

FRATERNITY AND SUPEREROGATION. SOME PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS ON THE ENCYCLICAL “FRATELLI TUTTI”

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Abstract Pope Francis’ encyclical “Fratelli tutti” proposes the so-called parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) as the paradigm of a fraternity understood as a social friendship (see *Fratelli tutti*, n. 56-86). The Samaritan’s attitude is traditionally considered the emblem of “supererogation”. This is a technical term which indicates those actions and attitudes which, while being morally good, are however not strictly required. This area of actions and attitudes has long been considered beyond ethics and beyond the call of duty which is typical of modern citizenship. This paper aims to show that supererogation can be considered an ethical phenomenon and the core of a new form of citizenship.


Keywords Fraternity, Supererogation, Ethics, Duty, Citizenship

Pope Francis’ encyclical “Fratelli tutti” proposes the so-called parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) as the paradigm of a fraternity understood as a social friendship (see *Fratelli tutti*, n. 56-86). This proposal is of interest to the moral philosopher for at least a couple of reasons.

The first reason is that the Samaritan's attitude is presented as a moral example which is not only valid for Christians, but for everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs. The second reason is that that attitude is considered valid, not only in the private sphere of interpersonal relationships, but also as a paradigm of a new form of citizenship.

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1. The notion of Supererogation

The history of the concept of supererogation (Heyd, 1982; Janiaud, 2007) has its origins precisely in the parable of the Good Samaritan and, in particular, in the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Christian Bible dating back to the 4th century. In the instructions the Samaritan gives the innkeeper so that he takes care, in his absence, of the unfortunate pilgrim, the Vulgata reads: “Curam illius habe, et, quodcumque *supererogaveris*, ego, cum rediero, reddam tibi” (Lk 10:35). The Latin verb “*supererogaveris*” is translated, in the current versions of the biblical text, by the periphrasis “whatever more you spend”. Supererogation has therefore to do with a “surplus” and, in particular, with an additional cost, an extra expense. This is why the attitude of the Samaritan has traditionally become the emblem of supererogation.

Starting from the Gospel, the Fathers of the Church have introduced the term into the technical language of theology, referring it to actions recommended by spiritual tradition, but contrary to natural inclinations, such as fast and chastity (Dentsoras, 2014, p. 351-372). But it is only with Thomas Aquinas that the term became relevant (Witschen, 2004, pp. 27-40). According to Aquinas, a good moral action can be either commanded or advised. That is, it can be the object of either an obligation (the sphere of “*praecepta*”) or a recommendation (the sphere of “*consilia*”, such as chastity, poverty, obedience). This second category includes supererogatory actions, i.e. actions which, while being morally positive, are beyond the call of duty. According to Aquinas, counsels are morally superior to commandments. If the latter concern what is good, the former concern a better good. Aquinas’ perspective on supererogation became canonical, remaining substantially unchanged for a few centuries, at least until Luther and the other Reformers (Konrad, 2005, pp. 119-140). In their eyes, supererogatory actions took the shape of human claims to obtain salvation thanks to one's own merits.

In the following centuries, the notion of supererogation lost its relevance and centrality, both in theology and philosophy, at least until 1958, when the British philosopher James Urmson published his short essay *Saints and Heroes* (Urmson, 1969, pp. 60-73). Urmson's thesis goes as follows: moral philosophy has traditionally disregarded two types of actions, the saintly and the heroic ones. Such actions would not fall in the commonly accepted classification, according to which moral actions would be divided into (1) morally right obligatory actions, (2) morally wrong prohibited actions, (3) morally neutral permitted actions. Saintly and heroic actions do not fit in this classification as long as they are morally good actions which are not obligatory, not due nor demandable. More precisely, although they may be perceived as mandatory from a first person perspective (i.e. by the subject at the moment of deliberation), they are not so from a third person perspective (i.e. from the point of view of an external observer). According to Urmson, compared to the “basic moral duties”, those actions would represent “the higher flights of morality”. Following Urmson's pioneering article, a huge debate has opened up in Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy about

the concept of supererogation: about its definition, about the taxonomy of supererogatory actions and attitudes, about the paradoxes inherent in the notion (Archer, 2018; Cowley, 2015; Heyd, 2016).

