Expecting Common Decency

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Every year, I teach a basic course on moral theory that compares varieties of utilitarian and Kantian theories. One of the things I stress to students is that different moral theories interpret the scope of our moral obligations differently. Some imagine that virtually everything it would be good to do is obligatory. Others try to carve out a more limited space for the strictly obligatory and imagine that much of what it would be good to do is not obligatory but simply a praiseworthy moral option. Almost inevitably, students reach a point in the semester where they begin to chafe at the binary options that I (and most moral theories) give them: either morally good acts are obligatory and owed like a debt, or they are completely optional but very nice things we might elect. The chafing tends to begin as soon as we start talking about socially conventional forms of kindness, thoughtfulness, mercy, forgiveness, and the like, such as sending a parent a birthday card or congratulating a friend on an achievement or holding a stranger's place in line. It seems odd to say that these kindnesses are *obligatory*. But it seems equally odd to say that they are just very nice things that we might elect to do or not. What my students see is that there is a whole range of things that we think we ought to do, not out of moral obligation, but simply because it would be the *decent* thing to do.[1] Much of what we expect from ourselves and others is just common decency.

The first part of this lecture is an attempt to get a fix on what common decency is. What I want to stress is that when we expect common decency from people we are expecting them to do *more* than they are obligated to do. And it is an expectation packed with moral pressure. Those who refuse to "elect" commonly decent forms of kindness and caring open themselves to sharp moral criticism.

What I am going to say about the nature of common decency has, I think, some interesting implications for thinking about what we expect from teachers on the job, about why teacher burnout is such a problem, and about why teachers and others in helping occupations are so vulnerable to job exploitation. I will say a bit about these implications in the second part of this lecture.

An Initial Portrait

To begin, recall Charles Dickens's classic portrait of a man who lacks common decency—Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge grumbles at being expected to let his employees off Christmas day. He threatens to take a ruler to a Christmas caroler. He gruffly rebuffs his nephew's invitation to Christmas dinner. He refuses even the smallest compliance with the convention of charitable giving during the Christmas season. He sees no reason why he should give his debtors a grace period. And he suggests the poor should just get on with dying and reduce the surplus population. In all this, Scrooge disappoints our expectations about how minimally well-formed agents will behave. A minimally well-formed agent would not remove himself from the daily commerce of favors, mercies, small kindnesses, forgivings, expressions of gratitude and sympathy, and social pleasantries that are the stuff of common decency.

But for all that Scrooge is "an odious, stingy, hard, unfeeling man," there is no one whom he clearly *wrongs*.[2] It may be indecent to insist that his employees work on Christmas day, but he correctly observes that since they also expect to be paid, he does not owe them this day off. Nor does he owe his nephew pleasantries, or Christmas carolers something for their cheer, or Bob Cratchit higher wages than agreed upon, or his debtors a grace period in meeting their debts. These are all gifts that he is within his rights to refuse to bestow. It is, however, precisely his miserliness of the heart—his refusal to bestow "moral gifts" on others and his rigid insistence on giving exactly what he owes, and not a bit more—that marks him out as a man without common decency. That is, Scrooge lacks common decency not because he shirks his minimal moral obligations but because he fails to live up to others' very strong expectations about which moral gifts—pleasantries, mercy, kindness, and favors—they can count on receiving. Common decency concerns the basic sorts of things that we expect any minimally well-formed agent will *elect* to do for others *absent any requirement* to do so.[3]

That Scrooge is *contemptible* for doing what he has a moral *right* to do, however, is philosophically puzzling. It suggests that acts of common decency occupy a shadowy territory between the obligatory and the supererogatory. On the one hand, Scrooge seems within his rights to withhold the kindnesses and mercies that are emblematic of common decency. He in fact does not owe his debtors grace periods or his nephew pleasantries upon their meeting. Yet those around him also seem justified in finding moral fault with his failure to give those moral gifts of kindness, mercy, and pleasantness that are only to be expected of a minimally well-formed agent. *But how can one be faulted for failing to give what was never owed?* What sense can be made of our treating acts of common decency as though they were not obligatory, but not purely elective either?

