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MORAL WORTH AND DOING THE RIGHT THING BY ACCIDENT

Jessica Isserow

Kantian conceptions of moral worth are thought to enjoy an advantage over their rivals in virtue of accommodating two plausible intuitions: that the praiseworthiness of an action is never accidental, and that how an agent might have acted in other circumstances does not determine the moral worth of her actual conduct. In this paper, I argue that neither the Kantian nor her rivals can adequately accommodate both intuitions inasmuch as non-accidentality presupposes counterfactual robustness. If we are to adequately accommodate both claims, then we must reconsider the kind of non-accidentality that really matters to moral worth. I propose that the kind of non-accidentality worth caring about requires only that the agent who does what is right act competently from morally relevant concerns. Under this account, both the Kantian and (some of) her rivals can ensure that the praiseworthiness of an action is never accidental without counting the behaviour of non-actual agents as relevant to assessments of moral worth.

Keywords: moral worth, duty, praiseworthy

1. Introduction

Few passages in moral philosophy are better known than the following one [Kant 1785: 4: 390]:

In the case of what is to be morally good it is not enough that [the action] conform with the moral law but it must also be done for the sake of the law; without this that conformity is only very contingent and precarious, since a ground that is not moral will indeed now and then produce actions in conformity with the law, but it will also often produce actions contrary to law.

Kant's claim here is, at its core, a claim concerning moral motivation; it tells us something important about the motivational profile that lies behind the scenes of morally worthy actions. On Kant's view, such actions must be carried out not only in conformity with, but for the sake of the moral law; the agent must act from the motive of duty. Were she motivated merely by sympathy or compassion, then her acting rightly would be 'precarious' and 'contingent'; such motives could very well lead her to act contrary to morality's demands.

Although these remarks have earned Kant a fair share of bad press, many find the basic line of argument compelling. The following view in particular has gained a remarkable number of contemporary sponsors:

The Kantian view: A right action has moral worth iff the agent acts from the motive of duty.¹

¹ There is decent textual evidence that Kant takes the motive of duty to be necessary and sufficient for moral worth (see Stratton-Lake [2000: 48]). Whether or not this is a wise move on his behalf is a question that I take up in section 3.2.

Moral worth, as it is commonly understood, concerns whether (or the degree to which) an agent is praiseworthy for acting rightly.² When we ascribe moral worth to an action, we don't only mean to claim that it was the right thing to do.³ The action must be performed for the right kinds of reasons; a particular motive is (or motives are) needed to endow it with moral worth. The Kantian view identifies a candidate motive; it tells us that the agent must act from duty. As it is sometimes put in more common parlance, acts of moral worth must stem from a concern to do what is right.⁴

My foremost ambition in this paper will be to show that the Kantian view does not have quite as much going for it as contemporary discussions would appear to suggest. The position is commonly thought to have an advantage over its rivals in virtue of satisfying two important desiderata. First, the Kantian view appears to satisfy what I shall call the non-accidentality constraint; it accommodates the highly intuitive idea that morally worthy actions are non-accidentally right. It is therefore said to fare better than proposals that take sympathetic motives—which may or may not issue in right action, depending upon good fortune—to suffice for moral worth [Herman 1981: 364-6; Sliwa 2016: 396-8]. Second, the Kantian view appears to satisfy what I will dub the pertinence constraint; it counts as relevant to assessments of moral worth only the motives that actually led the agent to act as she did. So it is thought to enjoy an advantage over proposals that (wrongly) take facts about how an agent would have acted in other possible circumstances to determine her praiseworthiness [Sliwa 2016: 399-400].

In what follows, I shall argue that appearances here are misleading; the Kantian view does not in fact enjoy this advantage over its rivals. I will begin by saying a little more about the Kantian view and its competitors (section 2). Following that, I argue that neither the Kantian nor her rivals can serve two masters (section 3). In their attempts to satisfy the non-accidentality constraint, they inevitably run afoul of the pertinence constraint (if not in letter, then at least in spirit). The problem is, I suggest, owing to the common assumption that non-accidentality requires an agent's acting rightly to be counterfactually robust, given her motives. I shall contend that the kind of non-accidentality worth caring about requires something far less demanding of the agent who acts rightly: that she do so competently from morally relevant concerns (section 4). This revised understanding not only solves the problem at hand, but also suggests that satisfying both constraints is not merely the province of the Kantian. I conclude by reflecting upon the implications of my proposal for ascriptions of moral worth (section 5).

² Following others (e.g. Sliwa [2016]), I understand 'right action' broadly here. I mean to refer not only to actions that are morally required, but to those that are supererogatory as well.

