Moral Worth Requires a Fundamental Concern for What Ultimately Matters

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Some acts that accord with duty have what philosophers call *moral worth*. These acts manifest the agent's virtuous motives and, thus, do her credit. More precisely, an act that accords with duty has moral worth if and only if the agent's reason for performing it is the same as what would have motivated a perfectly virtuous agent to perform it. To illustrate, suppose that I've rescued a drowning child. This, we'll assume, was my duty. Nevertheless, my act needn't have moral worth. For if my only reason for rescuing the child was that I anticipated receiving a reward, it won't. After all, this is not what would have motivated a perfectly virtuous agent.

What, then, must an agent's reason for rescuing a child be for it to have moral worth? On one popular view (call it *the rightness view*), an act that accords with duty has moral worth if and only if the agent's reason for performing it is the fact that it is right/obligatory.[1] On this view, what would motivate a perfectly virtuous agent to rescue a drowning child is the fact that doing so is obligatory, which is what Immanuel Kant (1785) calls *the motive of duty*. However, many find this view implausible. For one, the motive of duty seems to involve one thought too many. After all, it would, as Michael Stocker has pointed out (1976: 462), be disturbing to learn that the agent was motivated out of a concern to do her duty rather than out of a concern for the child (see

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[1] Zoë Johnson King (2018) calls the only-if portion of this bi-conditional the "KANTIAN VIEW: Someone performs an action with moral worth only if she is motivated to do the right thing by the very fact that it is right." And she considers both herself and Paulina Sliwa (2016) to be proponents of this view.

also Williams 1981: 18). For another, an agent whose primary motive for rescuing a child is a concern for doing her duty seems to have a moral fetish. For, as Michael Smith has noted, "good people care non-derivatively about honesty, the weal and woe of their children and friends, the well-being of their fellows, people getting what they deserve, justice, equality, and the like, not just one thing: doing what they believe to be right, where this is read *de dicto* and not *de re*" (1994: 75). And although many proponents of the rightness view have been left unconvinced by these two worries (e.g., Johnson King 2018), they have led others to accept instead *the right-making view*. On this view, an act that accords with duty has moral worth if and only if the agent's reason for performing it is the fact that it has feature F, where F is that feature of obligatory acts that makes them obligatory.[2] Thus, the right-making view holds that a perfectly virtuous agent would be motivated to rescue a drowning child, not because doing so is obligatory, but because doing so has feature F, where F is that feature of obligatory acts that makes them obligatory. For instance, if act-utilitarianism is correct, then the right-making view holds that a perfectly virtuous agent would be motivated to rescue a drowning child because doing so would "optimize" utility.[3]

Both views are, I believe, incorrect, and I'll provide counterexamples to prove it. These counterexamples will also suggest that we should instead accept *the what-matters view*. On this view, an act that accords with duty has moral worth if and only if the agent's reason for performing it is the fact that *p*, where performing this act in response to the fact that *p* is the correct response to appropriately valuing the things that ultimately matter. On this view, a perfectly virtuous agent would be motivated to rescue the drowning child out of concern for the things that ultimately matter. That is, a perfectly virtuous agent would rescue the child in response, perhaps, to the fact both

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[2] Johnson King (2018) calls the only-if portion of this bi-conditional the "NEW VIEW: Someone performs an action with moral worth if she is motivated to do the right thing by the features that make it right (the 'right-making features')." And she considers both Nomy Arpaly (2002) and Julia Markovits (2010) to be proponents of this view.

[3] I'll be using the word 'optimize' as a technical term such that an available act *optimizes* utility if and only if it would produce more utility than any available alternative would. By contrast, an available act *maximizes* utility if and only if there is no available alternative that would produce more utility than it would.

that the child would die if not rescued and that no one would be harmed if she were rescued, where rescuing her in response to this fact is the correct response to appropriately valuing the things that ultimately matter, which are (let's assume) the child and everyone else.

