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Acting Solely from Good Motives and the Problem of Indifference

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Abstract: Traditionally, it has been thought that, assuming other conditions are satisfied, your action must be morally worthy or good if you are acting solely from good motives. There is a lively dispute as to which motives are good, but whichever motives are good, acting solely from good motives is not always good and can even be bad on the whole. We may act rightly from a good motive while being indifferent to what matters most. Indifference, I argue, can make our actions less than ideally good and at times even bad. Traditional theories, however, cannot accommodate cases of indifference by assuming absent and ineffective motives can never make a difference to an action's moral value. Absent as well as ineffective motives can make an action less good and at times even bad. To accommodate this, we need to adopt a proportionality principle in assessing an action. An action is made good to a degree in proportion to the goodness of its effective motives. But an action is also made bad to a degree in proportion to the disproportion it exhibits through its whole set of relevant motives including not only effective motives but also absent as well as ineffective ones.

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An action's moral worth or goodness is traditionally thought to be distinct from its rightness. The same right act can differ in its moral value simply by being done from different motives. Consider Kant's honest shopkeeper (G 4:397). They rightly return correct change to customers. But they do so simply to retain a reputable business. Clearly, their actions are not morally good. Had they acted instead from duty (or honesty), their actions, it appears, would be morally good. So it appears that as long as one acts from good motives, one's action is morally good.[1] Perhaps,

[1] Other conditions may be necessary for good action. Perhaps, the agent may need to believe or know that they are acting rightly all-things-considered or their good motives may need to be counterfactually robust. What matters for us is just how the presence (and later the absence) of motives, affects an action's value, assuming those other conditions are satisfied.

acting partly from bad or neutral motives may make an otherwise good action bad on the whole. But at the very least, it appears that acting solely from good motives must be good on the whole. Traditional theorists about moral worth, I argue, are committed to this initially appealing thought as they assume that only one's *effective* motives, or the motives that prompt one's action, matter. For them, lacking good motives can make actions less than ideally good but never positively bad, and so acting solely from good motives must be good on the whole.

But acting solely from good motives can be bad on the whole. Consider cases of indifference.

> *Truth-Telling*: A parent can no longer afford to pay rent and must leave their current home. They know they have a duty to tell the truth to their son and daughter, so they do tell them. They tell them partly because they want to do what is the absolutely right thing to do, and partly because they care about fulfilling their abstract *pro tanto* duties to tell the truth as such. They also tell their son partly because they care about their particular duties to him as such. They, however, are entirely indifferent to their particular duties to their daughter as such. Unlike with their son, they tell her the truth only because they care about their abstract duties, and not at all because they care about their particular duties to her as such.

> *Gift-Giving*: For Christmas, a parent buys both their son and daughter equally enjoyable gifts. The parent does so simply out of love for their son and only their son. The daughter gets a gift solely because the parent does not want the daughter to throw a tantrum and bother their son. The parent cares a lot, and only for, the son but is entirely indifferent to the daughter.

Clearly, the parent's telling their daughter the truth as well as giving them a gift is positively bad, despite being done from solely good motives. Which motives are good is a very live question. But whether you think that only concerns for absolute rightness or *pro tanto* duties are good or that only concerns for those very features that make or make to an extent actions right are good, at least one of these cases shows that acting solely from good motives can be bad on the whole.[2] For the sake of neutrality, I mention both types of motives and treat both of them as good, but

[2] In the recent literature, there are three popular views about which motives are good. According to one, only concerns for what is (absolutely or *pro tanto*) right is good (e.g. Herman 1981; Sliwa 2016). According to a second, only concerns for those features that make actions right (to some extent) are good (e.g. Markovits 2010; Arpaly and Schroeder 2013). According to a third, both types of concerns are good (e.g. Hurka 2014; Johnson King 2019; Tomlinson 2019; Isserow 2020). Even if the last view is right, there is also a debate about whether a concern for what is right is at least needed for an action to be good (e.g., Aboodi 2016; Johnson King 2018; Howard 2019). Whoever is right, indifference will still matter.

feel free to switch the motives in a case or focus on the case with your preferred good motives. Here, the parent's treatment of their son is good, but their treatment of their daughter is not, because whereas the parent cares about their son or their particular duties to their son as such, they are entirely indifferent to their daughter or their particular duties to their daughter as such. Indifference, I argue, can make an otherwise good action less good and even bad on the whole. But because indifference here is an utter absence of a motive, and so not an effective motive, traditional accounts cannot make sense of this, facing what I call *the problem of indifference*.

