

Characterizing the Acts of Righteous Gentiles

A Matter of Duty or Supererogation?

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Abstract

This paper examines the frequently made claim by Holocaust rescuers, otherwise known as “righteous gentiles,” that they merely fulfilled their duty when they endeavored to save the Jews from Hitler and are consequently deserving of no special praise for having attempted to do so. It then argues, against the prevailing view, that there are compelling reasons for trusting this testimony. Finally, it relates this finding to contemporary discussions in ethical theory, in particular challenging J. O. Urmson’s widely influential claim that moral heroes who insist on the obligatory nature of their heroic conduct do not offer this judgment as a “piece of objective reporting,” but as a conviction that reflects a personal ideal. By contrast, this paper contends that the hero’s understanding of duty is not illusory, but, on the contrary, more enhanced than that of the majority owing to its origins in the hero’s virtuous character.

Rescuers’ Conceptions of their Duty

[1] To what extent should we trust the affirmations of Holocaust rescuers who, when questioned about their heroic efforts, tend to assert - adamantly - that they never went above and beyond the call of duty? How should we interpret claims such as, “I was only doing what anyone in my shoes would have done,” when the historical account reveals that the majority of persons who *did* find themselves in the shoes of a would-be rescuer became bystanders rather than incur the risks entailed in saving Jews and others from Hitler? From a common-sensical perspective, it seems plausible to suggest that rescuers are, in spite of their own views to the contrary, deserving of special praise. Indeed, common-sense intuition tells us that rescuers engaged in conduct which is *admirable*, but which, due to the costs involved, exceeds what we should morally *require* of ourselves or anyone else. This judgment is brought into even more relief if we consider that rescuing was no simple, one-time act of heroism: rescuers involved themselves in the plight of their beneficiaries in a sustained way, imperiling not only their own lives, but also those of their families throughout the duration of their efforts.

[2] It is nonetheless my aim in what follows to resist the common-sensical view by arguing that we should not be so quick to dismiss denials on the part of rescuers, otherwise known as “righteous gentiles,” to those who would label their actions “supererogatory.” In particular, I seek to challenge J. O. Urmson’s widely influential claim that moral heroes who insist on the obligatory nature of their heroic conduct do not offer this judgment as a “piece of objective reporting,” but as a conviction that reflects a personal ideal that is morally good, but not morally binding (204). In contrast to this view, I claim that the hero’s understanding of duty may not necessarily be an illusory one. I seek to defend this claim in part through reference to the insights of contemporary sociologists and historians who, unlike others who have engaged in former investigations of a similar nature, have sought to account for the righteous gentile phenomenon in a manner that is in conformity with rescuers’ own self-image.

[3] The question that governs this essay, then, is: “How should we understand the distinctive ‘ought’ of the Holocaust rescuer?” I argue that it is not a universal ought, as are so-called “rock-bottom” duties, such as the duty not to kill.¹ At the same time, I maintain that the rescuer’s ought is more than a personal ideal. Positively stated, it is a subjective ought, every bit as morally *binding* as universal, rock-bottom duties, but *applicable* only to those who have the requisite amount of virtue to be able to perceive it.² Thus, what is distinctive about rescuers is not only their courage, which makes them heroic, but also the *advantage* they have over others in being able to determine what, in the strictest sense, “ought” to be done in a situation in which those around them are either oblivious to, or overwhelmed by, the sheer magnitude of the evil and suffering to which they are exposed. It is not the case that rescuers are self-consciously “falsely modest” in attributing to themselves a greater burden of responsibility for others than the rest of us, as those following Urmson have argued (Heyd: 138). Rather, rescuers are persons with an expanded sense of duty owing to their virtuous character. They are moral exemplars, demonstrations of human beings living the best kind of life, able to see more vividly than those around them both the nature of the evil that confronts them and the kind of human response that such evil warrants. At the same time, rescuers are ordinary persons, not pictures of perfection. The daring and noble life to which they have habituated themselves is one that is in principle accessible to everyone.

