

A LEVINASIAN RECONCEPTUALISATION OF SUPEREROGATION

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ABSTRACT

Supererogatory acts, as moral acts that go beyond duty, problematise the notions of obligation and autonomy within such impartialist ethical accounts such as Kantianism and utilitarianism which opt to reduce and assimilate supererogation as a result. Bernard Williams's conception of a moral incapacity challenges the claim that cost to the moral agent, and consequently, autonomy, are necessary to conceptualise supererogation. I extend this finding by adapting Craig Taylor's idea of a primitive moral response as an attitude that can ground supererogation. However, because such a primitive response is too self-regarding, I argue for a reinscription of such an attitude in terms of a Levinasian moral response. Such a response relies on a reconsidered autonomy that is grounded in the alterity of the Other, but which is incessantly corrected by the presence of the third party to the face to face encounter. I argue for an understanding of such an incessant correction in terms of a Levinasian normativity which as a provisional imperative, can also be thought of as an attitude. I claim that Levinasian normativity is supererogatory and that supererogation can also be reconceptualised as the possibility of sacrifice rather than actual sacrifice.

KEYWORDS

Levinas, supererogation, autonomy, sacrifice, provisionality, saints.

0. INTRODUCTION

Supererogatory acts are moral acts that go beyond duty. While the term 'supererogation' is philosophically technical, and perhaps also "ugly and unpronounceable" (Cowley 2015; 1), supererogation is easy to recognise and understood in the paradigmatic cases of saints and heroes. We praise and admire the lives and actions of saints and heroes; *a fortiori* we praise and admire supererogatory actions, although crucially, we do not assign blame if a moral agent does *not* perform a supererogatory act.

It is uncontroversial to claim that we all have a moral duty to help the other when they are in need, or that morality imposes obligations to the other upon us. What *is* controversial is to mark where that duty ends, beyond which point, we can in good conscience claim that we have done enough, that we have discharged our moral

duties. It follows from this that moral autonomy is deeply implicated in supererogation. If an obligation is too morally demanding, then a moral agent must be able to restrict such a demand.

Supererogation problematises and is in turn problematised by both moral autonomy and duty. Autonomy is problematic because agency is central to ethical subjectivity – if a moral agent has no choice in deciding whether to pursue a course of action, how can she be held responsible? Duty is problematic because it raises questions about the limits of duty – how far should duty extend? The limits of duty implicate autonomy, in that the wider the duties extend, the more they encroach upon autonomy. The first research question that this paper seeks to answer is whether supererogation can be conceptualised in the absence of duty, which will in turn require determining whether autonomy is necessary or sufficient for supererogation. I will argue that conceptualising supererogation requires neither duty nor autonomy.

It will be at this juncture that I will attempt a leap across a philosophical and concomitant terminological divide, a leap which will see my argument shifting register from one engaged in the analytic tradition, to one engaged in the so-called ‘continental’ tradition. This precisely because I believe that continental philosophy has ethical concepts and resources at its disposal with which to overcome the impasse in conceptualising supererogation. Part of my concern with analytic moral philosophy will be encapsulated in what has been called ‘impartialism’, that is, identifying ethics with a set of universal and immutable principles.

It will be my contention that the work of Emmanuel Levinas (who, however one may wish to categorise him, at the very least falls within the continental philosophical tradition) is particularly well suited to reconceptualise supererogation. The paper’s second research question thus asks: can a Levinasian ethics offer a viable framework within which to conceptualise supererogation? I will argue that it can. This will however require an ‘operationalisation’ of Levinasian ethics

The paper proceeds as follows: In the first section I offer a brief circumscription of the traditional conceptualisation of supererogation as acts that go beyond duty. I also align myself with the position that a moral agent’s attitude can be constitutive of supererogation. In section II I describe how Kantian and utilitarian theories attempt to reduce the supererogatory to the obligatory through various assimilation strategies. In the process the notion of duty and its relation to supererogation is problematised. In section III I interrogate the link between cost and autonomy, which in turn implicates duty. I outline Bernard Williams concept of a moral incapacity and then argue that autonomy is no longer a necessary condition for supererogation. I then advance Craig Taylor’s positing of a ‘primitive moral response’ as a Wittgenstein ‘attitude toward a soul’ as a means to ground supererogation in the absence of duty and autonomy. However, Taylor’s primitive response falls short in certain respects and needs to be supplemented. I will argue that this can be achieved by

enlisting the work of Emmanuel Levinas. As a first step I briefly adumbrate Levinasian ethics in section IV, focusing on how he understands ethics as the constraining of autonomy, and, in section V, how a measure of that autonomy is restored by the third party. Based on Levinas's (1998; 158) argument that the third is "the incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity" I posit a Levinasian normativity as the 'provisional imperative' - an (reinscribed Taylorian) attitude that serves to ground supererogation. In the final section I tie this position to the idea that supererogation should be conceptualised as the *possibility* of sacrifice, rather than actual sacrifice and conclude that every moral act is also a supererogatory act.

1. MAPPING SUPEREROGATION - AN ANALYTIC ANALYSIS

Cowley (2015; 2) distils the various definitions of supererogation in the literature down to two broad groupings: the first basic definition frames a supererogatory act as "a morally admirable act that in some way goes 'beyond the call of duty'"; while the second definition accounts for the responses of others "according to which a supererogatory action is praiseworthy (or at least admirable) if performed, but not blameworthy if omitted". Heyd (1982; 1) notes that "supererogation is primarily attributed to acts or actions rather than persons, traits of character, motives, intentions, or emotions". Others reject this core focus on actions, and argue that a moral agent's character, motives and attitudes can in some cases be constitutive of supererogation (Cowley 2015). Cowley (2015; 4) argues that dismissing the supererogator's *perspective* as irrelevant, or as an "emotional distortion", impoverishes our understanding of the supererogatory act. He suggests that "the objective meaning of the [supererogatory] act partly depends on the way the supererogator comes to think about it" (*ibid.*). Forgiveness is a classic example of how supererogation can be constituted by an attitude. The giving up of justified resentment and claims to retribution towards the someone who has wronged them is a supererogatory forbearance that is "constituted by a 'change of heart', an expression of a new *attitude*, the willingness to restore personal relations of friendship" (Heyd 1982; 159) (emphasis added). In this paper I will follow Cowley and take the position that a certain kind of attitude is constitutive of supererogation, that is, grounding of supererogation. I return to this in section three below.

