Sacrifices: The Paradigmatic, the Demanding, and the Heroic

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Philosophy.

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Washington, DC
April 23, 2014
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Sacrifices: The Paradigmatic, the Demanding, and the Heroic

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Abstract

The concept of sacrifice harbors challenging puzzles and occupies an integral but neglected place in discussions of the problem of overly demanding moral duties. I argue that sacrificing is a distinctive type of act characterized by a number of conditions, the necessary core of which include the forfeiture of some good and an associated experience of hardship. One puzzle arises because sacrificing seems to entail coming out on the losing end of a particular kind of transaction, yet many paradigmatic sacrifices seem clearly to be best, all things considered, for an agent. A second puzzle arises in the tension between the fact that many sacrifices come in response to the claims of others, yet it is plausibly the case that in order to be a sacrifice an act must be an instance of freely giving rather than giving what is owed. In developing a novel analysis of sacrifice, I fill out the remaining conditions and address both of these puzzles. I then deploy the resulting account to offer an improved articulation of the demandingness problem, one that has important implications for its scope and importance. Understanding the demandingness problem to concern the ways in which moral duties entail sacrifices rather than the ways in which compliance with moral duties might be difficult or costly for agents enables us to resist two prominent arguments that would deprive demandingness objections of any force. Finally, I examine heroic sacrifices, often claimed by heroic agents to have been in some sense required. I argue against deflationary and moralizing responses to this claim and forward an alternative account that sheds new light on the vexing question of how we
might be bound to do morally good things without being morally bound to do what
would be excessive to demand.
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CHAPTER 1 | SACRIFICE: TWO PUZZLES IN A PORTRAIT, A PROBLEM, AND AN ACCOUNT

1.1 | INTRODUCTION

The abundant familiarity of acts of sacrifice in the normal run of life will make a portrait of the concept easily recognizable. But there are shades and angles in any portrait that, despite the familiarity of the subject, want for closer examination. And the fact that we can identify sacrifice in its portrait should not be confused with evidence that we have an adequate account of the necessary and sufficient conditions under which a sacrifice is performed. The theory will come a bit slowly. The portrait I provide shortly.

The portrait will be used to introduce two distinct puzzles harbored by the concept of sacrifice. Resolving the puzzles is of independent interest, but the work required to resolve them also has applications beyond reaching a satisfactory understanding of what it is to sacrifice. In particular, I will be arguing that a fuller account of sacrifice improves our understanding of the problem of overly demanding moral duties, and has some implications for the both the shape and importance of the problem. I also draw on the novel account of sacrifice I develop here in order to illuminate a striking feature of moral heroism.

Rather little scholarly attention has been paid to the concept of sacrifice itself.¹ Mark Overvold (1980) offers an account of ‘self-sacrifice’ in order to launch an objection against views of personal welfare that are based on having desires satisfied. I examine Overvold’s account in some detail here since it is the most prominent predecessor to the kind of account I aim to develop, and since the work he does to develop his account

¹ I later refer to what work that has been done, including excellent pieces by Vanessa Carbonell (2012), Connie Rosati (2009) and Douglas Portmore (2007).
connects to one of the puzzles I address. Between the persistence of the puzzles, the urgency of the problem, and the faults in Overvold’s account, my principal aim in this first chapter is to motivate much of the work that follows it, which starts in the next chapter with my own account of the concept of sacrifice.

1.2 | MR. XTREME: A PORTRAIT OF SACRIFICE

It’s hard to know what to call it – a movement, an organization, a cultural accretion – but it has, in the second decade of the 21st century, gathered a certain amount of steam and gotten no small amount of attention. The attention coalesced with an HBO documentary: *Superheroes*. The subject of the attention is the factual version of a comforting fiction: there are people endowed with special powers who dedicate their use of those powers to the altruistic pursuit of the greater good. In a word, the subject is the existence of so-called ‘real life superheroes’.

The superhero character, upon being translated into real life from the big screen and comic books, takes some hits. There are no super powers, for example. There is also precious little glamour, evil to be resisted is creeping and daily and not dramatic, public acclaim is drowned by ridicule, costumes look quaint at best, and the uncompensated nature of superheroic endeavors makes the day job more a necessity than a cover. And then there is also the increased use of the word ‘hero’, now commonly deployed to describe firefighters, police officers, soldiers, etc. Since they occupy none of these roles, it’s possible that ‘real life superheroes’ are, in the final analysis, neither super nor heroes.

But even if they aren’t really superheroes (which of course they’re not), we would do well to take a closer look before dismissing them. Take the case of Mr. Xtreme, based in San Diego. Mr. Xtreme, who guards his actual identity unless the courts or officers of
the law require it (another departure from superheroism as we usually know it), wears a motley collection of protective gear, including his signature goggles and a heavily stickered green helmet. He walks the streets bedecked in all manner of padding and armor and, if he’s current on his laundry, some camouflage pants that could only obscure you from sight in a bowl of mustard. On his chest, in addition to a small picture of the character Yoda from Star Wars, he wears a similarly sized picture of Kitty Genovese, the victim whose 1964 murder was alleged to have been finally accomplished only after several bystanders chose to do nothing rather than help or call the police. He is not especially tall or muscular. He speaks with the gentle, rhythmic lilt of a second-generation immigrant from points south or east.

His activities as Mr. Xtreme, founding and sole member of the Xtreme Justice League, principally include patrolling dangerous areas of town during the typically volatile hours of the late night and early morning. The aim of the patrols is to deter violent crime, in the first place, and second, to thwart and otherwise prevent violence and crime through active intervention when that is called for. If his costume alone somehow fails to assure the success of interventions, Mr. Xtreme has undertaken a training regimen that includes a variety of martial arts and self-defense techniques.

This is the real life superhero at his most ridiculous. Most streets, on most nights, don’t yield to violence. So the lonely patrol is more an exercise in a causal fantasy than crime fighting.\(^2\) But even on the rare occasion when something untoward appears in the superhero’s path, there is still the question of what to do about it. Mr. Xtreme is not

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\(^2\) Another group of self-styled superheroes operating in Brooklyn, NY, is depicted, in the HBO documentary (Barnet, 2011), as baiting crime by having one of their number pose as vulnerable while the others observe, at the ready to intervene. This group, it may be rightly worried, is actually increasing the incidence of crime rather than fighting it.
especially more adept at the forceful use of his limbs than the average drunken youth vaguely menacing the night. And of course the predictable response of the inebriated and possibly violent to the appearance of a caped man in their midst, if it is not violent, should probably be understood as an effect of humor or bewilderment rather than fear of justice or reasoned conversion. In all, Mr. Xtreme’s patrolling activity seems quite futile.  

But then consider the kind of hardship Mr. Xtreme is incurring, and with what apparent motives. For many of us, it’s hard enough to find free time to do anything at all, much less to donate it to serving others by spending several hours during the night roaming the streets. Imagine the impact this would have on the quality of our daytime hours. Mr. Xtreme also pursues various kinds of training, and this is again only possible through large expenditures of his own time and monetary resources. In the HBO documentary, Mr. Xtreme, suffering from reduced productivity at work and eager to dedicate an even more outsized portion of his resources to his superhero life, has to move out of his apartment. He moves into a van. Given the amount of time, energy and the not trifling ingenuity and dedication with which Mr. Xtreme continues to be Mr. Xtreme, it seems safe to say that he could do rather better for himself, in conventional terms, than living in a van, parking overnight in empty big box store lots, catching a shower where he can. Life for a ‘real life superhero’ is really lonely.  

Consider also an ancillary activity that Mr. Xtreme engages in as a real life superhero: he helps the homeless in a way so levelheaded that the dissonance of the

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3 And futility, it should be pointed out, is actually clearly second worst among the possible kinds of outcome. Another real life superhero based in Seattle has recently been arrested for assault, stemming from an apparent misunderstanding of a situation into which he inserted himself (Associated Press, 2011). He claims he is innocent, which he may well be, but he may not be, even if his intentions were good. Harming others needlessly, along with subjecting themselves to needless harm, seem to be worse outcomes for ‘real life superheroes’ than doing nothing at all.
costume is almost overwhelming. He goes to places where there are large concentrations of homeless people, asks them what they need, and procures it for them: underwear, toothbrushes, basic nutrition, etc. This aspect of his life as a superhero is every bit as essential as the patrolling – he does both as Mr. Xtreme, as a part of his core mission to serve others and fight injustice – and even if he is not, as we might hope that a superhero would do, single-handedly solving the problem of homelessness, it would be beyond cynical to describe his efforts here as futile. An explicit component of Mr. Xtreme’s aims is to raise awareness about violence and attract attention to what would otherwise go barely noticed, and in this he seems to succeed. He’s also aiming to show through example what one person can accomplish, and to campaign against indifference and inaction.

Finally, consider also the psychological roots from which this unusual life has sprung, important features of which are also echoed in the lives of many others who engage in similar pursuits. Mr. Xtreme claims to have been the victim of a number of crimes earlier in his life, including sexual abuse, assault and armed robbery. The trauma of these experiences, paired with the empowering thrill of helping others, secures his motivation to continue, despite the hardship. The ends toward which he works – even if the work doesn’t always manifest obvious progress – are thus at once both intensely altruistic and deeply personal. They are ends with which he strongly identifies, we could say, because his own identity has been shaped by the resistance to violence and the regrettable and tragic experience of being powerless to resist it.

1.3 | TWO PUZZLES
I suppose it is clear enough how Mr. Xtreme’s case is a portrait of sacrifice. But it is not without complications. Should we be so ready to describe the hardship Mr. Xtreme endures as constituting a sacrifice, given that it seems to be what he most wants to do, and given that he benefits from doing it? How can it be a sacrifice if it’s the very thing that makes him most happy, that most fulfills him? While Mr. Xtreme’s case is relevantly not like some other, standard cases of sacrifice — think of people serving in the military, think of mothers and fathers — it is also relevantly similar. Many parents become parents intentionally, because they want to, and it can hardly be doubted (by any of us who are sons or daughters!) that being parents is frequently a great benefit. Yet, as any parent will readily acknowledge, the sacrifices entailed by (competent, responsible) parenthood are legion. Many soldiers become soldiers intentionally, because they want to, because it is the best option open to them in terms of a career, and it can hardly be doubted that it benefits them — how else are you supposed to be all you can be? It seems very much in my own interest to be all I can be. Yet no one will doubt the extraordinary sacrifices many military lives entail. So it seems that in these, more traditional cases as well as in Mr. Xtreme’s case, there is a basic tension between what we are usually inclined to acknowledge as a sacrifice and a basic feature sacrifices are supposed to have — whatever else they involve, they’re supposed to be instances where the agent acts in such a way so as not to maximize her own welfare. And yet they turn out for the best. This is the first puzzle in the concept of sacrifice that a theory should enable us to address — winning by losing. Making a sacrifice must involve some variety of setback to the welfare of the acting

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4 For example, in (Zunger, 2011), Mr. Xtreme describes his activities as being almost like therapy for him, and mentions that if he weren’t doing it, he’d probably be succumbing to his battle with depression, helped by alcohol. Even if his own imagined counterfactual is false, the fact remains that Mr. Xtreme is getting a huge kick out of being Mr. Xtreme.
agent, yet many typical sacrifices turn out to be actions that greatly enhance the welfare of the acting agent. If making a sacrifice means one must come out on the losing end of the action, then it is strange that apparent sacrifices should sometimes turn out to be a winning proposition.

This puzzle of winning by losing is related to a paradox developed by Saul Smilansky (2007), ‘Fortunate Misfortune.’ The paradox deals in unchosen circumstances that we would normally describe as misfortunes without hesitation: a compromised background and upbringing, a peculiar malady or disease, etc. When these events are the source of great triumph for a person – when the agent overcomes a crippling leg infection by persistence in swimming therapy and becomes a world-class swimmer, as Smilansky’s example goes (2007, p. 12) – it’s unclear that it was really a misfortune after all. In Smilansky’s case, without the infection the swimmer might not have ever even seen a swimming pool. To say that her misfortune was in fact not a misfortune (or to say that, since it was a condition of such great achievement, it was actually good fortune) seems implausible if not offensive. On the other hand, to simply keep to the view that it was misfortune seems to ignore the essential contribution it makes to enhancing the swimming champion’s welfare.

The paradox occurs in instances of fortune rather than in instances of chosen hardship. But the paradoxical quality doesn’t hinge on the absence of a choice. Just as we can ask of a chance event whether it was fortunate or unfortunate and be puzzled by our inability to answer, so we can ask of a choice whether it was a prudentially good choice or not, with similar results. Smilansky’s paradox, when applied to choices, attaches rather closely to the idea of sacrifice. Dealing with the puzzle of winning by losing will
considerably clarify our understanding of what it is to sacrifice, but it will also be of use when we turn to moral heroism, in chapter five.

The second puzzle is the puzzle of *gift by right*. Mr. Xtreme takes himself to be doing work in the name of justice. When he supplies to the homeless the small necessities of dignified life, we understand his doing so as involving sacrifice on his part – he gives his time, and he buys the provisions with his own money. But if he is a servant of justice, as we might well expect the founder of the Xtreme Justice League to think of himself, and if he is not mistaken about the fact that his actions are indeed required by justice, then it seems that what he is doing consists of exactly what may be rightly claimed from him. And this introduces a tension in our understanding of the act – it seems a clear sacrifice, yet it also seems clearly not insofar as what he was giving was something he owed.

Suppose that I have a hat that I very much enjoy having and wearing, and suppose that you like it too, but it is one-of-a-kind. Suppose also that you’ve had a terrible time lately, including a dreadful haircut, and our group of friends has struggled to find a way to cheer you up. Someone suggests that giving you my hat might just do it. Suppose that it would in fact do it. It makes me happy to cheer you up, but not *that* happy – I really like my hat, and I sort of think you’ll get over the whole haircut episode soon enough anyway. If I give you the hat, I could rightly be described as making a sacrifice for your sake – I am giving up something that contributes to my welfare, something which I am loath to part with, in order to render a benefit to you.

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5 Whether in fact there is any right in question here is of course one question, and another is whether any such right would actually generate a claim against Mr. Xtreme, rather than against some elected authority. Even if we have doubts on either of these scores, the point remains that some acts that appear to be sacrifices also appear to be eligible to be claimed.
Now suppose that we complicate the case as given slightly by saying that actually, the hat was yours all along, but I had stolen it from you, and as a result of mild head trauma which led to the horrible haircut, you forgot that I stole it. In giving you the hat in these circumstances, it seems clear not only that I am not to be especially lauded for my behavior, but that my behavior does not include making a sacrifice at all. You have a valid claim against me that I give you the hat, because it’s yours, while I have no claim at all to the hat. The presence of a claim in this version of the case means that what I do in restoring the hat to you can’t be seen as a sacrifice on my part because what I give up wasn’t really mine to give. And this seems to indicate that sacrifice includes, as a concept, an aspect of being a gift, and this aspect is hard to square with an aspect of being owed to or justly claimed by another. But many apparent sacrifices are made in response to the claims of others, and in these cases the puzzle arises as we are pushed to see the sacrifice as involving a gift by right.

This tension is echoed elsewhere in philosophical discussions, in particular in connection with forgiveness and gratitude, both of which are supposedly essentially gifts in some way, but both of which, it seems, can also be due, claimed, earned and wrongfully withheld. So the question here is how it is possible for something that is in some sense essentially a gift to be claimable by right – for me to sacrifice by doing no more than giving you your due.

1.4 | A Problem

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Imagine for a moment that Mr. Xtreme were not, despite the moniker, doing anything morally unusual. In particular, suppose instead that his actions were just slightly misguided responses to widely acknowledged and accepted moral principles regulating our efforts to assist others. Keep in mind the nights spent patrolling, the investment in training, the tapering of remunerated work, the living in a van. There is undeniably something nice about this situation: the concern for and dedication to others seems hard to argue with as morally admirable. But while Mr. Xtreme seems to like his life well enough, it is probably nonetheless a life we would be rightly worried to find to be morally mandated. Our worry would have a lot to do with how demanding the moral principles in question are, and in entertaining that worry, we would likely fix our attention on the kinds of sacrifices entailed by abiding by them.

The stakes in the world as we actually know it are quite high, though. There is brutal, unrelenting poverty. There are people without food or water, children without parents, caretakers, adequate nutrition or access to education, elderly people without assistance and medicine, injured and ill people without hope of treatment or therapy. There are victims of natural disasters, individuals and families displaced and brought to ruin by droughts, hurricanes, wildfires, earthquakes, tornados, tsunamis. In a milder cast of want, there are people for whom many humble desires for things that make human life worth living must go unfulfilled, even if suitable caloric intake and shelter are assured. That this pressing deprivation might ground obligations for those who can do something about it to do so, or indeed, to do as much as possible, is where the current discussion of the demandingness problem has taken root. Peter Singer is the modern godfather of this sort of argument. In response to a humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh he famously argued “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” (1972, p. 231). The principle demands everything up until the point where, in moral terms, what it demands would be a solution worse than the deprivation being addressed. It is a principle that enshrines what we might call moral efficiency: it commands us to get the most moral bang for our buck. Among the set of things that most potential helpers care about and enjoy, however, relatively few meet that standard. So grave and widespread are the needs to be addressed that the requisite moral heft to make proposed reallocations morally efficient will not be reached until all potential helpers abandon a truly striking number of seemingly important things. And so an intuitively promising kind of response to Singer’s proposal is to say that his principle asks too much.

Anyone hoping to develop such a line of response acquired eloquent support from Bernard Williams (1973). In his contribution to *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Williams offered criticisms that have received tremendous scrutiny and voluminous response, and that Williams himself echoed and developed elsewhere. Directing his criticism at a brand of utilitarianism that endorses Singer’s principle of beneficence, Williams claims that “utilitarianism cannot understand integrity [because] it cannot coherently describe the relations between a man’s projects and his actions” (1973, p. 100). The problem arises in

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7 See Williams (1981) and (1985), for example.
8 As an epigraph to his contribution, Williams gives a selection from Nietzsche: “If we possess our why of life we can put up with almost any how. – Man does not strive after happiness; only the Englishman does that” (1973, p.77). Given this quote, it can seem a little jarring that Williams would subsequently introduce his central criticism in these terms: “[U]tilitarianism cannot hope to make sense, at any serious level, of integrity. It cannot do that for the very basic reason that it can make only the most superficial sense of human desire and action at all; and hence only very poor sense of what was supposed to be its own speciality, happiness” (1973, p. 82). If Nietzsche’s point is to adduce something other than happiness that animates human life, then it seems an odd thing for Williams to claim that utilitarianism fails to make sense of happiness rather than claiming that it doesn’t account for whatever else Nietzsche is pointing to. But Williams is (knowingly) not
the “vast hole in the range of human desires, between egoistic inclinations and necessities at one end, and impersonally benevolent happiness-management at the other” that utilitarianism opens up but cannot fill (Williams, 1973, p. 112). For it is precisely in that gap that most of us find ourselves making commitments and forming projects that give shape and meaning to our lives.

‘Projects’ is the general term Williams uses to denote some particular features of a life – desires, attitudes, concerns – which help constitute a person’s character (1981, p. 5). Character, in turn, has important implications for various aspects of a person’s identity, both in the sense of constituting a continuing subject and in the sense of distinguishing a given person from others. This helps us to see that the sense of integrity at issue here has to do with an agent’s ability to make her life her own. To have integrity in the relevant sense is to have and value a certain relation to one’s own projects as their author, as things that generate meaning in her being the particular person she is. Williams distinguishes between projects that make significant contributions to identity and meaning and those that don’t by calling the former ‘ground projects’ (1981, p. 12).

Moral demands to sacrifice ground projects are tantamount to demands for agent to forsake her integrity, to give up what conditions her identity and makes intelligible and appealing the prospect of continuing to exist as the person she is. So moral efficiency of the kind enshrined in Singer’s principle is alleged to be incompatible with necessary conditions for leading an individually meaningful life. If that were true, the principle would be quite demanding indeed.

using the term ‘happiness’ in the way one reads Nietzsche as using it. What Williams is suggesting that utilitarianism cannot make sense of is not simply a pleasing sensation, but a kind of happiness that depends on meaningfulness.

9 Probably another important function of character in this sense is uniting a person with others in groups.
It is still very much in the wake of the preeminent and opposed advocacy of Singer and Williams that the discussion of the problem of demandingness now takes place. But their wake, much like real wake, is a roiling, confusing place to be. The concept of sacrifice occupies an important but neglected place in this discussion. Consider Singer on beneficence once again: “[I]f 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” (1972, p. 231). This formulation of a principle of beneficence has in many ways shaped the discussion of demandingness that followed it over the past forty years. A subtle way it has done so is in its implication of where comparable moral importance is to be looked for: the object of sacrifice. What this formulation excludes, and what has been subsequently overlooked, is the possibility that the act of sacrificing itself could be significant. An improved understanding of the concept of sacrifice and its place in moral life is, I will argue, indispensable to a proper articulation of the problem of demandingness. The account of sacrifice I develop also has implications for where a demandingness objection would be misplaced, and helps refute the case that all such objections are without force.

1.5 | AN ACCOUNT

The only available predecessor to sustained work on the concept of sacrifice is Mark Overvold (1980), who develops an account of sacrifice in service of an argument against desire views of welfare. The argument Overvold gives is actually closely related to the *winning by losing* puzzle, geared to render desire views of welfare implausible by
showing that they cannot make sense of the existence or even possibility of making 
sacrifices. I condense his argument considerably here.10

Take a paradigm case of sacrifice – a parent forfeits all leisure in order to secure 
her child’s education.11 Under the plausible assumption that the parent desires very 
strongly, and we can imagine, stably, that her child receives education, it appears that on 
the desire view of welfare, achieving the satisfaction of this desire is a great and perhaps 
singular contribution to her welfare.12 So what looks like it was supposed to be a sacrifice 
in fact is not on the desire view – it is instead a dramatic way of furthering the parent’s 
own interests. In addition to helping her child (assuming her child desires to get an 
education, and that getting it will enable her to satisfy future desires, etc.), the parent does 
_herself_ a huge favor by satisfying her desire that her child get an education.

So, Overvold argues, if on the desire view the hard-working parent has to be 
understood as furthering her own welfare, which was supposed to be a paradigmatic 
instance of sacrifice, then _a fortiori_ there can be no such thing as sacrifice on the desire 
view. And that is unacceptable, since we generally could not accept that there has never

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10 See Hooker (1990-1991) for a compact presentation of Overvold’s argument.
11 I refer to Overvold’s account as being of ‘sacrifice’ rather than ‘self-sacrifice’ both for 
 ease of expression and for substantive reasons. For now, I mostly want to avoid what 
seems like the most natural reading of ‘self-sacrifice’, but which Overvold clearly does not 
mean: sacrificing one’s life. I discuss what might be at stake in the difference between 
sacrifice and self-sacrifice in detail below.
12 I am here passing over considerable nuance in discussions of desire views of welfare, 
which would be risky if not irresponsible were my goals at all engaged with evaluating the 
argument Overvold gives or rescuing desire views of welfare from it. To clarify somewhat 
all the same, the kind of desire view Overvold takes as his target is based on the work of 
Richard Brandt (1979). On such a view, desires have to be ranked, so that some make 
greater contributions to welfare than others. Desires also have to be quantified as ideal or 
actual, and Overvold’s target view engages in some idealization. Not getting to drink 
what’s in the cup in front of me although I want to when I’ve mistakenly identified the 
contents as water rather than poison does not make my life go worse, for example.
been a single sacrifice actually made in all of human history, and further since we think that it is at any rate possible for there to be sacrifices.

In presenting the argument this way, I am bypassing an assumption Overvold uses concerning the role of desire in motivating human action – namely that it is always involved. The assumption, vaguely Humean in nature, makes the link between desire views of welfare and psychological egoism quite tight: if you are always and only motivated by desires, and if getting what you desire constitutes your welfare, then you’ll always and only act in pursuit of your welfare, after all. Heathwood (2011) cites several philosophers who follow Overvold in this vein by accusing desire theory of simply being some form of psychological egoism (see pp. 18-19). That desire theories should be found unacceptable for that sort of reason is not, however, to Overvold’s point, exactly. For even if we rejected the Humean picture of motivation that is a simplifying assumption in the argument, Overvold’s central point would remain – we could still say of any given case of putative sacrifice that it was motivated by a very strong desire, and so performing it has been the best way to advance the agent’s welfare, and if there’s one thing sacrifices aren’t supposed to be, it’s the best way to advance the agent’s welfare. This remark connects Overvold’s argument, albeit somewhat tenuously, with the first puzzle of sacrifice discussed in the previous section. With this adjustment, the argument no longer entails that sacrifice is impossible on the desire view, but it would imply that many actions that seem very much like sacrifices are, if the desire view is true, in fact not. This version of the argument frees up the desire view from the problems faced by psychological egoism, and so puts the focus more squarely on the account of sacrifice used to make the argument.
Let us turn to the account of the concept of sacrifice that is at the heart of Overvold’s argument. Since my view of it is that it is a predecessor to my own account, my aim is not so much to discredit it as it is to show how it is incomplete or skeletal. This stems from the fact that it was designed for a very specific purpose, rather than advancing our understanding of what sacrificing is. Overvold’s account is composed by three necessary conditions. In order to be a sacrifice, an act must have these features:

1. The loss (there must be a loss – see condition 3) must be anticipated.
2. The act must be voluntary.
3. The act must (actually) be contrary to the agent’s self-interest (Overvold, 1980, p. 109).

The first condition is meant to rule out acts that are simply accidents, or blunders. The second condition is meant to further specify the underlying rationale behind the first condition – not only must the act not be a mere blunder, but “[t]here must be an element of choice such that the individual chooses to perform an act which he expects to bring a loss” (Overvold, 1980, p. 109). For an act to be a sacrifice, the agent must choose the loss, rather than blunder into it or get forced into it.

In an accounting of which acts are sacrifices, these conditions together rule out accidents, acts performed under coercion, and acts that are otherwise determined rather than elective. One question concerns the relation Overvold sees between the act being voluntary and chosen. In particular, there are two possibilities here concerning what to say about cases where a voluntary act produces a loss that is merely foreseen rather than

13 Perhaps Overvold would have done better to separate being chosen from being voluntary and had four conditions in his account, since these qualities seem not to be interchangeable. In any event, I note that Overvold specifies voluntariness with reference to being chosen.
intended. Overvold’s conditions neglect to specify the required relation between the act and its pertinent effect, the loss. This deficiency is largely irrelevant for the specific purposes to which Overvold puts his account in his argument, but it is the first of many ways, not all of which I’ll point out, in which his account is beholden to its dialectical origins and in which it requires, in order to be an adequate account of sacrifice as such, supplementation, specification and correction.  

The third and most complex condition is designed to make a distinction between sacrificing and ‘cutting one’s losses’. Overvold explains the motivation behind the distinction: “[w]e are reluctant to include cases of cutting one’s losses as instances of self-sacrifice because in such cases the individual is trying to salvage as much as he can for himself in light of his unfortunate circumstances…In cutting his losses he seeks to minimize an inevitable loss, and thus does not voluntarily forgo a net gain he might otherwise have had” (1980, p. 110). He gives examples: “the businessman must choose between his venture in real estate and his factory, assuming he cannot keep both. Or he may have to choose between his health and his career” (1980, p. 109).

This sheds some new light on the sense of ‘voluntary’ used in the second condition, inasmuch as it suggests that Overvold is thinking that true voluntariness requires alternative possibilities. The key point is that among the alternatives, the agent must not merely be choosing what is for him the best of only bad options: “Thus for self-sacrifice, we are interested in how the agent has done for himself relative to a standard of

14 Charitably, one might say Overvold should take the position that cases where the loss is a side effect of a voluntary action do feature acts that are sacrifices since this makes it the case that his first condition is not redundant. But, on the other hand, the fact that the third condition (to be discussed immediately below) stipulates that the act must be contrary to the agent’s self-interest suggests that he was thinking of the act and the resulting loss as being rather closely connected, which suggests that loss must be intentionally incurred. I return to these issues later in developing my own account.
the best he could have done for himself” (Overvold, 1980, p. 110). After all, whatever else might be true of acts as sacrifices, it seems they cannot be a way of doing the best one could do for oneself.

By the parenthetical inclusion of ‘actually’ in the first formulation of the third condition I intend to clarify, as Overvold later does explicitly, that the loss cannot be merely expected, but has to actually occur. But even if this formulation of the third condition rules out cutting one’s losses, it still fails to exclude, to Overvold’s satisfaction, the unimaginative plumper who elects a prudentially worse course of action simply out of lack of reflection. For example, imagine we both need new driver’s licenses and I offer to go to the DMV with you and experience the significant hardship that course of action inevitably seems to entail. As it happens, I was eligible to renew my license by mail, although you were not. But if I didn’t even know about that – if I thought you and I were in the same boat, as it were – then my act of taking on the formidable burden of the trip to the DMV doesn’t register as a sacrifice, even though it satisfies all three conditions as they stand. So a new formulation is introduced, and this completes Overvold’s account of sacrifice:

3”. There must be at least one other alternative open to the agent at the time of the act which is such that (a) if the consequences of the alternative act had been as the agent expected them to be, then the alternative act would have been more in the agent’s self-interest than the act he actually did perform, and (b) if the agent had chosen to perform the alternative act, then he would have acted more in his self-interest, objectively, than the act he actually did perform (Overvold, 1980, p. 113).

As I have already mentioned, the account Overvold develops is too minimal to serve the broader purposes at hand, so there is a whole set of questions about sacrifice

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15 Actually, two new versions are introduced sequentially, eventually leading to the one I give above. I pass over the intermediate steps, which involve argument not relevant to my purposes here.
that remain unanswered here. The account I develop will be more complete. But there are also some problems internal to Overvold’s account as it stands, which, having noted here, my account will improve upon.

Overvold takes the position that an act of assuming a risk, no matter how grave the harm and no matter how probable, cannot be a sacrifice unless that risk materializes in actual harm. The agent must expect the harm (not just the risk of harm), and those expectations must be borne out. Overvold applies this view to a case featuring a soldier who takes on a risk of bodily harm (as by throwing himself on a grenade) in order to spare a compatriot from the same harm. If the harm doesn’t materialize (because the grenade is defective), Overvold claims the soldier has not succeeded in making any sacrifice. Instead, the soldier has demonstrated that he was willing to make a sacrifice, even if he did not end up making one (1980, pp. 110-111), and it is the willingness to make a sacrifice that would ground praise or admiration in this case. I suspect that this stance on risk will prove to be a mistake, since in many cases it will be difficult to dissuade us that a sacrifice has been undertaken and made even though risk was the only hardship. I return to the question of risk in the next chapter.

In a variant of the case as given, Overvold imagines that the soldier goes home after the conflict and is celebrated for his heroism and becomes rich and famous as a result. Overvold suggests that, far from having made a sacrifice, the soldier has come out with a net benefit from the act, and this is incompatible with making a sacrifice (1980, p. 111). Overvold’s case engages the puzzle of winning by losing, and the solution he proposes is not without problems.

First, if net welfare over the course of a lifetime is the relevant measure of outcomes, then we can’t know of any act whether it was a sacrifice at least until the agent
has died. And given the difficulties of assessing counterfactuals over huge periods of time with innumerable interceding variables, this position is almost as bad as the one Overvold is ultimately arguing against: although it allows that sacrifices are conceptually possible, it nearly prevents us from ever knowing whether any particular act has been a sacrifice.

Second, if the response to this epistemic problem is to say that we can know whether an act is a sacrifice at the time, but the act can be converted from a sacrifice into something else (an investment, perhaps) by subsequent events, then imagine the following. Suppose the soldier is wounded, but not terribly, in assuming the risk in his compatriot’s stead. So the act is indeed a sacrifice (assume other conditions are satisfied). But now go along with something like Overvold’s story: thirty years later, in a documentary retrospective on the conflict in which the soldier was wounded, the story of his act resurfaces and reaches millions of people and he becomes a celebrity and earns great wealth from book deals, media appearances, etc., in addition to gaining much welcomed fame. What was, in fact, a sacrifice has now been made not a sacrifice. The nature of the act has been altered by events thirty years later upon reaching some tipping point of total welfare. The first few people praising him were not enough to compensate for the wound, but eventually the scales tipped because one more person acclaimed the soldier a hero. We should be reluctant to accept any account that entails that later and distant actors have such power over the nature of a prior act. There are deep difficulties here. I attempt to deal with some of them by elaborating on the differences between merely attempted sacrifice, on the one hand, and facing risk and suffering actual harm, on the other, below, and later by addressing the puzzle of winning by losing more fully after I develop my account of sacrifice.

Recall that the motivation for the third condition in Overvold’s account was to capture the distinction between making a sacrifice and merely cutting one’s losses. The examples Overvold gives here, and the distinction between sacrifice and cutting one’s losses as it is given, are especially puzzling since Overvold is throughout speaking of ‘self-sacrifice’. We might well say of the businessman that in choosing his factory over his real estate venture he is making a sacrifice, and indeed I think this is a common way of speaking about hard choices people make for their own, eventual sake (whether and how we would be correct to speak this way I will eventually return to below in discussing single party sacrifices), but we would never even think to say that his act is an act of self-sacrifice. So the fact that Overvold has chosen, I think unfortunately and awkwardly, to speak exclusively of self-sacrifice rather than sacrifice simpliciter already rules out, conceptually, a familiar form of cutting one’s losses and also rules out sacrificing for one’s own sake.

This opens the broader question of why Overvold chose to consider only self-sacrifice rather than speaking generally about sacrifice. The choice is additionally obscure since ‘self-sacrifice’ is by far the less common term in ordinary language. What is the addition of the modifier in ‘self-sacrifice’ meant to do? One way of reading it suggests that it specifies the object being sacrificed. Connie Rosati (2009) has criticized Overvold based on this reading. She argues that Overvold has left the ‘self’ out of ‘self-sacrifice’.\(^{17}\)

\(^{17}\) Rosati additionally notes that Overvold’s account does not explicitly state something that it should: namely, that the motive for acting on the prudentially worse alternative should be the good of another. This even more strongly rules out single party sacrifice. Brandt (1990-1991) makes a similar point on p. 360. This would call for a fourth condition, one that stipulates that the motive in choosing the alternative contrary to one’s interest is to benefit another. Rosati is clear that the other who is intended to benefit needn’t be another human being or person – you could act against your self-interest in order to benefit anything that is capable of benefiting. It’s something of an open question what is included in that set, but certainly many non-human animals would be included, and in addition possibly plants, possibly the environment as such. Ideals or movements or
Overvold’s account of self-sacrifice makes no distinctions among what is being sacrificed – it only requires that the act be worse for the agent than some alternative. Rosati aims to construct an account of the self such that she can provide a way of answering the question of “when and how the sacrifice of one’s good can be a sacrifice of one’s self” (my emphasis, 2009, p. 316). She thus embarks on the project of describing aspects of the self that, when given up (in the manner otherwise prescribed by the account of sacrifice, viz., voluntarily, etc.) could comprise a sacrifice of the self. Her account builds from the paradigmatic cases of, as she calls them, “life, limbs and loves” (2009, p. 317).

As Rosati reads him, then, Overvold’s use of ‘self-sacrifice’ is to be understood as specifying the object of the sacrifice – ‘self-sacrifice’ tells us that what is being sacrificed is the self. And, given this reading, she rightly points out that a lot of work would be needed to say what sort of things would count as that sort of object. But this is an odd reading for a number of reasons. It makes Overvold’s omission of any account of aspects of the self that would count for self-sacrifice quite glaring. The only mention of anything that could fill this gap comes in a footnote, where Overvold allows that a “thorough specification of the nature of self-sacrifice ideally should include some specification of the degree of loss required” (1980, p. 114, fn. 8). This could be read in such a way so as to make Rosati’s project a friendly amendment, a specification where Overvold had only left matters vague. But it’s also possible to read that footnote as insisting on a threshold for loss in welfare for sacrifice generally. Some effects on welfare could be so small that we would}

causes might also be included without reducing to benefiting people. The criticism concerning motive is mostly a friendly amendment – it thwarts no particular purpose of Overvold’s to adopt it.
not acknowledge them as sacrifices at all. And consider again that Overvold only speaks in terms of ‘degree of loss’ rather than in terms of kinds of loss. On Rosati’s understanding of ‘self-sacrifice’, presumably degree and kind of loss are important, and so the fact that Overvold continuously speaks only in terms of degree of loss suggests that he is not thinking of ‘self-sacrifice’ as a way of specifying the object of sacrifice at all. In that case, while Rosati’s project is of independent interest and promises to deepen our understanding of serious sacrifices, it is ill designed as a correction of Overvold’s account of necessary features of ‘self-sacrifice’.

The better and more natural reading of Overvold understands him to mean only ‘altruistic sacrifice’ by ‘self-sacrifice’. The use of the ‘self’ prefix does not specify the object of sacrifice. Instead, it simply marks the fact that Overvold is only concerned with sacrificing for others.

We could say, then, that Overvold is either assuming that all sacrifice is altruistic, conceptually, or that non-altruistic sacrifice, if there is such a thing, is simply not of interest for him for his present purposes. We should go the latter route. This allows us to make sense of his inclusion of the ‘self’ prefix and to see more clearly the underlying problem he is arguing that desire theories of welfare have. It’s conceptually impossible for me to act against my own welfare and for the sake of another since the other’s welfare, in virtue of being something I desire, becomes my own. The reason Overvold seems unconcerned with other forms of sacrifice therefore has again to do with the argumentative context in which his account is set. But in giving an account of only

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18 This point is especially important in conjunction with a point I make below concerning what sorts of losses in welfare Overvold apparently has in mind, which include lost opportunities rather than loss of goods already attained.
19 In chapters four and five, especially, how sorting the seriousness of sacrifices matters becomes clear, although I make no attempt at it.
altruistic sacrifice, Overvold either begs or leaves unanswered the question of whether all
sacrifice must be altruistic. A positive answer to this question would make nonsense out of
much of the way in which we normally describe behaviors, since it is common to think
that people make sacrifices for their own, later sake. A negative answer would open up a
number of new questions the account would be poorly positioned to respond to. While
the bulk of my interest is also to do with altruistic sacrifice, since it is among my aims to
give an account of the whole concept of sacrifice, and since ‘self-sacrifice’ is so much more
awkward to say, I won’t use it.

A further problem with Overvold’s account of sacrifice is to be found in the
relation between the various iterations of the third necessary condition. Overvold claims
that any act that satisfies (b) of 3” will always satisfy 3 (1980, p. 113). Consider the
relevant portion of the final formulation of 3”, (b). It says, “if the agent had chosen to
perform the alternative act, then he would have acted more in his self-interest,
objectively, than the act he actually did perform.” Yet recall the inclusion of the modifier
‘actually’ in 3, meant to rule out cases of merely assuming a risk that never eventuates in
actual harm. This feature of 3 separates it from 3” (see pages 16 and 18, above, for the
full statements of these conditions), and ensures that the latter formulation does not entail
the first. The problem here is that whereas in 3 the agent must suffer an actual harm, 3” is
compatible with the agent choosing the worse of two options that are fundamentally great
for the agent. So whereas 3 appears to require that something bad for the agent

20 The case of single-party sacrifice is another place where the winning by losing puzzle is
especially salient, since one and the same person both endures the hardship and receives
the benefits.
happens,\textsuperscript{21} 3’’ only requires that something good for the agent fails to happen. Some acts that satisfy 3’, therefore, would fail to satisfy 3.

Not only is Overvold mistaken about the relation between the later formulations of the third condition and first one, therefore, but his endorsement of 3’’ rather than 3 is strangely inconsonant with his earlier argument to the effect that assuming a risk in someone else’s place is not sufficient to meet the criterion of harm that sacrificing imposes. If a merely possible harm is not sufficient, why should a merely possible benefit foregotten be sufficient? If there is an important difference between incurring a risk and incurring a harm such that only one could constitute a sacrifice, it seems we should expect there to be a similarly important difference between deprivation of a good and deprivation of a mere opportunity for a good.

In sum, Overvold’s account of sacrifice, though perhaps sufficient for his purposes, should not be taken as a resting point if we are aiming at progress in understanding the concept itself. I suggest three criteria with respect to which my account promises to build on Overvold’s account:

1. The account should provide suitable coverage of ways in which the concept is deployed.\textsuperscript{22}
2. The account should position us to distinguish between sacrifice and nearby phenomena, such as cutting losses, but also such as investing and giving gifts.
3. The account should be sufficiently robust to make contributions to the many places in moral theory where sacrificing is relevant.

\textsuperscript{21} Or at any rate 3 is ambiguous in its use of ‘harm’. The natural reading, I am supposing, is that it requires an actual loss as measured against some baseline rather than just a foregone opportunity.
\textsuperscript{22} This criterion and the eschewal of ‘self-sacrifice’ are prominently in play in my discussions, below, of single party sacrifice and proxy sacrifice.
The tasks established in the foregoing are what set the pace for the chapters to follow. In the following chapter, I develop an account of the concept of sacrifice. My account is meant to be responsive to our actual concept, and so the methodology I employ is to use cases to isolate paradigmatic features of the act. Building such an account promises progress in our understanding of what it is to sacrifice beyond what is offered by Overvold’s skeletal account. It is also crucial work for the tasks of subsequent chapters.

Chapter three builds on my account to address both the winning by losing and the gift by right puzzles. The resolution of each puzzle is important in its own right and represents further development of an account of the concept of sacrifice, but the work done there will again resurface later. The gift by right puzzle is importantly connected to my discussion of the demandingness problem, to which I turn in chapter four. There I illustrate the surprisingly broad scope of the problem, which belies the customary treatment of the problem in exclusive connection with duties of beneficence. I then argue that articulating the problem in terms of sacrifice is the best way to account for its breadth, while also arguing that inserting sacrifice as the key concept in understanding demandingness frustrates a couple of influential efforts to dismiss the problem by denying that objections rooted in demandingness have any independent force. If demandingness is understood as centrally featuring sacrifices entailed by duties, then there is something distinctively forceful about such objections.

In the concluding chapter I turn to genuinely heroic sacrifice, and the claim, so frequently made by heroes themselves, that their heroic actions were somehow required. If, as I will have been arguing, sacrificing is a kind of act moral duties have to be sensitive
to, it would be very hard to explain how heroic sacrifices could nonetheless still be the objects of moral requirements. Therefore I argue against the moral interpretation of the requirement claim, but I also argue against a deflationary position that seeks to explain away the requirement claim. I am left, therefore, with the final task of presenting an alternative account of the requirement in question.
CHAPTER 2 | THE CONCEPT OF SACRIFICE

2.1 | INTRODUCTION

The lack of philosophical attention directed to the concept of sacrifice seems to be supported by an assumption that we already know what it is to make a sacrifice. This assumption is one that is surely safe for the rough and ready run of ordinary day-to-day living. But having paused to inspect the assurance with which we deploy the term, we find it harbors puzzles that are not straightforwardly resolvable. It turns out to be rather difficult to say exactly what it is that makes an act an act of sacrifice. In this chapter, I develop the key pieces of a new account of the concept of sacrifice. The account developed here will resurface in subsequent chapters in order to fulfill the tasks I have set for them. In particular, the account in this chapter will be the basis for resolving the winning by losing puzzle and the gift by right puzzle (in chapter three), and it will also be the basis of my articulation and limited defense of the demandingness problem (in chapter four). Finally, I will also put the work of this chapter to use in order to isolate a notion of moral heroism from heroism more generally (in chapter five).

2.2 | A NEW ACCOUNT OF THE CONCEPT OF SACRIFICE

One possible reaction to Overvold’s account would be to conclude that a complete account — a full set of necessary and sufficient conditions — for the concept of sacrifice is a fool’s errand, perhaps not least because there simply is no single, unitary concept of sacrifice. I make two points in response to this worry. First, a strict account that gave a full set of necessary and sufficient conditions and held all and only things that satisfied them to be acts of sacrifice would, even if it were not a fool’s errand, be
unsatisfactory in the following way. The hoped for analysis should illuminate the concept of sacrifice in all of its furthest corners, so in addition to shining a light on the acts in full compliance with the conditions, it should also shed some light on acts that in some way resemble the fully compliant acts. This is to say that an account that simply sorts all acts into two types, sacrifices and other, doesn’t do some of the work we want an analysis of the concept to do. So the account I aim to develop here does not proceed by ruling some acts out altogether while wholly admitting others as acts of sacrifice. Just as in life and language, family resemblances here are more important, more illuminating and more accessible than an elusive or fictional set of necessary and sufficient conditions.23 I will set up a paradigmatic sense of the concept in reference to which non-paradigmatic departures from that case can be analyzed.24 This approach will allow me to sort acts into more nuanced categories, to cover more cases, and in covering them to say something illuminating about the non-paradigmatic cases by way of the structural relationship between them and the paradigm cases.

Second, even if the nature of the relevant conceptual territory is such that a unified account cannot entirely map it, my account, I claim, does cover the heart of it. Furthermore, the puzzles I’ve adduced, and the importance of sacrifice for thinking about demandingness, can also be extracted from what is firmly the central area of the concept. So even if my account may rightly be characterized as in some sense stipulative around the edges, this doesn’t strike me as damaging, inasmuch as none of the work to which I put it depends on stipulations.

23 See Wittgenstein (1958).
24 This approach has been deployed with great success in other inquiries. Charles Griswold’s (2007) use of it in connection to the concept of forgiveness is exemplary.
I should attempt to make clear what is at stake in the first round of arguments, below. What will it mean that some acts are excluded from consideration as paradigmatic instances of sacrifice? The first thing to say is what such exclusion won’t mean. In arguing that $X$ is a necessary feature of paradigmatic sacrifice, I will not mean to imply that acts lacking $X$ are therefore sacrifices of a lesser magnitude or somehow ignoble. An unfavorable moral evaluation of non-paradigmatic sacrifices does not follow on the heels of that classification alone. What is at stake in isolating a paradigmatic sense of sacrifice is a kind of privileging of some features over others, but not a moral sense of privilege. The privilege is instead conceptual in nature: the paradigmatic features of sacrifice are those that compose the clearest, fullest, most compelling cases of what a sacrifice is.\footnote{This is also distinct, I think, from saying that the whole notion of paradigm cases is just a heuristic. In other words, while it’s true that paradigm cases are just those that happen to most clearly fall under the concept of sacrifice, it’s not true that argument concerning what should be included in the paradigm understanding is merely argument about a device by means of which to correctly classify acts. The paradigm cases really are those acts that really do fully instantiate the concept of sacrifice. My main concern in the text above is to show that nothing especially evaluative, and certainly nothing morally evaluative, is necessarily at stake in the distinction between paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic cases. It would require further argument for any moral distinction to follow from the conceptual distinction. For reasons that will be made clearer later, some kinds of departure from the paradigm will have specific tendencies in moral evaluations, but not all of them do – so we cannot infer merely from its being non-paradigmatic that a sacrifice has an inferior moral status. Something similar is true in terms of meaningfulness, I think: although some kinds of departures from the paradigm will tend to erode the meaning of a sacrifice, not all do, and so some non-paradigmatic sacrifices could be just as meaningful as paradigmatic ones.} It is then with reference to them that we understand variations in the many forms sacrifices can take.\footnote{There might be any number of ways to describe the contrast between paradigmatic cases and non-paradigmatic cases: we might call the former set of sacrifices genuine, real, true or full-fledged, for example, while calling non-paradigmatic cases the opposite. In what follows I attempt to avoid such additional labels not least because many of them have unhelpfully evaluative connotations.}
What features of an act make it an act of sacrifice? There may be subtle linguistic differences between how this sort of question guides an inquiry as compared to different, but apparently related questions. For example, whereas I am addressing a question in which ‘sacrifice’ figures as a noun, that noun could be related to different verbs in different ways: offering and making a sacrifice seem importantly distinct, and that distinction isn’t covered by yet another way the concept might appear, namely, as a verb itself. By taking up the question I do, I mean only to focus my discussion on what is most relevant for ethics at the most general level: acts. Some of the distinctions that ring in our ears given different usage I will hope to address more directly by distinguishing between different features of acts.

Let me begin, then, with some cases that exhibit some features of sacrifice.

**Cousins:**
Hal has a cousin, Terry, who is considerably worse off than Hal in financial terms. An uncle of theirs usually gives each of his nephews $100 for their birthdays. Hal is in fact quite rich, and cares not at all about the prospect of having an additional $100 at his disposal. He informs his uncle of that fact and directs him to send the money meant for him to Terry instead. His uncle verbally acquiesces, but forgets and actually sends Hal and Terry each their customary $100. Unbeknownst to him, Hal’s accountant deposits the check and neither he nor Terry ever knows that the $100 did finally end up with Hal rather than Terry despite Hal’s directive.

**Sisters:**

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27 I will also explicitly focus on relevant features of the agent of the act, and on the recipient of the act as well. I therefore have a broad understanding of what is comprised by ‘the act’. So broad is that understanding in fact that by asking the question this way, I do not mean to rule out inaction as a kind of act.
29 Speaking principally of actions and acts, for now, won’t preclude later speaking of dispositions to act and character.
Sabah has a twin sister, Mounia, who is considerably less well off than Sabah in financial terms. Their parents usually give them each $100 for their birthday. Sabah, acknowledging her sister’s greater need, tells her parents that she would rather they give her $100 to Mounia despite the fact that Sabah has treasured the past experience of receiving the gift and using it. Her parents verbally accede to her request. Sabah does not review her banking statements, however, and so fails to notice that in fact her parents do send her $100, and she never confirms with her sister anything other than that she received money from their parents. Mounia also received $100.

**Brothers:**
Dieter has a twin brother, Wilhelm, who is considerably less well off than Dieter in financial terms. In fact, Dieter is extremely rich. Their parents usually give them each $100 for their birthdays. Dieter’s parents ask for his new address in order to send the money, marking the first and only time Dieter considers the matter. Acknowledging Wilhelm’s greater need, and furthermore citing his own complete indifference to the sum of money at stake, Dieter directs his parents to send his $100 to Wilhelm rather than to him. They comply with his request. Dieter promptly forgets the whole episode.

**Siblings:**
Flor has a twin brother, Pedro, who is considerably less well off than Flor in financial terms. Their parents usually give them each $100 for their birthdays. Flor herself is only moderately well off, anticipates her birthday present with relish and joy, and cherishes it not just as an instrumental good with which to purchase something she wants, but also as a sentimental gesture from her parents. However, acknowledging Pedro’s greater needs, she requests that this year her parents send the $100 meant for her to her brother. Her parents comply with her request. Flor has an unusually spartan birthday, notable by contrast to previous birthdays for a certain celebratory joy it lacks, while Pedro derives significant benefit from the extra $100.

Of the acts performed by named protagonists in these cases, which most fully exhibits the characteristics of an act of sacrifice? While it would be possible to identify the acts in *Sisters* or *Brothers* as sacrifices, the fourth case, *Siblings*, is the clearest case of a sacrifice. *Sisters* does not feature a paradigmatic sacrifice because the good Sabah meant to give up

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30 I focus only on the actions undertaken by the offspring in each case, and not on the generosity of the parents or uncles. Whether the parental giving involves sacrifice can’t be determined without more information.
was not something she succeeded in transferring or even relinquishing. *Brothers* is not a paradigm case of sacrifice because the person making the sacrifice, Dieter, experiences no hardship whatsoever in making it. What these cases point to are subjective and objective necessary conditions that the giving agent in paradigm acts of sacrifice will satisfy:

**Objective condition:** the giving agent must forfeit some good.

**Subjective condition:** the giving agent must experience hardship caused by the forfeiture.

In standard cases of sacrifice, the sacrificing agent will *feel* something negative or unpleasant. Acting in such a way so as to sacrifice means, in this sense, taking on something unpleasant or otherwise distasteful so that the experiential quality of the act is at least partially marked by hardship. This is what the subjective condition captures. The objective condition is in place partly because typically it’s not the case in our world that we can make a sacrifice simply by feeling bad. That is, an act that had no other consequences than the agent feeling bad is usually insufficient to benefit anyone else. The more usual case features the forfeiture of some good – something of importance to the agent is rendered as a benefit to someone else. And while this variety of transfer would frequently cause the agent to experience hardship, sometimes it may not.

Both the objective and the subjective conditions are flouted by *Cousins*. Hal experiences no hardship in giving because the array of attitudes that characterizes him ensures that the foregone $100 would never eventuate in an experience of hardship. Hal also actually fails to forfeit a good, so it’s also not true that he, by his act, has been made $100 poorer. It should be clearest in the case of *Cousins* that no sacrifice is made.

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31 The claim is not meant to exclude the possibility of other feelings or to represent an all-things-considered, summary feeling about the act.
*Sisters* satisfies the subjective condition, since Sabah experiences all the hardship of passing on a benefit meant for her: she anguishes over the decision, she foregoes the distinctive pleasure of receiving the token of her parents’ affection. But the objective condition is not met: Sabah actually receives the benefit she has proposed to sacrifice; there is no hardship to experience, as it were. Her experience of hardship, real though it is, is rooted in a factual mistake. Perhaps the failure of the case to meet the objective condition is clearest in the failure of the intended recipient to be benefitted. But it is also the case that, even though she doesn’t know it, Sabah herself has received a benefit – precisely the benefit she meant to be giving up and which was to constitute her sacrifice is something she fails to transfer but instead receives herself.

We might say of *Sisters* not that a sacrifice is made, but that one is attempted. After all, under normal circumstances, Sabah does enough to accomplish the giving – only her parents fail to execute her plan. But suppose the deal was struck between Sabah and her sister rather than between Sabah and her parents, so that Sabah pledged her $100 to Mounia, but failed to actually transfer the funds, and they both soon forgot the promise. Without satisfying the objective condition, it seems Sabah cannot make a sacrifice, though she might well initially attempt one. The reason Sabah may be said to attempt a sacrifice whereas Hal, in *Cousins*, may not, has to do with whether what’s being offered matters to the agent. Since it does matter to Sabah, in trying (but failing) to give it up she attempts a sacrifice. Since it does not matter to Hal, whether he makes an effort to give it up or not (and indeed, whether he succeeds or not), the way in which he might satisfy the objective condition will not produce the requisite results to satisfy the subjective condition. The contrast between *Sisters* and *Cousins*, although neither is a paradigm case of
sacrifice, shows the relative independence of the two necessary conditions so far adduced (subjective and objective) and shows why both are necessary.

*Brothers* offers the converse situation from *Sisters*: the objective condition is satisfied without the subjective condition being satisfied. Dieter succeeds in transferring the money to Wilhelm, depriving himself of the additional resources. But because the deprivation is so slight for Dieter (subjectively, it’s actually non-existent), he does not experience any hardship in the objective transfer. Thus while he successfully gives, the giving is for him not in any way a hardship, and so not a paradigm sacrifice. If we were inclined to think that *Brothers* is closer to including a paradigmatic sacrifice than *Sisters*, this might show that we were inclined to privilege the objective condition above the subjective condition.

But it might be thought that the subjective condition could be excised altogether. As long as the objective condition is in place, and maybe even made more robust (for example, it might specify that a particular level of deprivation is consequent on the giving), why bother with the subjective attitudes of the agent?

Here I think the proposed alternative runs into a kind of dilemma: if the objective condition is filled out to specify some level of deprivation (so as to exclude cases like a billionaire giving a kid a penny), it’s doubtful that a plausible sense of deprivation could be achieved without some reference to something subjective. On the other hand, if the objective condition is left as is, then problem cases like the one just mentioned, along with a great many others besides, get in, and the concept of sacrifice balloons beyond recognition to include all manner of giving.

In *Brothers*, because there is no subjective experience of hardship in transferring the funds, what Dieter does may well be to give a gift, but he does not sacrifice in doing so. This conclusion – and the necessary place it implies for the subjective condition – may
seem dubious because of how it seems to rule out joy or generosity in sacrificing. The extreme version we can imagine in the person of Aristotle’s *phronimos*: such an agent would be, on my account, incapable of meeting the conditions for making a sacrifice, since in giving she\textsuperscript{32} would not experience hardship, but instead would only feel pleasure in enacting the virtuous transfer of a good.

