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The Moral Significance of Sacrifice

Joseph Raz

On the Moral Significance of sacrifice

By J Raz

The paper offers a few reflections on moral implications of making sacrifices and of possible duties to make sacrifices. It does not provide an exhaustive or a systematic account of the subject. There are too many disparate questions, and too many distant perspectives from which to examine them to allow for a systematic let alone an exhaustive account, and too many factual issues that I am not aware of. Needless to say, the observations that follow are in part stimulated by the popularity of some views that are mistaken. I will not however examine any specific view or account of these matters. The aim is to provide some pointers that will be helpful when considering specific issues regarding the moral significance of sacrifice.

I.

I take 'making a sacrifice' to mean knowingly giving up something, of such value to the agent that foregoing it would be deprivation or a hardship, for the sake of something or someone that one values, other than oneself or one's interests. In the long run, a sacrifice could turn out to enhance one's interests etc., but if it was done in order to enhance one's interests, it would not be a sacrifice[so long as was not done in order to do so]. Benefits from a sacrifice can of course happen accidentally or unforeseeably. But they can be foreseeable. I may make a sacrifice in order to save my child's life, and his life's eventual richness and happiness may greatly enrich my life. So long as in no way did I do it in order to avoid a disaster *for my life* it was a sacrifice. Needless to say, as with anything that depends on the agent's intention, there will be many cases regarding which it will be hard or impossible to determine whether they involve a sacrifice or not. What is clear is that a gift or any self-deprivation undertaken in order to be given an honour or a benefit is not a sacrifice even if the benefit does not come – it was just a bad deal.

My interest is in the moral significance of making a great sacrifice. Needless to say, sacrifices may take many different shapes and forms, and also be of different degrees. So I will use 'a great sacrifice' stipulatively to include ones that seriously and permanently impair one's health or render one seriously disabled, and those that prevent one from carrying on with the life one has. By 'the life one has' I mean the sort of life one is embarked on, where that

sort is identified by the features that are of central importance to the person whose life it is: so, if both Abe and Bob are hospital nurses, it could be that being a nurse is (part of) the life of one of them and not of the other, if one of them cherishes being a nurse whereas the other does not care about it in any way other than as a source of income. I will not discuss the sacrifice or the giving up of one's life, even though it is commonly thought to be the supreme sacrifice. I believe with Epicurus that death is nothing to us, that is, nothing to the person who is dying, or at least that that is generally the case. Therefore, generally giving up one's life is a sacrifice only when it is a hardship or deprivation for people or causes dear to the person who is giving up his life. Given that this is not the occasion to consider this view about the value of staying alive¹, I will avoid discussing this kind of sacrifice.

Sacrifices can be or fail to be virtuous, obligatory, something one has reason to do, and much else. To simplify matters I will often refer to them as being or not being moral requirements. I use the term to fudge the question of the precise moral status involved. Saying something like: if a great sacrifice is morally required it has one of the possible moral statuses[?] namely it is virtuous, obligatory, supererogatory, etc., and it does not matter for current purposes which status it has.

From the point of view of individuals involved there is a big difference between actions that risk ending up with a large sacrifice for the agent, e.g. loss of limb or being kidnapped, and actions that essentially involve making a sacrifice, such as resigning an irreplaceable job, or where the sacrifice is a virtually certain side effect of the action intended. Where there is a known significant risk of a sacrifice which does not materialise no sacrifice occurred, though the agent was ready and willing to make a sacrifice. Where there was a known risk and the risk materialised, so that the agent suffered a significant loss and hardship we do correctly say that the agent made a big sacrifice. In spite of the considerable difference between the different cases much of the time I will lump them together. This is not to deny the importance of the felt differences for agents, and the consequential policy differences when designing or controlling circumstances that call for sacrifices. Yes, it is preferable to ask people to run the risk of a sacrifice than to make a sacrifice outright, etc. But much of the time the differences would not matter to the discussion of the paper.

2.

¹ I argued for it in Chapter 3 of Value, Respect and Attachments.

Generally speaking, making a sacrifice is not in itself morally significant. Of course, we sometime refer to sacrifices made as an indication of how much one values the cause or person. But this is just an instance of the general way of assessing how much one cares or values something by how much one is willing to do to secure it or to avoid losing it etc. As one among several indicators it serves well, but there is nothing special in mentioning a sacrifice in that way.

Is it wrong to make some sacrifices? Yes, but that is not specific to sacrifices either. It is wrong to make silly sacrifices or badly judged ones, or those that are irresponsible towards oneself or another (one's child).

Is the making of a justified, well-judged sacrifice saintly? Not necessarily; not even if it was one's duty to make the sacrifice, and not even if one made it for the right reasons, say abandoning one's career and moving to another town to look after an aged parent, when there is no satisfactory alternative. One may resent having to make the sacrifice, hate the parent whose need made it necessary, hate oneself for not being able to do better, etc. And in such cases there is nothing saintly about the sacrifice.²

The manner in which one makes the sacrifice and the web of beliefs and attitudes surrounding it determine what it implies regarding one's moral dispositions and one's moral character. But that is so for any of one's actions and omissions. Again, there is nothing special about sacrifice here. But is not the making of a sacrifice necessary for the action to be anything like saintly? This question requires a broad ranging examination of the degree to which and the ways in which acts, activities and omissions reflect on or manifest established dispositions and character traits. It cannot be undertaken here. I for one do not think that even extreme moral virtue can only be manifested by making a sacrifice. But I will not argue for that view here.