The contemporary debate around supererogation is inaugurated by Urmson's (1958) seminal essay 'Saints and Heroes', which takes aim at the traditional classification of moral actions as either obligatory, permissible or forbidden; although he never once uses the term 'supererogation' in his essay. This tripartite deontic scheme, purporting to exhaust the category of all moral actions fails, he argues, to account for actions that do not fit neatly into any of these categories, such as saintly and heroic actions. Although saintly or heroic actions are neither obligatory nor forbidden, saying that they are permissible, while true, fails to capture important

features about them, namely, that declining to take up such permissibility is not blameworthy.

Heyd (2015; 44-5) recounts how Urmson (1988; 167-9) would, some thirty years after ‘Saints and Heroes’, regret replacing the tripartite deontic structure – obligatory, permissible and forbidden acts – typical of moral theory at the time, with a tetrachotomy which included supererogatory acts. In his revisiting of supererogatory acts, Urmson notes that common everyday acts, such as kindness and considerateness, are praiseworthy and non-obligatory, but far removed from the actions of saints and heroes. Central to Urmson’s retreat from treating supererogatory acts as a distinct class of moral acts is his observation that supererogatory acts do not all involve sacrifice. Urmson concludes that the significant heterogeneity between holding an open door and jumping on a grenade to save one’s fellow platoon-members, for example, should thus preclude a special category of the supererogatory.

Heyd (2015; 45) rejects Urmson’s *volte-face*, noting that Urmson himself pointed out that supererogatory acts share two common properties: “being non-obligatory and yet having moral significance.” In other words, both the acts of holding an open door and jumping on a grenade to save one’s fellow platoon-members are not required by duty, but both are morally significant – we praise the agent performing either of these actions – and both actions are at the discretion of the agent. Heyd (*ibid.*) thus urges us to ignore Urmson’s later position, which views supererogatory acts as indistinct from other moral acts. I will interrogate the claim that autonomy is necessary for supererogation in part III below. However, autonomy implicates duty, and so before that project, I first return to explore the notion of duty further. Duty, while so central to supererogation – as that which goes beyond *duty* – is also very problematic, leading to a fundamental paradox.

2. ASSIMILATING SUPEREROGATION

Heyd (1982; 3) claims that “the philosophical problem of supererogation is two-fold”. The first, the meta-ethical, is contained in the following purported paradox:

acts of supererogation are, by definition, distinguished from acts of duty; on the other hand, they have meaning only in the framework of a moral theory based on the concept of duty [...]. Non-deontological theory [...] cannot accommodate supererogation, because if there is no duty, then *a fortiori* there cannot be action which transcends duty. On the other hand, a purely deontological theory (like Kant’s) does not leave room for supererogation, either, for supererogation, is a class of non-obligatory acts (*ibid.*).

In other words, how can a purportedly ‘good’ action be optional if that action is morally better than the non-optional alternatives?¹

¹The source of the paradox can be traced back to the so-called ‘good-ought tie-up’: if an action is good, then an agent ought to do it. Heyd traces Raz’s (1975) formulation of this dilemma into the

The second problem is a normative one and is concerned with “the demarcation of duty and ‘beyond duty’” (4). Moral agents can share the same meta-ethical understanding of the concept of duty – as something which flows from the moral law, or from an obligation to maximize happiness, for instance – and yet still disagree over what the limits of that duty may be (*ibid.*). It is at this juncture that the question of autonomy becomes paramount. Both the meta-ethical and normative problems of supererogation find their roots in the concept of obligation or duty.

Heyd explores how particular moral theories treat the notion of the supererogatory within their frameworks. One particular, and common strategy is to simply, in the term preferred by Levy (2015), ‘assimilate’ the supererogatory within their frameworks, and so dispense with the supererogatory as a distinct class of moral actions. Heyd (1982; 52) calls Kantian attempts to assimilate the supererogatory into the obligatory a reductionist strategy. In this paper I will examine this reductionism/assimilation from only a Kantian and utilitarian perspective, these two theories being the most influential ethical theories within analytic moral philosophy (and also both exemplars of what I will term below, ‘impartialism’). Kantian reductionism will illustrate the meta-ethical problem of supererogation, while utilitarian reductionism the normative problem.

Kantian reductionism

In the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1964; 21-22 in Heyd 1982; 51), Kant declares that “an action that is neither commanded nor forbidden is merely *permissible*... An action of this kind is called morally indifferent.” It is this tripartite deontic classification of actions that Urmson argues is inadequate to account for supererogation, precisely because supererogatory actions, as permissible actions, are not morally indifferent. The problem Kant faces with respect to supererogatory acts, argues Heyd, stems from Kant’s understanding of moral duty as a categorical imperative. As a categorical imperative, an obligatory act is not optional for the moral agent to perform – moral acts should be performed “wholly out of respect for duty and not from aroused feelings” (Kant 1949:192).

Heyd attributes two complementary strategies to Kant which aim to resolve this conflict: firstly, reducing the supererogatory to the obligatory; secondly, extending the meaning and scope of duty (extending the scope of duty covers what Heyd called above the normative problem of supererogation). The second strategy, says Heyd, usually just makes the first strategy more plausible. Heyd explains that “these two strategies are not always clearly distinguished from each other and should be

language of reasons for action. Heyd argues that Raz is conflating evaluative with deontic concepts – ‘ought’ can be used in a commendatory way and, in such cases, its use is tied up with ‘good’, which then provides a reason for action; but only if ‘good’ is interpreted impersonally (Heyd 1982; 171-2). Prescriptive reasons for action for Heyd, then, do not exhaust all that is unique about supererogatory actions.

understood merely as auxiliary tools of analysis and interpretation” (*ibid.*). In positing a distinction between imperfect and perfect duties, Kant hopes to extend the meaning and scope of duty. By this mechanism, room is made to encompass a purportedly supererogatory act such as charity. With duty thus extended, Kant can now more plausibly reduce the supererogatory act of charity to the obligatory duty of justice.

