**Supererogation Across Normative Domains**

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[This is a preprint of an article whose final and definitive form will be published in the Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 2017. The Australasian Journal of Philosophy is available online at: [http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/](https://www.outlook.soton.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=RRjvHbcek4WZwhOsGYSjyKT3MrVVmVffyMrNcb5MRCVRlgbQ_fjTCA..&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.tandf.co.uk%2fjournals%2f).]

**Abstract**

The phenomenon of moral supererogation – action that goes beyond what moral duty requires – is familiar. In this paper, I argue that the concept of supererogation is applicable beyond the moral domain. After an introductory Section 1, I outline in Section 2 what I take to be the structure of moral supererogation, explaining how it comes to be an authentic normative category. In Section 3, I show that there are structurally similar phenomena in other normative domains – those of prudence, etiquette, and the epistemic – and give examples of acts of supererogation of each of these types.

KEYWORDS: supererogation, prudence, etiquette, epistemic normativity, obligation

**1. Introduction**

The phenomenon of moral supererogation – action that goes beyond what moral duty requires - has received much philosophical attention. In his 1958 paper ‘Saints and Heroes’, J. O. Urmson argued against what he perceived as a standard threefold moral classification of acts: the morally forbidden; the morally obligatory; and the morally indifferent, which are neither forbidden nor obligatory. Urmson [1958: 199] argued that this classification was ‘totally inadequate to the facts of morality’. Many actions that are *saintly* or *heroic* are neither morally required nor morally forbidden, yet we would hardly describe them as morally indifferent. Indeed, there seem to be other actions that are not so morally good as to be saintly or heroic, but that are nonetheless morally good, and neither morally required nor morally forbidden. We call all these actions (whether saintly, heroic, or neither) morally supererogatory.

Surprisingly little attention has been given, however, to the question of whether there are non-moral versions of supererogation.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this paper, I argue that the concept of supererogation is indeed applicable beyond the moral domain. I explain in Section 2 what I take to be the structure of moral supererogation, and articulate how it can be an authentic normative category. The key idea is that one may fall short of what is optimal by the lights of morality, and yet not merit the particular sort of criticism or negative reaction distinctive to morality. This thought is what justifies rejecting the so-called ‘paradox of supererogation’. In Section 3, I show that there are several other domains – prudence, etiquette and the epistemic - where a structurally similar phenomenon exists: one may fall short of what is optimal by the lights of the normative standards in question, and yet not merit a particular type of criticism or negative reaction that is distinctive of those standards.

**2. Moral Supererogation**

The category of the morally supererogatory emerges from the combination of two ways of morally classifying acts: (a) a division into *deontic categories* of morally obligatory, morally forbidden, and morally optional (neither morally obligatory nor morally forbidden) and (b) an arrangement within an *evaluative scale*, ranging from morally best to morally worst.

Let us assume that morally permissible acts (whether obligatory or merely optional) will always figure higher in the evaluative scale than morally impermissible acts. Morally permissible acts are always *morally better* than morally impermissible ones. And amongst the morally permissible acts, the morally supererogatory ones are those that are better than the least good of the morally permissible options.

We should accept then the following definition.

**Morally supererogatory acts**: Acts that (i) fall into the deontic category of the morally optional, and that (ii) figure higher up the evaluative scale of moral goodness than some other morally permissible alternative.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Given this definition, it should appear straightforward how to extend the concept of the supererogatory beyond the moral domain to any other normative domain, X:

**X-wise (e.g. epistemically) supererogatory acts**: Acts that (i) fall into the deontic category of the X-wise (e.g. epistemically) optional, and that (ii) figure higher up the evaluative scale of X-wise (e.g. epistemic) goodness than some other X-wise (e.g. epistemically) permissible alternative.

For some normative domain, X, to admit of a distinctive type of supererogation, it needs to meet two conditions:

1. We can draw up an evaluative scale of actions, according to the standards of X;
2. We can divide actions into deontic categories of the X-wise obligatory, the X-wise forbidden and the X-wise optional (neither obligatory nor forbidden).