I offer a number of points in response to this worry. First, it seems not to be much of a bullet to bite to allow that Aristotle’s *phronimos* can’t make sacrifices, not least because Aristotle’s *phronimos* borders on being other-than-human fiction. But even setting that to one side, it doesn’t seem that inappropriate as a measure of the distance between us and the beatitude of the *phronimos* to say that for her there are no sacrifices.

Second, biting the bullet is made even less painful by the possibility of explaining away the pressure to think it absurd that the *phronimos* cannot make sacrifices. The acts she undertakes are ones we are familiar with, but only *as sacrifices*, since we are only familiar with these acts as undertaken by ordinary agents. And just as our ordinary understanding of the act might spill over onto our understanding of the act as performed by the *phronimos*, so probably do our ordinary attributions project false expectations onto the perfectly virtuous agent.

Third, the subjective condition as I have given it does not require that the experience of hardship in the agent is the *only* experience the agent has in connection with the act, or that the felt hardship overwhelms any other feeling. If the *phronimos* doesn’t feel

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even a twinge of hardship, I'm happy to bite whatever is left by way of a bullet and admit that sacrifice is no longer possible for that sort of agent.

_Siblings_ is a clearer instance of making a sacrifice because _Siblings_ meets both conditions. Flor gives up her gift, successfully removing from her coffers the money her parents would have given her and depositing it with Pedro. Moreover, this act is accompanied by significant, experienced hardship for Flor – it deprives her of the material enjoyment of the resources she could have used and indeed looked forward to using, and it further deprives her of an important source of emotional support from her parents, something she has cherished in the past. Since _Siblings_ meets both conditions, it is the clearest case in which we see that a sacrifice has been made. The conclusion this set of cases supports is that sacrificing is, minimally, a specific way of conferring a benefit – one that involves an objective loss, and one that involves hardship in the experience of giving.

The subjective condition as given stipulates that the experience of hardship must be caused by the forfeiture of the good that satisfies the objective condition. This rules out cases where an agent meets the objective condition but experiences hardship only because of something unrelated to the object of the sacrifice:

**Accidental Siblings:**
Marco has a twin sister, Isabel, who is considerably worse off than Marco in financial terms. Their parents usually give them each $100 for their birthdays, but Marco, acknowledging Isabel’s greater need, directs his parents to send his gift to her instead of sending it to him. Marco is both

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33 Vanessa Carbonell (2009) imposes something very like the subjective condition onto the distinction made by Urmson (1958) and Wolf (1982) between loving saints and dutiful saints (p. 373). If loving saints are indeed agents who systematically fail to meet the subjective condition – if they feel no hardship whatsoever in their saintly acts – and if sacrifice is necessary for moral sainthood, then I think there is no such thing as a loving saint. Instead (if there are any actual people who would have been thought to fit the description of the loving saint), there is a rare breed of person so in love with giving that there is nothing but happiness in it for them, even when the giving is of everything one has.
quite wealthy and forgetful, so that the fact that the $100 goes to Isabel rather than him barely appears in his consciousness apart from the moment in which he makes the effortless decision. Marco communicated his decision to his parents by sending them a letter, and in the process of writing it he stabbed himself in the hand with a pen, an injury that required surgery and several weeks of rehabilitation. Isabel did receive the money, however.

*Accidental Siblings* satisfies both the objective and subjective conditions, but it satisfies the subjective condition in the wrong way (under the assumption that the risk of serious injury in writing a letter was negligible).

The first four cases also allow us to make a number of other claims about paradigmatic sacrifice. In each of those cases there are relevant features of a second person that come into play. This fact leads the way toward two additional points about paradigmatic sacrifice. First, it is a phenomenon that features two roles, a giver and a recipient. In the next section, I will entertain some complications of this feature—cases where one person plays both roles, cases involving groups, cases where the decision to sacrifice is not made by the same person who satisfies the conditions, and cases where one role is occupied by a cause or ideal. The point for now is only that there are two roles to be occupied. Second, in paradigm cases the recipient of the putative sacrifice actually receives the benefit. The most common ways in which this will fail to be accomplished will violate what we could say is an objective condition analogous to the objective condition for the agent, as is the case in *Sisters*. That is, some benefit or good that the recipient was meant to receive will fail to reach her. This is another reason that *Siblings* rather than *Sisters* features a paradigm instance of sacrifice. But it’s also possible that the act and its results could come off exactly as intended, and even, in an objective sense, be good for the

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34 The fact that Cousins, Sisters, Brothers and Siblings all feature a third party (either parents or an uncle) should not mislead on this point.
recipient, without the recipient being glad about any of it. In paradigm cases, at least, the recipient will both actually be benefitted and be glad of the benefit.\(^{35}\)

A slight adjustment to *Siblings* illustrates another crucial feature of paradigmatic sacrifice: imagine Flor’s parents threaten her with estrangement (or something worse if estrangement from one’s parents doesn’t seem so bad) if she chooses not to transfer her $100 to Pedro. The threat changes matters in at least two ways, each of which deteriorates the sense in which *Siblings* includes a Flor making a sacrifice. First, suddenly giving up the $100 looks like the best thing for Flor. I return to the condition at issue here below. Second, diminished voluntariness in acting casts doubt on the status of the act as an instance of sacrifice. At the far end of the spectrum, fully involuntary acts should be ruled out not unlike the way in which Overvold ruled out accidents or blunders. Similarly, coerced acts should also be ruled out: acting under coercive threat, as Flor does in the proposed variant of *Siblings*, changes the nature of the act – rather than Flor giving something to Pedro, something is being extracted from Flor.\(^{36}\)

Consider another case:

**Rock:**

Fumiko is walking idly along when she is approached by a radio personality informing her that she has won a pair of tickets to a concert starting shortly. The tickets are for a show of a band she knows and likes. There’s only one catch – if she doesn’t use the tickets herself, she’ll be banned from all future giveaways from this, her favorite radio station. As she walks away with the tickets in her hand, she weighs her options and chooses to go forward with her original plan of going to a movie rather than going to the concert. She leaves the tickets on a bench, not caring what happens to them. Herschel, a huge music fan who had not been able

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\(^{35}\) This does not mean that the recipient must be glad about how they received the benefit, that the agent did make the sacrifice they did, or that it was necessary for the agent to make that sacrifice in order for the benefit to be possible (if indeed it was). The idea is only that in typical cases the recipient will actually receive a benefit and that benefit will be associated with a positive subjective experience for them.

\(^{36}\) Although I consider some complications on this point in the next section, below.
to get tickets to the show, happens to sit on the bench and find the tickets an hour later. He goes to the show and enjoys it.

Fumiko’s act in *Rock* is voluntary – she chooses freely to leave the tickets and go to a movie, and this act turned out to benefit someone else. Furthermore, this choice carries some unfortunate consequences for her, consequences she is aware of and we can expect cause her displeasure. Is it therefore a paradigm case of sacrifice? I think it is not. The reason is that because, while Fumiko’s act of leaving the tickets is fully voluntary, the benefit to Herschel is no part of the act that Fumiko performed. In particular, it was not the intention of the act. What *Rock* shows us is that in paradigm cases of sacrifice, not only is the act in question voluntary, but it also has as its intention the benefit of the other. One way of seeing this is to emphasize the preposition that typically follows: one sacrifices for something or someone. The problem with Fumiko’s act as a putative sacrifice is that it isn’t for Herschel, although he benefits from it. Indeed, the problem is that the act as described isn’t for anyone (including an unspecified recipient), even if Fumiko had the vague notion that someone might find the tickets and use them (and this is why she leaves them somewhere rather than throwing them in the garbage).

A further point should be made with respect to *Rock*. Without the intention of benefiting another, Fumiko’s action is hard to make sense of unless she prefers, all things considered, to go to the movies. And if that is her preference, then even if she did intend to benefit someone else, Fumiko’s case would look more like cutting losses rather than making a sacrifice. So we need to introduce some comparative element in the conditions of paradigmatic sacrifice whereby *an alternative course of action is open to the agent such that, in choosing it, she would do better for herself, but which she nonetheless chooses against*. In *Rock*, we would have to imagine that Fumiko actually preferred to go to the concert, but chose to go to
the movies instead for this condition to be satisfied. Since the point of this condition relates to how the agent chooses an action rather than the alternative, we should also accept that the agent must be aware of the alternative possibility.

Consider another case:

**Ride:**

James knows that his friend, Omar, needs a ride to the airport. The only way James can give Omar a ride is if he gives up his seats at the basketball game that night. James is reluctant to give up his seats, but he also knows that he’s already booked a flight in a few weeks and having a ride to the airport in that case will be a great benefit for him, even though it will be inconvenient for Omar to provide it. He has not told Omar about his planned trip. James drives Omar to the airport, and later calls in the favor for a ride himself.

James’s act appears to have many of the features of a paradigm sacrifice that have already been discussed: the act is voluntary, the benefit is intended, both the loss and the benefit are actual, and James experiences the hardship associated with what he gives up. But for all that, the eye the agent casts toward reciprocation seems to change the nature of what’s being done. There are many ways of describing this. We might say that the actual intention of James’s act is to benefit himself by securing a ride to the airport for his own future trip. The fact that he doesn’t tell Omar about that trip supports this explanation. That would make the benefit to Omar either a side effect or more plausibly an intended means to a further end. Imagine that James had told Omar about his future trip, and the two formed an informal agreement about giving each other rides to the airport. The fulfillment of a contract may indeed require sacrifices, but in this case I think we should say that there is a difference between fulfilling the front end of a contract and
making a sacrifice.\textsuperscript{37} This suggests that the prospect of reciprocation should be distant and vague, if present at all, in paradigmatic cases of sacrifice. The horizons of the act and the intention in acting, in paradigmatic cases of sacrifice, do not reach to future reciprocation from the party benefited.

It is of course true that many important relationships will include a willingness of each party to make sacrifices for the other in addition to actual instances of doing so. And this fact might enter into any given choice to make a sacrifice – it’s my friend, and this is what friends do for each other, it’s what this friend would do for me, etc. So a kind of loose reciprocity might exist in some cases we’d still want to identify as including sacrifices, and this means that the horizons of the act might encompass, because of the nature of the relationship, the notion of prospective reciprocity. Here we should distinguish between sacrifices that are part of a relationship, as in most good friendships, and sacrifices that are the reason for the relationship, as in more contractual relations.\textsuperscript{38} Even though \textit{Ride} presents Omar and James as friends, it’s not so much as a friend that James gives Omar a ride; instead, it’s as a prospective passenger. Where the relationship grounds the action, we can still see it as a sacrifice, even if there is reason to expect that in the future there will be something like reciprocation because of the nature of the relationship. But where the very prospect of reciprocation grounds the action, the act is not a paradigmatic act of sacrifice (we might instead call it a species of investment). This rules out fulfilling the front end of contracts and trading costly favors as paradigmatic sacrifices. Before I claimed that sacrifice is, minimally, a very particular way of conferring

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{37} Sacrifice might be required in order to honor an agreement or contract, but that would depend on the content of the agreement, rather than being established in virtue of there being an agreement at all.

\textsuperscript{38} Cf. Halbertal (2012).
\end{footnotesize}
a benefit, and we can now add to this that it is not an exchange but a transfer: an act
defined in motive and intent by one-way giving.  

Another element that should be added to the account can be drawn out of *Brothers*
and *Rock*. While in the latter Fumiko’s act, which benefited a stranger, was found to flout
a condition of intentionality, it’s also true that in discarding the tickets Fumiko has not
acted under a motive that was in any way informed by the kind of benefit that Herschel’s
finding the ticket constituted. A further condition governing the *motive* of the action would
also help to explain one additional way in which Dieter, in *Brothers*, comes close to acting
in a way identifiable as making a sacrifice: his motive is presumably of the right kind.
What moves him to act is not explicitly described in the case, but it is safe to suppose his
motive prominently features his brother Wilhelm and the greater good that the $100
could do for him.

There are distinctions that I have not made in this section. For example, among
all the things that a sacrifice could be *for*, I have so far only said that in paradigm cases it
is for another person, and this was really only a simplifying assumption. While sacrifices
are routinely made for other individual human persons, they are also routinely made for
groups of people, for non-persons and non-human animals, for causes, for ideals, etc.

I have also declined to make distinctions among the many possible objects of
sacrifice, opting instead to speak only in terms of what is common among those possible
objects in terms of the impact of their loss on the agent. Sacrifices could be *of* one’s life,

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39 The addition of a condition concerning motive complicates the sense in which
paradigmatic sacrifices might be morally required, since motives only contentiously figure
into the way moral requirements are often understood (see Lichtenberg (2014, ch. 10).
Most of what I later discuss as potentially morally required sacrifice needn’t be
paradigmatic in this way – what is contentious about those requirements is not much to
do with imposing and valuing a particular motive.
one’s future, one’s possessions, one’s integrity, one’s hope, a relationship, etc. In paradigm cases, the sacrifice is of something significant. I suspect that some relatively trivial losses could still be the occasion of a (small) sacrifice. But probably some losses are too small to count as a sacrifice at all, much less a paradigmatic act of sacrifice (I return to this question below). This suggests that in one sense, at least, sacrifice is a threshold concept—the loss involved has to surpass a threshold of significance for the agent in order to count at all.

It is also important to note that my account of sacrifice does not entail that sacrificing is always or even generally morally good or praiseworthy. This means that acts could be paradigmatic sacrifices and still be subject to moral censure. To call an act an act of sacrifice on my view, then, is not automatically or presumptively to laud it. Recognizing or even acknowledging someone’s sacrifice is typically to laud it, but on my view that has at least as much to do with our attitudes towards other features of the act, such as an endorsement of the cause it serves, as it has to do with the fact that the act is a sacrifice. Still, the fact that paradigm cases, as I have argued, are aimed at benefitting someone else appears to set them on a track toward moral approbation. But I think it would be reckless to claim that this feature could ground a presumptively favorable moral view of even the intention behind sacrifice, much less sacrifice as such. We are too familiar with sacrifice going wrong to presume that it typically deserves praise—think of the many sacrifices made by Goebbels in order to benefit Hitler and the Reich. And we should be wary of thinking altruism the only moral ideal, particularly in a social context.
where a history of discrimination might make subservience especially possible in some groups of people.  

The picture of paradigmatic sacrifice that has been distilled in this section includes a number of features, the absence or non-standard instantiation of which will characterize departures from the paradigm. Here are those features, in summary:

**Structural Features**

- The act features two roles, an agent and a recipient.

**Recipient**

- The recipient satisfies subjective and objective conditions: she is objectively made better off in some significant way, and she experiences the benefit as such.

**Agent**

- In acting, the agent satisfies both a *subjective and an objective condition*: the agent forfeits a good and the forfeiture causes an experience of hardship.
- The act is *voluntary*.
- The benefit to the recipient is the guiding intention of the act.
- The agent’s *motive* in acting also features the benefit to the recipient.
- That guiding intention leads the agent to choose against an open alternative course of action more favorable to the agent’s own interests.
- The act is undertaken without regard for the possibility of future reciprocation.

2.4 | DEPARTURES FROM THE PARADIGM

In this section I address acts that feature some but not all of the characteristics of paradigmatic sacrifice. These acts may or may not be sacrifices at all; they may be sacrifices in only a lesser sense than the paradigmatic cases were, or they may be in the fullest possible sense sacrifices, but only unusual in the form they take. In any case, I’m

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more interested here in the criteria and the distinctions required to set up the criteria than
I am in any particular verdict about any particular act.

*Playing the Roles: Single Party Sacrifice, Groups and Causes*

In the paradigmatic case, a sacrifice is an act with two roles: the agent and the
recipient, and these are each played by a different individual. But a single person can play
both roles, and especially if time intercedes between the act and the expected benefit,
having a single person in both roles is a quite familiar way of enacting a sacrifice. The
hurdle to accepting these cases as acts of sacrifice at all is that since only one person
figures in the act it looks as though incurring a loss is really just a way of aiming for what
is best for oneself. Single-party sacrifice is thus a particularly vivid instantiation of the
*winning by losing* puzzle, the subject of an extended discussion in the next chapter.

Another complication in terms of who plays the roles of agent and recipient arises
when we consider groups instead of individuals. Putting to one side the considerable
complexities and puzzles involved with group action and group agency, it nonetheless
seems clear that groups can be benefitted by sacrifices and that groups can sacrifice in
order to benefit others. So we should say that groups are capable of filling the roles of
agent and recipient in acts of sacrifice. Some of these combinations will be more like
single-party sacrifices, and some will be more like the paradigm. A group could make
sacrifices for its own sake, and that will conform to the specifications of single party
sacrifice. A group could make a sacrifice for the sake of an unaffiliated individual or a
different group, and that would look more like a paradigm case. In the other direction,

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41 In part because of the complexities I have just put to one side, though, these sorts of
cases will still not be included among the paradigm cases.
when an unaffiliated individual makes a sacrifice for a group, that too should measure up to the paradigm conditions. Perhaps most complicated are cases where an individual member of a group makes sacrifices for the group of which she is a part. On the one hand, we can readily see how we could fruitfully describe some cases of this kind as a species of single party sacrifices: there’s a single party involved, but the single party is multiple, in that it’s a group. Think of a sacrifice fly in baseball, for example. A batter deliberately bats the ball into the outfield in a way that will assure that he, the batter, is out – and this lowers his batting average, deprives him of the chance to score a run, etc. But in doing this he advances his team’s cause (assuming the sacrifice fly has been appropriately called for), helping them to win. In doing this, of course, he helps his own cause, bringing himself closer to winning. Since the goal being pursued by the group is one that he, as a member, shares, in advancing their cause he advances his own, and so in sacrificing for the win, he sacrifices for his own sake. But there could be other cases where what’s given is too extreme to make sense of the act as a case of single party sacrifice.

Imagine an athlete who correctly thinks that his team will be incredibly motivated to win if he is maimed in a tragic way. He secures his own maiming and his team goes on to win. It’s hard to see how to make sense of this as a single party sacrifice, but easier to understand as more closely conforming to the paradigm case two-party sacrifice, since those that do the winning do it in an important sense without the agent also doing so.

Finally, many colloquial uses of the term ‘sacrifice’ pick out an act of giving where the recipient is not an individual being or group of beings, but rather a cause or ideal. Thus people are said to make sacrifices for freedom, or for justice or peace. Many of these causes will be good candidates for reducibility, at least in the sense that to benefit those causes is to benefit certain people (those restored to freedom, justice, or peace, for
example). The benefit to the cause in some cases may be reducible to a benefit to particular people or groups of people. But this may not be true in all cases of sacrificing for a cause (perhaps some sacrifices for the sake of beauty might be good candidates for irreducibility), and in any case it is often not the reduction base that animates the agent making the sacrifice. It may seem contrived to speak of benefiting a cause, so we may prefer, in these cases, to speak of the point of the hardship as advancing the cause rather than benefiting it. Enduring a hardship to make the world a more just or beautiful or peaceful place seems to be a rather good candidate for satisfying many of the conditions of sacrifice. The idea here is that it is a conceptual constraint on sacrifices that they be for something, and with causes no less than people there is something there for the sake of which we might sacrifice.

*The Unwitting, the Merely Foreseen, and the Coerced*

Let us return to cases in which the two-party condition is satisfied. Suppose also that the agent and the recipient satisfy the subjective and objective conditions, and furthermore that non-reciprocity is satisfied. Our focus here is on cases in which the agent’s relation to the act or the benefit is a departure from the voluntary, intentional manner of acting motivated by the benefit in the paradigmatic cases of sacrifice.

First, let’s consider a voluntary action that, despite not being intended to produce a benefit for the recipient, does indeed produce such a benefit. Among these cases, we should distinguish between the unwitting and the foreseen but unintended benefit. When the agent unwittingly produces a benefit for someone else in an act that otherwise conforms to the expectations of the paradigm, there is little temptation to think that a sacrifice has been undertaken. In one kind of unwitting case, the agent not only does not
foresee the benefit, but may never even become aware that the benefit was possible, much less that it actually happened. The motive will also usually fail to be of the right kind in these cases, and so we would not describe the action as a sacrifice of even a non-standard sort. Imagine an overwhelmingly qualified candidate turns down an attractive job offer for personal reasons, and the person next in line who then receives the offer and is thus hugely benefited by the first candidate’s action. The hardship for the first candidate is of the right kind, as is the benefit for the other candidate, but the benefit rendered doesn’t enter the first candidate’s choice to turn the offer down in any way, and it’s clear that this is not a sacrifice the candidate makes for the other. If the very qualified candidate was under the impression that the job listing was secret and that there would be no other applicants, she may have only unwittingly benefited the other candidate, and this action does not take on the aspect of a sacrifice.

Cases in which the benefit is not intended but is foreseen are less straightforward. These are cases where the benefit is a side effect of what the agent voluntarily does. So the agent has some of the appropriate suite of beliefs and attitudes toward the act: the agent knows that she is about to incur a loss and will suffer for it, and is aware that someone else will benefit as a result. Yet in performing the act, the benefit – though not accidental to the nature of the act she performs – is accidental to her reasons and motive for doing it. If in general we think of sacrifices as being for the sake of something, then these cases will lack this feature. And this lack may be more than just a departure from the paradigm case of sacrifice – it may rule these cases out as sacrifices altogether.

Yet this conclusion, if adopted across the board, would be hasty. There are still pertinent differences in how an agent may relate to her act and its consequences. These more fine-grained distinctions may salvage some side effect cases as falling under the
concept of sacrifice in a non-paradigmatic form. For example, though the benefit to the other is not the intention of the act, the agent may still harbor a number of pro-attitudes toward that consequence of her act: she may endorse it, approve it, be gladdened or even overjoyed by it. And on the other hand, the agent could well harbor a number of contrasting attitudes towards it: she might disapprove of it, regret it, be chagrined by it. There’s no temptation to think of the act as a sacrifice if the agent harbors a negative attitude toward the side effect – what the presence of that attitude suggests, counterfactually, is that if she could avoid causing the benefit, she would. But the presence of the positive attitudes suggests a different result. Let us subsume the positive attitudes under the label ‘endorsement’. What is the significance of the fact that the agent endorses the side effect, even though she didn’t intend it? Counterfactually, it seems to me that the implications are limited: we know the agent still would have performed the act in question even if it didn’t have the felicitous side effect. And this does not tell us much about how the benefit figures into the agent’s deliberations about how to act – the motive remains likely to be mostly directed elsewhere, for example. So while I think we should not conclude that the presence of pro-attitudes towards the benefit as a side effect are sufficient to characterize the act as a nonstandard variety of sacrifice, in some cases they may be. One such kind of case might go like this: the agent intends x rather than y (the benefit that is only a side effect) but is thrilled that y will also result from her act. Moreover, y is such that, even were x absent, she would still act and y would become her intention for so acting. X is her present intention rather than y only because it is even

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42 I do not here imply that all agents are always so introspectively acute so as to perceive the difference between what their intention in acting is and what they nonetheless endorse among the consequences of their acts. It’s enough for my purposes that it’s possible in principle to tell the difference between intending a consequence and endorsing it, and I think in many actual cases it’s easy enough to do.
more motivationally effective for her than y is, but y would be, in the absence of x, sufficiently motivationally effective. This still lacks a feature of paradigmatic sacrifice, though.

Something similar may be said about involuntary acts that nonetheless have the rest of the features of paradigm sacrifice. On the face of it, an involuntary act is an even worse candidate to be a sacrifice of any kind than a voluntary act with a beneficial side effect. Yet empirical research of ascriptions of responsibility may predict that some involuntary acts would be described as sacrifices. We would then have to entertain the idea that voluntariness, even if a feature of paradigmatic sacrifice, is not always necessary for an act to be a sacrifice of a non-paradigmatic kind. Woolfolk, Doris and Darley (2008) found that people were responsive to a factor they call ‘identification’ in ascriptions of responsibility. So, for example, even in situations of extreme coercion (a gun to the head), if acting in the manner prescribed by the coercing party is something the agent in question identified with (wanted independently, approved of, had some vague plans to do anyway), then people were likely to hold the coerced agent responsible for his action even though it was overtly coerced (Woolfork, Doris and Darley, 2008, see especially section 2).

One thing this suggests is that people view voluntariness as just one of many important features of the relation between an agent and an act. What is up for assessment in the agent is not only what they do under their own, autonomous power, but also what attitudes they have toward an outcome of an action they didn’t voluntarily perform. This line of thought is similar to the one entertained in connection with endorsement of side

43 Flouting the voluntariness condition entails flouting the intention condition, I assume. So what I have in mind here is a case that satisfies all other conditions except the condition dealing with intention.
effects, above, and I think it warrants similar treatment. On the one hand, the fact that an agent identifies with an outcome of an involuntary act seems insufficient, on its own, to make the case an act of sacrifice. But perhaps it is possible, if the relation between the agent and the outcome, despite not being mediated by a voluntary act of the agent, is robust and established, that even the involuntary act could comprise an act of sacrifice. In this sort of case we would say the agent was in full possession of the proper motive, but as events unfolded that motive, which normally might have been sufficient for action, was, as it were, preempted by a coercive force. Even if this were so, it would be a distant departure from the paradigm case.

*Proxies and Passive Sacrifices*

An important application of the concept of sacrifice is often associated with the passive voice: something or someone is sacrificed. A prominent example might be Judith Thomson’s very famous case of the large man we are to consider pushing onto the tracks ahead of an oncoming, runaway trolley in order to save some number of people in its eventual path (1985). We say of the large man that he is sacrificed in order to save the others in danger. Since the large man has undertaken no action, this is a case that is in some respects like those discussed in the section immediately prior – it might make a difference to how we understand things if we knew his attitudes about the relevant events. But since this case features someone else doing the action, there are two different things we might say. The first is to describe the pushing of the large man onto the tracks as a kind of proxy sacrifice, since the act would have been a sacrifice had the large man made the decision himself and acted independently. This would be one way of making sense of the passive use of sacrifice.
The second avenue to pursue is whether the agent pushing the large man has made a sacrifice – we can imagine her saying “I sacrificed the large man.” This might be true in the sense already described here, as a proxy notion of deciding and acting. In this sense, it would be misleading, despite the apparent license for this kind of implicature, to say that the pushing agent has made a sacrifice. To say that she made a sacrifice would only be true if the large man mattered to her (or perhaps if she felt she had given up a claim to some kind of moral purity). Abraham is preparing to make a sacrifice when poised, threateningly, above Isaac on the altar, but that is because Isaac is his son and Abraham cares for him, has use for him, etc. Abraham is also engaging in proxy sacrifice, inasmuch as he is usurping Isaac’s own agency in order to do something that, had Isaac done it, would have been a sacrifice.

Risk and Opportunity

The paradigm case of sacrifice features actual deprivation and actual benefit. Overvold, recall, explicitly argued for this feature as a necessary condition for sacrifice to have taken place at all. I think his position on this issue is importantly wrong.

The example adduced by Overvold concerned a soldier who stepped into harm’s way in order to spare a compatriot, but who was ultimately not harmed in so acting. Overvold’s way of salvaging what seems like a dammingly counterintuitive implication here – having to say the soldier did not make any sacrifice – was to make sense of our admiration for the soldier’s act by saying it demonstrated that the soldier was willing to make a sacrifice, and this is what merits praise (1980, p. 110-111).

Overvold’s account of this case fails to make a distinction that it should. The distinction it does make is between merely attempted (but failed) sacrifices and fully
successful sacrifices. This distinction we should accept as a specific instance of a more general distinction that might apply to most act types, namely that between an attempt to pull off a certain kind of act and actually doing it. But I think the soldier is successful in a kind of sacrifice here that Overvold overlooks. What the soldier is successful in sacrificing – fully – is his safety, and this is true even if he is not ultimately injured.

