

SUPEREROGATORY ACTIONS AND THEIR MORAL VALUE

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Abstract

Actions to help those who are in an extreme situation fall within supererogatory acts, i.e. "it would be better" to occur, but the inaction is not sanctioned, "not wrong." The two phrases, "right" and "wrong" applies the same people in the same circumstances, with the same obligations. In this paper I will try to determine the moral value of the supererogatory actions at an individual level, taking into account the institutional commitments that political decisions are determined by cultural, ideological contexts, and likely to violating moral principles. The supererogatory acts will be analyzed from two perspectives: a) the effective action derived from a personal ethics (classical utilitarianism), b) strategic actions arising from impersonal considerations related to consequences (utilitarianism). To grasp how individuals perceive and evaluate the quality of the supererogatory actions a questionnaire (testing hypotheses) was applied. Through this, it was intended, on the one hand, to establish the coordinates of which the supererogatory actions are placed (as defined as actions that lie beyond the debt), on the other hand, at another level of analysis it ranged the attempt to distinguish between the consequences and conditions of performing (reciprocity) supererogatory actions.

Keywords: *supererogatory acts, utilitarianism, consequentialism*

In the early '90s, Gilles Lipovetsky announced the "twilight duty" in a society desperately seeking the welfare, comfort and achieving the intimist, materialistic happiness; the values of sacrifice being, in this context, all muted. This trend has given rise to the "Postmoralist society" which Lipovetsky claims that "stepping out beyond the realm of duty, (these societies) does not hold without recognizing any authority, but according to a weak and minimal ethic, without obligation and sanction."¹

The societies that have accepted and have structured their activities according to the principles of minimalist ethics, and based on the dynamics of subjective rights, have had to adopt a new paradigm, capable, at an ethical and moral level to address and solve the problems that societies face: terrorist attacks, natural disaster,

famine. Actions required by extreme circumstances² transcend the duty, the moral values, "good", "right", "wrong", "bad" get other meanings, and their assessment cannot have as model the usual rational structures. In such circumstances, the emergence of the "hero", of the "saint" (acting on altruistic spirit, placing the welfare of the others above their own well beyond the boundaries of what duty states), imposes itself, and the society cultivates it and recognizes its merit. The terms "holy" or "holiness", referring to the action, as they are used by the supererogatory acts³ theories has purely moral sense, without any religious implications. The moral evaluation criteria of the terms "saint" and "hero", intended to be used in moral contexts is reduced, according to Urmson, to two dimensions: personal and actionable. The morality of the supererogation manifested at the first level is attributed to the person who carries out the duty in a context where the inclinations, desires, and the self-interest would determine most of the people not to do it, and the actionable perspective, self-control, self-mastery become essential. The hero overcomes the self-preservation instinct, terror – and acts under self-control in a context where most people are gripped by fear. These actions go beyond moral duty and obligation. From an ethical perspective, to act correctly means you do not help those facts which are considered to be wrong, and most of the ethical standards have a negative – they appear therefore under prohibitions as "not to do..." While the followers that promote a "closed ethical system"⁴, see the actions from a clearly dichotomous perspective, these being just right or wrong, and the requirement that every man over his lifetime, to always choose the lesser evil. The condition of the "saint" and the "Hero" from the point of view of normative theories, is

