**Consequentialism, Moral Motivation and the Deontic Relevance of Motives**

Some people believe that these two statements might both be true: if Jane informs the police of the location of the fugitive Smith out of revenge, she acts wrongly; but if Anita informs the police of the location of Smith out of public spirit she acts rightly. To suppose that both of these statements might be true is (probably) to suppose that motives are relevant deontically. To suppose that motives are relevant deontically is to suppose that the motive of an action can affect whether it is morally right or wrong.

The classical consequentialists from Jeremy Bentham to G. E. Moore were, in my opinion, understandably skeptical about whether the motive of an action ever could be relevant deontically. I begin this chapter with a historical sketch of their thinking about this question. But I go on to argue that there is room in consequentialist theory for saying that motives can occasionally affect whether an action is right or wrong. Furthermore, the consequentialist account that I sketch can, I believe, give a plausible account of those rare cases where motives do affect whether an action is right or wrong.

I think moral common sense is of two minds about whether motives ever are relevant deontically. On the one hand, we say that it is possible to ‘do the right thing for the wrong reason’. This suggests that motives (which could be taken to be an agent’s reasons for acting) are irrelevant deontically. But actions like informing from revenge probably do strike some people as being wrong in virtue of their bad motive.

The issues here are related to the concept of moral motivation. I interpret that concept to pick out the motive or motives that an ethical theory takes to be morally valuable or praiseworthy. Consider a case where an agent is thought to have done the right thing for the wrong reason. This would occur if, say, Jane gives money to a charity only from self-interest. To be led by moral motivation to give to the charity, someone might say, would be to give from sympathy for the recipients of the charity’s activities, or from a sense of duty, that is, from a desire to do what is right. I will describe three criteria that the classical consequentialists proposed for which motives are praiseworthy. We will see how the issues of deontic relevance and praiseworthiness can intersect.

The idea of deontic relevance will be one of our main concerns here. It can be explained more fully as follows. There are three deontic concepts or categories, which are applied to actions: the obligatory (required, a duty); the wrong (prohibited, forbidden); and the ‘merely permissible’. To say that an action is merely permissible is to say that the agent is neither morally required to perform it nor morally prohibited from performing it. In one important sense of the deontic terms—the ‘all things considered’ sense—it seems that all particular actions are either morally wrong, morally obligatory, or neither (that is, merely permissible): the three concepts are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive of all actions. In this sense, no action is, for example, both obligatory and wrong.[[1]](#footnote-1)

To give a more precise explanation of the idea that motives are relevant deontically we can then say this:

There is an action type X such that if a token of X were performed from one motive it would fall into one deontic category, and if another token of X were performed from another motive it would fall into a second deontic category in virtue of this difference in motives.

In other words, if motives are relevant deontically then there are cases where the motive of an action makes a difference in whether it is obligatory, wrong or merely permissible.

I

This section surveys the most important consequentialist treatments of the deontic relevance of motives in the early period of the theory’s development (1789-1912). After that period the theory went into eclipse until the 1950’s. There were certainly important ideas about the deontic relevance of motives that were developed after its revival in the 1950’s.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, I think that the basic consequentialist claims and distinctions were established in the earlier period. The consensus of consequentialist thinkers in the period we examine, I argue, is that motives are irrelevant to the deontic status of actions. We will also examine consequentialist ideas about moral motivation. In later sections I will criticize some of the arguments I present here.

The consequentialist approach to rightness and the other deontic categories, as it is currently understood, might be stated as follows. The fundamental claim of ‘act’ consequentialism is this: at a given time an agent is morally obligated to choose the action open to her that will have the best consequences. In other words, the right act is the one that will produce the best consequences. Any action that she chooses that has less than the best consequences is wrong. Utilitarianism is historically the main form that consequentialism has taken. The utilitarian version of act consequentialism is based on a hedonistic theory of value. This theory asserts that the only thing that is intrinsically valuable is happiness—which was itself conceived of by the early theorists as a large surplus of pleasure over pain. The only thing bad in itself is pain. Thus, the utilitarian theory of rightness is that at a given time an agent is morally obligated to choose the action open to her that will produce the most happiness. Any action that she chooses that produces less than the most happiness is wrong.

These statements leave some questions open, as we will see. Furthermore there are various other forms of consequentialism that make somewhat different claims. It is clear even from these statements that in consequentialism motives do not figure in the theory at the most basic level. But there is the possibility that they are deontically relevant in some derivative way. Nonetheless, it is easy to see why consequentialists would tend to doubt that motives are relevant deontically. If the consequences of an action are better than those of any alternative, it is plausible to think it would be right no matter what motive it were performed from. So, if Jane and Anita were to inform the police about Smith’s whereabouts, it hard to see how Jane’s motive could alter the calculation that determined whether her action has the best consequences. But, at this point we should turn our attention to the actual reasoning of the early consequentialists.