To solve the problem, I propose a novel account that counts not only effective motives but also absent as well as ineffective ones to explain how we may act badly in cases of indifference. Missing ideally good effective motives that one should have acted on makes an action less good, and on occasion they can even make an action done solely from good motives bad on the whole. In missing these motives that should have been either present in the first place or simply stronger, one's set of relevant motives is disproportionate. Since disproportionality is itself positively bad, it makes even an otherwise good action that exhibits it less good, and even at times overall bad. So in assessing action, we cannot simply sum up the individual values of one's effective motives. We also need to count the disproportionality of one's whole set of relevant motives.

In Section 1, I show that, in traditional accounts, absent as well as ineffective motives can make actions less than ideally good, but never positively bad. In Section 2, I argue that traditional accounts face the problem of indifference. Lastly, in Section 3, I argue that, to solve it, we must adopt a non-traditional account with a principle of proportionality.

1 Absent and Ineffective Motives

On traditional accounts, an action's moral worth simply depends on one's effective motives.

For example, W. D. Ross rightly held that one can have many motives and yet act only on one. He said, "[W]hen both sense of duty and ambition would incline a man to do an act, he may, though he is sensible of both motives, do the act wholly from the one or wholly from the other" (1930, 170). He also held, at least in *The Right and the Good* (1930) before changing his mind in *Foundations of Ethics* (1939), that an action's moral worth depends only on its effective motives. For the Ross in *The Right and the Good*, an action is ever good only if done from good motives and bad only if done from bad ones.

Some followers of Kant also hold that one can have many motives, but yet act only on one, and that the single motive that one acts on alone determines whether an action has moral worth. For instance, Barbara Herman says,

> If the moral motive [i.e., a morally good motive] *is* effective and motivating, it would seem that the presence of a nonmoral inclination should have no effect on the action's moral worth. That is, even if the moral motive expresses but *one* kind of interest the agent has in the helpful action, so long as it is the moral motive the agent acts on, the action should have moral worth. (1993, 18)

Herman suggests that the moral worth of an action is not affected by the presence of inclinations, or motives that are neutral or bad, so long as these are ineffective or "not operative" (1993, 11). For her, so long as your effective motive is morally good, your action will be morally good; and so long as your effective motive is not morally good, your action will not be morally good.

Though traditional theorists usually talk only about the presence of one's effective motives, the absence of good motives that should have been effective also makes an action less good. Ross suggested that the best actions are done from multiple motives. Suppose in a situation that one can act solely from love, solely from duty, or from both. In acting from both, one acts best. Implicitly, in lacking either motive, one's action will be less good than a more perfect action. When I split an apple pie to share with friends, it would be best if I act from both love and duty.

Acting only from duty would be good. And acting only from love would be good as well. Perhaps, the latter would be better than the former, but acting from both motives would be best. For illustration, Ross suggested that, in acting solely from duty, my action could be valued at +10, in acting solely from love, my action could be valued at +8, and in acting from both combined, my action could be valued at +18, assuming each motive by itself was sufficient (1930, 170–2). So the absence of motives affects an action's moral worth at least in one trivial sense insofar as the action could have been better if it had also been partly prompted by missing good motives that would have favoured the action.

Some will think that the motive of love has no value, and only the motive of duty has value. But they can agree that there are as many good motives as factors that help make an action right. There can be a plurality of such motives corresponding to a plurality of right-making features. The best action would be the one that is prompted by concerns for the full range of these factors. When Ross said that the desire to do one's duty is good in *The Right and The Good* (1930, 160), it is unclear whether he was referring to only one's duty proper or also one's *prima facie* duties. But in *Foundations of Ethics*, he clearly said that a desire to do one's *prima facie* duties is good:

> For an action will be completely good only if it manifests the whole range of motivation by which an ideally good [hu]man would be affected in the circumstances, a sensitiveness to … any special *prima facie* obligations or disobligations that may be involved. (1930, 309)

Suppose a dentist is performing a root canal surgery on a patient that provided informed consent. There are at least two *prima facie* duties that jointly make it permissible for the dentist to do so: one *prima facie* duty to help people relieve pain and another one to respect patients' autonomy. In missing concern for any, the dentist's action would be less than perfectly good.