either related to 'the voluntary assumption of the positions and functions that require these virtues for the proper performance of duties or to looking for higher purposes in a manner that is conform to justice, but that exceeds the requirements of obligation and duty. As such, the morality of the supererogation those of saint and hero, do not contradict the norms of law (right) and of righteousness (justice) rather the self voluntarily adopts specific purposes of these principles, going beyond"⁵. The supererogatory actions are not related only to this class of actions that would include only the "saints" and the "heroes". From a broader perspective, the supererogatory actions (because the focus is more on action and not on individual traits, motives, intentions or emotions) become optional or non-binding acts, completely different than the acts falling under duty, they transcend the duty because the agent made more than duty, which requires him or involves what to do. With these features, David Heyd believes that "the supererogatory acts have special value: they are morally good and praiseworthy"⁶. Actions with moral value, appraisal, non-mandatory, optional, voluntary undetermined by universal rules and which do not jeopardize the lives of those who perform them fall into the category of (unqualified supererogation)⁷. Due to these characteristics, they can be committed by all the human beings. After Heyd's typology, the unskilled supererogatory acts are: charitable acts, polite gestures to show mercy and forgiveness towards a person who deserves to be punished, volunteering (cannot be named but who voluntarily meet his/her own debt or feed his/her own children). Another possibility to identify supererogatory actions⁸ would be to take into account the private, distinctive features of the supererogatory acts: acts whose fulfillment is not dictated by moral obligation or duty, acts whose consequences are appreciated as worthy of praise and deserving.

To grasp how individuals perceive and evaluate the quality of supererogatory actions a questionnaire (testing hypotheses) was administered. It was intended, on the one hand, to establish the coordinates in which the supererogatory actions are placed (As defined as actions that lie beyond the debt). At another level of analysis the attempt to distinguish between

the consequences and conditions of performance (reciprocity principle) of supererogatory actions ranged. A total of 90 tests, hypothesis test questionnaires were given. The items focused on the presentation of semi-structured stimuli to which the respondent gave a free interpretation. The questionnaire took into account only some socio-demographic coordinates, relevant in terms of the discussed topics: level of education, religion, ethnic origin, political affiliation. The assessment took into account the results of a linguistic analysis, the typology of the supererogatory actions from the utilitarian consequential perspective and supererogatory actions performed on the basis of reciprocity. Similarly, in drawing the conclusions the degree of social desirability was taken into account, i.e. to consider the tendency of respondents to answer and ideally solve the problems, "this should be", not taking into account the doubt, fear, insecurity, compassion, joy, sadness, interest, lack of thinking time, naturally occurring when taking decisions for action. The linguistic analysis of supererogatory actions focused on the type of relationship that can develop between the basic concepts of the ethics theory and the moral discourse⁹ that aims a) need: duty and obligation; b) value: good and evil; c) conformity to the rule: right and wrong; d) character traits: virtue and vice, e) reaction of the other: praise and blame or reward and punishment f) reason to act: "must" – "must not"¹⁰.

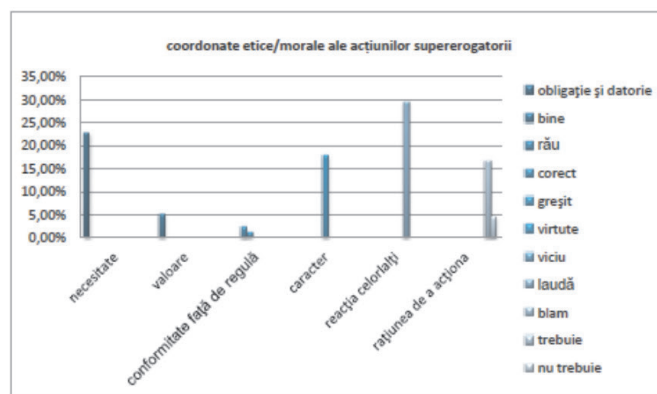


Fig. 1. Ethical / moral coordinates of the supererogatory actions

The survey results highlighted, considering the socio-demographic elements that

contextualizes the research, that relevant in evaluating a supererogatory action are the reactions of the others. Nearly 30% of respondents considered these indicators, while at the opposite pole the compliance to the rule was below 3%. Corroborating these results with the type of responsibility (accountability to the group, 75.5%) which should underpin the supererogatory actions (Fig.2) the social dimension of these actions may be highlighted.

