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SUPEREROGATION, OPTIONALITY AND COST

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Abstract A familiar part of debates about supererogatory actions concerns the role that cost should play. Two camps have emerged: one claiming that extreme cost is a necessary condition for when (and why) an action is supererogatory, while the other denies that it should be part of our definition of supererogation. In this paper, I propose an alternative position. I argue that it is comparative cost that is central to the supererogatory and that it is needed to explain a feature that all accounts agree is central to the very notion of supererogation: optionality. Perhaps because of this agreement on its importance, few attempts have been made to clarify and explain the notion of optionality. I argue that giving an account of the optionality of supererogatory requires drawing a line between doing the bare minimum permissible and going beyond the bare minimum and that this line ought to be drawn based on comparative cost of alternative permissible acts. Having outlined my account and motivated it, I discuss and reject two concerns that might be raised: firstly, that it is extreme cost, not comparative cost, that matters and, secondly, that in fact no cost is needed for an act to be supererogatory.

Keywords Cost; Duty; Optionality; Permissibility; Sacrifice; Supererogation

1 Introduction

Our lives and newsfeeds are peppered with examples of supererogatory actions: from doing favours and giving gifts to saving the lives of strangers. Going above and beyond the call of duty tends to involve a cost to the agent, whether this is time, effort, resources

or sometimes even life and limb. Two camps have emerged regarding the role of cost in accounts of supererogation: one says that extreme cost is a necessary condition of supererogation; according to the other, while supererogatory actions are often costly, they are not necessarily so. In this paper, I propose an alternative to these two positions. I argue that it is *comparative* cost that is central to the supererogatory. Furthermore, we need the notion of comparative cost to explain a feature of supererogation that all accounts agree is central: optionality.

Like morally required actions, supererogatory actions are not forbidden and are thus permissible; unlike morally required acts, they are also 'beyond duty'. As such, supererogatory actions are 'optional' in the sense that they are neither morally forbidden nor morally required.[1] It is this feature of supererogatory acts that I propose to elucidate in this paper.

In addition to being optional, supererogatory actions are also morally good.[2] They may well have other features. However, in this paper, I explicate the relationship between cost and optionality in order to build one of the cornerstones of supererogation, but leave aside exactly how we should characterise what it is for an optional action to be morally good or what other features might be necessary for an act to be supererogatory.

[1] The term 'optional' is sometimes used colloquially to refer to any permissible act, which would include morally required acts; however, following Paul McNamara's terminology (1996), I reserve the term 'optional' for those actions that are neither morally forbidden nor morally required. Of course, the moral landscape may not be this straightforward. Some acts like those of moral decency may well "occupy a shadowy territory between the obligatory and the supererogatory" (Calhoun 2004, 130). Nevertheless, we must first establish what it is to go beyond duty before we tackle what it is, for example, to go beyond decency.

[2] Or, perhaps more precisely, morally better than some permissible alternative.

No one denies that the notion of optionality is central to the very notion of supererogation. Yet, perhaps because of this agreement, many leave their descriptions at 'optional' (Allen 1981, 3), 'permissible to do and permissible not to do' (Chisholm 1964, 153), 'beyond duty' (Baron 1987, 238) or 'not wrong not to do' (Heyd 1982, 115)[3] without elaborating what these notions mean or how exactly they help distinguish the supererogatory from the obligatory.

My paper is structured as follows: I begin by considering the non-duty conception of the optionality of supererogatory acts. Having rejected two variations of this conception, I argue that the optionality of supererogatory acts is better characterised by drawing a line between doing the bare minimum and going beyond the bare minimum, and it is in distinguishing these that comparative cost plays a defining role. Thus, my account of optionality not only elucidates a feature at the heart of the very notion of supererogation, it also helps settle the debate about the existence and nature of a relationship between cost and supererogation.

Once I have explicated my account of the optionality of supererogatory acts in terms of comparative cost, I consider and reject the two positions on cost that are popular in the literature on supererogation: the first agrees that supererogatory acts involve a cost to the agent but insists this cost must be extreme and the second denies that these actions have to involve any cost at all. Finally, I briefly propose a further refinement of our notion of cost.

[3] See also Jackson 1986, 292; Raz 1975, 164; and Chisholm and Sosa 1966, 237.

2 Duties and Non-Duties

A natural way of understanding optional acts is as 'non-duties'. However, I demonstrate that the two ways of cashing out the optionality of supererogatory acts in terms of 'non-duties' are either much too broad or much too narrow. Thus, characterising optional acts as non-duties is wholly inadequate to the task of giving an account of the optionality of supererogatory acts. Rather, the problems I raise demonstrate the need to appeal to comparative cost in understanding optionality. Let's begin by getting a better grasp on what it means to do our duty.

2.1 Understanding Duties

Suppose that I promise to visit you in hospital. I then visit you in hospital on Tuesday, wearing jeans at 2:30pm. There seems to be a puzzle: on the one hand, the action I perform seems required, as this is how I keep my promise; on the other hand, this action appears *not* to be required, as I could have performed a different action instead (for example, visiting on Monday) and would still have kept my promise. This is indicative of a more general puzzle: "We fulfil our duties by performing acts. But it is never a duty to do any act" (Stocker 1967, 507).

This puzzle is easily dissolved once we consider the well-established distinction between act types and act tokens. An act type is an act property that many actions can have, such as stealing or brushing one's teeth. An act token, on the other hand, is the exemplification of an act type by an agent at a particular occasion, for instance, the theft of the *Mona Lisa* on 21st August 1911 or my brushing my teeth this morning. Any act type can be exemplified by many act tokens and an act token can exemplify many act types.