Others like Julia Markovits deny the value of concerns for both absolute and *pro tanto* duties. Instead, they believe that only concerns for the very features that make an action right are good. For Markovits, one's telling the truth is good if one did so just because one wanted to be honest. But one's telling the truth is not good if one did so not really because one wanted to be honest, but because at the most basic level, one simply wanted to do what was right, whatever that was, which one happened to correctly believe is being honest. And right actions are morally worthy, she says, "*to the degree that* the noninstrumental motivations for their performance coincide with noninstrumental moral justifications for their performance" (2010, 238).[3] And she elaborates that an action's "degrees of worthiness" is like "degrees of fullness;" to be "fully morally worthy" there must be a "perfect overlap" between one's motivation and one's justification (2010, 238). For example, assume a dentist has exactly two factors that jointly justify performing surgery: helping people relieve pain and helping patients when they want help in the exact way they want. In acting from concern for both described as such independent of any property of right-making, the dentist's motivation will fully match their justification and make their action fully worthy. And in failing to act from concern for either, their action will be less than fully morally worthy.

So even for traditional theorists, an action can be less good relative to the perfect action when one fails to act from concern for any feature that favours and helps make right the actual action. But they can only explain how missing good effective motives can make actions less good. Consider an analogy. Just as a cup could only be less full or empty, but never negatively full, given these accounts an action could only ever be less worthy or not worthy at all, but never bad

[3] Amy Massoud has developed a modified version of Markovits's account that distinguishes between "justifying reasons" and "requiring reasons" (2016, 690). Massoud's account still faces the same problem insofar as her account only distinguishes two distinct types of good reasons without considering whether lacking good reasons can make an action bad on the whole.

for merely missing good effective motives without acting partly from bad motives at all. And so, they cannot explain how merely missing effective motives can ever make actions bad on the whole.

2 The Problem of Indifference

In *The Right and the Good* (1930), Ross saw difficulty in counting only effective motives. Some actions are done solely from good or neutral motives and yet are clearly bad on the whole. In acting selfishly, one is often acting from a greater concern for one's own good than for others. For example, A may fail to help an accident victim just because A wants to get to work on time. If selfish actions are not typically motivated by bad motives, but purely by neutral or good ones, traditional theorists will find it hard to explain how typical actions can ever be bad on the whole.

In *Foundations of Ethics* (1939), the later Ross noticed another similar class of bad actions where one acts solely from a good motive – favouritism. Consider his case (call it *Nepotism*):

> Suppose that *A* out of nepotism bestows a job on *B*, in whom he is interested, ignoring the much stronger claims of *C*, *D*, etc., but wishing them no ill. His motive is good so far as it goes, though it does not rank very high in the list of motives. But his action is definitely bad, because he is not deterred as an ideally good man would be by the thought of the injustice to *C*, *D*, and the rest. (1939, 307)

A's action, Ross rightly suggests, is "definitely bad" (1939, 307). A's good motive is a bit good, but the great indifference to C and D and to the injustice done to them is to a greater degree bad. In some cases, say, in a small family business, it may be permissible to hire whomever one likes. But even within a family business, a parent may wrongly favour their son over their daughter. And for employers in public organizations, it is clearly wrong to hire just based on one's liking and clearly seriously bad to do so with indifference to others who have stronger claims to the job.

In these cases, the agent's serious indifference to what is clearly wrong or makes it wrong shows that the agent's action is clearly bad.