3.

Is one ever morally required to make a sacrifice, or to make a serious sacrifice, say to sacrifice the life one has?

Clearly, common opinion allows that sacrificing the life one has can be one's moral duty. After all, common opinion has it that people have a moral duty to volunteer for military service under certain circumstances, even though doing so regularly forces people to

² I am not referring to cases in which one overcomes negative attitudes of this kind, but rather to occasions in which one succumbs to them in thought and feelings.

abandon the life they have, without a secure prospect of being able to resume them later on.

I mentioned that the very act of joining the armed forces is often a major sacrifice. Needless to say, in the course of serving in the armed forces one may be required to sacrifice health, limbs, or life. The same is true of people who join the armed services without conscription, or extend their membership after conscription, as well as of police officers, fire brigade officers, and some others.

These are instructive illustrations for several reasons. First, analogical reasoning relying on some such cases makes a plausible case for there being a moral duty to make serious sacrifices in some cases. In many of these cases, the moral duty follows the imposition of a legal duty. That is, there are circumstances where there is no moral duty to join the armed forces except that once there is such a legal duty, that becomes also a moral duty. In other cases, there is a moral duty to do something, even if it involves making serious sacrifice, a duty that is independent of any legal or other institutional duty. But let us consider first the cases where a legal or institutional duty comes first.

First, to clarify the obvious: It is not my contention that whatever the law requires becomes, as a result, a moral duty; only that sometimes this is the case. Second, there is no denying that sometimes when the law's requirements involve making serious sacrifices, that very fact engenders resentment and grudging obedience, as well as a tendency to evade or simply break the law. But often enough it does not. Rather, most people join in the belief that the requirement is justified, being a civic duty or something of the kind. They know that life involves duties to others, and duties to the community, and that they personally bear their share of the burden of such duties. I do not mention these facts to suggest that these attitudes are self-verifying, that people have these duties because they believe that they have them. My sole point is that these facts remind us that the thought that morality cannot require serious sacrifices because making them is more than can be expected of ordinary human beings, that making them without resentment, or making them at all, can be expected only of saintly people, is simply empirically false.

It seems not too difficult to understand how the making of sacrifices can become part of the fabric of life. Here is part of the story: In principle we all know or can know when sacrifices will be expected of us. We know that if a fire breaks out in the next door building we may have to run into a burning building to try to save trapped people. But we don't know if and

when such a fire will break out. One difference with conscription, when it is part of the regular law so that all people who meet certain conditions are liable to a predefined period of conscription when they reach a certain age, is that people know or can know of the sacrifice expected of them years ahead of time. A second difference is that while the folklore of heroism and sacrifice typically concerns individuals acting singly or in small groups (though not always: remember the Battle of Thermopylae) conscription and other legally required sacrifices affect large segments of the population, selected or determined in a fair way (at least they could be so determined. A third important difference is that the legal requirements are, as we say, backed by sanctions, formal and informal.

The sanctions make it easier for people to make the required sacrifices, and this for at least two reasons. First, they can see or come to believe that they have no choice, the sanctions, formal such as fines or community service or imprisonment, and the informal ones, loss of reputation, adverse social reactions, loss of face, not to say loss of one's job, etc. ., mean that in many of these cases one has, or feels one has no choice but to make the required sacrifice. Besides, the fact that the requirement is enforced, as we say, by law, assures people that they are not taken advantage of by shirkers who benefit from their sacrifices, while not sacrificing anything themselves. The law, when functioning properly, solves the assurance problem, making it psychologically easier for people to carry the burdens allotted to them.

The fact that conscription and other legally enforced sacrifices apply to large sections of the population also makes sacrifice easier, as it is easier to act as part of a similarly oriented body of people. One derives strength and support from sharing the conditions one is in with others. The advantages of the first difference are also obvious. Knowing in advance of the sacrifice and its general character makes it possible to take it into account when thinking about and planning one's future. It may even enable one to change its character as a sacrifice. For example, one may decide on a military career. As a result the period during which one is conscripted is no longer a sacrifice of the life one has. It becomes the life one has. Many people find less dramatic solutions: while their time in the armed services is a disruption of their normal life as it was and as it will be, they try to use the time in the military to acquire some skills that interest them for their own sake, or for future use, etc. Even when no such avenue to lessen the sacrifice are available, it is easier to bear when its place in one's life is predictable.

4.