**Bentham.** JeremyBentham’s An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789) is largely concerned with the project of designing legal institutions, especially the criminal law, along utilitarian lines. Bentham begins the book by announcing what he calls the Principle of Utility, which is actually not stated in the same way as I stated the basic claim of act utilitarianism.[[3]](#footnote-3) Bentham proceeds to apply the principle in a methodical way, pausing over many analytic questions. Chapter 10 is devoted to the nature and evaluation of motives. This is the most searching treatment of motives ever written by a consequentialist.

Bentham states that the word ‘motive’ can have a number of meanings (IPML 96-100). The sense that is closest to what we mean by the term he calls “the internal motive in esse” (IPML 98). Bentham conceives of motives in this sense as being the pleasure that accompanies the anticipation of acting in a certain way. This sort of pleasure can trigger the will into acting. The fact that motives in this sense are pleasures leads Bentham to say, “There is no such thing as any sort of motive that is in itself a bad one” (IPML 100. Cp. 114). However, Bentham generally ignores the fact that motives have some small value in themselves:

If they [motives] are good or bad, it is only on account of their effects: good on account of their tendency to produce pleasure or avert pain; bad, on account of their tendency to produce pain or avert pleasure (IPML 100).

Most of the chapter is devoted to considering the effects of motives, which is to say, the effects of the actions they give rise to. One central claim of the chapter is that any given type of motive, like the love of reputation, can give rise to a variety of actions, some that are socially beneficial, and some that are not (IPML 100-16).

Bentham seems to think that motives can have these variable effects for three reasons. First of all, agents can be placed in different circumstances. This means that in one situation the motive of self-preservation, say, might lead an agent to kill another person, while in a second situation it might lead her to save another person’s life.[[4]](#footnote-4) Furthermore, an agent’s propensities to expect pleasure and pain, that is, her motives, always work in conjunction with certain beliefs that she has. This means that an agent in a given situation would be moved to do one thing by a certain motive if she had certain beliefs, but would be moved to do another if she had other beliefs. For example, if someone were pleased to do God’s will, which action she would choose to do would depend on what she believed God’s will to be (IPML 123. Cp. 126). In making this point Bentham is in effect recognizing something like the practical syllogism. He is noting that having a motive by itself cannot lead a person to act. She also needs a belief which functions as a minor premise. This belief states how she can realize the goal that her motive in effect sets for her. Finally, certain motives like the central one of benevolence admit of varying scopes. Bentham contrasts “enlarged” and “confined” benevolence (IPML 128. Cp. 116-8). Partial benevolence might move a person to do something that benefits her family; a more extensive benevolence might move her to do something else.

Bentham goes on to give utilitarian evaluations of the different types of motives that people typically act from. One such evaluation considers the general tendencies of certain types of motive to increase or decrease the amount of happiness of other members of society; a second considers the general tendencies of certain types of motive to increase or decrease the amount of happiness of all members of society, including the agent (IPML 114-22). He expends more effort on the former endeavor. ‘Good will’, especially enlarged benevolence, is adjudged the best motive; ‘dissocial’ motives like revenge are the worst.

Since no type of motive has uniformly good or bad effects even a dissocial motive like revenge can lead to actions that are right in utilitarian terms, and a good motive like enlarged benevolence can lead to an action that is wrong. Bentham’s legal orientation seems to explain his stress on the good consequences of initiating criminal prosecutions, even if the motive is dissocial, and however much popular condemnation they attract (IPML 124. Cp. 133, 154, note o.). Given all these facts, Bentham asserts that the legal (and presumably, moral) evaluation of a motive must consider what its effects are “in each individual instance” (IPML 116).

An act of injustice or cruelty, committed by a man for the sake of his father or son, is punished, and with reason, as much as if it were committed for his own (IPML 118. Cp. 128-9).

**Austin.** John Austin’s Province of Jurisprudence Determined (1832) is also focused on legal questions, especially analytical ones. But in developing his account of human and divine law Austin devotes some space to expounding utilitarianism as a moral theory. In Lecture 4 he addresses some misconceptions about the theory. The first of these involves confusing a “standard or measure” of conduct with “a motive or inducement” to conduct.[[5]](#footnote-5) Apparently echoing Adam Smith he states that a man who “delves or spins” does so in order “to put money in his purse”. But by doing so “he adds to the sum of commodities” so that his action “conforms to utility considered as the standard of conduct”, even though “general utility is not the motive to [his] action” (PJD 107). Austin continues with this striking example:

Of all pleasures bodily or mental, the pleasures of mutual love, cemented by mutual esteem are the most enduring and varied. They therefore contribute largely to swell the sum of the well-being, or they form an important item in the account of human happiness. And, for that reason, the well-wisher of the general good, or the adherent of the principle of utility, must, in that character, consider them with much complacency. But, though he approves of love because it accords with his principle, he is far from maintaining that the general good ought to be the motive of the lover. It was never contended or conceited by a sound, orthodox utilitarian, that the lover should kiss his mistress with an eye to the common weal (PJD 107-8).

