

Avoiding Teacher “Martyrdumb:” Sagely Supererogating at School

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Performing more work than duty requires to positively affect the academic achievement and life chances of students (supererogating at school) sometimes seems to be a standard society sets for all teachers.¹ We see this expectation expressed in a variety of ways in teachers’ work lives. It is estimated that teachers make over 1,500 decisions in an average workday—about 4 decisions per minute—as they fulfill job requirements such as teaching classes, dealing with work-related emails, participating in school meetings, mulling over curricular materials and instructional strategies, grading student work, and carrying on classroom management. On top of this, or as part of it, teachers are also expected to make their students feel a sense of engagement, care, and enjoyment at school. The stress of these job requirements and the expectation to be extraordinary that accompanies them may cause teachers to experience decision fatigue, a sort of mental stress that can make persons unwilling to continue making up their minds about matters presented to them. Teachers also find little support for going above and beyond at work. Every teacher whose school has what is often called a “Teacher’s Choice” program is aware that the few hundred dollars provided by the program to support classroom enhancements are likely to be as exhausted as the teachers themselves long before the school year ends.² Some teachers work in schools where supererogation is treated as a norm for school faculty. In these contexts, principals apply pressure on faculty to engage in “citizenship behaviors” in the form of extracurricular activities in support of the school and in support of the organizations in the community surrounding the school.³ Representation of teachers in popular culture follows a similar trend. Barbara Beyerbach’s study of films from the past several decades revealed teachers typically portrayed as civilizing agents in the unruly world of public schools. For the most part, cinematic treatments of teachers focus on young, idealistic, hardworking educators who routinely go beyond requirements of their jobs to improve students’ school lives or extra-school lives. However,

these teachers are also, tragically, except for a few miracle workers who beat the odds, drawn as martyrs of losing struggles and lost causes.⁴

Scholarly examples supporting this popular idea about teachers, via the idea of the teacher’s calling/vocation, span more than a century of commentary on teaching. Writing in 1884, T. J. Morgan offered his view on the profession of teaching and found in it an endeavor dealing with activating powers of the soul and developing character in human beings. Morgan advised that teaching be seen not primarily in terms of effort exerted in the here and now but as hours important for eternity.⁵ Some twenty-five years later, distinguishing between a calling and a trade, William H. P. Faunce identified teaching as a calling. He argues a trade is an occupation into which anyone may go just to earn a living. However, a calling is a vocation into which only those with a spirit for public service may go and only after prolonged study and self-reflection. “Trade,” he says, “is that which knows only the ethics of success, profession is that in which motive and ideal count more than any visible result.”⁶ More than one hundred years after these observations about teaching, the idea that teaching is a calling requiring supererogation remains strong. In a case study of three “excellent” teachers, States M. McCarter found that all three “shared a common trait – they were willing to spend the time required to develop the potential in their students.”⁷ After conducting their own case studies of teachers at work, Anne Game and Andrew Metcalf made McCarter’s point in metaphysical mood stating that the teaching they observed expressed a kind of love; and, “Love is based not on finite subjects and objects existing in Euclidean space and linear time, but, rather, on a non-finite ontology, the space and time of relations. Loving authority is a matter of calling and vocation, arising from the spontaneous and simultaneous call-and-response of a lively relation.”⁸

As lively as the teacher-student relation can be, it can also be deadening for teachers. First, when supererogation becomes a routine expectation of teacher job performance, teachers become vulnerable to exploitation by administrators. Administrators may try to use the sense of calling among their faculty as an antidote to valid workplace disillusionment and justified disaffection. In such circumstances, asking too much of teachers becomes professionally

debilitating.⁹ Second, when some teachers in a school seem routinely happy to supererogate, their actions put pressure on colleagues to do the same. Those declining supererogative forms of caring and kindness leave themselves open to sharp moral criticism from students, colleagues, and supervisors.¹⁰ David T. Hansen summarizes the moral dilemmas presented by supererogation in the educational workplace by saying it is *because* teaching is widely perceived to be not merely an attitude, idea or feeling of commitment, but a mode of being enacted through practice that teachers must be protected from undue social demands.¹¹ The trick, of course, is to give an account of social demands considered “undue” that is broadly independent of personal taste.