The crucial issue in assessing whether some normative domain admits of a distinctive type of supererogation will be whether there really are meaningful deontic categories within that domain which are sufficiently independent of the evaluative scale in question. To see why this is important, consider the challenge which lies behind the so-called ‘paradox of moral supererogation’: If some action were morally best, why would it not be morally required?

To defend the notion of moral supererogation, we must show how some action could be morally best under the circumstances, yet not morally obligatory. This task devolves into two parts: one conceptual, one substantive.

*The Conceptual Task*

In order to establish the possibility of morally supererogatory action, we must first outline some conception of the morally obligatory that is distinct from being top of the moral ranking. What is distinctive about saying that some action is not just the morally best one to perform, but is morally obligatory?

It seems clear that there is a sense of ‘mustness’ involved in the morally obligatory. If something is morally obligatory, it wouldn’t just be good to do, or best to do, but one *must* do it. But must on pain of what? Note that one answer is not available. We cannot characterise the morally obligatory as what one must do on pain of acting morally suboptimally. This would leave no conceptual room for actions that are morally best, but not morally obligatory.

We need a *distinct* answer to the question ‘Must on pain of what?’ At the most general level, I think the answer is that one must perform the action, on pain of meriting some distinctive moral criticism or negative reaction.

One attractive way of making this answer more specific is by reference to the moral reactive attitudes: to say that some action is morally obligatory is to say that one *must* perform it, on pain of meriting feelings of moral blame and guilt. This is plausibly the source of the phenomenological potency of first-personal judgements of moral obligation. When one feels morally obliged to do something unappealing, one feels a distinctive emotional discomfort, caught between doing something one doesn’t fancy doing, and being compelled to accept that one merits feelings of guilt and blame.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In portraying what is distinctive about moral obligation (as opposed to moral bestness) by reference to the appropriateness of these distinctive moral sentimental reactions, we can still make room for blameless wrongdoing. We can characterise morally wrong actions (actions that we are morally obliged not to perform) in terms of what would merit feelings of blame under typical circumstances. Angrily making some demeaning remarks to a colleague may be morally wrong, in virtue of being something that would merit blame under ordinary circumstances. But if someone has just received tragic news, or is suffering from clinical depression, or is suffering from excruciating physical pain, he might not merit blame for making such remarks. Recognising cases of blameless wrongdoing is thus compatible with the view that blame lies at the heart of moral obligation and moral wrongness.

We can now see how there is *conceptual* room for the morally supererogatory. It may be that some action is morally best, but not morally obligatory, since it is not an action that someone typically circumstanced would merit the sort of negative reactions distinctive of morality (blame and guilt) for failing to perform.

*The Substantive Task*

The second step is necessary to vindicate the supererogatory because it is open to someone to accept the conceptual framework outlined here, but to insist that, as a substantive normative matter, one always merits feelings of blame and guilt simply for doing something other than what was morally best. Such a view looks extremely unappealing.

The starting point of our best judgements about what is blameworthy is surely our actual dispositions to feel blame, which we then shape through reflection and discussion with others. We do not typically feel blame towards people for failing to perform the morally best available action. Consider a person who devotes a very substantial amount of her spare time and resources to helping the needy, but who does less than the most she possibly can. She merits admiration and praise, not condemnation or blame, and for this reason a charge of moral wrongness feels misplaced. The basic point is not the pragmatic one that it may be counter-productive to blame, or to remonstrate with those who have done a lot, for fear of demotivating them from continuing to do as much as they have. Rather, the point is that feelings of blame are simply frequently *unfitting* towards someone who acts well, but suboptimally. Sometimes, appeal is made to the idea of autonomy as justification for the supererogatory: a special domain of optional behaviour needs to be protected in order to promote this important value. But it seems to me that we need not make this appeal in order to recognise room for the supererogatory. The key thought is more basic: the distinctive negative reactions of morality are inappropriate towards someone who reaches a certain level in many cases, even though that level lies short of what is best. So we should, I think, reject the substantive claim that one is always morally obliged to do whatever is morally best.

If the foregoing is convincing, then the category of the morally supererogatory is in good order.

