

## THE DUTIES OF MERCY

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The quality of mercy is not strained,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath; it is twice blessed;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

– *Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice*

### Abstract

If goodness for Kant as seen above comes solely from one's duty, what then could be the possible motive for "supererogatory acts" (exemplified by the hero or the saint) which go *beyond the call of duty*? Because "supererogatory acts" involve the transgression of duty, what would be its corresponding motive? This paper will show that it is here in these acts that we may find a place for love, benevolence and kindness, the motives which Kant appears to disqualify as motives for moral action. This will be illustrated by appeal to a famous painting by Caravaggio, "The Seven Works of Mercy".

The difficulty of locating a place for goodness or love in Kantian ethics can be traced back to the very problem with which his ethics begins. The question that Kant poses for ethics *What ought I do?* by its very phrasing, requires in advance a response which is defined by duties and obligations. The *ought* entails a kind of requirement that an agent must fulfill. In its negative sense, my failure to pass such a requirement is tantamount to a failure of duty, which also amounts to saying that I become blameworthy. In some sense a failure of duty can mean the same in terms of its value and even intention as breaking the law. The difference in gravity between one's failure and one's crime matters little here; both disrespect the law, the one negatively and the other positively, and thus both violate it. The law both requires and prohibits; and when I fail to submit

to the requirement, I am as culpable of any malicious crime one can commit.

It is the essence of blame that it is indifferent of failure of one's duties, and of violations of the law. This is because the law determines in advance our duties of *what ought I to do* and lays down in writing *what I ought not to do*. Unlawful acts are in themselves defined by reason a priori as the failure or transgression of any agent. A state must possess laws even if there are really no criminals. This is because the law, ethics, and reason look formally into acts themselves, and never at individuals or agents, never at this man or woman of flesh and blood. Or again, the law sees clearly only acts themselves, but it is blind when it comes to the one who fails to obey the law – whoever you may be, as we are wont to say, “no one is above the law”.

But the anonymity of agents is at once disregarded when the *ought* is transgressed or violated. As in a police lineup of suspects, the irresponsible man or the criminal is identified by his negligence and violation. He emerges from the faceless and nameless populace. By virtue of his transgression he acquires an identity that the responsible or law-abiding citizen does not possess in front of the law. As God marked Cain after his heinous fratricide, blame marks a man, separates him from the rest, and singles him out in punishment. In predetermining *what ought to be done* and *what ought not to be done*, and in which instances they are to be observed, the law only truly manifests itself when it is not obeyed or broken. Here is the wrongdoer, the very embodiment of the law. Thus paradoxically, the law appears to apply itself to no one else but only the criminal.

But if blame marks a man for his failure or crime before the law, what then does he receive when he obeys it? In other words, upon the accomplishment of the *ought* or compliance to the *ought not*, how is the agent regarded? Obviously he cannot be *blamed* if he observes the law, if he follows the *ought* faithfully and avoids the *ought not* religiously. But is he to be *praised* then? If blame marks the failure or the criminal, should not praise be given to the faithful and the obedient? Apparently, this is not the case. When the taxpayer gives what is due to the state, we do not remark that he is a good citizen for he is only following what should be done by all. When the professional, say, a doctor or a teacher, attends to his duties and keeps office, he is not for the most part admired; it is “just his job” anyway, and he is only committing to either a solemn oath or a binding contract. When the father provides for his family so that his wife

and children are in the best possible situation to be healthy and happy, we only say that that is the duty of a father, and that to fail in that duty would be by definition to be no longer a father. The list of examples may go on, and it will show that there is for the most part nothing praiseworthy in fulfilling one's duties and obligations. And by keeping to the minimum, by giving what is required, the faithful agent does not gain any clear identity as when he violates the *ought* and *ought not*. Unlike the criminal, the law-abiding man is *unremarkable*: that is, nothing is said of him either positively or negatively, nothing is expected more from him, and he thus joins the faceless citizens before the law.