In the *Groundwork*, Kant (1948) distinguishes between perfect duties, which are narrow and “allow no exception in the interest of inclination”, while imperfect duties are wide and allow for some exception (in Heyd 1982; 62). So, for example, keeping a promise is a perfect duty, while charity can be understood as an imperfect duty. However, for Kant, imperfect duties are just as compelling as perfect duties, their prescriptive force being equal. More importantly, for the present argument, the distinction between the obligatory, in the case of perfect duties, and the optional, in the case of imperfect duties “lies *within* the sphere of duty” (*ibid.*). In other words, imperfect duties do not ‘go beyond’ duty as such, and so an imperfect duty, although allowing the moral agent more choice than a perfect duty, is still not a supererogatory action. This is because the choice just concerns the mode of application of the obligation, not whether to fulfil the obligation or not. However, once the obligation is fulfilled, one cannot fulfil more than that obligation. Heyd thus rejects Kant’s reductionist attempts to accommodate supererogation as a limiting and/or marginal case within his ethical framework, calling such attempts “qualified supererogationism” (4).

Utilitarian reductionism

In his seminal 1972 essay ‘Famine, Affluence and Morality’, Peter Singer, one of the leading contemporary exponents of utilitarianism, also attempts to reduce charity to duty, through an argument known as the life-saving analogy (LSA)². More than 35 years later, Singer (2009; 259) would confirm that (in reference to ‘Famine, Affluence and Morality’),

I originally used the term ‘moral obligation’ in order to break away from the idea that giving to assist the poor is ‘charity’, that is, something that is good to do, but not wrong not to do [that is, supererogatory]. I wanted to suggest that failure to make a

² Singer (1972; 231) argues that “if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it” (231). Singer then considers an application of this principle: a child is drowning in a shallow pond that I happen to be walking past. Most would agree that I ought to wade in and pull the child to safety; muddying my clothes and ruining my new shoes is a small price to pay for saving the child’s life. Singer then argues that allowing the poor to starve is analogous to letting a child drown. Just as we have a moral duty to save a drowning child, we, especially those in the developed world, have a similar moral duty to assist those suffering from malnutrition, hunger and disease in the developing world.

significant effort to assist the desperately poor is a failure to meet some minimal standard of moral decency.

Heyd (1982; 73) discusses the “deontic implications of utilitarianism” that follow from characterising the moral status of actions in terms of the goodness (or utility or welfare) of their consequences, which is that “actions can be described as obligatory only if certain conditions relating to their outcome obtain”. Put differently, although utilitarians do not generally speak of a moral duty as Kantians do, an action can be said to be obligatory (and hence falling under a duty to perform it) only if it would result in the most good for the most moral agents. The upshot is that “while deontology tends to be too strict in its definition of ‘moral’ (considering only obligatory actions as having moral value), utilitarianism is inclined to provide a definition of ‘moral’ which is too wide (taking every ‘useful’ action as morally good)” (*ibid.*). Starting from opposite positions, utilitarianism and Kantianism, reach the same conclusion in denying supererogation a place within their respective ethical frameworks. Utilitarianism, because “no action which is morally good can be non-obligatory” [that is, no action which increases the overall balance of utility should not be obligatory]; and Kantianism, because “no action which is beyond duty can be morally good” (*ibid.*) That is to say, no action which does not meet the categorical imperative can derive from the moral law.

3. IMPARTIALISM, AUTONOMY, AND SUPEREROGATION

In this section I want to tie Kantian and utilitarian attempts to assimilate supererogation to a wider concern with what is called ‘impartialism’. Impartialism, says Cullity (2004: 92), is simply the recognition that “morally speaking, I am no more important than anyone else.” Impartialism includes deontological (Kantianism) and consequentialist (utilitarianism) ethical theories and “however different these approaches, each identifies morality with a perspective of impartiality, impersonality, objectivity, and universality” (Alford 2001: 149).

The best articulation of the critique against impartialism is developed in Bernard Williams’ work (1973; 1981a; 1981b), and centers around the notion of autonomy. In ‘Persons, Character and Morality’, Williams (1981a; 5) starts with the idea that everyone has a set of desires and concerns – ‘projects’ – that help to constitute a character. These projects, which can be either one separable project or a nexus of projects, give meaning to the moral agent’s life and provide “motive force which propels him into the future” (13). Utilitarianism would require us, as impersonal utility-maximisers, to shelve, or seriously contradict, our personal projects, and so act anathema to our characters, whenever such conflicting demands arise (14). As for the Kantian who, in abstracting morality, effaces the individual, “there can come a point at which it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of the

impartial good ordering of the world of moral agents, something which is a condition of his having any interest in being around in that world at all" (*ibid.*).

Supererogation requires that the intrinsic value of individual autonomy be given expression (Heyd 1982; 175). This is the chief attraction of the supererogatory act for Heyd – its gratuitous and spontaneous nature. Supererogatory action is free from the impartialist imperative to follow abstract principles and “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” (*ibid.*). Acting in a supererogatory fashion can constitute a moral agents’ life project but without his autonomy to choose this project, the project would not be praiseworthy³.

Cost and the asymmetry of blame

In order to interrogate Heyd’s claim it is necessary to return to Urmson’s example of the soldier jumping on a grenade, and Urmson’s characterisation of this act as a *sacrifice*. Recall that Urmson’s later position is that quotidian acts do not constitute supererogatory acts. Drummond-Young (2015; 127) calls the disregarding of small acts, such as holding open a door, as supererogatory, ‘the appeal to cost’ argument. This argument has it that the supererogatory act needs to be voluntary because performing such an act usually comes at considerable cost to the moral agent, the notion of cost encompassing “money, time, effort and life itself”, as well as related opportunity costs borne from acting beyond duty (Kagan 1989; 232). Obligatory moral actions do not ordinarily incur a heavy cost to one’s capacities to pursue other interests such as learning to play the guitar, for example, while supererogatory actions usually do.

The soldier who jumps on a grenade to save his comrades lives and dies in the process pays the ultimate cost for his supererogatory act – with his life; and his sacrifice, voluntarily offered, is praiseworthy. However, Cowley (2015; 5) raises some problematic points in relation to such a grenade-jumper: if the grenade-jumper dies in his attempt then “it is not clear what he has incurred is a cost given that he does not live to *experience it as a cost*”, even though he might experience such risks and anticipated costs in the moment of jumping before he is killed. Or, if the grenade-jumper believes that he will be killed by the explosion anyway (because he is closest to it perhaps), he may calculate that he has nothing to lose, and so may as well try to save his comrades’ lives. Thus, the appeal to cost distorts our understanding of the act as supererogatory.