Common Decency, Supererogation, and Obligation

It might help if we looked more closely at how common decencies resemble and differ from both the supererogatory and the obligatory.

Common decencies share one important feature with supererogatory acts. They are *non-obligatory*.[4] As Scrooge understood so well, common decencies are elective—gifts one is morally free to give (or not). Because of this, common decencies all seem to fit quite naturally within the primary sub-categories of supererogation.[5] Those sub-categories are: (1) favors; (2) acts of beneficence; (3) volunteering; (4) mercy and forgiveness; (5) praising, congratulating, and honoring; (6) gratitude, and (7) gift givings.

Each of thee seven sub-categories contains some mixture of *common* decencies that are expected of all minimally well-formed agents and especially virtuous acts that could only be expected from unusually well-formed agents. (For example, doing the favor of telling someone the time is a common decency; doing the favor of towing a stranger's car out of a snow bank is notably virtuous.) Let me propose for the moment that, as a general rule, any act falling into categories (1) through (7) that has been socially conventionalized—so that it is just "what is done"—will be a matter of common decency. Giving one's child a birthday present is, for example, socially

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conventionalized. So too, in many organizations, is volunteering to take one's turn at some undesirable task (for example, serving as department chair). Holding a stranger's place in line, giving directions to those who ask, opening the door for those whose hands are full, and giving up one's bus seat to the elderly are familiar conventionalized favors and thus matters of common decency.

Common decencies differ from supererogatory acts in one important respect: they are not fully morally elective. An act is fully morally elective when omitting the act is not morally criticizable; when it is not recommended as an act one, in some sense, "ought" to do; when choosing the act is meritorious and commendable rather than owed or expected; and when gratitude untempered by any thought that one has some moral title to the gift bestowed is the proper response.

Common decencies are not fully morally elective in any of these senses. First, people who do not manage to do what is just a matter of common decency *are criticizable*. They are not criticizable for *wronging* others. But their failure to give expected moral gifts does open them to the charge of being petty, mean-spirited, contemptible, disappointing, irritating, and a poor excuse for a moral agent.[6] By contrast, supererogatory acts are ones whose omission does not warrant moral criticism.

Second, we *ought* to choose common decencies, even if we are not morally obligated to do so. The "ought" recommending common decency signals a strong normative expectation that people will behave with common decency. It also licenses us to bring firm moral pressure to bear on people to behave decently, including criticizing failures of common decency.

Third, common decencies are not fully morally elective, because common decencies are not constitutive of a virtuously high standard of moral agency. On the contrary, they define the standard for being a minimally acceptable moral agent. This is why omitting common decencies is criticizable. In the United States, for example, tipping waitpersons fifteen to twenty percent is a common decency, only to be expected of any minimally well-formed agent who is familiar with tipping conventions. It is not an indication of commendable virtue.[7] By contrast, supererogation is the domain of commendable virtue.

Fourth, the proper response to a fully elective moral gift is gratitude. By contrast, because we are normatively entitled to expect common decency from others, anything more than perfunctory gratitude for commonly decent treatment would be misplaced. Given this difference between common decencies and supererogatory moral gifts, a good way to discern which favors, mercies, and volunteerings are just matters of common decency is to ask oneself "What favors (mercies and volunteerings) could I ask of others without putting myself in the position of incurring a debt of gratitude?" Some ways of filling in requests like "Would you do me a favor of?" "Could you spare?" "Would you mind letting me?" "Could you tell me?" clearly impose on others' good will and would, if granted, incur a debt of gratitude. In other cases, we simply assume that others *should* be willing to grant our request because we are not asking for a meritorious display of good will— just common decency.