Austin seems to be claiming that the lover acts rightly in kissing his mistress.[[6]](#footnote-6) This entails that an act that is morally obligatory in utilitarian terms need not be done from a sense of duty or obligation, that is, from a motive that aims to do what is morally right. Nor need an act that is morally obligatory in utilitarian terms be done from a desire to produce the most happiness or pleasure for all concerned. Indeed, Austin argues that most people have a very limited understanding of other people’s interests, so that if they are motivated to further the general interest they will often fail to do so. “The principle of general utility imperiously demands” that an ordinary person commonly “shall attend to his own rather than to the interests of others” (PJD 106).

**Mill.** Perhaps the most famous treatment by a utilitarian of the deontic relevance of motives occurs in John Stuart Mill’s Utilitarianism (1861). It is in this brief passage that the claims of earlier utilitarians are put into their most general form. Mill, like Austin, insists that we must distinguish “the very meaning of a standard of morals”, which provides “the rule of action,” from the motive of the action. He continues:

…utilitarian moralists have gone beyond almost all others in affirming that the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much to do with the worth of the agent. He who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty or the hope of being paid for his trouble; he who betrays the friend that trusts him is guilty of a crime, even if his object be to serve another friend to whom he is under greater obligations.[[7]](#footnote-7)

We can reasonably take Mill here to be asserting here that motives are always irrelevant deontically. That is, whether an action is right or wrong is never dependent on facts about the motive it is performed from. It is a fair interpretation to say that Mill’s “morality of the action” is another way of speaking about its deontic status since he goes on to speak of “what is morally right”. Mill also makes another important distinction between the deontic relevance of motives and their relevance to character or virtue judgments about the agent. They are presumably also relevant to judgments about whether the agent is morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for so acting. Mill claims that the judgments that we make about an agent’s character do sometimes depend on facts about what motive moved her to perform a given action. But he insists that the rightness or wrongness of the action never does so depend. Note that Mill in effect agrees with Bentham that a good motive can, on occasion, lead a person to act wrongly: he asserts that a wrongful act can be done from friendship.

Why is the motive of an action irrelevant deontically? The passage is not clear. Mill seems to have relied on two lines of thought. The first is the one suggested by the passage just quoted from the first edition of Utilitarianism. The second is developed in a long footnote that was added to later editions. Here Mill responds to two counterexamples to the claim about motives put to him by a critic (U 18, note 2). I believe the material here is less persuasive.[[8]](#footnote-8) In any case, Mill must have continued to think of the material in the first edition as persuasive, since he did not withdraw it, but only added to it.

The following argument may well go beyond what Mill meant, but it has appeared in the literature.[[9]](#footnote-9) For a utilitarian the rightness of an action depends only on its consequences; the right act is the option that produces the most happiness. But motives are not consequences. (Mill himself thinks of a motive as a “feeling” (U 18, note 2), somewhat as Bentham did.) The motive of an action is one of its causes. Thus, at the time that an action is performed its motive is water that has just passed under the bridge. A completely ‘forward-looking’ theory of rightness like utilitarianism cannot allow that the antecedent of an action affects its rightness. Consider Mill’s case of saving the drowning person. Suppose that Jane and Anita on separate occasions have the option of saving someone from drowning. In each case the best consequences will result if they do so. The fact that Jane would be acting from a higher motive and Anita from a lower motive cannot alter the fact that saving the person has the best results.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Sidgwick.** Henry Sidgwick’s The Methods of Ethics (1874) is the most careful and comprehensive treatment of ethical theory by a classical utilitarian. He discusses the moral significance of motives at a number of points.[[11]](#footnote-11) Sidgwick recognizes that ‘low’ motives like malevolence can lead to socially beneficial results if, for example, they prompt a person to act “in aid of justice” (ME 371). And when he speaks most abstractly about the moral significance of motives he echoes Austin and Mill:

…the doctrine that Universal Happiness is the ultimate standard must not be understood to imply that Universal Benevolence is the only right or always the best motive of action. For, as we have observed, it is not necessary that the end which gives the criterion of rightness should always be the end at which we consciously aim: and if experience shows that the general happiness will be more satisfactorily obtained if men frequently act from other motives than pure universal philanthropy, it is obvious that these other motives are reasonably to be preferred on Utilitarian principles (ME 413. Cp. 202-10, esp. 202-4).

Sidgwick seems here to deny that motives are ever relevant deontically. He does not explicitly make the other distinction that Mill does, but he seems inclined to accept Mill’s claim that facts about the motive from which an action is performed are only relevant to judgments about the character or virtue of the agent.[[12]](#footnote-12) Again, these judgments can be thought of as concerning, in part, which motives are most praiseworthy morally.