Characterizing the Self-Perceptions of Righteous Gentiles: The Case of Le Chambon

[4] It seems, then, that while the contention that righteous gentiles demonstrated great courage and selflessness in rescuing is generally accepted without argument, the debate about whether or not they ought to be regarded as *moral authorities* is by no means settled. If we are to rely on Urmson’s commentary about the moral hero as a guide, then we must conclude that the rescuers’ virtuous character served to impede them from perceiving their duty in an objective fashion. According to an Urmsonian analysis, rescuers acted *as if* rescuing was obligatory because they possessed traits of character that enabled them, either effortlessly or through self-discipline, to overcome their fear and drive to self preservation, even though *in reality* they had no such duty (204-5). We can contrast this view with that of Camus’s Dr. Rieux. Camus suggests that Rieux, as one who perceptively evaluates himself as capable of making a difference in Oran by remaining to fight the plague, is at the same time one who is qualified to judge whether or not he has a moral duty to stay. This sentiment is best reflected in Rieux’s own words: “The essential thing was to save the greatest number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation, and to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical” (Camus: 133). If rescuers, like Rieux, did not exceed the bounds of

¹The question of whether or not there are even minimal, “rock-bottom” duties, is of course itself a hotly contested claim. Such duties would correspond to those “human rights” about which there is widespread cross-cultural agreement, at least at the level of content if not the level of justification. I do not debate the arguments in favor of or against the existence of such universal norms here. I wish merely to point out that if such norms do exist, then it is sensible to suggest that they are distinct from non-universal, agent specific obligations. In this case, “duty” would be *at least*, but not be *limited to*, a universalizable minimal moral requirement.

²I concur with Lawrence Blum’s judgment that Holocaust rescuers should be characterized as “noteworthy virtuous moral agents” who see the world differently than those around them, owing both to their individual character development and the influence of the communities in which they live (See 167-69.)

human expectation in their actions, then there are grounds for arguing, against Urmson, that we ought not merely to admire them, but attempt to emulate them, and that their achievements represent our own potential self-fulfillment. The question is whether Rieux, and figures like him, are in a position to make this judgment about themselves, or, by extension, anyone else. Does the situation in which Rieux finds himself, we are led to ask, reflect the predicament of *ordinary* persons?

[5] It is no accident of history that Camus wrote the majority of *The Plague* during 1942 in the little Protestant town on the Lignon River in Southeastern France, called Le Chambon. Like Camus's hero, the villagers of Le Chambon perceived clearly the threat posed by a given evil and, through their compassionate coolness and organized persistence, served as an example for how it could be possible for human beings to counter its drastic effects. The rescue activities of the Chambonnais are captured by Philip Hallie, in his inspirational chronicle, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*.³ Relying largely on the accounts of the Chambonnais themselves, Hallie relates the unlikely event of a poor town coming to focus in its entirety, and to the exclusion of all other activities, on a single good purpose: the sheltering of hunted innocents. The Chambonnais gave refuge to five thousand Jews in total, slightly more than the amount of residents who lived in the town (Sauvage).⁴ They did so, furthermore, in protest of the policies of the Vichy government, without being intimidated by the watchful eye of a nearby division of the Nazi SS. What is perhaps most special about the Chambonnais, however, is the humility with which they conducted themselves. Hiding and caring for Jews, while requiring a great deal of creativity and planning, were activities that were carried out unglamorously and simply: Jews disappeared into the forests and basements of the village as methodically as garments were hung on clothespins to dry. The harboring of refugees was not discussed; it is simply what happened at Le Chambon, as a part of the villagers' daily routine. In the words of some Chambonnais, the harboring of refugees was a "kitchen struggle," contributed to by women and children as much as by men, by the community as much as by its leadership (Hallie: 91).