Selfishness and favouritism are siblings in a more general family of cases – indifference, broadly construed. Often people act solely from good motives but lack other important ones. These are cases of absolute indifference, where one entirely lacks certain important motives. More often, important motives are present but are too weak compared to less important ones. These are cases of comparative indifference, where one merely lacks certain stronger motives.[4]

Traditional theorists can capture the idea that, in cases of indifference, one will act less well, but they cannot capture the idea that sometimes one may act badly. Given traditional accounts, not acting on good motives that also favoured one's actual action makes one's action less good. But in *Nepotism*, if A had acted on the good concern for C and D, A would have acted otherwise (say, hiring the best qualified). These theorists can capture the idea that A could have acted better if A had acted from other good motives that helped favour their actual action (that is, hiring B). But since A's actual action is not favoured by a good concern for C and D, they cannot explain why indifference to C and D makes that very action less good. This is a problem of indifference that has been neglected in the recent literature but must be confronted by traditional theorists.

In *The Right and the Good* (1930), Ross had proposed a solution (that I argue ultimately fails). He argued that selfishness is morally bad as it usually results in wrong actions or bad outcomes.

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[4] Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder (2013) offer a different notion of indifference that is relativistic. They say,

> If in one person the intrinsic desire to respect others is as present but substantially weaker than in most other people, then the person is closer to being indifferent toward morality than most others: she displays moral indifference. (2013, 167–8)

There is, however, a devastating problem with using a relativistic notion of indifference. Suppose that most people in a society have no concern about, say, fighting against sexism. According to a relative view, no one is indifferent to it in the relevant way, and no one could be criticized for lacking concern about it. If our parents were in a time and place where it was normal to care much less about daughters than sons, and they cared much less about their daughter, in their view we cannot call them indifferent. But clearly, we should still be able to call them indifferent.

He did not speak explicitly about indifference, but we can consider this as a solution to it as well. Ross suggested that acting solely from the desire to produce pleasure for oneself could be bad insofar as, in acting from this desire, one "excludes and makes impossible the doing of one's duty or the bringing into being of something that is good, or some pleasure for another" (1930, 167). So he proposed an explanation why acting from a stronger concern for oneself over others is bad, even without a positively bad desire: it would be bad because, in acting from strong self-interest, one would be unable to do what is right or produce what is good in itself or pleasant for others.

The explanation, however, fails since it conflicts with our understanding of moral goodness. An action's moral goodness is a kind of intrinsic goodness distinct from its instrumental worth. For traditional theorists and even Ross, an action's moral worth is solely based on its motives. Acting from self-interest can prevent one from producing goods as such or goods for others, say, knowledge in itself or pleasure for you, and even produce evils, say, false information or pain. The badness of an action's outcomes, however, is irrelevant to the action's moral worth.

In addition, an action's moral goodness is distinct and mainly independent of its rightness. Some believe only right actions are morally good, but even so, once we look at a right action, they will not deny that that right action would be good or not simply in virtue of its motives. Acting from self-interest may prevent one from doing one's duty, whatever that happens to be. But if the selfish action turns out right, it will still be unclear how the selfish action turns out bad. And if Ross is right here, as I am inclined to think he is, that even wrong actions can be good, whether acting selfishly results in acting wrongly will not be relevant to its moral worth.

Now, since moral goodness is distinct from wrongness, we can question our original intuitions about *Nepotism*. Are they genuinely about the action's moral badness rather than its wrongness?

In *Nepotism*, the action was wrong. So it may seem less clear that it must also be morally bad. But indifference can make a difference even in acting rightly. Consider *Gift-Giving* again.[5]

> *Gift-Giving*: For Christmas, a parent buys both their son and daughter equally enjoyable gifts. The parent does so simply out of love for their son and only their son. The daughter gets a gift purely because the parent does not want the daughter to throw a tantrum and bother their son. The parent cares a lot and only about the son and is entirely indifferent to the daughter.

The parent acts rightly in giving a gift to their son and well for doing so out of love for their son. They also act rightly in giving a gift to their daughter. But surely, they act badly in doing so because they do so only for the son's welfare. And they still act badly even if we described them as giving a gift to their daughter solely to protect their son. The daughter's welfare still matters. In an even worse case, the parent may have given a gift to the daughter solely out of self-interest, not to protect their son, but solely to avoid having to deal with their daughter's furious tantrums. So even when acting rightly, the absence of good motives can make an action bad on the whole. But again traditional accounts such as the earlier Ross's cannot make sense of this.

