

7:00 AM-8:00 AM

Beyond the Call of Duty

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You are mistaken if you think that a man who is good for anything at all ought to consider the risks of life or death.

Plato, Apology

Do you understand the difference between dying for something and dying for nothing?

Jack Bauer, Season Six

In April, 2007, 15 Royal Navy sailors and marines were taken prisoner and held hostage for nearly two weeks by Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Their crime? Allegedly crossing over into Iranian waters. Within 48 hours a British sailor was plastered all over Iranian TV publicly confessing that the Britons were entirely at fault in the matter. Another sailor wrote a letter—no doubt under some duress—calling for the UK to withdraw all of its troops from Iraq. Then to cap things off, the British soldiers were paraded in front of the Iranian President, where they gave him a big “thumbs up” before being allowed to go home. If you were one of the captives, what would you have done? Would you have cooperated with your captors? Or would you have resisted them, possibly putting your own life at risk?

Not surprisingly, the British people recoiled in shame. As one commentator put it, “The honorable thing would have been to renounce their coerced behavior, denounce the Iranians’ use of them for propaganda, and acknowledge that anything they endured was nothing

compared to the sacrifices others have made.” Sadly, for the Tehran 15, “their personal desires took precedence over their obligations.”¹

In far more dramatic fashion, *24* routinely confronts its viewers with life and death scenarios in which the show’s characters must put themselves in serious danger, risk death, and in some cases make the ultimate sacrifice. Ryan Chappelle must agree to Stephen Saunders’ demand for his execution, otherwise there will be further virus attacks on the public. If Lynn McGill doesn’t shut down a remotely inaccessible computer program in a room full of deadly Sentox nerve gas, Chloe won’t be able to use the A/C to flush the contaminated areas, and everyone in CTU will die. When Cheng’s men demand to know who the Director of CTU is, Nadia Yasir hesitates and Milo Pressman steps forward in her place. He is killed at once.

Without a doubt, however, it is Jack Bauer who is most often called upon to engage in acts of extreme self-sacrifice. Indeed, if it weren’t for Jack’s personal sacrifices, the city of Los Angeles would have long since ceased to exist! An atomic bomb must be flown out into the desert and detonated. Jack volunteers to pilot the plane. He lets Kingsley’s men torture him rather than reveal the location of the chip containing the source files for the Cyprus audio recording—files that show the recording to be a forgery and therefore no basis at all for President Palmer’s launching the planned nuclear retaliation.

But isn’t it asking too much to require anyone, even Jack Bauer, to give up his life for others? Isn’t it precisely because Jack goes “beyond the call of duty” that we consider his actions praiseworthy and his character heroic? He does what duty does not require, and we love and admire him for it. Still, this can seem paradoxical. If what Jack does is good, then why isn’t it something he ought to do, something we could blame him for not doing? If we answer, “It’s his job,” then that seems to diminish the merit of his actions. We don’t normally call someone a hero if they’re just doing their job. Moreover, if death puts an absolute end to us, blots us out of existence, how could anyone be morally obligated to give up their brief fling with existence for the sake of others—especially those they don’t even know?

1 Robert Sibley, “The Ugly Consequence of Our Narcissism,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 11, 2007.

Soldiers, Grenades, and Heroes

To consider these questions, let's take a look at how philosophers typically divide up moral actions. An action is said to be morally obligatory if it's something one ought to do; it's a good thing to do and bad not to do. For example, if Jack promises Wayne Palmer he won't give the Chinese an FB subcircuit board—yes, the one containing details on the entire Russian defense system—in exchange for Audrey Raines, then Jack has a moral obligation to follow through. He has a duty to the president to keep his word. If he doesn't, he is subject to our moral censure or disapproval.

A moral prohibition is the flipside of a moral obligation. It is something one mustn't do; not only is it good not to do it, it's strictly forbidden. Of course this is what makes Nina Myers one of *24's* most shadowy and intriguing moral figures. She is inexplicably drawn to doing what is prohibited. She manipulates CTU security clearances, sells state secrets to terrorists, and when Teri Bauer finds out too much, Nina murders her. She does what she shouldn't, and in the end she pays for it with her life.

Philosophers also recognize an “in between” class of moral actions. If an action is neither obligatory nor prohibited, we say that it's morally permissible: morally okay to do but also morally okay not to do. It's neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy. It's just neutral. Jack's decision to earn his living working on an oil rig (as opposed to working as a professional cowboy) while in hiding from the Chinese falls into this category. Perhaps the greater part of the actions we perform in the moral realm are of this nature.