1. The Two Leading Views about Moral Worth and Why Each Fails

In the literature, philosophers have tended to focus on only two views concerning moral worth. The first originates with Kant (1785) and is what I've called the rightness view. On this view, virtuous motivation consists in an ultimate concern for doing what's right/obligatory (read *de dicto* and not *de re*). Paulina Sliwa commits herself to this view in holding that "a morally right action [that is, an act that accords with duty] has moral worth if and only if it is motivated by concern for doing what's right" (2016: 394). As previously noted, though, many find this view implausible as it seems to involve both one thought too many and a fetishistic concern for the rightness of one's acts. As a result, these critics have tended to accept the right-making view instead. On the right-making view, virtuous motivation consists in an ultimate concern for performing acts that have feature F, where F is that feature of obligatory acts that makes them obligatory. On this view, the "morally good person is moved directly by wrong-making [or right-making] features of the wrongful [or the obligatory] act, rather than by the fact that the act would be wrong [or obligatory]; the former and not the latter are the good person's reasons for acting as she does" (Darwall 2010: 136).

To see why I reject both views, consider the following two counterexamples.[4] And let 'F' be a placeholder for whatever it is that makes obligatory acts obligatory. Thus, if act-utilitarianism is correct, then 'has feature F' stands for 'optimizes utility'. But if Kantianism is correct, then 'has feature F' stands for 'is the only act that accords with the Categorical Imperative'. And if some other criterion of rightness is correct, then 'feature

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[4] These are adapted from David Estlund's case entitled *Slice and Patch Go Golfing* (2017: 53), which in turn was adapted from Donald Regan's case of Whiff and Poof—see his 1980. But neither use this sort of example to test our intuitions about moral worth.

F' stands for whatever this criterion specifies as being the right-making feature of actions.

> *Golfing for Rightness' Sake:* Unless a patient's tumour is removed this afternoon, he'll die (though not painfully). Cutting and stitching this afternoon by the only two available doctors, Slice and Patch, is the only thing that can save him. For Slice is the only one who can do the cutting, and Patch is the only one who can do the stitching. If there is either cutting without stitching or stitching without cutting, the patient's death will be physically agonizing. It would even be cruel for one of the doctors to show up to the hospital knowing that the other won't, as this would only needlessly get the patient's hopes up, making his death psychologically agonizing. Unfortunately, both Slice and Patch are bad people who want their patient to die. Consequently, each has decided to take their own husband golfing regardless of what she thinks the other might do. And each knows this about the other. Thus, each knows that, given the other's unwillingness to do her part in saving the patient, taking one's own husband golfing has feature F and is, therefore, what one is obligated to do. For let's assume that, given the unwillingness of the other, the best thing that either of them can do is to take their own husband golfing. Now, neither doctor has any concern for anyone but herself, but each has a concern for doing what's obligatory (read *de dicto* and not *de re*). Of course, this desire is not as strong as each's desire to see to it that their patient dies, which is what explains why neither is willing to do her part in saving the patient. So, in the end, each doctor takes her husband golfing out of a concern to do what's obligatory. Thus, of the four collectively available outcomes, they together produce what I've labelled O_4. See Table 1.

> *Golfing for F's Sake:* This example is exactly the same as the one above except that in this example each doctor has a concern, not for doing what's obligatory, but for doing what has feature F.

I assume that, given the other's unwillingness to do her part, each doctor is obligated to take her husband golfing. And this, I believe, is a safe assumption. For, given Patch's unwillingness to cooperate, Slice's showing up to the hospital has no chance of saving the patient and every chance of making the patient's death agonizing. Likewise, given Slice's unwillingness to cooperate, Patch's showing up to the hospital has no chance of saving the patient and every chance of making the patient's death agonizing. So, given their circumstances, each doctor should stay away from the hospital. And let me just stipulate that each doctor has promised to take her husband golfing, that each can optimize utility only by doing so, and that, given that each has every reason to stay away from the hospital, the best thing that each of them can do, under the circumstances, is to take their own husband golfing. Of course, many non-maximizing theories would deny that an agent must always perform her best option. But every plausible theory (maximizing or non-maximizing) will require an agent to perform her best option when she has promised to do so and doing so would optimize utility. So, it seems safe to assume that, on any plausible criterion of rightness, F will be such that each doctor is, in both cases, obligated take her husband golfing.