3 The Principle of Proportionality

How can one act badly due to indifference despite acting from just good (or neutral) motives? At the very least, comparative indifference must be bad. When one is comparatively indifferent, some of one's less important motives are relatively stronger than one's more important motives. So considered as a whole, one's set of relevant motives will be disproportionate and thereby bad. Additionally, the disvalue of the resulting disproportion must contribute to an action's net value. In assessing an action, we should not just sum up the individual values of its effective motives, but also take into account the value of the whole set of relevant motives considered as a whole.

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[5] Or consider again *Truth-Telling*, if you think only concerns for (absolute or pro tanto) rightness is good. A similarly analysis applies there. Indifference makes a difference there as well.

Besides effective motives, both present but ineffective as well as absent ones can be relevant. Ideally, the agent that acts best will be concerned by all the factors that bear on their actual action and also concerned for each in proportion to its relative significance. In falling short of the ideal, even an otherwise good action will be to a degree bad by exhibiting a degree of disproportion. When one is not too far off, the action will still be on balance good, but less than ideally good, because the goodness of its effective motives will still outweigh the badness of the disproportion. But when falls too far off, the action will not be merely less good but also on balance bad, because the badness of the disproportion will outweigh the goodness of its effective motives. Thus, I argue, even if an action is otherwise good insofar as it is done solely from good motives, it will be on balance bad when it is seriously disproportioned due to a serious indifference.

A rough sketch of this proposal was suggested by the later Ross in *Foundations* (1939). There, he gave a more promising solution than the one he had given in *The Right and the Good* (1930). He abandoned the traditional view that, in assessing actions, only effective motives count and outlined an alternative that also counted ineffective as well as absent motives. Ross suggested that we compare the agent's actual state of mind with their ideal state of mind:

> If A does an act which he foresees to be likely to have certain characteristics, we ask ourselves what attractions an ideally good man would have towards the act in virtue of certain of its characteristics, and what aversions he would have in virtue of others. … We judge the action by comparing the agent's set of attractions and aversions with the set of attractions and aversions which would ideally arise in face of the foreseen changes to be produced by the action. (1939, 307)

First, we should compare the agent's actual state of mind only with the "attractions and aversions"

they would ideally have had that bear on their actual action's "foreseen changes" (1939, 307).[6] Whereas concerns, say, for fair hiring and for the candidates, or the lack of such concerns, count, concerns, say, for world peace, should not count in assessing an act of hiring, say, an accountant. This general point is obviously right. At any given time, there will be a lot on anyone's mind. When one acts, some of what is on one's mind will be relevant neither to what one in fact does nor to what one could have done in the situation. Suppose a child has been bruised by a bully. Acting out of a desire to relieve the child's pain, a nurse treats the injured child with an ice pack. While the nurse can have other desires, say, that they lived in another city or their mayor suffers, in evaluating their particular act of treating the child, these desires are intuitively irrelevant. Mental states that have no bearing on an action or its relevant alternatives should not count.

Second, like traditional theorists, the later Ross thought that lacking relevant good motives makes an action less good. But besides absent concerns that would have favoured the actual action, he also counted absent as well as present but ineffective concerns that would have disfavoured it.

