

## Supererogation and the Case Against an ‘Overall Ought’

Consider Helen, who is deciding what she ought to do with her money. Helen decides that what she morally ought to do is to give most of her money to charity, and what she ought to do based on her own self-interest is to spend it all on hiking. Helen might want to ask a further question: what ought she do *overall*, taking these different reasons into account?

My paper has two aims. Firstly, it will argue that the ‘overall ought’ is not treated carefully enough in philosophical discourse, and is in need of clarification. The second aim is more ambitious: to give a new argument for why the targeted overall ought does not stand up to scrutiny. The main problem I’ll pose for my opponent will be a version of the paradox of supererogation, a problem that has been discussed before (but not in relation to the ‘overall ought’) by, for example, Heyd (2016), Dancy (1998), Williams (2011) and Portmore (2003). I’ll also explain why it’s only a problem for this specific kind of overall ought, rather than for non-moral oughts generally (such as prudential oughts). The problem, briefly stated, is this: when our overall obligations and our moral obligations come apart, then the overall ought *obliges us* not to follow our moral obligations. This, I will argue, is implausible.

The first half of my paper will look at what philosophers are likely to mean when they use overall ought language. I take the kind of overall ought that I target to be widely used. Dancy (2003), for example, discusses an ‘overall ought’ as what we have most reason to do given all the ‘contributory reasons’, and Davidson (1970) talks about what we should do all-things-considered. Another example is Hurka (2014), who describes the overall ought as it is used by a school of thought he calls the ‘Sidgwick-Ewing’ school. Zimmerman (2008) discusses an overall ought from the perspective of virtue ethics. But one of the best treatments of the overall ought can be found in Macleod, (2001) as he argues for a coherent theory of an overall ought (which he refers to as the ‘Just Plain Ought’). I aim to clarify this idea, and define it as a concept that (i) tries to find a balance between different kinds of reasons (such as moral and prudential) (ii) does so by appealing

to an overall standard and (iii) does *not* explain that overall standard in terms of the agent's desires or society's standards.

Following this, I'll make some further distinctions. People might use this overall ought concept to indicate one or more of several possibilities: (1) as indicating a single act we're most obligated to do, that is most demanded of us (2) as indicating what single act it's most praiseworthy to do, (3) as indicating what single act we have most reason to do and (4) as indicating one act which is a 'minimum' on a scale of permissible actions.

For each of the four analyses I will argue that the overall ought cannot work unless my opponent either accepts some implausible claims about supererogatory acts (*obligating* an agent to avoid what's morally best) or else accepts an overall ought that is significantly different to the concept I'm targeting, and does not sound much like an 'overall ought' at all. At a very minimum, by the end of this paper the spotlight will be on my opponents to clarify their position and explain what route they're going to use to navigate away from these problems.

Some of the options open to my opponent throughout the paper are to understand the overall ought as carrying less normative force, and so not coming across the problem of demanding and obliging agents to avoid supererogatory acts. They might, after my objections, argue that overall ought language doesn't demand or obligate an agent to act a certain way (as my first argument targets), but rather makes a weaker normative claim, such as to suggest what action would be most praiseworthy (as with 2), what they have most reason to do (3), or to indicate a minimum standard for action below which the agent should not fall (4). But the less force the overall ought carries, the more the other problems stand out. For example, overall oughts of these kinds are not able to do the job they were supposed to without the stronger normative demands of (1). The less normative force there is, the less the overall ought actually directs agents to action, and the less plausible it is as an 'ought' of any kind.

Finally, I will suggest that the best option left (if one still wants to hold onto the concept of supererogation and an 'overall ought' that is different from the moral ought) is to understand

the overall ought as being grounded in something like an appeal to what the agent desires or her society expects. Considering Helen, what she overall ought to do might come down to how much she desires to be a good person relative to the society she lives in, compared to how much she desires to go hiking and pursue her own hobbies, not because of an appeal to a problematic and quasi-moral standard of correctness.

To what extent should moral philosophers be worried? I'll give a few final remarks here on the implications of losing a certain kind of overall ought. Macleod argued that the overall ought is important for a number of discussions in moral philosophy, including those about our ability to reason practically and whether we should obey moral oughts. This paper's argument will have an effect on those questions, but not leave them unanswerable. Work on these areas is, I believe, where the future of 'overall' normativity lies. I believe these sorts of questions can usually still be answered by appealing to desires or social norms. And when they can't, then appealing to an implausible theory of the 'overall ought' won't help.