**3. Generalising Supererogation**

We are better placed now to see a key aspect of what it would take for there to be supererogation beyond the moral domain: within some other domain, there will be an interesting analogue of moral supererogation only if it supports a distinction between *best* (according to the standards of that domain) and *must* (on pain of meriting some criticism or negative reaction distinctive of that domain).

We can thereby make more specific our second condition. For some normative domain, X, to admit of a distinctive type of supererogation, it must be that:

1. We can draw up an evaluative scale of actions, according to the standards of X;
2. We can divide actions into deontic categories of the X-wise obligatory, the X-wise forbidden and the X-wise optional (neither obligatory nor forbidden), where the notion of obligation is not simply conceptually equivalent to being top of the scale, but instead involves the appropriateness of a type of criticism or negative reaction distinctive of that domain, X.

In this section I argue that analogues of moral supererogation exist in three other normative domains – prudence, etiquette, and epistemic normativity. For each of these, (i) the domain can support some evaluative ranking from best to worst, (ii) the domain admits of deontic talk, and (iii) such deontic talk can quite coherently be conceived as distinct from the evaluative ranking, in virtue of some underlying type of criticism or negative reaction distinctive of that domain.

**3.1 Prudential Supererogation**

The evaluative domain most often distinguished from morality is prudence, whose standards assess actions according to how well they promote the agent’s own interests. Clearly, we can draw up an evaluative scale, ranking actions from prudentially best to prudentially worst. In everyday talk, we may say ‘That’s what would be best (or better) from the self-interested point of view’.

The question then is whether we have the requisite substantive notion of prudential *obligation*, or *obligations* of self-interest. We should first note, in order to lay aside, the disputed phenomenon of self-regarding *moral* duties. It is generally agreed that we can have moral obligations to take care of ourselves for the sake of our dependents. But according to some, we also have more fundamentally self-regarding moral obligations: for example, a moral obligation grounded in benefits to oneself, rather than in benefits to others.[[4]](#footnote-4) Our question, however, is whether there is a distinctive, *non-moral* conception of prudential obligation, allowing us to speak of a distinctive, *non-moral* phenomenon of prudential supererogation.

Clearly, we do sometimes use deontic language in the case of prudence:

‘You really must lose some weight, for your own sake.’

‘You owe it to yourself to take some time off, to stop giving such absolute priority to your kids, to think of yourself sometimes.’

‘You’ve really got to take better care of yourself, take more precautions when you go out hillwalking.’

These deontic phrases are frequently deployed in a way that is not moral; one is not saying that someone must behave in the prescribed ways on pain of meriting the moral sanctions of blame and guilt. One might think that when we use deontic language in the context of prudence we do so loosely, simply giving rhetorical emphasis to a claim about what is *best* for you. However, there does appear to be a distinctive prudential criticism or charge that one lays at the door of someone who fails to comply with the prescriptions in question: a charge of *foolishness* or, simply *imprudence*. Charging someone with being foolish expresses an attitude that we might call ‘prudential disapproval’.

Ways of being foolish or imprudent include: being very bad at judging means to achieving one’s own good; prioritising one’s lesser short-term good over one’s greater long-term good; prioritising the lesser good of others over a greater good to oneself; being overcome by self-damaging motives, such as revenge; sacrificing one’s own good for the sake of some misconceived value (e.g. a mistaken religious or aesthetic value).[[5]](#footnote-5)

The putative attitude of ‘prudential disapproval’ expressed in such a charge of foolishness involves a loss of esteem or respect. The threat of this can serve as an incentive to give greater weight to one’s long-term good, to cultivate greater self-control, to seek to suppress self-defeating desires like revenge, or to revise one’s conception of one’s own good. No one wants to be thought a fool, especially by loved ones; and no one wants to *merit* such a charge.