[6] This is not to say that the leader of the Chambonnais, pastor André Trocmé, did not play an indispensable role in mobilizing his community to resist the Nazis. One of the refugees, Daniel

³Hallie's title is an allusion to Deuteronomy 19:10: "Therefore I command you, you shall set apart three cities . . . then you shall add three other cities to these three, lest innocent blood be shed in your land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, and so the guilt of bloodshed be on you." In this Biblical passage, Hallie explains, "it is people guilty of what we now call involuntary manslaughter who are protected in the cities of refuge until they can be brought to a fair trial. But the Jews were being persecuted not because of any crime, voluntary or involuntary, but only because they were Jews. [The Chambonnais] must have felt that these modern Jews were all the more deserving of refuge because of their utter innocence of any crime or even any charge" (109). Le Chambon became an authentic "city of refuge," known by Jews and non-Jews alike as the safest place for Jews in Europe (125, 153).

⁴This statistic is revealed in Pierre Sauvage's film, *Weapons of Spirit*. Sauvage, an American film-maker, was born in Le Chambon of parents being sheltered by the Chambonnais during the war. Sauvage portrays the historical Le Chambon in its impoverished simplicity, conveying in particular the ability of the Chambonnais to disregard their poverty and give whatever they could spare to refugees. The phenomenon of the least well-off giving the most in a crisis has a modern analogue in the recent crisis in Southeastern Europe, where the majority of exiled Kosovars were taken in by the country of Albania, the poorest in Europe. In the latter example, of course, it is important to bear in mind that the Albanians were related to the Kosovars. The Jews, by contrast, were strangers to the Chambonnais. See the discussion in Finn.

Isaac, compared Trocmé's presence to "a glorious performance of Beethoven's *Eroica*: it lifted you, excited you, warmed you. It made you rise to your own highest level of joy and vitality. And it did this not by command but by contagion" (Hallie: 159). The Chambonnais did not need to have Trocmé's convictions *explained* to them in order to do the right thing. By Trocmé's virtuous example, they came to understand that they could not simultaneously appease their conscience and their government. They learned, for instance, that at times they had to lie to officials, forge documents, and defy the Vichy police in other ways in order to help (Hallie: 22).⁵ That these activities made them criminals, however, did not in their perception alter the *overriding* obligation to rescue. Informed by Trocmé, as well as by their own developing character, the Chambonnais acquired an unshakable confidence in their conduct, its incompatibility with the current laws of France notwithstanding.

[7] Beyond this burden, however, was the repetitive and exhausting nature of rescuing itself. Hallie introduces the French noun *surmenage*, in English translated as "overwork," to describe the mental fatigue that ceaselessly grated on the villagers, especially André's wife Magda, who complemented her husband's spiritual and organizational role in Le Chambon by undertaking the material tasks of feeding, hiding, and caring for refugees. Her vigilant readiness to respond to whomever might solicit her care was exhausting. As Hallie explains:

Interminably involved with refugees and their special, often terrible problems, she also managed the big house, her energetic children, and her ever-inventive husband, although "managing" him would have been a full time job in itself in a normal woman's life. . . . Many a day she would not feel like eating because she was so *surmenée* (tired and strained). And so she lost much weight and aged terribly. Sometimes all she could feel was weary disgust over the endlessness of the work (149).

[8] As with Rieux, Magda Trocmé exhibits what one could call an "emergency room" ethic. She exists "on call," as it were, in wait of the next crisis. The doctor who works in the emergency room accepts as a given that there will always be more patients than he and his colleagues can accommodate; he can only do his best, committing himself as earnestly as he can to each new victim that walks through the hospital doors. Magda was this kind of person: empathetic, boundlessly giving and pragmatic. Furthermore, she never considered her actions to be optional or praiseworthy. As Hallie describes:

Not only is she reluctant to use the word *love* when talking about her work with the refugees; she is also reluctant to use words like *good* and *saintly*. She does not believe that there is such a thing as a moral nobility that sets off some people - the saints - from others - the common, decent people. . . . There are only people who accept responsibility, and those who do not. For her, as for them, a person either opens the door or closes it in the face of a victim (154).

⁵Hallie discusses the difficulty that the Chambonnais, and Magda Trocmé in particular, had in coming to terms with the fact that some of their values would have to be compromised if they were to render aid to the Jews. Long after the war Magda still spoke of "our lost candor" as the price paid for lying and making false identity cards (Hallie: 126).