Certainly, James O. Urmsom set a solid negative limitation to supererogation when he argued self-preservation is the cutoff point between duty and going above and beyond duty.¹² Anyone faced with a situation suggesting the need for supererogation should think very deeply and seriously about whether there is more moral reason to sacrifice themselves than there is to play it safe and not exceed duty.¹³ Fortunately, Urmson’s strict criterion does not typically apply to teachers presented with the choice to supererogate at work. Supererogation is typically a much less open-ended concept when applied to school contexts in which teachers are considering going above and beyond the duties included in job descriptions.¹⁴ That is not to say teachers cannot be faced with life-or-death situations at work. It is only to say that, in the normal course of events at school, teachers rarely find themselves in situations where they are called upon to trade their lives for those of their students. Besides, Archer calls into question the common assumption that supererogation requires self-sacrifice. On the more positive side of setting limits to supererogation, Alfred Archer suggests that some supererogative acts may better position a person either materially by improving the supererogator’s own life circumstances and/or by making the person who does more than required by canons of ethical obligation a more complete moral agent.¹⁵

Aristotle gives some insight into what may be meant by a person becoming a more complete moral agent. If we understand Aristotle as offering an ethic of intra and interpersonal integration according to which the pursuit

of happiness (*eudaimonia*) for a moral agent consists largely in the application of a process of rationality to the construction of that moral agent’s ethical life, then we create the opportunity to talk about a theory of the *eudaimonia* of the moral agent: what it means for a moral agent to thrive.¹⁶ No longer must we talk, with Aristotle, about what it means to be fully human. Instead, we can turn our attention to what an individual must do to be considered fully moral. A reconstruction of Aristotle’s function argument lays out the sorts of rationality involved in the thriving of a moral agent.¹⁷ In this restatement, Aristotle’s argument is not so much about becoming fully human as it is about becoming more and more thoroughly moral in action and outlook, about the essence of morality rather than the essence of “man.”

The first sense in which the function argument enjoins moral agents to engage in rational activity¹⁸ is to make sure that action undertaken from a moral point of view is subject to deliberation. Aristotle rejects as morally out of bounds actions that surrender *logos* to *pathos*.¹⁹ *Logos*, Nicholas O. Pagan points out, is not to be understood as some sort of right rule to be followed without exception. Rather, *logos* expresses “a way of improving . . . given experience and what is now at hand.”²⁰ Call this the requirement of *logos* for moral action. To be counted as moral or virtuous, an action must be subject to rational deliberation, even if not done on any given occasion because of rational deliberation.²¹

The requirement of *logos* need not be met explicitly on any given occasion because actions meeting the requirement of *logos* may be undertaken and executed out of a sense of habit. As Lear explains, the best life, from Aristotle’s moral point of view, may be the life implying *logos*.²² *Logos*, unlike *pathos*, permits organization of a life in terms of several virtues, a life of reason, order, proportion, arrangement. A life of this kind links *logos* to character—a life guided by *logos* expresses over its course what Gregory M. Fahey calls, “a formed and stable ‘character.’”²³ We may state this as the requirement of character: to be counted virtuous an action must be capable of organization into a system of virtuous actions.

However, not just any formation of character will suffice for fullness of the moral life. The character of the fully functioning moral agent will take

on the aspect of what Dewey calls the “sympathetic character.”²⁴ Here, we may use John Dewey to supplement Aristotle’s requirements for complete moral agency.²⁵ Aristotle does argue against a eudaimonism of egoism and the idea that any human can be entirely self-sufficient or said correctly to be flourishing without friends; but Dewey takes the point further. For Dewey, Pagan explains, “our own happiness and the meaningfulness of our lives cannot even be thought of as separate from the happiness and meaningfulness of the lives of others. Dewey’s moral pragmatism involves the contention that by acting upon the right moral choices we make both our own lives and the lives of others more fulfilling. Dewey wants the moral self to empower others so that as many of us as possible can become involved in activities that make peoples’ lives happier and more meaningful.”²⁶ Dewey extends Aristotle’s arguments about the functions of the moral agent to include the requirement of conviviality: to be counted as virtuous an action must be capable of organization into a system of virtuous actions undertaken with others. If we agree with Aristotle’s comment in *Metaphysics*, 1044b36-a1 that final/formal causes, essences/ends may all amount to the same thing, we may say the fully functioning moral agent is adequately described by the requirements of *logos*, character, and conviviality.²⁷

Supererogatory acts are subject to the same criteria as any other actions when judging their moral worth. Supererogation undertaken from a positionality of *logos*, that strengthens the character of the supererogator, and enhances the capacity for conviviality in interpersonal relationships related to the supererogation is morally preferable to supererogation that is grounded in *pathos*, diminishes character, and reduces opportunity for conviviality. Some real life examples may be useful in explaining the meaning of this Aristotelian approach to supererogation applied to the work of teachers.²⁸

1. Teachers usually have few ways of knowing what’s going on with their students outside of school, but it certainly affects student behavior and academic achievement. Jessie Cayton found a brilliant way to check in with her students each day. They each write their names on the back of a post-it and put it in the zone on the chalkboard describing their state of mind that day. Not only can she privately check in with students who are struggling, but other students

know when there’s someone around them having issues, hopefully triggering an empathetic response. In this case of supererogation, the teacher reasoned out a way to improve communication and conviviality in the class and provided herself with information about her students that made her a better teacher for them. The teacher is doing an act that is not in her job description but one that is easy and positive and not time-consuming or costly. This act is simple enough that other teachers can use it without worries building toward teacher burnout or demoralization.²⁹

