

## Two Standard Views on Moral Worth

**The Kantish View:** A right act has moral worth only if the reasons for which the agent acts include the rightness of the action.

**The Problem:** A concern for rightness just does not seem like a suitable end for which an agent can act.

You might understand a concern for rightness substantively, i.e. the agent really takes ‘doing the right thing’ as an end of their action, in which case we will run into all the standard problems of moral fetishism.

The standard rejoinders to the fetishism objection have, I think for good reason, not received anything like uniform consensus.\*

So, you might instead understand a concern for rightness formally. Where rightness is not the *end*\*\* given in the agent’s practical syllogism, but is rather the formal aim or guise under which one practically reasons (just as you don’t believe things *because* they are true, but you are concerned to believe true things since truth is the formal aim of theoretical reasoning).

While this, I think, is a plausible way to understand the role of rightness in practical deliberation; such a concern cannot be an optional add-on to practical deliberation which secures moral worth.

### The Dilemma for Moral Worth:

For an action to express *categoricity*, the rightness (or practical requiredness) of the action must play a non-accidental role in explaining the act. However, that rightness or practical requirement cannot play the role of an *end* in action without rendering the action morally fetishistic.

The way forward is obvious, we need to look for some role, other, than being a reason for action; that rightness can play in moral worth.

**The New View:** A right act has moral worth only if the reason for which the agent acts is the reason that made the action right.

**The Problem:** The New View has problem securing the categoricity of morally worthy action.

I might wake up one morning and really want a mushroom omelet, not as a means to some further end, but simply as a final end.

I might, similarly, when seeing a child drowning want to jump into the lake to save the child, not as a means to some further end, but simply for the child’s sake.

However, there is an important difference. In the lake case, my reason speaks *categorically*. I recognize that my reason to save the child does not depend on having the desire; I recognize that the reason on which I act is a reason for which I should act, even if I had no desire to act on that reason at all.

This, however, is something the New View has an extremely difficult time capturing. Because we can do the same act, for the same reason, and yet the understanding of that end differs between the cases.

## Two Digressions on Theoretical Reason

### *Validity (Arguments Adapted/Adopted from Ram Neta)*

**Step 1**—For a belief to be inferred validly, the validity (or truth preservingness) of the inference must play a non-accidental role in explaining the inferences.

*Argument 1*— Suppose two people both reason as follows:

- (1) If the Spurs are playing the Pistons, then they will win their upcoming game.
- (2) The Spurs are playing the Pistons
- (3) The Spurs will win their upcoming game

One person draws this conclusion via modus ponens, and one draws this conclusion via ‘modus profuses’ (the principle that if two things are true, then any third thing is shown true).

Only one person has inferred validly. Even though both draw a conclusion from premises which validly entail the conclusion.

*Argument 2*—Consider this case of Ram Neta’s:

Now suppose that someone whom So-Hyun knows to be an eminent expert (if necessary, let this expert be a mind-reading logician and statistician) comes to her and, after going through a careful examination of So-Hyun’s reasons and her belief, authoritatively asserts the following: “

So-Hyun, you are absolutely right to believe everything in R—all of its contents are true, I assure you! Nonetheless, you are mistaken to think that those contents support the hypothesis that Russian forces have bombed civilian targets in Syria. In fact, I can prove that the totality of your reasons R does not support that hypothesis about Russian forces, but is entirely neutral with respect to that hypothesis.” Finally, let’s suppose that the eminent expert is wrong about the support relation at issue—in fact, R does support the hypothesis that Russian forces have bombed civilian targets in Syria, and the expert’s “proof” is unsound, but in a way that is too subtle or sophisticated for So-Hyun to be able to detect.

...

If So-Hyun simply persists in her belief about the Russian forces, and does so on the basis of R without having any reason to discount the expert’s testimony, then her belief concerning Russian forces loses ex post justifiedness<sup>1</sup>

**Step 2**—Validity cannot play the role of premise, or reason for belief.

*Argument 1*—Even if one were to add validity in as a premise, it would still leave open the question of whether one inferred validly or invalidly from the new syllogism. (Cf Lewis Carroll).

*Argument 2* —The case of So-Hyun seems to strongly suggest that someone might have all the correct premises, and reason from them to the conclusion, and yet not infer validly.

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<sup>1</sup> The Basing Relation

## *Perception*

To *know* a conclusion, it is not enough to reason validly from true premises that entail a true conclusion, the premises themselves must, ultimately, be grounded in some sort of rational non-inferential base.

Suppose two friends are the only ones sitting in a library. A one-legged man walks in.

Both friends reason that ‘a one-legged man entered the library, so there are now five legs in the library. The only difference, is that one’s premise that a one-legged man entered the library was explained by perception, while the other’s premise was explained by a coincidentally veridical, vivid hallucination.

Both friends validly infer a true conclusion from true premises, but only one knows the conclusion.

## *Implication*

Knowledge requires one to not only reach a conclusion from the right premises, but the premises themselves must have the appropriate rational grounds, and the inference itself must be grounded in the right rational disposition.

These rational grounds, cannot themselves be cited as reasons, at least in the sense of premises that justify a conclusion.

## The Parallel

Moral worth is the practical correlate of knowledge. Just as knowledge requires more than simply reaching the conclusion from the right premises, so moral worth requires more than simply performing the right action for the right end or reason. However, just as the further element knowledge requires is not some further premise or extra thought, so the explanatory role that rightness plays in morally worthy action is not as a further end or one-thought-too-many.