³ Traditionally, only right actions are taken to be candidates for moral worth (see Herman [1981: 366]; Benson [1987: 367]; cf. Markovits [2010: 240-1]). Though we may be less blameworthy (if at all) when noble motives lead us to act wrongfully, having one's heart in the right place does not suffice. The road to hell has no moral worth—whether or not it is paved with good intentions.

⁴ I intend for talk of desires or concerns to do what is right to be read as *de dicto* attitude attributions; the agent desires to do what is right, whatever that may be.

2. The Kantian view: friends and foes

The Kantian view has an impressive fan base (see, for example, Herman [1981]; Baron [1984]; Benson [1987]; Jeske [1998]; Sliwa [2016]). Much of the appeal, I suspect, derives from the intuitive idea that praiseworthy actions must issue from motives of an appropriate sort. It is commonly recognised that any plausible moral theory must reserve an important role for motives—particularly so in assessments of moral worth. (Crude moral behaviourism is not in fashion, if ever it was.) But of course, not any motives will do. An adequate theory of moral worth cannot applaud ulterior motives. If acts of kindness are to have moral worth, then an agent cannot perform them merely to increase her social capital. And the motive of duty certainly does not strike one as an ulterior motive. On the contrary, it seems a very natural candidate for the kind of motive that would endow an action with moral worth.

A more commonly cited motivation for the Kantian view is that it satisfies the non-accidentality constraint. Doing so is important. If my fortuitous position beneath a balcony breaks your fall, then I am surely not deserving of moral praise. Nor am I to praise if I intentionally save you merely for self-interested reasons—because you owe me money, say. In the latter case, it is no accident that I come to your rescue. But given my motives, it is an accident that I do what is right. The motive of duty, by contrast, invests an agent with an interest in the rightness of her action, and so, her acting rightly would seem to be a non-accidental effect of her motives [Herman 1981: 366].

The Kantian view also appears to satisfy the pertinence constraint. If an agent is to be praiseworthy for having acting rightly, the Kantian requires that she acted from a concern to do what is right. There is no need to consider how she would have acted in similar situations. This seems to be the right result. We wouldn't plausibly withhold praise from a dog-lover who risked her life to save a group of strangers simply because had her dog been in danger, she would have saved the dog instead [Markovits 2010: 210]. Counterfactual considerations such as these are commonly thought to be irrelevant in deciding whether agents are praiseworthy for their actual behaviour. To accord them any such determining role is to conflate moral worth (a property that attaches to dutiful actions for which an agent is praiseworthy) with moral virtue (which concerns an agent's overall moral character) [Herman 1981: 369; Smith 1991: 289-90; Markovits 2010: 240].

Before turning my attention to rival proposals, I should note that the Kantian view comes in different guises. Kant himself is sometimes saddled (perhaps uncharitably) with the view that the motive of duty must be present to the exclusion of all other motives if an action is to have moral worth. But quite a few allow that other motives—love or sympathetic concern, say—can happily co-exist alongside the motive of duty [Herman 1981; Baron 1984; Jeske 1998]. Still, it is debatable just how much heavy-lifting the motive of duty must do if an action is to be morally praiseworthy. In the ensuing discussion, I will engage with those who regard the motive of duty as a primary motive. These theorists require that the motive of duty be present at the time of deliberation, and that it directly explain or determine why the agent acts as she does [Herman 1981; Jeske 1998; Sliwa 2016].⁵

⁵ Others require only that the motive of duty function as a secondary motive—as a regulating, background motive that constrains one's conduct [Baron 1984; Benson 1987; Stratton-Lake 2000]. I put this possibility to the side for the purposes of this paper, and leave a proper discussion of it for another occasion.

The Kantian view is not the only game in town. A respected handful of philosophers deny that the motive of duty is needed to endow actions with moral worth. Their chief complaint against the Kantian view is that it is unacceptably narrow; we seem to recognise a great many actions as morally worthy that do not have duty at their source. To tread a little more upon an already well-trodden example, consider Mark Twain's Huck Finn. Huck regards slavery as a form of ownership, and so, famously suffers from a guilty conscience when he fails to turn in his friend Jim, a slave whom he helps to escape. In helping Jim, Huck acts contrary to what he takes to be his duty. Yet it is highly intuitive to suppose that Huck is praiseworthy for acting as he does; for he seems to act for the right kinds of reasons—compassion, concern, and an appreciation of another person's value [Arpaly 2002: 230; Markovits 2010: 208].