This kind of case presents some challenges in connection with the conditions that must be satisfied by the agent and the recipient. Is being exposed to risk that doesn’t materialize a way of being harmed? Is being spared such a risk a way of being benefitted? The questions here are mostly along the objective dimension, since we can readily imagine that there is hardship in facing the risk and relief in being spared it, and so even if the risk doesn’t eventuate in any injury, the subjective experience of facing it will often be unpleasant, to say the least. The case of giving up and receiving opportunity, which Overvold is also not attuned to, is analogous in many respects. Is losing an opportunity a way of being harmed? Is receiving an opportunity a way of being benefitted?44

I am inclined to think that, perhaps because of political and ideological rhetoric around the concept of opportunity, we’re more ready to accept the loss of opportunity as a real harm and being presented with an opportunity as a genuine benefit than we are ready to accept that being exposed to risk is itself a harm, or that being spared it is a benefit, in the sense that would satisfy the objective condition. But it seems that, as long as the cases are found to be analogous, they should be treated analogously. And if the way they should be treated is as involving genuine harms and benefits, then we could make

44 Claire Finkelstein (2003 & 2013) also embraces ‘chance benefit’ (as opposed to ‘outcome benefit’) as being parallel to ‘risk harm’ (as opposed to ‘outcome harm’, or what I am calling actual harm).
sense of these cases as non-paradigmatic sacrifices that feature probabilities in a way that paradigm cases do not.

My own view is that being exposed to risk is a kind of harm, and that being presented with an opportunity is a kind of benefit. Consider cases involving health risks. For example, imagine that at the site of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, there are huge risks that accompany the necessary clean-up work due to radiation. Imagine further that there are only a few people qualified and trained to do the necessary work, but that none of these people is contractually obligated to help. Were such a person to volunteer her labor and expertise, would we have to wait and see whether she later developed a rare form of cancer to know whether she had made a sacrifice? I think we would not. It’s plain that risk is sufficient to meet the subjective condition of experiencing hardship – risk is scary, anxiety-inducing, etc. The question is whether there is something that can satisfy the objective condition. The imaginary volunteer has placed herself in a pool of people with elevated risks of developing a number of terrible diseases. That is a bad place to be, a place she wasn’t before, and a place the rest of us would surely be willing to pay to not be in. If she were maliciously exposed to radiation that had a similar effect, it seems to me we wouldn’t hesitate to describe her situation as having become markedly worse, and being made worse off in this way seems sufficient to meet the objective condition of sacrifice.

And furthermore that being spared risk is a kind of benefit and being denied an opportunity is a species of harm.

Finkelstein (2003, pp. 977-978) cites a court case in which wrongful exposure to toxic waste was grounds for the defendant to pay the costs of testing and monitoring for illness in the plaintiff. On a (popular) conception of tort law that holds harm as a necessary condition for tortious behavior, she argues, it would be hard to understand this result as anything other than a case where risk constituted harm. This is one move in a longer argument toward the conclusion that risk sometimes is harm, even if the risk doesn’t materialize.
Privacy is another context in which risk of harm seems sometimes to constitute harm even without materializing in actual harm. Imagine someone writes your credit card number on 100 napkins in a restaurant, and distributes them randomly. You would, of course, be made even worse off if someone put the number to ill use, but damage has already been done in making that event so much more likely. Think of all the ways we pay for safety: we buy safer cars, bike helmets and knee pads, BPA-free plastic. We are made worse off when these things become unavailable: a ban on bike helmets would harm us not just by impinging on liberty, and not only when we eventually crack our heads open after crashing.

This supports the idea that in sacrificing one’s safety, nothing further than safety need be forfeited to complete the act as an act of sacrifice. This would be to say that exposing oneself to risk of harm in order to spare someone else that risk could fulfill both the subjective and objective conditions in the agent for sacrifice, since experiencing the risk would often enough introduce a bevy of negative mental states, and that negative experience is causally linked to the forfeiture of a good: a much lower probability of injury.47

**Borderline Cases: Trivial Harms**

Finally, there is the question of whether there is some threshold of harm or benefit that must be met in order for an act to be an act of sacrifice. If the paradigm case features significant harms and benefits, no more precisely specified than that, are there non-paradigmatic cases that feature trivial harms and benefits? That is, if an act satisfied all of

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47 I return to this question briefly in chapter five, where I argue that moral heroism consists principally in sacrificing.
the conditions of the paradigm but featured only relatively insignificant harms and benefits, would it nonetheless be an act of sacrifice?

Here I think there is room for a number of categories. The concept of sacrifice has gravity – sacrifices are by nature not trifling. Yet we might use qualifiers to denote acts that meet the formal requirements, but which are largely insignificant: we can speak of small sacrifices. And it may be important to that we are able to do so if we are to properly acknowledge the cumulative effect of many small sacrifices. So on my account there is such a category of non-paradigmatic sacrifice. But there are also acts that feature truly trivial setbacks and benefits while otherwise satisfying all the conditions of the paradigm, and these, I should say, are not sacrifices at all. When you, visibly wearing a watch, are stopped on your leisurely stroll by a stranger asking the time, even if in giving it you satisfy all the other conditions of sacrificing, by being momentarily detained you will not, I think, have made a sacrifice. There is no such thing as a truly trivial sacrifice.

2.5 | Taking Stock, Looking Ahead

My account of the concept of sacrifice is not quite complete – more work will be done in the next chapter as I work toward the resolution of the winning by losing and the gift by right puzzles. Resolving the puzzles will be a further contribution in our understanding of sacrifice, but the account as it stands will have to be amplified to accomplish the tasks set there; the work of this chapter is a crucial foundation for the work of the next. The vision of sacrifice constructed so far is as a particular kind of giving, where giving is motivated by the benefit aimed at, where it is carried out intentionally and voluntarily and without the prospect of reciprocation, and where giving is the occasion of experienced and objective hardship for the agent.
Developing this account largely for its own sake has committed me to several departures from Overvold's view of sacrifice, examined in chapter one. In place of that skeletal picture of sacrifice, the present account is rather more full-blooded, and covers a great deal more variety and nuance. The account I've developed is a better place to start work on understanding the place of sacrifice in moral life, the broader task of the next chapter. After resolving the puzzles as a sort of final development of the account itself, the next chapter will begin the path back toward the demandingness problem by reflecting on the significance of this very specific pattern of behavior.
CHAPTER 3 | THE PLACE OF SACRIFICE IN MORAL LIFE: SOLVING THE PUZZLES

3.1 | INTRODUCTION

The work of this chapter serves to both further and partially fulfill the work of the previous two by addressing the two puzzles of sacrifice introduced in chapter one, *winning by losing* and *gift by right*. In reaching a resolution for these puzzles, the account of sacrifice I developed in chapter two will be of use, and it will also be brought nearer completion. In addition to being an advance in its own right, solving the puzzles will also help in the tasks of later chapters, as the fuller understanding of sacrifice achieved up to that point will be brought to bear on the problem of demandingness, and, eventually, the phenomenon of moral heroism.

3.2 | WINNING BY LOSING

The basic nature of the *winning by losing* puzzle, recall, was that many apparent sacrifices, like those that Mr. Xtreme makes, seem actually to be important contributions to the welfare of the agent. Yet this is in tension with the features of sacrifice identified in the previous chapter, for it seems that in order to be a sacrifice, an act has to be an instance of the agent making herself worse off without the prospect of future benefits, as would be rendered by reciprocity. Sacrifice seems to be a way of coming out on the losing end of things. Yet sacrifices often enough seem to be a winning play. How can this be? The *winning by losing* puzzle is especially salient in single party sacrifices, where it seems the very concept of sacrifice paradoxically requires that a single agent both win and lose – after all, as the agent, objective forfeiture of a good is required, but as the recipient, an actual benefit must be instantiated. So I start by addressing single party sacrifice.
Developing an understanding of the possibility of single party sacrifice will be the basis for resolving the puzzle in more standard contexts of multiple parties, despite the presence of some important differences.

**Single Party Sacrifice**

Sacrificing for one’s own, later, sake might (and does) happen in a variety of ways. A useful distinction to make among them is between cases where the benefit only occurs much later, at a significant temporal remove from the hardship, and cases where the benefit follows closely in time from the hardship or where they’re simultaneous because both are ongoing. The distinction allows greater perspicuity in making the case for the possibility of winning by losing.

A serviceable example of typical cases of single party sacrifice that produce benefits only at a significant temporal remove from the hardship comes in the form of athletes who devote considerable time and effort to achieving excellence in their sport, where that excellence only really bears fruit much later, as when they win a competition, receive a college scholarship or secure a professional contract. I make three points in connection with this kind of case.

First, it’s possible to say in such a case that our temporally distant selves function in many ways like an other with respect to our present selves. If much time intercedes between the loss and the benefit, then I, in incurring the loss, will in many ways be

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48 I will assume that we aren’t speaking at any point here in terms of literal breaches in personal identity over time. If the ravages of time were so severe, that would in some senses make things easier for me here, since then these cases would not be single party sacrifices at all but would instead conform, in that respect, to the paradigm, two party case. One question would then be whether we should think of such cases as even potentially altruistic.
different from the person who eventually benefits, and it becomes plausible to say of the loss I incur not simply that it is offset by the later benefit, but that I, as the agent making the sacrifice, am made objectively worse off and suffer that hardship without that loss being merely temporary. Human rationality being what it is, our temporally nearer selves are ever our dearer selves, and so by incurring a loss in the short term for a longer term benefit, we can see that a kind of sacrifice is being made: the present self, much closer to me, loses, and the future self, a person I identify with less closely, benefits. I play both roles, but I can do that because in not playing them simultaneously or even at close to the same time, the ‗I‘ that chooses is not equally related to the recipient and the agent.49

Second, the temporal gap opens up the possibility that the guiding intention of the act does not include a lot of the problematic winning. For example, suppose an athlete trains very hard for several years, enduring a grueling regimen, a strict diet, a tattered social life, etc. Suppose also that her goal, firmly fixed in her mind, is to win a state championship. She does, and – such is her success – she also gets offered a college scholarship, goes on to win at that level, goes on to further professional and commercial success in the sport, etc. Her sacrifice, we might think, has paid off so handsomely that it’s absurd to continue thinking of it in those terms. Her winning has obliterated her losing. But keep in mind that her sacrifice was undertaken only with the intention of winning the state championship. Suppose she’d never heard of the college that eventually offered her a scholarship and had no idea she was being recruited, and no real plans to go to college, to continue her sport or her education after high school. Furthermore, suppose her

49 We shouldn’t get carried away with the significance of this first point – on its own, it would not be enough to resolve the winning by losing puzzle. But I do want to note that something it does do is help to cover a lot of cases where we’re inclined to describe something as a sacrifice, even if, on closer inspection, what’s really at issue would be better described as an investment.
expectations in this sense were well grounded: she was, despite her local success, a marginal candidate for recruitment and had neither the means of pursuing further education nor the interest in doing so. All the subsequent winning does depend in a crucial way on her earlier sacrifice – but we would nonetheless be right in this case to think of it as extraneous to that action since it forms no part of the intention with which the action is undertaken.

The final point follows from the second – we might think there is something about the intention in sacrificing that connects it to the later success. Her intention has something to do with being the best she can be at her sport, with being good enough to win the state championship. And it turns out that being that good is also good enough to get a scholarship, etc. – she just didn’t know it. We might therefore think that her putative sacrifice is still, as it were, cancelled by the later benefits it brings. But this is to embrace an implausible view of the scope of the action. The much later good that causally depends on the putative sacrifice should not be included in our taxonomy of benefits rendered by the putative sacrifice, even if it’s true that the athlete would never have achieved that good without the putative sacrifice. The later good depends on many other, unrelated causal factors – the representative from the college had to show up that day, watch the athlete compete, not get distracted by his phone, not get called away on something urgent at halftime, etc. The independent actions of many agents in the intervening period play a crucial causal role in producing the benefit, diminishing the sense in which the benefit can be seen simply as a consequence of the putative sacrifice, and so diminishing the reluctance to understand the prior act as a genuine instance of sacrificing, albeit one that ended up playing a role in producing substantial later good for the agent.

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50 I expand on this notion below.
The special considerations that the temporal remove makes relevant in some cases can be supplemented with the more general argument for the possibility of single party sacrifice, regardless of the temporal locality of the benefit. Some of these cases will fail to exhibit several of the features of the paradigm case, and so on my account those cases would arguably be misdescribed as sacrifices of any kind and would be better described as cutting one’s losses or damage control. But there is, I think, an explanation for how some of them could satisfy many of the paradigm conditions, albeit in nonstandard ways.

It will be useful again to have an example to hand. Recall Overvold’s example of someone cutting his losses rather than making a sacrifice: a businessman has to choose between his factory and his real estate venture. Part of what initially prevents this case from being a compelling case of sacrifice is that the two goods at stake are so similar in nature: they are both sources of revenue. What’s at stake in either, as far as we are led to believe, is purely monetary. Since the value of the real estate can be measured directly against the value of the factory – by measurement in a single unit, even – there’s little doubt that what’s going on is merely damage control. The businessman is aiming to end up with more money rather than less. So although we may casually speak of the need to sacrifice the real estate venture, this is, strictly speaking, only a metaphor. He has indeed given it up. But in so acting, he has not made a sacrifice, for he hasn’t lost but only won, where what it meant to win was rather worse than one might have hoped.

But now imagine that the real estate venture is actually a half-completed renovation of a Victorian house that the businessman has painstakingly labored over for the past several years, honing his craft as a carpenter, acquiring other, related skills, and

51 The metaphor might be linked to the notion of proxy sacrifice, developed in chapter two.
spending all of his free time adding details that augment the authenticity of the restoration. Imagine further that it has been his dream to restore a Victorian house of just this kind for many years, and in addition to being an investment of money, the project has become central to the way he thinks of himself. It’s all he talks about with his friends. He’s struck up meaningful relationships with other craftspeople who have helped him. When, under financial pressure to meet his own needs, he sells off his uncompleted renovation project, we come a step closer to seeing that he has made a sacrifice.

Interestingly, I think the example would work if it were put the other way around as well. Imagine the same circumstances around the choice, but suppose now that the businessman gives up his factory instead so that he can continue working on his project. Suppose that this choice forces him to do things like sell his car and move into a rental efficiency unit. It seems clear that this case is a way of sacrificing rather than cutting one’s losses, and not merely because we admire the pursuit of one’s dreams over material ambition. If the example does work either way, then that’s a good illustration of how the alternative course of action condition is complicated in the single party case – for that would suggest that each course of action is a relevant alternative to the other.

The effect of entertaining the restoration project version of the case is to introduce a different dimension of wellbeing. Instead of weighing a certain amount of money against another amount of money, the businessman is faced with choosing between different kinds of goods, some of which may not be fully commensurable with others. To speak only in terms of overall loss and benefit – in terms of a single, mythical bottom line

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52 We should imagine our businessman to be a bachelor in this case, and furthermore without elderly parents or dependents of any kind, since it has to be exclusively for his own sake that he acts here. So imagine that the economy in general has taken a turn for the worse, and he’s facing imminent foreclosure on the modest apartment where he lives.
is too crude to capture salient features of the case, which include giving up something of
great value in order to attain a very different kind of benefit. Given that there are
different and sometimes incommensurable dimensions of wellbeing, in cases of single
party sacrifice it’s possible for one person to play the roles of both agent and recipient
because a single person can simultaneously win and lose where the winning doesn’t
cancel out the losing.

The key to resolving the puzzle of winning by losing, then, and to making sense of
single party sacrifice, is to see how winning and losing are both possible, and the
suggestion here is that if the winning and losing take place in quite distinct dimensions of
wellbeing, then you could win in one way by losing in another. This way of handling the
winning by losing puzzle relies on something that initially looks like incommensurability (the
impossibility of precise comparison by measurement in a single unit) or incomparability
(the impossibility of ordinal ranking)\(^53\) of values in different dimensions of wellbeing. But
Vanessa Carbonell (2012) has argued that it is a different, weaker claim at stake here
rather than incommensurability or incomparability. Her argument comes in the highly
related context of dealing with a worry that if the sacrifices of saintly behavior end up
producing an overall benefit for the saintly agent, which they might, then actually there
remains no sacrifice to speak of. The weaker claim embodied in this worry is that “gains
and losses from different sources of wellbeing can compensate for one another” (p. 237). I
call the denial of this claim the non-compensation hypothesis. The non-compensation
hypothesis is a weaker claim than incommensurability and incomparability: even if gains
and losses in distinct dimensions of wellbeing are commensurable and comparable, they

\(^53\) See Chang (1997). I note that these terms are not used uniformly with the meanings I
stipulate above in the literature.
could still be non-compensating. The claim at issue in responding to the *winning by losing* puzzle is not that the choice of the goods to be gained and lost in a sacrifice is beset with incoherence or arbitrariness because of the nature of the things it is a choice between. It is instead that when a putative sacrifice turns out to be a source of a great good for the sacrificing agent, that windfall, as it were, doesn’t compensate for the hardship, “if by ‘compensate’ we mean something like *make up for or replace without loss*” (Carbonell, 2012, p. 237). Carbonell ultimately takes the view that what is required of an act in order to constitute a sacrifice is a gross loss rather than a net loss (p. 238), and so she embraces the idea that some sacrifices might turn out to be greatly beneficial to the agent without for that reason being something other than sacrifices.}

This is a promising step, but Carbonell’s position suffers from three kinds of problem. First, as Carbonell herself comes close to acknowledging (2012, p. 238), it’s not clear how talk of gross losses and net benefits is supposed to be understood if the non-compensation hypothesis is correct. Net gains as compared to gross losses seem to make sense only if the gains do compensate for the losses – that’s the only way for there to be a net, rather than just gross losses and gross gains. Second, if we follow Carbonell’s way of speaking, it seems there’s nothing in her account to rule out cases of very small gross losses that produce a huge net benefit as sacrifices, and this might end up including things that should instead be ruled out. Finally, it seems we do often ask of putative sacrifices, both prospectively and retrospectively, was it all worth it? This is, we must now admit, a

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54 See also Carbonell (2009), p. 379.
55 I don’t return to this difficulty in the text below, so I note here that one way to react to this problem, which might affect my view as well, is to return to the discussion about trivial sacrifices in chapter two, and introduce a comparative measure of triviality, at least for cases of single party sacrifice: if the hardship endured is, compared to the benefit (intentionally) secured, trivial, then the act of incurring that hardship is not a sacrifice.
complicated question. But if we reject Carbonell’s language of net gains and gross losses, then it’s not clear her position leaves us any way to make sense of this question. It would all be worth it if there was a net gain, and not if not. But if we can’t speak that way, then it’s not clear what to say, and this is a bad result – we need a way of making these decisions for ourselves, and of thinking and talking about them afterwards.

The challenge is to make the point about non-compensation without incurring these problems. Gains produced by a sacrifice must be such that they don’t cancel or offset the losses. Both the experience of the hardship and the hardship itself have to be lasting parts of the act, not undone by later benefits. Douglas Portmore (2007) speaks of single party sacrifices that achieve their targeted benefit as ‘redeemed’, and is careful to distance this phenomenon from compensation, saying that instead the offsetting of disvalue in cases of redeemed sacrifice alters the meaning of that disvalue (fn. 26). I’ll return shortly to elaborate on what this might amount to, but for now I want to suggest that the idea of redeeming a sacrifice is again closer to what is sought, although that language retains some of the undesired connotation of exchange and compensation. Instead, I propose we say of some losses that they are vindicated by later benefits they bring. The businessman who chooses to surrender his prosperous factory may later feel vindicated in making that choice, while simultaneously continuing to feel the loss it entailed.56 The financial hardship he endures is not compensated for, offset or canceled by the satisfaction he derives from continuing his dream renovation project. But the hardship may be vindicated by the fact that it makes continuing the renovation possible. In this case, we could say both that he has made a sacrifice, and that it has been worth it.

56 One thing to be wary of here is that I in no way mean to imply that an agent who made a sacrifice that didn’t bring eventual and great benefit to her couldn’t feel vindicated about making the choice she did.
The case for the possibility of single party sacrifice is one we should hope to be able to make – it’s a customary way of categorizing actions, and an account of sacrifice that didn’t enable us to make that case would fail to cover a significant territory where the concept is deployed. Making the case, as I have here, is a significant step toward resolving the *winning by losing* puzzle, since in all cases of (successful) single party sacrifice an agent wins by losing.

*Multiple Party Sacrifice*

One highly relevant difference between single party sacrifice and more standard, multiple party sacrifice concerns the intentionality condition identified in chapter two. Rendering a benefit has to be the intention guiding the act of sacrificing, and in the single party context, this complicates things because it means that in acting the sacrificing agent has to be intending to benefit herself, which seems out of keeping with the concept of sacrifice. That complication is absent in the multiple party context. But although it is less vexing here, the winning by losing puzzle still manifests itself: the intentionality condition of chapter two assures that whatever winning takes place here is not the target of the sacrifice, but something more like a side-effect.

Much of the argument for single party promises carries over; I return to a variation of Overvold’s case of the celebrity soldier to illustrate. Imagine that the soldier is actually wounded in the process of saving her comrades, but that the later celebrity she earns is so great that in the grand scheme of things, by her own lights and objectively, it is tempting to conclude that she has come out ahead. I turn first to the point about intention. The soldier has no way of knowing, at the time of acting, that she stands to gain as she eventually does gain. Now, the mere fact that the soldier did not *know* that her
action would achieve the benefits for her that it did cannot mean that those benefits are irrelevant to the nature of the act. If it did, all gambling and investing would be single-party sacrifice. What’s relevant about the soldier’s epistemic standing with respect to her eventual benefits is that it provides information about the likely intention and motive under which she acted. Her intention in acting plausibly has nothing to do with the benefits she later receives, and indeed, those benefits are possibly also not even foreseen. She would have done it even if the benefits were somehow impossible. In that case, they form no part of the act.

Second, whereas the connection between the act and the loss is in a number of ways tight and direct, the connection between the act and the later benefits is highly contingent and loose. The sense in which the loss the soldier suffers is a consequence of her act is quite different than the sense in which her later gains are consequences of that same act. There is thus some reason to treat the soldier’s act as having as its consequence only the loss; the later gains are better understood as being the consequences of the later acts of others in response to the soldier’s act. Drawing these lines is no doubt difficult, but it cannot be the case that everything that happens after an act is to be understood as a consequence of that act.

Finally, consider what the soldier has lost and what she has gained. The loss, let us assume, was for some time or forever the function of a part of her body; she would also have experienced a lot of physical pain, the frustration of rehabilitation, etc. The gain is acclaim, money and recognition. Just as it was possible in the case of some single party sacrifices for one person to play both the role of agent and of recipient because of the difference in dimensions of wellbeing between what was lost and what gained, here it is possible to see the soldier as having lost, despite having also gained. It is simply too crude
to say that her loss, when it is of such a different kind, has been compensated for such that there is only a net gain. Instead of summing up everything on a single balance sheet, we do better to keep track of the losses while also noting the gains. The soldier’s loss, since it is genuine and since it is not simply wiped from the ledger by the subsequent gains, can be the occasion of sacrifice. Her sacrifice is vindicated (and to some extent she is too, no doubt) by the later acclaim, but this is not a way of offsetting hardship.

Here we have finally arrived at what I take to be the most important class of cases represented by the *winning by losing* puzzle. These are instances of putative sacrifice where the benefit is so compelling and roughly contemporaneous with the hardship, such that the sense in which the agent satisfies the subjective condition is clouded. I return to the case of Mr. Xtreme. Recall that he has drastically altered the shape of his life in pursuit of his work as a ‘real life superhero’: he sleeps in a van, incurs pay cuts, forgoes sleep and rest, etc. The targeted beneficiary of his sacrifices could be described as either the community at large or as the cause of justice. The problem arises in that Mr. Xtreme seems to relish the choices he’s made, and the rewards for making them are substantial and ongoing. He seems glad to make the sacrifices he does, and this raises the question of whether what he’s doing is really sacrificing at all.

A particular elaboration of the point about different dimensions of wellbeing and the concept of vindication without compensation is the basis of my response to this kind of case, which will conclude my treatment of the *winning by losing* puzzle. I assume that Mr. Xtreme will not be mistaken for Aristotle’s *phronimos*, discussed in chapter two – that is, I

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57 That the recipient is not another party or an individual person complicates the case, as does the fact that the benefits can be disputed in many instances, but none of that is especially pertinent here.
assume that he still experiences some hardship in doing what he does, even though it appears to be outstripped by the great benefits his actions bring him.

Two things waiting to be explored here are the force that makes Mr. Xtreme’s actions so rewarding and that motivates the act in the first place, on the one hand, and the nature of the reward, on the other. The force is something like identification. The reward is meaning.

Mr. Xtreme so strongly identifies with the cause of justice that he has literally crafted an identity based precisely on that cause. His is, fittingly, an extreme case in this sense, but the same phenomenon is visible, despite the absence of costumes, in the way parents go about looking after their children, for example.58 Here is Harry Frankfurt (1999), discussing a highly related notion of identification that he cites as the source of a necessitating influence on the will:59

[S]uppose a [parent] tells a [child] that his love for her is the only thing that makes his life worthwhile. She is surely unlikely to feel – if she actually believes this – that what [he] tells her means that he is exploiting her and that he cares about her only because it makes him feel better to do so…The apparent conflict between selflessness and self-interest disappears once it is understood that what serves the self-interest of the [parent] is, precisely, his selflessness. The benefit of loving accrues to him only if he is genuinely selfless. He fulfills his own need only because in loving he forgets himself (p. 174).

Loving is a common way of caring about something or someone – of identifying with them – that produces powerful benefits for the agent. But it only does so when characterized by selflessness, a willingness to lose rather than win. We could call this

58 Swann, et al., (2010) present the results of studies that suggest that identification with one’s group (nationality) is at the root of an expressed willingness to make truly extraordinary sacrifices. Having rated highly for nation-group identification, Spaniards were presented with a number of trolley cases with potential casualties being either from Spain, elsewhere in Europe, or the United States. The willingness of subjects to entertain various possibilities that would constitute sacrificing (jumping onto the tracks to derail the trolley, for example) increased as identification did.

59 I return to discuss Frankfurt’s notion of volitional necessity briefly in chapter five.
version the *winning by loving* puzzle. The point is, even when you do win because the object of your love with which you identify flourishes through your selfless contributions to its welfare, it can still be true – indeed, as Frankfurt would have it, it must be true – that you have also lost.\(^6\)

The many sacrifices of parenthood can hardly be questioned as genuine sacrifices by any actual parent, and I think it’s quite plausible to suppose that actual parents won’t have much trouble seeing how their actions do in fact satisfy the subjective condition of sacrifice. The hardship in parental sacrifice is thoroughly experienced. But the rewards of parental sacrifice are intense, partly because they are characteristically driven by a very strong sense of identification with the recipient by the agent. The sense of identification at issue involves incorporating a certain pursuit or activity or cause into one’s self-conception, such that the agent’s life is importantly her own partly in virtue of continuing that pursuit. Most people that are parents incorporate that fact into a central place of their self-conception.\(^6\)

When identification is the force responsible for making an action rewarding, there are implications about the nature of the reward. In arguing that sacrifices might advance the agent’s good, Connie Rosati (2009) draws a helpful distinction that will start us on the path to seeing the relevance of meaning as an apt way to capture a distinctive kind of reward:

> The greater part of what comes to make up our good are those things to which we come to stand in the good-for relation by the exercise of our capacities for reflection, evaluation

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\(^6\) This is not the first, nor probably the last, time that the discussion comes into contact with the familiar debate concerning psychological egoism. Much of what I contend here is in line with the response to psy

\(^6\) Throughout this section I am building a notion of competence or excellence into what makes a parent a parent. It should be clear that parenthood is not merely a biological relationship. Beyond that, I guess it’s actually a little hard to say.
and choice. Given our dual nature as biologically determined but also autonomous beings, it is absolutely predictable that those things that come to be a part of our good through the exercise of the capacities that render us autonomous may come into conflict with those parts of our good, equally central to self, that come to us just as living human beings (p. 324).

The distinction Rosati draws is best understood as one particular distinction among many we might make in what I have been calling dimensions of wellbeing. Giving up some aspect of one’s biological good – aspects of wellbeing determined by biology, roughly – for the sake of some autonomous good – some aspect of wellbeing not so determined, but instead autonomously chosen by the agent herself – might constitute a sacrifice, even if the autonomous good is great, and even if the autonomous good vindicates the loss. The class of autonomous goods, it should be noted, is broad enough to include both cases of single party sacrifice and cases of multiple party sacrifice – autonomous goods could be the good of another (wounded soldier), or some aspect of one’s own good (businessman renovator). Either way, when what makes something an aspect of one’s autonomous good is that the agent identifies with it in the sense I have discussed above, the dimension of wellbeing represented by the benefit is aptly characterized as meaning.

