

UTILITARIANISM AND SUPEREROGATORY ACTS

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Article:

Utilitarianism is the view that an act X is right if and only if the doing of X will have consequences at least as good as the consequences of any alternative act open to the agent. Among the many standard objections raised against this theory is the claim that it requires too much. We ordinarily classify some actions as supererogatory; that is, we say of some actions that, though they are ideal and morally meritorious, they are not obligatory because they require the agent to sacrifice or risk too much. But, the objection goes, the utilitarian theory cannot allow for the category of supererogatory acts. If an action is the one among the alternatives open to the agent that will maximize the good, then the agent is *obligated* to perform the action regardless of the sacrifice involved. This seems much too austere, and so utilitarianism conflicts with our ordinary beliefs about the moral life.

This objection, as it is usually stated, purports to show that all of the actions that we normally classify as supererogatory will be ones that are morally required within the utilitarian system. As it stands, this claim is false. But when the criticism is stated correctly, it presents an even more serious difficulty for utilitarianism.

It is incorrect to say that all of the acts that we normally think are above and beyond the call of duty are obligatory according to utilitarianism. Some actions that we typically call supererogatory are, on utilitarian grounds, *wrong*. Consider a slightly modified version of a case well known to philosophers. A group of ten potholders are making their way out of a cave in which the water is rising rapidly. They have imprudently allowed a fat man to lead them out. Unfortunately he gets stuck, and the other nine are trapped behind him. However, they have a stick of dynamite with them which they can use to blast the man out of the mouth of the cave. If they do nothing, they will drown and the fat man will be rescued. If they use the dynamite, the nine of them will be saved and the fat man will be killed. Now if each of the ten is (roughly) an equally useful citizen (as we shall assume), then the utilitarian must say that blasting the fat man out of the cave is the right thing to do; indeed, the act is morally required. That such an act is at least permissible might well be correct; at any rate we need not quibble about that here. Suppose, though, that each of the other nine refuses to perform this action. They are so appalled by the idea of using the dynamite on their friend that they are willing to die rather than do that. If they wait it out, as they plan, and they in fact drown, the utilitarian must judge that their act is wrong. But such a moral verdict is one that many will be reluctant to accept. Surely we would ordinarily say that the nine had performed an act of supererogation. Or consider the action of a parent who saves the life of a sickly or deformed child at the expense of his or her own life. If the parent would have lived a longer, more productive life than the child (and everything else is equal), then the action performed is wrong on utilitarian grounds. Yet one is more inclined to describe such an act as heroic than wrong. To judge that this act is impermissible seems much too harsh. Many other examples can be cited to make this same point. If an action which will benefit others involves so much sacrifice that it threatens the life of its agent(s), we think that in some sense it is morally ideal, though normally not obligatory. A theory which deems any such action to be morally wrong is surely suspect.

What has been said so far, though, may be misleading. I have talked as if all supererogatory acts require a great deal of sacrifice and are acts that one is likely to call heroic. However, it has been argued, persuasively I think, that some supererogatory acts are trifling.¹ Acts that we ordinarily call small *favours* fall under this category. Suppose, for example, that while visiting a bookstore I discover a new publication that would be of great interest to my colleague, Jones (because it is related to his current research). If I buy the book for Jones, it seems that the act is above and beyond the call of duty but certainly not heroic. The act involves no great sacrifice on my part. Now imagine that of all the acts open to me at this time, buying the book for Jones will produce the best consequences. If this is so, then utilitarianism entails that I am *morally required* to do this favour for Jones. This result alone will strike some as odd. In fact, it has been argued that a favour, by definition, is the sort of thing that one cannot be required to do.² But rather than dispute this, let us consider an additional problem. Suppose I come upon another book that my colleague, Smith, would enjoy. Smith, however, would not enjoy this book as much as Jones would enjoy the other one. As the situation is described, if I buy the book for Smith instead of the one for Jones my action is wrong, according to utilitarianism. One would think, though, that an agent is permitted to use his discretion in performing favours for others. Thus, again the utilitarian theory yields the result that some acts which are plausibly described as supererogatory are morally forbidden.

If, as the standard criticism suggests, utilitarianism were to classify all supererogatory acts as obligatory, matters might not be so bad. After all, one might be willing to pay the price of austerity to gain the theoretical advantages that utilitarianism offers. But when one sees that some actions that we would ordinarily say are above and beyond the call of duty are judged by the utilitarian to be morally wrong, then the price to be paid is much greater. Of course, the utilitarian may hold his ground and stubbornly insist that the acts of self-sacrifice and the trivial favours that I have described are, in those circumstances, wrong. It must be acknowledged, however, that if he says this he will be departing radically from the way we ordinarily talk. To conclude from this that his theory is false would be question-begging, since to some extent the utilitarian is a reformist. However, in this case the departure is great enough that it does provide one with additional ground for seriously doubting the adequacy of the view.

Notes

1. Roderick M. Chisholm, 'Supererogation and Offence: A Conceptual Scheme for Ethics', *Ratio*, V (1963), pp. 3-4.
2. Joel Feinberg, 'Supererogation and Rules', *Ethics*, LXXI (1961), p. 277.