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## Supererogation and Moral Reasons

Justin B. Yee

University of Missouri-St. Louis, [jybcd@mail.umsl.edu](mailto:jybcd@mail.umsl.edu)

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# **Supererogation and Moral Reasons**

Justin B. Yee

B.A. Philosophy, California State University Stanislaus, 2018

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Philosophy

May  
2020

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## Abstract

This paper is about the paradox of supererogation and why supererogation is morally optional. I argue that supererogation is morally optional because it is supported by both moral reasons and nonmoral reasons. I understand moral reasons to be agent-neutral reasons that apply to everybody while nonmoral reasons are agent-relative reasons that don't apply to everybody. By understanding supererogation in this way, I have rejected the common assumption that what makes supererogation supererogatory is moral. Instead I argue that the source of supererogation is nonmoral. One important upshot to this is that unlike those who claim that the source of supererogation is moral, I do not have to deny the moral overridingness of moral reasons.

### I. Supererogation

It was in J. O. Urmson's seminal essay "Saints and Heroes" that attention was brought to the special category of supererogatory actions.<sup>1</sup> Prior to recognizing the special category of supererogatory actions, there was only a tripartite deontic scheme for classifying actions. The tripartite deontic scheme consisted of actions that are obligatory and morally good, actions that are optional or permissible but morally indifferent, and actions that are impermissible and morally bad. In order to demonstrate why supererogatory actions do not fit into any of the three categories of the tripartite deontic scheme and as a result deserve their own category, Urmson characterized supererogatory actions as being actions that are morally good, but morally optional.<sup>2</sup> Built into the first component of supererogation is the understanding that supererogatory actions are not just morally good, but that they are also better than some of the other alternative actions immediately present at the moment, particularly actions that are the minimum of what morality requires.<sup>3</sup> This gives rise to the common characterization that acting

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<sup>1</sup> See David Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 15-34; J.O. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes," in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. A. I. Melden (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), 198-216.

<sup>2</sup> Urmson, "Saints and Heroes," 198.

<sup>3</sup> See Alfred Archer, "Supererogation," *Philosophy Compass* 13, no. 3 (2018): 4; Michael Ferry, "Beyond Obligation: Reasons and Supererogation," in *Supererogation: Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 77, ed. Christopher Cowley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 51; Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, "Untying a Knot From the Inside Out: Reflections on the "Paradox" of Supererogation," *Social*

supererogatorily is “beyond the call of duty.” This understanding of supererogation is accompanied by the second component which notes that even though acting supererogatorily is morally good and often better than some of the other alternative actions, it is still permissible to either perform or not perform that supererogatory action.<sup>4</sup>

To demonstrate the existence of supererogation, Urmson provides two paradigmatic examples of supererogation in the saint and the hero. In the example of the saint, Urmson compares two doctors. There is one doctor who fulfills her duty as a doctor by remaining inside a disease-infested city where her practice is located in order to continue to help her ill patients. There is a second doctor who voluntarily leaves her city where there is minimal disease to go help serve in the disease-infested city. In this scenario, it is only the second doctor who is carrying out a supererogatory act. Although the first doctor is displaying some level of sainthood, the kind of sainthood the first doctor is displaying is not of the supererogatory kind. The first doctor has a duty as a doctor to remain in the disease-infested city because the people in the city are her patients and that is where her practice is located. The second doctor on the other hand does not have a duty to go to the disease-infested city. The second doctor only has a duty to her patients in the city where her practice is set up. It appears then that the second doctor acted supererogatorily since the decision to voluntarily go to the disease-infested city was morally optional despite also being morally good.

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*Philosophy and Policy* 27, no. 2 (2010): 29; Douglas Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 248.

<sup>4</sup> See Alfred Archer, “Moral Obligation, Self-Interest and the Transitivity Problem,” *Utilitas* 28, no. 4 (2016): 441-464; Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40-41; Ferry, “Beyond Obligation: Reasons and Supererogation,” 50; Heyd, *Supererogation*, 115; Horgan and Timmons, “Untying a Knot From the Inside Out: Reflections on the “Paradox” of Supererogation,” 29-31; Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality*, 91.

In the example of the hero, Urmson compares two soldiers. There is one soldier who is awarded the Military Medal by the British Military for bravery on the battlefield. This soldier faithfully followed the commands of her superior and bravely lead the British Army in breaking through the enemy line. In this case, this soldier was not acting supererogatorily. Despite the soldier doing something few people are capable of, namely leading a group of soldiers through intense combat, the soldier was simply fulfilling her duty as a soldier. As a soldier, the soldier had a duty to obey the instructions of her commanding officer. Now consider a second soldier who voluntarily falls on an enemy grenade in order to save the lives of her fellow soldiers. This second soldier appears to have acted supererogatorily. This is because even though such an action is morally good, the soldier was not morally obligated to sacrifice her life so that her fellow soldiers might live. From these two examples, it appeared evident to Urmson and many others that supererogatory actions exist.

With the existence of supererogatory actions, a paradox appears to emerge. Without getting into the formal structure of how the paradox is set up which will be done in the next section, I just want to informally introduce the paradox along with briefly canvassing my solution for solving the paradox. This will provide a bit of guidance for how the rest of the paper will go. Informally, the paradox is about why an action that is often the best action compared to all other alternative actions (i.e. a supererogatory action), is morally optional. It seems somewhat counterintuitive to think that an action that is the best is also morally optional.