Susan Wolf (2010) argues at length that meaning is not only a distinctive dimension of wellbeing and value but also a historically overlooked variety of motive, to be contrasted with the more historically influential categories of self-interest and morality. Neera Badhwar (1993) makes a related point in arguing that self-affirmation through acting in ways that sustain values one identifies with can be simultaneously self-interested (because they serve an interest in affirming one’s sense of oneself) and altruistic (because what one values often directs the action to promoting the interests of others). What Badhwar calls self-affirmation would often enough go by ‘meaningfulness’ instead.

Badhwar and Wolf argue in different ways for how to think about the relation between
meaning and other kinds of value, especially self-interest and morality. What’s relevant here is the way in which their arguments support the idea that meaning, achieved through identification, is not readily assimilable to more conventional varieties of self-interest.62

When the benefit a sacrificing agent derives from her sacrifice is that it contributes to making her life meaningful, the arguments above concerning non-compensation and vindication are only more compelling. To the extent that he wins, Mr. Xtreme does so in terms of the meaning his sacrifices give his life. This way of winning does not compensate for his many losses, but it does vindicate them.63 We might consider this point an amendment to Victor Frankl (2006): “In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice” (p. 113). To vindicate hardship through producing meaning, we might say, is to transform it – but not to erase it.

Many sacrifices can turn into what we might be tempted to see as winning propositions in this fashion – sacrificing is, as an act type, a singularly important way in which we express what really matters to us and what provides us with meaning in our lives. To be associated with others for whom one is willing to sacrifice, to have convictions

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62 Wolf (2010, p. 53) gives an example of a woman who has adopted a child and has, as a result, experienced a great deal of hardship in being a parent to that child. Faced with the question of whether she considers herself in an all-things-considered way better off for having adopted the child, Wolf surmises she might not even care whether she is or isn’t – the fact she finds being a parent to this child meaningful is an independent source of reasons to endorse the choice.

63 It seems to me that the introduction of distinct dimensions of wellbeing and of meaning in particular does help diminish Smilansky’s (2007) puzzle of fortunate misfortune (see chapter one, above). It suggests, in particular, that the totalizing question – was the event fortunate or not? – is misleading. But this is less than a solution, I think, because there remains confusion over how to properly address past events of the kind Smilansky isolates in the puzzle.
that beckon sacrifices – these are important avenues of meaning made possible by identification. But the achievement of meaning should not fool us into overlooking the lasting and uncompensated nature of the hardships endured and experienced. I have detailed a number of ways in which an agent might win by losing: whether intentionally, as in the case of single party sacrifice, or unintentionally, as in the case of much later benefits derived from a sacrifice long completed, or again as a kind of side-effect, as when an agent’s life is filled with meaning by making the sacrifices she does. If the winning takes place in a dimension of wellbeing quite distinct from the dimension where the agent loses, we have seen that we needn’t conclude that the hardships of sacrificing have been offset or compensated for. In many cases, they are instead vindicated. This is not to say that all sacrifices are winning propositions, or that every apparent sacrifice that includes winning should indeed be counted as a sacrifice. But it is to say that the winning by losing puzzle can be resolved such that some genuine sacrifices may include significant contributions to the sacrificing agent’s wellbeing.

3.3 | Gift by Right

The second puzzle arises when we notice what seem like sacrifices coming in response to the claims of others, yet we insist that if what’s given in making the sacrifice wasn’t yours to give, then by giving it you didn’t make a sacrifice at all. If another could rightfully claim what you give, then it seems it wasn’t really yours to give and giving it can

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64 Speaking of sacrifice motivated by identification with others or with a cause is echoed in descriptions characterizing sacrifice as a species of self-transcendence. Cf. Halbertal (2012).
constitute no sacrifice. Recall a case I introduced to illustrate this puzzle: I offer you the use of my prized hat, making a sacrifice in doing so since it’s a hardship for me to part with a treasured good, and since I do it in order to help you get past an unfortunate haircut (assume all other conditions are satisfied). The relevant variation of the case is where I’ve stolen the hat from you, and your bad haircut is actually the result of emergency shaving for cranial surgery following some mild head trauma that has also erased your memory of ever owning the hat. In giving you the hat in this circumstance, it seems clear that I cannot be said to be making a sacrifice – the hat isn’t mine to give, and I come to the table with nothing to contribute to a transfer.

Before addressing the gift by right puzzle directly, I want to make a note about the conditions under which the puzzle arises. The puzzle addresses sacrifice as something that is given. What it means, exactly, to be given in the relevant sense is to be worked out below. But I want to set aside a few candidate interpretations now. Sometimes we understand giving to mean something like ‘offered without being solicited’. As it happens, the clearest case of sacrifice in chapter two, Siblings, did feature an unbidden benefit. And the portrait of sacrifice I drew in the opening chapter, centered on Mr. Xtreme, also featured sacrifice that had not been solicited. But if we change those cases to make them responses to an explicit request, it seems to make them no less clearly cases of sacrifice. The property of being unsolicited may indeed characterize many acts of sacrifice, and it may in some way set them apart from those that come in response to a request, but

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65 By speaking in terms of the object of sacrifice, I shouldn’t be taken to be excluding sacrifices of non-material goods. The same points still hold whether we are talking about a particular material good, like a hat, or any number of quite different things, like one’s time, energy, future, etc.
sacrifices could be solicited or not. So the *gift by right* puzzle has to feature something stronger than a *request*.

I begin my treatment of the *gift by right* puzzle with a third version of the hat case. Suppose we made the hat together, on equal terms. It belongs to both of us equally. Usually this results in neither of us ever wearing it because we’re each a little prone to bouts of envy and we each love it so much that the sight of it on the other is intolerable. When, in this circumstance I give you the hat to wear, it seems I do make a sacrifice, for even though you have some claim to the hat, I also have some claim to it, albeit not a decisive one. In relinquishing that claim, I’m giving something up in order to benefit you. My claim to the hat, in this case, serves two functions. First, it blocks your ability to decisively claim the hat from me, as would be the case if you had an unrivaled right to the use of the hat. Second, it marks what I’m giving up as something that is mine to give – vacating my claim leaves the field clear of competing claims and leaves you in sole rightful possession of the hat.\(^{66}\)

Let me elaborate on the way competing claims have come together in the imagined case. One way to speak about the status of the benefit to be conferred is that if it is subject to asymmetrical claims, the asymmetry must favor the agent rather than the recipient in order for the act of giving the benefit to constitute a sacrifice. The asymmetry is between having no claim at all versus having some claim. If the benefit is somehow something the recipient has a claim to while I don’t, as in the stolen hat case, then it’s

\(^{66}\) I note that if the vacating of the claim did not have that precise effect, it might nonetheless still be a sacrifice – consider another variation where the hat is owned equally by three of us. Vacating my claim doesn’t leave you in sole rightful possession of the hat in this case, but it does get you closer (it also gets the third owner closer to sole ownership, however). Whether there’s any real benefit there without further elaborating the case, I’m not sure.
conceptually impossible for me to sacrifice by giving the hat. If the case is reversed – if only I have a claim to the hat – then it’s clear how I might give it, and how I might be making a sacrifice in giving it. The complicated case where we gain insight into the sense in which sacrifice has to constitute something given rather than something claimed is a case of symmetry, where we both have claims to the hat. In giving it up, I am relinquishing my claim, improving your normative relation to the hat by leaving you with the only remaining claim over it.

Consider a final case:

**Roll**

Khang and Kalaya are eating together at a restaurant, and there is only one remaining spring roll. It is presently in Khang’s possession. Kalaya, who like Khang would very much like the last spring roll, points out that her plate actually only came with three spring rolls on it, whereas Khang’s came with five. She reasons that the remaining spring roll was only mistakenly put on his plate, and although she admits it is now in his hands to choose what to do about it, she asserts, audibly, that the spring roll is probably rightfully hers. Khang moves the spring roll from his plate to hers, and Kalaya eats it.

Has Khang, in responding to Kalaya’s assertions, made a sacrifice? Certainly his action, coming as it does in response to the assertion of a kind of entitlement, might fail to be a sacrifice insofar as it looks like the spring roll is the subject of a claim by Kalaya. So the question is whether asymmetry obtains: does Khang have any claim to the spring roll to rival Kalaya’s claim, or is Kalaya’s the only claim around? More important than answering that question in this particular case is noticing that this is what the status of the act as a sacrifice hinges on. If Khang acquires no claim to the spring roll by finding it on his tray, then he cannot be said to be making a sacrifice when he gives it to Kalaya. If he does acquire a claim by finding the spring roll on his tray, then he could properly be
described as sacrificing for Kalaya’s sake, even though the spring roll is in some sense hers by right.

Some instances of the gift by right puzzle can therefore be resolved – symmetrical cases where the recipient has some claim to the object are cases where the giving of the object may still constitute a sacrifice despite being claimed by the recipient. But if the asymmetry favors the recipient, then there is no sacrifice – this form of the puzzle shows us a limit on the concept of sacrifice. What this means for my account of sacrifice is that it should be amended to include a further condition stating that any asymmetry in claims on the object of sacrifice must favor the agent. Consider leaving a restaurant on a rainy day with a friend. As you head for the exit, you notice a large collection of umbrellas at the entrance, and you also notice that you might take one that is not yours to give to your friend. Without something like the condition just described, we are left unable to resist characterizing your giving the umbrella as a sacrifice, something it is clearly not. The reason it is not is that a sacrifice is a transfer, and you are not in a position, in this case, to enact a transfer, since there is nothing that is yours that you might give up.67

In Roll, even if Khang acquires a claim by finding the spring roll on his tray, we might still say there’s a relevant kind of asymmetry: rather than an existential asymmetry (some claim versus no claim), there is an asymmetry in the strength of the claim: the spring roll really belongs to Kalaya, whereas Khang’s claim to it is much more tenuous. Asymmetry in strength that favors the recipient might include many cases where the agent’s claim is clearly overridden or outweighed by the claim of the recipient, and as such, might also be thought to be incompatible with the concept of sacrifice.

67 This way of speaking focuses attention on the objection condition of sacrifice elaborated in chapter two, which calls for a forfeiture. You cannot forfeit something you have no claim to.
Asymmetry in strength of claims is an important additional feature of some cases, but in the end, I think it does not make sacrifice impossible the way existential asymmetry of claims does. This would mean that the proposed condition above should be amended: 
the agent must have some claim over the object of sacrifice. This condition is compatible with the presence of a claim in the recipient as well, even a much stronger claim, but it still rules out cases of existential asymmetry that favor the recipient. To see why this version of the condition is an improvement, consider a different way things might play out in Roll, again under the assumption that Khang has some claim to the extra spring roll on his tray. Kalaya, justice firmly on her side, goes to the authorities and makes her case, and they remove the spring roll from Khang’s tray and give it to her. In this case, it seems the spring roll has been extracted from Khang. His agency in the reallocation of the spring roll is limited – we can even imagine that the reason the authorities are called in is that he has resisted Kalaya’s claim, insisting on his own. This variation supports the original asymmetry condition, which included as incompatible with sacrifice asymmetry in strength. But as the case actually plays out in the initial description, Khang willingly surrenders his claim, and the roll with it. There is something that is his to give in this case, and he does give it. The fact that Kalaya might go on to press her rights and forcibly extract the roll from Khang does not imply that in rendering the spring roll willingly Khang has not given anything up. So I favor the second elaboration of the condition above – the agent must have some claim to the object of sacrifice, even if that claim is outweighed by a claim in the recipient. Even though in these cases the gift is the recipient’s by right, it is not by exercising the full strength of her claim that she receives

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68 It also rules out cases where neither party has any claim to the object. As far as I can tell, this seems appropriate.
the gift. So a sacrifice can still be made, even if the good in question might later have been rightfully extracted.

Finally, I have nowhere here mentioned obligations, despite the fact that obligations are usually assumed to be paired with some of the sorts of claims I’ve been discussing. While the concept of sacrifice is incompatible with existential asymmetry in claims, this does not entail that it is incompatible with obligation. This is to say that you could have an obligation to sacrifice. In some cases that obligation will not be claimable by another party. The situation here, it seems to me, is rather like how things stand with respect to forgiveness: the person you are forgiving may rightly be said to have earned your forgiveness (via contrition, apology, making amends and forswearing future offenses, etc.), where what this amounts to is that you’d be wrong not to forgive her. In this sort of case it doesn’t seem out of place to conclude that you’re under a kind of obligation to forgive, or at least to try (forgiving might not be something that can be accomplished simply by willing). But even if that were all true, it’s not the case that the offender can claim your forgiveness or that she has a right to it. Something similar may be true of any number of sacrifices – they may fall under some variety of obligation without entailing a problematic kind of asymmetry. But even where the obligation to make a certain sacrifice can be claimed by the recipient, I have argued, it is still possible to make a sacrifice by surrendering what claim to the object to be given one has rather than resisting.

3.4 | AHEAD AND BEHIND

The developments of this chapter mark the conclusion of my account of sacrifice. Having articulated two puzzles attending the concept of sacrifice in chapter one, I

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69 See Griswold (2007), generally.
developed an account of sacrifice in chapter two that made resolving those puzzles possible in the present chapter. The resolution of each of the two puzzles involved broader reflection on the place of sacrifice in moral life. *Winning by losing* was resolved in no small part by elucidating what kind of winning sacrifice characteristically produces, where an important link between the act and meaning was found. *Gift by right* was resolved by situating sacrifice in the complicated landscape of competing normative claims. The advances made here reflect back to the account of chapter two, improving and completing it. But they also project forward into the next two chapters, where first I address the problem of demandingness before concluding with an examination of heroic sacrifice.
CHAPTER 4 | THE PROBLEM OF DEMANDINGNESS

4.1 | INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I more or less simultaneously pursue two argumentative goals: first, to show that focus on sacrifice improves our ability to articulate what the demandingness problem is in its fully general form, and second, to resist the conclusion that the demandingness problem cannot be the source of any forceful objections to any moral duties. This is to say that interpreting the problem of demandingness in terms of sacrifice is helpful in rebutting a position Samuel Scheffler (1986) provides a slogan for: “morality demands what it demands”. The substance of the position is that the demands of morality can be determined without any regard for what that means is required of agents in order to be moral. It’s not a position explicitly embraced very often, though as we’ll see, some philosophers seem committed to it. Rebutting this position means that moral theories must be sensitive to the sacrifices they entail, or they risk being so demanding so as to be theoretically unacceptable. The strategies deployed are these: first I explore the underappreciated breadth of the problem, and this motivates thinking of the problem in terms of sacrifice, but also suggests that, rather than posing a particular objection against a particular moral theory or duty, the problem actually stems from deeper roots, and constrains the ambition of moral duties generally, so that theories – of whatever stripe – must be responsive to it. Second, I show that sacrifice is a significant improvement in our understanding of demandingness as a problem over presently favored concepts – difficulty, first, and cost, second. Finally, I show how a focus on sacrifice meets an additional form of skepticism with respect to the seriousness of the problem.
4.2 | The Breadth of the Problem

To demonstrate the underappreciated breadth of the demandingness problem I entertain three very different kinds of moral duties in connection with which we might run into demandingness concerns. The fact that demandingness problems show up in connection with all three kinds of duties I examine supports a broader conclusion about the kinds of duties the might give rise to a demandingness problem: most or all of them. A focus on sacrifice allows us to account for the way in which the concerns are the same for each of the three kinds of duties, and this in turn motivates the idea that the underlying concern should be taken seriously by moral theory. One worry to head off at the outset is that there is no single demandingness problem, but instead a loose collection of related problems. I concede that it is, on some level, something of a conceit to speak of a single problem of demandingness. The literature has often embraced that conceit, even while spawning different problems, and this has been true as far back as what I claimed (in chapter one) were the modern roots of the discussion in Bernard Williams, where at least the labels integrity, alienation and motivation sum up versions of demandingness. So I must temper my aims here – I won’t claim to bring every possible variation of the demandingness problem under the single, all-purpose umbrella of sacrifice. But I do claim that sacrifice can be fruitfully used to cover an awful lot of that variety, and that doing so illuminates an important core concern in the demandingness problem, however nebulous or plural the latter might turn out to be.

Beneficence

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Beneficence is the historical root of the problem and in some ways its most natural and obvious home. This is the context in which Singer and Williams carried on their fecund debate, and the context where most discussion of the problem still takes place. While duties of beneficence have traditionally been accommodated with a wider variety of positions than other duties, they are, of course, not unlike other kinds of duties in that they make demands of us. Viewed in this light, it’s a little odd that the problem of demandingness should so persistently have been confined to discussions of beneficence and rescue. Moral duties, as I will understand them, are the sorts of things that make demands just in virtue of being the sort of thing they are. For example, they play a prominent role in deliberation in properly functioning, non-akratic agents. When an agent fails to take them into deliberation in the prescribed manner, she fails to respond correctly to the reasons that support the duty. When she attends to the reasons and takes the duties into account in her deliberations, she is allowing the duties to regulate her decisions and ultimately, her behavior. A duty that never made any demands would not be capable, I think, of genuine regulation.\footnote{It is possible to do moral theory without duties though (see Norcross (2006) and Hurley (2006), for example). Many will be reluctant to dispatch the concept of duty from moral theory entirely, and there are pressing questions about morality’s regulative role if it makes no use of the concept. Whether a moral theory that eschewed duties could nonetheless be too demanding I leave to one side here, although I take it up briefly in connection with the issue of blaming, below.} To say that an agent is under a duty of some kind is to say that she is subject to a demand concerning her behavior.

The question posed by the problem of demandingness in connection with duties of beneficence is, how much must one give in order to help others? Singer argues that there is a limit to how much one must give, but it is a limit that very few people have ever
reached.\textsuperscript{72} So his answer to the question posed is widely suspected of being too demanding. This question, though of clear importance and ongoing interest, is nonetheless not the question at the core of the demandingness problem. To get closer to the core of the problem, we have to examine it outside of its historical connection with beneficence.

\textit{Duties Correlated to Rights}

One traditional contrast to duties of beneficence is duties that correspond to rights.\textsuperscript{73} Duties of beneficence require agents to take action to benefit others but provide no special grounds for those others to exert a claim over the benefit. Rights are precisely such grounds. Whereas beneficence tracks all possible ways of benefiting others, duties corresponding to rights might be thought to be in less jeopardy of becoming very demanding because what any given person can claim by right is very particular and circumscribed, as is the set of candidates against whom they may claim it. Not just any possible benefit is sufficient to ground a rights claim – only certain needs ground rights and thereby generate duties. Therefore there is reason to think that those duties will also be circumscribed, and thus not especially demanding in nature.

\textsuperscript{72} Most authors accused of espousing excessively demanding moral views still argue for \textit{some} limit to what you must give in order to help others, just usually very demanding ones. One possible exception is Peter Unger (1996), who appears to argue that surrendering your life in order to save two others may still be required. Perhaps this does not imply that there is \textit{no} limit to what may be required to help others, since there may be things besides your life that moral theory could not require, but one’s life is commonly accepted as a limiting case. This makes Unger a good candidate for someone who occupies the position that ‘morality demands what it demands’.

\textsuperscript{73} This contrast shows up in a great number of ways in an even greater number of places, often with a hint of priority for rights-based duties over duties of beneficence (see Pogge (2008) and Ashford (2006) for example). It is also reflected in the distinction Cullity (2009) draws between concern and respect as distinct sources of moral duties.
The dawning realization that this is not so stems from a combination of work leading to at least the following three consequences: the multiplication of rights and holders of rights, the increasingly messy nature of the causal entanglements of people the world over, and a more substantial view of what rights amount to and the duties they entail. I briefly discuss these trends in reverse order.74

Henry Shue (1996) famously argued that the set of duties corresponding even to basic security rights – the most universally asserted, least controversial, and widely assumed to be the most easily honorable of basic rights – was just as expansive as the set of duties corresponding to other basic rights, notably rights to subsistence. In addition to the standard duty to refrain from depriving someone of the substance of their basic rights, Shue argued that basic rights also ground two other kinds of duties: to protect from deprivation and to aid the deprived (1996, p. 52). This view decouples positive rights and positive duties and instead asserts basic rights to be correlated with both positive and negative duties. Rights cannot be guaranteed unless duties of both kinds are fulfilled. This influential point expands what basic rights amount to in a way that makes respecting rights more demanding. So, for example, it takes more of each of us than not killing each other for us to have discharged our duties correlated to our rights to bodily security. And while it may quite rightly be noted that refraining from killing each other is unlikely to be very demanding, it’s much less clear that supporting adequate protection and extending required aid will be similarly unconcerning. Considering how widespread violations of even basic security rights continue to be in the world, certainly it appears that much more

74 The three trends in rights theory I go on to discuss seem to me likely to make lasting impacts on how we view rights, but I do not defend that assertion here. I only suggest that if the commitments represented by these trends are scaled back or rejected, it is likely that will have something to do with the demandingness of maintaining them.
than is currently being offered will be required to adequately honor even the most basic of rights. The institutional turn in this discussion (see Pogge (2008)) converts all personal responsibility connected to distant rights violations into duties to create and sustain institutions that do the work. These duties may also be quite demanding, given the stubbornness of political systems, entrenched and opposite interests, the unending nature of the task and near-constant arrival of new threats, etc.

Reflection on the nature and number of basic rights has also tended to amplify rather than stifle the demands rights place on us. I take Martha Nussbaum’s (2000, 2006, 2008) work on capabilities to be instructive here. Construed as a more transparent and ample window on human dignity, capabilities put flesh on the bones of traditional rights. Like Shue, Nussbaum argues for a more complete view of the moral features of persons to which rights answer. So even if we take issue with some particular piece of her view, it’s unlikely to be in the spirit of systematically scaling back our view of basic entitlements befitting of human dignity. Taking something like Nussbaum’s view on board means expanding both the set of basic rights beyond security, subsistence and liberty and the nature of the duties correlated with each entitlement. In Nussbaum’s case, the tentative list of central human capabilities consists of life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination, thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, relations to other species, play, and control over one’s material and political environment (2000, pp. 78-80). Shue’s set of correlated duties will also have to be expanded to keep up, for with respect to capabilities, it seems mere avoidance of deprivation, protection, and aid for the deprived won’t capture the whole significance of the moral claim, at least if protection

Nussbaum herself suggests something like this interpretation: “[Respect] requires creating the conditions in which capacities can develop and unfold themselves” (2008, p. 359).
and aid are read in such a way so as to exclude cultivating and providing for. I observe – without offering it as an objection against these views – that these improvements in our thinking about rights have the effect of ramping up the sum of demands embodied by the correlated duties.

Combined with two other consequences of recent work on rights, this more ambitious picture of what rights are and what they impose as correlated duties might threaten to become quite demanding, though – even problematically so. Consider some ways in which violating rights is alarmingly easy and even woven into how we live our lives. Take anthropogenic climate change, for example. Rising sea levels will soon displace significant populations, depriving them of security and subsistence, at least. Some island nations residing on low-lying atolls face the threat of disappearing altogether. Here are the remarks of the Prime Minister of one such nation, Tuvalu: "We live in constant fear of the adverse impacts of climate change. For a coral atoll nation, sea level rise and more severe weather events loom as a growing threat to our entire population. The threat is real and serious, and is of no difference [sic] to a slow and insidious form of terrorism against us" (Cannon, 2010). The comparison to terrorism is not one we need to accept, but it is not inapt inasmuch as the harms of rising sea levels are, just as the harms of terrorism are, the consequences of human actions. And, as with terrorism, the harms in question are quite grave – so grave, in fact, that they not infrequently constitute rights violations. The conclusion that we whose lives entail outsized emissions of greenhouse gases are responsible for these harms seems inescapable. If that is true, then it is also true that we together will have unwittingly perpetrated a great number of rights violations by destroying property and homes, at least. We do this by continuing to emit high levels of
harmful gases in our personal activities, in our patterns of consumption, and in our
tolerance of ambivalent government and unapologetic industry.

Climate change is a big problem – given reasonable assumptions about the actions
of other nations and individuals, the toll of fixing it on the committed will be heavy, to say
the least. It’s possible to spend the rest of your life cycling around to protests, raising
awareness, setting an example and working toward change at both the political and
private levels without running out of progress that could be made. And this is precisely,
perhaps, what the fact that climate change produces rights infringements means you
ought to do.\textsuperscript{76} Singer’s principle of beneficence raised worries about how demanding it
was because of the confluence of two things: the very high limit it established for what
could be demanded and the fact that there is sufficient need in the world such that
reaching that limit would usually happen before the need ran out. The point here is that a
similar dynamic is exhibited by climate change duties understood as correlated to rights.
Since rights are supposed to be moral claims of an especially urgent, strong kind, usually
it is thought that the limit on what their correlated duties can demand will be quite
high.\textsuperscript{77} The problem of climate change is big enough that reaching that limit will
generally happen before the problem has been solved.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{76} The case is, admittedly, rather more complicated than this. For example, there is the
issue of claimability (see Ashford, (2006)). Nonetheless, I have argued elsewhere (Fruh &
Hedahl (2013)) that duties related to halting climate change should be understood as
correlated to rights, and that the worry of demandingness is nonetheless relevant to
limiting what the rights in question entail as duties for individuals.

\textsuperscript{77} See Shue, for example: “One is required to sacrifice, as necessary, anything but one’s
basic rights in order to honor the basic rights of others” (1996, 114). This is strikingly
reminiscent of Singer’s principle of beneficence.

\textsuperscript{78} I later take up Liam Murphy’s proposed fair share resolution of the demandingness
problem, which might be thought to be of help here.
Thomas Pogge (2008) and Kristin Shrader-Frechette (2007) have made similar arguments about economic harms of poverty and health deprivation through environmental injustice, respectively. The basic contours of the story, in each case, are that basic human rights are being (for the most part) unwittingly violated by the aggregated activities of huge numbers of people. Addressing these violations is of the utmost moral urgency. In these cases as in the case of climate change, I think it is inarguable that these views are roughly correct, at least in broad outline.\(^{79}\) But if this is right, the scale of duties correlated to rights has been underestimated if they have not been thought demanding.

Finally, I note a third trend of acknowledged holders of rights to proliferate. Consider non-human animals of the kind that evidently lead relatively rich cognitive lives. Rights views that exclude such creatures as holders of some rights do so at their own peril as the hope for a bright line between humans and other animals recedes into the evolutionary past.\(^{80}\) But attributing rights to non-human animals greatly enlarges the set of duties correlated to rights to which agents are generally subject. And, again, since rights denote an especially important kind of moral claim, attending to those duties will take a priority such that the limit on what they may demand will be quite high. There is no end in sight to the improvements in rights respecting you could achieve if you

\(^{79}\) This would mean that another distinction among duties would have failed to mark a boundary of the demandingness problem; namely, that between positive and negative duties. This is to say that the fact that beneficence is a positive duty is not really what’s responsible for the fact that it might be too demanding, and efforts to theoretically contain the problem to positive duties will be fruitless (cf. Lichtenberg (2010)).

\(^{80}\) Regan (2004) is the foundational source here. But attributing rights or ersatz rights to at least some non-human animals is something many moral theories will be attracted to, even if they are not, at bottom, rights views.
dedicated your life to it, so that the limits of what may be demanded will once again usually be reached before rights violations are at an end.\textsuperscript{81} There is a pattern of thought that suggests rights-based duties would be immune from any objections based on demandingness not because those duties will somehow avoid being very demanding, but instead because it is wholly irrelevant to their status as strict duties owed to others whether it is very demanding to fulfill them. Judith Thomson, for example, writes, “It’s rather a shocking idea that anyone’s rights should fade away and disappear as it gets harder and harder to accord them to him” \textsuperscript{(1971, p. 61)}\textsuperscript{82} Paired with the expanding scope of what rights actually entail in terms of duties, the insidious way in which our contributions to rights violations are woven into the pursuit of our daily lives, and the outwardly mobile scope of rights holders, this is a very difficult position to maintain. But if we follow something like Shue’s categorization of duties associated with basic rights, we can see that the idea that rights-based duties are not fit targets for demandingness objections needn’t be sustained across the board in order to be significant.

