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.

By

Kyle Fruh, M.A.

Washington, DC
April 23, 2014

PREVIEW

UMI Number: 3618376

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS
The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript
and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed,
a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI 3618376
Published by ProQuest LLC (2014). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.
All rights reserved. This work is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code

PREVIEW

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

Copyright 2014 by Kyle Fruh
All Rights Reserved

PREVIEW

SACRIFICES: THE PARADIGMATIC, THE DEMANDING, AND THE HEROIC

Kyle R. Fruh, M.A.

Thesis Advisor: Judith Lichtenberg, PhD

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

PREVIEW

might be bound to do morally good things without being morally bound to do what would be excessive to demand.

PREVIEW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 | SACRIFICE: TWO PUZZLES IN A PORTRAIT, A PROBLEM, AND AN ACCOUNT
1.1 Introduction…1
1.2 Mr. Xtreme: A Portrait of Sacrifice…2
1.3 Two Puzzles…5
1.4 A Problem…9
1.5 An Account…13
1.6 Overview of Subsequent Chapters…26

CHAPTER 2 | THE CONCEPT OF SACRIFICE
2.1 Introduction…28
2.2 A New Account of the Concept of Sacrifice…28
2.3 Paradigmatic Sacrifice…31
2.4 Departures from the Paradigm…45
Playing the Roles: Single Party Sacrifice, Groups and Causes…46
The Unwitting, the Merely Foreseen, and the Coerced…48
Proxies and Passive Sacrifices…52
Risk and Opportunity…53
Borderline Cases: Trivial Harms…56
2.5 Taking Stock, Looking Ahead…57

CHAPTER 3 | THE PLACE OF SACRIFICE IN MORAL LIFE: SOLVING THE PUZZLES
3.1 Introduction…59
3.2 Winning by Losing…59
Single Party Sacrifice…60
Multiple Party Sacrifice…68
3.3 Gift by Right…75
3.4 Ahead and Behind…81

CHAPTER 4 | SACRIFICE AND THE PROBLEM OF DEMANDINGNESS
4.1 Introduction…83
4.2 The Breadth of the Problem…84
Beneficence…84
Duties Correlated to Rights…86
Duties to Self…94
Collective Duties…98
Theory without Duty…100
4.3 Rival Interpretations: Difficulty and Cost…103
Difficulty…103
Cost…106
4.4 Murphy's Dilemma…113
4.5 Final Transition…117

PREVIEW

CHAPTER 5 | HEROIC SACRIFICE AND THE REQUIREMENT CLAIM
5.1 Introduction……………………………….……….……….…………118
5.2 Moral Heroism and Heroism More Generally………….…….……….120
5.3 Urmsonian Error Theory…………………………………….…………..127
5.4 Heroism as a Moral Duty……………………………………….………..133
5.5 Practical Necessity……………………………………...………...138

BIBLIOGRAPHY……………………………………………………………148

PREVIEW

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).

PREVIEW

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

PREVIEW

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

PREVIEW

[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.[3]

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

PREVIEW

[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

PREVIEW

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?[4] 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

PREVIEW

[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.

PREVIEW

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.[5] 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.

PREVIEW

---

[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.[6] 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

PREVIEW

[6] Cf. Garrard and McNaughton (2010) and Griswold (2007) on forgiveness. On gratitude, see Card (1988).

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

PREVIEW

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.[7] 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).[8] The problem arises in

PREVIEW

[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.[9] 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.

PREVIEW

---

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.

PREVIEW

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

PREVIEW

---

[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.

PREVIEW

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).[13] 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.

PREVIEW

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.[14]

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

PREVIEW

[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.