Despite this, I want to argue that the reason for why acting supererogatorily is morally optional has to do with the fact that supererogatory actions are supported by both

moral reasons and nonmoral reasons. The reason why it is important to realize that supererogatory actions are supported by both moral reasons and nonmoral reasons is because explaining the difference between moral reasons and nonmoral reasons will help explain why supererogatory actions are morally optional. I argue that what differentiates moral reasons from nonmoral reasons is that moral reasons are universalizable while nonmoral reasons aren't. This means that moral reasons apply to everybody while nonmoral reasons do not. Because some of the reasons that support supererogatory actions do not apply to everybody, supererogatory actions are not morally required but morally optional. Furthermore, I also want to demonstrate that supererogatory actions are not uniquely favored by moral reasons compared to morally obligatory actions. This means that what makes supererogation supererogatory is nonmoral. It is the presence of additional nonmoral reasons, not moral reasons, that make it the case that supererogatory actions are the best actions. And so, the main thesis of this paper is that the source of supererogation is nonmoral.

## II. The Paradox of Supererogation

The paradox of supererogation arises from a series of three claims. These three claims seem to be intuitively true and yet they are inconsistent with each other. I will begin by noting what the three claims are, then I will briefly examine each claim. The three claims are the following:

1. Supererogatory actions exist. (*Existence*)
2. If an action is supererogatory, then that action is morally optional and is the best action compared to all of the other alternative actions. (*Best*)
3. If an action is the best action compared to all of the other alternative actions, then that action is morally required. (*Obligatory*)

*Existence* appears to be true insofar as the paradigmatic examples of the saint and the hero are successful in demonstrating the existence of supererogatory actions. *Best* is a conditional statement involving two claims about the nature of an action when it is supererogatory. *Best* claims that if an action is supererogatory, then that action is morally optional and is the best action compared to all of the alternative actions. In setting up *Best* and the paradox, I want to stipulate two things. The first is that I am excluding tragic dilemmas (i.e. bad cases involving only morally bad options) along with cases involving ties between two equally good options. Secondly, I am only considering cases where there is only one supererogatory action present. For example, consider the supererogatory action of giving \$100 to the poor. By stipulating that this is the best action in the situation, the possibility that there might be better supererogatory actions available (i.e. giving \$101 or \$200) is eliminated. With these stipulations in place, I think that similar to *Existence*, *Best* is plausible if one is convinced that Urmson's examples of the saint and the hero demonstrate supererogation.

Finally, *Obligatory* claims that if an action is the best action compared to all of the alternate actions, then that action is morally required. Given the two stipulations noted above, the sort of action *Obligatory* is concerned about is an action that is not only morally good, but also the best action compared to all the other alternative actions. It seems quite plausible that if an action is both morally good and the best action, then that action is morally required.

The paradox of supererogation can be located in the conflict between *Existence* and *Best* on the one hand and *Obligatory* on the other. *Existence* and *Best* state that acting supererogatorily is morally optional despite being the best action compared to all of the

other alternative actions. *Obligatory* states that because a supererogatory action is the best action compared to all of the other alternative actions, then acting supererogatorily is morally required. The dispute is about whether an action that is the best action compared to all of the other alternative actions is morally optional or morally required.

In response to the paradox, a number of different solutions have been put forth but they have been largely unsuccessful.<sup>5</sup> The solution I want to focus on is the one offered by Dreier, Horgan and Timmons. Dreier, Horgan and Timmons begin by reframing the paradox in terms of moral reasons. In reframing the paradox in terms of moral reasons, Dreier, Horgan and Timmons have conflated what it is for an action to be the best action compared to all of the other alternative actions, with being an action that is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternate actions. The paradox in terms of strongest moral reasons is the following:

1. Supererogatory actions exist. (*Existence*)
2. If an action is supererogatory, then that action is morally optional and is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternative actions. (*Strongest*)
3. If an action is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternative actions, then that action is morally required. (*Good-Ought Tie up*)

The dispute in terms of strongest moral reasons is about whether an action that is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternative actions is morally optional or morally required. The *Good-Ought Tie up* claims that acting supererogatorily

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<sup>5</sup> One solution is offered by Portmore and Rawls who argue that an agent is not morally required to perform the morally best action because of the level of sacrifice that the agent might have to make in carrying out such an action; See Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality*, 131-136; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 100. See objections by Archer, "Supererogation," 6; Elizabeth Drummond Young, "Is Supererogation more than just Costly Sacrifice?" in *Supererogation: Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements 77*, ed. Christopher Cowley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 127-129. A second solution is offered by Archer, Heyd, and Ignieski who argue that it is the autonomy and freedom of the agent that explains why an agent is not morally required to perform the morally best action; Archer, "Supererogation," 7; Heyd, *Supererogation*, 172-178; Violetta Ignieski, "Defending Limits on the Sacrifices We Ought to Make for Others," *Utilitas* 20, no. 4 (2008): 424-446. See objection in Archer, "Supererogation," 7.



is morally required since it is an action that is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternative actions. *Strongest* and *Existence* claim that even though acting supererogatorily is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternative actions, it is still morally optional.