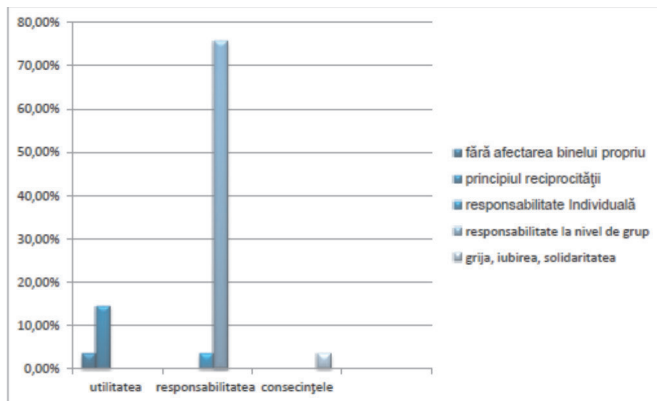


Fig. 2. Supererogative performative attitudes

The moral responsibility is configured based on self-awareness and reason, even at the individual level, as the acquisition of focusing the “acts according to some moral principles and ideals”¹¹ will cause two types of responsibility. A consistent accountability and here Jankélévitch considers the committed acts that have a social and legal basis. Basically, we can make judgments on the already performed actions on moral judgments, praise / blame, right / wrong etc. and an antecedent and forward responsibility.

Assuming the responsibility (consistent or foresight) and the implementation of the basic decisions in this manner can create the moral models of the individual personality: re-active or pro-active¹². Only the prospective responsibility after Jankélévitch can be described as moral responsibility, due to its features, primarily for targeting actions to be committed. This type of responsibility is one that Jankélévitch places him alongside duty and freedom, at the moral actions ground.

The linguistic analysis of the supererogatory actions (Fig. 1) revealed a certain tension, namely that the non-mandatory performing actions are based on the consistent responsibility (reaction

of the others), 29.4% of the answers and only 22.7% on the prospective responsibility (necessity: obligation and duty). The responsibility of the group (fig. 2) and the individual responsibility must both be understood as moral attitudes influenced by his own conscience (prospecting) or group (consistency), resulting in actions that modify events, things, states.

From this point of view an action becomes supererogatory if the company or the group recognizes this type of action as commendable, meritorious, the achievement of which involves not just one person, but the community, all individuals affected by the action. The responsibility to the group can be interpreted as the trend of blurring the role of the “Hero” or “holy” and taking these roles by the groups, communities, and institutions. On the other hand, without generalizing, the performative non-binding attitudes, according to test results (Fig. 2) had lower rates for the actions based on care, love and solidarity. The analysis of these values was done in a consequential manner. The followers of the consequentialism base their actions, regardless whose name they act, on a range of values; the outcome of the consequential actions is considered desirable and moral even if it only partially reflects the value of the underlying action. For example, a charity (supererogatory) such as food donation is moral, regardless the motivation or intention underlying the action, as long as it is not the proof of an obvious lack of respect. From this point of view, the test results can be understood as a decrease in the “voluntary third kind” as called by Lipovetsky, i.e. a specific category of people who hide behind deeply humanistic ideals - solidarity, care for other etc. – To obtain social recognition, social integration, “to fill a void and anguishing for”¹³.

The supererogatory actions, understood from a utilitarian perspective (J. St. Mill’s utilitarianism) would require maximizing the good. At the level of moral action, actually it means to generate as much good for as many people. Against the doctrine of utilitarianism, Rawls raises two objections. The first one discusses the inability of the utilitarian theory to explain the supererogatory actions¹⁴. This unsuitability is due to the disagreement between the utilitarian fundamental