So we have this threefold moral division: the obligatory, the prohibited, and the permitted. However, in a highly influential article “Saints and Heroes,”² the philosopher J. O. Urmson has disputed this classification. There is a missing fourth category, he says: the supererogatory.³ This is just a fancy philosopher's word that means “going beyond what duty requires.” To illustrate this concept, Urmson

2 J. O. Urmson, “Saints and Heroes,” in *Moral Concepts*, ed. Joel Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). Page references to Urmson are to this work.

3 Urmson doesn't actually use this term to describe his category, but it has become a favorite among philosophers.

asks us to imagine a soldier who throws himself on a live hand grenade to save his comrades. The question arises, he says:

if the soldier had not thrown himself on the grenade, would he have failed in his duty? Though clearly he is superior in some way to his comrades, can we possibly say that they failed in their duty by not trying to be the one who sacrificed himself? If he had not done so, could anyone have said to him, "You ought to have thrown yourself on that grenade"? . . . The answer to all these questions is plainly negative. (63)

What Urmson is saying is that a supererogatory act isn't something you're obligated to do; nor can we blame you if you choose not to do it. However, it is both permissible and highly praiseworthy.

Must Chappelle Die?

This has the effect of shedding new light on Ryan Chappelle's character—generally thought to be wanting in important respects. When Stephen Saunders discovers that Chappelle's expertise at following "money trails" has led to Saunders' Cayman bank account, he knows it's only a matter of time before Chappelle tracks him down. Accordingly, Saunders demands Chappelle's execution (within the hour) on threat of releasing the virus—already wreaking havoc at the Chandler Plaza Hotel—at hundreds of locations across the country. It's a race against time to find Saunders before the deadline, and a distraught Chappelle knows it's not going to happen. Caught trying to leave CTU, Chappelle has to be placed under surveillance. Then moments before Jack kills him, Chappelle confesses, "You were right back at CTU to put me under watch. I wasn't going out for a cigarette, I was trying to bolt. But I know this has to happen."

But give the guy a break! If Urmson is right, we really shouldn't blame Chappelle. The poor guy is being driven to do something that isn't actually his duty. To be sure, it has to happen, but arguably all that means is that Chappelle must be killed (with or without his consent) or operational objectives won't be achieved. They're just buying more time for the purpose of locating Saunders before he makes good on his threats. So Chappelle's done. You might object that Chappelle has a duty to sacrifice his life in this case; after all, Division has placed

him in charge of CTU. Consider, for example, the Homeland Security Act of 2002. Section 101 states that the US Department of Homeland Security exists to “prevent terrorist attacks within the United States.” Surely then, its employees—and, by extension, those in CTU—must be under some sort of obligation to be prepared to give their lives for that purpose.⁴

Well, perhaps so. But all that shows is that Chappelle should know up front that he could be killed in the line of duty. You might think you’re just following up on a promising new lead. The next thing you know, however, you’re standing in a room aglow with hazy radioactive plutonium! (If you’re not Field Ops, stay out of the field!) Hiding under the desk in your glass office might not help either—not if members of Joseph Wald’s paramilitary operation have disguised themselves as phone line technicians in order to plant explosives inside the bowels of CTU, or Cheng’s mercenaries are making their way through an underground sewer system and are about to launch an armed assault on the facility.

So perhaps there is a general obligation here to perform one’s duties, knowing that they might result in one’s death. It hardly follows that Chappelle has a specific duty to take his own life or to allow Jack to shoot him in the back of the head—executioner style. Even Jack seems to realize this. If Chappelle is duty-bound to die and Jack to kill him, then why plead “God, forgive me” before pulling the trigger? If everyone is simply doing his duty, what’s to forgive? At any rate, what if it had been Kim Bauer who discovered Saunders’ Cayman account? And suppose Saunders had therefore asked for her execution? Would she have had a duty to do that as a CTU employee? This is far from clear. And would Jack have agreed that a bullet needed to be put through her head as well? Well, we all know the answer to that one. The point is: on the surface, it is somewhat difficult to see how anyone could be morally required to give up his or her life for others. Sacrificing one’s life seems, for all the world, to go well beyond the call of duty.

4 Compare the US Army *Code of Conduct* established by Eisenhower in 1955: “I am an American fighting in the forces that guard my country and our way of life, I am prepared to give my life in their defense.”