The most interesting feature of Sidgwick’s thinking is the way that he takes issue with Kant, who was now being studied carefully by British philosophers. Sidgwick disputes the Kantian claim that the motive that is most praiseworthy morally is the concern to do one one’s duty. Some virtuous actions, Sidgwick says, are “made better by the presence of certain emotions in the virtuous agent” (ME 222. Cp. 204-5).

We recognize that benefits which spring from affection and are lovingly bestowed are more acceptable to the recipients than those conferred without affection, in the taste of which there is admittedly something harsh and dry (ME 223).

But Sidgwick seems to think that these important points are only relevant to judgments about character or virtue, or, presumably, moral praiseworthiness, and have no bearing on whether an action is right or wrong.

**Moore.** G. E. Moore developed one of the first important pluralistic forms of consequentialism. In Principia Ethica (1903) he defends the view that morally obligatory actions produce the greatest amount of good.[[13]](#footnote-13) But he claims that more than one type of state of affairs has intrinsic value. The two types of states of affairs that have the greatest intrinsic value, according to Moore, are complex ‘organic unities’, namely, the enjoyment of beautiful things, and personal affection (PE 183-208). Moore also says that certain psychological attitudes have intrinsic value. He holds that “a love of some intrinsically good consequence which he [the agent] expects to produce by his actions” is intrinsically good, as is “a hatred of some intrinsically evil consequence he hopes to prevent” by his action.[[14]](#footnote-14) “The emotion excited by rightness as such” is also intrinsically good (PE 177; 179). On the other hand, the love of what is evil or ugly and the hatred of what is good or beautiful are intrinsically bad (PE 208-11).[[15]](#footnote-15) The importance of these claims lies in the fact that these desires and emotions can be motives that lead an agent to act. Moore thus seems to leave room for saying that the intrinsic value of a motive can change the intrinsic value of an action. This seems to mean, in turn, that the intrinsic value of an action could change the intrinsic value of its consequences, construed broadly. In the next section I will expand on these points.

However, in Ethics (1912) Moore explicitly denies that motives are relevant deontically. He devotes some space to the consideration of this question.[[16]](#footnote-16) He first makes the point often made by utilitarians that an agent may act from wrongly from “the best of motives” (E 78). But the main reason that he rejects the possibility that motives are deontically relevant is based on a set of distinctions. More carefully than Mill, or any previous philosopher, Moore distinguishes the question of whether the rightness of an action depends on its motive from other moral judgments that we make concerning motives: (i) whether the motive is itself intrinsically good or bad; (ii) whether a motive tends generally to produce right actions; and (iii) whether the agent deserves moral praise or blame for performing the action from that motive.

With regard to the first type of judgment Moore claims that even if motives do have intrinsic value this cannot affect the value of an act’s consequences (E 78-9). I will show below that this is false.

The second distinction adds nothing to points already made by Bentham, but the third is of some interest. Moore here seems to be addressing the issue of moral motivation. He argues that the question of whether an action is right or wrong is distinct from the question of whether the agent deserves praise or blame for performing it. He supports the existence of this distinction as follows:

When we say that an action deserves praise or blame we imply that it is right to praise or blame it; that is to say, we are making a judgment not about the rightness of the original action, but about the rightness of the further action which we should take if we praised or blamed it. And these two judgments are certainly not identical (E 79).

This concludes our historical survey. Let us take stock first of consequentialist thinking about the deontic relevance of motives. All of the leading consequentialists in this period tended to believe that the motive of an action never has any bearing on whether it is morally right or wrong. Only Mill and Moore make this assertion explicitly. But the others seem clearly inclined to accept it. I attributed to Mill, with some hesitation, an argument for this claim, but the same train of thought may well be operating in other writers like Bentham. Many of them note that any given type of motive, including even the one most often rankest highest, ‘enlarged benevolence’, can sometimes have good effects, and sometimes bad. And we find them developing a set of distinctions—between the standard of rightness and an action’s motive, and between rightness and the worth of character, or rightness and the desert of praise or blame—that tend to support the claim that motives are never relevant to issue of an act’s rightness or wrongness.

Let us now consider moral motivation. At least three different consequentialist criteria for when a motive is praiseworthy can be found in our material. Bentham often seems to lean towards the view that the types of motive that are most praiseworthy morally are the ones that most commonly lead people to act rightly. Sidgwick sometimes seems to agree with this (ME 413). One often-noted problem with this claim is that it leaves open the possibility that self-interest is a morally praiseworthy motive, which seems to be false in most cases, if not all. A sophisticated second approach to moral praiseworthiness, which is designed to address this difficulty, is found in Sidgwick and Moore. They distinguish between the usefulness of a motive or character trait and the usefulness of praising it. Certain motives like self-interest, although very useful to society, are usually present and operative in human beings, and there is little need to praise people who act from it. Other motives, though also useful, are less common, and these are the ones a utilitarian ought to praise (ME 428; PE 172).[[17]](#footnote-17) Moore seems to make another proposal in Principia Ethica: the motives that are most praiseworthy are the ones that are intrinsically valuable. Moore thinks that the motives that are intrinsically valuable are the ones that constitute correct responses to other, more basic values such as beauty**.** Consequentialists used all three of these criteria to argue for the praiseworthiness of motives like love and extended benevolence.