These dissenters also have something positive to say about morally worthy actions. The central point of departure lies in an emphasis upon the right-making features of an action, as opposed to its rightness *per se*. Julia Markovits [2010: 205], for example, takes an agent to be praiseworthy just in case she does the right thing for the reasons in virtue of which it is right. If my saving a child from a burning house is to have moral worth, then I must be motivated by the considerations that explain why this is the right thing to do—that the child needs my help, and that her life has value, say. In what follows, I will refer to this proposal as the responding view:

The responding view: A right action has moral worth iff the agent is motivated by its right making features.

This proposal has also been advanced by Nomy Arpaly [2002], who adds to it a further condition that determines degrees of praiseworthiness. In Arpaly's view, the degree to which an agent is praiseworthy for having acted rightly is determined by the strength of her 'moral concern'; that is, by the extent to which she is disposed to respond to morally relevant considerations [2002: 233-5; 2003: 87].⁶ An agent with a 'persistent devotion to moral issues even in hard times', for example, is, *ceteris paribus*, more praiseworthy for having acted rightly than one who is not so persistently devoted. Call this the dispositional view:

The dispositional view: A right action has moral worth iff the agent is motivated by its right-making features, and it has greater moral worth the more strongly disposed she is to be motivated by such right-making features.

Notice that the dispositional view takes an agent's dispositions to be relevant only for the purposes of deciding how praiseworthy she is. What I shall call the strong dispositional view takes an agent's dispositions to be relevant for the purposes of deciding whether she is praiseworthy at all:

⁶ Moral concern, on Arpaly's understanding, is a concern for morally relevant considerations (e.g. that someone needs help) rather than a concern for morality *per se*. It is also possible to understand moral concern as the categorical basis of particular dispositions—say, an agent's general commitment to moral causes. The arguments in what follows do not hang upon either interpretation.

The strong dispositional view: A right action has moral worth to the extent that the agent is disposed to be motivated by its right-making features.

On this latter view, an agent's praiseworthiness is a matter of her general responsiveness to morally relevant considerations. An advocate of this proposal might take moral worth to be something that comes in degrees; the greater the agent's responsiveness, the greater the moral worth of her actions. Or, she might stipulate a threshold of responsiveness that must be cleared before an action can be a candidate for moral worth. Although (to my knowledge) neither variety of the strong dispositional view has earned a contemporary sponsor, the proposal will serve us well later on for the purposes of comparison.

Before proceeding, I should note that these rival views typically come attached with the qualification that the praiseworthy agent be motivated by right-making features non-instrumentally. It clearly won't do if an agent is motivated by morally relevant considerations in an instrumental way; if she is only motivated to help someone in order that she may be branded a hero afterwards, say. She must rather value the end of helping this person for its own sake [Arpaly 2003: 84; Markovits 2010: 230]. Though I will mostly omit this qualification for ease of expression in what follows, I will intend for talk of being motivated by right-making features to be read as talk of being motivated in the relevant non-instrumental fashion.

3. The difficulty of serving two masters

The rival proposals canvassed above strike me as strong contenders. However, proponents of the Kantian view have declared them inadequate. Both the responding view and the dispositional view have been criticised for failing to accommodate the non-accidental character of morally worthy actions. While the strong dispositional view is not vulnerable to this criticism, it is said to fall short of satisfying the pertinence constraint. As we shall see, Kantians have alerted us to a substantial problem here. However, it is not a problem from which they themselves are completely immune. I shall argue that they too run afoul of the pertinence constraint in important respects in their efforts to secure non-accidentality.

3.1 The case against helpful motives

Proponents of the Kantian view deny that helpful motives are sufficient to endow actions with moral worth. Although someone who acts from such motives may very well do what is right, this is alleged to be wholly accidental. Suppose—to slightly modify an example from Barbara Herman [1981: 364-5]—that I spot an artist struggling to lift her painting outside the local museum. Since I desire to help, I quickly rush to give her a hand. I have acted rightly. Yet Herman argues that my doing so is a matter of sheer luck. I was, she suggests, just as likely to help a struggling artist as a struggling art thief.

Paulina Sliwa [2016: 398] voices a similar worry. She invites us to consider Jean, who does the right thing—giving a friend a lift to an important meeting—for the relevant right-making reason: that doing so saves the friend a great embarrassment. Since Jean simply desired to spare her friend an embarrassment, Sliwa argues that it is a fluke that she did what

was right. What would have happened, she asks, if the only way to spare her friend a great embarrassment had been for Jean to kill this friend's ex-boyfriend? It seems to be a matter of moral serendipity that Jean did not find herself in the latter situation. Thus, Sliwa concludes that Jean's acting rightly was accidental—ergo, her action has no moral worth.