principle, welfare maximization – and the personal interest of the one who voluntarily acts. In this situation, if the fundamental principle prevails, then the supererogatory actions, which by definition are non-binding, become mandatory, and on the other hand, if the interest still prevails, then no one should act in a supererogatory spirit. The second objection of Rawls envisages maximizing the good effects, whereas the maximization cannot take into account the fundamental individual rights and interests, and thus, the principle of utility is “incompatible with the idea of social cooperation of the equal persons for mutual benefit”¹⁵. In relation to the idea of good and the principle of reciprocity (mutual benefit), Rawls will assert that an action promotes the good to somebody else, and this supererogatory action “is a natural duty imposed by the principle of mutual aid”¹⁶. At the level of actions, of the actions disposal, according to the results of applied questionnaires (Fig. 2), there is no difference between the supererogatory actions that take into account the personal interests and the actions put in parenthesis such interests, both categories recording a rate of 3.3%. A partial conclusion, based on these results, show that the two extreme positions, the personal sacrifice (welfare maximizing) and the personal interest (within committing good with a personal non-assignment), confirms the possibility, at the level of moral actions, of the utilitarian supererogation. According to the theory of justice, the supererogation is based, as Rawls argues, on the principle of reciprocity or mutual aid. In common terms this means that the good made to someone, who is in an extreme situation, will come back to you in the same form from the person or group you supported, if you find yourself in a similar situation. The questionnaire took into consideration a real situation¹⁷, but which suffered small modifications based on theoretical considerations, in order to test the validity of the principle of reciprocity in performing supererogatory actions. The theory of justice as fairness (Rawls), both owners should be supported and helped and according to the principle of reciprocity, the community would have to return the good to that one who voluntarily supported to repair the school. The

test results revealed that a percentage of 26.66% felt that we should help those in need, and only 2.22% for the one who helped to develop the community, a percentage of 4.44 declared themselves undecided, while 66.66% stated their support for the low income. In interpreting these results it was taken into account the degree of social desirability, whereas the trend in theory was to assist and help the disadvantaged. Comparing the test results with the results of the actual situation that generated the result, a contradiction comes out. At a real level, in situations like the one specified above, the tendency is to help the person who is able to support you, the principle of reciprocity, when you face a situation similar to that in which you offered your help and less the person who cannot return you the good.

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Endnotes

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2. Fried, by the way he defines the catastrophe is very close to the sense that this term has in the extreme situation - which has a wider scope and it includes not only the natural disasters but also the terrorist attacks or even the situations in which, incidentally, an individual witnesses a tragedy (accident, fire etc.) and intervenes. Fried said: "the concept of catastrophe is special because it identifies the situations in which the usual reasoning is no longer valid (neither on good or evil)" (Fried, C., *Right and Wrong*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 10).
3. J. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes", *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, 1958, pp. 196-216.
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8. Gregory Mellema, *Beyond the Call of Duty: Supererogation, Obligation and Offence*, State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 3
9. David Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 8.
10. Fig.1. Ethical/moral coordinates of the supererogatory actions
11. Mary Ann Warren, "Avortul", in Peter Singer (ed.), *Tratat de Etică*, p.340). The moral action, taking into account the temporal dimension; Jankélévitch, (Vladimir Jankélévitch (2011), *Curs de filozofie morală*, Polirom, p. 128) asserts that "the future is the natural time of the will and action".
12. Paul Balahur, *Personalitate și creație în etica modernă*, Editura Universității "Al.I. Cuza", Iași, 2004, pp. 26-30.
13. Lipovetsky, p. 164.
14. Rawls, *Teoria Dreptății*, p. 118.
15. Ibidem, p. 35.
16. Ibidem, p. 389.
17. The following situation, partially real, was included in the questionnaire: "In your native community, at certain time intervals, two unhappy events take place: a) the house of the richest man in the community is burnt into a fire; b) the house of the poorest man of the community is burnt into a fire. In both cases, the fire was not set by mistake. The low level of living of one of the owners is not subordinated to vices, he is hardworking. His incomes got lower due to his job – he repairs umbrellas, watches and glasses. The other owner, due to his earnings could support the school repair and got involved into other projects that the community benefited from. Who do you help and why?"