What makes my act of visiting you in hospital on a Tuesday, wearing jeans at 2:30pm required is that it exemplifies the act type of 'visiting you in hospital.' I cannot fulfil my promise without performing an act that exemplifies this type, even though no particular token is required. This gives us a better understanding of what it is to do one's duty: as Michael Stocker argues, it is our duty to "exemplify an act type" (1967, 517). Any of the (permissible) act tokens of this type will do.

2.2 Two Ways of Understanding Optionality in Terms of 'Non-Duties'

Given that supererogatory actions stand in contrast to morally required actions, it is natural to try to understand supererogatory acts as 'non-duties'.[4] Duties, as we have seen, should be formulated in terms of act types; thus let's characterise 'non-duties' in a similar way:

> **The Non-Duty View of Optionality**: an action is optional (in the sense that supererogatory acts are optional) if it is a token of some optional act type; that is, some act type that we are neither required to exemplify nor forbidden from exemplifying.[5]

On the face of it, this way of formulating the optionality of supererogatory acts seems to account for many cases that are thought to be quintessentially supererogatory. 'Running into a burning building to save a child' is not only considered morally good

[4] This term is from Feinberg 1961, 281.

[5] Mellema discusses a similar attempt at formulating the optionality of supererogatory actions in terms of act types (1991a, 31–32).

(as many morally required actions are), it is also generally considered supererogatory. The Non-Duty View can explain this: it is an act type that is neither required nor forbidden, thus tokens of this type are optional.

However, this formulation suffers from the problem that, as Gregory Mellema says, "an act token is not uniquely the instance of one act type" (1991b, 169). Thus, any action that we might want to class as obligatory will also exemplify many other act types that are neither obligatory nor forbidden. As Paul McNamara argues, "it is virtually impossible to do what you are required to do—what morality demands that you do—without also doing those things in particular ways, ways that are not themselves required" (1996, 425). To return to my example, my act of visiting you in hospital can be described in many ways such as: (a) visiting you in hospital; (b) visiting you on a Tuesday; (c) being in a hospital at 2:30pm; and (d) visiting you in jeans.[6] Given that (b), (c) and (d) are act types that we are neither required nor forbidden from exemplifying, my visiting you in hospital would count as optional on this view, as would all obligatory acts. The Non-Duty View of Optionality is therefore much too broad, failing to distinguish obligatory actions from supererogatory actions in terms of optionality.[7]

The problem with the Non-Duty View was that characterised actions like my fulfilment of my promise to visit you in hospital as optional. The reason that this action

[6] For a similar argument, see Mellema 1991b, 169.

[7] It might be thought that we can avoid the problem discussed above if we can give a list of act types that are optional to exemplify, just as we might be able to give a list of act types that it is obligatory to exemplify. Thus 'running into a burning building to save a child' is an optional act type, as is perhaps 'donating blood', 'giving a gift' and so on. However, it is implausible to think that such a list can be given that would accommodate the diversity of acts that are and could be supererogatory and that would also allow for the fact that sometimes acts of those types may well be forbidden or required.

was not supererogatory was that it exemplified an act type that *was* morally required. I therefore propose a modified version of the Non-Duty View, one that explicitly rules out acts that exemplify required or forbidden act types:

> **The Narrow Non-Duty View of Optionality**: an action is optional (in the sense that supererogatory acts are optional) if it is a token of *only* optional act types; that is, only act types that we are neither required to exemplify nor forbidden from exemplifying.

While no one (to my knowledge) has considered this way of cashing out the 'non-duties' characterisation of supererogation, this is much more promising than the previous Non-Duty View. Given that I promised to do so, my visiting you in hospital is an act token of a type that I am required to exemplify: it is therefore not optional on the Narrow Non-Duty View. Running into a burning building to save someone's life, on the other hand, would, on this view, qualify as optional, and therefore supererogatory (if it is also good to do). Or so it seems.

2.3 Cases of Oversubscription

Suppose I promise to give you £100 and then give you £200. This action clearly fulfils the duty generated by the promise I made.[8] Under the assumption that I could have just given £100 and that instead I chose to give £200 (and that it would be morally good to give you £200 rather than £100), this action is also supererogatory.

[8] If it didn't, then I would still owe you £100. But imagine our response to someone who, promised £100 and having received £200, demanded a further £100!

Some might try and give an alternative interpretation of this example: perhaps the first £100 was obligatory and giving the second was supererogatory. However, note that this move does not work in all cases. Suppose I am required to give some feedback on a student's essay but I do so in a way (in terms of quantity and quality) that goes beyond what I am required to do. It is not possible to say of this comment that it was required and of that comment that it was not. Alternatively, suppose I have to give you some bad news which I could permissibly tell you either in person (which you would most certainly prefer but would be very difficult for me) or via email (which would be the easier, though more cowardly, option for me). The sense in which I oversubscribe by telling you in person cannot be that one part was required and one part was not: it is only by reference to a completely alternative course of action that we can understand how I oversubscribed.

Those actions that both fulfil a duty and exceed it are generally accepted as cases of supererogatory action. Such a claim is not particularly controversial. Heyd calls such actions 'oversubscription' (1982, 1 and 135) and Joel Feinberg calls them 'duty plus' (1961, 282). But few have considered the implications of these cases.

Before considering such cases, it might have been thought that the categories of the required and the optional were exclusive: that nothing could fit into both groups. What cases of oversubscription show is that an act can be both optional (in the sense that supererogatory actions are) and also required (in the sense that they fulfil the obligations that we have).[9]

[9] It might be thought that we have, rather, fulfilled our obligation in a way that was not required. However, as pointed out earlier, we always fulfil our obligations in ways that are not required (for example by fulfilling our promise on a Tuesday); therefore, this does not distinguish the mere fulfilment of our duty with those that go beyond the mere fulfilment.

