IMPERFECT DUTIES AND SUPEREROGATION

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Introduction

• **Urmson**: “this threefold classification [...] is totally inadequate to the facts of morality” (1958, 198-9)

• **Question**: if we wanted to keep the three classic deontic categories, and reduce supererogation to it, how would we do so?

• **Basic Intuition**: if I am required to do $x$ or $y$, doing $x$ and $y$ is a candidate for supererogation. (Heyd, Guevara, Hill)
I am not committed to a Kantian framework, though Kantians might find my position compatible with theirs.

Giving sufficient conditions for supererogation is hard:

- motives
- competing duties
- “gaps” in the scale of supererogation \((\text{Wessels})\)

So I will focus on necessary conditions.
DISJUNCTIVE DUTIES
Imperfect and Perfect Duties

- **Rainbolt**: 8 different possible ways to draw the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties
- **Schumaker**: 25 minor, 3 major understandings of the distinction

Instead:

**Disjunctive Duty.** An actor \(i\) has a disjunctive duty with regard to the set of actions \(A =_{\text{def}} i\) has a duty to do some (i.e., at least one, but not all) of the members of the set \(A\).

- This is wide-scoped: \(O(a_1 \lor a_2 \lor \ldots)\)
- Disjunctive duties are a **simplification** to get to describe the skeleton of more complicated, realistic duties
Remarks

- We have to clearly distinguish between
  - disjunctive duty (applies to the set)
  - being disjunctively required (applies to members of the set)
ACTS AND SETS
Where Should We Look For Supererogation?

- **Acts.** Supererogation is a property which a particular action has. *(Majority of writers)*

- **Persons.** Supererogation is a character trait, or something else pertaining to persons. *(Trianosky, Statman)*

- **Sets of Acts.** Supererogation is a property which a set of actions has. *(?)*
Two Definitions

- **Acts.** Defining supererogation through disjunctive duties on act-level:

  If an act $a$ is supererogatory, then
  
  (i) $a$ is disjunctively required as a member of set $A$, 
  
  (ii) the disjunctive duty w.r.t. $A$ is already fulfilled.
Assume $O(x \lor y)$, $x$

Is $y$ a candidate for supererogation?

(i) $y$ is disjunctively required as a member of $\{x, y\}$
(ii) the disjunctive duty w.r.t. $\{x, y\}$ is already fulfilled, because $x$ has been done

Thus, $y$ fulfils the necessary conditions for supererogation.
**Two Definitions**

- **Sets.** Defining supererogation through disjunctive duties on set-level:
  
  If a set of acts $A$ is supererogatory, then
  
  (i) $A$ is a subset of $B$, and there is an disjunctive duty w.r.t. $B$
  
  (ii) the disjunctive duty w.r.t. $B$ is fulfilled by some proper subset of $A$. 

Two Definitions

• Assume \( O(x \lor y \lor z), x \)
• Is \( \{x, y\} \) a candidate for supererogation?

(i) \( \{x, y\} \) is a subset of \( \{x, y, z\} \), and there is an imperfect duty w.r.t. \( \{x, y, z\} \),
(ii) the imperfect duty w.r.t. \( \{x, y, z\} \) is fulfilled by some proper subset of \( \{x, y\} \): it is fulfilled by \( \{x\} \)

Thus, \( \{x, y\} \) fulfils the necessary conditions for supererogation
• **Act framework**: If the first six are done, k7 and k8 will be supererogatory (k1-k6 will not)

• **This is strange for two reasons:**
  o asymmetry: why should the temporal location of k7 and k8 matter?
  o unimportance: k7 and k8, by themselves, look too insignificant to deserve the label „supererogatory“

• **Set framework**: If you do the set \{k1, ..., k8\} that set will be supererogatory
Simultaneous Charity-Giving