The boundary between the moral sanction of blame and the distinctive disesteem we face when we are judged foolish or imprudent is not always clear-cut, but it is important. John Stuart Mill undertakes to draw such a boundary in Chapter 4 of *On Liberty*. Mill’s central aim there is to argue that the coercive sanctions of morality – the informal sanctions of blame and the formal sanctions of punishment – are inappropriate responses to self-regarding acts. But this is not to say that other, non-coercive negative reactions won’t be in the offing in response to self-damaging behaviour:

If he is eminent in any of the qualities which conduce to his own good, he is, so far, a proper object of admiration… If he is grossly deficient in those qualities, a sentiment the opposite of admiration will follow. There is a degree of folly… which, though it cannot justify doing harm to the person who manifests it renders him necessarily and properly the subject of distaste, or in extreme cases, even of contempt… this judgement and feeling are a fact which he would prefer to avoid. [Mill 1859: 100-1]

The negative sentiments in response to imprudence are natural, but also *proper*, according to Mill. Such feelings may be a *fitting* response to failures of prudence. We should also note especially the phrase ‘grossly deficient’. This implies that one need not act prudentially optimally in order to avoid meriting the distinctive distaste or contempt associated with foolishness. Since there is no presumption of optimality, room is left for an equivalent of supererogation: action that is prudentially better than the minimum necessary to make the charge of foolishness and its attendant sentiments inappropriate. Just as one is not appropriately condemned as *immoral* simply for falling short of what is morally best, so one is not appropriately condemned as *foolish* or *imprudent* simply for falling short of what is prudentially best.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This independent, non-moral charge of imprudence or foolishness allows then for a prudential analogue of moral supererogation. When one acts in a way that is prudentially better than the minimum required to fulfil one’s ‘prudential obligations’ (picked out by reference to meriting the peculiar distaste or contempt embodied in a charge of foolishness), one’s behaviour is prudentially supererogatory. The clearest-cut examples of such behaviour are cases where one is especially or unusually prudent, showing impressive self-discipline in resisting a temptation to enjoy an immediate benefit in order to secure a long-term one: an athlete doing extra training even in awful weather in order to maximise chances of success; or a young person in her first job making savings for retirement. In such cases, going for the shorter-term benefit would be quite understandable. By omitting to act in these ways, one doesn’t breach a duty of prudence; one isn’t foolish, merely suboptimally prudent. Such acts then are prudentially supererogatory.

**3.2 Etiquette Supererogation**

Etiquette is another non-moral domain where we distinguish between ‘best’ and ‘must’. In the case of etiquette, the deontic categories are more common than scalar evaluation: we speak predominantly of the requirements of etiquette, of what etiquette allows or forbids. But we do also deploy judgements of betterness here, and so it is quite possible to have clear instances of etiquette supererogation. Consider, for instance, the statement: ‘You must at least wear a shirt and jacket, though it would be better to wear a suit.’ Wearing a suit is supererogatory by the lights of the specific code appealed to here.

Since etiquette is a disparate phenomenon – there are many sets of norms of etiquette in different sorts of social groupings – there is probably not some single distinctive negative reaction characteristic of such norms as a class. But the force of the deontic judgements of etiquette is at least frequently delivered by some threat of *social exclusion*: you must comply with the demands, or else you can’t be in our club. Violations of requirements of etiquette may also provoke feelings of *disdain*.

Such evaluations of etiquette are at least sometimes quite distinct from any moral evaluation. It need not be the case that one is morally obliged to wear a shirt and jacket, or that wearing a suit would be morally best. For sure, some norms of etiquette shade into moral norms against rudeness. When a friend goes to great effort to lay on a fancy dinner, to turn up in muddy sports clothes may well constitute rudeness and ingratitude, such that reactions of moral resentment are appropriate. But this is not necessary for something to count as an authentic requirement of (some code of) etiquette – all that requires is that there be the threat of social exclusion or disdain.

We can note structural similarities between moral normativity and etiquette-normativity while remaining neutral on whether the norms of etiquette ought to be taken seriously.[[7]](#footnote-7) In general, there may be a phenomenon structurally similar to moral supererogation in some domain which asserts wholly misconceived sets of values, by treating as valuable something which has no value, or which is positively disvaluable. For any positive code of duties, it may sound quite natural to talk about what goes beyond what duty requires – e.g. being extra-conscientious in being a good Nazi, going beyond the mere fulfilment of the duties of one’s station. It should be clear that putative normative domains may have structural similarities quite independently of whether we should endorse their norms.