The notion of cost is also tied to what has been labelled the ‘perspectival problem’ of supererogation’. This describes a common asymmetry between an observer to, and the agent of, a supererogatory act: to the observer of the act wherein a soldier

³ Susan Wolf in ‘Moral Saints’ (1982) argues that praising those pursuing such a project might nevertheless be undesirable.

throws himself onto a live grenade in order to save the lives of his comrades, the act is praiseworthy (because of its great cost), and yet, from the perspective of the soldier, the action is precisely just his duty. Levy (2015; 229) explains that this asymmetry should be understood as “how *others* are restricted from asserting that the supererogatory action is obligatory or (morally) blaming the actor for non-performance [in the event that such action is deemed obligatory].”

Statements such as, “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” (Monroe 1996; 104, in Horgan and Timmons 2010:40) are widespread in the literature. The supererogatory act does not present itself as optional to the agent to perform and “nobody else can call on him to perform such an act as they can call on him to tell the truth and to keep his promises” (Urmson 1958; 204).

Some argue that such first-hand accounts are really just misdescriptions – the moral agent is either misremembering his experience or is being modest (Horgan and Timmons 2010; 40) and, as such, the action is still supererogatory. However, some theorists, most notably Bernard Williams (1981b; 1993), regard the claim that a moral agent could not act otherwise in a particular situation as a genuine incapacity – a ‘moral incapacity,’ as Williams calls it. So while Williams posits autonomy as central to a moral agents’ pursuit of her life projects, Williams also envisages a situation where such autonomy becomes, paradoxically, constrained by the very commitment to those pursuits. I examine this next.

Moral incapacity and the implications for autonomy

Bernard Williams (1981b) first introduces the notion of an incapacity to perform a particular action as tied to a ‘practical necessity’, which concludes a deliberative process following the question ‘What ought I to do?’ In reaching the conclusion that she ought to perform a certain action as a *practical necessity*, the moral agent recognises that such conclusion represents “a certain incapacity of mine” (128).

Williams, some twelve years later, develops this idea into the notion of a moral incapacity, which is not “an incapacity to engage or be engaged in moral life” but rather

incapacities that are themselves an expression of the moral life: the kind of incapacity that is in question when we say of someone, usually in commendation of him, that he could not act or was not capable of acting in certain ways (1993; 59).

Williams uses as a paradigmatic example of moral incapacity, Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms in 1521. There, Luther famously declared ‘hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders’ (Here I stand; I can do no other).

Williams distinguishes moral incapacity from other physical and psychological incapacities, with the chief criterion being that “a moral incapacity belongs to the

species: incapacity to do a certain thing knowingly” (1993; 62). A moral incapacity also reveals itself “in the fact that for the appropriate kinds of reasons, I will never try” to overcome that particular moral incapacity (63). This is because moral incapacities are expressions of the agent’s moral life, and in attempting to overcome them, or in ceasing to identify with them, that incapacity no longer counts as a moral incapacity.

At this point, Alfred Archer (2015) argues that if a genuine moral incapacity – to perform, or refrain from performing, a particular act – exists, then this undermines the idea that the supererogatory agent is sacrificing something of value or incurring a considerable cost to themselves. The traditional notion of supererogation, as involving cost, then, is flawed. An important consequence of this result is that the autonomy of the moral agent, in particular with regard to performing supererogatory acts, comes into question. If the supererogatory act no longer constitutes a cost for the moral agent, then the supererogatory act need not be optional for the moral agent. This is not to say sacrifice, or cost, will never feature in a supererogatory action, just that its appearance is no longer a necessary condition for supererogation.

Primitive moral responses

Craig Taylor (1995) challenges Williams on the idea that moral incapacities only, or typically, result from a deliberative process. To be clear, Taylor elsewhere (2002; 62) notes that Williams does not mean only certain deliberative conclusions that a moral agent does reach, but also conclusions he *might* reach, if he was not deliberating under false assumptions, for example. For Williams (1993; 65), even if no actual process of deliberation occurs, “the idea of a *possible* deliberation by the agent [...] gives us the best picture of what the [moral] incapacity is” [emphasis added].

Taylor (1995; 277) provides the example of a moral agent **R**, a member of an anti-government movement fighting an authoritarian regime, who discovers that a comrade has betrayed the cause. **R** deliberates on the appropriate course of action, considering the need for a strong show of leadership and discipline, and concludes that the only moral option is to execute his comrade himself. However, when the time comes to confront his comrade, he discovers that he can’t pull the trigger.

Taylor (278) considers what this discovery – that one cannot go through with the act of intentionally killing somebody – entails:

On the one hand, we might say that **R** has discovered something in this situation about himself, about what real fear is like or whatever – that is relevant to his conclusion that (in the end) he cannot kill his comrade. But on the other hand, it might be suggested that what **R** has discovered here is *simply that he cannot kill his comrade*.

Taylor argues that it is the latter reply which resists explanation in terms of some further deliberation; whether this entails deliberating about **R**'s life project, or about

other information forthcoming from the situation. In other words, further deliberation about whether or not to proceed with the execution, “has simply been ruled out” (*ibid.*).

R’s moral incapacity to continue with the execution of his comrade, in spite of all the preceding deliberation, is an example of what Taylor calls a ‘primitive response’; ‘primitive’ being used “to emphasize the point that such responses cannot be further analysed, broken down and explained in terms of something more basic, such as an agent’s motives, beliefs and practical deliberations” (282-3). If R could answer the question why he could not kill his comrade with the reply ‘*because* he is my comrade’, then such a reply would constitute a reason and *ipso facto* would not be a primitive response. Such a reply might indicate a possible psychological incapacity. However, R cannot articulate why he cannot kill his comrade and the reason why is precisely because such reasons are not present, and cannot be present, to the agent. Nevertheless, such a primitive response is still a moral incapacity insofar as the agent cannot bring himself to perform the act in question despite concluding that good reasons to do so exist.