Now, there is a concern with the accidentality challenge as formulated.⁷ It seems slightly unfair to infer from someone's desiring to help an artist or a friend that they would help just anyone under any circumstances. That strikes me as a considerable leap; for very few people plausibly have helpful desires that are so woefully indiscriminating. I'd gladly help a friend to set up her new computer, but it doesn't follow that I'd gladly help her to set off a nuclear bomb. So the worry (if it is to be worrying) cannot be that if some individual desires to help ordinary person A in circumstances C₁, then she is very likely to help evil, scheming person B in circumstances C₂. The real worry, I take it, is not that this is likely to happen, but that we are offered no assurance that it would not.

The accidentality challenge would seem to have force against the responding view and (though perhaps to a lesser extent) the dispositional view.⁸ Both proposals take an agent's being motivated by the right-making features of her action to be necessary and sufficient for moral worth. Yet helpful desires seem problematically precarious in that they render right action hostage to good fortune; given such motives, an agent's moral conduct cannot be declared suitably robust.

However, these arguments carry little if any force against the strong dispositional view. (I shall assume the threshold variety for illustrative purposes.) If Jean is disposed to kill someone to save her friend an embarrassment, then (presumably) she is not properly responsive to morally relevant considerations, and so, is not praiseworthy at all. But if Jean is only disposed to save her friend an embarrassment when doing so wouldn't significantly harm anyone else, then she would seem properly responsive to morally relevant considerations. Given this, it is no accident that she does what is right, and she is a proper candidate for moral praise.

Yet in its attempts to evade the accidentality problem, the strong dispositional view violates the pertinence constraint. Sliwa [2016: 399-400] contends (and I agree) that these counterfactual facts about Jean are not relevant to her praiseworthiness.⁹ When we ask whether Jean's helping her friend has moral worth, we are only interested in the motivations that actually led her to respond as she did—we are not interested in her general responsiveness to morally relevant considerations. The strong dispositional view would seem to conflate moral worth with moral virtue.

3.2 The best of both worlds?

There is something puzzling about the criticisms that the Kantian directs against her rivals. One is not permitted to appeal to an agent's dispositions; for doing so builds in counterfactual

⁷ I am indebted to Gerald Lang for very helpful feedback here.

⁸ The dispositional view can at least accommodate the idea that Jean is not very praiseworthy. If she really is disposed to kill someone to help her friend, then, presumably, she is not terribly responsive to morally relevant considerations.

⁹ This may also present a problem for the dispositional view if one also regards these counterfactual facts as irrelevant to her degree of praiseworthiness.

facts that seem irrelevant in assessing the moral worth of her conduct. Yet one must do something to ensure that the agent's acting rightly is no accident. And non-accidentality seems to require some measure of counterfactual robustness. Given this, the temptation to appeal to counterfactual facts is quite understandable.

Indeed, one feels compelled to ask how the Kantian herself proposes to navigate a happy middle path between the horns of irrelevancy and accidentality. Upon reflection, it is not obvious that she can. As Thomas Hurka [2014] points out, Herman's criticism of helpful motives would seem to have equal force against the motive of duty if that motive is simply construed as a desire to do what is right. The motive of duty, so construed, is no guarantor of right action. A Kantian agent may very well abet Herman's art thief; for she may (falsely) believe that her duties to help others take priority over any duties to respect property rights. A natural fix (and Hurka [2014: 497] suggests, what it may be charitable to take Herman to be assuming) is that 'a Kantian agent knows and is motivated by her duty'.

The idea that praiseworthy agents act from what they know to be their duty is not merely a helpful piece of exegesis. Sliwa [2016: 394] has recently proposed to understand an agent's acting from duty in terms of her being motivated to do the right thing by both a concern to do what is right, and 'by knowledge that it is the right thing to do'. The touted virtue of Sliwa's proposal is that it promises to secure [2016: 400-1]:

...a counterfactually stable link between an agent's actual motivation and her right action... if an agent knows that an action is the right thing to do, then it is the right thing to do and she could not have easily been mistaken about it's being the right thing to do.

Clearly, this variant of the Kantian view (hereafter, the knowledge view) satisfies the non-accidentality constraint. But does it satisfy the pertinence constraint? Matters here are not so straightforward.¹⁰

The knowledge view would seem to satisfy the letter of the pertinence constraint. If an agent's acting rightly is to have moral worth, then we need only require that she act from moral knowledge and a concern to do what is right. On the other hand, knowledge plausibly requires some sort of counterfactual stability. So the knowledge view will demand something of praiseworthy agents counterfactually as well as actually. Given this, it is difficult to shake the niggling worry that the proposal goes against the spirit—even if not the letter—of the pertinence constraint.

