

# SUPEREROGATION AND THE LIMITS OF MORAL OBLIGATIONS

## GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE

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### *Introduction*

Do moral obligations include all the good that can be possibly achieved? Does every instance of the good always entail obligatory performance? Supererogation is a moral concept that tries to address this claim, by pointing out the existence of a category of morally relevant good acts that go *beyond the call of duty*. Paradigmatic examples of this category of acts are represented by deeds of *heroism* and *sanctity*, where the agent is sacrificing herself in order to benefit the others in an exemplary way. However, supererogation is not limited to extreme and utmost cases of generosity, but it has much to do with our everyday life. From a moral point of view, making a small donation to the local children's hospital is considered to be morally good, but optional.

The renewal of philosophical interest for the concept emerged in the late 1950s, when James O. Urmson published his essay entitled *Saints and Heroes*<sup>1</sup>. From that moment on, the debate on supererogation is mainly concerned with the following questions:

- The definition of the concept and the delineation of the defining features of a supererogatory act;
- The compatibility of the concept with existing normative theories. In particular, Kantian Ethics, Utilitarianism and Virtue Ethics;
- The application of the concept to specific acts.

<sup>1</sup> Urmson J. O., 'Saints and Heroes' in Melden A.I. (edited by), *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, University of Washington Press, 1958.

David Heyd, with his *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, has been one of the first authors to address all these issues in a complete work<sup>2</sup> and many of his original arguments are still the point of reference for the current debate.

From a philosophical point of view, the peculiar aspect of supererogation is that it entails some *paradoxes* about the moral framework. In particular, the so-called *paradox of supererogation* is especially relevant for the justification of the concept: why some instances of the good are not morally required as duties? Anti-supererogationists claim that this conclusion is simply untenable (the good and the *ought* cannot be untied). On the other hand, supporters of supererogation need to provide an account of how the good and moral duties do not coincide.

### *The Two Levels of the Normative Dimension*

If we want to make sense of supererogation, there is a fundamental aspect of morality that needs to be acknowledged: the normative sphere of morality is constituted by two distinct levels. These are the *deontic* and the *axiological*<sup>3</sup>. Any supererogationist account is conceptually connected to the fact that the good is not fully exhausted by the *deontic* sphere of morality. This is what makes possible to pursue that extra good that lies within the *axiological* dimension. Hence, this latter moral dimension expresses an open-ended character that allows to moral acts to exhibit much more goodness than the *minimum* required.

The term “supererogation” found its first appearance in the parable of the Good Samaritan<sup>4</sup>. While it is widely accepted that this parable is the etymological origin of the concept, it is not clear, from the moral point of view, if the Samaritan has performed any act of supererogation. Rescuing a stranger whose life is in danger after being assaulted by the bandits is an act that seems to be morally required. The Samaritan’s omission to rescue the stranger would have represented a case of refusal of first aid. It is much more likely that the actual instance of supererogation is represented by the fact that the Samaritan is

<sup>2</sup> Heyd D., *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1982. Some others noteworthy publications have followed, including Gregory Mellema’s work a few years later. Mellema, G., *Beyond the Call of Duty: Supererogation, Obligation, and Offence*, State University of New York Press, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> For further analysis of this point see Heyd D., *Supererogation*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2016 Edition), Zalta E. N. (ed. by), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/supererogation/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Luke*, 10:25-37.

offering to pay to the innkeeper every extra expense of the rescued man<sup>5</sup>. However, from the philosophical point of view, it should be noted that what makes supererogation possible is the assumption that morality is two-faced (the *deontic* and the *axiological*). In this regards, there is another passage of the Gospel that turns out to be particularly significant for this point: the parable of the Young Rich Man<sup>6</sup>. Theologically, this parable represents the conceptual origin of the famous distinction between *precepts* and *counsels*. In particular, after Jesus has listed to the young man the main rules already contained in the Old Law, the text reads as follows:

<sup>20</sup>*The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?"* <sup>21</sup>*Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."*

These lines entail a moral framework that is twofold. The minimum required is exhibited by the requirements of the Old Law, i.e. the Decalogue. Moreover, this passage suggests that there is some extra good that can be achieved by going beyond these *precepts*. *Counsels* point out all those instances of the good that lie beyond the merely required and, as such, stand as the way to aim at moral perfection. As the works of many Christian theologians show, the concept of supererogation has had a prominent role in the fervent theological debate about *precepts* and *counsels* in the following centuries.

The important aspect to be considered, then, is that a morality conceived as being composed by two parts is the fundamental premise for any account of supererogation. That is, we need to acknowledge the twofold framework of the normative sphere if we want to make sense of supererogatory acts. Moral goodness is not an exclusive neither of the *deontic* nor of the *axiological* sphere of morality. The theological origin of the concept within the Christian thought highlights this theoretical prerequisite of the concept. A consequence, a philosophical account of supererogation cannot but start by providing the same theoretical framework that gave origin to the concept.

### *Introduction to the present issue of Ethics and Politics*

The present monograph issue of *Ethics and Politics* entitled *Supererogation and the Limits of Moral Obligations* aims at providing a good example of the most updated lines of research about the concept of supererogation. In

<sup>5</sup> *Luke*, 10:35.

<sup>6</sup> *Matthew*, 19:16-22.

presenting the issue, I am particularly glad to acknowledge how the papers presented, not only express a variety of different topics, but also a significant diversity in the countries of origin of the authors. This does not only show how the debate on supererogation is well articulated, but it also highlights how much the debate is widespread across universities and research centers.

The articles cover wide-ranging topics that include questions about the definition of the concept, its metaethical foundations, its relation with other moral concepts, its consonance with existing normative theories, its possible further development, and its applicability in the field of applied ethics.

I want to thank the journal's Editorial Board for assigning to me the role of Invited Editor and for giving space and visibility to the debate on supererogation. Finally, I want to thank the authors of the papers for their trust, patience and hard work. If this issue contains worth reading material (and I am sure it does), it is mostly thanks to their job.