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Constructing the Category of the Decent

In short, common decencies occupy a hybrid category, sharing some features of obligation and some of supererogation. I think it is possible to explain the existence of this rather odd moral category. Consider, first, the fact that, like Blanche Dubois, we depend on the kindness of strangers. We need help carrying out our plans, emotional support, occasional release from promises, forgiveness and mercy for errors, a grace period for repaying debts, and so on. That is, we depend on people electing to give us "moral gifts." Personal planning and social coordination are enhanced, however, if some of what others might elect to do for us is *routinized* in social conventions so that we can have advance knowledge of the contexts in which we can or cannot depend on others to help out. For example, when giving directions, telling the time, and lending a match are converted from fully elective, supererogatory gifts into socially institutionalized, expected gift-givings, we can venture out in the world unburdened with maps, watches, and lighters. In short, social coordination is enhanced when there is a reliable exchange of basic moral gifts. Converting fully elective supererogatory acts into normatively expected ones by institutionalizing them in the shared, everyday moral practice of a group of people produces that reliability. When socially institutionalized, formerly fully elective acts such as picking up items dropped by another or giving up one's seat on a bus to the elderly become things that a decent person *ought* to do, even if others cannot demand them as a right.

What I am proposing then is this: The category of the decent—with its peculiarly hybrid properties—is constructed *out of* an antecedently determined domain of supererogatory acts. A good moral theory should help us determine what acts are obligatory and what acts are supererogatory. All acts in the domain of the supererogatory then become possible *candidates* for common decencies. The actual list of commonly decent acts is then constructed from those candidates as participants in a social practice of morality develop moral gift-giving conventions. These conventions determine which moral gift-givings participants in a particular social practice of morality will be expected to elect.

In short, conventionalizing some moral gift-givings has social utility. This explains why societies would be motivated to construct a concept of common decency. The utility of these conventions may also partly justify our strong normative expectations that people will behave decently.

There is also a second, and I think more important, reason why acts of common decency carry a heightened normativity that entitles us to bring moral pressure to bear on people to behave decently. Think back to Scrooge. Scrooge does not just behave badly. He disappoints our expectations for how any *minimally well-formed* agent will behave. This is a distinctive and distinctively important form of moral failure. For a practice of morality to function, the practitioners need not fulfill *all* their moral obligations, nor need they be particularly virtuous. But they must be able to live up to some minimal standards. Those minimal standards will, then, have a heightened normativity.

In general, acts that are reasonably expected of even *minimally* well-formed agents are, first, acts that are not motivationally taxing. They cost the agent very

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little. Doing them is, as it were, no skin off one's nose. Nor do they presuppose any appreciable degree of virtue. As a result, excuses appealing to temptation or understandable failures of virtue are unavailable. Second, they are acts whose moral value in the situation at hand is obvious and unambiguous. So excuses like "I didn't realize I should…" or "I wasn't sure I ought…" are not plausible. This is why we so strongly expect people *not* to omit them.

Some *obligatory* acts are motivationally non-taxing, obvious, and unambiguous and thus only to be expected of any minimally well-formed agent. Some moral gift-giving is also motivationally non-taxing, obvious, and unambiguous. It is these moral gift-givings that come to have heightened normativity, because we cannot imagine how a minimally well-formed agent could fail to elect them.

To see this, bear in mind that the domain of the supererogatory covers acts that vary widely in the degree to which they tax agents' motivational resources. Some supererogatory acts, particularly the saintly and the heroic, entail significant losses for the agent. Because of that, their performance requires exceptional motivational resources. So we understand why people do not usually elect these forms of supererogation. The domain of the supererogatory, however, also includes many unspectacular acts that are motivationally non-taxing. Although everything in the domain of the supererogatory is elective, the farther one moves away from the saintly and heroic the more reasonable it becomes to wonder why one would *not* elect to do this or that morally valuable act. As we imagine motivationally less and less taxing supererogatory acts—such as doing favors or engaging in idle pleasantries—we find it increasingly difficult to make sense of a person's refusing or neglecting to elect them. This is, in part, because whatever it is that we imagine moves a person to satisfy her minimum obligations—for example, concern for others' welfare or commitment to the value of rational agency—should also move her to elect some morally good, but non-required acts. Someone who *only* did what duty required and elected no supererogatory acts would, thus, not be a plausible candidate for a minimally acceptable agent. On the contrary, when someone like Scrooge does not elect even the least motivationally taxing supererogatory acts, we have to suppose that something has gone wrong with his moral psychology. In this way, reflection on what can be expected of a minimally well-formed moral agent leads us to construct a conception of commonly decent moral gift-givings from the larger domain of the supererogatory.[8] Those gift-givings retain their elective character; but their incorporation into our conception of what any minimally well-formed moral agent would elect heightens their normativity.