Upon reflection, this turns out to be more than a niggling worry; for it strikes me that the pertinence constraint has an important additional purpose aside from that of helping us to prevent counterfactual considerations from infecting our assessments of moral worth. It is for this reason that I believe that the knowledge view does go against the spirit of the pertinence constraint. (And unfortunately for the knowledge view, the spirit matters in this case.) In order to properly articulate these concerns, it will be helpful to reflect upon why the concept of moral worth is important to us.¹¹

There is widespread agreement that moral worth is distinct from moral virtue. But an important connection is often thought to hold between the two. Morally worthy actions are

¹⁰ I am indebted to an anonymous referee for helping me to see this.

¹¹ I thank an anonymous referee for pressing upon me the need to do so.

said to be the ‘...building blocks of virtue —a pattern of performing them makes up the life of a good person’ [Markovits 2010: 203]. I am inclined to side with the majority on both counts. But I also feel that there is more to be said. We have a number of reasons for wanting the conceptual resources to single out right actions that issue from the right motives.

To begin with, we do not only value moral worth as a means of achieving virtue. We value morally worthy actions non-instrumentally as well. We value there being acts of kindness and generosity in the world, and we do not only value these states of affairs in so far as they translate into more kind and generous people. Further, good states of affairs often come about as the result of human action; the sick are cheered up by visits from charismatic electoral candidates, vegan-friendly products are promoted by profit-driven companies. But only some good states of affairs that result from human action strike us as moral achievements, and thus, worthy of singling out; those that come from the right place.

Moreover, and importantly, these moral achievements are not only the province of those on the path to virtue. They are also to be found on the path to redemption. Morally defective agents can plausibly be contenders for moral praise (even if they will only ever reach bare moral decency). Indeed, acknowledging this is often an important part of their re-entry into the moral community. Nor do morally worthy actions seem restricted to seasoned moralisers. Children don’t usually have a great deal of moral insight. But many arguably do have enough to be fitting candidates for moral praise.

I am now in a position to explain why I do not believe that the knowledge view satisfies the spirit of the pertinence constraint. A core purpose of the pertinence constraint, I want to propose, is to prevent an account of moral worth from being unacceptably demanding. If we set the bar too high, then it becomes increasingly difficult not only to retain distinct categories of moral worth and moral virtue (the latter being something that plausibly does require robustness), but also to acknowledge the moral accomplishments of a wide array of moral agents, with varying degrees of moral insight and commitment—something which, I have suggested, we should want our concept of moral worth to do. In so far as one’s account renders morally worthy actions counterfactually robust, it risks rendering praiseworthy agents far rarer than we take them to be. Indeed, this is precisely why I believe that the knowledge view delivers the wrong results in a variety of cases; it is because it makes the conditions for praiseworthiness far too demanding.

To illustrate my concerns, consider the following case. Suppose that John spots a drowning child in the ocean, and that though he is morally required to save her, he does not know this. (This is not to suggest that John is morally clueless; he is simply unsure as to whether his saving the child would amount to violating certain duties that he has to himself.) Being slightly more (justifiably) confident that the moral law requires him to come to the child’s rescue, John jumps into the ocean and successfully retrieves her. The proponent of the knowledge view must deny that John’s action has moral worth.¹² But this seems harsh. John was deeply concerned to do what was right—so concerned that he was willing to take on significant personal risk in the course of fulfilling his moral duties.

¹² I take it for granted here that an agent who is only slightly more confident that p than that not p (where p is true) does not know that p. But the basic point does not stand or fall with this particular case. As I will later argue, acting rightly from justified beliefs does not seem to disqualify one from moral praise.

In fairness to Sliwa, she does do some work to address the concern that the knowledge view is ungenerous and over-demanding. Consider her example of Peter, who unwittingly donates to a charity that exacerbates famine problems (despite his best efforts and noble motives). Although Peter is not praiseworthy for donating to this charity, Sliwa contends that he can nonetheless be praiseworthy for donating a portion of his income, and for following expert advice (on the assumption that he is motivated to perform these intermediate actions by a concern to do what is right, and knows them to be morally right). As Sliwa [2016: 403] observes, ‘...most actions are complex’, and so, ‘...agents who perform some morally wrong action may, at the same time, perform actions that are morally right’.