The upshot is that the required—as distinct from the optional—cannot be characterised solely in terms of acts that fulfil duties. Optional actions can also have this feature. Thus, the optional cannot be characterised, in contradistinction to the required, as 'non-duties'. Instead, we have to distinguish the required from the optional in some other way. My proposal is that we should understand the optionality of supererogatory actions in terms of comparative cost.

3 The Bare Minimum and Beyond

3.1 The Importance of Comparative Costs

A distinction must be made between those acts that involve *merely* fulfilling our duty and those actions that fulfil and *exceed* our duty. This is in keeping with the fact that supererogatory acts are often described as 'going the extra mile'. On this understanding of supererogation, cases of oversubscription can be easily understood. There are multiple ways of fulfilling a duty: we can fulfil it *minimally* or we can fulfil it in a way that goes beyond this minimum.[10]

My proposal is that the line between these two classes of action—doing the bare minimum and going beyond the bare minimum—should be drawn with respect to the comparative cost to the agent involved in performing different permissible actions. The bare minimum is, therefore, defined as the act (or acts[11]) that involves the *least* cost to

[10] McNamara makes a similar distinction between the supererogatory and what he calls 'doing the minimum morality demands' (1996, 426). However, he does not say explicitly what this distinction ought to be based on. I give an account here that does.

[11] When more than one action involves the least cost, the bare minimum is constituted by more than one act. Suppose that I could either watch TV or have a nap and both involve the least cost to me of all the permissible actions available to me; then, both actions would constitute doing the bare minimum. Often

the agent of all the permissible acts available. To perform this act is to minimally fulfil our duty, as doing any less would be forbidden. Optional actions, in contrast, are permissible acts that involve greater cost to the agent than the bare minimum.[12]

'Cost' here is, importantly, comparative. What is of interest is that the cost involved in performing an action is *greater* than the cost involved in performing an alternative action that could permissibly have been performed instead. This means that an act can involve a cost even though the agent is left better off than they were before. Suppose for example I find £20 on the floor with no obvious owner and am deciding whether or not to keep it or give it to charity. I decide to give £10 to charity and keep £10. Supposing it was permissible for me to have kept all the money for myself, this action involves a cost, despite the fact that I am still better off than I was before. This demonstrates two things: firstly, that a comparative reduction of benefit can also constitute a cost and, secondly, that the significant comparison is with other permissible actions that I could have performed instead.

The notion of cost I employ here represents a comparative reduction in those things that are valuable or make life go well. This is deliberately broad, as I do not endorse any particular view of what this might include. Some costs might be

multiple tokens of the same type can involve the same amount of cost to perform: both watching TV and having a nap might be tokens of the type 'staying at home in my pyjamas'. However, some tokens may be much more costly than other tokens of the same type (for example, missing a hospital appointment may also be a token of the type 'staying at home in my pyjamas').

[12] My proposal is similar to that made by Feinberg, who claims that a person 'exceeds' duties in terms of the amount of sacrifice undertaken (1961, 280). However, I do not believe that the cost involved in performing supererogatory acts has to amount to 'sacrifice' (as I discuss further in §4) and I disagree that there need to be two types of supererogatory act: 'oversubscription' and 'non-duty'. The notion of the bare minimum is missing from Feinberg's account, a feature that would unify these two supposedly disparate types of supererogatory acts.

subjectively determined, while some are clearly more objective. The notion of cost could well include vital interests like physical integrity, but also less dramatic ones like effort, time and resources, as well as less tangible things such as social standing. Therefore, I avoid the term 'sacrifice' (I give further reasons for this in §4), which might be interpreted as implying an extreme cost to the agent or as referring only to reductions in those things I have described as 'vital'.

I intend the notion of 'cost' to cover not only reductions in those things considered valuable, but also risks of such reduction. Thus, an act can be supererogatory even if it ends up not being costly, so long as the cost is *risked*. This is not uncontroversial. Mark Overvold, for example, rejects the claim that risk is sufficient for self-sacrifice: "It is not sufficient if the agent merely performs an act he expects to produce a loss of welfare for himself. The loss must actually be suffered for the act to be an act of self-sacrifice" (1980, 110). Whether or not we want to accept this as a good account of self-sacrifice, we ought to reject that supererogatory acts must involve the actual undertaking of costs rather than just the risk of doing so. To see why, take the classic case of a hero who jumps onto train tracks in order to save someone who has fallen onto them. This action is absolutely paradigmatic of a supererogatory act *whether or not the agent is injured in doing so*. This act is heroic because they were willing to *risk* life and limb. If we disbarred from being heroic those acts which only *risked* loss then, as M.W. Jackson eloquently puts it, "there could only be dead heroes" (1986, 292).

3.2 Optionality Defined

Having established the importance of comparative cost, I formulate my account of the optionality of supererogatory acts as follows:

> **Optionality**: An act is optional, in the sense that supererogatory actions are optional, if it is a permissible act that is (or risks being) more costly[13] for the agent than the act (or acts) that constitutes doing the bare minimum (where the bare minimum is the least costly permissible act(s) available).[14]

Note that my use of the term 'optional' here differs from the use might be put to in other contexts. Suppose that you lend me £5 and thus I am morally required to return it to you. I could give it back to you as a note or in coins. Suppose that it makes no difference to me which I choose and that both constitute the least costly way for me to do what I am required to do. We might say colloquially or in contexts outside discussions of supererogation that it is optional for me to return the £5 you lent me as a note or in coins because when I pay you back in the money with a note there is a sense in which I didn't have to: I could of course have paid you back in coins. However, given that both

[13] Note that a small refinement of the notion of cost is made in §5.4.