Clearly, however, not *every* supererogatory act that is motivationally non-taxing is a matter of common decency. There are endless favors, mercies, kindnesses, forgivings, volunteerings, praisings, and present-givings that we could do for others that would be no skin off our noses. Most are not expected of all minimally well-formed agents. Stooping down to tie a stranger's shoelace when his hands are full of packages, for example, is no more motivationally taxing than stepping forward to open the door for him. Yet shoe tying is not a matter of common decency, while door opening is. So why are some motivationally non-taxing moral gifts matters of

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common decency and others not? The obvious difference between shoe tying and door opening is that opening doors for others is a socially conventionalized moral gift-giving. Tying strangers' shoelaces is not. Such conventions convert supererogatory acts into common decencies.

Social conventions can convert supererogatory acts into common decencies in part because they make it obvious and unambiguous what it would be good to elect. When there are no conventions, giving people moral gifts can be problematic. We may give the appearance of bribing, currying favor, being paternalistic, taking liberties, showing favoritism, or seducing. This was the problem with tying the stranger's shoe. What was intended as a kindness may come across as an invasion of privacy, presumptuousness, paternalism, or a bit of seduction. So while tying the stranger's shoe may be motivationally non-taxing, its uncertain reception makes it neither obviously nor unambiguously a good thing to do. Conventions disambiguate. They render obvious and unambiguous the desirability of, say, opening doors for strangers with their hands full.

Conventions also affect what agents do and do not take to be motivationally taxing. When there are moral gift-giving conventions in place, agents expect the costs associated with those conventions.[9] When you board a bus, you expect to give up your seat to elderly passengers. When you teach a course, you expect to give some grace periods. Such expected costs are not burdensome because our plans and expectations for ourselves already include their possibility. We do not feel particularly burdened by giving over our seat, because doing so is not an *additional* cost of riding the bus. It comes with the territory of riding the bus. So too, showing occasional mercy to students comes with the territory of teaching.

In short, gift-giving conventions determine which elective acts will be motivationally non-taxing and obviously and unambiguously desirable. But this means that *there is no one standard for being a minimally well-formed moral agent*. The moral gift-giving conventions of actual moral practices supply the standard. Common decency is thus always a local construction.

Local moral gift-giving conventions supply the substantive content for the concept of common decency. There will, of course, be objective *limits* to what could count as common decency. Common decencies cannot strain human nature with their motivational demands. But just as the standard for a decent cup of coffee may vary with locale, so may the standard for common decency. Among the vast array of motivationally non-taxing supererogatory acts, different moral practices might conventionalize different sets. So, for instance, California Bay Area residents conventionally gift each other with enormous forbearance in wearing perfumed products; but they have no conventions for doing drivers who wish to change lanes the favor of permitting them to do so. Elsewhere, one finds conventions of doing fellow drivers favors, but none of forbearing to wear perfume.

Conceptions of common decency can also vary *vertically*. Some locales may have lower standards all around for commonly decent behavior. The villagers in Le Chambon during World War II constructed what seems to us an extraordinarily high standard of decency. They came to see as "only to be expected" grave risk-taking in

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order to protect Jewish strangers from Nazi capture. As Lawrence Blum observes, knowing that many others were involved in aiding the refugees had a double effect: It made the worthwhileness of taking the risk to help more obvious and unambiguous; *and* it reshaped the villagers' sense of undue burden, making it motivationally easier to choose to take those risks.[10]

Decent Teachers

I suggested at the beginning that reflection on the nature of common decencies has interesting implications for understanding what we expect from teachers as well as why teachers are vulnerable to exploitation and burnout. I turn now to these implications.

Any social practice—whether it be the practice of morality or the practice of a profession—will typically generate a conception of the minimally adequate practitioner. So, for example, it is possible to articulate what is expected from decent jockeys, decent insurance sales reps, and decent teachers. Typically, these conceptions will build in at least some moral dimensions, particularly a list of minimal *obligations*. Decent jockeys do not deliberately bump other horses in the race. Giving some moral gifts may also be built into these conceptions of decent practitioners. Decent jockeys, for example, congratulate those who win.