Following from the previous chapter’s discussion of the gift by right puzzle, the pertinent distinction to make is between cases where the right establishes an existential asymmetry in claims and cases where it doesn’t. In cases where it doesn’t, fulfilling the duty correlated to the right might still entail sacrificing, and that would entail the possibility of excessive sacrifice. The direct duty not to violate the basic rights of another

\textsuperscript{81} Alison Hills (2010) argues, in response to Ashford (2003), that Utilitarianism is in at least one sense more extremely demanding than Scanlonian contractualism, and that one sense is in what is demanded of agents on behalf of animals. I think Hills is right to notice that the moral status of animals is relevant to how demanding a moral theory is, but this hardly indicts Utilitarianism alone. And if Scanlon’s contractualism only escapes this particular charge by saying next to nothing about animals, that victory might well turn out to be pyrrhic.

\textsuperscript{82} I note that Thomson’s characterization of the problem here is in keeping with an interpretation based on difficulty, which I address at some length below.
seems the best candidate for establishing existential asymmetry in claims, and that would make it true of at least these rights-based duties that they are systematically invulnerable to demandingness objections.\textsuperscript{83} The duty to protect against violation, on the other hand, looks much more likely to fail to establish an existential asymmetry in claims. The reasons are complex: partly it is to do with the fact that supporting law enforcement isn’t something any one person can accomplish on her own, partly it is to do with the fact that the directive is notably less concrete. Various ways of fulfilling the duty could trespass on things over which I clearly have some claim, even if not a decisive one – my time, my energy, my vocation. Understanding the duty to protect others from rights violations as establishing an existential asymmetry in claims would be as grossly revisionary as a consequentialist view of what we have some claim to (I return to this view in 4.3, below). On this view, each chance you seize to support law enforcement will not feature you giving something of yours toward the cause of justice, but will instead be a case of you rendering to the cause what already belonged to it. This is an odd and unappealing way to understand what it amounts to to fulfill duties.

The point of this section is only to show that we have reason to think that duties of many or even all kinds are prone to be very demanding, so that the problem is apt to appear in the discussion of any kind of moral duty. I have not here argued whether any particular duty may or may not be successfully turned back because of how demanding it

\textsuperscript{83} One complication here is when, as is the case in many important instances of rights violations, the violation comes about as the consequence of collective action. I have argued elsewhere (Fruh & Hedahl (2013)) that in cases (such as climate change) where the rights violations come about as the unintended and merely aggregative effect of many individual actions, the rights in question – even basic rights – should not be taken to establish an existential asymmetry in claims, and furthermore that duties to refrain from contributing to climate change are therefore reasonable targets for a demandingness objection, even if those duties are understood to be rights-based.
is. Instead, the argument at this stage is only that moral duties generally may turn out to be very demanding, so demanding in fact that a prima facie worry arises about their status because of their demandingness. That worry is one that I argue we should certainly have about many duties correlated to rights – but it is only a prima facie worry, and perhaps there is some reason to think it will never culminate in a telling objection against only these particular duties. Whether there is some such reason would take argument to show, however – argument that is only more needed now that the duties correlated to rights have been seen to be rather more demanding than previously thought.

The question posed by the demandingness problem in connection with duties of beneficence was, how much must one give to help others? But since the problem also arises in connection with duties correlated with rights, that characterization of the problem will not do. Instead, we might put this question this way at this point: How much must one give to help others and respect their rights? Most going views of rights and beneficence will include a very high limit in their answer to this question, and so will be, in the same way that Singer’s principle of beneficence was, properly characterized as very demanding. But this question, while clearly important, is also not the core question of the demandingness problem. A brief examination of one more kind of duty will bring the core of the problem into view.

*Duties to Self*

At first blush, the primary relevance of duties to ourselves in this discussion might appear to be as serviceable safeguards against a moral theory becoming too demanding – especially if the only way for a moral theory to be too demanding was for it to require us

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84 Liam Murphy (2000) poses a dilemma that capitalizes on this point. The dilemma is considered more fully below.
to do too much for the good of others. This is indeed how Jean Hampton (1993) argues.

She claims that an emphasis in moral theory on ideals of beneficence has obscured what are nonetheless genuinely moral failings of servility and lack of self-respect. A principle of beneficence like Singer’s, could, on this view, be accused of levying expectations that are incompatible with other moral obligations. Whether this is so, I claim that duties to ourselves are potentially extremely demanding, just as other kinds of duty are. While it is true that not all moral theories embrace this category of duty, the fact that the problem of demandingness also makes an appearance here is of vital significance for understanding the question driving that problem.

Consider, for example, self-regarding moral duties of a Kantian variety, as in the duty to pursue one’s own perfection (Kant, 1996, p. 150). This duty encompasses more than one’s moral perfection – it includes also “cultivating one’s faculties.” If this is interpreted as including the cultivation of, for example, native talents and abilities, then the familiar dynamics of duties of beneficence and duties correlated to rights, adduced above, are readily identifiable in this instance too: it is not possible to exhaust the possibilities of improving yourself. The phenomenon of people wholly dedicated to maximizing a particular ability is, in an era marked by specialization, almost too familiar to warrant comment. The dedicated violinist, tennis player, author, artist, whatever – may sink her entire life into her calling without running out of ways to improve or goals to achieve or skills to refine.

It is true that for Kant duties of self-improvement are imperfect duties rather than perfect duties, and this fact may be thought to save them from any concern of

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85 See Johnson (2011).
86 See Wallace (2012).
demandingness. For imperfect duties, even if they contend with an endless task, do not set an extremely high limit on what may be demanded in pursuit of that task. In response I make two observations. First, if this were so, that would only show that being imperfect safeguards a duty from being too demanding, not that being self-directed does. And in that case, my main claim of this section would still go through – it’s possible for duties to oneself to be too demanding (just not imperfect ones). Second, interpretations of imperfect duties are contentious, and part of what is contended is precisely to do with demandingness. Rather than presenting an exception to the rule that duties of any kind might be subject to demandingness concerns, then, imperfect duties will only be systematically invulnerable to demandingness concerns insofar as they have already been subjected to demandingness concerns. What it means for them to be imperfect is already informed by a concern to prevent them from being excessively demanding.

Then again, even imperfect duties might end up being worryingly demanding. Adopting a maxim of beneficence, even if we understand there to be considerable latitude in acting so as to exhibit commitment to the maxim, might still generate a formidable list of demands. And this forces us to modify the question asked by the problem of demandingness once more. We are left with something like the following: How much must one give to help others, respect their rights and improve oneself? A prominent feature of the literature on demandingness centers on striking a balance between an agent’s interests and those of others. While striking such a balance responds to a very urgent and worthwhile question, it does not respond to this question. The point of this section, however, has not been to isolate these three kinds of duties and argue that the

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88 See, inter alia, Scheffler (1982), Miller (2004), and Murphy (1993 & 2000).
problem of demandingness is relevant just for *them*. It is instead that the problem of demandingness attaches to demands, and duties – of all kinds – embody demands. So the question posed by the problem should instead be formulated in more general terms: How much must one give to comply with moral duties? This question is nearer the core of the demandingness problem.

Return for a moment to Singer: “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 (my emphasis).” The focus since Singer published these lines has in large part been on what could be of comparable importance – or, in the question as I have phrased it above, on the part that reads, ‘how much’? But the more general question posed by the problem of demandingness concerns giving at all. So the question at the core of the demandingness problem is really this: What does it mean for moral duties that fulfilling them requires sacrifice? Rather than the worth of what is to be sacrificed, then, I suggest an adequate treatment of the problem of demandingness will proceed by focusing first on the act of sacrificing.

Seeing the problem of demandingness as it arises in connection with a variety of duties yields some reassessment of the precise nature of the problem. In particular, we are forced out of the narrower question of how much my own interests may be allowed to count against the interests of others and into the more general question of how sacrifice may or may not be demanded by moral duties. Thus the demandingness problem, in its most general form, centrally concerns sacrifice.\textsuperscript{89} We’ll shortly come to see how this is an

\textsuperscript{89} I note one further aspect of my construal of the demandingness problem in relation to the literature. Demandingness can happen all at once or a little at a time. Different theorists have emphasized different dynamics of the problem. See Unger (1996) for an example of focus on one-off, dramatic demands, and Cullity (2003) for an example of
improvement over other common interpretations and how it’s relevant to assessing whether there is genuine force in the problem.

**Collective Duties**

Until now, I have mostly been assuming that the moral duties under discussion are individual duties. Not only does this fail to account for an important kind of duty (collective ones, namely), but it may be thought to do so in a way that distorts how demanding duties are. This is because viewing duties as in the first instance collective rather than individual may affect the ultimate demandingness of duties. Liam Murphy (1993, 1997 & 2000) has developed an argument to this effect with respect to a principle of beneficence. Shifting our understanding of beneficence to be in the first instance a duty that we, collectively, share allows for the costs of compliance to be distributed among the collective, bringing them down so that no one individual faces the daunting prospect of fixing huge problems by herself. The hoped-for effect is to reduce an inexhaustible focus on iterated demands that are cumulatively extreme. This distinction in how the problem arises is one I will pass over in what remains. I pause here to note it, and to note its compatibility with a focus on the act of sacrificing rather than on the object sacrificed. Sacrifice as a type of act shares these possibilities of coming all at once or a little at a time – it can be sudden or ongoing. So whether it is in virtue of a single, onerous demand or by dint of a series of independently innocuous demands, the problem understood as centrally involving the particular way of behaving that is to make a sacrifice is identifiably the same problem of demandingness.

With respect to the claims made above about climate change in particular this was a simplifying assumption. See Lichtenberg (2014, ch. 6) for an important development of this view. Distribution of the costs of compliance is the obvious way in which a move to collective duties might drive down how demanding a moral duty is. But, due to the relativity of wellbeing, it’s also true that if we all incur the same losses in the pursuit of some moral end, those losses will be less felt by any of us, and so our compliance won’t have been as demanding as lone compliance in a sea of noncompliance would have been. This is to say that if everyone gives, the giving is less likely to be experienced as a hardship, or the severity of the hardship will tend to be diminished. This is a reason for optimism with respect to the
supply of opportunities to do good through sacrificing to something more manageable. A fair share of what’s needed is derived from ideal conditions where everyone complies with the duty, and that fair share is used as a limitation on what may be demanded of individuals even in non-ideal conditions where many people aren’t doing their part.

Murphy is surely right to think that a shift to a fair share will help alleviate demands in many areas. But a shift to a collective view of duties doesn’t offer a general solution to the problem of demandingness. There are several reasons for this. First, it is possible that there could be so much need that no fair share distribution of the burdens of meeting the need would avoid being too demanding for every individual accountable. This is, I think, empirically possible, but even if it is unlikely for things to get so bad, it remains theoretically relevant. Second, as Samuel Scheffler points out, “even if a theory demands the same thing of everyone, it may not be as demanding of some people as it is of others. What this means is simply that, even if a moral theory exhibits formal universality, neither the cost of satisfying its requirements, nor the extent to which those requirements are confining, needs to be the same for everyone” (1992, p. 99). So if what constitutes a fair share is determined without regard for what would be too demanding on some, then, despite being in a pertinent sense a ‘fair’ share it could still be too demanding for some agents but not others. The alternative is to take account of what would be too

prospects of duties that might otherwise have entailed great sacrifices – if the sacrifices they entail aren’t so great because of the way the relative areas of each giving agent’s wellbeing are protected by the fact that everyone else also gives, then the demandingness problem won’t arise, or will be less of an obstacle to sustaining and enacting moral duties. See Lichtenberg (2014) ch. 10 for some proposals in this vein.

92 Climate change is perhaps a case in waiting. Assuming that it is true that reaching certain trigger points rapidly escalates damaging effects, continued political complacency risks creating a situation where so much has gone so wrong that no amount of spreading the burden of helping out will make the burden bearable for lots and lots of people.
demanding in determining what constitutes a fair share, but of course this just revives the problem.

It seems the question I’ve identified at the core of the demandingness problem is not one that the introduction of collective duties really responds to. Collective duties, however understood in their details, are not somehow prevented from being the occasion of individual sacrifice. Murphy’s view of collective beneficence may not, even if it is a step forward and of independent interest, claim to be free of concerns of demandingness. So I continue under the assumption that choosing to address only individual duties as a simplification doesn’t assume away a viable solution to the problem.

*Theory without Duty*

I have not explicitly made the case that every moral theory potentially faces problems of demandingness. The problem has been variously taken up in connection with specific moral theories elsewhere—indeed, specifically in connection with utilitarianism is the customary mode of addressing the issue. I have instead made the case that the problem of demandingness is something that becomes relevant to moral theories as they deploy the concept of duty. Since almost all moral theories deploy some such concept, the problem is better understood as a problem that faces moral theory rather than a problem confronted by particular moral theories. This understanding is in line with the question at the core of the problem: what is the significance of the fact that morality provides directives that entail sacrifice?

This does not imply that every theory is equally susceptible to objections rooted in demandingness, for some theories may be more attentive to the problem from the outset.

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93 See, inter alia, Swanton (2009), Ashford (2000 & 2003), and Cruft (2009).
than others and therefore curb demands as the theory generates them. Nor does it yet imply that any such objection is successful. In any event moral theory must walk a fine line, for a moral theory that made only very few demands would cave in to complacency. Moral theory must be challenging and reforming, and so it must also be demanding. Even if there were a theory that had struck the perfect balance, then, the problem would remain salient because of how unfolding events and trends require additional interpretation and theoretical innovation. As things stand, moral theories face the ongoing challenge of making demands without being too demanding.

One possible exception would be moral theory that eschewed duty or similar concepts altogether. Such a view could be thought to avoid the problem of demandingness simply by avoiding demands. Alastair Norcross (2006) has forwarded a variety of utilitarianism along these lines.

One possible response to this development is to concede that this strain of theory would constitute a real exception to the relevance of demandingness. But probably there is a better response, because even moral theories of this kind aspire to guide action. Duties are a particularly overt way of guiding action, and so the problem is dramatically apparent with them – but more subdued action guidance might have only a more subdued version of the problem rather than avoiding it completely. In the case of Norcross’s scalar utilitarianism, rather than a standard of rightness and duties to meet it, the theory only provides a ranking of states of affairs (2006, p. 43). The relative goodness and badness of possible states of affairs you might bring about constitute reasons for

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95 If they don’t, that is a separate problem as much as a solution to the problem of demandingness. Which is the baby and which the bathwater – or whether there’s any bathwater here at all – I leave to the reader.
acting, and attending to these reasons well or badly ultimately constitutes the grounds for evaluation by others in the form of blame and praise. That a state of affairs is the best possible means that the strongest reasons available favor bringing it about, and this is true regardless of how demanding it would be to insist on bringing it about since whatever costs associated with bringing it about have already been accounted for in the evaluation of the state of affairs.

This sort of view is akin to views which, although they issue duties, hold the content and extent of duties to be identifiable independently of how demanding they are.\(^{96}\) In Samuel Scheffler’s terms, these views embody the response to demandingness that says: “Of course we may find it hard to satisfy the demands of morality…So much the worse for us” (1986, pp. 531-532). The relevance of demandingness, on these views, is for purposes of blaming and praising only. But even if we provisionally accept this feature of these views, there is still a problem of demandingness: namely, how demanding can duties be without the failure to fulfill them becoming blameless? To say that a moral theory was too demanding, on this view, would be to say that it too readily asserted a basis for blame rather than the more customary problem of requiring too much. This is, to be sure, a departure from the way I have been treating the problem. But it is not a successful avoidance of the problem either. Since Norcross’s view retains grounds for moral criticism, it still faces the task of establishing a standard, and that standard runs a risk of being too demanding in the form of making too much sacrifice blameworthy if not undertaken.

So whether a moral theory issues duties or eschews them, its defenders still have a stake in dealing with the problem of demandingness. The problem of demandingness

makes an appearance even in moral theories that don’t make demands because the central question posed by the problem concerns making sacrifices while acting under the guidance of morality. Even if they don’t demand them, theories of this style still aim to supply us with reasons to make sacrifices. Since attending to those reasons is the basis for blame and praise, there is a question of which sacrifices there is reason to blame agents for not making. If these reasons extend to all possible sacrifices, we will have come back to confront something very like the demandingness problem.

4.3 | Rival Interpretations: Difficulty and Cost

It’s common to describe demandingness in shorthand as consisting either in difficulty or in cost. Both descriptions are misleading, and a focus on the act of sacrifice is the proper remedy for each of these maladies. In this section I examine the shortcomings of each.

Difficulty

I start by looking at difficulty in complying with duty as a view of what it is to be too demanding. I noted above (in footnote 82) that Judith Thomson speaks in these terms, and certainly there are others, but Christine Swanton (2009) will serve as the example here.

Colloquial use of the term ‘demanding’ usually denotes a kind of difficulty, or challenge. Particular careers, obstacle courses and classes could be compared to other such things in terms of how demanding they are, and the comparison would be tracking a kind of difficulty connected to requiring growth or advancement in order to achieve success. Understanding the problem of moral demandingness along these lines renders it
as something like an iteration of the ‘ought implies can’ dictum. In being too demanding, a moral duty would be requiring us to do something that is too far out of reach of our current capacities, so that even reasonably expectable progress in cultivating the relevant capacities would not allow us to comply with the duty. Swanton, borrowing from Owen Flanagan, writes, “[t]he question of demandingness is the question of difficulty…a theory can be difficult because it ‘calls for some very unlikely contortion or realignment of our basic psychological equipment’” (2009, p. 110). Swanton arrives at this understanding of the demandingness problem after explicitly adopting a virtue theory perspective. She discards some ways the problem might show up in other theoretical contexts, including views that render morality essentially other-regarding (pp. 105-106). So while Swanton is concerned to articulate a distinctive version of the demandingness problem as it surfaces in the context of virtue theory, the interpretation she develops is not at home only in that theoretical context. Indeed, the notion of difficulty she hits on is widely echoed in discussions of demandingness from many different theoretical contexts.

Return, not for the first or last time, to Singer’s proposed principle of beneficence. Is it demanding in this sense of difficult? It is tempting to give an affirmative answer based on the assured psychological difficulty of giving so much so consistently to distant strangers whose need is not viscerally salient. But perhaps it would not be that hard—perhaps we have yet to really try. In any case, that is mostly beside the point, because in order to be difficult on this view, compliance with the duty would have to do more than

97 This way of understanding the problem is rebutted in two ways in my discussion of duties to self, above.
98 Cf. Lichtenberg (2013, ch. 6). One upshot of the relativity of wellbeing (discussed above in footnote 91) might be captured by saying that giving would become less difficult if only more others were also giving. On my view, this would be a less felicitous way of capturing the significance of the relativity of wellbeing for demandingness than speaking in terms of sacrifices, as I do in the mentioned footnote.
just be hard or unpleasant – it would have to require adjustments to our basic psychological equipment. But is the difficulty most of us find in imagining ourselves living by Singer’s principle this kind of difficulty? In particular, the claim that it is our basic psychological equipment that blocks our compliance rather than some non-basic, acquired traits of laziness and indulgence will be very hard to sustain. People who come close to living in compliance with Singer’s principle do not appear psychologically alien in some basic way.99

The other major issue with difficulty as an account of the problem of demandingness is that it allows for compliance that is incredibly damaging to a person’s life to fail to be demanding, as long as the agent has the psychological wherewithal to do what is necessary to comply. An agent facing down Singer’s principle, fully able but reluctant to subject not her basic psychological equipment but her life to contortion, will not find even a possible defense of noncompliance in a problem of demandingness. Positing difficulty as the central issue in demandingness is a mistake.

Although it is not adequate as an account of the problem of demandingness, difficulty is not totally irrelevant to the problem. The way it is relevant is accounted for by a view of the problem that allots a central place to the act demanded. As an act type, sacrifice typically involves something akin to difficulty – it involves overcoming something, foregoing a good, willingly taking on a hardship, etc. So although difficulty does not, as Swanton and others have claimed or implied, comprise the problem of demandingness, difficulty is derivatively relevant. Its relevance is derived from the concept of sacrifice.

99 Probably most people will have their own favorite example. Tracy Kidder’s (2009) account of Paul Farmer makes the latter a candidate. See also Carbonell (2009) and Matthews (2013).
Cost

The other most common way of describing the problem of demandingness invokes the notion of cost. David Sobel (2007), who will be my example and target here, argues in the context of a consequentialist principle of beneficence that any objection based on the demandingness of compliance is impotent. He presents the following case: Sally needs a donor kidney in order to survive, and Joe, in no way affiliated with Sally, has two functioning kidneys, one of which he could successfully deliver to Sally (p. 3). Sobel supposes that if a consequentialist principle of beneficence required Joe to surrender one of his kidneys, that result would be assailed by complaints of demandingness. But, as Sobel claims, letting Joe off the hook produces a result that is even more demanding than holding him to the duty, for the result is that it is permissible for Sally to be allowed to die, and that is – for Sally – extremely demanding. Any denial of Sally’s complaint, Sobel argues, must somehow invoke a morally significant distinction between doing and allowing. Since consequentialists generally don’t accept any such distinction, the demandingness problem poses no non-question begging threat to consequentialist views.

On Sobel’s view, the very concerns that give rise to the problem for the giver give rise to a stronger version of the same problem in the recipient who does not receive. So with respect to principles of beneficence like Singer’s, claims that compliance is excessively demanding overlook how demanding noncompliance is for those whose need is addressed by the principle. Justification for overlooking the demandingness of noncompliance, the argument goes, could only come in one form: the demandingness of noncompliance is the result of allowing rather than doing. But this difference cannot be
successfully invoked against consequentialist views. And, even in other theoretical contexts, this line of reasoning would show that the demandingness problem hinged on the doing/allowing distinction. Sobel’s conclusion is that demandingness offers no distinctive challenge to moral theory or to consequentialism in particular. It was only a masked way of taking some costs but not others into account. But once the mask has been removed, we see that the costs of noncompliance with a principle like Singer’s are greater than the costs of compliance (necessarily). To object to the principle on the grounds that it is overly demanding is to unjustifiably elevate the importance of some costs over others, despite the fact that they are not as costly:

No one suggests, in the name of the Demandingness Objection, that the potential recipient of aid would inappropriately sacrifice more under non-Consequentialist ethical theories because these moral theories do not require others to aid them. This is because, when we are advancing the Objection, we are already in the grip of the thought that a moral theory that requires X to sacrifice for Y is demanding on X but a moral view that permits Y to suffer rather than insist that X help is not similarly demanding on Y (p. 6).

If the demandingness problem is really only about costs – whether actively or passively incurred – it is challenging to see how to resist Sobel’s argument. It seems a hopeless cause to insist that the cost of going without one of your two kidneys is greater than the cost of going without any kidneys. Since Sobel’s argument undercuts the possibility of a forceful demandingness objection, it seems that on his view there is no principled limit to the reach of moral demands. Some moral demands might end up overreaching and being, in consequentialist terms, counterproductive, and that would be a reason to scale them back. But – in principle – if a moral duty to dedicate your life wholly and comprehensively to a particular cause produced the best consequences, you would have nothing telling to say against the duty.
Peter Unger (1996) arrives at a similar conclusion by a different means. Whereas Sobel’s argument attacks the possibility of a forceful demandingness objection, Unger argues for truly radical demands, including a duty not just to lie down on the trolley tracks to derail it ahead of some greater number of potential victims, but a duty to go and find runaway trolleys and get onto the tracks (p. 150). Indeed, by the time Unger has reached his conclusion that you ought to turn the runaway trolley onto yourself from its present course where it will kill two children, it’s no longer clear what could stop Unger from embracing as a duty the plan to secure both a good life insurance policy and one’s own sudden death, while designating a highly effective life-saving charity as the beneficiary for the policy. If this plan cannot be objected to on demandingness grounds, it’s not clear that any action could be.

Understanding demandingness as a way of taking into account the costs of compliance with a moral duty threatens us with this conclusion. But, as I have already suggested, this view of the problem is inadequate.\textsuperscript{100} This is to refute Sobel’s argument about the possibility of a forceful demandingness objection – but it is not to refute Unger’s argument that we are under a duty to offer up our own lives when that is a useful thing to do. My argument here is aimed at restoring a structural possibility of lodging a demandingness complaint, but I don’t argue here for a precise or even imprecise view of a substantive limit on the demands of morality. So I use Sobel’s case as an example without implying any particular conclusion about whether the duty for Joe to donate his kidney is indeed too demanding. Rather than arguing whether his objection is ultimately successful, I only argue that it is possible for Joe to object in that way without his

\textsuperscript{100} It is also supremely convenient for defenders of consequentialism.
objection being a nonstarter, or impotent because it has no force independent of the
distinction between doing and allowing.

We can start by noticing that if Joe were under no duty to transfer his kidney to
Sally, morality would in that case make no demands of anyone, and in particular, it
would not demand anything of Sally. While it would mean it was permissible for Joe not
to help Sally, it would not demand that Sally not be helped – the absence of the duty is
not a prohibition on helping. This is the way in which Sobel’s view of the problem of
demandingness empties it of any distinctive quality: Sally and Joe can both make claims
about the demandingness of the duty or lack of duty only if what it is to be demanding
has nothing to do with demands, but is instead only a marker for the extremely reductive
notion of costs. But there is something distinctive about the situation Joe is in: he faces a
demand. Sally does not, even if she does face a grim prognosis.

The best way to see this is, again, in terms of sacrifice. If the duty binds him, Joe is
called to act in such a way that would constitute a sacrifice (let us plausibly assume). If the
duty does not bind him, is Sally called upon to make a sacrifice? I note before answering
that sacrifice as an act type is neutral with respect to the distinction of doing and allowing
– that is, it is equally possible to make a sacrifice by refraining from some action as by
performing some action. Although I characterized sacrifice as an act, that
characterization is compatible with acts of declining or omitting or allowing. I think Sally
does not make a sacrifice by going without a kidney transplant. The reason no one
complains as Sobel does, above, that the potential recipient of aid inappropriately
sacrifices when the potential benefactor is not held by duty to provide it is because she
doesn’t in fact sacrifice at all. So I argue that, in contrast to cost, sacrifice restores
distinctiveness to the problem of demandingness without presupposing a morally weighty

distinction between doing and allowing.

There are several additional points worth making here. To begin with, I should

make clear that the issue here is not whether accepting a duty for Joe to give his kidney to

Sally creates the nightmare scenario of coercive nephrectomies in an ambitious organ

redistribution program. Stipulate that Joe is a thoroughly conscientious person, earnestly
desiring to do what it is his moral duty to do. If citing the costs of donating is all a

demandingness objection amounts to, then Joe will readily see that it is his duty to donate –
such are the obvious costs of his failure to donate to Sally. I have been arguing that Joe

should be understood to be asking a question about whether his sacrifice can be required

by morality, and this question is not so readily dismissed since Sally cannot point to a

greater sacrifice imposed by the absence of the duty.

In the case as it is described, Sally doesn’t so much allow Joe to keep his kidney as

she just does nothing at all. She does not, for example, exercise her will toward the end of

avoiding the extraction of Joe’s kidney. This makes my conclusion inappropriately easy to

endorse, since if Sally doesn’t do anything, a fortiori she doesn’t sacrifice. The picture of

sacrifice that emerged from chapter two emphasizes that sacrifices are for something. As

the case is described, Sally does not go without a functioning kidney for anything, and in

particular she does not do so in order to spare Joe the loss of his second kidney.101 But

since Sobel’s case is meant to contrast an act (Joe) and an omission (Sally), the case is

101 We could, of course, imagine the case that way. Say Joe is Sally’s young nephew, and

while he is a viable donor, he would nonetheless face some complications as a result of
giving at a relatively young age. In that case, maybe Sally would refuse the transplant in

order to spare Joe the complications, and that, it can hardly be denied, would be a

sacrifice. The point here is not, however, that it is impossible for Sally to make a sacrifice

by going without a kidney. It is instead that the going without a kidney does not, by itself,

constitute a sacrifice.
better represented is we understand Sally to actually omit to take Joe’s kidney. So imagine that Sally happens to be a capable and presently equipped surgeon, while Joe just happens to fall into her operating room, unconscious. By not taking Joe’s kidney, is Sally making a sacrifice? Consider the parallel development associate with Unger’s position: say I have a life insurance policy that would save 1000 people. If those 1000 people together have the opportunity to bring about my death and see to it that they are designated beneficiaries of my policy, do they make a sacrifice by not taking the opportunity?