[9] Magda was among the large majority of the Chambonnais who dismissed attributions of moral praise. “In almost every interview I had with [the Chambonnais],” recounts Hallie, “there came a moment when he or she pulled back from me but looked firmly into my eyes and said, ‘How can you call us good? We were doing what had to be done. Who else could help them? And what has all this to do with goodness? . . . You must understand that it was the most natural thing in the world to help these people’” (20-21).

The Righteous Gentile Phenomenon

[10] Hallie’s conclusions are corroborated by extensive studies conducted by social scientists and historians who have studied the “righteous gentile” phenomenon. (Friedman: 1978; Fogelman: 1994; Monroe 1996; Oliner and Oliner 1988; Tec: 1986; Paldiel: 1996). Testimonies offered by rescuers reveal an abundance of statements like the following:

I don’t think I did anything that special. I think what I did is what everybody normally should be doing. . . . It is common sense and common caring for people (Monroe 1996: 104-5).

Oh, I don’t know if I’m the world’s most desirable citizen. Let’s not get too focused on me. We live in one world. We are one people. Working together, we basically are the same (Oliner and Oliner: 113).

I did nothing unusual; anyone would have done the same thing in my place (Oliner and Oliner: 228).

It’s pretty near impossible not to help (Monroe, Barton and Klingemann: 103).

[11] Did rescuers really do what was commonplace, nothing out of the usual? In answering this question, it is of course important to mention that no one disputes that rescuers were among an extremely small minority. They themselves were aware that the majority of others similarly circumstanced did not risk their lives and those of their families to save the Jews (Oliner and Oliner: 118). How, then, do rescuers account for the infrequency of their deeds while insisting at the same time that they were motivated by the most minimal standard of decency? Their way of doing so seems to be to attribute a certain short-sightedness to non-rescuers. When they assert the “impossibility” of not helping, knowing the *de facto* falsehood of this judgment, they implicitly state that those who did not help, in effect, acted against themselves. In the words of Sartre, they acted in “bad faith” (Sartre: 59). That is, they engaged in an inauthentic or self-deceptive refusal to admit to themselves the full extent of their freedom, thereby acting contrary to how they otherwise would have had to act had they known better. This is not to say that, according to rescuers, bystanders are necessarily to be blamed, although it is not to release them from blame either. It is, however, to make a distinction between lacking insight and knowingly committing wrongdoing.⁶

⁶Monroe explains rescuers’ unique way of perceiving the world in terms of their distinctive “canonical expectations,” or their expectations of what should occur (i.e. what is “right” or “proper”) in the normal course of human behavior. While everybody has canonical expectations of some sort, these vary cross-culturally and among people with different capacities for altruism. For especially altruistic individuals or groups, certain altruistic acts will not seem out of the ordinary. Monroe writes:

[12] Kristen Monroe, Michael Barton and Ute Klingemann explain the enhanced moral perception of rescuers by attributing to them a special worldview according to which all persons are seen as part of a common humanity (118; Monroe 1991: 395) They cite John Donne to enforce the point:

No man is an island, Intire of itself:
every man is a piece of the Continent. A part of the Maine; . . .
Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in Mankinde;
and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee (John Donne, *Devotions, XVII*).

According to their findings, rescuers made neither a distinction between their own welfare and that of others, nor between special relations and the impersonal other. The proposal here advanced is meant to supplant the dominant model in the social sciences, commonly known as "rational actor theory," according to which all human behavior, including altruism, "can be viewed as involving participants who maximize their utility from a stable set of preferences" (Becker: 14, quoted by Monroe, Barton and Klingemann: 120).⁷ In rational actor theory, self-interest is what guides agents' choices. In terms of rescue activities, rational actor theory interprets the decision to help the Jews as one motivated, for example, by group ties or by identification with the persecuted group (Monroe, Barton and Klingemann: 117-18). The case of righteous gentiles, argue Monroe and her colleagues, undercuts the plausibility of rational actor theory because of the sense of "connectedness" rescuers felt for Jews in spite of the ways in which Jews were cast as foreigners in Hitler's Europe. The inadequacy of the prevailing model is further supported by the consideration that rescuers knew that if they were caught then their family members would be likely to suffer the consequences with them (Oliner and Oliner: 125-27).