In *Moralism*, Taylor (2012) offers a more concise formulation of his notion of a primitive response, articulating what he takes to be the two most important aspects of a primitive response; first, they

are *immediate and unthinking* in the sense that they are not mediated by certain prior thoughts we might have about the particular human beings we are responding to [...which] is not to concede that such responses are merely mindless or instinctive. Rather, and this is their second aspect, such responses are [...] themselves a *form of recognition* of another’s humanity. (*ibid.*; viii)

A primitive response, to the suffering of another for example, is itself both the action (of recognition of such suffering) that the agent performs, *and* that which moves the agent to perform that action. It would be wrong to call this a reason for action as this would imply that the agent had deliberated on his course of action and can articulate, however vaguely, his motivations and beliefs. Such a deliberative response would no longer be a primitive response as defined by Taylor. The primitive response, which moves the agent to act, is thus better described as a *ground* for action

An important implication of a primitive response as an unthinking and immediate response is that it is not a voluntary response and is thus not an expression of the agent’s moral autonomy. This is, however, not problematic insofar as supererogation is concerned, as it has been established that autonomy is no longer a distinguishing feature of supererogation.

Taylor (2002), explores sympathy (in an eponymous monograph) as a paradigm for a primitive response. Taylor argues that sympathy is “a primitive response to the suffering of another” (3). This means that the phenomenon of sympathy cannot be broken down and explained in terms of something more fundamental such as a

desire or a motive. Taylor considers how we can know that another is suffering, and so be moved to sympathy, by building on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1958) theory of other minds in *Philosophical Investigations*. Taylor (2002; 5) links a primitive response to what Wittgenstein calls 'an attitude towards a soul'. Taylor argues that "our conception of thoughts and feelings of others is constituted by our *expressive responses* to their expressive behaviour" (*ibid.*). So, for example, an expression of sympathy toward someone crying out in pain is an indication of our belief that they are feeling pain. While they may be faking their pain, my sympathetic response still constitutes my conception of the other's pain. Our primitive responses to others thus express our attitude that the human before us is "the kind of being that has thoughts and feelings" (84). This attitude – an attitude towards a soul – is the recognition of the other's humanity (to feel, to suffer) and is revealed in my primitive response to the other.

At this point I want to argue that supererogation can be understood as consisting of an attitude – an attitude towards a soul – which manifests in a primitive moral response to the other. There is however a problem with this formulation as it stands which concerns autonomy. I will elaborate on this over the next three paragraphs.

Taylor (2002; 5) argues that not all primitive responses need be *moral* responses. Besides sympathy, an equally immediate and unthinking (that is, primitive) response to the sight of a leper, for example, could be to turn away in disgust, or embarrassment. Taylor (*ibid.*) argues that these types of (primitive) responses cannot be called *moral* responses. In keeping with his project, he rejects appealing to an agent's reasons or grounds for action to determine whether or not a primitive response is moral. Instead, he argues that responses such as disgust are not primitive *moral* responses because they are not constitutive of how we understand human suffering; such primitive responses

fail to recognize the suffering of another *as like one's own*. More precisely [...] where sympathy is totally absent from our dealings with another we fail to recognize their suffering as making the kind of claim on others that we take it that our own suffering makes (6) [emphasis added].

My concern with Taylor's argument is that it is the recognition of the suffering of the other, *as like my own*, which is constitutive of moral agency. Cullity (2004; 22), expresses my concern: "I make the reason to help other people too self-regarding [in that] this offers a fact about *me* as the reason for helping, rather than the good it would do for *him*." Taylor (2012; 79) rejects this criticism on the grounds that "the relation between them and me is not itself my reason for helping them. On the contrary [...] my sympathetic response to others itself helps to constitute the web of relationships through which we recognize another as an appropriate object of various kinds of concern."

However, my concern is less about reasons for helping the other, which may or may not be selfish, but rather how I can *recognise* the sufferings and joys of the

other *as like my own*. If I am not in a relationship with the other, then how will I be able to recognise her sufferings *as* suffering, much less as sufferings *as like my own*? Part of my unease with Taylor's understanding of sympathy as constitutive of moral agency is reflected in Desmond's (2010; 249) concern with "the extent that the sympathizer has oversight and control *over* the other [...] Sympathy retains us within the circle of our comfort zone." As the sympathiser, it is *my* response that guides and directs the moral encounter. A primitive response, while immediate and unthinking on the one hand, sneaks autonomy in through the back door. While a primitive response serves to ground supererogation as an attitude, the return to autonomy problematises that move. One solution would be a reinscription of a primitive response that avoids this pitfall. I will do precisely that in section V.

At this juncture I will attempt a leap across a philosophical and concomitant terminological divide, a leap which will see my argument shifting register from one engaged in the analytic tradition, to one engaged in the so-called 'continental' tradition. This precisely because I believe that continental philosophy has ethical concepts and resources at its disposal with which to overcome the impasse in conceptualising supererogation I have identified with respect to duty and autonomy above. Painter-Morland (2008; 91) argues that

the continental philosophical tradition rejects the idea that [the moral responses of individuals] can be prescribed or proscribed in the form of immutable principles, codes or laws [since these] are seen as being, in a sense, called forth by appeals that emanate from a particular set of situational, contextual and relational contingencies.

In other words, my shift to the continental philosophical tradition will allow an examination of supererogation in the absence of universal and fixed principles, i.e. impartialism, that attempt to, *inter alia*, circumscribe supererogation. As such, the concept of 'duty' or 'obligation' will be displaced by the notion of 'responsibility', more particularly, an infinite responsibility, which in turn becomes the foundation on which I intend to reconceptualise supererogation.

It what follows I will argue that the work of Emmanuel Levinas (as one continental philosopher) is particularly well suited to reconceptualise supererogation. My reason for this claim is that Levinas has a noteworthy interest in the figure of the saint, which has been noted, is one of the paradigmatic figures within the supererogation literature. Levinas (1988; 172) says that "I believe that it is in saintliness that the human begins; not in the accomplishment of saintliness, but in the value. It is the first value, an undeniable value." In the second half of this paper I thus aim to make the case for my claim that Levinasian ethics can offer a viable framework within which to conceptualise supererogation by overcoming the limitations of duty and autonomy as understood in the analytic tradition. I will reinscribe Taylors' primitive response as an attitude (toward a soul) that grounds supererogation as a Levinasian moral response that grounds supererogation. This Levinasian response will address the problem of autonomy, which this section has established is

superfluous to conceptualising supererogation. As a first step I adumbrate Levinas's ethics, using his understanding of autonomy and responsibility (*in lieu* of duty) to guide the exposition.