The helping professions—teaching, nursing, social work, and the like— are distinguished from other professions by the central place and unusually high level of moral gift-giving that is built into the conception of what these professions are about and thus into any plausible conception of a decent practitioner of a helping profession. Practitioners in helping professions take on a special responsibility for promoting something of moral value that those outside the profession do not have a similar responsibility to promote. According to one teaching code of ethics, for example, teachers are to give foremost consideration to students' well-being, to assisting students to develop their whole personality including their ability to work, to protecting students from conditions harmful to learning, health, and safety, to advancing the causes of education, including helping junior colleagues "in all possible ways" and improving one's teaching effectiveness "in every possible way," and to making "every effort" to encourage parents to interest themselves actively in their children's education and welfare.[11] High educational ideals like these give practitioners a reason for generating a wide array of moral gift-giving conventions with respect to students, fellow teachers, parents, and the school community.

Because teaching is driven by a humanitarian mission to promote education and human development, the local norms that define what it takes to be a decent *teacher* will also tend to define what it means to be a minimally well-formed *moral agent* in educational contexts. Thus teachers who refuse to write letters of recommendation for their students when asked act without both decency as teachers and without common decency. So too, students perceive teachers who are unmercifully exacting about due dates, tardiness, and preparedness for class as both inadequate teachers and as Scrooge-like and morally criticizable persons. Thus the pressure that is brought to bear on teachers to perform adequately is not just job pressure. It is also moral pressure.

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It is, in particular, moral pressure to elect to do things for students, parents, fellow teachers, and the school that are not strictly required by the job, and typically are not remunerated. Teachers are expected to do as a matter of common decency what in other occupations would seem noteworthy generosity—for example using one's own funds to provide client services, routinely coming in before the workday begins, staying after hours, working weekends, and not striking. Just how much teachers feel morally pressured to take on will vary with locale and local conventions.

Ideally, the bar for what teachers ought to elect out of common decency to others in the educational community would be set through ongoing processes of reason-giving and negotiation among teachers, students, parents, and academic administrators committed to the educational mission. The reasons given for expecting teachers to do X or Y or Z as a matter of common decency, should be connected to the moral value of promoting students' educational, personal, and moral development—that is to the teaching mission itself. And the negotiation needs to take place primarily among those who are going to be normatively expected to give these moral gifts and who will be vulnerable to criticism if they do not (that is, among teachers). That is because they are best positioned to speak to the question of whether the existing bar, or a proposed raised bar, for decency would be too motivationally taxing. But students and their parents, too, ought to have some say in these negotiations since students are the ones being helped; and students are perhaps best positioned to state what minimal forms of help they need most. The voice of educational administrators and philosophers of education may also have a place here since they may be best positioned to interpret what teachers' educational mission is and what moral gifts might be most critical to accomplishing it. By "negotiation," I do not mean formal negotiation. Within any community, standards for common decency are typically negotiated through everyday conversations, gossip, print media, and organized communal discussions in which we articulate our minimal moral expectations, as well as through patterns of acting and refusing to act. The bar for common decency can, for example, be lowered through persistent and widespread refusal to elect acts that were formerly common decencies.

Although ideally the bar for common decency will be set by the moral gift givers and their recipients, with an eye to the moral value of the gift, this is often not the case within teaching. Frequently, those most directly responsible for setting the bar for teachers' common decency are bureaucrats or high-level administrators, not teachers, students, and parents. And the level at which the bar is set for teachers is often substantially influenced by economic and political factors that have little to do with effective teaching. Colleges and universities, for example, must often compete for scarce grant funding. And within institutions, departments must often compete with each other for scarce institutional funds. In both cases, securing new funds often means generating new initiatives such as implementing new labor intensive mentoring or writing programs or hosting academic open-houses on weekends for prospective students. While these initiatives are rationalized by appeal to their educational value, they may not in fact be doable without adding to faculty workload or asking faculty to come to work outside standard work hours. To take a second example, both