**3.3 Epistemic Supererogation**

Epistemically supererogatory behaviour is behaviour that is epistemically better than the minimum level required to meet one’s epistemic duties. The key to making sense of this phenomenon is establishing what underlying charge, criticism or negative reaction could give force to distinctively epistemic *duty*. In this section, I suggest that a social conception of epistemic evaluation offers an attractive answer that fits well with our epistemic thought and practice.

We can begin by noting that we have important *moral* duties concerning our belief-forming practices. When my child is sick, I have a moral duty to check carefully that I am giving her the correct medicine. Similarly, I may have a ‘duty of prudence’ to check that my harness is secure when parachuting from a plane. But what are distinctively epistemic duties – duties with a distinctively epistemic sanction or negative reaction?

Trevor Hedberg offers an example (taken from Hilary Kornblith) which looks promising as a paradigm violation of distinctively epistemic duty. A young physicist, Jones, desperate for acclaim from colleagues, ignores compelling criticism of his work:

By refusing to even listen to the criticism, Jones violates an epistemic duty because he acts in an epistemically irresponsible manner. His action is inconsistent with a genuine desire to have true beliefs, and this deliberate avoidance of acknowledging criticism will (most likely) lead Jones to form false beliefs rather than true ones. [Hedberg 2014: 3626; Kornblith 1983: 36].

Jones violates the epistemic duty that ‘one should be attentive to reasonable criticisms of the beliefs that one holds’. [Hedberg 2014: 3626] As Hedberg notes, one need only be *sufficiently* attentive to reasonable criticisms:

these duties do not require epistemic perfection. A duty to be attentive to criticism, for instance, does not require that one be unfailingly alert to all possible criticisms that could be raised against her beliefs … [It] is better understood as a duty to acknowledge and seriously consider criticisms that are substantive and articulated clearly. This epistemic duty - like others that we could examine – specifies a threshold that must be met for one’s conduct to be epistemically responsible. [Hedberg 2014: 3626]

Such a charge of epistemic irresponsibility, or perhaps ‘epistemic irrationality’, looks like a promising analogue to a charge of moral wrongness or imprudence. Someone who goes around forming beliefs recklessly, believing on insufficient evidence or on the basis of faulty reasoning, believing what suits her, who turns away from countervailing evidence, who systematically fails to be open-minded, will properly be faced with such epistemic criticism.

In making more determinate the sort of distinctively epistemic disapproval expressed in such a charge, it helps again to make a comparison with morality. As we have noted, a core element of our moral practice involves bringing to bear distinctive moral sanctions in reaction to certain sorts of behaviour - feelings of blame, and their expression in remonstration, shunning, exclusion, punishment. To judge something morally wrong is to judge that some degree of these sanctions is merited. Similarly, I propose, judging someone epistemically irresponsible or epistemically irrational (in our specific sense) involves some degree of exclusionary reaction. The fitting reaction to a reckless belief-former, or to an incompetent belief-former, is to exclude them from our epistemic community. A person who forms beliefs in ways liable to lead to false beliefs is someone whose testimony is not to be trusted; it is appropriate to exclude her from our community of those whose assertions we rely upon. Such warranted exclusion from our epistemic community need not be built on moral disapproval; one may be morally blameless for one’s epistemic shortcomings.[[8]](#footnote-8)

One has an epistemic duty then to avoid irrational belief-forming behaviours; one *must* avoid these on pain of meriting (threat of) exclusion from the epistemic community. Thinking in terms of such exclusion helps us see both how talk of distinctively epistemic duty is distinct from moral duty, and how deontic talk (‘must’-talk) gets purchase within the epistemic domain.