We may quickly draw a few consequences from the preceding determination of neglect and obedience of the law. First, we may translate Kant's requirement of universality – that an action is morally good when it is done out of duty – as anonymity before the law. When I do what all men ought to do, I become all men, that is, I become everyone and no one. Second, in following it the law supersedes everyone, it becomes what is ultimate above all since it is given a higher privilege than any individual agent. The law is what becomes significant, what is correct, and not the unidentified man who merely observes it. Third, perhaps the gravest danger in such a view is that when it comes to ethics and the law, even to morality, there may in the end be nothing essentially good in it. Paradoxically, it may seem that goodness, kindness, and benevolence may not be accounted for in a Kantian and law-based morality; these states of character most persons wish to possess become unnecessary, or to put it bluntly, “optional” instead of required; that is, more dangerously, goodness then becomes inessential to becoming human. And in a world where everyone observes the law anonymously, where everyone does what everyone else does, and where all are tranquilized by sheer obedience to or fear of the law-while there may be peace in such a place, there would be no need for benevolence, kindness, or charity.

In his seminal work “Saints and Heroes” (1958), J. O. Urmson pointed out the inability of traditional moral theories to accommodate exceptional phenomenon: the existence of saints and heroes. A saint, according to Urmson's tentative description, is one who “does actions that are far beyond the limits of his duty, whether by control of contrary inclination and disinterest or without effort”, and in the same vein a hero is one who “does actions that are far beyond the limits of his duty, whether by control of natural fear or without effort”.<sup>1</sup> He frames this according to Kantian ethics. Urmson does not have merely the religious saint or a

medaled soldier in mind; he is referring to living, ordinary men and women, who in everyday circumstances may display beneficence or great courage, “beyond the call of duty”. We call such actions which are not required of all but are praiseworthy *supererogatory actions*.

Urmson provides us a few examples of saintliness and heroism. He speaks of a doctor who volunteers to care for ailing patients in a plague-stricken city, a soldier who throws his body on top of a live grenade to save his comrades, and to a more familiar case of an individual who goes out of his way to serve their organization. There are countless other examples of exemplary acts and behavior that can be given. Sometimes one only needs to look around to identify those who show extraordinary effort and dedication to their work or vocation, or perform generous acts for those in need. These individuals defy the logic of the everyday man who for the most part attends to his restricted idea of duty.

The challenge for Urmson was thus precisely how to think of supererogatory actions within the bounds of morality and ethics. Can we really identify them and determine their nature using the lexicon of ethics? For, as Urmson rightly saw, saints and heroes transgress the limits of what has been traditionally understood as morality because they violate the very boundaries which it establishes, those of duties and obligations. Thus in “going beyond the call of duty”, saintly and heroic acts, as it were, seem to leave the horizon of morality. Or at best such phenomena grant to ethics problematic limit-cases which have to be understood. Because in order to answer the question *What ought I to do?*, we seek principles, laws, or guidelines which may give shape to the freedom we possess, and give direction to our choices and our dealings with our fellowmen. Morality in a word hopes to establish foundations (either rational, practical, etc.) for determining right or moral action, that is, it determines laws or goals which in principle can be enforced for all men. But Urmson saw that these Kantian guidelines fail to make room for undoubtedly moral actions of saintliness and heroism. “[I]t is surely evident”, Urmson concludes, “that Kant could not consistently do justice to the facts [of supererogation] before us”.<sup>2</sup>

The possible inadequacy of Kantian thought when faced with the nature of supererogatory acts can be intimated. To go back to Urmson's examples, it is unrealistic to ask of all doctors to serve in plague-stricken places, as it is absurd to chastise a soldier for not jumping over a live grenade. Doctors and soldiers, and all men for that matter, simply have to fulfill their prescribed duties and obligations, or observe the law. In the

*Critique of Practical Reason* (1787) Kant does in fact give credence to what he called “super-meritorious acts”, such as holding out information from a king who has tyrannical intentions, or saving drowning passengers in a shipwreck;<sup>3</sup> but it is important to note that Kant considers these examples, however praiseworthy they may be, as having undoubtedly moral worth if they were done “merely as a duty in relation to the solemn law of morality”, and neither tainted by the possibility of seeking merit or praise (self-love), nor partly motivated by the spontaneous inclination to help others where respect for the moral law may be confused with sensibility.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, Kant seems to put the very notion of supererogation into question – or at least under suspicion.