II

Moore argued that certain desires have intrinsic value, but denied that they are ever relevant deontically. In this section I show that he made a mistake about the concept of an act’s consequences that is appropriate for consequentialism.

An act is not a consequence or effect of itself. Nonetheless, consequentialism has to include any intrinsic value that the action itself has in the calculation that determines its deontic status. This is because the choice to do one action rather than another will not only mean that the world will differ with respect to the consequences of the two actions. It will also differ with respect to the fact that one action rather than another is performed. The total difference in the world that an action makes must reckon on the difference the act itself makes. Moore takes note of this point in passing (PE 25).

We therefore need to clarify the notion of consequence in the statement of act consequentialism. Above it was stated as follows: at a given time an agent is morally obligated to choose the action open to her that has the best consequences. Let us begin by distinguishing between the ‘narrow’ consequences of an action and its ‘broad’ consequences. Narrow consequences include only those events that occur after an act, qua intentional bodily movement. ‘Narrow consequences’ thus include two kinds of events (or facts): first, the causal effects of an action, considered as an intentional bodily movement; second, any states of the world following the action that would have been different had the agent chosen to act differently. If S shoots and kills T then the death of T is a narrow consequence of S’s action. Likewise, if S sees T drowning and chooses not to rescue T then the death of T is also a narrow consequence of S’s action (that is, her intentional inaction). This sort of conceptual inclusiveness is commonly accepted, I think, by consequentialists. The notion of a broad consequence is more inclusive still. Broad consequences include all narrow consequences, as well as the properties of the act itself. The terminology here is my own, but all consequentialists should agree that deontic status is determined by the value of the broad consequences of actions. That is, they should agree that if an action X has properties that have any intrinsic value, or if the act itself does, then this value must be included in the moral calculation that determines if X is right. We saw that this point has some significance in Bentham’s approach to the question, since he seems to think that motives themselves are pleasures. If so, a utilitarian should include their magnitude in the calculation of the broad consequences of actions. Bentham himself seems to ignore this point.

Moore’s form of consequentialism opens up the possibility that motives could be relevant deontically in a different way than utilitarianism could allow them to be. Some motives themselves have intrinsic value, Moore’s views imply, and this value is not due to the fact that they are pleasures. It is due instead to the fact that they are correct responses to values. Other motives, like malevolence, are incorrect responses to values. These values or disvalues should theoretically be reckoned into the value of an act’s broad consequences. If a particular action is performed from, say, self-interest, this motive has no intrinsic value. On the other hand, if another token of this type of action is performed from a love of rightness, then the motive has intrinsic value. Thus, even if these two action tokens have narrow consequences that have exactly the same total intrinsic value their broad consequences would differ in intrinsic value. That means that one action could be right and the other wrong. Consider this chart, where the numbers represent units of intrinsic value. We are comparing the options of two individuals, S and T, where both of them can perform a certain type of action X or not.

S’s Options T’s Options

Do X Not-X Do X Not-X

Act 0 0 3 0

Narrow Consequences 10 12 10 12

Total 10 12 13 12

We are supposing that S will perform X from a motive that has no intrinsic value, and will perform not-X from a motive that has no intrinsic value. T, however, will perform X from a motive that has 3 units of intrinsic value, and perform not-X from a motive that has no intrinsic value. The narrow consequences of the two actions will be the same for both agents (10 if either of them does X, 12 if either does not-X). But the value of the broad consequences of doing X differs for S and T, precisely because T will be doing X from a motive that has intrinsic value, while S will not. Given these assumptions, a consequentialist like Moore should say that doing not-X is right for S, but doing X is right for T. And this is to say that the motive for doing X makes a difference to its rightness. So his pluralistic form of consequentialism suggests that motives are deontically relevant.

III

In this section we will investigate further the problem of the deontic relevance of motives. We will look more closely at the central argument that I hesitantly attributed to Mill. There are two defects in this argument that consequentialists themselves must recognize.

**The Value of Motives Themselves.** The first defect has already been noted. The Millian argument assumes that the deontic status of an action is determined only by the value of its consequences. But we have seen that all consequentialists must count any intrinsic value that the act itself has in the calculation that determines the value of its consequences. And we have seen that there are different reasons why a consequentialist could hold that motives themselves sometimes have intrinsic value, which would thereby give some intrinsic value to actions. In this way, the motive of an action could make a difference to the act’s deontic status. The Millian argument ignores these points.

