

## What (Doesn't) Make an Heroic Act?

**ABSTRACT:** This paper focuses on the nature of saintly or heroic acts, which, according to J.O. Urmson, exist as a fourth, less traditional category of moral actions. According to this division, heroic acts are those, which have positive moral value, but cannot be demanded of an individual as their duty; however, this paper argues that Urmson is mistaken in his claim that a consequentialist ethical framework is the most capable of accounting for heroic acts. Furthermore, this paper claims that an Aristotelian account is the most appropriate ethical theory to consider, which could better countenance the existence of heroic acts.



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This essay is an examination of J. O. Urmson's article "Saints and Heroes," in which he argues that the categories which modern philosophers use to classify moral actions is insufficient, as it is unable to capture a certain set of actions which clearly have moral value. Therefore, Urmson argues, we need to modify our conception of the rightness and wrongness of actions in order to accommodate them. While I agree with much of what Urmson says in his essay, I take issue with his suggestion that consequentialism is the moral theory which most readily presents itself as amenable to the necessary restructuring. In this essay I will examine

Urmson's argument for the existence for this new category of actions, and explain why I do not think a consequentialist theory of value is suited to capture it. I will argue that the moral value of these actions lies in the character of the agent, and conclude with a discussion of how virtue ethics provides an approach, which *can* capture their moral value.

At the beginning of his essay, Urmson outlines the three categories in which moral philosophers place human actions: those actions which are right (which we have a duty to perform); those which are permissible (which have no moral weight one way or the other); and those which are wrong (from which we have a duty to refrain).<sup>1</sup>

1. J. O. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes," in *Twentieth-Century Ethical Theory*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Joram G. Haber (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1995): 322.



However, there are certain actions that do not fit into this framework, which Urmson calls 'heroic' or 'saintly.' A person is a saint "if he does actions that are far beyond the limits of his duty, whether by control of contrary inclination and interest or without effort,"<sup>2</sup> and a hero "if he does actions that are far beyond the bounds of his duty, whether by control of natural fear or without effort."<sup>3</sup> The actions which correspond to these terms have positive moral value – and are thus neither wrong nor merely permissible – but which we have no duty to perform, and thus cannot be expected or demanded of us.

To clarify this idea, Urmson gives the example of a squad of soldiers who are practicing throwing live hand-grenades. A grenade falls on the ground after the pin has been pulled, and one of the soldiers – who we will refer to as Smith – throws himself on the grenade in order to stifle the blast. Smith has sacrificed his own life in order to save the lives of the rest of the group. He has clearly done something of great moral worth, but he has not, in so doing, performed an act which we could consider his duty. Urmson makes this clear by posing the question: Can we say of any of the other soldiers in this case that "they failed in their duty by not trying to be the one who sacrificed himself?"<sup>4</sup> Even if Smith's own conscience led him to believe that, in fact, it *was* his duty to sacrifice himself, it would be absurd for us to say that he was morally obligated to throw himself on the grenade. Therefore, this act of sacrifice has moral worth, and yet cannot be placed into any of the familiar moral categories.

After laying out the facts as he sees them, Urmson suggests that we need a new kind of moral theory in order to accommodate them. We need a system which will account for those actions which can be considered duties and also those actions that are of moral value, but which cannot be expected of an agent as duties, and which we cannot censure him or her for refraining from doing. Of all the traditional theories, Urmson thinks that consequentialism can best account for our intuitions about heroism and saintliness. The moral value of these actions must be treated in terms of their results; a world that contains saints and heroes is better than a world without them.<sup>5</sup>

I find it unlikely that a consequentialist theory of value can accurately reflect the nature of the phenomena Urmson has demonstrated. We cannot account for the goodness of heroism and saintliness in terms of the consequences of actions, because if we do, those characteristics of the acts that make them heroic or saintly are completely obscured.

The main problem with trying to account for the value of these actions in this way is that, under any sufficiently strong version of consequentialism, the numbers involved would have to play a major role in our judgments. However, that does not seem to be the way we judge these kinds of cases. If a man is sacrificing his life in order to save the lives of others, what difference does it make whether he saves one life, or ten lives, or one hundred, or even one thousand? It is clear that it makes no difference whatsoever. The man is heroic no matter how

many lives he saves, and the degree of heroism which we attribute to him does not increase or decrease with that number, which is what we would expect if the goodness of the act were simply a function of its consequences. To return to the example Urmson gives, suppose that there are five men in the squad besides Smith. We can easily construct cases in which, for one reason or another, Smith's body is unable to stifle the entire blast of the grenade, and we can construct a case in which five lives are saved, or only three, or one, or even none. The point here is that while the case where Smith actually succeeds in saving all five of his squad-mates certainly produces better results than the case in which he saves only one, this does not affect the degree of heroism which we can attribute to him. Thus, our focus on the consequences has in some way obscured the nature of the act, and its moral value.