In his earlier *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), we also find two key texts often referred to where Kant in a straightforward manner already cast doubts on the motives of benevolence or kindness. Speaking of what is the proper motive of duty for any action to have any moral content, he says the following:

To help others where one can is a duty, and besides this there are many spirits of so sympathetic a temper that, without any further motive of vanity or self-interest, they find an inner pleasure in spreading happiness around them and can take delight in the contentment of others as their own work. Yet I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, *has still no genuinely moral worth*. It stands on the same footing as other inclinations—for example, the inclination for honor, which if fortunate enough to hit on something beneficial and right and consequently honorable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem; for its maxim lacks moral content, namely, the performance of such actions, not from inclination, but *from duty*.<sup>5</sup>

Kant also confronts squarely the commandment of loving one’s neighbor by qualifying when it can be considered to have moral worth. As he continues:

It is doubtless in this sense that we should understand too the passage from Scripture in which we are commanded to love our neighbor and even our enemy. For love out of

inclination cannot be commanded; but kindness done from duty—although no inclination impels us, and even although natural and unconquerable disinclination stands in our way—is practical, and not *pathological*, love, residing in the will and not in the propensions of feeling, in principles of action and not of melting compassion; and it is this practical love alone which can be an object of command.<sup>6</sup>

Kant in sum regards as having improper motives any action based on our *natural or pathological* inclinations. He places on the same plane, the kindness towards and love for others, with the tending to one's own happiness and the aspiration for honor. The reduction of what is usually most esteemed, benevolence and love for others, to what is amoral is possible only if we consider altruistic actions as always necessarily going back or referring to the self – its desires, its passions, its concerns, even if it is concerned for the sake of others. For as long as altruistic actions can be *suspected* of, whether truthful or otherwise, having any trace of “vanity” or “self-interest”, or leading to “an inner pleasure in spreading happiness around them” and “delight in the contentment of others as their own work”,<sup>7</sup> or as long as the agent in short gains anything intentionally or accidentally, it seems safer to say that such actions do not count as truly moral or good. Only in the name of duty can I be good, divested of all pleasure or interest I may gain. In this peculiar case, because I may gain some happiness from it, goodness out of love or benevolence absurdly does not make me morally good.

This leads us back to the dilemma supererogation poses for ethics: if goodness for Kant as seen above comes solely from one's duty, what then could be the possible motives for supererogatory acts which as Urmson defined are actions *going beyond the call of duty*? Shall supererogation then be considered as not “good in itself”, as it were, or at least morally neutral, because it is not inspired by what Kant considers as the proper motive for our actions – to do something out of duty – by the simple fact that it by definition goes beyond it? (It is difficult to understand how a hero or a saint can become so out of sheer duty.) This paradox thus begs the question: because supererogation is the transgression of duty, what would be its corresponding motive? Is it in this instance that we may find a place for love or benevolence or kindness, the motives which Kant appears to disqualify as motives for moral action?