We can view charges of epistemic irrationality as having a function – that of *policing* our epistemic community. The area of epistemic assessment where duty-talk is most at home concerns norms against forming beliefs *too readily*. The epistemic exclusionary sanction is most clearly warranted in response to someone who persistently makes assertions[[9]](#footnote-9) expressing beliefs that she wasn’t warranted in forming: beliefs formed on the basis of insufficient evidence, in the face of strong counter-evidence, on the basis of faulty deduction, bad induction and so on. It is the particular cluster of epistemic faults that leads to too readily forming beliefs that most clearly demands distinctively epistemic deontic judgements, since we have a strong community interest in excluding such unreliable patterns of belief formation.[[10]](#footnote-10) We issue charges of epistemic irrationality as a way of flagging these patterns, and issuing a deterrent warning that such practices will not be tolerated.[[11]](#footnote-11) Just as with a charge of immorality or foolishness, the ‘sting’ of a charge of irrationality can serve to motivate us to conform to certain standards. The weaker judgement that one has done something epistemically suboptimal would not have this motivational effect. We sustain our norms of proper belief-formation partly by guiding the behaviour of those we criticise in this way. But we also guide the behaviour of third parties. In criticising Smith as irrational, I warn you off forming beliefs on the basis of his testimony, and also motivate you not to reason as Smith does.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Note that this epistemic irrationality is one of two grounds on which the exclusionary reaction in question may be warranted. The other is insincerity. If someone is disposed to assert things that he doesn’t believe, we have a strong interest again in excluding him from the epistemic community. A charge of epistemic irrationality then can be characterised in terms of warrant for exclusion on grounds *other than* insincerity; one is epistemically irrational (in our sense) if disposed to make *sincere* assertions on inadequate grounds.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Epistemic irrationality thus characterised is only one epistemic fault amongst others. But it is interesting that talk of epistemic duty sounds less natural in the case of other epistemic vices, such as incuriosity. An incurious person may be guilty of *moral* failings. In contributing little to some epistemic community, we might charge him with being lazy, or with free-riding on others. He may stray into culpable negligence if he fails in work-related or family-related responsibilities because of incuriosity. But speaking of an *epistemic* obligation to be sufficiently curious sounds strained. It seems rather forced to say that there is a standing epistemic duty to acquire, to a sufficiently high degree, more general knowledge (even though in some sense it would be ‘epistemically better’ to know more).[[14]](#footnote-14)

This observation fits well with the view that epistemic obligation should be understood by reference to exclusion. We have an especially significant communal interest in avoiding false beliefs, and so we police standards of belief-forming by charging those who form beliefs too readily as epistemically irrational, shunning them from communal inquiry. We have far less interest in shunning those who are merely unhelpful in adding true beliefs to our common stock. Keeping the ignorant and incurious within our epistemic community is uncostly, while keeping rash belief-formers within our epistemic community has significant costs.[[15]](#footnote-15)

For similar reasons, deontic language is likewise less at home in the case of a vice we might call epistemic over-scrupulousness or over-caution: being too hesitant in forming beliefs, even when one has adequate evidence. We might say, ‘Why are you still suspending judgement?! The evidence is more than ample! You’re being irrational!’ Even though this is a case where we might naturally speak of epistemic irrationality, it is not a case where talk of epistemic *duty* feels natural. While over-caution, like incuriosity, is an authentic epistemic fault, it is, again like incuriosity, one we have relatively limited communal interest in eliminating. It is because there is no pressing need to exclude cautious belief-formers from our epistemic community, I suggest, that we do not talk of epistemic duty here.[[16]](#footnote-16)

So it seems that we can give some clear distinctive content to the idea of epistemic duty that fits our general model of supererogation. That leaves the question of what it is for some behaviour to *go beyond* what epistemic duty requires, for it to be *better than* the minimum required by epistemic duty. There are several intelligible ways of drawing up the requisite scale of epistemic goodness.[[17]](#footnote-17) We might say that behaviours are epistemically good to the extent that they tend to promote some optimal balance between avoiding false beliefs and securing true beliefs. Alternatively, we might characterise epistemically good behaviours by reference to their tendency to promote more general ‘epistemic benefits’ and to avert the corresponding ‘epistemic harms’, as Hedberg calls them:

Such epistemic beneﬁts could include (among other things) the acquisition of true beliefs, the elimination of false beliefs, the improvement of a particular cognitive attitude (e.g. turning a mere true belief into knowledge), or the cultivation of an epistemic virtue (e.g. open-mindedness)… Epistemic harms could include the acquisition of false beliefs, the elimination of true beliefs, the regression of a cognitive attitude (e.g. a justiﬁed true belief becoming a mere true belief), or the cultivation of an epistemic vice (e.g. closed-mindedness). [Hedberg 2014: 3626-7]

Hedberg [2014: 3628-3633] offers paradigm examples of epistemically supererogatory behaviour: scrupulously double-checking a PIN number; critically reflecting on the day’s subconsciously-formed beliefs; reading an extra article on a philosophical question after one has already read a sufficient amount to form a justified view; reading an encyclopaedia every night instead of watching TV re-runs; reading articles on quantum physics, rather than simply relying on the conclusions of experts. These examples fit well into our model: such behaviour, displaying exceptional diligence in promoting epistemic benefits and averting epistemic harms, is epistemically *good*, but is clearly not epistemically *obligatory*, since there is no question that failure to do these things would warrant any charge of irrationality or threat of exclusion from the epistemic community.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**4. Conclusion**

It is clear then that the concept of supererogation can meaningfully be applied beyond the moral domain. In any given normative domain, X, some behaviour will be X-wise supererogatory if it is X-wise better than some other X-wise permissible alternative. In making room for the supererogatory within some domain, I have suggested, it is crucial to identify a sense of obligation that is clearly distinct from simply being best according to the standards of that domain. I have argued that in at least three other normative domains besides morality – prudence, etiquette, the epistemic – we can indeed make sense of such independent talk of obligation, by reference to the applicability of a particular criticism or negative reaction distinctive of the domain. In each of these domains then, we observe analogues of moral supererogation.[[19]](#footnote-19)

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1. An exception is Hedberg [2014], who argues for the existence of epistemic supererogation, as I discuss in Section 3.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some authors suggest a further necessary condition for supererogation – that the action be praiseworthy. Apparent counterexamples to this include what David Heyd [2011] calls ‘small acts of favour, politeness, consideration and tact’ and more generally morally optional behaviour where ‘no particular effort, cost, or risk is involved’. Heyd suggests that there may simply be two conceptual variations of supererogation. See Archer [2015] for argument that supererogatory acts need not be praiseworthy. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For characterisations of moral obligation and moral wrongness in terms of the appropriateness of feelings of blame and guilt, see Gibbard [1990]; Skorupski [2010]; Mill [1861]. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an account of moral supererogation that makes room for such self-regarding duties, see Kawall [2003]. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An important point is that whether one has responded inadequately to prudential reasons cannot be settled without evaluating the reasons for which one did act. If one acted for sufficiently weighty other-regarding reasons, then one doesn’t merit a charge of foolishness, as when one puts one’s life at risk in order to save several other people’s lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is worth noting that Mill himself here avoids the language of obligation, which he reserves for morality, and which he associates with punishment. It is important for Mill that though being the object of reactions of prudential disapproval is unpleasant, it is nonetheless improper for us to express such disapproval as a way of *punishing* imprudence: ‘we may express our distaste, and we may stand aloof from a person as well as from a thing that displeases us; but we shall not therefore feel called on to make his life uncomfortable… He may be to us an object of pity, perhaps of dislike, but not of anger or resentment’. [Mill 1859: 102]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Many would judge that ‘mere’ etiquette does not provide reasons for action, or provide reasons for negative responses to falling foul of the deontic standards in question. If falling foul of the code will upset or distress my companions, that will (at least normally) be some reason to comply. But the mere fact that some code of etiquette requires me to act in some way does not obviously provide me with any normative reason to act. Sometimes in fact there are good positive reasons to violate a code of etiquette, perhaps to make vivid that others are taking such norms too seriously, imposing unjustified entry costs to some set of opportunities, such as requiring a dinner suit to attend a student dinner where firms are recruiting. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It is for this reason that we might prefer ‘epistemic irrationality’ to ‘epistemic irresponsibility’. ‘Epistemic irrationality’ is not ideal either perhaps, since, as noted below, there are cases of seeming epistemic irrationality where deontic language seems less at home. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Note that assertion is just one way of revealing beliefs. Someone who reveals her belief through non-assertoric language or non-verbal behaviour opens herself to the same response. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mere unreliability in avoiding false beliefs may not be sufficient to warrant a charge of epistemic irrationality in our sense, or for us to judge that an epistemic duty has been breached. In a radical sceptical scenario, a brain-in-a-vat may be systematically unreliable in avoiding false beliefs, while adequately responding to evidence, applying correct rules, and so will not merit such charges. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It is worth emphasising that it is our patterns of belief formation, *our belief-forming behaviour*, the *rules or processes* we deploy in forming beliefs, which are the primary focus of such epistemic evaluation. In calling a belief itself irrational, we do so in response to how it was formed, rather than on the basis of its content: Jones may *irrationally* believe that *p* while Smith *rationally* believes that *p*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. An interesting point of comparison here is with Sinan Dogramaci’s ‘epistemic communism’. On his view too, the function of charges of irrationality is to police belief-forming rules or processes so that we may together reliably acquire true beliefs through testimony.