4. LEVINASIAN ETHICS AND AUTONOMY

Levinas (1969; 43) famously defines ethics as the “calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other”. It is the radical alterity of the Other that arrests my autonomy. The ‘I’ exercises an ‘imperialism of the same’ (38) over the other – an ontology that attempts to reduce all alterity into a totality of comprehension through the interposition of themes and categories. The Other seeks to remain other to this totality through an ethical resistance, which is ‘not formed out of resistance to the same’ but is rather – the resistance of what has no resistance” (199). The site of this ethical resistance is to be found in the face of the Other, which Levinas describes as the mode in which the Other presents her alterity, a singularity irreducible to any theme (50).

The ethical resistance of the other is thus not an opposition to my freedom as such, as it is an awakening to my responsibility for the Other: “The face summons me to my obligations and judges me” (215). It is a responsibility for the other, whose essence Levinas claims is captured in the commandment “Thou shalt not kill”, (2001; 62). This should be understood not only literally, but also as the metaphysical violence of reducing the other to the same. The face-to-face encounter with the Other is also marked by an asymmetry between the Other and me – here the Other “comes from a dimension of height [which is] a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself [...] without opposing me as obstacle or enemy”. (1969; 215). Levinas (1985; 89) explains that the Other is higher than me because “there is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all”. The asymmetrical relationship I have with the other, “who cannot be resolved into ‘images’ or be exposed in a theme”, Levinas labels ‘proximity’ (1989; 89).

The asymmetry of the face-to-face can also be understood as an asymmetry of representation. Only the Other, as face, can represent herself and her needs; any attempt to do so by me will lead inevitably to a totalisation of the Other's alterity. How then can the Other, as face, represent herself without the interposition of ontological categories? How does the Other, as face, signify its alterity to me? For Levinas, the face is “meaning all by itself” and “signification without context” (1985; 86). That is to say, the face represents the other beyond the social context in which the other is encountered, such as “occupation, social status, economic class, heritage, race, gender” (Perpich 2008; 61). Elsewhere, Levinas (2001; 48) says that the

face “is an appeal or an imperative given to your responsibility: to encounter a face is straightaway to hear a demand and an order”.

The asymmetry of representation in the face-to-face encounter results in an asymmetry of responsibility – because I can never know whether any representation of the Other is faithful, or final, I am infinitely responsible to and for the Other. Levinas attempts to capture the scope and depth of this infinite responsibility by claiming that “I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others” (1985; 99).

Another way of understanding why responsibility is infinite is through Levinas’s (1985; 101) notion of substitution, by which he means that “my responsibility is untransferable, no one could replace me [...] I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject”. In other words, I am individuated by my responsibility, my subjectivity is constituted through my election by the Other. Levinas (1989; 107) warns however, that “substitution is not an act; it is a passivity inconvertible into an act, the hither side of the act-passivity alternative”. Substitution as an act would imply that I can *choose* responsibility for the other. Responsibility cannot be assumed; it is thrust upon me because my subjectivity is held hostage by the other.

The infinite need of the other consumes us (Alford 2004; 156); the only thing that can save us from this annihilation is another Other – the third. While the face of the other holds my subjectivity hostage, Critchley (2012; 57) notes that “autonomy comes back into the picture for Levinas at the level of another demand, namely the demand for justice, the just society and everything that he gathers under the heading of ‘the third party’”. I continue adumbrating Levinasian ethics by examining how the third party restores a measure of autonomy to the subject.

5. RETHINKING AUTONOMY BY CONSTRUCTING A LEVINASIAN NORMATIVITY

Levinas (2001; 165-6) acknowledges that

if only the other and I existed then I would have had nothing but obligations! But [...] there is always a third party in the world: he or she is also my other, my fellow. Hence, it is important to me to know which of the two takes precedence [...] must not human beings, who are incomparable, be compared? Thus justice here, takes precedence over the taking upon oneself of the fate of the other.

Justice is, for Levinas (1988; 171), “a calculation, which is knowledge, and which supposes politics; it is inseparable from the political. It is something which I distinguish from ethics, which is primary.” But calculation and comparison – politics – require categories and themes and thus lead to the reduction of the Other to the same.

Has the Levinasian position arrived full circle only to nullify itself? Is the alterity of the Other inviolable in the face-to-face encounter, until the other Other arrives and then that alterity is allowed to be violated? No, because, argues Levinas, the third does not arrive *after* the other in the face-to-face encounter, but is *already there* in the encounter with the other: “It is not that there first would be face, and then the being it manifests, or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face *qua* face opens humanity” (1969; 213). The Other and the third are contemporaneous and coterminal: “it is only with the third that we can speak of the first and the second, of the I and the Other” (Naas 2003; 107).

Critchley continues, the “passage from the ethical to the political is not a passage of time, but rather a doubling of discourse whereby a response to the singularity of the Other’s face is, at the same time a response to community [as] a commonality”, that is, as a group of equals. To put it simply, as Wolff (2011; 21) does, “ethics necessarily passes into politics, or in fact, that ethics *has always already passed* into politics” [emphasis added]. As such, argues Wolff (2011; 25), “‘political responsibility’ is a pleonasm.” My infinite (ethical) responsibility for the other is *also* a finite (political) responsibility for the third; or, rather, my political responsibility for the third is contained in my ethical responsibility for the Other. The third, argues Levinas (1998; 157), “is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice?” Critchley’s (2004; 178) remarks that “politics itself can here be thought of as the art of a response to the singular demand of the other”.

While the third restores a measure of autonomy back to the moral agent – to compare, to calculate – such autonomy still needs to be able to respond to the singular demand of a singular Other. How can the relation with the Other remain only *for* the Other in the presence of the third? Levinas (1998; 158) argues that the third is “an *incessant correction* of the asymmetry of proximity” [emphasis added]. In what follows I will argue that this incessant correction should be seen as the enactment of the Levinasian primordial ethical relation – politics, while ethics is the thinking of the Levinasian primordial ethical relation (Woermann 2016; 133). This enactment will require giving guidelines, what I will call a constructing of a Levinasian normativity.

Constructing a Levinasian normativity (without norms)

Calling my project a ‘constructing of a Levinasian normativity’ recalls one of Levinas’s (1985; 90) most cited remarks: “My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning”. Levinas is not, however, against such a project either – “one can without doubt construct an ethics in function of what I have just said, but this is not my own theme” (*ibid.*). As such, we need norms to guide our response to the Other, but because norms also totalise the Other, a Levinasian normativity will need to be “a *normativity without norms*” (Perpich 2008; 126).