It is worth pointing out that Horgan and Timmons are the ones who coined the third thesis in the reframed paradox the “*Good-Ought Tie up*.” By coining the third thesis the “*Good-Ought Tie up*,” they appear to be making the assumption that there is a tight connection between reasons and evaluative concepts. In the case of the *Good-Ought Tie up*, the strongest moral reasons track the evaluative term “good.” This is an assumption that will be bypassed in this paper.

In response to the paradox, Dreier, Horgan and Timmons present arguments against the *Good-Ought Tie up*. One of the arguments is by Dreier and the other argument is by Horgan and Timmons. Both arguments argue that the reason why an action that is supported by the strongest moral reasons is not morally required is because there are only some moral reasons that are qualified in making an action morally required. Dreier shows this by arguing that some moral reasons are oriented toward justice while other moral reasons are oriented toward beneficence.<sup>6</sup> Dreier believes that it is only the moral reasons that are oriented toward justice that are qualified to make an action morally required. The moral reasons involved in acting supererogatorily are oriented toward beneficence, which in turn makes acts of supererogation morally optional.

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<sup>6</sup> Jamie Dreier, “Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn’t,” in *Satisficing and Maximizing*, ed. Michael Byron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 149-150.

Horgan and Timmons argue against the *Good-Ought tie up* by differentiating between moral reasons that are requiring and moral reasons that are favoring.<sup>7</sup> Horgan and Timmons claim that requiring moral reasons are able to convey moral obligation while favoring moral reasons cannot. Horgan and Timmons argue that the moral reasons concerned with acting supererogatorily are only favoring moral reasons which results in the supererogatory acts being morally optional.

What Dreier, Horgan and Timmons have essentially done by rejecting the *Good-Ought tie up*, is to presuppose the antithesis of my thesis which is that the source of supererogation is moral, not nonmoral. Dreier, Horgan and Timmons have argued that what makes supererogation supererogatory is that there are extra moral reasons (i.e. the strongest moral reasons) that support supererogation but not morally obligatory actions.

### III. Consequences and Objections to Dreier, Horgan and Timmons's Solution

In thinking about whether the solution offered by Dreier, Horgan and Timmons is successful, there appear to be at least four consequences where three of the consequences are clear cut objections. The first consequence and objection to Dreier, Horgan and Timmons's account is by Alfred Archer. Archer notes that their solution cannot account for all supererogatory acts, particularly the kind of supererogatory acts that appear to be supported by moral reasons that have requiring force.<sup>8</sup> Archer argues that in the paradigmatic example of Urmson's soldier, some of the moral reasons supporting the supererogatory act of jumping on the enemy grenade are requiring moral reasons. Despite

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<sup>7</sup> Horgan and Timmons, "Untying a Knot from the Inside Out: Reflections on the "Paradox" of Supererogation," 47-59.

<sup>8</sup> Archer, "Supererogation," 5.

being supported by requiring moral reasons, the supererogatory act of jumping on an enemy grenade remains morally optional. In response, Horgan and Timmons argue that these kinds of supererogatory acts are not really supererogatory acts, but are rather some kind of quasi-supererogation.<sup>9</sup> This however does not seem to be a satisfying answer insofar as Urmson's soldier seems to not only be a fair example of supererogation, but a paradigmatic example of supererogation.

The second consequence and objection has to do with differentiating between requiring moral reasons and favoring moral reasons. It isn't clear as to what distinguishes the two types of moral reasons from each other, other than the fact that only one of the two types of moral reasons have the ability to make an action morally required. An explanation isn't given as to how requiring moral reasons get the requiring force that they have or why favoring moral reasons are stuck with only favoring force. Dreier acknowledges this objection and admits that a fuller account of requiring moral reasons and favoring moral reasons is needed.<sup>10</sup>

The third consequence and objection is that Dreier, Horgan and Timmons ended up denying the highly plausible claim that if an action is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternative actions, then that action is morally required. It seems more plausible to think that if there was ever a case where an action failed to be morally obligatory even though it was supported by moral reasons, then at the very least it

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<sup>9</sup> Horgan and Timmons, "Untying a Knot from the Inside Out: Reflections on the "Paradox" of Supererogation," 61-62.

<sup>10</sup> Dreier, "Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn't," 150.

was because that action was supported by weaker moral reasons, not the strongest moral reasons.

The fourth consequence has to do with the moral overridingness of moral reasons or rather the lack thereof in Dreier, Horgan and Timmons's account. This consequence isn't as obvious an objection as the other three consequences are since some people, such as Doug Portmore, find it unproblematic that moral reasons lack moral overridingness.<sup>11</sup> Despite the uncertainty of whether this is a strong objection, addressing moral overridingness is an important issue for any account involving moral reasons as it provides insight into the limit and scope of the power that moral reasons have or don't have in that particular account. I want to briefly explain what moral overridingness is, how it gets hashed out by Portmore, and why one might think it is important to maintain that moral reasons have moral overridingness. Although Dreier, Horgan and Timmons do not address moral overridingness specifically, they share a similar view with Portmore about the power that moral reasons have with respect to supererogation such that moral overridingness appears to play out the same in all of their views.