[14] Note that on my account, optionality is an attribute of *actions*. This follows a general trend of thinking that being supererogatory is a property of actions rather than agents. It is true that the costliness of an act can only be determined in relation to an agent, as it only an agent who can bear the cost. However, it is not particularly controversial to think that determining whether or not an *act* is supererogatory needs to appeal to some qualities of the agent. Many accounts of supererogation, including those that are actively hostile to the idea that features of the agent like praiseworthiness should be taken into account, still allow that, for example, the agent's intentions or the permissible alternatives available to her are an important part of determining whether an act is supererogatory (see, for example, Heyd 1982; Montague 1989; Archer 2013). Thus, I do not believe that taking into account the costliness of an act undermines supererogation—and optionality—being understood as attributions of an act.

constitute the bare minimum fulfilment of my moral requirement, these actions would not count as optional on my account. This is because I did have to pay you back the £5 one way or another. When I pay you £200 when I only owe you £5, I do something that, in a much stronger sense, I need not have done. It is therefore optional for me to give you £200 in a way it is not optional for me to pay you back the £5 (whether as a note or in coins). My account of optionality captures this fact.

It may well be difficult to determine which action involves the least cost of all the permissible alternatives available to us. However, this simply reflects the complex reality of some situations: it is not always possible to determine which action constitutes the bare minimum. Furthermore, in order to determine that an act is optional it is only necessary to determine whether it is more costly than *some* permissible alternative. If it is, then we can know that it is more costly than the bare minimum.

Also note that I do not assume that cost plays a role in determining what our duties are. This is discussed in more detail in §4.2. I mention it now to make clear that my account is perfectly compatible with the idea that even the minimal fulfilment of our duties could be extremely demanding and that many supererogatory actions can involve very little cost (or even a reduction in benefit). However, no matter how our obligations are determined, we must still find a way of distinguish going beyond the bare minimum from the bare minimum itself. My contention is that we can only do so by appealing to cost.

I now discuss and reject two popular positions concerning the role of cost in accounts of supererogation that run contrary to my account. The first agrees with me that costs are a necessary part of supererogatory actions but, contrary to my view, makes it a necessary condition that these actions involve *extreme* costs. The second claims that a supererogatory action need not involve any cost at all.

4 Rejecting the Extreme Cost View of Supererogation

4.1 Extreme Cost and Sacrifice in Accounts of Supererogation

Cost appears in many accounts of supererogation. Nancy A. Stanlick, for example, claims that supererogatory actions are those in which the agent promotes the good of others "either at the expense of herself or without regard for her own interests" (1999, 211). Similarly, Joan Straumanis equates the supererogatory with self-sacrifice for the good of others (1984, 3 and 6). Note that on these accounts extreme cost is taken to be a condition of supererogation *in addition* to optionality, rather than what distinguishes optional acts from non-optional acts.[15]

More specifically, *extreme* cost is often taken to be an essential feature of supererogatory actions. Sometimes this is implicit, as when discussions of cost are couched in terms of 'sacrifice', which suggests something greater than the cost involved in, say, buying an inexpensive gift for a friend. Some authors explicitly claim that extreme sacrifice is a requirement of the supererogatory. For, example, in the exchange between Elizabeth M. Pybus and Patricia M. McGoldrick, it is taken as a premise that a necessary condition of an act's being supererogatory is that it is performed "at extreme risk to one's own life and well-being" (McGoldrick 1984, 525; see also Pybus 1982). Elsewhere, Jackson defines a supererogatory act as one that is good and comes at "a high cost" to the agent (1986, 295).

In what follows, I will refer to the position that supererogatory actions necessarily involve an extreme cost to the agent as the *Extreme Cost View*.

[15] Thus, on these particular accounts, no account of optionality is actually given. If cost is not included in the notion of optionality itself, then 'optional' simply means 'permissible'.

4.2 Cost-Independent Determinations of Duty

Sometimes extreme cost is taken to be a necessary requirement of supererogation because extreme cost is used to explain *why* some actions are optional rather than required. On John Rawls' account, for instance, certain acts are supererogatory—and thus optional—*because* of "the loss or risk involved for the agent himself" in their performance (1999, 100). This is because, while we are normally required to perform acts that are good, "we are released from this duty when the cost to ourselves is considerable" (Rawls 1999, 100). This claim is also echoed by Russell A. Jacobs[16] and Douglas W. Portmore[17].[18]

My account differs from these because, while I do give a central place to cost in determining which actions are optional, I do not make any assumption that cost must play a role in the initial determination of our duties. It is perfectly compatible with my account of optionality that the considerations that establish our obligations are not directly responsive to how costly a particular course of action is.[19] My account is

[16] For Jacobs, supererogatory actions would be our duty but for the fact that "they are too costly to be required" (1987, 97).

[17] For example, Portmore argues that were it not for the sacrifice involved in saving a child from a burning building, "attempting the rescue would be obligatory rather than supererogatory" (2003, 315).

[18] Given the explanatory role that cost has played in many accounts of supererogation, it is tempting to think (as I am sure some do) that we are morally required to do what is morally better if there is no extra cost to the agent in doing so. If you accept this principle, then it will indeed turn out that morally better acts are necessarily more costly. In which case, morally better acts will necessarily be optional (on my account of optionality). However, it is important to note that this principle is not uncontroversial. As I explain in the following sub-section, we might think that certain considerations establish our obligations without being directly responsive to how costly a particular course of action is.

[19] For example, I argue elsewhere that room for the supererogatory can arise as 'spandrels' from other commitments not directly concerned with extreme cost (Benn 2017).

compatible with different theories of how our duties are determined, including those that are cost-independent. I do not assume that some actions are 'too costly to be required'. Thus, my account allows that we may sometimes be morally required to make enormous sacrifices in order to fulfil our duties.[20] However, once we have settled on what's required, cost plays a role in distinguishing those acts that involve *merely* fulfilling our duty from those actions that fulfil and *exceed* our duty.