[13] Neither familiarity nor empathy with the person in need therefore seems to account for the acts of rescuers; while for rescuers there was indeed a bond established between the altruist and the person helped, this bond was seen as *universal*, "available to everyone merely by virtue of their existence" (Monroe 1996: 234). Dismissing self-interest, even disguised as particularistic empathetic connection, as a factor in rescuers' deliberations, Monroe proceeds to attribute to rescuers a distinctive way of looking at humanity, which she calls the "altruistic perspective" (Monroe 1996: 197ff). By virtue of having this perspective, she argues, rescuers were able to bypass cost-benefit analysis as a means of determining the boundaries of moral duty. Their decision to render aid was a simple one, requiring no calculation. Rescuing formed such a central

The expectations about what is ordinary and right and proper translates into the idea that such behavior requires no explanation. When quizzed about it by analysts, people are often puzzled; when pressed further, they often explain it though a quantifier ("Everybody does it") or through reference to a deontic model ("That's what you're supposed to do"). I found precisely this kind of response when I spoke with people who had rescued Jews from the Nazis. When I asked what made them risk their lives for strangers, they usually looked at me with some surprise and replied, "But what else could I do?" Their behavior was ordinary to them, although it seemed exceptional to me and was certainly exceptional statistically during the war (1996: 11).

Canonical expectations are thus not merely descriptive, but normative: it is "good" when the world operates in the expected way. According to Monroe, to understand altruism, we must ask what the altruist expects ought to occur under ordinary circumstances. These expectations will differ significantly from those of nonaltruists.

⁷Monroe, Barton and Klingemann list a number of references from which they formulate a picture of "rational actor theory" (117-18). Among the most helpful of these are Withrobe, Margolis, and Kolm.

core of rescuers' identity that it left them no choice in their behavior toward others (Monroe, Barton and Klingemann: 119). In this sense, rescuing is better interpreted as an act of self-fulfillment rather than one of self-sacrifice. Rescuers were heroic not so much because they overcame their fear and drive to self-preservation - although this may be how *we* interpret their heroism - but more because they had the wisdom to perceive correctly the responsibility that life had unexpectedly thrust upon them, as well as had the courage to actually meet the demands of such responsibility in their actions. Through exhibiting wisdom and courage, rescuers were able to flourish fully as human beings.

Characterizing the Acts of Righteous Gentiles

[14] The observations of Hallie, Monroe and others working on the righteous gentile phenomenon help us to come to a determination about how we ought to characterize the actions of Holocaust rescuers insofar as they call into question the standard assumption in ethical theory that there is a universal algorithm for distinguishing acts of duty from acts of supererogation. The standard approach categorizes altruistic actions as either "obligatory" or "optional" by appealing to a cost-benefit analysis that aims to "specify in a formula applicable to all individuals the conditions under which they have duties and the conditions under which they are absolved from duties because of undue burden" (Blum: 173). But while for most of us, giving to others *does* entail requisite deliberations about the costs we perceive ourselves and our loved ones to be able to incur, rescuers made an appeal to no such calculus. They simply saw someone in need, and the loving deed was done. Given their espousal of what Monroe calls the "altruistic perspective," to not have acted thus could only be regarded by them as an egregious breach of duty. It seems, then, that the same act, rescuing, should be regarded as obligatory in some circumstances and supererogatory in others, depending on the particular agent who considers performing the act. Yet, this judgment will require still further qualification, for it does not yet address the disturbing fact that there were so many bystanders that could - and arguably should - have acted otherwise. If the "altruistic perspective" that Monroe and others describe corresponds to a worldview shared only by a few, then how can we meaningfully decide what, precisely, ought to be required of most people who find themselves in a position of being a potential rescuer?