Moral overridingness is the claim that moral reasons always override nonmoral reasons such that whenever there is a moral reason in favor of some action and a nonmoral reason against that very same action, the moral reason will always override that nonmoral reason.<sup>12</sup> For example, suppose I have a moral reason to tell the truth while at the same time I also have some nonmoral reasons for not telling the truth. Because I have a moral reason

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<sup>11</sup> Douglas Portmore, "Are Moral Reasons Morally Overriding?" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11, no.4 (2008): 386-387.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 370; Sarah Stroud, "Moral Overridingness and Moral Theory," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (1998): 171.

to tell the truth it doesn't matter what sort of nonmoral reasons I might have for not telling the truth, the moral reason always wins out and I am required to tell the truth. However by denying moral overridingness, one is conceding that there are times where nonmoral reasons can prevent moral reasons from generating moral obligation.

Portmore argues that in cases involving supererogation, people have the moral option to either promote their own interests or to sacrifice those interests for the sake of doing more to promote the interests of others.<sup>13</sup> It is from having this moral option that Portmore, Dreier, Horgan and Timmons must reject moral overridingness. There are three key components for why this is the case. The first is recognizing that the kind of reasons that involve promoting one's own interests are nonmoral reasons.<sup>14</sup> The second is a claim that Portmore, Dreier, Horgan and Timmons all make, which is that supererogatory actions are supported by the strongest moral reasons. It isn't just that there are some moral reasons for doing a supererogatory act. It is that the moral reasons overwhelmingly favor acting supererogatorily over not acting supererogatorily. The third component is that there are no nonmoral reasons in favor of acting supererogatorily. Rather, the only nonmoral reasons present are those that support not acting supererogatorily such as the promoting of one's own interests.<sup>15</sup> So the reason why conceding that people have the moral option to promote their own interests over the interests of others commits Portmore, Dreier, Horgan and Timmons to having to give up moral overridingness, is because it means that a nonmoral reason to not act supererogatorily can override the strongest moral reason favoring one to act supererogatorily. In other words, it is possible that the strongest of moral reasons cannot

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<sup>13</sup> Portmore, "Are Moral Reasons Morally Overriding?" 369.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 377.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 375.

generate a moral requirement because there are some nonmoral reasons for not doing that action.

One reason for why one might want to maintain moral overridingness is because once one allows for the possibility that a nonmoral reason can prevent a moral reason from generating a moral requirement, it becomes difficult to explain when exactly a nonmoral reason can prevent a moral reason from generating a moral requirement and when it cannot. One cannot simply rely on the distinction between supererogatory actions and morally obligatory actions to determine when exactly a nonmoral reason can prevent a moral reason from generating a moral requirement as that would lead to a circular argument. One cannot explain the difference between supererogatory actions and morally obligatory actions by arguing that it is only in supererogatory actions that moral reasons are not necessarily overriding and so supererogatory actions are morally optional, while at the same time arguing that the way in which we determine whether a moral reason is overriding is based on whether the action is supererogatory or morally obligatory. Now there may be other arguments that avoid the circularity and that can adequately explain in what situations moral reasons fail to override nonmoral reasons and in what situations moral reasons do override nonmoral reasons, however it is unclear as to what they might be.

It is important to be able to adequately explain when exactly nonmoral reasons can prevent moral reasons from generating a moral requirement because there are many cases where we don't want a nonmoral reason to prevent a moral reason from generating a moral requirement. For example, in cases involving murder we don't want there to be any nonmoral reasons that might make murder morally permissible. Since (1) it is unclear as to how to adequately explain when a nonmoral reason can prevent a moral reason from

generating a moral requirement and (2) there seems to be a lot at stake in allowing for the possibility that a nonmoral reason can prevent a moral reason from generating a moral requirement, it seems better to try to maintain moral overridingness.

#### IV. Moral Reasons and All-Things Considered Reasons

Despite these negative consequences and objections to Dreier, Horgan and Timmons's solution, I do think that Dreier, Horgan and Timmons are correct in trying to draw a distinction between the type of reasons that support morally required actions versus the type of reasons involved in acting supererogatorily. However, where I want to depart from Dreier, Horgan and Timmons is that rather than trying to differentiate between two types of moral reasons, I want to differentiate between moral reasons and nonmoral reasons. But before I can do that, I need to show that having an all-things considered reason to do a supererogatory action is not just composed of moral reasons. What I mean by this is that although moral reasons might contribute to what one has an all-things considered reason to do, what one has an all-things considered reason to do is not just made up of moral considerations. Recognizing that having an all-things considered reason to act supererogatorily involves more than just moral reasons is important as it will allow us to see why differentiating between moral reasons and nonmoral reasons solves the paradox and why the source of supererogation is nonmoral.