2. Carl Schneider is one of five teachers at Whitney Achievement Elementary School in Memphis, Tennessee who got together with colleagues and school administrators to create a volunteer effort to walk children home each day. About 200 students at the school need a safe way home and Schneider and his co-workers are doing their part to make sure it happens. The walk-the-students-home effort was organized by teachers in discussion with one another and anyone who did not or could not participate felt no sense of guilt or pressure associated with them not participating. While a spirit of many-hands-make-light-work imbued the planning of the effort, school staff came amicably to an agreement about who was and was not contributing to the “program” without imposing its necessity on anyone.

3. It takes more than pencil and paper to learn. Poverty can interfere with education and development. One kindergarten teacher understands that and started a “comfort closet” at her school for kids to get hygiene supplies, food, and clothes for free when they needed them to help them focus on learning. Originally, the teacher bought items to supply the students in her class; but then sought donors, from among colleagues and the community surrounding the school, to enhance needed supplies and expand the range of students able to benefit from The Comfort Closet. In this scenario, a teacher saw the condition of some of her students when they came to school and made a rational choice to make a change to counterbalance the negative effects of the poverty in which some students lived. The result was a program that positively affects the learning of participating students, making life in the school more convivial as opportunity to participate expanded. The teacher did not just think about her own classroom

but gave consideration about helping the school and how The Comfort Closet could spread kindness to *all* in the school.

All of these scenarios are acts of supererogation. Each teacher is doing an act not listed in their job description. Supererogation, in Aristotelian understanding, is a very positive term. Aristotle claimed that virtuous actions are choice-worthy for their own sake and used as means to secure further desirable ends. Virtuous action is a choice that can have a positive effect on a person's future.³⁰ For Aristotle, an action is said most completely to be virtuous if it stems from a righteous outlook.³¹ In the case of supererogation, acting virtuously means going above and beyond duty through acts guided by attitudes like kindness, generosity, and love. However, Aristotle also claims we can become virtuous by acting virtuously even if the actions stem from non-virtuous motives. This raises the problematic idea that some people can engage in virtuous actions without being virtuous. While a virtuous action is truly virtuous only if the motive behind the action is also virtuous, people can decide to take virtuous actions for selfish motives. Even then, Aristotle insists, selfish persons may develop virtuous character if they perform virtuous acts often enough.³² To supererogate successfully and sagely at school, teachers must have insight and perseverance to articulate and achieve goals that are not required by their job descriptions but will make them happy while having a positive effect on people around them.

Aristotle's virtue account of supererogation helps explain how supererogation can go sour. It is possible to put too much pressure on oneself to be virtuous. Pressure to please can lead to the "paradox of striving." Trying too hard to act a certain way may ruin the efforts we put forward. Nancy E. Snow describes the paradox of striving as "forcing, impulsivity, overthinking and holding oneself to too high a standard."³³ When someone forces themselves to do something or tries too hard to meet the goal behind their action, they can end up acting in ways that miss the point of being virtuous. Snow suggests understanding Aristotle's point in terms of the message of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi emphasizes openness toward self-transformation, turning inward to achieve virtuousness. Turning toward yourself to find happiness is more effec-

tive than forcing yourself to achieve standards that will not make you happy. Teachers who are interested in supererogating should develop a sense for when something is needed to make a lesson, etcetera, better and when something is not necessary and just extra work. If teachers have knowledge of what may be reasonably expected of them when they supererogate, then they can have confidence that the good acts they are doing for their students are virtuous and that they are appreciated as teachers in the school and community.

Jaime L. Beck summarizes these points with an important but neglected distinction affecting the work of teachers: heavy hours versus light hours. Heavy hours weigh on teachers, fatigue them, and naggingly linger long after the work is done.³⁴ Light hours, by extension and contrast, revive teachers, restore their professional pride, and (re)establish among them a determination to do their job well. Virtuous supererogation describes the paradigm case of light hours in a teacher’s career. Such hours must, therefore, at the very least, be morally permissible for teachers to enact. However, extra duty that leads to teachers putting in heavy hours at work is, by contraposition, morally impermissible. Sharon Hartnett and Frank Kline distinguish between two senses of teacher’s calling. On one hand, the call to teaching as typically understood binds teachers to a demanding, if not unremitting, commitment to perform the duties of their office even at personal cost or professional dismay. On the other, Hartnett and Kline suggest a reinterpretation of the call to teaching as teachers’ responsibility to find fulfillment, fit, and joy in the field of teaching.³⁵ Virtuous supererogation may be one of the best avenues to follow in exploring possibilities suited to actualizing the sense of calling described by Hartnett and Kline. Elena Seghedin echoes these thoughts in her observation that teachers are not primarily involved at work in obeying the dictates of a professional ethic imposed from outside or above them. Instead, teachers at work are primarily engaged in developing a professional personality, what Seghedin calls a “Personal Moral Professionality,” as they navigate the confluence of autonomy and responsibility where they work.³⁶ Such a vision of the applied ethical side of teachers’ work promises to permit teachers to avoid the hero’s paradox. According to the heroism paradox, people who supererogate make the mistake of thinking their acts of supererogation are