4.3 Small Acts of Supererogation

Not only is my account compatible with the position that our duty can be extremely demanding, it is also compatible with the possibility that there can be small acts of supererogation; something that the Extreme Cost View rules out. Just as doing one's duty can be more or less dramatic, acts of supererogation can be more or less heroic: giving a small gift to a friend or doing a favour are just as intuitively supererogatory as more extreme, heroic acts. However, if only those acts that involve extreme sacrifice are supererogatory then these small acts of supererogation cannot be accommodated. Any theory that excludes small acts of supererogation from its definition owes us an explanation as to why only *heroic* acts of supererogation are worthy of inclusion. That I could be required to give presents to my friends is just as implausible as that I could be required to make the extreme sacrifice of giving a kidney to a stranger.

This is of course not to say that all supererogatory actions necessarily have the same value. Some supererogatory actions are better than others, and some of those who perform supererogatory actions are deserving of greater praise than others.

[20] For arguments that raise doubts about placing a cap on what could be required of an agent, see Benn 2016, 71; Murphy 2000; Murphy 1993.

Nevertheless, while it may be the case that giving a gift is not as good or as praiseworthy as giving a kidney, this does not entail that the former is not supererogatory.

Therefore, any account that makes extreme cost a necessary condition of supererogation is much too narrow. Just as we can go beyond demanding duties, we can, as Jason Kawall says, "also go beyond relatively minor, nondemanding duties" (2003, 489).

By emphasising *comparative* cost, my account can accommodate small acts of supererogation. If the bare minimum involves very little cost, then a supererogatory act need only involve a cost to the agent that is marginally greater. Moreover, if the bare minimum involves a non-comparative *benefit* to the agent, then simply *less* benefit to the agent is enough to make the action optional (so long as it is permissible): recall the example of the shared windfall. It is therefore not a corollary of my account that supererogatory actions must necessarily involve extreme cost.

Therefore, extreme costs play no role, whether intuitive or explanatory, in my account of optionality. However, rather than the claim that supererogatory actions necessarily involve an *extreme* cost, some authors have instead claimed that supererogatory acts need not involve *any* cost. I now consider and reject this view.

5 Rejecting the No Cost View of Supererogation

I discuss three variations of the view that cost need not play any role in accounts of supererogation.

5.1 Optionality and Moral Goodness

Instead of appealing to cost in order to distinguish the minimal fulfilment of our duty and those acts that go beyond this minimal fulfilment, we could try to cash out optionality in terms of the other feature of supererogatory acts: moral goodness. For example, the classic example of someone who runs into a burning building to save a child, it could be argued, is optional because it is morally better than a permissible alternative: for example, simply calling the emergency services.

However, optionality cannot be understood solely in terms of goodness: some good acts are clearly morally required and some optional actions may well be morally bad. Take the examples of "the greedy adventurer who sets off on an arduous journey into the heart of the jungle, determined to brave all dangers in order to find a buried treasure" or the "dedicated crackpot who nearly freezes to death trying to convert the indifferent Eskimos to Caribbean Voodooism" (Feinberg 1961, 281). Assuming that it is not forbidden to do so, these actions are optional (they are clearly not morally required). Nevertheless, these actions are not morally good and are therefore not supererogatory. Thus, the deontic category of optionality should not be—cannot be—reduced to the evaluative concept of goodness.[21]

[21] An alternative to reducing optionality to goodness might be to try to abandon optionality entirely and define supererogation solely in terms of goodness (or betterness). However, no account of supererogation denies the centrality of the optionality of supererogatory acts. The only good reason to reject a core feature at the heart of all accounts of supererogation would be that a coherent account of optionality could not be given, but this is exactly what I have done. Finally, the notion of optionality is important because it allows for the possibility of optional *bad* actions. The possibility of such acts provides the basis of the moral mirror of the supererogatory: the suberogatory. Suberogatory actions are bad and yet permissible. Suppose supererogatory actions are characterised as morally permissible acts that are morally better than a permissible alternative (thus, dropping the notion of optionality altogether). This would mean that all permissible acts except the least good permissible act would be supererogatory. Not

5.2 The No Cost View

I turn now to a more robust attempt to reject of the role of cost in accounts of supererogation as presented by Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons. They explicitly reject the claim that any sacrifice on the part of the agent is necessary for an act to be supererogatory (2010). If 'sacrifice' is taken to mean *extreme* cost then we are not in disagreement because, as argued above, I too reject the claim that supererogation requires extreme cost. However, I take Horgan and Timmons to be saying something stronger: that an act can be supererogatory even if it involves *no* cost to the agent.

Note that I do not disagree with the claim that an act can be supererogatory even if it involves no cost *on a before-and-after comparison*. Take a modification of the charity case: suppose I find £20 on the floor with no obvious owner and I can decide whether or not to keep it or give it to charity. If I give it all to charity, I am left no better or worse off than I was before I found it. Thus, on a before-and-after comparison, this act might be thought to involve no cost. However, as I have argued, what is important for an act to be supererogatory is that it involves a cost *compared* to actions that I could have performed instead. Thus, giving the £20 to charity is supererogatory on the assumption that it would have been permissible for me to keep the money and therefore does involve a comparative cost.

The point of disagreement between Horgan and Timmons and myself must therefore be over the following claim: that an act can be supererogatory even if it involves no extra cost compared *to any other permissible actions that could otherwise*

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only is this an extremely inclusive account of the supererogatory, it leaves little or no room left for the suberogatory. It is an advantage of my account of optionality that it makes room for suberogation.

have been performed. I call this the *No Cost View*. Horgan and Timmons offer a series of examples that are intended to motivate this view, which I now consider and reject as counterexamples to my view. I then show that, without the notion of cost, the No Cost View is not able to distinguish the required from the optional.