Could it be that one may be morally required to make big sacrifices only if there is a legal or other institutional requirement to that effect? One reason to doubt this possibility is that so far as the three differences listed above are concerned, the differences they mark are a matter of degree. Almost universally people's moral views are shared among large groups. So that whether or not they are institutionally enshrined they are known and understood by whole groups of people, thus having a public definition even when they are not legally defined. That definition eases the burden of decisions when a sacrifice is required, and means that people's conduct in making required sacrifices is socially supported, and failure to make them is socially disapproved. Without denying that conditions are different when the moral duties are legally enshrined, one has to admit that there are many similarities between the social recognition and the legal recognition of moral duties, similarities that make compliance with those duties easier for individuals, partly by enabling them to incorporate the duties into the parts of their lives that provide meaning and a sense of fulfilment, and partly by providing a background of support for compliance and pressure against violations of moral requirements.

That great sacrifice is sometimes morally required leaves open the possibility that it cannot be something one has a strict duty to do, or that if there is a strict duty to make a great sacrifice, failure to fulfil that duty is excusable, and if not altogether excusable then at least any blame attached to the failure is mitigated by the fact that it is a failure to make a great sacrifice. Various considerations can tempt people into such views. One of them relies on some thoughts about the relations between motivation and sacrifice. But what thoughts?

One assumption is that there is a reverse correlation between degree of sacrifice and degree of motivation: the greater a sacrifice the less willing is one to make it. It can be given a form which makes it close to true. For example, it may be taken to say that if one can achieve a goal one is set on either by doing A or by doing B, and the agent believes that the only difference between them is that A involves a smaller sacrifice on his part than B then the agent will choose to realise his goal by doing A rather than by doing B. Most of the time agents will have that preference, but not always. Sometimes an agent will pursue his goal by doing B because (a) that will enable him to feel more confident that he has done all he could have done, or because (b) he would feel that his (greater) sacrifice would expiate his guilt for being in a condition where he has to pursue that goal, etc. Sometimes the failure of the assumption may be attributable to an irrationality in the agent (as perhaps in case (a) above), but that is not always so (a sense of expiation through sacrifice is not necessarily irrational).

Once we develop the assumption to make it true it turns out to be nothing more than (a direct derivation from) the truism that there is no case for incurring greater disadvantages than would likely suffice to secure one's goal. It does not tell us anything about the connection between sacrifice and motivation.

What some people have in mind is (among other variants on this thought) something like this: suppose that people who are C have a duty to achieve goal G. Doing so may require different things of those people. Some of them could achieve the goal only if they make a great sacrifice. But normally people cannot be expected to make great sacrifices. Human nature is such that one can rarely and/or with great difficulty be motivated to make a great sacrifice. Therefore, either that moral duty does not apply to them, or they are excused if they do not fulfil it, etc. However, many of the earlier reflections aimed to show that that assumption, that view of the connection between great sacrifice and motivation is mistaken. Hence the questions about the scope of moral duties, and the grounds for excuses are not affected by such views about sacrifice.

We need to understand when is the making of great sacrifices particularly difficult to motivate. It is likely that what makes great sacrifices difficult also makes compliance with moral duties in other cases difficult. Not surprisingly, it turns out that many factors affect the motivation to comply with moral requirements. We gain some understanding of their nature by examining the conditions, like those surveyed above, which help with complying with demanding moral duties: the ability to predict when one may encounter them, and to find ways of integrating them into one's life; the support one gains from the common opinion of one's community, and of course of one's friends, etc. The absence of such factors creates the emotional, and therefore the motivational difficulty of facing up to one's obligations. These, however, are the conditions of a wholesome life in general: if one is at peace with oneself one can find that complying with moral requirements enables one to affirm one's sense of self-respect and self-worth. Being consumed with self-doubt, self-loathing, or guilt makes one more conflicted, more inclined to self-destructive behaviour including immoral conduct (or what one takes to be immoral). Being at odds with the society one lives in breeds alienation, and negative-destructive attitudes, and drives one to extremes of defiance or of capitulation to demands that are not understood, and compliance with which increases the negative attitudes rather than infusing one with a sense that one's life has a meaning. One can go on and detail the conditions that best sustain moral life – "best sustain" because there is no suggestion here that one cannot lead a

morally exemplary life without them – however, there is no point in adding details. The general picture is fairly clear. The moral life is best sustained when moral requirements and people's attitudes towards them are integrated in what I will call a broadly understood support network of psychological and social factors encompassing all other aspects of life. It is a mistake to try to understand moral attitudes and moral life as an autonomous sphere, detached from all the rest.

One has to be lucky to find oneself at home in oneself and to be in a society that is moral and to which one feels an unconflicted sense of belonging. Saying that is no more than saying that the moral life is a social life, and that one is not assured of living in conditions that support both wholesomeness and morality. Of course, even the best support networks leave one struggling with oneself on occasion. There are no conditions, however perfect, in which one can avoid solitary struggle with one's conscience and emotions. These struggles may be occasioned when facing the demand to make a sacrifice, but they are as or more likely to occur when confronting misfortunes that, as it were, inflict sacrifices (losses that would have been sacrifices had they been the results of one's intentional action), or other circumstances that cast the success and direction of one's life in doubt.