**Motives and their Narrow Consequences**. The argument depicts motives as prior to the actions they lead to. But this is a deeply mistaken view about how a motive functions when an agent acts from it. A motive establishes an end or goal for an agent, and she guides her activity accordingly. As she acts she will monitor her activity to be sure that it is succeeding in achieving her end, and she will modify it if it is not. She will look to see that she is actually employing her chosen means appropriately. So, for example, if my motive in driving my car is to attend a certain concert at a certain time, I will modify my driving if I think I am going to be late. This means that it is better to think of a motive as contemporaneous with an action, rather than as prior to it. If an agent acts from a certain motive it has not receded into the causally inert past.

The fact that motives guide the performance of actions means that when the same type of action is performed from two different motives it may be performed in somewhat different ways. This fact plays an important role in detective stories, and, presumably, in real detective work. Someone who kills in revenge will do so in a way that differs from someone killing out of greed. In the former case, for example, the killer may leave the victim’s wallet in place. This means that if some peculiar lover were actually to ‘kiss his mistress with an eye to the common weal’ he would not do this in quite the same way as if he did it from love. Hence, if Smith kisses his mistress from affection, and Jones kisses his mistress ‘with an eye to the common weal’, Smith’s mistress might find the kiss to be more satisfying simply as a physical movement. The point applies especially to those actions that Bernard Williams called “human gestures”.[[18]](#footnote-18) So a consequentialist cannot suppose that all tokens of an act type are such that they produce the same narrow consequences no matter what motive leads to their performance.[[19]](#footnote-19)

There is another reason why motives can make a difference in the narrow consequences of an action. Motives can be of interest to another person, even when they lead to perceptually indistinguishable actions. A number of the points in this paragraph and the following one are made in the excellent discussion of Thomas Scanlon in his Moral Dimensions. He speaks of the ‘meaning’ that an action has for an agent and others; this derives from the agent’s reasons for acting. If Jones is the recipient of a favor from Smith then Jones might be interested in knowing Smith’s motive, that is, her reason, for so acting. Jones might have one sort of reaction to Smith’s action if she believes that Smith acted from self-interest, and another sort of reaction if she believes that Smith acted from affection. This important fact about human nature helps to explain why people often try to conceal their motives.

One reason that we care about others’ motives is that they are evidence about the further relations that we will have with them, conceived of simply in terms of actions without motives. That is, I may infer from the fact that you acted from a certain motive that you are likely to kick me—or to kiss me—in the future. I may also make further inferences about what motive you will act from. And we care about what use another person will put our interactions to. Scanlon gives the example of Smith wanting to know why Jones invites her “to the big end-of-the-year dance”. Smith might want to be reassured that Jones was not merely seeking a chance to associate with the ‘in crowd’ (MD 115). These sorts of concern obviously rest in part on a more basic one: to understand an agent’s reason for acting on the present occasion. Even if Smith expects never to meet Jones again, she may have a different feeling about the favor that Jones provides her if she believes that Jones acts from one motive rather than another.

This point has had a particular significance in discussions of what Kantians call ‘the motive of duty’. We saw that Sidgwick raised doubts about whether the recipients of actions motivated by a sense of duty are always gratified to think that this is what led the agent to act (ME 223). In our own day Bernard Williamshas echoed this thought. In a well-known example, he suggests that a man’s wife would be disappointed if she learned that, when he could either rescue a stranger or her, but not both, he reasoned thus: she is my wife and it is morally permissible for me to rescue her. Williams memorably remarks that such a man has “one thought too many”.[[20]](#footnote-20) Michael Stocker[[21]](#footnote-21) and Lawrence Blum have endorsed this sort of claim. Blum believes that “in general one prefers to be helped from sympathy [rather] than from duty; for the former response conveys a greater good than does acting from duty.”[[22]](#footnote-22) If this is correct then consequentialists can not only take issue with the Kantian claim that the sense of duty is always a praiseworthy motive. They can even assert that sometimes it is wrong-making, as we will see.

In conclusion, motives can affect how an action is done, and people care, for various reasons, why actions are done, that is, what motives led to their being undertaken. So a consequentialist should not grant that the narrow consequences of a type of action will be the same, no matter what motive leads to its performance in a given instance. The Millian argument in effect denies this.

IV

In this section I draw on my preceding comments and present an example in which an agent’s motive is relevant deontically. I intend for this example to be plausible in this sense: it should strike the reader as being a case where a certain motive is part of the reason why a token of an action type is wrong (or where another token of the action type is right in virtue of being performed from another motive). I will argue that consequentialism can explain why motives in this sort of case are relevant deontically. This ability to explain the relevance of motives in such a case is, I believe, a point in favor of the theory. Furthermore, consequentialism can provide such an explanation even if it does not make the Moorean assumption that motives themselves have intrinsic value. That is, it need not assume that motives themselves are pleasures or pains (and thus intrinsically good or bad according to hedonistic versions of the theory), or another psychological state (such as a desire) that is sometimes intrinsically valuable according to pluralistic forms of consequentialism similar to Moore’s. So the example is designed to show that motives can be relevant deontically only because they make a difference in the narrow consequences of actions.