5.3 Praise, Merit and the Importance of Cost

To begin with, take the following case:

> **Olivia's Offer**: Olivia has just moved to a new city and meets a neighbour, Mary, who is recently widowed. Mary is an avid baseball fan and used to attend baseball games regularly with her husband. Olivia, who has no particular interest in the game, suggests going to a game with Mary so that Mary has someone to go with.[22]

Horgan and Timmons claim that Olivia's offer of going to a game with Mary goes beyond duty. This is also beyond duty on my view: it is optional because it involves a greater cost (of buying a ticket and of the time spent doing something in which she has no particular interest) than an alternative permissible action (refraining from offering to go with Mary and instead doing something she enjoys). But now consider the following variation from Horgan and Timmons:

[22] Paraphrased from Horgan and Timmons 2010, 47.

> **Modified Olivia's Offer**: 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 [cost] (Horgan and Timmons 2010, 54).

They argue that, if Olivia were to offer the ticket to Mary, it would involve no cost on her part but would, nonetheless, be supererogatory.

Let us suppose that, in Modified Olivia's Offer, exactly the same cost is involved whether Olivia leaves the ticket at home or gives it to Mary. Furthermore, let us suppose instead that not only do these acts involve the *same* cost, they both involve the *least* cost of all the permissible alternative actions available to Olivia. On my view, these actions would then both constitute doing the bare minimum: both giving the ticket to Mary and refraining from doing so is permissible but neither is optional in the sense that supererogatory actions are. Horgan and Timmons must reject this conclusion and defend the claim that giving the ticket to Mary is in fact optional and supererogatory.

In order to understand why Horgan and Timmons's account of this example fails to succeed, we must look at their definition of supererogation in more detail.

Horgan and Timmons's definition of supererogation consists three elements: the deontic, the evaluative and reactive attitudes. Under the deontic, they claim that supererogatory acts are neither morally required nor morally forbidden, they are not wrong, and thus they are optional (Horgan and Timmons 2010, 31). Thus, they presuppose that we can distinguish the required from the optional. However, I have shown that, in order to make this distinction, we need the notion of cost. However, perhaps the other parts of their definition can help do this without invoking cost.

Under the evaluative elements, Horgan and Timmons claim that supererogatory acts are not morally indifferent because they realise moral value for people other than the agent. It is here that we encounter the notion of *merit* that is central to their account: they claim that not only are supererogatory actions good, they are also *meritorious* (Horgan and Timmons 2010, 31). Finally, under the reactive attitude element, Horgan and Timmons they claim that the performance of supererogatory acts is praiseworthy while their non-performance is not blameworthy.

So, there are two candidates that we might suppose can help us distinguish when the fulfilment of duty is supererogatory and when it is not: praise and merit. Gregory Mellema uses the notion of praise to explicitly distinguish the optional from the required. I demonstrate the problems that arise for Mellema and then show that the very same problems arise for Horgan and Timmons's appeal to merit.

Mellema invokes the notion of praise because he too recognises cases of oversubscription as a problem for defining the optionality of supererogatory acts in terms of non-duties.[23] In order to deal with cases of oversubscription, he makes the following distinction: an act fulfils a duty *directly* if and only if "its performance (if it is praiseworthy at all) is praiseworthy *for no other reason* than the fact that it fulfils a duty", while an act fulfils a duty *non-directly* "if and only if the act fulfils the duty, and the performance of the act is morally praiseworthy f*or reasons other than* the mere fact that it fulfils a duty" (Mellema 1991a, 37, emphasis added). Mellema proposes that supererogatory acts cannot fulfil a duty directly. Therefore, acts that fulfil duties and

[23] Mellema does not use the term 'oversubscription' but he does discuss cases where an act "both fulfils a duty and goes beyond the fulfilment of a duty" (1991b, 172).

are supererogatory can be distinguished from those that aren't because the former are praiseworthy *for reasons other than the mere fact that it fulfils a duty*.[24]

In making the above distinction, Mellema acknowledges that a line must be drawn between those actions that fulfil duties and *are* supererogatory and those actions that fulfil duties and are *not* supererogatory. In this, I agree with Mellema. I also agree that supererogatory acts, when they do fulfil duties, are often praiseworthy for reasons other than the fact that they fulfil duties. However, I reject Mellema's praise-based distinction for several reasons.

Praiseworthiness, like blameworthiness, is ambiguous between an act assessment and an agent assessment. It is an agent assessment when it concerns the agent's motivation for performing the act and is an act assessment when an act is praiseworthy in virtue of being an act of a certain sort, independent of the motivations of the agent who performed it.

Let us suppose, firstly, that Mellema intends praiseworthiness as an *agent* assessment. It should be noted, however, that praiseworthiness (as an agent assessment) must be a necessary requirement for an act to be supererogatory *in addition to* optionality and goodness, because an act being optional and good does not guarantee that the agent acted with any particular motivation that makes them praiseworthy. But, as an *addition* to optionality and goodness, praiseworthiness cannot be what helps us to distinguish the deontic categories of the required and the optional. We must be able to

[24] Praiseworthiness plays a role in many accounts of supererogation (see for example Attfield 1979, 481; Baron 1987, 239; Jacobs 1987, 97; Raz 1975, 164). It is also a premise of the debate between Pybus and McGoldrick (Pybus 1982; McGoldrick 1984).

identify what is required and what is optional without first knowing the motivation of the agent.[25]

So, alternatively, let us suppose that Mellema intends praiseworthiness as an *act* assessment. On this supposition, a supererogatory action is optional if the act is praiseworthy for reasons other than the mere fact that it fulfils a duty. However, the question is what kinds of reasons would make an action praiseworthy for reasons other than that it fulfils a duty. The answer must lie in the explanation of *in what way* these acts go beyond those that 'merely fulfil' duties. While Mellema remains quiet on how they might go beyond the mere fulfilment of our duties, I believe more can be said. It is precisely an account of in what way supererogatory acts go beyond the minimal fulfilment—and thus in virtue of what they might be praiseworthy—that I give here: they go beyond the minimal fulfilment in terms of comparative cost.

