IMPERFECT DUTIES AND SUPEREROGATION

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DUBLIN, 5 June 2014

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)

Two Preliminary Remarks

- 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 (Wessels)
- So I will focus on necessary conditions

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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 $=_{def}$ 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($a1 \lor a2 \lor$ ...)
- Disjunctive duties are a **simplification** to get to describe the skeleton of more complicated, realistic duties

Remarks

- We have to clearly distinguish between
  - o disjunctive duty (applies to the set)
  - o 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.

Two Definitions

- Assume   O(x ∨ 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 ∨ y ∨ 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

Kindness

k1   k2   k3   k4   k5   k6 | k7   k8

- **Act framework**: If the first six are done, k7 and k8 will be supererogatory (k1-k6 will not)
- This is strange for two reasons:
  - asymmetry: why should the temporal location of k7 and k8 matter?
  - 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
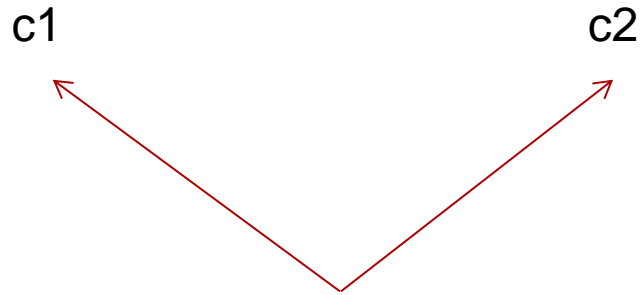
c1   c2

- **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:
  - o (1) help the people in the plague-ridden city
  - o (2) help people suffering from the plague
  - o (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

Doing Your Supererogatory Share?

- 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

Doing Your Supererogatory Share?

- 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.

Doing Your Share Of Imperfect Duty?

- "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.

Doing Your Share Of Imperfect Duty?

- "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

WIDER PICTURE

Comparison: Supererogationism

- 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!