I will not get into any immediate detail about what differentiates a moral reason from a nonmoral reason because it is something that will be done later on in the paper. However, I do want to briefly explain what an all-things considered reason is. An individual has an all-things considered reason to do some action when the reasons in favor

of doing that action outweigh the reasons in favor for not doing that action. Often times, one has an all-things considered reason to do some action at some particular moment, but the next time around that person might not have an all-things considered reason for doing that same action. This is because what one has an all-things considered reason to do is often generated from a variety of different kinds of considerations where some of these kinds of considerations can be moral, financial, prudential, health-related, utility-related, etc. Sometimes these kinds of considerations can favor doing some particular action while at another time they can favor not doing that same kind of action. As a result, just because someone has an all-things considered reason to do some action does not mean that person will continue to having an all-things considered reason to keep doing that action.

In order to show why having an all-things considered reason to act supererogatorily involves more than just moral reasons and why this is relevant to solving the paradox, I want to begin by pointing out something implicit within the way Dreier, Horgan and Timmons set up the paradox. It has already been noted that Dreier, Horgan and Timmons reframe the paradox in terms of “strongest moral reasons.” What this “strongest moral reasons” talk implies is some sort of ranking system in which according to Dreier, Horgan and Timmons supererogatory actions rank high in terms of moral reasons. I want to focus on the idea of ranking actions within different types of ranking systems as I think that understanding that an action can be ranked differently depending on which kind of ranking system one is using will help solve the paradox.

An action can be ranked in many different ways. The way that I want to focus on ranking an action will be based on the different kind of reasons that support it. By ranking an action based on the different kind of reasons that support it, where an action can rank



can be drastically different when going from one ranking system to another. It is possible for an action to rank high in terms of one type of reason while ranking lower in terms of another type of reason. For example, consider a case where two poor parents steal some expensive medicine that their sick child needs. Where this action ranks based on what one has most reason to do in terms with complying with the law is entirely different than what one has most reason to do in terms of doing what helps one's family. Stealing the medicine will rank high in a ranking system of doing what helps one's family while it will not rank high in a ranking system of complying with the law.

In order to begin solving the paradox, I want to compare both supererogatory actions and morally obligatory action on two different ranking systems. The first ranking system will be a system based on "supererogatory reasons." The second ranking system will be a system based on moral reasons.

A ranking system based on "supererogatory reasons" is a system based on what one has an all-things considered reason to do. The reason for why this is the case is that when one thinks about why one might ultimately come to do a supererogatory action, it seems very plausible that it is because that person had an all-things considered reason for doing it. Now it isn't always the case that a person will have an all-things considered reason for doing a supererogatory action, but it seems that when one does choose to do a supererogatory action it is because that was the action one had the most reason to do. If a person has the most reason to do some action, then that action is generally understood to be the best action compared to all the other alternative actions. As a result, actions that rank the highest in a ranking system that is determined by "supererogatory reasons" will be actions that are the best actions compared to all the other alternative actions.

In evaluating how supererogatory actions compare to morally obligatory actions in this ranking system, it seems intuitive to rank supererogatory actions somewhere at the top while ranking morally obligatory actions not at the top. This is because supererogatory actions are generally understood as being actions that go above and beyond the call of duty where one's duty entails morally obligatory actions.

To give an example for why it seems plausible that a supererogatory action ranks higher than a morally obligatory action, let's consider a case where I have a moral obligation to mow my neighbor's lawn. I have this moral obligation because I promised my neighbor that I would mow it for her. Suppose I mow my neighbor's lawn and as I finish up, I notice that my neighbor's bushes need to be trimmed and the weeds need to be pulled. However, I am not morally obligated to trim the bushes and pull the weeds as I did not promise my neighbor that I would do it. Trimming the bushes and pulling the weeds would be a supererogatory action.

Suppose I decide that in addition to doing the morally obligatory action, mowing the lawn, I also opt to do the supererogatory action, trimming the bushes and pulling the weeds. In the scenario where I do opt to do the supererogatory action, it seems plausible that it is because it is what I have most reason to do. For example, I might have a moral reason. The moral reason might be that helping my neighbor is the sort of thing I should do for individuals who have intrinsic value and worth. I might also have a nonmoral reason or more specifically, a prudential reason. The prudential reason might be that it is prudentially advisable to sometimes help your friends out by doing more than what they might have expected you to do. To be clear, it doesn't have to be these exact reasons to make it the case that I have an all-things considered reason for doing the supererogatory

action, all that is needed is that there are more reasons in favor of doing the supererogatory action than not doing the supererogatory action.

Now when one does come to have an all-things considered reason for doing some supererogatory action, that supererogatory action will be better than all of the other alternative actions. Pulling the weeds and trimming the bushes is better than doing neither of the actions. It is better than doing one but not the other. It is also better than pulling and trimming only some of the weeds and bushes. Clearly in this scenario, the supererogatory action is going to rank somewhere at the top in a ranking system based on actions that are the best.

On the other hand, the morally obligatory action, mowing the lawn, will not rank at the top of a ranking system based on which actions are the best. This is because although mowing the lawn produces some good, it doesn't produce the most overall good. One reason for why this is the case is that in doing the morally obligatory action one has only done what one is required to do. I've only done the bare minimum. In this particular situation, I haven't done the action that is morally best and prudentially best. It seems clear then that a morally obligatory action will not rank at the top of a ranking system based on actions being the best. If that is the case, then it appears that when one uses a ranking system based on what one has an all-things considered reason to do (i.e. what is the best action), supererogatory actions rank somewhere at the top while morally obligatory actions rank not at the top.