But straightaway saying that love or kindness would be the rea-

son why saintly and heroic acts are done would obviously be too hasty or careless. One danger in using love as the measure of goodness is that actions become arbitrary: sometimes I do good, sometimes I don't, because sometimes I love, sometimes I do not love. Neither does love or kindness reflect what experience shows us. The doctor who leaves for a plague-stricken town would not say that he does so because he loves those who are sick. I imagine him saying "*I just had to do it*". The soldier who uses his body to protect his comrades does not necessarily love them; if he could speak he'd say the same: "*given the circumstances before me, I had to do it*". Of course, as Urmson pointed out, what they did was not required by duty as defined by Kant. Objectively speaking, supererogatory actions are by definition unnecessary. But it can be imagined that the saint or hero sees otherwise: for them their actions were *quasi*-duties, that is, they took it upon themselves to make the unnecessary obligatory and the optional categorical.

What thus can be gained from the subjective or inner view of the saint or the hero in front of a concrete situation is this: they make what is not strictly a duty, a duty. They "take it upon themselves", they "volunteer" in the sense that they *will* (*voluntas*) themselves to do what need not be done, which means the same as elevating the moral ground to a higher plane that only they can perceive in a particular moment and decide to enter. Because of a certain situation which calls on them for possible action, whether it be for a span of a lifetime or for a gripping moment, they require from themselves more than what others have to give, much more than what is required of all – even surprising themselves at times when they give what they did not know they had. In the same manner that blame marks and singles out the criminal for disobeying the law, the hero and the saint assume singularity and individuation by their actions which go beyond the law, doing what is no longer demanded by the universal *ought*; they are praised, admired, and distinguished from those who merely observe the law. By raising the bar, as it were, by setting new standards that he alone sees and must meet, the saint or hero accomplishes a transvaluation of values that he does not apply to others. In doing so, by virtue of a kind of moral promotion, he acquires new and many more duties the performance of which others find unnecessary and at times even absurd.

Perhaps this is why the saint says that what he does is nothing "special" or "good". *For us*, we look up to the saint because he does what we need not do; yet *for him*, he only does what he saw he had to do. It is we who *praise* saints for their actions, while they usually remain

silent. They do not regard themselves as saints or heroes because the moment they do so they fall into the temptations of vanity and pleasure, the very inclinations which Kant disqualified as motives for moral actions. In his heart he acts not necessarily out of love, or because he is good or kind; it is only we who are not saints or heroes, who need to explain to ourselves *why* they do what they do. But the saint gives more not because he has more or more is asked from him; he gives more because he asks more from himself. And it is unnecessary to explain why he in fact does, or what motive he can have, as it is unnecessary for Kant to ask why a duty must be done or why only a good will can be called good.

Supererogatory acts, it is here proposed, can therefore be viewed from “the inside”, that is, through the eyes of the saint or hero, as the unnecessary becoming an imperative, as the reception of new duties which must therefore be done and accomplished. They are praiseworthy and unnecessary *for us*, yet *for them* it is necessary as an obligation and thus may be nothing special or admirable in their eyes. These new duties are neither imposed on them by the law, nor by other men, nor even by the God one believes in, least of all by rationality and its clear and distinct explanations. They create these duties – they as it were *write their own laws*. And one such instance where the saint or hero takes it upon himself to assume new duties is when he performs *an act of mercy*. It will be claimed in what follows that, much more stable than the emotions, more certain than love, mercy is in itself not required formally by duty, yet it paradoxically has the force of an obligation. It is also praiseworthy or “saintly” outwardly, but subjectively “nothing special”. Mercy also resides in the concrete person, not written in some universal tablet of laws. Mercy, finally, is for the most part exempted from any possible pleasure or vanity which the agent may enjoy. As we will try to depict in the next section by way of a work of art, indifferent acts done out of mercy may account for the assumption of new duties which can explain supererogatory actions.