I think the answer in both cases is clearly ‘no’. The view of sacrifice I have developed (principally in chapter 2) casts sacrifices as a species of transfer, and Sally is not in a position to participate in an action of that kind because there is nothing in this case that is hers to give. As we saw in connection with the gift by right puzzle, the agent must have some claim over the object of sacrifice. Sally has no claim over Joe’s kidney, and so in declining to take it, she makes no sacrifice. Recall that without this condition, we would be forced to describe every case of wayward temptation resisted as a case of sacrifice. Once it occurs to me that I might steal your coat, when I refrain from stealing it I am rightly characterized as having made a sacrifice. Seeing, correctly, that the chain around your bike is so weak that I could kick it to pieces, but nonetheless not going through with it would entitle me to say that I had made a sacrifice. These are absurd results, better to be avoided.

The insertion of claims here will, no doubt, smack of question-begging. It’s possible that we’ve reached an impasse where any move will seem question-begging, but I believe I can say a bit more to defend the conclusions I’ve drawn, restoring distinctive force to the demandingness objection. If it is the case that Sally does have some claim to
Joe’s kidney, then even if Joe also has some claim to it, there would be a real sense in which the kidney is a just a functional organ, and not really Joe’s. Parting with a view of existential asymmetry in claims on Joe’s kidneys favoring Joe comes at a high price – our view of our bodies as ours is subject to radical revision. Something similar can be said in the parallel case from Unger – if the 1000 people who stand to benefit from my death via my life insurance policy have some claim over my life, a very important way in which my life is mine cannot be retrieved. That this is hard to believe is, of course, not decisive. But ruling out the possibility of a forceful demandingness objection entails radical revisions of quite basic, deep-seated beliefs about what we have claims over. It makes better sense of things to see the notion of sacrifice as restoring the possibility of a distinctive demandingness objection.

In summary, if the duty to give his kidney is not something Joe is subject to, then, this does not entail that Sally makes a sacrifice. But being subject to the duty does entail a sacrifice for Joe. There is, after all, something distinctive about the position Joe is in, and that distinctiveness is well captured by an understanding of the demandingness problem focused on sacrifice as the kind of act demanded. The view of the demandingness problem that sees it as concerned only with some very reductive notion of ‘costs’ is misleading because it erases distinctive features of the positions with respect to the putative duty. It remains to be seen whether and how much this matters to our assessment of what our moral duties actually are, and I have not argued that Joe is under no duty to send his kidney to Sally. Instead, I have only argued that he, unlike Sally, is in the distinctive position of making a sacrifice, and since this is what the problem of

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102 Not even if it’s so hard to believe that Unger himself can’t believe it. On page 152 he specifically notes that there’s nothing sacred about vocation, and singles out metaphysicians as being especially profligate.
demandingness is centrally concerned with, he alone is in a position to make that kind of objection.

4.4 | Murphy’s Dilemma

So far we have seen that demandingness concerns cut a broad swath across duties and theories, and that the best way to capture what is distinctive about the problem in its full breadth is by deploying sacrifice as a central interpretive concept. Responding to Sobel’s argument in the previous section allowed me to show that sacrifice offers important assistance in understanding what the core of the demandingness problem consists in, but it also served to deflect an influential argument seeking to undermine its force. I turn now to another argument with a similar aim. Responding to this argument will more fully restore the possibility of a forceful demandingness objection, and so more fully establish that moral theory must be sensitive to the sacrifices its duties entail.

Liam Murphy poses the following dilemma for objections on the grounds of demandingness:

[E]ither extreme demands are objectionable as such, or they are not. If they are, we must regard extreme demands as objectionable whatever moral principle is involved. If they are not, we cannot object to the optimizing principle of beneficence on the simple ground that it is too demanding. Philosophers have not been rushing to defend the idea that constraints against killing should be rejected or in some way weakened because of the potential for extreme demands. And it seems likewise unlikely that many would argue that it is too demanding to expect a group of robber barons to redistribute their riches among those they have exploited. It seems, then, that we cannot object to the optimizing principle of beneficence on the ground of extreme demands either (2000, p. 39).

The dilemma posed by Murphy is not unrelated to the argument made by Sobel, in that it seeks to multiply the parties who could complain about demandingness in such a way that the complaint itself becomes absurd or ineffective. My response to Murphy is also
similar, in broad strokes: I deny that the multiplication he alleges is possible on a suitable understanding of the problem of demandingness.

If the demandingness problem is to be taken seriously as a problem, then it has to be addressed wherever it shows up – Murphy alleges that it shows up in the exploitative robber barons facing the prospect of redistributing their wealth and in the yearning murderer faced with a prohibition on killing. Since it cannot be taken seriously as a problem for the duties to return unfairly extracted goods or to not murder others, it cannot be taken seriously anywhere.

I have already argued that the problem is indeed more widespread than has traditionally been assumed, so if the argument were just that many duties have been assumed to be impervious to demandingness concerns while beneficence is unfairly picked on, then I would welcome that contribution. But Murphy’s point is that taking demandingness as the grounds of a serious objection to moral duties would threaten moral duties even where it is intuitively absurd to do so, because, after all, even the duty not to kill makes a demand on us. Whereas Sobel pointed to people who would suffer from a duty’s absence and suggested they were well positioned to complain about demandingness, Murphy points to the murderous and merciless and suggests that they too are entitled to the same complaint.

The question, then, is whether the demandingness problem does indeed show up in places and ways that would render it absurd. I think it does not, and again the focus on sacrifice is key to seeing why not. I argue that if we understand the demandingness problem as centrally focused on that particular act type, we can again draw the appropriate line between those possibly entitled to the complaint and those that are not. The robber barons, in being held to a duty to redistribute their wealth among those
whom they exploited, make no sacrifice. This is again because in order to sacrifice, an agent must have some claim on the benefit the act confers on the other, the condition established in the course of resolving the *gift by right* puzzle. When I refrain from forcibly extracting the money from your wallet in ordinary circumstances, I make no sacrifice – and this is true even if I desire the money, if having the money would further my interests, and if it is psychologically difficult for me to refrain. The fact of exploitation highlights this feature by explicitly placing us in a context of duties of reparations. Compulsory restitution may in some cases entail some sacrifice, but it does not, on its own, constitute making one.

With respect to the duty not to kill, there are two things to say. First, I have already allowed that duties bundled with a right not to be murdered, such as supporting adequate law enforcement, might well end up being quite demanding. These duties are not unfit targets for demandingness objections (I don’t say they are defeated by such objections) because fulfilling them may conflict with all manner of things I do have some claim to – that is to say, fulfilling these duties might entail sacrifices. This result, rather than discrediting the problem, is an illustration of its breadth. But, second, the duty not to murder other people is not a fit target for demandingness objections, because it is never the case that the would-be murderer has a claim to the life of the would-be victim. We could style a case after Sobel’s argument and suggest that the cost of not killing to the dedicated, artistic serial killer is greater than the cost of being killed to his ambivalent,

103 As with the case of Joe and Sally, above, the point here is not that it is impossible to imagine a scenario in which the robber barons do make sacrifices in order to redistribute their wealth, but only that the redistribution of their wealth itself does not constitute a sacrifice.

104 This is one feature that might make compulsory restitution an appealing alternative to traditional punishment. Cf. Boonin (2008).
near-suicidal victim. In the previous section I argued that thinking about demandingness in terms of costs invited and facilitated this kind of misleading comparison that ultimately deprives the demandingness objection of any force. Seeing the demandingness problem as arising only when duties entail sacrifice is an important corrective measure, since doing so blocks the invidious comparison. The mere fact that you stand to gain from some action does not make the prohibition of that action demanding in the relevant sense. The serial killer has no claim whatsoever to the lives of others, and so even if it is difficult for him to forego his murders, his actions do not constitute sacrificing because the benefit his restraint bestows on others isn’t something he was in a position to claim for himself instead. So demandingness as I have argued it should be understood will be of no avail for the murderer complaining about the burdens of the duty not to kill.

In concluding this section, I again note that I have not attempted to specify what sacrifices morality may rightly demand and which it may not, nor to say what the difference consists of. The bulk of my work here has taken place at a significant theoretical remove from the fully applied context of sorting, on the ground, when a moral theory or duty engages a sacrifice it shouldn’t. That figures to be messy work, although what I have said here should provide some direction.

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105 We might say that no such person could fail to be a psychopath, and so would only complicatedly be subject to norms anyway. But we should say more.

106 There is a sense in which characterizing something as a cost also presupposes a privileged default arrangement in which the agent does have some claim to the object to be surrendered. If you’re truly playing with house money, it costs you nothing to lose. It’s only if the money is yours under some description that it costs you to play. Focusing on sacrifice brings this out more clearly.
4.5 | Final Transition

Having earlier developed an account of the concept of sacrifice, resolving the two named puzzles along the way, in this chapter I have argued that the insights about sacrifice are of vital importance in addressing and understanding the demandingness problem. The problem, I have argued, should be understood largely in terms of sacrifice because, first, in its full, historically underappreciated breadth, there is little else to unify the various challenges the problem materializes in, and second, because the rival candidates, difficulty and cost, are inadequate to capture the real core of the issue. Understanding the problem of demandingness in terms of sacrifice has the further virtue of deflecting a couple of influential arguments seeking to undermine its force. In the next and final chapter, I address a dramatic potential counterexample to this conclusion in the form of heroic sacrifice.
CHAPTER 5 | HEROIC SACRIFICE AND THE REQUIREMENT CLAIM

5.1 | INTRODUCTION

A lot has happened since I introduced Mr. Xtreme in chapter one. My focus in the concluding chapter is on his less fanciful, not super brethren: actual heroes. But not just any actual heroes – specifically I want to focus on moral heroes, a distinction I make in the following section. The case of the moral hero presents us with a number of difficult explanatory tasks. There is the question of why she did the heroic act, of how she was able to do it, of whether the rest of us are similarly capable. But there is also the fact that it is a commonplace for acts of moral heroism to be undertaken with a reported sense of being somehow required. Here are two samples of such claims. The first is from Philip Hallie’s classic study of the French village of Le Chambon, whose citizens harbored Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution. Praise from interviewers consistently generated a response of this kind: “How can you call us ‘good’? We were doing what had to be done” (Hallie, 1979, p.20). The second example is from the recent bombing of the Boston Marathon, where in the immediate aftermath of the two explosions, when it still could not be known whether further violence was planned, several bystanders rushed into the chaos to assist the wounded. “In the aftermath of Monday’s explosions, much of the early lifesaving was performed by amateurs…They tied tourniquets and carried away the injured in wheelchairs or in arms. ‘I did my duty,’ [one such amateur, Carlos] Arredondo said the next morning” (Fahrenthold, 2013).

Even if the reports of heroes to the effect that their actions were required resolve some of the mystery of why they did what they did, we are left with a new question: whence this sense of requirement? In the remainder of the chapter, I develop an account
of what I will call the requirement claim: that, based on the experience of facing action, the
heroic action was in some important sense required of the heroic agent. The
requirement claim therefore includes two assertions that cry out for explanation: the
heroic action is experienced as required at (or during) the time of acting, and in retrospect
the agent judges that it was in fact required. The requirement claim seems to form a basis
of resisting my conclusion in chapter four. If heroic sacrifice can be morally required, it’s
not clear why any lesser sacrifices couldn’t also, and so it’s not clear how sacrifice could
constrain moral theory.

I begin with a discussion of moral heroism as a species of the more general
phenomenon of heroism. Here a focus on sacrifice is again privotal. I then turn to the two
most vetted kinds of response to the requirement claim. First, there are a variety of ways
in which we might explain away the phenomenon. These explanations are all
deflationary in that they undermine the contention that the heroic act was in any sense
required. This response would remove the threat to the claim that sacrifice constrains
moral theory, but I argue that it is subject to serious problems and should not be
accepted. Second, we might accept the requirement claim as representing a moment of
moral insight in which moral heroes glimpse a side of moral duty the rest of us are too
benighted to see or too depraved to accept. This response would uphold the threat to the
claim that sacrifice constrains moral theory, leaving me to grasp for a way to block the
inference from the moral requirement in heroic cases to a moral requirement in ordinary,
non-heroic cases. Fortunately, this response is also subject to serious problems and should
not be accepted. I offer a superior, alternative account that has the additional virtue of

107 The sense of requirement is left deliberately open here, and I use ‘requirement’ as a
neutral stand in for what might be duty, obligation, non-optionality, etc.
allowing that sacrifice does constrain moral theory. It’s possible to sort the responses in terms of the answers they provide to the following questions: were the heroic acts in any sense required of heroes, and are they also required of the rest of us? Whereas the deflationary response answers both questions negatively, the moral insight response answers both affirmatively. My own view will answer affirmatively that there is a sense in which the heroic acts were required of heroes, but negatively that such acts need not be required of the rest of us.

5.2 | MORAL HEROISM AND HEROISM MORE GENERALLY

There are a number of distinctions to draw among heroes and heroic acts – more, certainly, than the ones I’ll mention now.\textsuperscript{108} The goal here is not to give a comprehensive account of heroism, but to see how sacrifice figures in our understanding of one important kind of heroism. I’ll speak about acts that are heroic, and the agents who perform these acts as heroes. I won’t pay much attention to more general considerations about how their acts are received, or what effect their acts have on others. This is to distinguish \textit{being a hero} from \textit{being someone’s hero}. The latter embodies what we might call a relational view of heroism. This could come in a couple of different varieties. It could insist that it is a sufficient and necessary condition of heroism that it has a certain kind of inspiring effect on others (we might call this the purely relational view). One problem with this view would come to the surface in cases where a rather ordinary action had, for whatever peculiar reasons, an inspiring effect on witnesses. To rule out such cases, a more moderate relational view could insist on an inspiring effect as only a necessary condition,

\textsuperscript{108} See Walker & Frimer (2007) for a profitable use of the distinction between brave and caring heroes, for example.
but this would (wrongly, I say) leave out cases of extraordinary feats that happened to have no witnesses, or that happened to be witnessed only by incredibly jaded, cynical people. A hypothetical refinement of the relational view would retreat from the actual inspiration of others as a necessary condition and instead focus on a quality of being inspiring to suitable witnesses in normal circumstances, etc.

The focus of the relational view is less on the hero or the heroic act itself than it is on the reception or construction of heroism by the rest of us. The relational view responds to an important dimension of inquiry regarding heroes: how do we create, treat, and respond to them? The view captures one side of a distinction I want to draw between what we might call personal heroes and moral heroes. Being someone’s hero is different than doing something heroic. Many people when asked to identify their heroes mention family members. This seems to reflect a relational status that obtains between the survey respondent and her family member – namely, that the former was a role model who inspired and spurred the respondent on in some way, and so on. But this result is plainly compatible with the idea that the cited family members have not actually done anything heroic. The target of the relational view we might call a status, but what I aim to investigate here is something much more like a property. The suggestion is that the answer has a lot more to do with the nature of the act than with the way it is received by others. The isolated moral hero is no less heroic than one that happens to have an adoring audience, and being a moral hero is compatible with not being anyone’s personal hero.

Becoming a hero to someone could happen any number of ways – being an excellent athlete, a successful corporate CEO, a legendary statesperson, etc. Michael

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109 See Allison & Goethals (2011) for a developed view of this kind.
110 See Ibid., p. 26 for the results of one survey.
Jordan is still often cited as a hero by survey respondents asked to identify their own heroes.\textsuperscript{111} The way Michael Jordan is a hero to many is through his excellent displays of awesome competence in a skillful domain (playing basketball) and by inspiring others through that excellence. Without insisting that this is the basis for a hard and fast distinction, the idea is that what makes an agent eligible to be someone’s hero is often his outstanding competence. Moral heroes, as opposed to personal heroes, are probably not aptly characterized this way. Parents who become personal heroes are a good example of a complication of this distinction, since it may not be their awesomely competent parenting that makes them a hero to their children, but something else. More on this in a moment. What we need now is a general way of characterizing the kind of actions that are the basis of moral heroism, and that would further distinguish it from personal heroism.

Here is one further task that characterization should be up to: it should position us to distinguish moral heroes from other nearby figures. Much of the discussion in the literature is inattentive to the (as I think) rather obvious fact that most moral heroes are, despite their heroism, not morally perfect people or anything close. Oskar Schindler is probably a good example of a moral hero who was nonetheless probably kind of an asshole.\textsuperscript{112} Whether an agent has moments or periods or something close to a lifetime of moral achievement is one thing that might distinguish saints from heroes, so often in the literature lumped together. Moral heroes needn’t, then, aspire to a more morally excelling life outside a single morally heroic act in order to properly be considered heroes. Yet moral heroes are also to be distinguished from ordinary altruists – helpful, generous

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{112} See Furrow (1998).
people performing quotidian acts of good will, or philanthropists – people of means who become outsized sponsors of commitments to pro-social ends.

In his landmark mid-century piece, J.O. Urmson (1958) offers an account of moral heroism hinging on a notion of resisting fear. Resisting fear – or more generally overcoming difficulty – is surely an important element in many acts of heroism. But it struggles with each of the two tasks I set above. First, it doesn’t help distinguish personal heroism from moral heroism. Michael Jordan may well have overcome a lot of difficulty, having quelled a powerful fear of failing or losing, for example. Second, overcoming fear won’t help us place heroes between ordinary altruism and saintliness. What sets saints apart isn’t the fear they overcome, as opposed to the fear overcome by altruists and heroes. Finally, it’s just not clear why fear should feature so prominently in the account – it seems moral heroism could proceed largely without any fear to overcome in the first place.

The insight captured by Urmson is that there is something standing in the way of acting heroically, that the heroic action isn’t without downside, and perhaps that heroism is relatively rare for reasons that are readily understandable and durable. Instead of focusing on fear as a typical reaction to the downside (which might be grave bodily harm or death, after all), the proper emphasis is on the downside itself. This is to say that moral heroism is characterized by sacrificing for others. Since sacrifice entails an objective hardship that is also experienced as such, this way of analyzing moral heroism will be able to account for the kind of overcoming Urmson rightly points to. Insofar as the heroic is partially indexed to expectations (especially where expectations are grounded in the relative absence of obstacles), the way sacrifices feature enduring hardship will also tend to reflect this.
Whatever Michael Jordan’s virtues, this is a plausible way to distinguish his brand of heroism from moral heroism. It also puts us in a much better position to distinguish the hero from the saint and the altruist – the nature of the sacrifices each figure makes is different. It’s not quite so simple as placing them on a scale of lesser to greater, for heroes sometimes make great sacrifices without thereby becoming saints. So the question of what makes some sacrifices for others saintly, some altruistic, and still others heroic is a complicated one. It seems the distinction between (mere) altruists and moral heroes might be captured largely in terms of the value of what’s given up in sacrificing, with heroic sacrifice being across some vague threshold of seriousness from the lesser sacrifices of altruists who give their time, money, labor, etc. On the other hand, the distinction between saints and moral heroes seems more likely to involve several layers of differences, such as frequency of sacrificing, and the degree to which the sacrificing encompasses the life of the agent. Without filling in these distinctions more, the point is that an account of moral heroism centered on the kinds of sacrifices agents make for others and how they make them positions us to makes sense of altruists, saints and moral heroes as distinct but related categories of moral achievement. A view focused on overcoming fear does not so position us. In lieu of a more detailed account of what distinguishes morally heroic sacrifices from merely altruistic ones, in the discussion that follows I’ll rely on cases of moral heroism that seem uncontroversially heroic.

I have already conceded that the distinction between personal heroism and moral heroism is not perfect. For example, a parent could come to be a hero to her children not by excellent parenting, per se, but through consistent sacrificing for their sake. Since I have said sacrificing is the way to characterize moral heroism in contrast to the outstanding competence that is more characteristic of personal heroism, this seems like a
problem case with plenty of actual instances. There are two things to say in response here, in addition to the concession I have already made. First, in the parenting case (as in many others, I imagine) it is still not the nature of the sacrifice as such that makes the parent a hero to the children. It is instead the relation affirmed in the sacrifices – the children are the beneficiaries of the parent’s sacrifices, and those sacrifices needn’t be heroic in order to make the parent a hero to the children. Moral heroes are morally heroic not because of the particular identities of the beneficiaries of their sacrifices, but because of the seriousness of the sacrifices they make for others. Second, it might well be the case that some parents are indeed moral heroes in addition to being personal heroes to their families.

Given the account of sacrifice developed in chapter two, an account of moral heroism based on sacrificing for others is in tension with perhaps the most prominent account of moral heroism available. Philip Zimbardo (2007, p. 466) adduces, as one of four distinguishing features of moral heroism, a necessary condition that any personal gain from the heroic act be unanticipated by the agent. Since my account of sacrifice allows both that sacrifices ultimately benefit the agent (winning by losing), and that the benefit be foreseen by the agent (although not intended), it seems my account is at odds with Zimbardo’s condition.\textsuperscript{113} If the earlier arguments concerning the compatibility of sacrifice with ultimately benefiting were right, then it’s not clear why heroic sacrifices would constitute an exception. Morally heroic sacrifices will, it seems, often feature quite different kinds of risks and benefits for the agent such that non-compensation will be a

\textsuperscript{113} It’s also worth noting that Zimbardo characterizes the heroic act as at least potentially a sacrifice, suggesting that incurring risk of grave harm is not sufficient, on his view, for making a sacrifice. I argued in chapter two that incurring risk was not infrequently itself a kind of harm appropriately associated with an experience of hardship such that we could not just metaphorically say in such cases that one had sacrificed one’s safety.
plausible way of describing the relation between the gains and losses. And the rewards of heroism are often highly contingent, unforeseeable eventualities – such as public recognition and awards. A dim awareness that these are possible seems less important for understanding the act as a heroic sacrifice than the motivational attitudes attached to the action – if those rewards are the reason and motive for acting, then the act looks different, and less like a sacrifice. But this is to say that mere anticipation\(^ {114}\) is insufficient to make the act something other than a sacrifice, and Zimbardo’s condition should be rejected.

Finally, I want to introduce one more distinction among moral heroes. I distinguish acts of spontaneous heroism from deliberate heroism. These labels aren’t perfect, but here is what is intended: the heroes I mean to deal with here are spontaneous in the sense that they hadn’t, well before acting, come to the conclusion that they ought to so act, and they didn’t seek out the circumstances in which their heroic act played out.\(^ {115}\) Contrast such heroes with another group of agents, as far as I can tell no less deserving of the title but who come by their heroism differently. Take for example a recent and talented college graduate who, instead of pursuing her dream career, instead seeks employment based on the single criterion of remuneration so that she can donate as much money as possible to charity.\(^ {116}\) She does this because she has thought through the global distribution of wealth, read arguments about moral duties of the affluent, and

\(^ {114}\) ‘Anticipation’ is unhelpfully vague, of course. It could mean, as I take it to, a mere awareness. On the other hand, it could also denote something more robust, including something like a motivation. Understood this way, Zimbardo’s condition is much more in keeping with my view.

\(^ {115}\) Rescuers during the Holocaust, whose actions in many cases were ongoing for long periods and which certainly involved no small amount of deliberation in most cases are nonetheless typically spontaneous heroes in the sense specified above.

\(^ {116}\) See Matthews (2013) for some actual examples of this type of agent.
researched effective aid. Her heroic actions are the result of an argument she has found persuasive.

The point of making this distinction is not to identify greater and lesser kinds of heroism, but to limit my focus to spontaneous heroes. The first reason for this is that the requirement claim in the case of deliberate heroes is not especially in need of an explanation – it’s the conclusion of an argument. It’s in the spontaneous heroes that the consistent appearance of the requirement claim calls out for an account.117 The second reason for this is that I want to be able to address arguments that seek to use the requirement claim to establish moral duties to do the heroic,118 and these arguments would be uncharitably empty if the requirement claim itself were just the conclusion of other arguments. I turn now to the task of accounting for the requirement claim in acts of spontaneous moral heroism.

5.3 | URMSONIAN ERROR THEORY

Urmson (1958) launched the category of supererogatory actions in part through his assertion that when heroes claim of their heroic actions that the latter were required, we can understand their claim as an instance of false modesty. Claiming ‘only’ to have done what was needed is on this view a way of graciously deflecting the awkward light of praise. The social need for false modesty generally can hardly be disputed – singing one’s own praises is typically not viewed favorably, and merely echoing back praises as they are

117 In what follows, all references to the requirement claim will assume that a spontaneous rather than deliberative hero is under discussion. What I propose as an account of the requirement claim, therefore, is not an account of moral heroism more generally. For support for the idea that there are multiple paths to moral heroism, see Walker, et al. (2010).

118 See Hale (1991, p. 279) and Carbonell (2012) for example.
sung to you is too close to the same thing to fail to raise eyebrows. By invoking a duty that she was merely fulfilling, the hero is able to close the uncomfortable gap in moral status that has opened up between her and her admirers and restore social parity. The label I give this view is as much a matter of inspiration as attribution; here is the relevant moment from Urmson, which comes in the context of discussing a soldier who throws himself on a live grenade in order to spare his fellows: “But if he were to survive the action only a modesty so excessive as to appear false could make him say, ‘I only did my duty,’ for we know, and he knows, that he has done more than duty requires” (p.203). As will become clear, there is an important sense in which I will argue Urmson is right. But the view I present as inspired by Urmson here does nothing to retrieve a sense in which the requirement claim might be true, whereas my view does. It is for this reason that it makes sense to call the view presented in this section an error theory – it dismisses as systematically unfounded the kind of claim in question by explaining all utterances of it away as something like false modesty rather than as an assertion in need of some other explanation. So I call the view ‘Urmsonian Error Theory.’

Some forms of the requirement claim might be readily interpreted along these lines. Consider one such formulation: “I did nothing unusual; anyone would have done the same thing in my place” (Oliner & Oliner, 1992, p. 113). This expression is quite explicit in setting everyone on the same moral footing, and so it’s especially plausible here that its function is to do just that. Moreover, at least on many occasions, it seems the speaker must surely know that many other people would not have done as she did. Unless the last phrase, ‘in my place’ is construed to include lots of particular information about the identity of the speaker (such as her background, upbringing, etc.), it stands a good
chance of being plainly false and of being known to be false by the speaker. So it seems that this way of making the requirement claim is a good candidate to be explained away as an instance of false modesty. Having got that far, the explanation can be extended to interpretively more challenging instances of the requirement claim.

This explanation can be supplemented by noting that some kind of false modesty is so commonly associated with acts of heroism that it’s become a trope. Here’s an analogy: in the normal course of playing, a huge proportion of tennis players say the phrase ‘come on’, often to themselves. This includes a huge proportion of non-English speaking tennis players. One might wonder how this came to be. The answer, it seems, is that they learned it from watching other tennis players. It’s just something serious players do at certain moments, and so when aspiring players become serious players, they know how to act in this regard. When someone like Carlos Arredondo is interviewed by major media outlets after his heroic actions at the Boston Marathon, he likely comes to the interview with a thorough understanding of the narrative his story will be made to fit for purposes of news consumption, and he knows what his role in giving the interview is. And so when he says that he was only doing his duty, he’s really just playing his part – to take him to be making a serious contention about the deontic nature of his action would be to misinterpret what’s really happening.

119 Of course, if ‘anyone in my place’ is construed in such a way so as to make it tantamount to ‘anyone who was me’, then the expression would become vapid.
120 See Koblin (2013).
121 The idea that the requirement claim is a trope tied up with a popular understanding of heroic comportment may find some support in the idea of ‘scripts’ from psychology – general conceptions of kinds of events that generate expectations. See Allison & Goethals (2011), p. 69. There the idea is that we have hero scripts that structure our expectations, and those, I suggest here, may include something like the requirement claim.
Urmsonian error theory casts other instances of the requirement claim as mere misapprehensions. What seemed to be a requirement in the heat of the moment was seen to be no such thing in cooler reflection.\textsuperscript{122}

Finally, there is one more important phase of deflationary explanation of the requirement claim. Heroic actions are often a kind of trauma – not infrequently they involve tremendous danger for the hero, haunting risk for loved ones. Having subjected your children, for example, to the risk of being part of a rescuer family in the Holocaust, you might well experience some pretty complicated psychology in the aftermath.\textsuperscript{123} Retrospectively positing a requirement might be a welcome way of coping with your choices. The requirement claim takes on the aspect of a post hoc rationalization for something that can no longer otherwise be countenanced, and is thus explained away as a dramatic instance of cognitive dissonance.