Dogramaci [2012: 522] emphasises that mere non-normative attributions of unreliability generally won’t be enough to motivate those who stray to change their ways. Similarly, I doubt that merely evaluative observations that someone is epistemically suboptimal would have significant motivational impact. Instead, what is required is the special deontic force of an epistemic *must* that serves to motivate compliance with reliable rules. One must stick to the relevant rules on pain of avoiding the sting of a charge of irrationality.

A distinctive aspect of Dogramaci’s picture is that such epistemic deontic language is used primarily to secure *coordination* in belief-forming rules or processes. We call someone irrational not just when they adopt unreliable rules, but more generally when they adopt *idiosyncratic* rules. When someone forms beliefs on the basis of reliable rules that are idiosyncratic (perhaps because they are counter-intuitive), we cannot safely trust her testimony since we need to check ourselves that the rules are reliable. By contrast, when someone deploys belief-forming rules that we ourselves would have used, we can treat her as an epistemic surrogate – she forms the same beliefs that we would have formed ourselves on the basis of the same evidence. On Dogramaci’s view then, our epistemic deontic language is used to police those in our epistemic community not just into reliable rules, but more specifically into a *common* set of reliable rules. See [Dogramaci 2012]; [Dogramaci 2015]. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Compare Dogramaci [2012: 782]. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hedberg [2014; 3632] questions whether there is any duty to strive to increase our stock of true beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. There may be *some* sense in which we exclude someone who has these other epistemic vices. We may leave him out of our discussions, because he ‘brings nothing to the table’. But the exclusion underlying epistemic duty is more akin to ignoring someone’s assertions. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Epistemic over-caution is rare compared to epistemic rashness. Epistemic over-caution should also be distinguished from a closely related *practical* fault. We may issue a practical criticism of over-caution towards those who refuse to act in the face of uncertainty, who misweigh the possibility of future benefits of learning more against the costs of present inaction. In the case of global warming, for instance, it is foolhardy to insist on greater evidence before deciding to act. But this *practical* vice of over-caution is distinct from the epistemic vice of over-caution (over-reluctance to assent to a proposition in the face of available evidence). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For our purposes, we need not endorse some particular conception of epistemic goodness. (More than one such conception may be useful, in any case). So long as some such conception is in good order, then there will be a phenomenon of epistemically supererogatory behaviour which fits our model: behaviour that is epistemically better than the minimum required to meet one’s epistemic duties, where such duties are characterised by reference to warranted exclusion from the epistemic community. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Epistemically supererogatory *beliefs*, then, are those formed on the basis of such epistemically supererogatory behaviour – e.g. those beliefs acquired by doing epistemically optional reading of encyclopaedias. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This paper was presented at the Universities of Basel, Reading, and York. I am very grateful to the audiences for very useful discussion. For extremely helpful feedback on earlier drafts of the paper, I would like to thank Sebastian Becker, Iason Gabriel, Felix Pinkert, Enzo Rossi, Richard Rowland, Joe Slater, Justin Snedegar, Jesse Tomalty, Jonathan Way, Daniel Whiting, and referees and editors for this journal. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)