Caravaggio, *The Seven Works of Mercy* (*Sette opere di Misericordia*), 1607  
Oil on canvas, 153 1/2 x 102 3/8 in.  
Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples

A few years before his death in 1610, and at the height of his powers, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio would be exiled to Naples, a dark city much unlike his beloved Rome. Because of the difficulty to find employment, its people were struck with poverty; they had to live with the everyday dangers of crime and violence on the streets. But such a place nevertheless suited the itinerant and brash painter. Welcomed both by its painters and art collectors, Caravaggio was something like a celebrity in Naples. He would soon be commissioned to paint for those who can afford him. His first major work in Naples would be a commission requested by some aristocrats for an altarpiece in the Pio Monte della Misericordia. Caravaggio's dominant *Seven Works of Mercy* (*Sette opere di Misericordia*), considered to be his greatest Neapolitan work, remains there today. Addressing the dire situation of the people of Naples, Caravaggio was asked to depict the six corporal acts or works of mercy as can be found in the Gospel of St. Matthew: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, give shelter to the wanderer, visit the sick and the imprisoned. A seventh act will be added to the six, also found in the Book of Tobit, to address the urgent problem of the city after a recent plague: to bury the dead. Finally, in addition to what already promised to be a very complex painting, Caravaggio was also asked to portray the Madonna della Misericordia.<sup>8</sup>

Challenging as it was for Caravaggio to place multiple figures with different intentions on one canvas, what he would produce after would be one his most remarkable and most beautiful works in his lifetime. The *Seven Works of Mercy* easily mirrored the dark and impoverished streets of Naples, and most of its figures portrayed its people – one reason why the aristocrats of Naples, unlike the many sponsors that Caravaggio earlier offended in Rome, praised the work. The scene is set deep into the night when most are asleep. Yet Caravaggio's scene is charged with activity and life. Caravaggio populates the lower part of the canvas with multiple figures which may confuse the gaze as to what is really happening. The torch a man to the right is supposed to be the only light source, but Caravaggio remains faithful to his mature technique of dark backgrounds with multiple sources of radiant light reflecting on the figures. Put together the nine figures at the lower part all make for a dramatic scene, a kind of theatrical tableau. But nothing in the painting seems staged. While it is a spectacle there is a calmness to the figures who go about performing their acts of mercy.

Drawing most of the light in the scene, the woman to the right

exposes her breast to a prisoner who forcibly extends his head through the grills as far as possible. She lifts her skirt to provide the prisoner a sort of bib as he drinks the milk from her breast. But she is startled by what goes on around her; so she ashamedly covers her right breast to hide what she is doing. Behind her and contrasting the nourishment and life that the milk she gives symbolizes, the feet of a dead man can be seen. The corpse is carried by two men, but only one is visible under the fire of the torch that the priest who administered the last rites carries. The priest appears to be praying for the soul of the poor man who will be laid to rest in eternal darkness in the dead of night. Here birth and death, light and darkness, the beginning of life and its end, freedom from life and imprisonment in it – these are conditions characterized by helplessness and require aid or assistance from another human being. I was not “there” in the beginning to feed myself, care for myself, as I will be helpless when my freedom is taken from me or when I am dying. I, too, am then asked to attend to those who can no longer attend to themselves. It is already a matter of decency.

On the foreground to the left, the back of a half-naked man is illuminated from a source of light outside the visible field of the painting. He lies on the ground together with a man regarded to be either a sick man or a beggar who is clasping his hands, asking for aid. But they are both received by a man, modeled after St. Martin of Tours, who cuts with his drawn sword the cloak on his back to share with the half-naked man. This act recalls the vision of Christ which Saint Martin had after he had given half of his cloak to a naked man. Also on the left, two men converse with each other. One man directs a wanderer to the direction of his inn so that he and his companion behind him may have shelter for the night. Finally, between the innkeeper and the wanderer we find something out of place. It is a weary Samson who zealously drinks water from the jawbone of an ass, the weapon he used to kill an army of Philistines as was written in the Old Testament. Taken together we see the corporal acts of mercy – corporal in the sense that man needs drink, clothing, and shelter from the elements for its body to survive. In a certain sense an act of corporal mercy is simply giving a man his due. As a human being who is also faced with these necessities, I have a debt to the famished, the naked, the sick and the homeless to give them what is properly theirs, what all men should have and enjoy.