The second ranking system that I want to evaluate supererogatory actions and morally obligatory actions by is a ranking system based on moral reasons. I don't want to

give an account of what moral reasons are just yet. But what I want to do instead is to simply give an argument for why it is intuitive to think that morally obligatory actions will rank higher than supererogatory actions in a ranking system based on moral reasons. To demonstrate this, I want to argue that when one analyzes the reasons that are needed to support a morally obligatory action, one finds that they are all moral. On the other hand, when one analyzes the reasons that are required to support a supererogatory action, one finds that only some of the reasons are moral.

Consider the impermissible act of murder. It seems that one reason that can sufficiently prohibit murder might simply be that a human being has intrinsic value and is an end in and of itself. The fact that a human being has this intrinsic value seems to be enough to sufficiently prohibit someone from engaging in murder. It also seems plausible to think that that reason is moral. I want to argue that it isn't just in this case involving moral obligation that the reasons that support a morally obligatory action are only moral, but that it is in all cases involving moral obligation. If that is the case, then in a ranking system based on moral reasons morally obligatory actions ranks somewhere at the top.

Alternatively, supererogatory actions don't appear to rank at the top in a ranking system based on moral reasons. This is because it seems that supererogatory actions are supported by both moral reasons and nonmoral reasons. In the neighbor example, I had an all-things considered reason for pulling the weeds and trimming the bushes. The all-things considered reason consisted of both a moral reason and a nonmoral reason. It seems plausible that in cases involving what one has an all-things considered reason to do, what one has an all-things considered reason to do is going to be made up of many considerations. Some will be moral and some will be nonmoral. If that is the case, then

since supererogatory actions when carried out are supported by all-things considered reasons, supererogatory actions will need to be supported by both moral reasons and nonmoral reasons. This means that when supererogatory actions are being ranked in a ranking system based on moral reasons, supererogatory actions will not rank at the top. Furthermore, when one is comparing supererogatory actions to morally obligatory actions within a ranking system based on moral reasons, morally obligatory actions rank higher than supererogatory actions.

When comparing supererogatory actions and morally obligatory actions within two types of ranking systems where one of the ranking systems is determined by what one has an all-things considered reason to do and the other is determined by moral reasons, it seems that to rank high in terms of what one has an all-things considered reason to do is different than what it is to rank high in terms of being supported by the strongest moral reasons. This would indicate that an action that is the best action compared to all the other alternative actions is not necessarily the action that is supported by the strongest moral reasons. This would explain why an action that is the best action, such as a supererogatory action, is not morally obligatory. Supererogatory actions simply do not rank high enough in terms of being supported by the strongest moral reasons. Additionally, this would indicate that the source of supererogation is not moral. This now opens the door to allow me to demonstrate that the source of supererogation is actually nonmoral. What I want to do now is to explain what differentiates a moral reason from a nonmoral reason and how this is relevant to explaining why supererogatory actions are not supported by the strongest moral reasons and why supererogation is morally optional.

## V. Moral Reasons as Being Universalizable

The way I want to differentiate between moral reasons and nonmoral reasons is by following a distinction Nagel and Schroeder make between agent-neutral reasons and agent-relative reasons. Nagel and Schroeder understand agent-neutral reasons to be reasons that apply to everybody such that if R is an agent-neutral reason for doing A, then R is a reason for all of us to do A.<sup>16</sup> Since agent-neutral reasons apply to everybody, agent-neutral reasons are objective and universal. Agent-relative reasons on the other hand, are reasons that only apply to some people such that if R is an agent-relative reason for doing A, then R is a reason for only some of us to do A.<sup>17</sup> As a result, agent-relative reasons are not universal. What determines whether an agent-relative reason is a reason for someone has to do with the relationship that that person has with the agent-relative reason and the associated action. For example, I don't particularly care about going shopping. Because I don't care much about going shopping, then the fact that there will be sales on Black Friday will not be a reason for me to go out shopping the day after Thanksgiving. However, for people who do enjoy shopping, the fact that there will be sales on Black Friday will be a reason for going out and shopping on the day after Thanksgiving. That there will be sales on Black Friday is an agent-relative reason which generally applies only to the people who enjoy shopping.

This way of distinguishing between moral reasons and nonmoral reasons in terms of agent-neutral reasons and agent-relative reasons is shared by both Nagel and Schroeder. Nagel writes that, "Ethics is concerned...with what should happen...[which] neutral

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 152-153; Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18, 105-106.

<sup>17</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 152-153; Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*, 18.

reasons underlie.”<sup>18</sup> Schroeder writes, “As I understand Agent-Neutral, context can determine who counts as one of ‘us’ for the purposes of the utterance...in other contexts, particularly moral contexts, it will be clear that everyone counts as one of ‘us.’”<sup>19</sup> If it is plausible to think of moral reasons as being agent-neutral reasons and nonmoral reasons as being agent-relative reasons, then a reason is moral just in case it is universalizable. What I mean by this is that a moral reason is universalizable just in case it universally holds for all rational agents. Understanding a moral reason in this way, as being universalizable, seems plausible since morality is often understood as tracking what is universal and objectively good.<sup>20</sup> As a result, it seems plausible to understand a moral reason as being an agent-neutral reason.