The Duty to Die

Like anything else in philosophy, however, this conclusion has not gone unchallenged. According to the distinguished Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore (1873–1958), when we are trying to decide between alternate courses of action, what duty requires of us is clear: to perform that action “which will cause more good to exist in the Universe than any possible alternative.”⁵ Moore sees a logical “hook up” between the goodness of an action and our duty to perform it. But here we strike a problem. For of the soldier who sacrifices himself by falling on the grenade, Urmson says, “clearly he is superior . . . to his comrades.” And this suggests that the soldier’s action has made the world a better place than it would have been had no one fallen on the grenade and all died. He has done what is best. Now since failing to do what is best (and within one’s power) is normally considered blameworthy, it follows that doing what is best is obligatory. Hence there is no such thing as a supererogatory act.

If we think about this argument carefully, though, we can see that it doesn’t really show there is always a duty to sacrifice one’s life for others. To see this, let’s simplify the argument as follows:

- 1 It is better to sacrifice one’s life for others rather than not.
- 2 Duty requires that we do what is best provided that it is within our power to do so.
Therefore,
- 3 Sacrificing one’s life for others rather than not is a duty provided that it is within our power to do so.

The problem lies with step (1). How are we to understand it? Should we read (1) as saying that it is always better to sacrifice one’s life for others, or just that it is sometimes better? Let’s call the first way of reading (1) the Always Better Principle. Now the fact is: our little argument works only if this principle holds true. Otherwise, our conclusion at step (3) cannot rule out the possibility that there are some acts of self-sacrifice that go beyond the call of duty.

5 G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), Sec. 89.

How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb—Or Not!

The question facing us, therefore, is whether the Always Better Principle is true. There is reason to think not. Think back for a moment to those far off, fabulous hours of Season Two. A string of tension-filled torture sessions (of NSA Director Roger Stanton, Islamic terrorist Syed Ali, and the brainwashed Marie Warner) finally yields the location of the atomic bomb set to go off that day—Norton Airfield. That's the good news. The bad news is: the bomb's trigger is tamper-proof; if it's dismantled, it will detonate on the spot, and that's going to happen in 55 minutes anyway.

Given these constraints, there's only one workable solution. The bomb has to be loaded onto the fastest, most reliable plane at the airfield, and then flown into the Mojave Desert. But that's not the worst of it. It also has to be dropped in a very precise location: a depression below sea level but also surrounded by mountains to contain the radioactive fallout. Unfortunately, the only available plane is a Cessna. So it doesn't have the on-board equipment to deliver its payload with the needed degree of accuracy. The pilot will have to go down with the plane.

What happens next is remarkable. Jack makes the unilateral decision that he alone will fly the plane. Then when the president inquires about the identity of the pilot, Jack actually lies to him: "We have a few volunteers, sir. All of them good men." In fact, there are no volunteers. Jack hasn't made the slightest effort to find any. Even Tony Almeida can't believe it: "Jack, there's gotta be somebody else who can fly that plane, somebody who doesn't have a family or at least doesn't have kids. C'mon." Jack's reply is a complete red herring: "I didn't have time to take a census, and I can't order anyone else to do this." Tell that to Kim Bauer. At any rate, there was time—except that Jack wasted it all jawing on the phone with Tony about Kim's whereabouts, and about some safe in his apartment containing a will, a letter for Kim, and so on. Tick, tock. Tick, tock. Talk about wasting time.

What's going on here? Ask George Mason. He gets it. Emerging from his place of hiding at the back of the Cessna, George tries to convince Jack to let him fly the plane; all he gets is grief. After some back-and-forth, however, George manages to expose the true intent behind Jack's actions:

You still have a life, Jack. You wanna be a real hero, here's what you do. You get back down there and you put the pieces together. You find a way to forgive yourself for what happened to your wife. You make things right with your daughter, and you go on serving your country. That'd take some real guts.

All Jack can do is sheepishly hang his head. George has his number. Jack's primary intent isn't really saving lives, though that operational objective will no doubt be secured as well. Jack is trying to escape, to get relief: from his guilt, his personal pain, and his fractured relationships. Let's face it: it's an attempted suicide with some happy consequences for LA tacked on.

There is a lesson to be learned here. The Always Better Principle simply isn't true: it's not always better to sacrifice your life for others rather than not. It's not better, for example, when doing so is an act of suicide that will orphan your daughter, rob the country of someone widely recognized to be its single most effective weapon against terrorism (yourself), and when you know very well that others are better positioned to make the sacrifice—that is, willing to make it and with far less to lose. In such a case, self-sacrifice is neither permissible nor praiseworthy; it's downright immoral.