Thus if I see a child on the street who has not eaten since the previous night, how can I not give aid? But *what ought I to do?* If I

formulate the maxim Thou shall give aid to those in dire need, and apply it as moral principle, I will always run into contradictions and problems. By what standard do I measure “need” or “dire need”? And what is the intention or motive behind giving aid? I say that such an act furnishes another human being with what he properly needs. But I can also answer that such a motive, because it is not based solely on the laws of duty, can be subsumed to “natural inclination” of pity and sympathy, which, for Kant, cannot qualify as properly moral motive. Kant was very clear on this: “To help others when one can is a duty. . . . Yet I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, *has still no genuinely moral worth*”.<sup>9</sup>

But on the other hand, if I were to understand my desire to aid the needy as only a particular case which pertains to *this child* and not for all children in need (perhaps the child’s face is more pitiful than that of others, or he seems sincere, or I feel unusually generous that time or was in a good mood), I also fall into a dilemma. I shall have to decide in each case *who* I shall dress, feed, and give drink to, and *when* I should do so given that there are so many in need. At first glance there seems to be no problem here. Not everyone helps another who is in need at all times. We cannot show extraordinary generosity to everyone that we encounter. Generosity, too, has practical limits in this sense. But the moral problem at stake here is the relativity of goodness. I shall always have to decide whether I will be good to *this* particular man or child, or not. And since I am neither required by the moral law to perform all acts of charity, nor am I able accomplish them because of my finitude, I thus end up only helping a few. I help only arbitrarily.

In other words, if I act rationally, I will be obeying an impersonal universal law. And if I help this particular child, I may be only arbitrarily good. Can such an aporia be transgressed? There is one possibility: if I am to understand an act of corporal mercy as a quasi-duty that I am obliged to accomplish not because it is required by duty, but because each case of suffering demands from me a basic act of mercy. Mercy resides *in between* what is a *duty* and what is *unnecessary* for me to do. I can always excuse myself from feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, as I can imagine others doing this duty. But that an act of mercy nevertheless has something obligatory in it, as evidenced by the concrete feeling that it is *I* who am asked to give aid to this naked, hungry, or thirsty man. I cannot completely excuse myself and defer to others this sudden responsibility I receive in the face of suffering. In the face of

suffering I encounter a new duty I did not have before. I cannot “look away”, or be indifferent to the face which asks from me. The other human being imposes upon me a moral injunction which in this one perfect instance acquires the force of a moral law (Levinas). Upon the arrival of another human being, “the rights of the I collapse beneath the infinite obligations that come down to *me*” (J. L. Marion).<sup>10</sup>

I do not need compassion to perform an act of mercy, all I need is to *see* with my eyes without having to feel anything in my heart. I know in my flesh what *I ought* to do. I do not, in a word, have to become a saint to have mercy. Mercy is perfect in itself; it does not need to fear reprimand when it is not administered, nor does it deserve honor when it is shown because nothing is really given or taken, because it only gives back what is due to every human being. And because mercy is apathetic, it is able to stand the Kantian test for what qualifies as a valid moral motive for action. Having mercy, to answer Kant, is not regarded to be a natural inclination: it is not the shadow of self-interest, obviously, and it cannot be reduced to vanity as “nothing special” was really done; it was only fitting that I have mercy, and it required from me neither generosity nor benevolence but only to be human.

More importantly, mercy does not give to those who show it “an inner pleasure in spreading happiness around them” and “delight in the contentment of others as their own work” (Kant).<sup>11</sup> For one, happiness can only proceed when the basic needs are already in place to act as its stable base. But acts of mercy attend first and primarily to that physical substratum of human life, they only provide the conditions of the possibility of happiness, and not yet happiness or pleasure itself.