[15] Part of the problem rests with the idea of perception itself. Rescuers are propelled by their unique way of looking at the world. They perceive vividly, while others perceive palely, or not at all, their responsibility to a common humanity (on "pale" and "vivid" beliefs, see Kagan: 283-91, 299-300, 304-7). Thus, ironically, their conviction that they are no different than anyone else (and the corresponding notion that "anybody in their shoes would have done the same thing") is one that is particular to them alone. In a very important sense, they are "heroic" because of the degree to which they view themselves as ordinary. Others, with a less robust sense of moral responsibility, see the hero's actions as noteworthy, and certainly as praiseworthy. But from the rescuer's perspective, such a judgment is the result of an understandable though limited and perhaps morally complacent outlook. This conclusion is supported by the response of rescuers who were asked to account for the limitations of others who had the opportunity to help the Jews, but who were unable to reach across the boundaries of ethnicity and nationality. According to them, such bystanders lacked the capacity to give a human face to misery; they did not "see" others but rather objectified them (Monroe 1996: 215-16). Not "seeing" in this respect made them cognitively deficient, precluding them from acting as rescuers themselves did. Rescuers' capacity to see Jewish refugees - filthy, emaciated and exhausted from fleeing the Nazis - as human beings

enabled them both to appreciate the imperative to offer their assistance and to cultivate the courage necessary to carry through the moral task at hand. Rescuers were *heroic*, and thus could be distinguished from bystanders, because they possessed this capacity in abundance.

[16] I have arrived at a controversial conclusion, for while I have suggested, against the commonsensical view, that we ought not simply to understand the phenomenon of rescuing as an instance of supererogatory behavior, I have also claimed that, given the costs involved, rescuing becomes one's duty, strictly obligatory as all moral duties are, only for those who have the requisite amount of virtue to be able to perceive it as such. Although there were compelling reasons that bystanders ought to have intervened on behalf of the Jews, these reasons were outweighed from the point of view of the bystander by the costliness of rescuing and the risk in which rescue efforts potentially placed one's family. Lacking the virtuous insight to be able to perceive the *overriding* moral urgency of rescuing, bystanders were caught in a moral conflict, consigned to deliberate about the extent to which costs to self and family ought to take priority over the benefits to a recipient who was the stranger. The greater those costs in the scenario, the more compelling the bystander's case to regard rescue efforts as supererogatory. Righteous gentiles, whose view of reality enabled them legitimately to maintain the irrelevance of such costs to the question of whether or not they were morally required to rescue, had an equally compelling case for regarding their conduct as obligatory.

[17] This conclusion warrants a final qualification, however. In claiming that bystanders lacked the rescuers' capacity to see the overriding moral nature of the claim placed on them by the faceless, destitute, Jewish other, I am *not* at the same time claiming that bystanders were released from the obligation of *disposing* themselves to become the kind of people who could come to possess this capacity over time. From the righteous gentile phenomenon, we learn the lesson that rescuers, as they themselves attest so consistently, were not born saints, but ordinary people doing what was possible for anyone to do once coming to share their way of looking at things. What is for us "above and beyond" at one time in our lives, I am suggesting, becomes at a subsequent stage of our moral development part of what we ought to do. The follower of Urmson will object at this point, claiming that if morality is seen as something which can come to demand more of us over time, then when people fall short of its requirements, as they inevitably will, they will also become frustrated and say to themselves that they might as well obey none of morality's requirements (Kagan: 35). In response, I would comment that we never know before the fact how much we will be able to give of ourselves, and consequently how much we will be able to redefine for ourselves what is "duty" and what is "supererogation." I would grant that there were some bystanders who under any set of circumstances could never have come to possess the virtuous character of rescuers. I submit with thinkers such as Albert Camus and Emmanuel Levinas, however, that the possibility to "be otherwise" is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the human condition. In light of this prophetic sentiment, the rescuer's courage can be interpreted as a daringness to be otherwise, or as in Iris Murdoch's words, an "operation of wisdom and love" that results in our "seeing the order of the world in the light of the Good and revisiting the true, or more true, conceptions of that which we formerly misconceived" (95).

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