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[6] This addresses a potential problem of the "ubiquity of indifference" (Arpaly and Schroder 2013, 191–2). Indifference will not always matter in assessing a particular action. As finite agents with finite motivation, one will always be entirely indifferent to an endless number of individuals and matters of importance, whether directly around us or indirectly around the globe or further along an infinite future. Conversely, there is also a potential ubiquity of reverse indifference. And Ross's account solves these problems better than Arpaly and Schroeder's which counts a particular indifference only if it makes a causal difference. Making a causal difference, however, is not even what is required for desires to make a moral difference. Desires can be present and make one's action less good without being needed at all to cause that action. So that very action may have been caused whether or not those desires were even present. In some cases, one will have a strong desire that suffices by itself to prompt that very action. Still, it is clearly false that, in these cases, only the strong desire matters morally. Suppose an officer rightly stops a violent robber. They are moved by a strong desire to protect the rightful property, say, a bag of food, of the store owner. This desire by itself would prompt their action. But they are also disgusted by the robber's appearance, and so also wanted to hurt them. But this is a very weak desire. Without it, the action would still be done. Without the good desire, the action would not be done. Despite the causal inefficacy of their bad desire, the officer's action is still clearly less good because of it, even when the good desire sufficed by itself. Causality is not morality. Making causal differences is not why present motives make moral differences. Similarly, absent motives do not make a moral difference only when they in fact make a causal difference. Consider again *Gift-Giving*. The parent gives a gift to their daughter mostly for the sake of their son with absolute indifference to their daughter. The absolute indifference makes no actual causal difference at all, because the parent would still have given their daughter the gift even if they were no longer indifferent. But the absolute indifference still clearly makes a moral difference to the value of the action.

Missing any strong concern that one would ideally have makes one's action less good. In *Nepotism*, A acts less well by "fail[ing] to have a strong aversion which an ideally good [person] would have" (1939, 307).

But counting concerns that disfavour A's action does not suffice to show that A acts badly. Though A's action is less good insofar as a gap exists between A's actual and ideal states of mind, this is insufficient evidence that A's action is on balance bad. Even non-ideal agents can act well. Counting concerns that disfavour the actual action also adds nothing new to analyzing *Gift-Giving* since the absent ideal concern there is one that would have also favoured the parent's actual action. Having less-than-ideal concerns can make an action less than ideally good, or in Hurka's terms, have a "shortfall in virtue" (2001, 83). But a shortfall in virtue does not make for vice on the whole. So Ross leaves unresolved how lacking ideal concerns can ever make an action not just less good but also on balance bad.

Ross has no explicit solution. But I propose a plausible one that is compatible with what he says:

> [A]n action will be completely good only if it manifests the whole range of motivation by which an ideally good man would be affected in the circumstances, a sensitiveness to every result for good or for evil that the act is foreseen as likely to have, as well as to any special prima facie obligations or disobligations that may be involved; and only if it manifests sensitiveness to all these considerations in their right proportions. (1939, 308–9)

The best action manifests concern for the full range of morally salient factors in the situation and more importantly, the degrees of concern for all of them are "in their right proportion" (1939, 309). Developing this, I propose counting an action's motives both separately as parts *and* as a whole. First, an action's net worth is partly settled by summing up the effective motives separately. Second, it is partly settled by weighing the disproportion of the whole set of relevant motives, which can include not only effective motives but also relevant ineffective as well as absent motives.

So effective motives count directly but ineffective as well as absent motives count only indirectly. Whereas in traditional theories, only bad motives can make an action to any degree positively bad, in this proposal, a disproportionate set of motives can as well. So even without bad motives present, comparative indifference can make an action on balance bad. If the indifference is small enough, acting solely from good motives only results in a shortfall in virtue and is less than ideally good. Here, the total badness of the disproportion exhibited by the relevant motives as a whole will not outweigh the total goodness of the effective motives summed up separately as parts. However, if the indifference is large enough, acting solely from good motives will result in a vice on the whole. Here, the total badness of the disproportion exhibited by the relevant motives as a whole will outweigh the total goodness of the effective motives.

For illustration, recall *Nepotism*. In looking solely at A's good effective motive to please B, without considering A's inadequate concern for the injustice to C and D, A's action is simply good. Suppose the value of the good motive is +2. If we count simply that, the action has a value of +2. But in assessing an action, we should count not only the values of its individual effective motives, but also the larger relevant whole they are part of and the degree to which it is proportionate. Preventing injustice to C and D clearly matters much more than and outweighs the benefit to B. Ideally, A would care much more about preventing injustice to C and D and hire the best candidate. The lack of a stronger concern that A would have ideally had in the situation is itself positively bad. So in acting from an overly strong concern for pleasing B, A not only acts wrongly but also badly. The disvalue of the disproportion manifested in A's comparative indifference could be say, –3, or some number that would be large enough to outweigh the positive value of A's good motive, +2.