Perhaps Horgan and Timmons's appeal to merit rather than praise will do a better job at distinguishing the optional from the required. The paradox of supererogation concerns how an action can be good and yet not required. They use merit to help solve this supposed paradox: an action can be good and meritorious without being required because some reasons confer merit without playing a requiring role. This role is defined as follows: "A moral reason, M, plays a moral-merit-conferring role when performing an action for reason M confers some degree of moral merit on the action which, were it performed for some other reason, would either lack merit or enjoy less merit" (Horgan and Timmons 2010, 54). Thus, they claim, supererogatory acts are "such that when performed *because of* the moral value or

[25] For more arguments rejecting the importance of praiseworthiness of agents as a necessary part of accounts of supererogation, see Archer 2015 and Heyd 1982, 139.

goodness in question, they are (more or less) morally meritorious" (Horgan and Timmons 2010, 31, emphasis added). How does this relate to cost? Well, while they accept that "the greater the [cost], the greater the merit conferred," they deny that any cost is *necessary* for merit to be conferred (Horgan and Timmons 2010, 54).

The problem with this account is that it takes *the reason that the agent was motivated by* to be central. Thus, their definition of meritoriousness is (like praiseworthiness) ambiguous between an act assessment and an agent assessment. Their phrasing suggests that the merit attaches to the action, and yet, whether an action is meritorious turns on the reasons for which the agent acted, and so concerns the agent's motivation, suggesting it is an agent assessment.

The importance of the motivation of the agent on Horgan and Timmons's account can be seen from the fact that they specify that the merit of a supererogatory action depends on the agent's primary reason for performing the action (Horgan and Timmons 2010, 33). They give the example of someone who risks their life to save someone with the (main) motivation of making the evening news: this action, they claim, is "not morally praiseworthy, because it is not morally meritorious" (Horgan and Timmons 2010, 33). By contrast someone whose motivation is purely altruistic "performs a meritorious act of supererogation worthy of praise" (Horgan and Timmons 2010, 33).

It is unclear from these statements how the meritorious nature of the act differs from the praiseworthiness of the act. Horgan and Timmons state that the reactive attitudes element of their definition of supererogation—that the performance of supererogatory acts is praiseworthy while nonperformances are not blameworthy—is *in light of the evaluative elements* (Horgan and Timmons 2010, 32). However, this means that the praiseworthiness of the performance of the act is dependent of the merit

of the agent, rather than a separate concern or addition. Just like Mellema's appeal to praise failed—either as an agent assessment or an act assessment—to help distinguish the optional from the required, so Horgan and Timmons's appeal to merit similarly fails.

Note that just because the performance of an action is meritorious does not mean that it could not also constitute the bare minimum. In fact, Horgan and Timmons accept this, as they do not deny that reasons can play multiple roles, such as both a merit-conferring role as well as a requiring role (2010, 55). Thus, just because Olivia would be worthy of merit if she gave the ticket to Mary does not mean that doing so was not the bare minimum. The assumption in the final permutation of the Olivia case is that it 'made no difference'—that is, that there was absolutely no increase in cost—to Olivia whether or not she gave the ticket to Mary. If this is so, I submit that it was not supererogatory for Olivia to give it to Mary, even if Olivia was meritorious for doing so.

Let us make the example more stark in order to see why this is so. Suppose Olivia is walking down the street when she finds a ticket on the ground for a baseball game she cannot herself go to (for simplicity, suppose that there is no way to find the original owner and return the ticket). She then bumps into Mary. On Olivia's right is a bin and on her left is Mary. She could either turn to her right and drop the ticket in the bin or turn to her left and hand it to Mary. It makes absolutely no difference to Olivia. I do not believe that it is supererogatory to give the ticket to Mary rather than put it in the bin.[26] It is permissible for Olivia to give Mary the ticket and it is also permissible for her to put it in the bin but neither is optional in the sense that supererogatory actions

[26] As I hope to explore in later work, I believe it would be suberogatory to put the ticket in the bin.

are because both constitute the bare minimum.[27] However, an action is not rendered optional (in the relevant sense) simply by the existence of an alternative permissible action. Recall the example of visiting you in hospital: this was morally good to do (you very much appreciated and enjoyed my visit) and yet it was not supererogatory because it was not optional *despite* the fact that there were plenty of alternative permissible actions available to me such as wearing something other than jeans or visiting on Monday.

If Olivia is motivated by Mary's well-being, her action of giving Mary the ticket may well be meritorious. Such actions can say something about our character, our motivation, our awareness of the needs of others. But then so does my returning the money I owe you gladly and gratefully rather than resentfully. However, returning the money is obligatory not supererogatory. Thus, the meritoriousness of an action does not make it optional.

Horgan and Timmons's example does not provide a counterexample to my account of the optionality of supererogatory. Furthermore, their account presupposes rather than gives an account of optionality.

However, I turn now to a further, final objection to my cost-based account of optionality. This object provides an alternative defence of the No Cost View based on the fact that what is costly for some is not costly for others.