To see why these are counterexamples, consider first that the rightness view implies that, in *Golfing for Rightness' Sake*, each doctor's act of taking her husband golfing has moral worth, for each doctor's reason for taking her husband golfing is that doing so is obligatory. And consider second that the right-making view implies that, in *Golfing for F's Sake*, each doctor's act of taking her husband golfing has moral worth, for each doctor's reason for taking her husband golfing is that doing so has feature F, which is, we're assuming, what makes obligatory acts obligatory. But it seems that, in both cases, it's just an accident that each doctor does the right thing. For, in both cases, each doctor's motives were such that they were going to take their own husband golfing regardless of what the other was willing to do, and doing this would have been wrong had the other been willing do her part in saving the patient. So, each just lucked out in that the other doctor was unwilling to do her part. For had the other doctor been willing to do her

part, she would have acted wrongly. Now, the one thing that all parties to the debate agree on is that an act that is just accidentally right cannot have moral worth (Arpaly 2002: 230, Johnson King 2018, Markovits 2010: 206, and Sliwa 2016: 6). So, all parties should agree that neither the rightness view nor the right-making view is correct given that both views imply that an act that is just accidentally right can have moral worth.

So, we need to look for a different view. Consider, then, why it was just an accident that each doctor acted rightly in the above two cases. It was, it seems, because neither doctor cared about something that ultimately mattered: namely, their patient. Had they each cared appropriately for their patient, each would have been willing to do her part in saving him. And, in that case, each would have had motives that guaranteed that each does her part in any situation in which the other doctor is willing to do hers. So, these examples suggest that virtuous motivation consists in one's fundamentally valuing the things that ultimately matter, valuing them in the right way (by, say, respecting them and/or wanting to promote their utility), and valuing them to the extent to which they each merit being valued. This is what I've called the what-matters view, which I will now develop.

2. The What-Matters View

What ultimately matters is just whatever it is that we should ultimately value and/or care about. Perhaps, what ultimately matters are people, sentient beings, or their utilities. But the properties of our actions don't ultimately matter. If an agent cares about whether her act has, say, the property of being obligatory or the property of having that feature that makes it obligatory, it should be only because she must perform such an act so as to respond appropriately to the things that ultimately matter. So, an agent's concern for the rightness or the right-making features of her actions should be entirely derivative of her concern for the things that ultimately matter.

It's important to realize, then, that a criterion of rightness doesn't specify the things that ultimately matter, but only the features of obligatory acts that make them obligatory. To see this, it will be helpful to consider three moral theories, starting with

act-utilitarianism. On act-utilitarianism, what makes an act obligatory is that it optimizes utility. But acts that optimize utility are not among the things that ultimately matter. If they were, act-utilitarians wouldn't care which of O_1 or O_4 Slice and Patch produce, but only that they produce one or the other. For so long as they produce either O_1 or O_4, they each perform acts that optimize utility.[5] Yet, those sympathetic to consequentialism generally and, I believe, rightly find it problematic that this theory fails to require Slice and Patch to produce the best outcome that they could together produce: namely, O_1.[6] And the reason it's problematic is that what ultimately matters is not that each agent performs utility-optimizing acts, but that the best outcome that they could together produce obtains. So, we should think that the things that ultimately matter are not utility-optimizing acts, but, perhaps, people and/or their utilities. And, perhaps, the appropriate way to value such things is to prefer larger to smaller quantities of utility and, thus, to prefer O_1 to O_4. This would, then, explain why act-utilitarianism's implications in cases like the above are problematic.