Turning to when one has an all-things considered reason to do a supererogatory action and what its relationship is with agent-neutral reasons and agent-relative reasons, it has already been mentioned that what one has an all-things considered reason to do is made up of a variety of different considerations. To simplify things, we can break up these different considerations into two groups. We can categorize the considerations as involving either moral reasons or nonmoral reasons. I’ve already addressed why it seems plausible to think of moral reasons as being agent-neutral reasons, now I will explain why nonmoral reasons should be thought of as being agent-relative reasons.

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<sup>18</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 165.

<sup>19</sup> Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> The reason why I think moral reasons are universalizable and why being universalizable is a key feature of moral reasons, is because I am following Kant in how he understands what it is for an action to be morally right or morally wrong. Although Kant’s ethical theory is grounded on maxims and not moral reasons, there is still a shared similarity in the universalizability of moral reasons and the role maxims have in Kant’s categorical imperative. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 31, 43-45.

It is plausible to think of a nonmoral reason as being an agent-relative reason because some of the nonmoral reasons we have for acting don't apply to everybody. For example, consider the case involving my neighbor. I had both a moral reason and a non-moral reason for helping my neighbor. The non-moral reason was that my neighbor is my friend and it seems prudentially advisable to sometimes help out your friends more than they might expect. This kind of non-moral reason is an agent-relative reason in that this particular reason with respect to my neighbor is irrelevant to the people who are not friends with my neighbor. Now it may be the case that this non-moral reason becomes relevant for those people who are not my neighbor's friend when this reason is modified such that it is directed toward those people's own friends. However, with respect to this particular situation involving my neighbor, this non-moral reason only applies to me and all the other people who are my neighbor's friends. It appears to be the case then that this nonmoral reason is an agent-relative reason.

A nonmoral as an agent-relative reason can also be further demonstrated in the case of Urmson's soldier. Suppose one of the reasons Urmson's soldier has for falling on the enemy grenade to save the lives of four other fellow soldiers is that, being able to save four lives rather than just one life is better. This non-moral reason is an agent-relative reason in that this particular reason with respect to those four soldiers is irrelevant to people who are the enemy. This non-moral reason only applies to those who are allies to those four other soldiers. From this case and the case above involving my neighbor, it seems plausible to think that all nonmoral reasons are agent-relative reasons.

If it is the case that all nonmoral reasons are agent-relative reasons and that having an all-things considered reason to do a supererogatory action involves reasons that are both



agent-neutral and agent-relative, then supererogatory actions are not necessarily supported by the strongest moral reasons. This is because even though supererogatory actions are morally good and possibly supported by some reasons that are agent-neutral, those supererogatory actions are also supported by agent-relative reasons which are not universalizable. Since being universalizable tracks what is moral, it seems plausible to think that when comparing actions that are only supported by agent-neutral reasons to supererogatory actions which are supported by both agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, those actions that are only supported by agent-neutral reasons (i.e. moral reasons) will rank higher in term of strongest moral reasons than supererogatory actions. This indicates that what one has an all-things considered reason to do is not necessarily the same as being supported by the strongest moral reasons.

There are two immediate takeaways from understanding that supererogatory actions are not supported by the strongest moral reasons. The first is that it is now possible to explain why supererogatory actions are not morally required. Supererogatory actions are not morally required because some of the reasons that are required to support those actions are not universalizable. This means that some of those reasons that are required to support those supererogatory actions do not apply to everyone, particularly the non-moral reasons. As a result, those supererogatory actions are morally optional. This seems to be a plausible explanation when one considers morally obligatory actions and the reasons that support those actions. In examining morally obligatory actions and their supporting reasons, one finds that those reasons are all universalizable and as a result those actions are morally required.

The second takeaway is that Dreier, Horgan and Timmons are mistaken in the way they construe *Strongest*. This is because in *Strongest* they conflated strongest moral reasons with all-things considered reasons. For a clearer picture of the conflation, the original paradox was formulated as the following:

1. Supererogatory actions exist. (*Existence*)
2. If an action is supererogatory, then that action is morally optional and is the best action compared to all of the other alternative actions. (*Best*)
3. If an action is the best action compared to all of the other alternative actions, then that action is morally required. (*Obligatory*)

Dreier, Horgan and Timmons reframed the paradox as:

1. Supererogatory actions exist. (*Existence*)
2. If an action is supererogatory, then that action is morally optional and is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternative actions. (*Strongest*)
3. If an action is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternative actions, then that action is morally required. (*Good-Ought Tie up*)

By reframing the paradox in this way, Dreier, Horgan and Timmons are suggesting that an action that is the best action compared to all of the other alternative actions is also the action that is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternative actions. This however is wrong as what one has an all-things considered reason to do is not necessarily what is supported by the strongest moral reasons. As a result, Dreier, Horgan and Timmons's presupposition that the source of supererogation is moral, is wrong.

Upon my solution, we are able to reject *Strongest* and accept the *Good-Ought Tie up*. Had *Strongest* and the *Good-Ought Tie up* only referenced strongest reasons rather than strongest moral reasons, then the *Good-Ought Tie up* would be rejected and *Strongest* would be accepted. On the original paradox, my view accepts *Best* while rejecting *Obligatory*.