5.4 Concerts and Soup Kitchens

Suppose that I love Beyoncé and her music and you hate her (unlikely, I know, but possible). If helping a stranger involved missing her concert, this would count as a cost

[27] Note that on my account just because an action is not optional does not mean it is required.

for me but not for you. Many preferences are like this. We all like, value and enjoy different things and this surely makes a difference to what counts as a cost for different individuals.

However, suppose that you are a morally great person who loves helping other people, while I am rather lazy and gain no enjoyment from helping strangers. Overall, you would be much happier if you helped at the soup kitchen than if you stayed at home in your pyjamas (whereas I would be happier staying at home).[28] If we apply the logic of the concert, helping at the soup kitchen involves a cost for me that it does not involve for you.

If this is so, then being someone who takes pleasure in doing good would mean that good acts often do not involve a cost for you that they normally would for other people. Given the relationship between cost, optionality and supererogation on my account, this means that there would in fact be *fewer* supererogatory opportunities for more morally developed people who take pleasure in doing good.[29] Some may well be happy to bite the bullet on this issue. However, if you reject this conclusion, it might seem like this is a more plausible example of a cost-free supererogatory act: helping at a soup kitchen and enjoying it. Thus, it looks like I am faced with a dilemma: either I am forced to accept the counterintuitive conclusion that there could be fewer supererogatory opportunities for those who take pleasure in doing good or I have to

[28] You might even experience psychological distress if you didn't help when you knew you could.

[29] Archer expresses this as a concern that more morally developed persons would experience fewer opportunities to supererogate because they would be under increased *obligations* (for more, see Archer's discussion of what he calls the No Cost Principle (2016, 342)). However, it is important to note that this need not be the issue. I do not assume that something that is no more costly and yet worse than another action needs to be *forbidden*. It could, rather, simply be bad. Or not. Nevertheless, I accept that if we cannot draw a distinction between the concert and the soup kitchen, then it would lead to fewer opportunities to supererogate.

accept the possibility of cost-free supererogatory action, contrary to my account. There is, however, a third option: refine our notion of cost to exclude the moral pleasure or satisfaction we might receive for performing morally good actions, while *including* the pleasure we get from non-moral things such as attending a concert.

In fact, this is exactly how we often calculate cost: we think that the person who leaps on the train tracks to save someone risked life and limb, without taking into account—or even bothering to wonder about—whether or not their moral character is such that they were happier doing it than not.[30] Thus, some actions, like helping in a soup kitchen, involve a cost, even though the person may well be happier doing it than not.[31]

Distinguishing the satisfaction of different types of desires is already a matter of lengthy discussion. This kind of distinction is central to accounts of egalitarianism and welfare more generally where we must distinguish between the satisfaction of the desire to attend a music concert from the satisfaction of desires and preferences that are

[30] Alternatively, we could appeal to Calhoun's notion of a 'minimally morally good person' who is someone who has the most basic concern for others needed to do their duty but nothing more (2004). Thus, we could ask of the person who performed the action in question: if I were like them in my non-moral preferences (such as my favourite band or whether I like football) but was a *minimally* morally good person, would this action be costly to me? Those costs we all associate with supererogatory actions, which excludes the satisfaction they might get from doing good.

[31] It should be noted that the 'moral pleasure' I wish to exclude need not be felt as an explicitly moral pleasure by the agent. It is the pleasure gained from those parts of an action in virtue of which the act is morally good. Thus, what makes gift giving morally good is, for example, that it demonstrates caring for others, anticipation of their needs and understanding of their interests. The pleasure we get from these elements can be excluded, even if it not experienced as a distinctively *moral* pleasure. On the other hand, if someone gets pleasure from helping at a soup kitchen only because it is the only occasion on which they can hang out with their friends who also work there, this pleasure can be included in determining how costly the act is. It is of course true that helping in the soup kitchen is *morally better* than actions that the agent could otherwise have done (such as stay at home, bored and lonely). However, as discussed in §5.1, neither supererogation nor optionality should be cashed out as moral goodness (or betterness).

pathological (to amputate one's own limbs), evil (to harm others), irrational (to count blades of grass) or malformed (Stockholm syndrome). Take the case of Tiny Tim (often discussed in debates on egalitarianism): he has a disability but a cheery disposition (Cohen 1989, 918). Just as we can accept that he is entitled to compensation and in need of assistance *even though he is happy*, we can acknowledge that someone who helps in a soup kitchen undertakes a cost even though they are happy to do so.

There is a familiar concern that all our actions—even seemingly altruistic ones—benefit us, if only through the self-satisfaction we gain from helping others.[32] However, just because we may well get pleasure from helping others does not mean that we need to give up the notion of altruism altogether. We do not have to abandon the claim that there is a sense in which helping others often involves a cost—and it is this sense that we simply need to capture—even if this is (in some other sense) compensated for by our pleasure in doing good.

6 Conclusion

To understand the supererogatory, we need to unpack the idea of the optional, in contrast to the required. As I have shown, this distinction cannot be based on merit or praise or on contrasting duties and non-duties. Instead, I have argued that it is comparative cost that provides a way of distinguishing those actions that merely fulfil our duty and those actions that supersede that fulfilment. Thus, an action is optional, in the sense that supererogatory actions are optional, if it is a permissible act that is (or

[32] For example, self-sacrifice was thought to be a challenge to the idea of natural selection (Darwin 1871, 163). The solution has been to see self-sacrifice as actually benefiting the person sacrificing through, for example, the preservation of the genes of their offspring.

risks being) more costly for the agent than the act (or acts) that constitutes doing the bare minimum (where the bare minimum is the least costly permissible act(s) available), and where this cost excludes any well-being or pleasure that comes from doing something morally good or, to put it another, where the cost is that which would be experienced by a minimally morally good person.

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