Sentox Can Really Get On Your Nerves

Clearly then, we can't simply assume that anyone who gives his or her life on behalf of others is automatically to be praised for having gone beyond the call of duty. As we've just seen, a self-sacrificial act might well be contrary to duty. But neither can we assume that it is never our duty to make the ultimate sacrifice. For consider what Mike Novick says to David Palmer to justify the idea of a pilot going down with the plane: "One man dies, Mr. President, to ensure the safety of millions." This One for Many Principle, as we might call it, seems to underwrite someone's having a duty here. But which "someone"?

Once again, *24* presents us with valuable material for philosophical reflection. Anyone who knows anything recognizes that when Division sends someone over to take control of the chain of command, there's going to be a few speed bumps. Transitions like this have to be managed with tact and delicacy. Kicking Bill Buchanan out of his office, and requiring that everyone call you Mr. McGill,

is probably not what Dale Carnegie would recommend for your first day on the job. But then of course you're not Lynn McGill. This guy is a self-fulfilling prophecy on wheels. He's paranoid that no one respects him, and so of course acts in such a way that no one can. He's sure that everyone is working behind his back; so he monitors their calls and requires all their work to be mirrored to his system. Not surprisingly, this spawns secret meetings and conversations wherever he looks. Eventually, his judgment becomes so impaired that he devotes all of CTU's resources to apprehending Jack Bauer instead of finding the Sentox nerve gas.

The pressures on McGill continue to build when his drug addicted sister starts begging him for money. When he meets with her, he is promptly robbed not only of his cash but his CTU key card as well. Embarrassed, he never reports it. Finally, McGill snaps and has to be put in holding. Well, you can guess what happens next. Terrorists use his key card to gain entrance to CTU and release a canister of Sentox into the air duct system. A number of people are killed, including the much beloved Edgar Stiles.

Fortunately, our favorite characters manage to get themselves (or find themselves) in barrier-sealed rooms. But a corrosive agent in the Sentox is quickly eating away at the barriers. Chloe's attempt to flush the Sentox out of the contaminated areas fails because of a computer interrupt on the A/C control unit. The only glitch is that the unit is located in a contaminated area. Wait a second! Jack's pretty good at holding his breath. Let's get him to shut it down. Sorry, no can do. He's already tried; he's too far away. The only one close enough is Lynn McGill, who is in a room right beneath the A/C unit.

Here's a question for you. Does McGill have a duty to sacrifice his life for Jack and friends? Turning to the security officer assigned to guard him, McGill says: "We have to do this, Harry. We're going to die anyway. If we don't, so will everyone in CTU. We have to do this." There it is again, that One for Many Principle. Here the "have to" isn't like the one Chappelle faced, namely, the "have to" of operational objectives and forced self-sacrifice.⁶ Jack can't enforce

6 In Scott Calef's chapter, he argues that McGill's decision *is* forced. However, by a "forced" decision, Calef simply means one in which the consequences are the same regardless of whether the decision is made. I don't dispute that. My claim is quite different: namely, that McGill's decision isn't forced in the sense of being causally constrained or determined.

anything here. He's in another room separated by a corridor of deadly Sentox. This is McGill's decision; it's entirely up to him. The "have to" in play, rather, is that of moral obligation. With the terrible consequences of his actions before him, the clear light of reason returns to McGill, and he calmly applies the One for Many Principle to himself. It's no longer "Someone must die to save the many," it's "I must die to save the many." It's the right thing to do. For if he does nothing, he'll be dead in minutes anyway—along with everyone else. Besides, this is all his fault; he alone has put them in this fix. And only he is in a position to shut down the program.

For all the world then, and as strange as it may sound, there are these cases in which there appears to be an actual duty to sacrifice oneself for others. Even so, this conclusion has troubled some thinkers. For example, according to philosopher David Heyd, "Doing one's duty does not win the agent any credit. She only did what she had to."⁷ You'd better go that extra mile, or we'll not praise you at all. Well, here I can only reply, "Nuts!" McGill's actions are indeed praiseworthy—and objectively so. They're not forced; they're free. They spring from a good intent: to save lives. There's not the slightest hint that McGill is merely trying to appease his own sense of guilt or to atone for past wrongs. Not that there's anything wrong with that! Moreover, unlike Harry Swinton, the security officer, there's no hand waving or back peddling over Jack's assessment of the situation, no retaliation for his "treasonous" removal as acting director of CTU, no shrinking from duty out of fear or panic. This guy is made of sterner stuff than that. As McGill slouches to the floor, the Sentox only a breath away, Jack's voice is heard over the loud speaker: "I want you to know what you did was successful. The seals are holding. I will personally notify your families and tell them of the sacrifice you made." McGill goes out a hero. No question.