Let us imagine, then, there are two teenage grandchildren who are expected to visit their grandmother every so often.[[23]](#footnote-23) One of them enjoys playing card games with her. The other does not enjoy such games or any other activity that her grandmother is interested in. She visits her grandmother only because she believes she is obligated to. She finds the visits disagreeable, and although she tries to mask this fact, it is evident to her grandmother. This makes her visits disagreeable to her grandmother as well. Let us capture these facts in the following chart, where the numbers represent units of happiness ‘when all is said and done’, that is, taking account of all the effects of the various actions. S is the grandchild who enjoys visiting, T the grandchild who does not, and G the grandmother.

S’s Options T’s Options

Visit Today Don’t Visit Visit Today Don’t Visit

S 10 10 T -5 10

G 10 -5 G -5 -5

Total 20 5 -10 5

The numbers represent the following psychological facts. S would enjoy playing cards with her grandmother—a desire to do this will be her motive—and she would enjoy the visit. She will get 10 units of happiness from doing so. G will enjoy it to the same extent. The total happiness produced by the visit will be 20 units of happiness. If S does not visit she will enjoy herself doing something else. Her grandmother’s unhappiness will amount to 5 units, so the total amount of happiness produced by this choice would be 5. Compare T’s options. If she visits today she will do so from a sense of duty—this will be her motive—and be somewhat unhappy, as will her grandmother. The visit will produce 10 units of unhappiness in total. If T does not visit she will also enjoy herself doing something else, but her grandmother will be just as unhappy about this as she will be if S does not visit. The total amount of happiness produced by this choice would be 5. What these numbers mean is that S will produce more happiness by visiting her grandmother today, and T will produce more happiness by not visiting her grandmother today. Therefore a utilitarian would say S would act rightly in visiting her grandmother and T would act wrongly in doing so. This difference in the deontic status of the two tokens of the same act is due to the fact that the motives cause the actions to have different narrow consequences.

Some comments are in order about the reasoning just presented. First, certain assumptions were made about the narrow consequences of different motives and the available alternatives. But there is nothing objectionable in making special assumptions, which are in any case not unrealistic, in supporting the claim that motives are relevant deontically. To say that motives are relevant is only to say that they are sometimes relevant. The assumptions can therefore be taken to illustrate a case when they are relevant.

Second, I used utilitarian assumptions to structure the example. But it is clear that other forms of consequentialism, employing different assumptions about intrinsic value, can also support the claim that motives are relevant deontically. Indeed, as we have seen, there are forms of consequentialism which assert that some motives are intrinsically valuable, and they also entail that motives are relevant deontically. But these forms of consequentialism are less plausible, in my opinion.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Third, the example can be accepted without holding that motives are often or generally relevant deontically. I stated above that consequentialism is unlikely to say that the motive of an action can change the calculation that determines which action has the best consequences. This example is not meant to withdraw this assertion. We can still accept Mill’s statement that saving someone from drowning is right, no matter what motive leads a person to do this. It is, again, only with certain kinds of ‘human gestures’ that the consequentialist is likely to see an agent’s motives as relevant deontically, and this seems to be correct.

Fourth, saying that S’s and T’s motives make a difference in whether they act rightly is not to make their moral obligations into objectionable hypothetical imperatives, as Kant might put the point. It might seem to a Kantian as though T is relieved of her obligation simply because she does not want to carry it out. But if there is something objectionable about what we might call a hypothetical moral imperative then this is a difficulty that would tell against any theory that holds that motives are relevant deontically, not just consequentialism.And it does seem that in the realm of personal relations we are in a sphere where agents’ feelings can sometimes make the difference between right and wrong behavior. Furthermore, the consequentialist need not deny that there is something that T is obligated to do with regard to her grandmother. For example, T might be obligated to send her grandmother a card expressing her appreciation of her grandmother’s affection for her, and, if she is mature, describing why visits are currently problematic. (A sensitive grandmother might take heed and try to find something more enjoyable for the two of them to do.) All of this confirms how intimate relations do need to be shaped by a good understanding of the parties’ current motivational tendencies (and a sense of how they might be changed over time). These assertions can be seen as consistent with a consequentialist understanding of what makes any action whatsoever morally right.

If there are cases where motives are relevant deontically, then the distinction between the rightness of an action and the praiseworthiness of its motive probably breaks down. This is because if an action is obligatory because it is done from a certain motive, it is likely that this motive is praiseworthy. Typically in consequentialism an action’s deontic status is unaffected by the motive that leads to its performance.