What is interesting for us is that the encyclical “Fratelli tutti” places supererogatory attitudes and acts – of which the Good Samaritan is a moral example – as a paradigm not only of ethics, but of a new form of citizenship. What can the moral philosopher say about this claim?

2. Rethinking the notion of duty

As I have tried to show elsewhere (Biancu, 2020, pp. 25-39) taking the notion of supererogation seriously requires to rethink the notion of duty. In particular, I think it is necessary to distinguish at least three different levels of the experience of duty.

A first experience of duty is situated at a legal level: my duty corresponds either to the respect of the right of another person or to what is established by a law. This kind of duty is intended to protect freedom and human rights, which are supposed to be an original human feature, as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (article 1). By setting boundaries and limitations, legal duties aim at protecting everybody's original freedom and rights.

A second experience of duty is situated at an ethical level. A form of responsibility comes up at each encounter between humans. Not only I am responsible for my own actions (which I might be asked to justify), but I am somehow responsible for the other's life and destiny (Levinas, 1961; Waldenfelds, 1997; Waldenfelds, 2002). An implicit call for love is present in each human encounter and I have to respond as suitably as possible to this call.

A third experience of duty is situated at an anthropological level. At this level, the idea according to which all human beings are born free is an abstraction (Ferry, 2004, p. 201). Humans are born able to be free, but they actually need to become free. Freedom has its own genealogy and conditions, and love is one of these conditions. Not only I need to be free in order to love someone, but I also need to receive and give love in order to become free. Only if I act out of love – love for myself and for others – I can truly be free.

Supererogation is beyond the call of duty at a legal level, i.e. beyond what the moral agent might be required to do by either a law or the respect of a third person's rights. At this level, no one has the right to bother me by asking me to love them (i.e. to forgive, to be generous, to give my life for someone...).

But supererogation is not beyond the call of duty at an ethical level: I have to respond as suitably as I can to the call for love of my neighbour, since both their and my destiny depends on my

response. This is what Jaspers called a “metaphysical” responsibility, based on an original solidarity among humans (Jaspers, 1946, p. 11).

Supererogation is not beyond the call of duty on an anthropological level either. At this level, duty is what I actually need in order to become free, to actually become a subject. Something is due to the extent that it is a condition of my subjectivity and liberty. I become subject by freely and suitably responding to someone who in some way bothers me by asking me for love.

According to a very traditional view, supererogation is beyond the call of duty and (therefore) beyond ethics. The implicit presupposition of this view is that duty has in itself a legal shape: it corresponds to the respect of a third person's right or to what is established by a law. But we need to enlarge our understanding of duty, by seeing it also as a necessary condition of possibility (of freedom, of subjectivity, of humanity...). Being one of these conditions of possibility, supererogation exceeds the mere legal understanding of duty, but not duty itself. It therefore becomes in all respects, an ethical phenomenon.

In other words: supererogation can be considered as a "maximum" if compared to the "minimum" which cannot and must not be missing – i.e. the area of what is demanded either by a law or by the respect of a third person's rights. Since it is one of the conditions of freedom and subjectivity, this “maximum” is nevertheless somehow “necessary” – the liberal State needs citizens who are truly free human subjects.

By contributing to create truly human and free subjects, the supererogatory attitude of the Good Samaritan – a fraternity understood as a social friendship – fulfils those premises on which the liberal State lives without being able to guarantee them by itself (Böckenförde, 1976, cit. *Recht, Staat, Freiheit*, 2006, p.112 «Der freiheitliche, säkularisierte Staat lebt von Voraussetzungen, die er selbst nicht garantieren kann»). With good reason, it can be thus considered an ethical phenomenon and the core of a new form of citizenship.

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