We might begin to wonder whether the simple fact that lives are being saved – regardless of number – is playing the major role in our judgment of people like Smith. That is, if we can rightly call two acts heroic despite a wide divergence in the number of lives saved, this is *prima facie* evidence that we should be looking elsewhere in our description of these actions for that property which makes them heroic. One aspect of heroic and saintly actions which presents itself as the relevant feature is the fact that, in such cases, the agent makes a great personal sacrifice. This would explain Urmson's claim that heroic actions cannot be demanded of an agent as a duty. There are many ways in which to save a life, some of which can be expected – or indeed demanded – of us, but no one can demand that we lay down our lives. It is this factor that makes the act heroic. But we

have seen that a consequentialist moral theory cannot capture the value of heroism. Therefore, we must turn away from consequentialist considerations in order to focus on the nature of self-sacrifice, and try to determine what is morally valuable about self-sacrifice *in and of itself*, keeping in mind that whatever theory we use to explain its value must also be able to explain its supererogatory nature.

What I have said up until now has been mostly critical. We have seen that there are certain kinds of actions – saintly and heroic – which have recognizable moral value, and yet cannot be included in the traditional threefold framework of action, which recognizes only obligatory, permissible, and impermissible acts. Saintly and heroic acts have positive moral worth – and so are not impermissible or merely permissible – but are not obligatory. I have argued that consequentialist moral theories leave us unable to explain the distinctive moral character of these acts, and suggested that this distinctiveness lies in their sacrificial nature. Recall that a heroic act involves going beyond duty where most would be held back by fear, and a saintly act involves going beyond duty where most would be held back by self-interest. Thus, the quality of heroic and saintly acts seems to point us away from their consequences, and towards the people performing them. There is something morally praiseworthy about the man who goes beyond what we can expect him to do. Therefore, I will conclude this paper by considering how the theory of virtue ethics might lend itself to Urmson's new category of moral behavior.

Virtue ethics has at its basis a different question than consequentialist theories. While the latter tend to ask "What makes something a good act?"

2. Urmson, 1995: 324.

3. Urmson, 1995: 324.

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5. Urmson, 1995: 328.



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the former asks "What makes someone a good person?" To be sure, the quality of actions is still an issue, but it is subordinated to the quality of the character of the agent. Thus, an act is right or good if done in accordance with one or more of the virtues. The virtues are characterized as states – as opposed to feelings or capacities – by Aristotle<sup>6</sup> and as excellences of the will by Philippa Foot.<sup>7</sup> This means, succinctly put, that an act is good not because it follows a universal maxim or because it maximizes utility, but because it is done in accordance with a quality of character which is valuable in and of itself.

Aristotle argued that each virtue is a "mean state" between two vices. So the woman who is never afraid and is over-confident is rash, while the woman who is always afraid and under-confident is cowardly.<sup>8</sup> The courageous woman is confident and unafraid only to the degree that is rational to be. Therefore, an act which reflects courage – such as resisting injustice without fear or overconfidence – is for that reason good.

While the theory needs to be modified, this seems close to what we are looking for. What makes Smith's act heroic is that it displays a quality of selflessness, a willingness to put aside one's own needs and desires when they conflict with others.<sup>9</sup> The moral value of a saintly or heroic act lies in the character of the

agent, the selflessness with which such actions are performed. We find such a character trait valuable and praiseworthy in everyday life, but in a hero or a saint we see it taken far beyond what most people can – or could be expected to – achieve. Virtue theory, therefore, supplies us with a plausible explanation of how these actions can be morally valuable without being duties: their value lies in the character of the agent who performs them, their willingness to put aside fear or personal interest in order to satisfy other goods. However, we must rework the concept of virtue as a mean state in order to account for the fact that Smith's action can go beyond moral duty, and yet still be virtuous rather than vicious. That is, we must explain how a virtue can be pushed so far without becoming a vice.

I agree with Urmson's argument for the existence of heroic and saintly acts, and with his statement that, while these acts are valuable, they are not duties. I have argued that focusing on the consequences of such actions only obscures their sacrificial nature, because heroism and saintliness are not functions of consequences; they do not increase or decrease with the quality of results. Finally, I have suggested that by focusing on the agent, we may be able to provide an account of the moral value of those actions which we call saintly or heroic. ♦

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6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 1998): 26

7. Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in *Twentieth-Century Ethical Theory*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Joram G. Haber (New Jersey, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1995): 585-586

8. Aristotle, 1998: 28

9. This virtue arguably lies between the vices of asceticism and selfishness.