V

The classical consequentialists denied, implicitly or explicitly, that motives are relevant deontically. And they had reason to do this: above all, the fact that in most cases the factors bearing on the moral rightness of an action concern its narrow consequences. But Moore’s claim that certain attitudes have intrinsic value left room for the possibility of motives being relevant deontically, and it suggested a new way to think about which motives are praiseworthy. More traditional forms of consequentialism will not assert that motives are intrinsically valuable but they leave room for rare cases in which motives are relevant deontically. I described such a case. These forms of consequentialism will favor using criteria of moral praiseworthiness that focus on the effects various motives have on human well-being or—more debatably—on the effects on well-being of acts of praising them.[[25]](#footnote-25)

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1. See my Motive and Rightness (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R.M. Hare, Moral Thinking (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), chs. 2, 3; Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 24-43; Peter Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” in Facts, Values, and Norms (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 151-86; David Brink,Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1989), 216-17, 256-62. Robert M. Adams, “Motive Utilitarianism.” Journal of Philosophy 73 (1976), 467-81, comes at the issue in a fundamentally different way. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jeremy Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation. Eds. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London: Methuen, 1982), 11-12. For discussion of whether Bentham meant to endorse a moral principle somewhat like the central claim of act utilitarianism, see the introduction by Hart, xlix-lii. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cp. IPML 112-3, which oddly instances only actions that work to the detriment of others. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John Austin*,* The Province of Jurisprudence Determined. Ed. H. L. A. Hart (New York: Noonday, 1954), 105. A similar distinction was earlier made by William Godwin in a pamphlet published in 1801. Godwin distinguished “the motive from which a virtuous action is to arise, and the criterion by which it is determined to be virtuous”. See William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, with Selections from Godwin’s Other Writings. Ed. K. Codell Carter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Austin is here apparently criticizing the utilitarianism of Godwin’s Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793). Godwin was understood to be claiming that rational benevolence should always be a utilitarian’s motive for acting. See J. B. Schneewind, Sidgwick’s Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 136-7; 153-4. Godwin later disavowed this idea. See the pamphlet of 1801, op. cit., 321-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism. Ed. George Sher. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), 17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On this note see Jonathan Dancy, “Mill’s Puzzling Footnote,” Utilitas 12 (2000), pp. 219-22; Michael Ridge, “Mill’s Intentions and Motives,” Utilitas 14 (2002), pp. 54-70; MR 47, n. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Julia Driver, Uneasy Virtue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 68-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Let us add: setting aside the variant of the case discussed in Mill’s note, viz., saving a person in order to torture her. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics , 7th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 202-10; 217-28; 362-72; 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See ME 221-8, but Sidgwick nowhere says this explicitly. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. G. E. Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 25; 106; 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This sort of ‘recursive’ structure is developed in depth in Thomas Hurka’s Virtue, Vice, and Value (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Moore also accepts the hedonistic claim that pain is intrinsically bad. PE 211-14. In contrast, he thinks that pleasure as such has very little intrinsic value. PE 92-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. G.E. Moore, Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 77-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This point was earlier suggested by Joseph Butler. “A Dissertation upon the Nature of Virtue,” in Five Sermons. Ed. Stuart Brown (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Bernard Williams, “Morality and the Emotions,” in his Problems of the Self (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 227. Williams used this idea to criticize Kantian, not consequentialist, moral theorists. However, Michael Stocker, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theory,” Journal of Philosophy 73 (1976), 453-66, argues in a related vein that both a pure consequentialist and a pure Kantian would not be able to act from the motives that are central to relationships like friendship. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This conclusion seems to be endorsed by Brink, op. cit., Parfit, op. cit., and Railton, op. cit. All three are concerned to rebut Williams and Stocker. But I have not found a passage in them where they make the point that different tokens of an act type can have different effects because of their motives. See also Thomas Scanlon, Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 28-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character and Morality,” in Moral Luck. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 18. Cp. Williams, Problems, op. cit., 227. Michael Smith has generalized Williams’ point in a certain way, claiming that acting from a concern to do what it is right, understood as a de dicto commitment, makes such motivation into a kind of fetishism. Michael Smith, The Moral Problem (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 75-6. For a recent assessment, see Vanessa Carbonell, “De dicto desires and morality as fetish,” Philosophical Studies 163 (2013), 459-77. See also Julia Markovits, “Acting for the Right Reasons,” Philosophical Review 119 (2010), 201-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Stocker, “Schizophrenia,” op. cit., p. 462. Cp. Michael Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman, Valuing Emotions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Lawrence Blum, Friendship, Altruism and Morality*.* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 168. See all of ch. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This example differs from the one in MR 55-8.In thinking aboutconvincing examples I have benefitted from conversations with Richard Galvin and Julia Staffel. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See MR, ch. 4 for criticism of Hurka’s version of pluralistic consequentialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I am grateful to the other authors of this volume for helpful discussion and to Iakovos Vasiliou for his encouragement. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)