Yet I worry that this strategy will only get the knowledge view so far. *John’s* action does not seem particularly complex; he simply sees a child drowning and saves her. There aren’t many natural contenders for intermediate actions here, and so, it is difficult to see what (if anything) we could praise John for if not for saving the child.

Of course, in principle we can cut things down as finely as we wish. Perhaps John pinpoints the child’s location, then swims in her direction, and then retrieves her. Is John at least praiseworthy for these intermediate actions? If he is not, then the knowledge view starts to look ungenerous once again. If he is, then the verdict now seems to be that John is praiseworthy for scanning the ocean, for swimming in the child’s direction, but not for saving the child. Yet this verdict strikes me as both odd (is saving the child not what we would be most inclined to praise John for?), and arbitrary. It’s easy to see why we ought to stop short of praising Peter for donating to a charity that exacerbates famine; after all, that’s morally wrong. But it’s not at all clear why we should stop short of praising John, who acted rightly. And I wager that many of us would not be inclined to stop short of praising John. Our practices of lending praise seem to me to be far more generous than the knowledge view allows. Clearly, something has to give. And in my view, it is the assumption that counterfactual robustness is needed for moral worth.

4. Non-accidentality reconsidered

If we are to move forward, then it will be helpful to diagnose how we came to find ourselves in this unhappy situation. The error, I will suggest, lies in mistaking the importance of what counterfactual truths can reveal for the importance of counterfactual truths themselves. This diagnosis gains plausibility once we reflect upon why particular sorts of cases seem to count in favour of the pertinence constraint, whereas others seem to support a counterfactual robustness reading of non-accidentality.

Consider first the sorts of cases that motivate the pertinence constraint. Suppose that I dive into dangerous rapids to rescue my pet poodle, and that upon my return to the river bank, you deny that I am praiseworthy for my heroics. ‘After all’, you explain, ‘you wouldn’t have jumped in had your dog been a heavier one—a Great Dane, say.’ Your counterfactual claim may very well be correct. But your moral assessment is surely not. Facts about my choice of dog breed in other possible worlds do not seem to bear upon the moral worth of my conduct.

Yet sometimes counterfactual facts do appear to affect assessments of moral worth. Suppose now that upon my return to the river bank, you had instead claimed, ‘Your action has no moral worth. After all, you wouldn’t have jumped in had no one been watching.’ What

is counterfactually true of me in this case certainly does seem to impact upon my action's moral worth.

However, I want to suggest that appearances here are misleading. Although the latter counterfactual is tracking something important, what is important is not the counterfactual truth per se. What is important is what it suggests to us about my actual motives: they fail to pick up on what is morally relevant. If I wouldn't have helped my dog in the absence of an audience, then it would seem that the consideration that she needed help, or the fact that saving her was the right thing to do, were wholly beside the point for me. What I was really seeking, it seems, were the moral accolades.

When I am motivated to save my pet by a selfish desire for acclaim, it is indeed accidental that I act rightly. But in order to accommodate this verdict, we need not appeal to the counterfactual truth that had there been no one around to do any acclaiming, there would have been no poodle-saving. What we can instead appeal to is something that is lacking in my actual motives. Saving my poodle is the right thing to do, and what makes it right (in part) is that her life has value. But neither of these things has anything to do with my saving the poodle; for neither play any role in explaining why I acted as I did. What I saw in the action was the prospect of earning acclaim; something which was quite clearly irrelevant to what I was required to do.

What I want to propose, then, is that the kind of non-accidentally that truly matters for moral worth requires that the agent be (non-instrumentally) motivated by morally relevant concerns. And the case above (along with others) suggests to me that neither a concern for rightness nor a concern for right-making features ought to strike us as morally irrelevant. We should not want to say of me that had I been motivated by the fact that saving my pet is the right thing to do, or by the fact that her life has value, then I would have been motivated by something that was, morally speaking, beside the point. I therefore propose that we adopt a moderate pluralism on the matter of what is morally relevant.

However, morally relevant concerns alone won't do. To see why, consider a case of the following sort. Suppose that Cara is wholly unsure as to whether or not she has any duty to donate to famine relief, and flips a coin to decide (tails for 'yes', heads for 'no'). Very much desiring (de dicto) to do her duty, Cara acts in line with the coin's result—no questions asked, no reasons needed. Intuitively (and assuming that the coin lands tails, and that Cara does indeed donate to famine relief) her moral success is accidental. But the issue cannot be that she is moved by morally irrelevant concerns. The issue rather has to do with the manner in which Cara brings about the right action. Since she anticipates the verdicts of a coin to be more reliable than her own, she would seem to have little if any insight into what makes her action right. It therefore seems wrong to characterise the donation as an achievement on her behalf.