- **Act framework**: both acts are supererogatory (wrong), one of them is (arbitrary), none of them is (wrong)
- **Set framework**: \{c1, c2\} is supererogatory. The question of whether c1 or c2 are does not arise.
Other Arguments

• **Theoretical Neatness.** “Imperfect duty” is justified on the level of sets, and so is supererogation
  “While [‘supererogation’] can be applied to particular actions (as well as to classes of actions), [‘imperfect duty’] has meaning only as an attribute of classes of actions.“ (Heyd)

• **Ordinary Language.** Praise is often given to “projects”, “things that an agents has done” etc.: what we praise, and think supererogatory, is a complicated set of actions
COUNTEREXAMPLES
Absence of Imperfect Duty

- “[The] heroic doctor is not simply doing his ‘duty plus more of the same.’ He does not travel a definite number of miles more than the total required by duty [...]. [H]e has no duty to travel one step toward the plague-stricken city or to treat one single victim in it.” (Feinberg 1961: 280)

- **Objection**: this action is not disjunctively required as part of any imperfect duty
Reference Class Problem

- **Reply.** The heroic doctor had several imperfect duties:
  - (1) help the people in the plague-ridden city
  - (2) help people suffering from the plague
  - (3) help people in need

- **Objection 2.** This is a gimmicky way of redescribing the case.

- **Reply 2.** We need a general account of when a duty is relevant to an action.
- Surely, travelling to the city is a way of fulfilling any of (1)-(3)
Only One Action

• Hanna throws herself onto a live hand grenade

• **Reply.** Hanna had a disjunctive duty: to take many small risks to ensure the survival of her comrades

• Hanna’s action can be redescribed as taking one big risk, which is the conjunction of taking many small risks

• There’s not only the problem of individuating duties; there’s the problem of individuating actions
MORALITY AND QUOTAS
Peter ought to give 30 times a year to charity. He gives 31 times.

**Objection 1.** Minimally over fulfilling your duty shouldn’t be enough to count as supererogatory

**Reply 1.** Fine; have two thresholds. (E.g., 30 and 50)

**Reply 2.** Add further necessary conditions
Peter ought to give 30 times a year to charity. Giving 50 times counts as supererogatory. He gives 51 times.

**Objection 2.** Fulfilling “thresholds” of any kind is inconsistent with supererogation

**Reply.** Remember that we’re setting aside motives. Imagine Peter never aimed for it to happen this way.
• “Peter ought to give 30 times a year to charity. He gives 31 times.”

• **Objection.** This is “Yuppie ethics”: imperfect duties are imperfectible. They do not contain threshold levels. *(Hale, Baron)*

• **Implication.** Disjunctive duties do not provide the “skeleton” of imperfect duties—they misrepresent what imperfect duties are about.
“Peter ought to give 30 times a year to charity. He gives 31 times.”

- **Reply 1.** The thresholds might be very high.
- **Reply 2.** Actual threshold will be vague.
- **Reply 3.** Again, don’t forget about motives.

If you still insist that imperfect duties are imperfectible, that has probably to do with a diverging “deep” picture of morality.
Supererogation lies outside any duty (Heyd); it is part of the “higher flights of morality” (Urmson)

**Disagreement.** All supererogation lies within duty. Supererogation is analysable purely in terms of duty.

**Challenge.** To solve the reference class problem for duties.

**Compatibility.** Morality does come in two parts—areas covered by perfect & imperfect duty, and the area going beyond it.
Comparison: Rigorism

- Against Yuppie ethics: the idea of us ever fulfilling our duties is illusory (Hale, Baron)

- **Disagreement.** Duties can in principle be fulfilled; disjunctive duties are a helpful analytical tool to understand imperfect duties

- **Compatibility.** The fulfilment level might very high!
Some Conclusions

- Imperfect duties can be analysed through the simplified notion of disjunctive duties
- Supererogation should be considered as a property of sets of actions
- One crucial issue between the supererogationist and the non-supererogationist is about the individuation of duties
Thanks!