Now that it has been established that the source of supererogation is not moral, I want to provide an argument for why the source of supererogation is nonmoral. Although

I've demonstrated that supererogation is morally optional because it is supported by both moral and nonmoral reasons, I haven't yet shown that supererogation is supererogatory because it is supported by extra nonmoral reasons.

In order to see why the source of supererogation is nonmoral, let's consider a case where I am considering whether to donate 10% or 50% of my income to charity. In deciding which to do, it appears that doing either of the actions is supported by the same moral reason. The moral reason might be that human beings have intrinsic value. Although the moral reason supports both actions, the moral reason does not require me or tell me to do one action over the other. However, what does make giving 50% of my income to charity more supererogatory than only giving 10% of my income has to do with the fact that donating 50% can be supported by extra nonmoral reasons. It is plausible to think that in certain cases when it is appropriate for someone to give 50% of their income, some of the extra nonmoral reasons are that, donating \$X is better than donating  $< \$X$  and making the greatest amount of people happy is better. These reasons to give 50% of one's income are clearly agent-relative reasons as they are not going to apply to everyone. They are only going to apply to those who are particularly wealthy. Despite that, when they do apply to people it will be because of them that donating 50% of one's income is better than donating only 10%. The moral reason for donating money in this situation remains neutral about whether I should donate 50% of my income over donating only 10%. It is the agent-relative reasons (i.e. nonmoral reasons) that appear to be telling me to donate 50% of my income rather than just 10%. If that is the case, then it appears that the source of supererogation is in fact nonmoral.

## VI. Consequences of My View

What I want to do now is to compare my account to Dreier, Horgan and Timmons's account by determining whether the four consequences that appeared to follow from Dreier, Horgan and Timmons's account follow from mine also.

The first consequence was that Dreier, Horgan and Timmons's solution cannot account for extreme cases of supererogation such as Urmson's soldier. This was because some cases of supererogation are not supported by favoring moral reasons which make the action morally optional, but are supported by requiring moral reasons which make the action morally obligatory. On my account, I do not have this problem. All supererogatory actions remain morally optional because they are supported by both agent-neutral reasons and agent-relative reasons. The agent-relative reasons are what cause the supererogatory actions to be morally optional.

The second consequence that followed from Dreier, Horgan and Timmons's solution was that they were unable to give a detailed explanation for what distinguishes the two types of moral reasons from each other, other than the fact that only one of the two types of moral reasons have the ability to make an action morally required. An explanation isn't given as to how requiring moral reasons get the requiring force that they have or why favoring moral reasons are stuck with only favoring force. This is not a problem on my view as the reason why moral reasons generate moral obligation and nonmoral reasons do not, has to do with the fact that one is universalizable and the other is not.

The third consequence and objection is that they ended up denying the highly plausible claim that if an action is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternative actions, then that action is morally required. It seems more

plausible to think that if there was ever a case where an action failed to be morally obligatory even though it was supported by moral reasons, then at the very least it was because the action was supported by weaker moral reasons. My account avoids this issue altogether as it maintains that if an action is supported by the strongest moral reasons compared to all of the other alternative actions, then that action is morally required.

The fourth and final consequence has to do with moral overridingness. On Dreier, Horgan and Timmons's account they had to reject moral overridingness in order to maintain that supererogatory actions are morally optional. They had to reject moral overridingness because on their account a supererogatory action is supported by the strongest moral reasons, and nonmoral reasons only support not doing the supererogatory action. This means that when someone fails to do a supererogatory action, the nonmoral reason overrides the moral reason, albeit the strongest moral reason in the situation. On my account I do not have to give up moral overridingness in order to maintain that supererogatory actions are morally optional.

To see why this is the case, consider first that I don't claim that supererogatory actions are supported by the strongest moral reasons. I concede that there are moral reasons for doing a supererogatory action, however I don't concede that the moral reasons favor acting supererogatorily over not acting supererogatorily. Secondly, I don't claim that not doing the supererogatory action is always supported by nonmoral reasons. Because supererogatory actions are not necessarily supported by the strongest moral reasons, it is possible that the action that is not the supererogatory action is supported by stronger moral reasons than the supererogatory action.

To see why these two points matter, let's return back to the case where I am considering whether to donate 10% of my income to charity or 50% of my income to charity. First off on my account, the same moral reason, such as a human being has intrinsic value, might support both donating 10% of my income to charity and donating 50% to charity. However, what makes donating the 50% better than the 10% is that donating 50% is supported by extra nonmoral reasons, not extra moral reasons. Furthermore, since donating 50% is not necessarily supported by the strongest moral reasons, it is possible that actually donating only 10% is supported by stronger moral reasons than donating 50%. This might be because I also have moral reasons to use some of my income to take care of my family which won't happen if I donate 50% of my income. As a result, I have the moral option to not do the supererogatory action without having to deny moral overridingness.

## VII. Conclusion

Upon conclusion, I argued that the reason why the best action (i.e. a supererogatory action) in a particular situation is not morally required is because some of the reasons that are required to support that action are not universalizable. When all the reasons that are required to support an action are universalizable, then that action is morally required.

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