Something more is clearly needed if a right action is to count as a moral achievement for which an agent can be praiseworthy. In what follows, I shall fill in this gap by drawing upon (certain aspects of) Gwen Bradford's [2015] promising account of achievement, which requires that the relevant outcome be something that the agent competently brings about. Before we attend to the finer details here, though, I think it will be helpful to have what I take to be the right conception of non-accidentality on the table:

Non-accidentality*: A right action is non-accidental in the sense that is relevant to determining its moral worth iff the agent acts from a non-instrumental concern for its rightness or its right-making features, and it is something that she competently brings about qua right action, or qua action with right-making features.

Two quick points of clarification. First, I intend for ‘determining’ to be read in a metaphysical and not (merely) an epistemic sense; I mean to refer to what grounds moral worth—not only to what is needed for us to ascertain whether particular actions have it.¹³ Second, the ‘or’ is inclusive; one may very well act from a non-instrumental concern for the rightness of the action and from a non-instrumental concern for its right-making features. (In some such cases, one’s conduct will be overdetermined.¹⁴)

We can now consider what is needed for an outcome to be something that an agent competently brings about. As Bradford [2015: 20] observes, competently bringing it about that *p* requires more than playing some causal role. *P* must be ‘competently caused’—it must be properly creditable to the agent’s competent performance. As to what is involved in bringing about *p* in a competent manner, I follow Bradford [2015: 65] in thinking that what is needed is (relevant) justified beliefs; that is, the agent must have justified beliefs about the action that she is performing.¹⁵ Moreover, and on my understanding, competently bringing it about that *p* need not entail having an impressive repertoire of skills or expertise with respect to *p*. An individual can, for example, plausibly argue for a moral conclusion in a competent manner on a particular occasion without being a moral philosopher, and without being especially skilled at argumentation more generally.¹⁶ Finally, and as non-accidentality* anticipates, agents may act competently under some descriptions, but not others. John for example, may competently bring about the saving of the child qua right action (in so far as he is justified in believing saving the child to be morally right), but not qua feat of swimming (perhaps John is an awful swimmer, and the rescue mission is something of a slog). It is only the first that is of moral consequence.

We can now see what was missing in the coin-flip case. Though Cara acted rightly from morally relevant concerns, she failed to do so in a competent manner; for she was not justified in believing that she was acting rightly. Thus, Kantian agents cannot merely act from a desire to do what is right if their acting rightly is to be non-accidental; they must also be justified in believing their actions to be right. Similar lessons apply to those who are motivated by the right-making features of their actions. Such agents must plausibly be justified in believing that they ought to act as they do (for example, to extend help).

¹³ I thank an anonymous referee for helpful feedback on this point.

¹⁴ I have neglected to discuss other sorts of cases of motivational over-determination, whereby an agent acts from both laudable motives and less laudable ones. Doing so would take me astray, and I do not think that I could do greater justice to this complex issue than Smith [1991] does in her paper-length treatment of it.

¹⁵ Bradford actually speaks of justified true beliefs. I omit this feature in my own discussion because non-accidentality* already limits the cases of concern to right actions. Moreover, one can surely act more or less competently. Bradford [2015: 76] takes both the amount and value of justified true beliefs into account in determining degrees of competence.

¹⁶ Put differently, acting in a competent manner need not manifest a more systematic competence (of the sort that interests advocates of dispositionalist views, for example). It may of course manifest a very specific competence that is (more or less) local to the circumstances in which the agent finds herself. But the latter strikes me as too weak and uninteresting to count as competence proper.

Justification may result from normative reflection, or from something less intellectual—compassion, say. This qualification rules out those who lack any insight into what matters in the case at hand, and act on mere whim.¹⁷

Indeed, many of the proposals canvassed in section 2 are plausibly interpreted as assuming that praiseworthy agents have justified beliefs in this vein. Markovits [2010: 219] characterises the praiseworthy agent as one who does what she has ‘sufficient epistemic reason to believe it would be best to do’. Likewise, some Kantians assume that agents who desire to act rightly have some grasp of the characteristic goals of morality [Jeske 1998]. Acting from duty need not amount to mere rule-following.