Next, consider rule-utilitarianism. On rule-utilitarianism, what makes an act obligatory is that it is required by the ideal code of rules, the code of rules whose internalization by the vast majority of everyone everywhere would optimize utility. But, the rule-utilitarian shouldn't hold that what ultimately matters is utility. For if she did, she would have an overarching commitment to maximizing utility. And such a commitment would make rule-utilitarianism incoherent. For rule-utilitarianism directs us to follow the ideal code even when we know that doing so would not maximize utility. And such a directive would render any theory with an overarching commitment to maximizing utility incoherent (Hooker 2000: 99–102). Thus, rule-utilitarians should instead hold that what ultimately matters are people. For, in that case, they can defend rule-utilitarianism by appealing instead to an overarching commitment to people. They could, then, hold that we appropriately value people only by respecting them and that

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[5] Slice and Patch will each optimize aggregate happiness so long as they each act as the other does—that is, so long as they either each go golfing or each do their parts in the surgery.

[6] See, for instance, Regan 1980.

we adequately respect them only by ensuring that we 'behave in ways that are impartially defensible', which, the rule-utilitarian will argue, requires us to act in accordance with the ideal code (Hooker 2000: 102). And if the rule-utilitarian eschews an overarching commitment to maximizing utility in order to instead adopt an overarching commitment to respecting people by treating them in ways that are impartially defensible, there will be nothing incoherent in their insisting that we follow the rules even when we know that doing so won't maximize utility.

Finally, consider Rossian pluralism. On this view, what makes an act wrong is that it violates the weighted balance of one's *prima facie* duties (Ross 1930). But it's implausible to think that what Rossians ultimately care about is whether agents perform such acts. It's more plausible to suppose that what they ultimately care about are the things that these *prima facie* duties safeguard: fidelity, justice, reparation, gratitude, beneficence, non-maleficence, and self-improvement. So, again, we see that what ultimately matters isn't that one's acts are right or even that they have whatever feature it is that makes them right, but instead things like fidelity, justice, happiness, or people.

Given that the things that ultimately matter are not the rightness or the right-making features of actions, the only way to ensure that an agent who acts in accordance with duty does what's right for the right reason rather than accidentally is to insist that she does so out of an appropriate concern for the things that ultimately matter. And this is why I've claimed that virtuous motivation consists in one's valuing the things that ultimately matter, valuing them in the right way, and valuing them to the exact extent to which they merit being valued. Given this, we should think that an act that accords with duty has moral worth if and only if the agent's reason for performing it is the fact that *p*, where performing this act in response to the fact that *p* is the correct response to appropriately valuing the things that ultimately matter. Thus, we should accept the what-matters view.[7]

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[7] I admit that both Arpaly (2002) and Markovits (2010) may count as proponents of the what-matters view. But it's unclear. Both talk about moral worth being a matter of the agent's performing the act for "the reasons morally justifying the action" (Markovits 2010: 205)—that is, for "the reasons making it right"

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3. Huckleberry Finn

To better understand the what-matters view, it will be helpful to consider what is perhaps the most central case from the relevant literature: that of Huckleberry Finn. For it is useful to compare and contrast the implications of the three views that we've been discussing with respect to this case. I'll begin, then, with Arpaly's helpful description of the case.

> In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huckleberry befriends Jim and helps him escape from slavery. While Huckleberry and Jim are together on their raft, Huckleberry is plagued by what he calls 'conscience'. He believes, as everyone in his society 'knows', that helping a slave escape amounts to stealing, and stealing is wrong. He also believes that one should be helpful and loyal to one's friends, but loyalty to friends is outweighed by some things, such as property rights, and does Miss Watson, Jim's owner, not have property rights? Hoping to find some excuse not to turn Jim in, Huckleberry deliberates. He is not very good at abstract deliberation, and it never occurs to him to doubt what his society considers common sense. Thus, he fails to find a loophole. 'What has poor Miss Watson done to me', he berates himself, 'that I can see her nigger go away and say nothing at all?' Having thus deliberated, Huckleberry resolves to turn Jim in, because it is 'the right thing'. But along comes a perfect opportunity, and he finds himself psychologically unable to do it. (2002: 228)

Let's assume that what motivates Finn to help Jim to elude the authorities is that Finn has come to see Jim as a fellow human being and, consequently, can't stand the thought of his losing his newly-found freedom. And let's assume that what justifies Finn in helping Jim to elude the authorities is the fact that Jim is a fellow human being who would lose his freedom if caught by the authorities. Given these assumptions, the right-making view implies that Finn's act has moral worth. But, given that he wasn't