Going Beyond the Call

It's no secret that if you want to learn how to interrogate a witness, rescue hostages, or lead an assault team, Jack Bauer is your "go to"

7 David Heyd, "Supererogation," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2006 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, available online at www.plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2006/entries/supererogation/.

guy. Believe it or not: he can also teach us a thing or two about the moral life. Jack's moral life isn't perfect of course, but it's on the move, expanding in both breadth and subtlety. Jack learns from his past mistakes—even in the area of self-sacrifice. In the world of 24, there is constant pressure to adopt the self-serving, political agendas of presidents, chiefs of staff, handlers, and the like. If you're not careful, you'll be dying for those agendas. Jack's polygraph-like insight into human nature enables him to see through the flawed, self-interested plans of those around him. A fed up Bauer eventually declares: "I'm tired of putting my ass on the line for nothing. I'm done putting my ass on the line for nothing." Some things are just not worth dying for. Frequent contact with death has a way of sharpening one's focus on what really matters. Thus Jack refuses to offer himself up to the Chinese just to help President Logan save political face—"the idle business of show"⁸ as one Stoic sage puts it. Instead, Jack wisely goes into hiding.

Jack's question to us is: "Do you understand the difference between dying for something and dying for nothing?" Is there really anything worth dying for? Not surprisingly, Jack points the way. Without a moment's hesitation, he sets up the planned exchange with the Chinese: the subcircuit board for Audrey. Of course, he can't actually give the component to Cheng, for that would compromise Russia's defensive capabilities, and then President Suvarov would have no choice but to retaliate against the US, thereby triggering a global military conflict. Jack isn't about to pull a "McGill" either, putting the lives of the many at risk. Absolutely not. Jack knows he has rare expertise.⁹ After Audrey has been safely returned, he will ensure that enough C4 explosive detonates that both he and the subcircuit board are destroyed.

In one way, then, his planned death is for all—all those who would lose their lives in the military devastation to follow were Cheng to obtain his subcircuit prize. No doubt Jack has a duty to prevent that from happening. Yet this doesn't exhaust the moral complexities of the plan. For Jack's main intent is to offer his life as a ransom for one person, Audrey—to buy her back from torture and imprisonment at

8 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997), p. 47.

9 I thank Doug Geivett for drawing this to my attention.

the hands of the Chinese, something he himself has experienced first hand. The sacrifice for Audrey is gratuitous. It follows neither from the One for Many Principle,¹⁰ nor from some specific duty Jack has towards Audrey. Sure Jack says, “Audrey Raines was willing to give up her life to save mine. I cannot and will not do anything less for her.” But this is said to Wayne Palmer, and is nothing but dramatic overstatement designed to stir up the president’s emotions and pry that subcircuit board out of his tightly clenched fist. The reality is: Audrey only went to look for Jack. She didn’t risk her life, leading an assault team to spring him from captivity. Jack intends to keep his duty (to the many) but then go beyond that, personally sacrificing himself that Audrey (the one) might live. Thanks to some CTU bungling, Jack’s plan falls apart and he’s spared from paying that heavy price. It hardly matters though; he’s got “hero” written all over him.¹¹

Leaders of the cult-like religion Scientology once described actor Tom Cruise as their “Christ.” “Like Christ,” they noted, Cruise has “been criticized for his views.”¹² Good heavens. At one time or another, we’ve all been criticized for that. That’s not what makes someone Christ-like. Better to ask yourself: Have I ever been willing to sacrifice my life that others might live? That even one might live? I’m sorry. When it comes to the answers to these questions, I’ll take Jack Bauer over Tom Cruise any day.¹³

10 For the purists out there: this would constitute a fallacy of division. Even if I have a duty to sacrifice my life for a certain group *as a whole*, it doesn’t follow that I owe that duty to *each part* of that whole in and of themselves.

11 In his chapter, Rob Lawlor argues that since Jack couldn’t provide a “100 percent guarantee” that his actions here would succeed, we should consider him a “liability” and not a hero. But that strikes me as a bit strong; it would imply, for example, that there are no heroes. For if you think about it: none of our actions comes with *that* sort of guarantee—not up front anyway. It’s always possible that some event (however unlikely) will thwart our action plans.

12 Emily Smith, “Cruise ‘is Christ’ of Scientology,” *The Sun*, January 23, 2007.

13 Special thanks are due to Glen Meyer for all those “sacrificial” conversations, and to Caroline Davis for her many helpful suggestions on early drafts.