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primary and secondary public schools may be given educational mandates that, again, are rationalized in terms of their supposed educational value, but that may be primarily designed to respond to the demands of voters for greater accountability and better results. For example, when students are required to take mandatory state exams, and when school funding hinges on successful student performance, teachers end up being expected to take on additional responsibility for coaching students. Finally, economic considerations may also motivate teachers and not just institutions to raise the bar for what is expected of a decent teacher. For example, when tenure and merit pay depend on meeting some unspecified but high standards, teachers find themselves entering a race to outdo each other by volunteering to do increasingly more for their students and their institution. The ultimate result is often that new more demanding gift-giving conventions get established.[12]

Sometimes the effect of economically and politically driven state and institutional decision-making is not to drive up the bar by increasing the *amount* of helping activities expected of decent teachers. Instead, the effect is to maintain the existing bar but increase the amount of stress that teachers are expected to tolerate as they attempt to be decent teachers. Changes in institutional structure can make what were once relatively cost-free acts of common decency much more *motivationally taxing*. Under-funding of educational institutions from kindergarten through college puts pressure on states and school administrators to increase class size and to mainstream students with emotional and learning handicaps. Teachers in urban schools may also have to deal with students suffering from gang violence, drug use, and family poverty. Teachers are thus faced with *more* students who will need extra academic help, personal counseling, recommendation letters, parent-teacher conferences, consideration of their special reasons for tardiness and misbehavior, independent study mentoring, and the like. At the same time, they are often faced also with more needy and more difficult students. Not turning a deaf ear to those special needs and forbearing from punitive responses to difficult students may not be motivationally taxing for teachers who have few such students, but when their numbers increase living up to expectations of common decency may be far more difficult.

Not only may teachers find themselves with more students and more difficult students, they may also find themselves with less time to do for students what has been conventionalized as just a matter of common decency. Escalating bureaucratic paperwork and committee work, the imposition of additional duties such as hall, lunch room, and cross-walk monitoring, and writing grant applications to supplement inadequate institutional funding all take time and emotional energy. As a result, teachers may find themselves struggling to find the time and energy to do for students what they have learned to regard as just a matter of common decency for a teacher. In one study, while eighty six percent of teachers reported not feeling tired at the beginning of the day, sixty one percent felt drained by the end.[13]

Let me now be specific about what is problematic about the way expectations about common decency work in educational institutions. First, at least some of what is expected of decent teachers is not a reflection of what teachers, students, parents, and educational administers could reflectively endorse as the minimal that can be expected of anyone who accepts the educational mission. Rather it is a result of

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increasing the amount of expected gift-giving or the expected tolerance level (by bureaucrats, administrators, and sometimes teachers) for motivationally taxing activities *for primarily economic or political reasons*. Now, there is of course nothing inherently wrong with businesses, including educational "businesses," attempting to get a larger slice of the economic pie by asking their employees to do more or to tolerate more stress. But there is something inherently wrong with doing so by bringing *moral pressure* to bear on employees, suggesting that employees who refuse are not simply bad employees, but are also bad persons. This is exactly what happens in teaching. Teachers who refuse to comply with the minimal expectations for how much after-hours labor teachers will do, who refuse to be merciful or kind to students under conditions where they face large classrooms full of unruly, unmotivated students, or who refuse to take their turn volunteering for weekend fairs, plays, open-houses and the like are vulnerable to *moral* criticism. But moral criticism for failing to meet standards of common decency that have been shaped by extra-moral incentives is misplaced.

This suggests that it is important for teachers, students, parents, policy-makers, and the public to achieve *transparency* about why they expect what they do from teachers. To what extent are current gift-giving conventions in education a product of competitive market pressures on schools and faculty that might be relieved through institutional changes? It is not Scrooge-like for teachers to protest that the standards of common decency that they are expected to live up to are primarily designed to serve economic and political agendas.