Otherwise stated, Levinasian normativity will need to comprise a meta-ethical position whose content consists not of any specific norms but rather delineates the condition(s) any purported norm should satisfy. One way in which to achieve this is to employ a ‘quasi-transcendental’ approach – to follow norms “as *if they were universal rules*, but we have to remotivate the legitimacy of the rule *each time we use it*” (Cilliers 1998; 139). In this manner, enlisting a purportedly universal (and totalising) norm remains a response to the *singular* demand of the Other, treating the response to the Other *as if* there were no third party, or came after the Other.

A much more intuitive and workable version of the quasi-transcendental is to be found in the work of Woermann and Cilliers (2012) – who use Complexity Theory⁴ – to posit what they call the ‘provisional imperative’. Woermann and Cilliers (2012; 451) describe the provisional imperative as follows – “When acting, always remain cognisant of other ways of acting”. The provisional imperative requires that we justify the norms we use to guide our actions and decisions because such norms can always be contested by the Other, that is, incessantly corrected by the Other.

Woermann and Cilliers (2012; 448) clarify what the provisional imperative entails: while it precludes “a substantive account of ethics [...it] nevertheless constitutes a type of ethical strategy, similar to Kant’s categorical imperative, which urges us to adopt a certain *attitude* when taking ethical decisions” [emphasis added]. (It is this characterisation of the provisional imperative as an attitude which I will utilise below to reinscribe a Taylorian primitive response). While the categorical imperative cannot generate any norms, what it does do is provide a test for determining whether any particular norm is ethical or not. That test is, of course, the test of universalisability. Similarly, the provisional imperative cannot generate any particular norms, but can apply the test of provisionality to determine if any one norm is ethical or not.

Reinscribing the provisional imperative into terms of a Levinasian normativity would read: ‘when representing the alterity of the other, always consider other ways of representing the alterity of the other.’ Levinasian normativity as the provisional imperative thus describes the incessant correction of the ethical (the proximity of the Other) by the political (the third) – a recursive modality that consists in an attitude.

To recall Taylor’s primitive response (section III) is shaped by recognising the other’s suffering *as like my own*. It is thus a response that exposes the Other to the danger of a totalisation of her suffering into a system of the same. The recognition of the Other’s suffering that flows from a Levinasian response, on the other hand,

⁴ Woermann (2016; 2) describes Complexity Theory as “an umbrella term covering many different understandings of, and approaches to, the study of complex systems”. She broadly distinguishes philosophical complexity from scientific complexity. While the latter focuses on complex physical, computational, biological and social systems with the aim to formalise and model them, philosophical complexity seeks, *inter alia*, to “focus attention on the normativity that any serious engagement with complexity implies” (*ibid.*). For an account of complex systems and complexity, see Cilliers (1998).

is grounded in otherness, not sameness, and so avoids this threat. In order to give effect to this recognition (of otherness), Levinasian normativity requires that any recognition of the Other and the Other's suffering be constantly corrected, and in this way interrupts my totalising of the other's suffering. Levinasian normativity, as the provisional imperative, thus ensures that Taylorian primitive responses remain primitive, that is, unthinking and immediate.

I can now arrive at this paper's central claim – *a Levinasian moral response to the Other grounds supererogation as an attitude consisting in the provisional imperative* (the incessant correction of the proximity of the Other by the third). That is to say, *Levinasian normativity is supererogatory*. What follows from this is, however, much more radical – for Levinas, all ethical acts are supererogatory. I will expand on this claim by approaching it from another angle – the notion of sacrifice, and the concomitant figures of the saint and hero, who were found to be so central to traditional conceptualisations of supererogation (section I).

6. THE POSSIBILITY OF SACRIFICE⁵

Levinas (1998; 117) argues that “it is through the condition of being a hostage that there can be pity, compassion, pardon and proximity in the world – even the little there is, even the simple ‘after you sir’”. Perpich (2008; 135) clarifies Levinas' argument: “[t]he events we recognize as ethical, from the polite gestures of social commerce to the selfless lives of saints, and everything in between, are predicated upon or find their condition in the unconditionality of being hostage”.

In other words, because common and everyday moral actions and the actions of saints belong to the same ethical spectrum, the distinction between them disappears. Bernasconi (2002; 245) argues that what Levinas is searching for is “what underlies that behaviour that is sometimes called the supererogatory, gratuitous or, as he prefers to say, ethical [...] He is not saying one *should* sacrifice oneself. He merely wants to account for its possibility.” What follows from this is that it is *the possibility* of sacrifice which establishes the condition for ethics and thus *a fortiori*, supererogation, and not the actual sacrifice. That is, *if every moral act, no matter how trivial and banal, contains within it the possibility of sacrifice, then every moral act is also a supererogatory act*.

Levinas (1988; 172) says that

⁵ The term ‘possibility’ here is not to mean to indicate choice or autonomy, such that the moral agent is able to choose to sacrifice or not. Possibility as choice slides into ontology such that responsibility can be assumed; the unconditionality of being a hostage to the other means that I can never assume, never choose, responsibility. Levinas thus rejects ‘possibility’ as an ontological category. ‘Possibility’ here then, should be understood as the autonomy of undecidability. One can also think about the ‘possibility of sacrifice’ as it is meant here as the “space or risk of absolute sacrifice” (Derrida 1995; 68).

we cannot not admire saintliness. Not the sacred, but saintliness: that is, the person who in his being is more attached to the being of the other than to his own. I believe that it is in saintliness that the human begins; not in the accomplishment of saintliness, but in the value. It is the first value, an undeniable value.

Recall that in Urmson's 1958 essay 'Saints and Heroes' (Section I), his discussion of the *sacrifice* made by saints and heroes is meant to demonstrate that their actions are praiseworthy *because* such sacrifice is not obligatory. Urmson later recants that position, arguing that common everyday acts such as kindness are also voluntary and praiseworthy – thus ostensibly supererogatory acts – and yet do not involve sacrifice at all. I also noted in that discussion that Heyd (2015) rejects Urmson's recantation, arguing that despite Urmson's objection to sacrifice, he (Urmson) nonetheless recognises supererogatory acts by their "optionality, agent discretion and non-universalizable nature" (45).