### *Theoretical Reason*

Something like an understanding of validity must play a role in valid inference, and yet that role cannot be as a premise or reason for belief.

An understanding of validity will involve, at a minimum, reasoning from a disposition which has a reliable tendency to infer well, rather than having one infer well simply because the premises happened to validly entail the conclusion.

A valid inference requires a recognition of something like ‘logical necessity’ in inference.

### *Practical Reason*

Something like an understanding of rightness must play a role in morally worthy action, and yet that role cannot be as an end or reason for action.

An understanding of rightness will involve, at a minimum, acting from a disposition which has a reliable tendency to produce right action, rather than having one act well simply because the reasons lined up with what is right.

A morally worthy action requires a recognition of something like ‘categorical necessity’ in action.

## Kantian Echos

There are compelling connections between this way of approaching moral worth and things that Kant and certain other Kantians say.

“An action from duty has its moral worth not in the aim that is supposed to be attained by it, but rather in the maxim in accordance with which it is resolved upon; thus that worth depends not on the actuality of the object of the action, but merely on the principle of the volition, in accordance with which the action is done, without regard to any object of the faculty of desire. It is clear from the preceding that the aims we may have in actions, and their effects, as ends and incentives of the will, can impart to the actions no unconditioned and moral worth.” (Groundwork)

“A person who does a beneficent action from immediate inclination and a person who does one from duty have the same purpose—namely to help someone. Both of these people help others for its own sake.” (Korsgaard, “From Duty”)

“Now the fundamental difference at which I think Kant was aiming is one between different ways in which conceptions of circumstances influence the will; that is, between different ways in which they function in the explanation of behaviour in terms of the agent’s reasons. To a virtuous person, certain actions are presented as practically necessary—as Kant might have put it—by his view of certain situations in which he finds himself. The question is whether his conceptions of the relevant facts weigh with him only conditionally upon his possession of a desire.” (McDowell, “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?”)

## Some Objections

\* Two plausible alternatives are the regulative views of Marcia Baron, Barbara Herman, et al., and the balancing view of Zoe Johnson King.

Regulative Views: you should be motivated to perform an action, not because, but only in so far as it is right.

Balancing Views: a concern rightness motivates striking the right ‘balance’ between your ends.

### *Objection 1—The Role of Stakes*

If our deliberative patterns are explained by our first-order concerns, then it makes sense why our concern to be right ramps up with importance of our first order concerns. You spend the most time deliberating not just when the balance of reasons is very fine, but when there is a lot at stake. But if what motivated deliberation was just making the right choice, you should be equally motivated to deliberate when a lot is at stake as when little is at stake.

I’m not as bothered that I did wrong when what made the act wrong was less significant. Further, I don’t deliberate as much when little is at stake.

### *Objection 2—Separation Thought Experiments*

When we separate out the rightness of an action from the first-order concern that explained why the act is right, we lose any grip on why we care whether a right choice is made. Suppose in one week I will be forcibly plugged into an experience machine, inside of which I will think I face real dilemmas. Choosing to murder inside the experience machine is a terribly immoral thing to do (since I don’t know I’m in the machine, it’s on par with attempted murder in real life). I’d be a bad person who did a terrible thing if I

chose to murder in the machine. However, by hypothesis, no actual person will be harmed or killed as a result of that terrible choice.

I don't have reason to preemptively deliberate about decisions I'll only face in the experience machine, nor should I now be concerned to make sure I won't act wrongly in such a situation.

### *Objection 3—Articulacy about Tradeoffs*

We often face tradeoffs between our various ends. And when two ends really are in direct conflict, we then think through reasons why one end is of greater importance than the other. The problem is, if we try to explain our deliberation by supposing that agent's take 'rightness' as an end, in anything like the way they take other ends as ends, then we quickly reach inarticulacy about why rightness is so important.

This problem is even clearer for balancing views. After all, we don't just deliberate until we are sure that we are right. Deliberation takes time, and as such there is an opportunity cost whenever we deliberate. But, when we decide whether it is worth spending more time deliberating, we *don't* make that decision by weighing the value of a 'right answer' against the other goods we could pursue in the time spend deliberating. Instead we compare the goods we would forgo by a wrong choice to the goods we forgo by deliberating.

\*\*Both Zoe Johnson King and Paulina Sliwa argue that moral testimony shows rightness is an appropriate end in action.

Testimony: Fliers containing racist messages are posted all over Evelyn's college campus. Evelyn, a first-time teacher, asks a friend with substantial pedagogical expertise and good character whether she should deviate from the syllabus to mention the fliers in class, and what she should say if so. Her friend tells Evelyn that she should ignore the syllabus and use this opportunity to encourage students to discuss strategies that they and their instructors can implement to make the campus a more welcoming place for students of color. Evelyn can tell that her trustworthy friend is well aware of the complex combination of facts that collectively make this the right thing to do. But she doesn't have time to ask her friend to explain it all. Nonetheless, she performs the intervention that her friend suggests, and does so because it's the right thing to do.<sup>2</sup>

*Rejoinder* — Cases of testimony are curiously *derivative* on you taking there to be a good, if shadowy, first-order reason for action. If I believe something you tell me, it is because I assume you have a reason for believing it, and that you are a good judge of such reasons. Something similar is true of practical testimony. It seems that you take an end to be at stake, and for which you act, testimony simply allows you to act on these shadowy ends.

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson King "We Can Have our Buck and Pass it Too"