Identifying these precise values is hard. But we can make more precise how we assess actions

by both identifying the possibility that indifference can flip the valence of an action's net value and explaining the conditions under which that is possible. If A had cared relatively more for C and D, and so relatively less for B, A's comparative indifference will be less disproportionate, and less bad. At some point, A's indifference will no longer outweigh the goodness of A's good motives. Ideally, A will not be indifferent to C and D relative to B, but care in the right proportion for B, C, and D, and as a result, A will act differently, say, by hiring the right person, E. With this new proposal that comparative indifference is bad in virtue of manifesting disproportion, we can thereby understand the transition between these three key boundary points: first, where an action is perfectly virtuous, second, where an action exhibits a shortfall in virtue but is nonetheless virtuous on the whole, and third, where an action is vicious on the whole. As the degree of comparative indifference increases, even an otherwise good action can become less good, and at some point, even on balance bad.

The proposed account modifies the traditional account that simply counts effective motives to not only count effective motives but also count present but ineffective as well as absent ones by supplementing it with a principle of proportionality similar to the one proposed by Hurka (2001). But whereas his general account of virtue counts all states of mind without any explicit restriction when assessing an actual action, the new account, like Ross's, counts only motives that bear on it. But they both fail to make a key distinction between effective and ineffective motives. Without it, they fail to explain our intuitions about the original cases motivating the traditional account.

Recall again the case of the honest shopkeeper who wants to charge everyone the same price both because it is profitable, and because they ought to do so, but acts on only one of these motives. And suppose both motives are equally strong, and so each alone can prompt them to charge fairly. Intuitively, whether the agent's action will be morally worthy depends on which motive they act on.

An action is not good when the agent acts solely from a neutral motive such as profit or ambition. But it is good when they act solely from a good motive such as duty, even though in either case, both motives are present in the agent's mind, and either could have prompted them to act the same. Now, if we count non-effective motives just like effective ones, we will be forced to conclude that the agent who acts solely selfishly will act equally as well as if they had acted solely dutifully. Whichever motive is solely effective, both motives will contribute the same net value in both cases. And ideally, the shopkeeper's motive of duty would be stronger than their motive of self-interest. But whether they act from self-interest or duty, we stipulated that both motives are equally strong. So in both cases, the disproportion of the set of motives will contribute the same net value as well. But clearly, the shopkeeper will act better from concern for duty than from concern for self-interest. Thus in assessing actions, we should distinguish between ineffective and effective motives.

The new proposed account rightly distinguishes between ineffective and effective motives, and thereby returns the right intuitive verdict on the above cases. According to the new account, each individual effective motive's value contributes directly one-to-one to an action's net value, but relevant ineffective motives only contribute indirectly insofar as proportionality does so directly. Suppose the earlier agent's motives of self-interest and duty have respective values of 0 and +10. So when they act solely from self-interest, their effective motive directly contributes a value of 0. When the agent acts solely from duty, their effective motive directly contributes a value of +10. Ineffective motives do not contribute directly. They only contribute indirectly via proportionality. When assessing the contribution of proportionality, we must consider all the relevant motives, which include not only effective motives but also relevant ineffective ones. In these two cases, the agent's set of relevant motives as a whole is the same, and so proportioned equally poorly. They would have ideally had a much stronger concern for duty than for their own self-interest.

But the disproportion, I think, is not bad enough to make the solely dutiful action on balance bad, and so suppose for illustration that the disproportion has a relatively small negative value of –1. Whereas the disproportion will make the solely selfish action bad on the whole (net value of –1), it will make the solely dutiful action only less good on the whole (net value of +9). And so, effective motives count both directly and indirectly, but ineffective motives count only indirectly.