I argued that Williamson moral incapacity demonstrates that autonomy, traditionally understood, is unnecessary for supererogation (Section III). Autonomy understood as the provisionality of Levinasian normativity, however, can ground supererogation. Furthermore, Levinasian normativity is non-universalizable because it is both contingent and provisional; so, non-universalisability as a distinguishing feature of supererogation becomes redundant. Heyd's rejection of Urmson's recantation can thus itself be rejected.

It is now possible to demonstrate the flaw in Urmson's initial positing of saints and heroes as indicative of supererogatory actors. Saints and heroes are praiseworthy – that is to say, are supererogatory actors – not because they as moral agents *do* make (voluntary) sacrifices, but because any act they perform carries the *possibility* of sacrifice. The possibility of sacrifice which establishes the condition for supererogation can therefore also be described as the *possibility* (and provisionality) of the moral agent's saintliness (or heroism). It is the possibility of sacrifice that establishes the ethical subject as necessarily a supererogator.

Consider Urmson's hero who jumps on an activated grenade and is killed but, in so doing, saves the lives of his comrades. However, it is also possible that the grenade-jumper may not need to make a sacrifice at all – the grenade may fail to detonate. Nonetheless, his act still stands as supererogatory because his action embraces the possibility of sacrifice. The act is supererogatory because it expresses the grenade-jumper's *attitude* of openness to the possibility of sacrifice. *Apropos* this, Wood (1999; 117) remarks that "[o]penness does not require that one leaves the door open, but that one is willing to open the door. Responsibility is the experience of that openness". The purported hero does not go in search of situations in which to demonstrate his heroism but is always ready to act in a provisionally heroic fashion; that is, in a supererogatory fashion. Or, the (provisional) hero is not the one

who always sacrifices but is the one who acts with the attitude that such an act may result in a sacrifice, should the contingencies of the situation require it.

In 'Moral Saints', Susan Wolf (1982; 420) argues that a necessary condition of moral sainthood is a life "dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole" to the extent that pursuits such as fashion and literature, for example, will have to be sacrificed. In keeping with Wood's metaphor, I would characterise such a position as not just holding the door open but standing at the threshold, directing others through one's open front door. Someone who actively seeks out situations in which to pursue saintliness forgets that it is the possibility of sacrifice that constitutes saintliness, not actual sacrifice. In seeking saintliness, I mistake the *embracing* of infinite responsibility for the *assumption* of infinite responsibility; my attitude reflecting that I do not need to correct my recognition and representation of the Other.

7. CONCLUSION - TWO OBJECTIONS TO A LEVINASIAN NORMATIVITY AS SUPEREROGATORY

In conclusion I would like to anticipate two possible objections to the claim that Levinasian normativity is supererogatory. If this claim is correct, how does one deal with the charge that Levinasian normativity is too onerous to enact? On the other hand, if there is no distinction between the actions of the saint and everyday moral actions, doesn't the concept of supererogation become vacuous? I consider the latter objection first.

The claim that 'if every moral act is supererogatory then the term 'supererogatory' becomes vacuous' can be understood in terms of the Kantian and utilitarian assimilation strategy delineated in Section II. While the Kantian and utilitarian assimilation strategy would reduce supererogation to obligation, Levinasian normativity would seem to operate in an inverse manner to assimilate obligation into supererogation. If both the saintly and the everyday spring from the same source such that the ethical and the supererogatory come to occupy the same conceptual space, then it appears that the concept of supererogation can be foregone altogether and so we no longer need to account for supererogation⁶.

However, it is incorrect to say that the ethical and supererogatory occupy the same conceptual space. To say that the ethical is supererogatory means that the ethical is manifested through the supererogatory; supererogation (as provisional saintliness and heroism) operates as the condition for the ethical. To say that

⁶ Morgan (2007; 298 Fn.254) raises and then dismisses this very objection - that an acceptable moral theory must allow for supererogation as distinct from obligation - very quickly in a footnote by arguing that that this is a problem about moral *theories*, and as such "is a problem at the level of 'ontology' for Levinas [...] and not a problem about the face-to-face as a 'social fact' about human existence".

supererogation is the possibility of sacrifice is to say that supererogation manifests as (to use a Derridean formulation) the (im)possibility of ethics.

The flipside to the criticism that Levinasian normativity as supererogatory is banal is that it is too demanding. The argument is that if we are always morally required to act in a supererogatory way, then such a requirement is too onerous. Otherwise put, how can I be expected to act as a saint, or hero, in every moral situation? The rebuttal to this criticism goes as follows: I have established that common courtesy, politeness and considerateness, *inter alia*, are saintly/supererogatory acts because they all rest on the unconditionality of being hostage. Yet these everyday moral acts are not onerous in themselves, therefore, supererogatory acts are not onerous. Also consider Levinas's (1969; 244) remark that "infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed". Perpich (2008; 89) takes this to mean that

the better I accomplish my obligations, the more demands I find addressed to me. It is not a matter of the actual number of demands increasing, but a matter of my sensitivity increasing so that the demands and injustices of which I was formerly unaware now come to press and weigh on my conscience.

Wolf (1982; 438) argues that "any plausible moral theory must make use of some conception of supererogation". In section II it was shown that impartialist ethical theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism fall short on this account – they cannot offer a coherent conception of supererogation and so resort to assimilating supererogation within their frameworks. If this is the case then, following Wolf, we must question the plausibility of these theories. Their implausibility stems from their impartialist doctrines which require that all moral responses be universalizable and absolute. While Levinas does not offer us a moral theory, Levinasian normativity, as an attitude driven by the recursivity of the provisional imperative, not only restores to supererogation a rightful ethical significance, it makes supererogation the very centre of a plausible account of moral responsibility. Impartialism assimilates the supererogatory, while Levinasian normativity is supererogatory.

While such a conclusion is no doubt radical, it also strikes me as paradoxically intuitive, because such radicality is premised on the *possibility* of sacrifice. The smallest act of kindness towards the other may demand the greatest sacrifice from me, but I can never know this; that is, I can never calculate this because it always stands under correction. Actual sacrifice only makes this implicit state of being in the world with others explicit. Supererogation is the saintly potentiality at the core of every moral act. Levinasian normativity makes this finding at once extraordinary and also inevitable.

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