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DOUBTS ABOUT DUTY AS A SECONDARY MOTIVE

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Abstract

Many follow Kant in thinking that morally worthy actions must be carried out solely from the motive of duty. This outlook faces two challenges: (1) The One Feeling Too Few problem (actions that issue from, say, compassion also seem to have moral worth), and (2) The One Thought Too Many problem (some actions have moral worth precisely because they're not motivated by duty). These challenges haven't led Kantians to dispense with the motive of duty. Instead, they have proposed to push it into the background. We should not (the thought goes) construe duty as a primary motive, a consideration that motivates the agent to act. Duty is best thought of as a secondary motive, a background concern that constrains her choice. Since it is consistent with acting from duty at the secondary level that one is motivated at the primary level by compassion, this move is thought to overcome both challenges. In this paper, I argue that secondary motive views don't live up to their stated ambitions. Such proposals either fail to make progress on issues with which primary motive views continue to grapple, or they render the motive of duty ill-suited to underwrite a plausible account of moral worth.

1. Introduction

It is common to distinguish between the moral status of an action and how that action reflects upon the person performing it. The right sorts of actions (those that are morally required, say) may be carried out for the wrong sorts of reasons, and vice versa. It is only when agents do the right thing for the right reasons—from appropriate motives—that their actions can be said to have moral worth; to reflect well upon them, morally speaking, or to merit praise and esteem (Baron, 1995; Herman, 1996; Arpaly, 2002; Markovits, 2010; Sliwa, 2016). Acts of moral worth are, moreover, usually thought to involve a *non-accidental* connection between an agent's motives and her acting rightly; morally worthy actions are not merely accidentally right.¹ On this much, there is broad agreement. The disagreement concerns *which* motives invest actions with moral worth.

¹ It is up for debate precisely what non-accidentality amounts to in this context and precisely which motives are capable of securing it. I return to this question in Section 4.

Kant, as is well-known, held that acts of moral worth must be carried out from a motive of duty; (roughly) from a concern for their moral rightness. Even this fairly minimal Kantian claim (henceforth, ