of the sort featured in our scenarios as including (a) an initial phase in which one experiences a felt demand grounded in one's apprehension of fittingness or unfittingness, (b) a reflective phase in which one mulls over one's choice (a phase in which one may imaginatively adopt a spectator's perspective), and (c) a final phase in which one decides what to do. Of course, such "phases" need not be temporally separate, but might instead be experientially superimposed.

to perform some specific action, but where one is responding to a general open-ended felt demand, one's sense of the psychic cost does not have to do with being held responsible for performing some particular act, but rather with negative feelings about oneself.³⁴ In both cases, there is this underlying similarity: one is aware that certain considerations constitute reasons that *require* that one undertake either some fairly specific course of action (in the case of perfect obligation), or that one undertake some course of action at some time or other (in the case of imperfect obligation).

Having described the key elements of experiences of moral obligation, and having distinguished experiences of perfect obligation from those of imperfect obligation, let us now turn to cases of supererogation.

B. Direct experiences as of supererogation

Mandelbaum never discusses cases of supererogation. Urmson's paper, recall, came out three years after the 1955 publication of Mandelbaum's *Phenomenology*. We have mentioned a range of types of action that are taken (by pro-supererogationists) to be instances of supererogation, including spectacular cases of heroism and more mundane cases such as favors. As we explained in the previous section, cases of heroism are particularly contentious, owing partly to the testimonies of heroes. Thus, we begin with a mundane case in which the agent does not experience herself as being morally obligated to perform some action, but in which, nevertheless, she performs the action out of altruistic motives.

Olivia's offer. Olivia and her husband Stan have recently moved to St. Louis, each having accepted an academic appointment at one of the local universities. During their first week in their new home, Olivia attends a block party organized by one of their new neighbors where she meets a recently widowed woman, Mary, a neighbor who lives a few doors down from Olivia and Stan. In conversation, Olivia learns that Mary lost her husband to cancer after forty-eight years of marriage. She also learns that Mary is an avid baseball fan and that she and her husband used to regularly attend Cardinals games. But without anyone to go with, she doesn't go anymore. The next day, it occurs to Olivia that it would be a nice gesture to offer to go to a Cardinals game with Mary, although she herself has no particular interest in the game. But she thinks: "Here is a chance to do something nice for someone, and the fall semester doesn't begin for another couple of weeks. Why not?" She calls Mary, who is delighted by the invitation, and they end up going to a game.

In our little story, Olivia does not feel a demand of any sort to take Mary to a baseball game. Nor does she experience any sort of demand to

³⁴ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "You Ought to Be Ashamed of Yourself (When You Violate an Imperfect Obligation)," *Philosophical Issues* 15 (2005): 193–208, argues that violations of perfect duty call for guilt on the part of the agent, while violations of imperfect duty call for shame on the part of the agent.

do something nice for Mary or for neighbors generally. Olivia isn't callous; she would gladly do favors for others if *asked*. But in our story, she is simply moved by her neighbor's circumstances, together with the fact that there is something she can do that would be much appreciated by Mary. Taking Mary to the baseball game would be "beyond the call of duty" and, in effect, is experienced by Olivia as such. We say "in effect" because, of course, while the thought that her offer is beyond the call of duty need not enter Olivia's mind, her experience involves her sense that the offer is not something she is morally required to do, but something that it would be good to do, something the doing of which would be fitting. In contrast to cases of obligation, Olivia does not experience the reasons she has to initiate contact with Mary as requiring her to do so, although, of course, the reasons in question are experienced as *favoring* the initiation of contact. Such reasons, then, are experienced differently than are the reasons involved in experiences of obligation. This aspect of Olivia's experience of reasons (besides not seeming to require that she call up Mary) is reflected in the fact that Olivia experiences no sense (however dim) that guilt, shame, or blame would be an appropriate response were she to pass up the opportunity in question. She does not take herself to need an excuse for simply not extending the invitation.³⁵ She may, of course, feel in some sense good about herself for what she does, but her motive (so we stipulate) is purely altruistic.³⁶

Let us now do some comparing and contrasting in order to highlight important similarities and differences among the types of direct moral experience we have just described. There are three points of similarity. All of the types of experience are "direct" in Mandelbaum's sense of being experiences in which an agent is presently confronting a situation in which she contemplates a choice to be made by her in that situation. Furthermore, the situations in question all involve an agent who contemplates performing an action of some moral significance. In addition, the action that the agent contemplates performing strikes him or her as fitting the situation. Alternatively, this third point can be expressed in terms of

³⁵ Hale, "Against Supererogation," refers to the alleged phenomenon that failure to perform supererogatory actions calls for an excuse, and appeals to this phenomenon as evidence that supposed cases of supererogation are really cases of imperfect duty. But Olivia does not take her nonperformance to call for an excuse. If asked by her husband why she didn't go ahead and call Mary (in a scenario where she does not perform this particular act of supererogation), Olivia may say that she just didn't feel like it. Her not feeling like it explains why she didn't call, but it is not put forth as an excuse. Nor, from a spectator's point of view or her own, does she need an excuse. Like many other writers on the topic, Hale seems to focus on contentious cases of saintly and heroic actions, and she seems to assume that if an action is good then it is *prima facie* required.

³⁶ For those with egoistic leanings who are skeptical of putative cases of pure altruism, we recommend the experimental work of social psychologist C. D. Batson as an antidote. See, for example, Batson, "How Social an Animal?" *American Psychologist* 45 (1990): 336-46; and Batson, *The Altruism Question: Toward a Social Psychological Answer* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991).

reasons: the agent featured in each of our scenarios takes it that there is a good moral reason, given the situation he or she confronts, that favors performing a particular action.

The major point of contrast between the two cases of obligation (on the one hand) and the case of supererogation (on the other) is that in the former, but not the latter, the agent's experience includes that of there being a felt demand. In the case of Valerie, she experiences a *focused* felt demand to perform a particular action, while Don's experience involves more of an open-ended, less focused felt demand to perform actions of a certain type at some time or other. Moreover, they each have a looming sense of some sort of psychic cost that each would experience were they to refrain from performing the action each of them contemplates performing. By contrast, our characterization of Olivia's phenomenology did not include either of these elements. Although Olivia takes the fact that she could do something nice for Mary as a reason for extending the invitation to the baseball game, she does not experience this consideration (and the situation in which it is embedded) as imposing a demand on her. Nor does her experience include a looming sense of psychic cost when she considers not extending the invitation. These related points of difference can be described in terms of how the various moral reasons that favor the various actions featured in our scenarios are experienced by the agents. Valerie and Don experience moral reasons as not merely favoring some course of action, but as requiring and hence demanding something of each of them. By contrast, Olivia does not experience a felt demand to invite Mary to the baseball game, and this reflects the fact that she experiences a moral reason (doing something nice for Mary) as favoring a course of action, but she does not experience it as requiring the action in question. This difference in moral phenomenology between experiencing a moral reason as *requiring* and experiencing a moral reason as *favoring but not requiring* is, as we shall explain in the next section, a phenomenological reflection of an important distinction between requiring and nonrequiring moral reasons, a distinction which we claim is the key to resolving the apparent paradox of supererogation.

This completes our third task, the task of providing a phenomenological description of what we take to be basic forms of direct moral experiences involving cases of perfect and imperfect obligation as well as certain common, everyday cases of supererogation. We have enriched Mandelbaum's description of direct experiences of moral obligation by including elements having to do with anticipated responses to the contemplated options one faces in a moral choice situation, and we have enlarged this category by including experiences of supererogation. We have also drawn attention to important phenomenological differences between experiences of obligation and experiences of supererogation, at least of the kind represented by our case of Olivia. In doing all of this, we have stressed in particular the differences in the way moral reasons are

experienced. Having completed our third task, we turn now to our fourth: addressing the paradox of supererogation.

VI. UNTYING THE KNOT

Return for a moment to Argument A, which we used (in Section III) to articulate the paradox of supererogation, and focus on premise 3:

If there are morally best reasons that favor performing an action that one is in a position to perform, then one is at least *prima facie* morally required to perform that action, and one is perhaps all-in required to perform that action.

It is this tempting premise that we think ought to be questioned. In extending the invitation to Mary, Olivia acts for a good reason (to cheer her neighbor) and, being other-regarding, it is a moral reason. But (so we claim) had she not acted for this reason (or some similar reason) and just gone about her business, she would not to the slightest degree be morally accountable; the good moral reason in question does not (in the case under consideration) have *any* obligating force. What the case of Olivia suggests, then, is the idea that not all good moral reasons for an agent to perform some action, even reasons that are plausibly considered “best,” are such as to require that she perform that action, even *prima facie*. Some moral considerations clearly do have a requiring force, but (we submit) others need not. And if this is correct, then premise 3 is false, and so Argument A can be resisted. In short, a more fine-grained understanding of moral reasons and how they bear on the actions they favor is needed to untie the so-called good-ought tie-up.

Thus, we offer our case of Olivia as providing phenomenological evidence that premise 3 of Argument A is false. Moreover, as we just noted, the case suggests how one might go about substantiating our claim that this premise is false. We are thus appealing to the facts of phenomenology as data for philosophical theorizing, and we are claiming that a philosophical view that treats the phenomenology in a non-debunking way is preferable to one that does not. But phenomenological evidence is, like most evidence, defeasible. After all, a critic might grant that, in our story, Olivia’s experiences are as we have described them, but he might go on to claim that her experiences fail to register the requiring force of the reasons that favor doing something nice for Mary. In light of this sort of response to what we have done so far, we now wish to strengthen our case for rejecting premise 3 by defending the following series of related claims.

- (A) What is called for in rejecting premise 3, as well as making sense of the case of Olivia and similar cases, is a defense of the idea

that practical reasons generally, and moral reasons in particular, can play roles that are logically distinct from the sort of requiring role in which they are typically cast.

- (B) In particular, we propose what we call a nonrequiring, “moral-merit-conferring” role that a moral reason can play and that makes sense of the very idea of supererogatory acts: acts that are completely morally optional, but good and morally meritorious to perform.
- (C) Furthermore, there are considerations that provide reason to recognize a merit-conferring role that moral reasons can play without also playing a requiring or justifying role—considerations other than the fact that recognizing a merit-conferring role for moral reasons figures into a solution to the apparent paradox of supererogation.

Finally, in addition to defending these claims, we briefly compare our view to related views about supererogation—views that also recognize a variety of roles that a moral reason can play. (This comparison can be found in Section VII below.)

Having done all this, we will have done enough to justify the claim that our view represents a plausible solution to the paradox of supererogation. We now proceed to address claims (A) through (C), taking them in order in the following three subsections.

A. Practical reasons playing a nonrequiring role

In defending the claim that moral reasons can play a nonrequiring role, we appeal to some excellent work by Joshua Gert in which he argues for a conception of practical reason that features a contrast between two logically distinct normative roles that a practical reason can play: what he calls a “requiring role” and a “justifying role.”³⁷ The significance of Gert’s work for our project of addressing the alleged paradox of supererogation is that it will provide some independent reason to think that practical reasons generally, and moral reasons in particular, can play roles other than the requiring role. Moreover, Gert’s view will provide useful background for the proposal we will make, since our proposal will be framed

³⁷ See Joshua Gert, *Brute Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Gert, “Normative Strength and the Balance of Reasons,” *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 533–62. Patricia Greenspan also defends the idea that practical reasons can function in ways that do not require. See, for example, Greenspan, “Asymmetrical Reasons,” in M. E. Reicher and J. C. Marek, eds., *Experience and Analysis: Proceedings of the Twenty-Seventh International Wittgenstein Symposium* (Vienna: OEBV and HPT, 2005), 387–94; Greenspan, “Practical Reasons and Moral ‘Ought,’” in R. Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 172–94; and Greenspan, “Making Room for Options: Moral Reasons, Imperfect Duties, and Choice,” elsewhere in this volume.

in a way that exhibits certain important differences from Gert's own treatment of alternative roles for practical reasons.

Gert's view is concerned with practical rationality generally and not specifically with morality or moral reasons; however, he partly motivates his conception of practical rationality by calling attention to requiring and justifying roles for moral reasons in common-sense morality (as well as certain moral theories), and then he suggests that practical rationality is like morality in this regard.³⁸ Here, then, is how Gert distinguishes the two roles in question.

Central to Gert's view about these roles is that they need not covary. A consideration that counts in favor of some action can be a strong justifying reason but it need not have an equivalent requiring strength; indeed, it may completely lack requiring strength. According to Gert, one can describe the role of a practical reason in terms of how a reason in that role affects the overall rational assessment of actions—how it affects whether an action (or omission) is rationally required, optional (merely permissible), or irrational. The function of a requiring reason that favors some action or omission Φ is to overcome reasons for not Φ -ing. It is not irrational to eat bananas. But if one suddenly develops a strong allergic reaction to them, then the fact *that one will suffer harm* is a reason that makes eating a banana irrational—it requires that one refrain from eating one. By contrast, a practical reason plays a justifying role when it functions to make rationally permissible an action (or omission) Φ that would otherwise (owing to competing considerations) be irrational to perform (or omit). To use one of Gert's own illustrations: *that it is extremely dangerous* is a reason (one that has requiring force, on his view) to not rush into the flow of fast-moving traffic. But the fact *that there is a helpless child in the traffic who might be killed* is a reason that justifies (but does not require) one to rush into the traffic to save him: the act of rushing into the traffic is thus rationally permissible, but not rationally required. In general, then, a practical reason plays a *requiring* role when it serves to make an action that would otherwise be rationally permissible rationally impermissible (and thus make the omission of the act rationally required), as in the case of the banana. By contrast, a practical reason plays a *justifying* role when it makes rationally permissible the performance of an action that would otherwise be rationally impermissible, as in the case of the helpless child in traffic.

Here is one way to think about these roles. When it comes to questions about the practical rationality of an action, there are three basic categories into which it might fall: the rationally required; the rationally optional (permitted, but not required); and the rationally impermissible. What practical reasons do, according to Gert's picture, is to take an action (or omission) that would otherwise belong in one of these categories and

³⁸ See Gert, *Brute Rationality*, chap. 2.

move it to another category. Let us extend the term ‘deontic’, which is typically used in association with the moral categories of the obligatory, optional, and wrong (impermissible), and apply it to the analogous categories of rational evaluation pertaining to action. Then we can say that Gert’s requiring/justifying distinction with regard to roles that practical reasons can play has to do with how reasons may operate—how they do the work they do—within the “space” of deontic evaluation.

Although Gert’s work is concerned exclusively with reasons as they bear on the rationality of action, as we noted a few paragraphs back, he partly motivates the requiring/justifying role distinction by appealing to cases in which moral reasons seem to play a justifying role that is distinct from playing a requiring role. As an example, Gert points out that one is morally justified in harming or killing in self-defense, although one is arguably not morally required to do so. Therefore, considerations of self-defense may serve to justify and thus make morally permissible the performance of an action (intentionally harming someone) that would otherwise be morally wrong. So the requiring/justifying distinction applies to roles that can be occupied by moral reasons as well as by nonmoral practical reasons.³⁹

Over the course of his 2004 book *Brute Rationality*, and in subsequent essays,⁴⁰ Gert does much to elaborate and defend his claim that practical reasons can play these logically distinct roles, so we refer our readers to Gert’s work as a defense of our first claim: namely, that practical reasons in general, and moral reasons in particular, can play a role that is logically distinct from a requiring role. We turn now to our second major claim, which brings us to the heart of our proposal.

B. Merit-conferring moral reasons

What one needs in order to make sense of supererogation⁴¹ is a role that a moral reason *can* play, but one that neither morally requires what would otherwise be morally wrong to omit doing, nor serves to morally justify what would otherwise be morally wrong to do. In seeking to identify such a role, we employ Gert’s way of characterizing normative practical-reason roles in terms of how the occupiers of those roles affect the overall assessment of actions. But to identify the kind of role one needs, one must look to nondeontic forms of moral evaluation. It will not

³⁹ In the following subsection, we say more about how the requiring/justifying distinction relates to supererogation.

⁴⁰ In addition to the works mentioned in note 37, see also Joshua Gert, “Reply to Tenenbaum,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 37 (2007): 463–76.

⁴¹ Here it is important to recall that our focus in this essay is on cases in which the supererogatory action in question is neither prima facie required nor prima facie forbidden. As explained above in Section II, cases in which a “supererogatory” action is prima facie morally required, but with respect to which there are competing reasons that make the action all-in morally optional, are what we call cases of “quasi-supererogation.”

work to focus only on deontic evaluation and the roles that reasons play as they bear on the deontic status of actions. The moral reasons that figure in supererogation need not affect the deontic status of an action, as the case of Olivia illustrates. So the obvious move is to appeal to nondeontic moral assessments of actions—assessments having to do with whether an action has positive moral merit, negative moral merit (demerit), or no merit.

We thus introduce the idea of what we call a *moral-merit-conferring* role that a moral reason can play. We characterize this role in terms of the bearing that reasons playing this role have on the overall merit of an action. *A moral reason, M, plays a moral-merit-conferring role when performing an action for reason M confers some degree of moral merit on an action which, were it performed for some other reason, would either lack merit or enjoy less merit.*

Notice two features of this characterization. First, in mentioning the *degree* of moral merit an action may enjoy, the characterization implies that reasons occupying this role can vary in merit-conferring strength. What sorts of factors determine the merit-conferring strength of a moral reason? Certainly the degree of self-sacrifice involved in some action plays a role. The greater the degree of self-sacrifice, the greater the merit conferred by the reason in question will tend to be. Suppose, for instance, that before meeting Mary, Olivia had bought tickets to go to the baseball game, and finds herself with an extra ticket as game day approaches, so her going will not involve any self-sacrifice. When she decides to invite Mary along, less merit accrues to Olivia's action than in the original story. No doubt other factors affect the strength of merit-conferring reasons. Here is not the place to explore this issue of what factors affect the merit-conferring strength of moral reasons. We do note, however, that our characterization of a moral-merit-conferring role is specified so that it allows that acts of supererogation can be more or less meritorious.

A second feature of our characterization is that it allows that an action's being morally meritorious can be overdetermined. That is, there may be cases where even if the action is not performed for some particular moral-merit-conferring reason, M, there may be some other moral-merit-conferring reason, N, for which the agent acts and which thus confers moral merit on the action. In cases where there are, for example, two moral-merit-conferring reasons for performing an action A, and it is possible to perform A for both reasons, and the agent performs the action for those reasons, then one may expect the degree of moral merit conferred upon the action to be greater than the moral merit that would accrue were the agent to perform the action for only one of the reasons. If there were two neighbors, Mary and Nancy, who would benefit from going to a Cardinals baseball game, then if Olivia were to invite them both to the game, she would presumably be acting for two morally meritorious reasons, each affecting somewhat the degree of merit her course of action enjoys.

So far, then, we have introduced a role that a moral reason can play, one that is distinct in terms of how reasons that occupy this role bear on the moral evaluation of actions. Moreover, we propose that recognition of this sort of role is what is needed to adequately accommodate cases of meritorious supererogation exemplified by our character Olivia. So let us pause for a moment to see how much progress we have made in addressing the paradox of supererogation.

The idea of a merit-conferring role for a moral reason to play should not be too controversial. After all, most moral philosophers will agree that in some cases there can be moral reasons for performing an action which are such that if the agent performs the action for those reasons, what she does is morally meritorious. So we have called attention to, and partially characterized, a role for moral reasons in virtue of which occupiers of the role function to confer merit. But what we claim is that a moral reason can play a merit-conferring role without also playing either a requiring role or a justifying role.⁴² We do not deny that a moral reason can, in a particular circumstance, play multiple roles. For instance, assuming that there are duties of self-preservation, seriously risking one's life by running out into the flow of busy traffic to save a child (for the child's sake) both morally justifies an action (running into traffic) that would otherwise be wrong *and* confers merit upon what one does. But our case of Olivia is supposed to be one in which her inviting Mary is completely morally optional. She is not *prima facie* required to perform the kind action, nor is her performance of it *prima facie* wrong and thus in need of justification.

We have already noted that our appeal to moral phenomenology featured in the Olivia case only provides defeasible evidence for the rejection of premise 3 and in favor of our positive proposal involving a moral-merit-conferring role that a moral reason can play. A critic may want to insist that the moral reason for which Olivia acts, although merit-conferring, also functions to require (at least *prima facie*) that she perform the act in question. This sort of critic will claim that even if our phenomenological description of Olivia is accurate, we have nevertheless described the moral experiences of someone who simply fails to respond properly to the moral reasons that favor her act of kindness. Such reasons, the critic will say, impose a *prima facie* moral requirement on Olivia; she morally ought to take Mary to the baseball game unless she has some reason of sufficient justifying strength that would permit her to do something else.

Responding to this challenge requires that we defend the third claim we announced at the outset of this section; it requires that we go beyond an appeal to phenomenology and explore the possibility of providing a further rationale for our idea that moral reasons can play a moral-merit-conferring role in some circumstances without having to play either a requiring or a justifying role. We claim that such a rationale is available

⁴² That is, without playing the sort of role that Gert characterizes as the justifying role.

and provides support (in addition to the support provided by phenomenology) for the claim that there are merit-conferring reasons that are not obligation-generating. The sort of rationale we have in mind appeals to normative moral considerations having to do with certain elements of life and experience that people normally take to have intrinsic value.

C. *A moral-normative rationale*

So why do moral reasons—in this case, other-regarding ones that favor helping or doing something for others—sometimes function not to require or “justify” (in Gert’s sense) but merely to confer merit on the deed in question? This question asks about the significance of the category of moral merit, and raises questions that are similar to (if not identical with) questions about the sort of rationale that can be provided for the category of the supererogatory. In what immediately follows, we offer an answer to this question, making some use of ideas that David Heyd offers in his defense of supererogation.

Heyd usefully distinguishes between two types of rationale that one may offer in defense of supererogation: theoretical and normative. A theoretical rationale appeals to the category of supererogation in order to make sense of certain ethical intuitions and experiences.⁴³ Our appeal to the case of Olivia (and similar cases) can be viewed as offering a theoretical rationale for recognizing the category of supererogation. The way in which Olivia experiences the reasons for inviting Mary to the baseball game, and the value that Olivia realizes through her action, fit best with a description of her action as completely morally optional, but morally meritorious and thereby praiseworthy. Of course, as Heyd points out,⁴⁴ anti-supererogationists will challenge the veridicality of Olivia’s moral experience and will want to insist that her experience fails to register the fact that moral reasons, whatever else they may do, function to require the acts they favor.

Against this line of criticism, Heyd claims that the defender of supererogation can usefully appeal to a moral-normative rationale that attempts to explain the overall moral significance of acts of supererogation. He further claims that this sort of rationale has both a negative and a positive component. The negative component stresses the value to the individual of being morally free to pursue individual projects without having to worry about the promotion of the general good, without needing an excuse or a justification for not performing actions that pro-supererogationists take to be beyond the call of duty. Expressed in the language of rights, this negative rationale focuses on the fact that individual autonomy is not only of pos-

⁴³ An example of this kind of rationale would be to argue (as Urmson does in “Saints and Heroes”) that a morality that does not put limits on what duty requires, and thus does not make room for supererogation, would not be livable given typical human psychology.

⁴⁴ Heyd, *Supererogation*, 165.

itive value, but is the ground of a moral right to pursue one's projects and interests without being subject to a duty to act for the benefit of others, at least in a large range of cases—cases where, intuitively, one needs no excuse or justification for pursuing one's own interests.

The positive component of the moral-normative rationale focuses on the sort of value that is realized by a supererogatory action. Heyd's basic claim is that the exercise of one's autonomy with respect to actions that are entirely morally optional but done for the good of others allows for the expression of certain valuable attitudes and traits that would otherwise not be possible. Here is the crucial passage in which he makes this point:

Being purely optional, the supererogatory act is spontaneous and based on the agent's own initiative. Not being universally required (of everyone in a similar situation), supererogatory action breaks out of the impersonal and egalitarian framework of the morality of duty—both by displaying individual preferences and virtues, and by allowing for some forms of favoritism, partial and unilateral treatment of someone to whom the agent wishes to show special concern. This may result in friendship and in an attempt to return a supererogatory service (thus creating a higher type of reciprocity than that required by the system of mutual rights and duties). These characteristics of supererogatory behavior can be realized only under conditions of complete freedom and would be stifled under a moral totalitarian concept of duty. Supererogation is necessary as providing an opportunity to exercise certain virtues.⁴⁵

This sort of positive moral-normative rationale offered by Heyd requires further development in order to be fully convincing, far more development than we are able to provide here. However, we do wish to add something that we think complements Heyd's remarks about the positive value of supererogation. Specifically, we propose to focus, if only briefly, on the phenomenology of care. In doing so, we call attention to the moral value of such forms of life as friendship and love and associated experiences of such forms of life. We also call attention to the fact that such forms of life and associated experiences seem to require that moral reasons can, in some circumstances, play the role of conferring moral merit on an action performed for those reasons without also having to play either a requiring or a justifying role vis-à-vis that action.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 175. In defending supererogation against the paradox, Heyd claims that "the model of reasons is inadequate to the explanation of supererogation" (*ibid.*, 170). However, his claim is apparently based on the assumption that reasons for action can only play a requiring role in how they favor an action. Nevertheless, it seems to us that the sorts of considerations that Heyd brings forth in defense of supererogation could be cast in terms of the language of reasons if, as we are suggesting, one recognizes a moral-merit-conferring role that moral reasons can play.

What we have in mind concerns the sorts of experiences associated with acts of caring that are performed in contexts of love and friendship. In this connection, the experiences of both the agent and the recipient are worth considering. From the perspective of the *agent* performing the action, there is the experience of responding to the needs and preferences of a lover or a friend, which involves a feeling of deep connectedness or special union with the other person. We submit that not only is this sort of feeling of intrinsic value and worth desiring for its own sake, but it reflects the sort of “special concern” directed toward a particular individual (mentioned by Heyd in the quoted passage) which, as a constellation of benevolent dispositions, has intrinsic value.

But there is something it is like to be the *recipient* of what one interprets as an act of “pure” caring—caring that is not guided by a sense of duty, but rather done out of love or friendship.⁴⁶ Being the beneficiary of an act of genuine caring (and experiencing it as such) may trigger certain feelings of comfort (in being cared for) and feelings of being “in union with” or deeply connected to another person—aspects of one’s experience that are intrinsically valuable.

Of course, in the case of Olivia, her offer to Mary does not involve the kind of phenomenology involved in cases of love and friendship. But Mary’s experiencing Olivia’s offer as one of pure kindness (assuming she does) has a significance that would be absent were Mary to think that Olivia’s offer is prompted by an *impersonal* imperfect duty of beneficence. Acting on the basis of merit-conferring reasons (that do not, in the circumstances, also either require or justify) allows for such actions to have the sort of personal significance that may be registered in the qualitative feel of one’s experiences. And of course, there is more than just a certain sort of qualitative feel. There is here a form of human interaction that is not possible without it being possible to do something for another that is morally meritorious without being morally required. Such relationships are intrinsically valuable in a morally significant way, and their value depends partly on the fact that the actions in question are not morally required.

Consider now the question of the conditions of the possibility of such forms of caring as we have briefly described. These forms seem to have the particular significance they do because they involve responding to others for reasons that, in the circumstances, do not involve the sort of demand on one’s behavior that issues from either a perfect or an imperfect obligation. This thought can perhaps be reinforced by imagining a

⁴⁶ We distinguish between actions guided by a sense of duty and those *guarded* by a sense of duty. Actions guided by duty include those performed because the agent believes them to be required (perfect duties), and those performed because they are believed to fulfill an imperfect duty. By contrast, actions are guarded by duty when the agent is careful about not doing something that violates duty. Actions guarded by duty in this way may nevertheless be done for reasons that serve to confer merit.

community of creatures whose interactions are guided exclusively by a sense of duty toward others. In some cases, they act out of a sense that the action in question must be performed, and in other cases out of a sense that the action in question fulfills an imperfect duty. It is far from clear (and we think very unlikely) that such creatures would have the sorts of caring and being-cared-for experiences that we have been highlighting. In particular, there would be certain kinds of interpersonal relationships that they would not be able to enter into, relationships that we humans consider intrinsically very valuable. If this speculation is correct, then surely these creatures lack forms of life and associated experiences that are of great value.

We offer these reflections on the value and possibility of certain morally significant forms of care to bolster the presumptive case we made in the previous subsection for the recognition of a role that moral reasons can play without also having to play either a requiring role or a justifying role. If there is good reason (as we think we have shown) to recognize a moral-merit-conferring role for reasons to play, then we have hopefully provided sufficient reason to reject premise 3 of Argument A (the anti-supererogation argument), and in the process we have been able to make sense of the category of supererogation. Indeed, the case we have been making for merit-conferring reasons by appealing to the phenomenology of supererogation, and by appealing to the sorts of intrinsically valuable forms of relationship that we have just been discussing, puts a substantial burden on the backs of anti-supererogationists. It looks as if they would need to argue that people are not only mistaken in their phenomenology but also deeply mistaken or confused in valuing the kinds of interpersonal relations that humans clearly do have and value very highly.

We now proceed to consider a pair of related views that we think help bolster our case for the recognition of the sort of merit-conferring role that a moral reason can play on some occasions without also having to play a requiring or a justifying role.

VII. RELATED VIEWS: DREIER AND PORTMORE

We have argued that the only way to accommodate cases in which a supererogatory action is completely optional, is to reject the claim that moral reasons can play only one sort of role; they must be able to play a nonrequiring role as well. Douglas Portmore⁴⁷ and Jamie Dreier⁴⁸ have each made proposals for understanding supererogation that employ the

⁴⁷ Douglas Portmore, "Are Moral Reasons Morally Overriding?" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11 (2008): 369–88; and Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality* (work in progress).

⁴⁸ James Dreier, "Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't," in Michael Byron, ed., *Satisficing and Maximizing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 131–54.

idea that moral reasons can do something other than require. Before we conclude, it will be useful to compare the view we have been defending with these related views.

Dreier's proposal for avoiding the paradox of supererogation embraces the idea that not all moral reasons serve to require; some moral reasons are nonrequiring. His suggestion (which he puts forth tentatively) is that there are two moral points of view. The point of view of justice involves reasons that have strong moral requiring strength. By contrast, the point of view of beneficence involves reasons that lack moral requiring strength. Thus, in cases of supererogation where reasons of beneficence favor performing an altruistic act that we normally think of as supererogatory (and where reasons of justice do not apply), the reasons of beneficence do not function to make the act in question morally required. Hence, the action favored by the best moral reasons in the circumstances is not at all thereby morally required.

What exactly reasons of beneficence do (what role they play) is not developed by Dreier. But in any case, the important point of contrast between Dreier's proposal and the view we have been defending is that Dreier's requiring/nonrequiring distinction is applied to types of moral reasons rather than to types of roles that moral reasons can play. And the resulting problem (pointed out by Portmore)⁴⁹ is that it is implausible to suppose that reasons of beneficence never function to require (even *prima facie*) the actions they favor. That I can easily help someone in desperate need, and can do so at almost no cost or inconvenience, seems to be a reason that requires that I help. So Dreier's proposal has the right idea (moral reasons need not require) but does not properly locate the bearers of the requiring/nonrequiring distinction. Perhaps if one were to narrow the scope of reasons of beneficence so that only a proper subset of such reasons are the ones that favor (without requiring) the supererogatory action, then Dreier's view and our own would converge. In any case, it is better, we think, to draw the distinction between reasons that require and those that do not in terms of roles that reasons can play.

Portmore addresses the question of how a moral theory can accommodate so-called agent-centered options, understood as morally permissible options that one sometimes has in certain circumstances of either pursuing one's own interests and projects, or sacrificing those interests and projects in order to benefit others—the latter option being an act of supererogation. In doing so, Portmore makes use of Gert's requiring/justifying distinction applied to roles that moral reasons can play. Thus, in determining an action's deontic status, reasons can play a moral requiring role and they can play a moral justifying role. And so, associated with each of these roles, moral reasons can enjoy two distinct dimensions of strength: morally requiring and morally justifying strength, respectively. Accord-

⁴⁹ Portmore, "Are Moral Reasons Morally Overriding?" 381.

ing to Portmore's characterization, (i) supererogatory actions are actions that are morally optional (they are neither all-in morally required nor all-in morally forbidden), but (ii) they are actions that one has "most moral reason" to perform. Of course, these two claims are in apparent tension; they reflect the paradox of supererogation. And Portmore agrees with us that a resolution of the alleged paradox requires denying the idea that moral reasons only play a requiring role. But he also claims that in denying this assumption there are two ways of explaining the possibility of supererogation: the non-moral-reasons (NMR) explanation, and the insufficient-moral-requiring-strength (IMRS) explanation.