(Arpaly 2002: 226). But people like Johnson King (2018) interpret them as thereby referring to the right-making features of the action. Now, I'm less clear on whether this is what they intend to be referring to. Nevertheless, my hope is that this paper will clarify that there are three, not two, main views that need to be kept distinct and evaluated. Thus, when people like Johnson King (2018) point to problems with the right-making view, they haven't thereby shown that there are any problems with the what-matters view. And people like Arpaly and Markovits need to be clearer on whether they accept the right-making view or the what-matters view.

motivated by the rightness of his helping Jim to elude the authorities (indeed, he believed this to be wrong), the rightness view implies Finn's act lacked moral worth.

Now, I think that neither view is correct, for, contrary to what both views suppose, we don't yet have enough information to determine whether Finn's act has moral worth. For suppose that Finn's concern for Jim's keeping his freedom is so great that he would be willing to help Jim elude the authorities even if he knew that Jim was planning on killing several white children in retaliation for his previous enslavement. In that case, it was just an accident that his motives led him to do the right thing in his actual situation. For his motives would have led him to do the wrong thing had the situation been one in which Jim was planning on going on a murderous rampage. Thus, it seems that for us to determine whether Finn's act has moral worth, we need to know more than just whether he was motivated by the fact that Jim is a fellow human being who would lose his freedom if caught by the authorities.[8] We also need to know whether Finn appropriately values *all* the things that ultimately matter. Thus, we need to know whether he appropriately values all those who could potentially be affected by Jim's going free. And Finn doesn't if he would be willing to help Jim elude the authorities even if Jim were planning on going on a murderous rampage.

So, it seems that neither the rightness view nor the right-making view gets the correct answer in this case. For the correct answer is not that Finn's act lacks moral worth given that Finn's reason for helping Jim was not that doing so was right, nor is it that Finn's act has moral worth given that his reason for helping Jim was the fact that justified his act: the fact that Jim is a fellow human being who will lose his freedom if not so helped. Rather, the correct answer is that Jim's act has moral worth if and only if his reason for helping Jim was, say, the fact that this would be the only way for him to

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[8] Johnson King (2018) also presses this sort of objection against the right-making view.

adequately express his respect for all those involved.[9] Thus, it is the what-matters view that provides the correct account of moral worth.

4. Conclusion

The distinction between the right-making features of acts and the things that ultimately matter is an important, but often overlooked, distinction. First, it can help us to explain why those originally sympathetic to act-utilitarianism became dissatisfied with the theory when it was shown not to guarantee that those who satisfy it will collectively produce the best outcome that they could together produce. Second, it can be employed by rule-utilitarians in explaining how they can avoid the incoherence objection. And, third, it can, as I've shown here, help us to better understand what virtuous motivation consists in. I've argued that it consists in valuing the things that ultimately matter, valuing them in the right way, and valuing them to the exact extent to which they merit being valued. Thus, I've concluded that we should reject both the rightness view and the right-making view and accept instead the what-matters view.

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[9] This is just one possible suggestion, and which is the correct suggestion will depend on what ultimately matters. For instance, if utility is what ultimately matters, then the relevant fact would be the fact that helping Jim elude the authorities is the only way to appropriately value utility.

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Table 1

	Slice cuts	Slice golfs with her husband
Patch stitches	(O_1) The best world that they could together produce: the patient lives and both husbands are disappointed not to go golfing. Each optimizes utility.	(O_2) Tied for the worst world that they could together produce: the patient dies in agony, Patch's husband is disappointed not to go golfing, but Slice's husband is glad to go golfing.
Patch golfs with her husband	(O_3) Tied for the worst world that they could together produce: the patient dies in agony, Slice's husband is disappointed not to go golfing, but Patch's husband is glad to go golfing.	(O_4) The second-best world that they could together produce: the patient dies painlessly and both husbands are glad to go golfing. Each optimizes utility.