Second, when under-funded educational institutions bank on teachers being willing to do more or tolerate more stress for the sake of their students, those institutions as well as the public in general takes unfair advantage of teacher's decency.[14] Even if, for example, primary school teachers should, as decent persons, be willing to pay out of pocket for classroom decorations that will enhance their students' learning environment, *employers* of school teachers should not use this as a reason not to provide teachers with supplies for decorating their rooms. Or, for example, even if an English teacher feels that it is only common decency to volunteer to teach a math class because there are no available math teachers, the *public* should not use this as a reason not to respond aggressively to the shortage of math and science teachers. Educating children and youth from grade school through college is a social responsibility. Something is seriously wrong when institutions, legislators, and citizens take advantage of teachers' decency (and thus their willingness to compensate for inadequate social support of educational institutions) to shirk their own responsibilities for seeing that children are decently educated. Thus even if decent teachers should, in fact, be willing to give students, parents, and fellow teachers moral gifts that enhance education, policy-making should not be premised on the expectation that decent teachers will elect to do more than their job requires. Teachers who complain that their common decency is being exploited are not being Scrooges.

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1. Joel Feinberg is perhaps the most well-known moral philosopher who has made this observation that some of the things we ought to do are not matters of obligation but just what any "reasonable man of good will" would do. See Feinberg, "Supererogation and Rules," *Ethics* 71(1961): 276-88.

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2. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol and Other Haunting Tales* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 316.

3. The *OED* for example defines a decent person as someone who is kind, accommodating and pleasant—not as someone who does her minimal duties (*OED* Online, definition 5a). John Kekes observes that decency is especially connected with "moral attitudes that call upon one to go beyond the rules" (John Kekes, "The Great Guide of Human Life," *Philosophy & Literature* 8 (1984): 236-49, 243). It "involves good will toward fellow members of the society, a reluctance to injure others in pursuit of our own ends, *even if we have the right* to pursue our ends. It is the attitude opposite to extracting our pound of flesh" (Kekes, 248, my italics). Acts of common decency, in this sense, belong on the same scale with George Bailey's uncommonly decent acts in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Both common and uncommon decencies involve "interfering" for the better in others' lives through moral gifts of kindness, compassion, generosity, charity, mercy, forgiveness, patience, pleasantness, thoughtfulness, and the like.

4. David Heyd's observation about one kind of common decency—favors—applies generally to acts of common decency: "They may be deserved or undeserved, done spontaneously or as a response to a request. Yet they are never deserved as a matter of right, and a refusal to do a favor cannot be criticized as morally wrong. We can ask for a favor, but never claim it." David Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 148.

5. For a useful discussion of subcategories of supererogation, see Heyd, *Supererogation*.

6. Common decency thus does not fit David Heyd's familiar description of the supererogatory: decisions that concern the truly supererogatory are "free not only from legal or physical compulsion, but also from informal pressure, the threat of moral sanctions, or inner feelings of guilt. It is purely optional" (Heyd, *Supererogation*, 175). For a discussion of criticizable failures that is closely related to what I have in mind by criticizable failures of common decency, see Julia Driver's "The Suberogatory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1992): 286-95.

7. An agent could not *omit* common decencies and still claim to have a virtue like generosity. But to be generous is to be disposed to treat others also in some ways that exceed mere common decency. Purchasing the prize goose for Bob Crachit's family exceeds common decency, and it provides some evidence of Scrooge's commitment to becoming a better, more generous person.

8. Lawrence Blum draws a similar distinction between levels of virtue—noteworthy virtue and ordinary virtue. He describes ordinary virtue in a way that captures what I have in mind by common decency. Acts of ordinary virtue "are simply to be expected of a normal moral agent"; they are "not regarded as meriting distinct praise or esteem." Lawrence Blum, "Virtue and Community," in *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 149.

9. Lawrence Blum argues that communities generate a collective sense of reality via their expectations of one another's behavior that affects what individuals perceive as an undue burden. See Blum, "Virtue and Community."

10. Ibid.

11. "Malta: Code of Ethics for Teachers," *European Education* 25 (spring 1993): 100-2.

12. Roy Sorenson, in conversation, raised this concern about eager teachers raising the expectation bar for everyone.

13. Isaac C. Friedman, "Professional Self-Concept as a Predictor of Teacher Burnout," *Journal of Educational Research* 86 (September/October 1992): 28-35, 31.

14. I am relying here on Claudia Mills's parallel discussion of the way we sometimes wrongly take advantage of others' goodness. See her "Goodness as Weapon," *Journal of Philosophy* 95 (1995): 485-99.

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