

SUPEREROGATION

One common objection to utilitarianism is that it supposedly doesn't allow for supererogatory acts, acts that go above and beyond the call of duty. Since utilitarianism – at least, as traditionally construed – requires agents to perform the best available option (i.e. the option that maximizes utility), it seems to leave no room for doing more than duty requires. Some, however, argue that utilitarianism can, despite appearances, accommodate supererogatory acts.

An act is supererogatory if and only if it meets the following three conditions: (1) it's morally optional, (2) it's morally praiseworthy, and (3) it goes beyond the call of duty. Clearly, some acts will be morally optional on utilitarianism, for sometimes there will be more than one available act that would maximize utility. And some of these morally optional acts will be morally praiseworthy. Suppose, for instance, that Smith has the choice of saving either himself or Jones and that either way utility will be maximized. If Smith saves Jones at the cost of his own life, this certainly seems morally praiseworthy. Moreover, it's morally optional, since it would maximize utility. So, here's an act that meets the first two conditions for being supererogatory. What about the third? Does it go beyond the call of duty?

Some argue that it does (Harwood 2003; Vessel). They argue that an agent goes beyond the call of duty so long as she does more for others than she is required to do. But we might wonder whether this correctly specifies the relevant

sense of going beyond the call of duty. If we specify that going beyond the call of duty amounts only to doing more for others than is required, then we must deny the possibility of supererogation with respect to self-regarding duties. Yet it certainly seems possible to go beyond what such duties require. What's more, it seems that a supererogatory act must involve doing more of whatever there is moral reason to do. After all, we wouldn't think that perspiring more than is required is supererogatory, because we don't think that there is any moral reason to perspire more than is required. So we should think that doing more for others than is required is supererogatory only if there is some moral reason to do more for others than is required. Yet, on utilitarianism, there is no moral reason to do so. Smith, for instance, has no better moral reason to save Jones than to save himself. All that matters on utilitarianism is that utility is maximized, and utility will be maximized either way.

Even if we allow that an agent goes beyond the call of duty so long as she does more for others than is required and, thus, allow that utilitarianism can accommodate certain supererogatory acts, such as Smith's saving Jones rather than himself, some would still argue that utilitarianism doesn't accommodate the range of acts that we take to be supererogatory. What's worse is that utilitarianism implies that many intuitively supererogatory acts are morally wrong (McConnell 1980). Suppose, for instance, that Smith's saving Jones would produce slightly less utility than his saving himself. In that case, it would be wrong for Smith to sacrifice his life to save Jones. Yet, arguably, this act is

supererogatory. Or take a different sort of case. Suppose that Smith is doing some small favor for Jones: taking him out to lunch. And suppose that what would maximize utility is if Smith took Jones to the most expensive restaurant in town. In that case, utilitarianism implies that Smith's taking Jones out for a nice lunch at some moderately priced restaurant would be wrong. Yet, intuitively, it seems that performing such small favors is supererogatory. To avoid such implications and to accommodate a wider range of supererogatory acts, some philosophers have proposed that we adopt satisficing utilitarianism or even some other more novel version of utilitarianism – see, for instance, Portmore and Vessel.

Bibliography

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