This new account may seem to have an odd result. Suppose I have only two relevant motives. One is good. The other is neutral. And I act from the neutral one. According to this new account, it appears as though I must necessarily be acting poorly. My effective motive will have no value. But my whole set of relevant motives, it seems, must be disproportioned, and so I must act badly. This would be true if the only actions ever available are obligatory ones without any costs to me, and so ideally I would always be concerned infinitely more about duty than my own self-interest. But I am permitted to pursue my own self-interest in a wide range of scenarios. For example, when deciding what haircut to get, I am definitely not obligated to get any particular style; instead, I am permitted to choose exactly how short my hair is cut and which side to part it. Whenever we have no strict restrictions on what to do, we have permission to do what we want. In these cases, my ideal state of mind will involve more concern for my own interests than duty. In fact, duty will not even be relevant to assessing my actions in these cases. Duty is silent here. For example, since duty neither favours nor disfavours me from getting any particular hairstyle, duty will not be relevant to assessing my act of getting one particular hairstyle over another. Duty will be relevant to assessing my paying my barber for my haircut, which I ought to do, but the assessment of that is independent of the assessment of my getting my particular hairstyle. Thus even the ideally proportioned set of relevant motives will at times admit some self-concern. And so at least in these cases, acting solely from self-interest need not always be on balance bad,

but at times simply be on balance neutral.

Some may still find it odd that acting solely from self-interest must always be on balance bad when the agent is obligated to pursue a course of action, say, giving customers correct change. When Kant talked about the honest shopkeeper who acts solely from self-interest, it seemed that he merely deemed their action to be without moral worth without explicitly deeming it to be bad. But upon reflection, a shopkeeper who acts solely from profit, I believe, is still to an extent bad, even if they had an ineffective motive of duty. They need to also act partly from a good motive. Just imagine a shopkeeper like Scrooge that always followed the law merely from self-interest. Even if they are acting solely from a neutral motive, I am still inclined to think they acted poorly.

Some may find this hard to accept and suggest counting ineffective motives at a discount. They may suggest that if a motive's contribution to an action's value is equal to x when effective, that very same motive (with the same strength and object) will contribute dx when ineffective, where d is a discounting factor, say, $\frac{1}{10}$. So in the case that the above agent acts solely from duty, their motives considered individually together contribute a combined value of $10 + \frac{1}{10}0 = 10$. When they act solely from self-interest, their motives contribute a smaller value of $0 + \frac{1}{10}10 = 1$. And accounting for their disproportion, their actions have a net value of +9 and 0, respectively. Thus this alternative account can make sense of the original cases supporting the traditional view while accommodating the thought that acting solely from self-interest need not be positively bad.

I prefer the account that I initially offered**.** Counting directly only effective motives is simpler because there is no need to figure out a discounting factor. The alternative account also fails to fully address the initial worry that motivated it: acting from self-interest seems simply neutral. And according to the alternative account, it can sometimes be simply neutral. But in some cases,

that same account will say that acting solely from self-interest is on balance bad. For example, if the above agent's motive of duty was any weaker at all, their action would be on balance bad. And oddly, that account will say that acting solely from self-interest can also be on balance good. This is even more surprising than that acting solely from self-interest is always on balance bad. Clearly at the very least, acting solely from self-interest cannot have moral worth. So I believe that it is more reasonable to accept that acting solely from self-interest can be on the whole bad, and that acting partly from good motives can be necessary for an action to be on the whole good, than to accept that acting solely from self-interest can sometimes be on the whole good.

4 Conclusion

I have brought out a pressing problem for traditional theories of moral worth or goodness. Though traditionally, it has been thought that acting solely from good motives must be good because only effective motives can affect an action's value, and only bad ones can make it bad. As I have shown, forms of indifference that bear on one's action make it to some degree bad. More generally, I have shown absent as well as ineffective motives can make an action less good, and at times even bad on the whole, because in having less than ideally good effective motives, an action exhibits a degree of disproportion. In falling short from the ideal, an action is less good, but not always bad on the whole. But if it falls too far, it will be bad on the whole.

In the new account that I offered, we still keep the intuition that effective motives count more. In fact, they count twice. First, they directly contribute their individual values to their action. Second, they, along with other relevant motives that include absent as well as ineffective ones, can contribute to the disproportion exhibited by an action, and thus contribute to its value again. In sharp contrast, relevant absent as well ineffective motives can count only once, that is,

indirectly via disproportionality. Given this new distinction, we can accommodate our intuitions to both the cases of indifference as well as the original cases motivating the traditional account, where it makes a difference which one of the many available motives we act from.

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