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Prerogatives for Bystander Intervention

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Abstract

It seems to be true that we are not always obligated to take the best course of action. Some good deeds are considered supererogatory, meaning they are optional yet preferable to other permissible acts. Examples include enduring injury to save a life or doing someone a favour. Why would this not be the case for bystanders as well? That is, given that by-stander usually consists of saving lives or preventing harms, when is it the case that we are permitted in not doing so? The aim of my talk is to determine if there are obligations for bystanders to intervene. I argue that the prevailing Sacrifice View, which holds that an act is supererogatory only if it incurs a cost to the agent's well-being, fails to provide a clear guideline for determining one's duty to intervene.

This account faces three critiques, namely the experience of costs by the supererogator, the failure to distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable costs and the unclear definition of the term costs. Yet, all three critiques point to the perspective usually taken to tackle the question whether a bystander has a duty to intervene, which is to refer to the agent's internal perspective. However, a different route is an external perspective. One account that champions this approach is the Cautionary Account (CA) (Eslami and Archer 2024). I will build upon the CA, which posits that a supererogatory act is one among several morally permissible options but is distinguished by its responsiveness to higher order cautionary reasons. According to the account, which is restricted to a specific account of virtue ethics, a supererogatory act arises from a virtue that mitigates a natural human inclination towards a specific vice.

I argue that the view entails that one has the duty to get our duties right, which in turn demands that we have the duty to know about our duties. This means that we have to place a high emphasis on the external perspective in our moral reasoning.

I show that the potential counter-argument to my account, namely that it is left unclear what the moral baseline for our external perspective is, does not hold by claiming (1) since the Sacrifice View does not hold the agent does not compare herself with regards to costs towards others, but rather (2) the agent must do her best unless she has a prerogative not to (Muñoz 2021).