Caravaggio’s figures show precisely the indifference and apathy of the works of mercy: they all go about their work, as one goes about doing his job. The circus atmosphere of his *The Seven Works of Mercy* can at first glance be mistaken as what one will usually see in the piazza or marketplace where everyone unmindfully passes each other by on his or her way to do their own labors (*opera* or work). To borrow the words Urmsen used to describe the actions of saints and heroes, all of our actors seem to work with “disinterest or without effort”, *as if* they were all merely performing their duties. And the motive of mercy seen in this way confirms what Kant all along had been insisting. We can take the privileged case of mercy as a form of what Kant described as “kindness done from duty”, which he had described as “*practical*, and not *pathological*, love, residing in the will and not in feeling, in principles in action and not

in compassion. It is this practical love alone which can be an object of command".<sup>12</sup> Kant would later in *The Doctrine of Virtue* in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) rename such a command of kindness done from duty as a *duty of love*, as "active benevolence", which, along with the duty of respect for others, is a duty I owe to "others merely as human beings".<sup>13</sup> And the man who performs duties of love to other men he calls a friend of man or the philanthropist.<sup>14</sup>

This explains why the aristocrats who commissioned Caravaggio were only too happy with the new altarpiece of the Pio Monte della Misericordia. They were part of a confraternity which aimed to address the plight of the poor through the work of charitable deeds, and Caravaggio was able to *show* what they had long felt and known in their hearts: that aiding the weak and the needy of Naples was each one's duty, and as nothing fantastic, praiseworthy, or heavenly.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps it is in this sense that we too may begin to understand, or remember, why charity can also be a duty, and recognize that saints and heroes walk among us everyday.

In Caravaggio's powerful portrait, mercy is seen not from on high, or as something that only God can bestow. Mercy here becomes a human and not necessarily a religious or theological virtue. Instead of painting the majestic saints on the grand altar of the Pio Monte della Misericordia as in many other churches, what Caravaggio depicts here are the real men and women of Naples who perform saintly acts. Mercy is brought down from the level of the superhuman to the soil where the works of man are performed. The separation of the two realms can be seen in how Caravaggio distinguishes between the lower plane where the works of mercy are done, and the upper realm where the Virgin and her child, and two powerful angels, observe the actors with compassion. The muscular boy-angel to the left stretches out his right arm to the action below. But the other angel holds him back to keep him from crossing over unto the human realm, and to let the mortals below continue their works of mercy by themselves. I do not need help from above or a command from a hidden God to see and to know what I ought to do in front of poverty and suffering and the death of my brother. I show mercy not because I feel compassion or because I gain happiness or I perceive a future heavenly recompense, but because I already perceive it is as *what I ought to do*.

The duties of mercy are, at bottom, the works of man. The angels, the Madonna and the child may see beauty and goodness in these acts, as Caravaggio shows in their compassionate faces, but I need not know this nor do I need hope for it. God may praise a good man who makes it *his*

duty to do acts of mercy, but man does not require such a confirmation. Perhaps to learn that, and to earn any reward, would be a revelation that can only occur at the end of mercy's duties. We recall how upon asked when they saw the Christ hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick or in prison, he answered to their amazement: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>J. O. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes", *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. A. I. Melden (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), p.201.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p.207.

<sup>3</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. T. K. Abbott (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1996), pp.186-188.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Patton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p.66. Italics mine.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p.67.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p.66.

<sup>8</sup>For this and the preceding, see Francine Prose, *Caravaggio: Painter of Miracles* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), pp.116-1120; Francesca Marini, ed., *Caravaggio*, with a preface by Renato Guttuso (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2006), pp.154-155.

<sup>9</sup>Kant, *Groundwork*, p.66.

<sup>10</sup>Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen Lewis (New York: Fordham, 2002), p.86.

<sup>11</sup>Kant, *Groundwork*, p.66.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p.67.

<sup>13</sup>Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and edited by Mary Gregor and with an introduction by Roger J. Sullivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 198-203.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>15</sup>Prose, *Caravaggio*, p.117.

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