Urmsonian error theory is at least an explanation – it’s better than a response that simply discards the requirement claim as so much noise dressed up in words. But it has more or less the same dismissive effect. The principal challenge for the deflationary response is that it is very hard to believe that its deflating explanations successfully address every case. I address the phases of explanation in turn.

We can start by noting that extending the false modesty interpretation from certain instances of the requirement claim (‘anyone would have done it’) to the rest will be challenging.\textsuperscript{124} It doesn’t exactly eliminate a social distance between the hero and the

\textsuperscript{122} See Urmson (1958, p. 203).
\textsuperscript{123} See Galston (1993) for an argument that exposing loved ones to risk by rescuing is morally dubious.
\textsuperscript{124} Rejecting the false modesty explanation implies nothing about whether modesty is fitting for heroes. Even if modesty – or at least reluctance to self-aggrandize – is fitting of heroes, it doesn’t follow that modesty is what the requirement claim is basically about.
ordinary folks around her to assert that she was simply doing what needed to be done or only doing her duty when the rest of us were standing around *not* doing those things. It’s also true that whether the act was the fulfillment of a duty or not seems not really to affect our appreciation of it as heroic. So the modesty the requirement claim is supposed to express seems not to be served by the assertion, since even if the action were understood as required, we’d still admire it.

But we also don’t have to grant that the seemingly easy cases are transparently susceptible to the false modesty explanation. When heroes say ‘anyone would have done it’, it’s true they can’t mean ‘just anyone’, because plainly enough lots of people would not have done it, and it’s true they can’t mean ‘anyone who was me’. But there’s something in the middle they can mean without disingenuousness – ‘anyone who shares my point of view, anyone who has spent time in places where people suffer, anyone who finds herself in relatively rude health, unassailed by self-doubt or a weak will would have done it’. Of the reluctant or otherwise inactive bystanders, the hero will, in saying this, be committed to finding some salient difference.\textsuperscript{125}

The point about tropes similarly fails to cover much ground. There are surely cases of heroism without an expected audience, when it’s less tempting to suppose that there are sufficient cues for the agent to take on the role of hero. It should also be said that the script, such as it is, won’t have reached everyone before their performance. Whereas a trend in tennis can take off because aspiring tennis players all watch the same professional tournaments, there’s nothing nearly so widespread and consistent consumed by people who end up heroes. So even if in some cases of heroism the hero assumes a role

\textsuperscript{125} See (Walker, et al., 2010) for one elaboration of such differences.
and reads the lines instead of reporting on their action, for many heroes it won’t be
plausible to say that when they make the requirement claim they are only acting out their
part.

This brings us to the contention of a misapprehension by the hero in the heat of
the moment: “Subjectively, we may say, at the time of the action, the deed presented itself
as a duty, but it was not a duty” (Urmson, 1958, 203). But the requirement claim as it is
actually made usually occurs at some remove from the act itself, and it typically reflects
the agent’s later attitude as much as the presentation of the action. For that matter, what
the requirement claim amounts to is not only a description of how acting felt, but also a
considered conviction about the status of the act. A further problem with the contention
that the hero *incorrectly* concludes that she is required to perform the heroic act is that
construing heroic agents as acting under a misapprehension of this sort implausibly
diminishes their heroic appeal. Even when delusions spur people on to good, the fact they
are laboring under delusions casts their actions in a curious light, one in which our
admiration mingles with something akin to pity. To the extent that the latter attitude isn’t
generally part of our view of heroes, we should be reluctant to characterize the
requirement claim as a simple mistake.

But the fact that the requirement claim typically comes in cooler moments does
not make it invulnerable to the covert workings of cognitive dissonance, the last phase of
explanation in Urmsonian error theory. Although I will not deny that dissonance theory
may be an apt explanation of some instances of the requirement claim, just like the other
phases of explanation discussed above, it seems to fail as a general explanation. There are
two principal reasons for this. First, although the requirement claim includes a claim
about the normative status of an action, it also includes the descriptive claim of a felt
requirement in the agent’s experience at the time of acting. While dissonance theory might predict a post hoc rationalization recasting the normative status of the action so as to alleviate the psychological burden of having chosen something terrifying or otherwise unpleasant, it’s a strain on the theory to also predict the wholesale retrospective invention of a state of mind at the time of acting. Yet even if dissonance theory is able to withstand the strain, we’ll be left to wonder why the agent acted as she did: after all, if even the feeling of requiredness the agent reports is only a post hoc posit to further alleviate the psychological wreckage of heroism, the questions of why the agent acted as she did and how she managed to bring herself to do so – questions that the feeling of requirement helped to answer – return, unanswered.126

Error theories are by nature ambitious, and they carry a heavy burden of proof as a result. Ultimately it seems that Urmsonian error theory’s deflationary explanation of the requirement claim leaves some buoyant remainders, cases where heroes coolly and without regard for the dangers of glory assert of their actions that they were required. Urmsonian error theory fails to take seriously this consistent feature of moral heroism, unwarrantedly discarding rather than really explaining part of the phenomenon of heroism. So if the phenomenon can be explained rather than explained away, that would be theoretically preferable.

5.4 | HEROISM AS A MORAL DUTY

126 To be clear, rather than attempting an explanation of heroic behavior, I aim to offer an account of the requirement claim. But insofar as an account of the requirement claim will be helpful in mounting an explanation of heroic behavior, explaining the requirement claim away deprives us of that help.
Occupying the opposite pole from Urmsonian error theory is the view that treats the requirement claim as a moment of genuine insight subsequently reported by the agent. In direct contrast to deflationary explanations, this view credits heroes with correctly apprehending that their actions were in fact required, in the sense of falling under a moral duty.

In offering this view, we should be careful to distinguish between general moral duties that every agent has and special moral duties that some agents incur, often voluntarily. Not infrequently, heroic actions are performed by people who occupy some official position of responsibility or authority. It is especially commonplace to call someone a hero who has precisely chosen such a position. Soldiers, firefighters, police officers, other first responders – their heroic actions are especially good candidates to come under the heading of a moral duty because of the roles they have (let us assume) willingly taken on. But in these cases, it would be a special duty, one not shared by people who are not soldiers, firefighters, etc. While many heroic acts are indeed performed by the people who occupy these roles, many are not. For that reason, the heroic duty view, as I’ll call it, may not rest with pointing toward special moral duties to sustain the requirement claim. If it is to vindicate the requirement claim, the heroic duty view must cite a general moral duty.\(^{127}\)

There are a number of candidate duties under which heroic actions could be subsumed, but a single kind of duty is usually brought in to cover the lion’s share. Whether they’re of a utilitarian, Rossian or Kantian variety, duties of beneficence might encompass many heroic actions and account for the requirement claim made in connection with them. So on the heroic duty view, the scope of widely accepted duties is

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argued to include heroic acts, to ground the truth of the requirement claim and to explain its frequency. The requirement claim is, on this view, a moment of moral revelation.

The heroic moral duty view is inadequate to the phenomenon of the requirement claim, and this shortcoming is visible in at least two ways. The requirement claim sometimes appears like something that a moral duty would neatly explain and make true: Carlos Arredondo says, of his rushing into the smoke and debris in Boston, that he ‘did [his] duty’. But even if there are some easy interpretations, there are some that won’t be easy. In fact, the moral duty hypothesis is sometimes nearly explicitly rejected by moral heroes. Consider the following two cases from Kristen Monroe:

“‘One thing is important…I never made a moral decision to rescue Jews…I felt I had to do it’” (1996, p. 210).

“Q. Do you consider it to be your duty to help someone in difficulties, even if that exposes you or people who are close to you to danger?

A. This is a strange question. At that time, one had quite another attitude than at the present prosperous time. We were simply much more welded together, we and our Jewish friends. We knew they needed us” (1996, p. 204).

Later, Monroe remarks, “The altruists I interviewed rejected… the importance of moral reasoning. They suggested not that the conscience wins out over the baser passions but rather that altruists’ view of themselves in relation to others is so central a factor in their altruism that such a debate never even arises” (1996, p. 212).

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128 I note here that Arredondo was a one-time firefighter and an evacuator of wounded bullfighters (see Fahrenthold (2013)), and as such may be interpreted as citing something more like what I have called a special duty than a general duty.
What these reports point toward is the first difficulty the heroic duty view faces in accounting for the experiential aspect of the requirement claim. To feel of an action that it is required without having come to a conclusion to that effect will be hard to explain merely by citing the pertinent moral duty. Especially in cases of moral heroes who are otherwise not committed to the idea of moral duty, the felt requirement will be very much an anomaly if all there is to explain it is a moral duty.

The second glimpse of the inadequacy of the heroic duty view comes upon seeing that the requirement claim is frequently not represented as something that generalizes. Some form of generalizability is arguably an essential feature of moral duty, yet the requirement claim is often issued together with a policy of non-reproach toward the bystanders who did not do as the hero did.

One possible response here is to claim that what I call non-reproach is actually clemency. The idea is that heroes actually do see their actions as fulfilling a moral duty which others are also subject to, but view the failures of others with leniency. The leniency is called for because bystanders have an excuse – they don’t share crucial traits

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129 I have already mentioned Oskar Schindler – but really, it should be quite straightforward to establish that many acts of moral heroism are one-off in nature, and the agent that performs them could be in all sorts of ways flawed, uncommitted to morality or even corrupt.

130 Rejecting the heroic duty view on the grounds that it is inadequate to the experience of performing the act does not entail that we are not in fact under duties to perform heroic rescues. We might be – those arguments have to be sounded out (as one kind is below). The argument here just means that positing such moral duties is a bad way to account for the requirement claim, and as such, the latter should not be admitted as part of an argument that seeks to establish heroic duties. For one example of such an argument, see Hale (1991).

131 Or at least of what I am calling (after all) ‘general’ moral duties.

132 See Monroe (1996, p. 86) for example.
the heroes enjoy. What this response misses about the requirement claim is how personal it often is: the proposition it expresses is as much ‘I have to do this’ as it is ‘I have to do this’. This emphasis on the personal nature of the entanglement shows up in a number of ways: as a focus on oneself rather than the recipient of heroic aid, as a special kind of private achievement, or as a way of honoring especially dear aspects of personal history.

Finally, the heroic duty view of the requirement claim embraces a problematically demanding vision of morality. Consider again the actions in the examples of the requirement claim at the outset: one agent sheltered Jewish refugees from merciless persecutors in the context of one of the most dehumanizing conflicts in human history. The other ran toward the smoke, chaos and debris that followed utterly unexpected explosions, found a man who had already lost one leg in the blast and had injured the other so badly that he was ultimately to lose it as well, and wheeled him to safety. These actions, involving both considerable risk and hardship, are saliently not like pulling children from shallow ponds. Even as the debate about the very idea of a demandingness problem in moral theory continues, most of the debate excludes heroism of this kind from our moral requirements. Although this is just to reiterate rather than offer further support for the claim that moral theory must be attentive to the sacrifices it requires, heroic sacrifice provides an especially good illustration of how rejecting the

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133 For example, see Flescher (2003, p. 141). To further support the argument here, Flescher turns to the case of rescuers who seem not to view bystanders with clemency. While it must surely be admitted that there are such cases, the ones Flescher supplies involve blaming others who are not mere bystanders, but collaborators in genocide (see also Kohen (2010)). The explanation for moral reproach in these cases, then, needn’t have much to do with failing to be heroic.

134 See Monroe (1996) at p. 238, p. 150 and p. 90, respectively.

135 See Singer (1972).

136 See Unger (1996) for an apparent exception.
possibility of a forceful demandingness objection makes of morality an implausible, monstrous thing.\textsuperscript{137}

5.5 | Practical Necessity

Earlier I suggested that one way of sorting responses to the requirement claim was to chart their answers to the following two questions: is there a sense in which heroic acts were in fact required of the agent, and are they required of the rest of us? Urmsonian error theory answers both questions negatively, whereas the heroic duty view answers both affirmatively. I have argued that neither sort of response is satisfactory. Heroes and ordinary folks have customarily been pitted against one another in such a way that these two questions could not be answered differently: whereas heroes assert the requirement claim, ordinary folks deny it. One of the groups must be wrong.\textsuperscript{138} But this is a false dilemma.\textsuperscript{139}

\textsuperscript{137} One possible response here is that there are kinds of duty that won’t be too demanding. In the context of the debate about the category of supererogation, for example, some Kantians (see Baron (1995), Hale (1991) and Hill, Jr. (1992)), arguing against the category, deploy the concept of imperfect duty in a similar vein. But I think the move to invoke imperfect duties won’t save the heroic duty view as a response to the requirement claim. The feature of imperfect duties that makes it plausible that they are not systematically excessively demanding is the latitude they allow agents in pursuing them. So if the imperfect duty of beneficence, for example, is actually a duty to adopt a maxim to the effect of promoting the ends of others, it seems not, with respect to any particular action, to issue a requirement in the way duties customarily do. The problem with this move is that what gains it produces in tamping down demands are offset by losses in descriptive adequacy. For the requirement claim does claim, of a particular action, that it was required.


\textsuperscript{139} The other possible combination, denying that heroic actions are required of heroes but asserting they are required of the rest of us, seems to be an unmotivated, unappealing and unoccupied position.
Consider Kristin Renwick Monroe (1996) nearing her conclusion after extensive interviews with moral heroes: “[The heroes’] perspective, their view of themselves as part of all humanity, constitutes such a central core to their identity that it leaves them the sense that they have no choice but to aid others in need” (p. 213). This assertion, widely echoed in the literature on heroes, posits something like an enlarged sense of solidarity, an enhanced capacity for empathy, such that heroes tend to take ownership of the suffering of others in a way that excludes non-helping options. The phenomenon, thus understood, sounds much less like apprehending a moral duty and much more like what Bernard Williams (1981) called ‘practical necessity’. Here I briefly introduce the concept of practical necessity before arguing for its promise in this context: it can furnish a sense of requirement that is faithful to both the experience of performing a heroic action and the subsequent claim about the status of the action. Moreover, the sense of requirement it furnishes is not one we would normally expect all agents to be subject to. This means that it is possible to sustain this sense in which heroic actions are required while also maintaining, as I do, that there are limits on the sacrifices morality may require.

Williams’s understanding of practical necessity reflected what he took to be a common experience of simply having only one real option, despite the apparent existence of alternatives.\textsuperscript{140} The emergence of a single option in these cases, whether because a single option proves necessary or because all but one option prove impossible,\textsuperscript{141} is the result not of a merely decisive balance of reasons or a settled preference; instead, features

\textsuperscript{140} See Gay (1989, p. 551). I am concerned with uncommon instances of practical necessity (heroic ones), but nothing about that focus is incompatible with the commonality of practical necessity as a part of agential experience.

\textsuperscript{141} See Williams (1980, p. 127).
of the agent’s character\textsuperscript{142} structure deliberation such that necessity sometimes attaches to some options:

We are subject to the model that what one can do sets the limits to deliberation, and that character is revealed by what one chooses within those limits, among the things that one can do. But character…is equally revealed in the location of those limits, and in the very fact that one can determine, sometimes through deliberation itself, that one cannot do certain things, and must do others. Incapacities can not only set limits to character and provide conditions of it, but can also partly constitute its substance (Williams, 1980, p. 130).

Being the person one is means that some apparently possible actions will sometimes be unthinkable,\textsuperscript{143} just as failing to act may also be made impossible by one’s character.

The sense of impossibility invoked here needs some explaining. Williams is keen to keep the modal force of practical necessity on the same footing as literal, physical impossibility. In this vein, he aphoristically notes the absence of vocabulary to speak of the relevant kind of non-compliance: “Nothing stands to the practical \textit{must as ought to have stands to ought}” (1981, p. 128). We can look back at errors in morality and rationality and rue that what we did was not what we ought to have done. But for Williams, there is no counterfactual perspective we can occupy with respect to what is for us practically necessary. If there were, that would just show that the proposed behavior was not in fact necessary at all. For Williams, practical necessity is grounded in character.\textsuperscript{144} But it would only be fair to point out that we change over time, and so it seems also only fair to insist that we might change at a time – so if the necessity stems from character, and if character can change, then practical necessity seems to be necessity only metaphorically. The worry

\textsuperscript{142} I mean to construe this as broadly as possible, so that it includes all aspects of identity – traits, dispositions, but also commitments, projects, cultivated talents, etc.

\textsuperscript{143} Robert Gay uses the term ‘unreal’ to describe apparent alternatives to practically necessary actions (1989, p. 555). Harry Frankfurt, in connection with the similar notion of ‘volitional necessity’ discussed briefly in chapter 3 and below, also describes apparent alternatives as unthinkable (1999, p. 111).

\textsuperscript{144} See Williams (1985, p. 223, fn. 16). See also Van Hooft (1988, pp. 349-352).
is that the raw materials of human character are a poor foundation for strong modal claims.

In response to this worry, I first note the limits on our capacity for change – in most cases, there are stable aspects of our identities that could ground a quite robust kind of necessity in any given moment of acting. Practical necessity is only as durable as the character that generates it, and just as character is only acquired and developed over time, it might also change over time. What is practically necessary for an agent now may not have been several years before and may not be several years hence. But it can still show up with a distinctively modal force now. Harry Frankfurt (1999) reaches a similar conclusion with respect to the possibility of changes in which courses of action exhibit volitional necessity over time. Frankfurt’s notion of volitional necessity is not simply Williams’s practical necessity by a different name – but the differences needn’t detain us here. In each case, the primary concern is the way in which features of someone’s identity could make it the case that some courses of action become necessary or impossible. The idea in both cases is that a tie between an agent and a given course of

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146 See p. 112 and p. 136.
147 As we saw in chapter 3, Frankfurt’s notion is explicitly connected to a technical notion of love, which is closely tied to notions of identification and meaning that were crucial to my arguments there concerning the possibility of sacrifices that were, despite being sacrifices, good for the sacrificing agent. We can now also connect those points to the current discussion of practical necessity: many sacrifices performed with practical necessity might turn out to be good for the sacrificing agent, not least because being the sort of person for whom some sacrifices are practically necessary is the only way of achieving a certain kind of meaning for one’s life. Williams’s notion of practical necessity is tied less narrowly to love as a species of caring about something than Frankfurt’s volitional necessity, and although an unusual capacity for empathy in moral heroes might turn out to be a very nice example of caring about others, it seems there are other relevant features of the characters of moral heroes (a tendency to form redemptive narratives with respect to their own past suffering, for example (see Walker, et al. (2010))) that might also be importantly tied to the way they come to feel and be bound to act. This is one reason I have chosen to emphasize practical necessity over volitional necessity.
action can be of the strongest, necessitating kind. But since the various aspects of our identities that give rise to the necessity are subject to change, what’s necessary for a given agent now may not be later. A qualification Frankfurt imposes on this concession is that the way the relevant changes take place is unlikely to have been strongly orchestrated by the exercise of the agent’s own will, since it is, of course, that very will that is under the necessitating influence. The changes in character that produce shifts in genuine volitional necessity, therefore, might take place naturally (or perhaps, from the agent’s perspective, passively) or indirectly as the result of successful efforts the agent makes to become a different kind of person. So the fact of change in human character over time is not incompatible with a necessitating power with respect to discrete actions rooted in that character.

However, I also allow that it may be possible for one to fail to do what was for him practically necessary even at a given moment, but only with serious violence to one’s sense of oneself.\textsuperscript{148} So in Williams’s aphorism, I propose that as ‘ought to have’ stands to ‘ought’, the closest thing for ‘must’ would be ‘how could I?’, or perhaps better, ‘who am I?’ Here is Williams again: “Conclusions of practical necessity seriously arrived at in serious matters are indeed the paradigm of what one takes responsibility for. That is connected with the fact that they constitute, to a greater or lesser degree, discoveries about oneself” (1981, p. 130). Just as arriving at a practical necessity is a way of discovering something about oneself, somehow flouting practical necessity is a way of destroying what had been discovered, or indeed a way of becoming something else.\textsuperscript{149} For practical necessity to earn its keep as a variety of necessity, these instances should be rare.

\textsuperscript{148} See Badhwar (1993) for a related discussion on the aftermath of failing to do something that one judges necessary to do.

but they seem undeniably possible. Whereas change over time was allowed as a source of changes in necessity above, I am now suggesting that occasionally the same variety of change might take place at a time. The violence to one’s sense of oneself that would accompany any such occasion might manifest in a kind of alienation, or, if the changes aren’t durable or subsequently endorsed, shame.\(^{150}\)

Rather than voicing moral duty or an illusion, I contend that the requirement claim is best understood as expressing practical necessity.\(^{151}\) This view furnishes us with a sound account of the experiential dimension of the requirement claim: the question of why heroes persevere through trying circumstances is well answered when they say they had no choice.\(^{152}\) The later endorsement of the judgment typical of the requirement claim

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\(^{150}\) See Frankfurt (1999), p. 170 for a discussion of the aftermath of breaking with volitional necessity as distinct but similar to failing in moral obligations. By saying that failing in a case of practical necessity one will have done violence to oneself, I don’t mean to beg the question of whether this is always a bad thing. Indeed, I think it’s possible for vile character to produce practical necessity that is morally really undesirable, and violence to that character would be an instance of overcoming and triumph rather than a sudden descent into depravity. This is a departure from the tone taken by both Williams and Frankfurt, who systematically take up the issuances of practical and volitional necessity as being supremely important to the good of the agent, almost as if authenticity were the true rock bottom of value.

\(^{151}\) Williams seems to have had a rather more ambitious aim for the concept of practical necessity – namely, it figured into an argument against ‘the morality system’ by explaining away some of the territory purportedly covered by moral obligation (see Williams (1985) and Van Hooft (1988, p. 345)). In proposing practical necessity as an account of the requirement claim, I remain uncommitted to the rest of Williams’s project.

\(^{152}\) Cf. Furrow (1998, p. 213). Combined with the view of moral heroism that features sacrifices for others, the practical necessity view of the requirement claim complicates the open alternative condition for sacrifice, elaborated in chapter two. There are three possible things to say here: first, sacrifices that come as a result of practical necessity may be non-paradigmatic in just that sense, without failing to be sacrifices altogether. Second, I do allow, above, that breaks from practical necessity are possible. Finally, we could revise the condition offered in chapter two to reflect the fact that in these cases it is something about the agent’s character that closes alternatives rather than events in the world unfolding in such a way so as to present an agent with only a single option. This would doubtless be a difficult distinction to make, but perhaps not impossible.
is also what we would expect, barring the rare case of a major break in the interim.\footnote{153} Additionally, the practical necessity view allows that the normative status dimension of the requirement claim is importantly true: there is a real sense in which the heroic agent was indeed required to act as she did.\footnote{154} Given the failures of deflationary explanations, this is the theoretically preferable outcome.

Finally, the practical necessity view manages to sustain the requirement claim without creating a problem of demandingness. Since the requirement on this view is not a general moral duty, but instead a deeply personal fact, a hero’s utterance of the requirement claim doesn’t necessarily have implications for the rest of us. The heroic character, we have some reason to believe, isn’t one that most of us inhabit. This allows us to hold that moral theory faces limits on the sacrifices it requires while also saying it is true that heroes are in some sense required to act as they do, including even making their heroic sacrifices. So practical necessity doesn’t create generalizable grounds for problematic demands. And in the case of the heroic agent, since what is demanded of her is also demanded by her, it’s not clear that there is distinctive cause for demandingness complaint.


\footnote{154} My goal here has not been to settle the question of whether there are any supererogatory actions, even though the first two responses to the requirement claim I consider in this chapter are more or less proxy warfare for that conflict. Since heroic actions are frequently held as paradigmatic instances of supererogation, explaining away the requirement claim is to argue for the existence of the category, while positing a duty is to argue against it. But notice I throw out both of those responses – and with respect to the question of supererogation, this is confusing. To the extent that I say the heroic acts aren’t covered by a duty (even an imperfect one), it seems I at least leave the door open to such a category. But to the extent that I ultimately argue for a non-deflationary explanation of the requirement claim, it’s hard to say just how open that door really is.
A final question to entertain is whether we ought to try to cultivate the kinds of character that would produce morally heroic practical necessity. A necessary prequel to that question is an examination of the extent to which heroism is something that can be willfully cultivated. There are outspoken optimists with respect to this challenge. Philip Zimbardo, for example, has founded the Heroic Imagination Project on the premise that it is possible, at least, to become more heroic.\textsuperscript{155} He even adduces the requirement claim as a piece of evidence that heroes are ordinary people, not unlike the rest of us. The invited inference is that it would not be so hard for the non-heroes among us to accomplish what the heroes do, since they are not so different than us.\textsuperscript{156} For Zimbardo – in some ways the arch situationist – the optimism for growth in the hero population is also founded on the idea that creating more heroes is more a matter of social engineering than character development.

I’ll mention two problems with Zimbardo’s position before conceding that psychology hasn’t found a consensus view on cultivating moral heroism. So while I think there are good reasons to hesitate at Zimbardo’s optimism, both the existence of gaps between us and heroes and the possibility of bridging them remain contentious. The first problem with Zimbardo’s view is the ambition of situationism. Heroism is rare – it may be partly defined by being an exception rather than the rule. If everyone made what would formerly have been heroic sacrifices, it’s not clear there’d be anything heroic about it. Whether because of this conceptual point or through happenstance, moral heroism tends to consist of actions that most people wouldn’t have performed, and often enough it consists of an action that many people – right there, right then – didn’t perform, despite

\textsuperscript{155} See http://heroicimagination.org/.
\textsuperscript{156} See Zimbardo (2007) p. 443.
being in the same situation as the heroic agent. We needn’t deny that situations contribute to determining human behavior, including heroic behavior. But it seems hard to deny that individual differences also make contributions. Several studies already cited in this chapter suggest that we can identify some such differences as character traits – enhanced capacity for empathy and solidarity, a tendency to view past hardship within a redemptive narrative, optimism with respect to one’s own efficacy.\textsuperscript{157} Whether the relevant traits are susceptible to systematic cultivation regardless of differences in native dispositions is then a question Zimbardo agrees can’t be answered affirmatively at present.\textsuperscript{158}

The second problem, in any event, is that Zimbardo and fellow optimists consistently conflate heroism and what I somewhat reluctantly call mere altruism. Recall that the distinction, I have suggested, is to be located somewhere in the seriousness of sacrifices the agent makes. An agent who jumps onto the tracks in front of an oncoming train to help a hapless person who’s fallen there isn’t just being altruistic. She’s not merely making a small donation to a local charity or helping a stranger change a flat tire on the side of a road. The conflation here is partly strategic: celebrating altruism as heroism is potentially a good way to promote altruism, an important goal. But when empirical support is marshaled to establish the possibility of cultivating altruism, optimists run into trouble on both fronts – on the one hand, the evidence doesn’t extend to truly heroic sacrifice rather than the more mundane actions of mere altruism. And on the other, since a prominent grounds for optimism in cultivating altruistic dispositions features the way altruistic behavior produces pleasure such that if we just tried it we’d likely find we

\textsuperscript{157} See Walker & Frimer (2007).
enjoyed it, there’s a worry that a lot of apparent altruism wouldn’t turn out to be altruistic at all, or at least that it wouldn’t entail acting in a way that constituted a sacrifice.159

But even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that we can successfully cultivate the kinds of character that would eventuate in heroic practical necessity, it’s not clear that we should, and only less clear that we have a duty to do so. If morally requiring heroic sacrifice is not tenable, morally requiring us to become the sort of person for whom engaging in heroic sacrifice is practically necessary will only be less tenable.

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159 See Svoboda (2013) for a popular review of prominent efforts to promulgate heroism. I note here that we may well find that low-level altruism is still rightly understood as such and plausibly does consist in making sacrifices despite the pleasure gained for reasons discussed in chapter 3 in connection with the winning-by-losing puzzle. But some apparently altruistic actions might be harder to argue as involving sacrifice, if, for example, the $2 you were going to spend on candy is diverted instead to someone in need (with a guiding intention and motive of helping them). If the act of giving produces pleasure, it might be difficult to draw the necessary distinctions between that pleasure and the kind of pleasure you might have gotten by eating candy such that the loss is vindicated without being compensated for.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