The first of these explanations involves the following three claims. First, reasons of self-interest, despite being *nonmoral* reasons, are nevertheless morally relevant in that they can figure in the determination of the overall deontic status of actions. Second, nonmoral reasons can prevent moral reasons from generating an all-in moral requirement to perform the action favored by the moral reason. Nonmoral reasons in such cases thus play the role of moral justifiers in that they invoke considerations of self-interest in order to make morally permissible what would otherwise be a morally impermissible action. Third, nonmoral reasons lack moral requiring strength (otherwise, the nonmoral reasons in question would generate a moral requirement to act out of self-interest, and thereby turn the putative act of supererogation into a morally impermissible act).

Given these three claims (which Portmore does much to defend), one is able to explain the possibility of supererogation because Portmore's view allows for the possibility of cases in which one has nonmoral reasons of sufficient strength to prevent the moral reasons that *favor* the act of supererogation from morally *requiring* that act. And yet, since such nonmoral reasons do not themselves have moral requiring strength, they do not generate a moral obligation to promote one's self-interest and thus an obligation to refrain, in such circumstances, from doing something supererogatory.

Note that this explanation fits those cases in which the moral reasons that favor performing the supererogatory act are playing a requiring role, and it is thanks to nonmoral reasons of sufficient justifying strength that acts of supererogation do not end up being all-in morally required. But this means that the non-moral-reasons explanation is meant to address what we have been calling cases of quasi-supererogation. Consequently, this particular explanation cannot account for such cases as Olivia's offer to Mary. If one agrees that there are or can be cases like Olivia's offer, then appealing to the distinction between requiring and justifying roles that moral reasons may play (together with Portmore's additional three claims) will not be enough to accommodate genuine supererogation. It is because the requiring/justifying distinction with regard to reasons operates exclusively within the space of the deontic, shifting actions from one deontic category to another, that the distinction will prove inadequate for handling cases of supererogation. This is why one needs to recognize a role

for moral reasons to play that does not function to move an action from one deontic category to another.

As we noted above, however, Portmore does allow that there is another way one might try to avoid the alleged paradox of supererogation. This second way is to embrace the so-called insufficient-moral-requiring-strength explanation, according to which (roughly) moral reasons that favor the supererogatory action lack requiring strength. This is how Dreier tries to explain supererogation, and it is the kind of explanation we have offered in terms of the claim that moral reasons are capable of playing a merit-conferring role (without also playing a requiring role). What Portmore argues is that not all cases of “supererogation” admit of this kind of explanation—there are cases in which the reasons that favor the supererogatory option do have moral requiring force, and thus the only way to make sense of them is by appeal to the NMR explanation. Now we can happily grant this claim since, as we have noted, the cases that seem to require the NMR explanation are what we have been calling cases of quasi-supererogation. What we claim is that not all cases of supererogation (using the term broadly now to include both quasi and non-quasi cases) admit of the NMR explanation.⁵⁰

VIII. CONCLUSION

Much of the philosophical controversy over supererogation involves the alleged paradox of supererogation, whose source is the supposedly tight connection between the evaluative and deontic concepts involved in the very notion of supererogation—the “good-ought tie-up.” Our central aim has been to dissolve the seeming paradox, guided by facts about experiences of supererogation—their phenomenology. We set for ourselves four tasks. The first was to clarify the concept of supererogation and explain the paradox. The second task was to motivate our phenomenological approach to the topic. The third was a task of phenomenological description: describing the phenomenologies of moral requirement, both perfect and imperfect, and contrasting them with each other and with a prototypical case of experiencing an action as of supererogation—considering the phenomenon from the inside. Our fourth task was to address the paradox of supererogation in light of moral phenomenology. With respect to the good-ought tie-up that generates the alleged paradox, we argued that the source of the tie-up is the assumption that the only way in which a moral reason can favor an action is by tending to require that action. So to undo the good-ought tie-up—to untie the knot and thus dissolve the apparent paradox—we identified and characterized a non-requiring role that moral reasons may play in making sense of supererogation. We called it a moral-merit-conferring role. If a moral reason can

⁵⁰ Portmore does not deny this claim.

play this merit-conferring role without also playing the role of requiring whatever action the reason favors, then it is possible for an action to be deontically optional yet morally meritorious. And this is what is central to the notion of meritorious supererogation that has been our focus. In defending our proposal, we offered a moral-normative rationale in defense of the claim that moral reasons can play a merit-conferring role (without also functioning to require). Finally, we briefly compared our account of supererogation with related accounts.

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