One might wonder whether non-accidentality* doesn’t itself engender some form of counterfactual robustness.¹⁸ Perhaps morally worthy actions are counterfactually robust precisely in virtue of the agent acting from morally relevant concerns, and bringing about the outcome in a competent manner. However, I do not think this is quite right. Moral knowledge or understanding (see Hills [2009]) is surely sufficient for an agent to competently bring about a right action—as is the systematic moral sensitivity that dispositional views emphasise. But they are not plausibly regarded as necessary; justified beliefs suffice. The latter offer no assurance of counterfactual robustness. They are consistent, for example, with an agent’s avoiding widespread and misleading information via some sort of epistemic serendipity, with her failing to make the right trade-offs in very similar circumstances—and indeed, with her being ever so slightly more justified in believing her action to be right rather than wrong.

Non-accidentality* has an important pay-off, and delivers an important lesson. The pay-off is that there is no longer any tension between our two constraints. Non-accidentality* concerns only an agent’s actual psychology, and so, we need not go against the pertinence constraint in our attempts to satisfy it. The lesson is that once we have pinned down the sort of non-accidentality at issue, Kantian views lose their touted advantage over the responding view; neither proposal runs afoul of non-accidentality*. However, the Kantian’s other rivals do not fare quite so well. When all is said and done, the challenge for dispositional views still stands. In so far as their proponents demand a great deal of praiseworthy agents counterfactually, they continue to violate the pertinence constraint.

5. Implications

We should want non-accidentality* to be capable of filling the boots of its counterfactual predecessor. It must deliver the correct rulings, counting as accidental much of what we pre-theoretically take to be accidental in our assessments of moral worth. I believe that it can.

As we have seen, non-accidentality* counts right actions that result from utter moral cluelessness as accidentally right. It also counts actions that issue from ulterior motives as accidentally right. Presumably, Jean’s action would have no moral worth if she had only helped her friend because she had planned to ask for a loan later that day. Non-accidentality*

¹⁷ I understand justification here along internalist lines. Someone whose moral beliefs were reliably connected to the truth but whose moral success seemed wholly accidental from her own perspective would not be praiseworthy in my view. I thank the editor for pointing this out.

¹⁸ I thank an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

rules that Jean acts rightly accidentally in this case; for she fails to act from morally relevant concerns.

What non-accidentality* does not count as accidentally right is Jean's act of helping her friend, where she is motivated by the consideration that doing so would save this friend an embarrassment. Assuming that Jean is non-instrumentally motivated to save her friend an embarrassment and is justified in believing that she ought to do so, she does what is right in a competent way. True, her motives afford no guarantee that Jean wouldn't kill this friend's ex-boyfriend in other circumstances.¹⁹ But I do not believe that we should infer from this that she is not praiseworthy for behaving as she actually does.

Of course, nothing that I have said commits me to the claim that Jean's action has moral worth. I am only committed to the claim that this is not ruled out by its being accidental. Some may think it a shortcoming of my proposal that it does not swiftly rule out helpful folk like Jean. But I myself am inclined to regard this result as a feature rather than a bug; for I think that we ought to give up on the idea that helpful desires are too modally fragile to endow actions with moral worth. This idea does not appear at all central to our practices of moral praise. Indeed, it seems that judgments of praiseworthiness often persist even as we wonder whether an agent's motives might lead them morally astray in other circumstances. We might worry, for instance, that some parents seem slightly too devoted to their children, and wonder whether their desire to promote their children's well-being might lead them to act wrongly in certain situations. (They may, for example, refuse to allow their children to incur a very small cost in order to greatly benefit many less fortunate children.) But this doesn't seem to prevent us from judging these parents praiseworthy when they (rightly) undergo incredible sacrifice for their children's sakes. Cases such as these are familiar—they are hardly idiosyncratic. And they strongly suggest to me that judgments of moral praise do not stand or fall with judgments of counterfactual robustness.

6. Conclusion

My foremost intention has been to show that the Kantian view does not have quite as much going for it as is commonly advertised. If the non-accidentality constraint requires that an agent's acting rightly be counterfactually robust given her motives, then it is only secured at the cost of failing to satisfy the pertinence constraint (whether in letter or in spirit). This constitutes a challenge for the Kantian as well as her rivals. In addressing this challenge, I have proposed that the kind of non-accidentality worth caring about only requires of the praiseworthy agent that she act competently from morally relevant concerns. My proposal does not exclude those who act competently from helpful desires from the sphere of moral praise. Far from being an unwelcome consequence of the view, I have argued that this is the right result. Few of us think it is fitting to withhold praise from someone who rushes to our side simply because they wish to help. This does not seem to be an appropriate way for moral agents to relate to one another, and nor, thankfully, is it the way they do.

¹⁹ Helpful desires may therefore leave us with unanswered questions about an agent's virtue. But in my view, this should not lead us to question her action's moral worth.

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