merely obligatory acts, just another of their professional responsibilities. This error robs the moral agent of enjoyment of the self-sustaining power typically taken to be derived from acts of supererogation. Archer and Michael Ridge find the source of this error in the moral depth actors may bring to their ethical lives, especially their professional ethical lives. Whatever these moral “heroes” do is, by their own lights, dangerously never enough.³⁷ Working at such depths of moral commitment may disorient teachers to the value of their work and lead to burn out or brutal exit from a profession in which they may have very well just as easily excelled. Aristotelian account of supererogation as necessarily virtuous action to actually count as supererogation may allow teachers to plumb moral depth in their work without also succumbing to pressures that depth of moral commitment may create for them. Perhaps supererogation is best understood as a special case of what Santoro discusses under the rubric of demoralization. Teachers become demoralized when features of their work prevent them from realizing moral rewards inherent in the profession of teaching.³⁸ Supererogative teachers may be understood as reaching for a moral reward of the profession, but sometimes they trip over their job. Guidelines describing morally permissible supererogation may help teachers solve the riddle of the call to teaching in ways that make all concerned in the processes of schooling more complete moral agents.

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- 12 James O. Urmson, “Saints and Heroes,” in A.I. Melden, ed. *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958): 198-216. Also, for a defense of Urmson, see M.W. Jackson, “The Nature of Supererogation,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 20, no. 3 (1986): 289-296.

13 Douglas W. Portmore, “Transitivity, Moral Latitude, and Supererogation,” *Utilitas: A Journal of Utilitarian Studies* 29, no. 3 (2017): 266-298.

14 Framing discussion of supererogation in terms of professional responsibility of teachers as stated in their job descriptions solves a variety of philosophical puzzles that attend the idea of going above and beyond the call of duty when duty is taken in its broadest moral sense as ethical obligation. Here we are concerned with contractual or legal obligation. For more on the classic problems attending supererogation see Alfred Archer, “Supererogation,” *Philosophy Compass* 13, no. 3 (2018): e1-e9.

15 Alfred Archer, “Supererogation, Sacrifice, and the Limits of Duty,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 54, no. 3 (2016): 333-354. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12176>

16 Aristotle supports such a move by extending his arguments in ethical theory to cover the possibility of moral thinking among beings different from or even superior to humans (*De Anima*, 414b17-19); Unless otherwise noted references to the works of Aristotle indicate material taken from translations in Terence Irwin and Gail Fine, trans. and eds., *Aristotle: Selections* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1995). Gods, considered as moral thinkers, must, as such, obey criteria of moral thinking to be counted as fully functioning moral agents. Also, using “moral agent” rather than “human being” as the focus of moral theory simultaneously relieves Aristotle from difficulties associated with *defining* what it means to be fully human and releases him from problematic teleological, end-state interpretation of *eudaimonia*. For an example of the sort of ideological thinking into which a teleological approach to Aristotle may tempt see Kathleen W. Harrington, “John Dewey’s Ethics and the Classic Conception of Man,” *Diotima* 1 (1973): 125-148.

17 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b22-1098a20.

18 See Jennifer Whiting, “Aristotle’s Function Argument: A Defense,” *Ancient Philosophy*, 8 (1988): 34 and 41. <https://doi.org/10.5840/ancientphil19888119>

19 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b34-36 and 1147b16.

20 Nicholas O. Pagan, “Configuring the Moral Self: Aristotle and Dewey,” *Foundations of Science* 13 (2008), 243. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-008-9137-8>

21 Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b31 and 1144b23-31

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26 Pagan, “Configuring the Moral Self,” 247.

27 W. D. Ross in *The Works of Aristotle*, Vol. I (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952).

28 The following three examples are from Tap, “Twenty Teachers Who Went Above and Beyond the Call of Duty—All for the Love of Their Students;” Comparing some real-life scenarios of supererogation to determine what is appropriate and what is not is a good strategy to use with school staff so they can develop their own supererogating rules on a whole-school level.

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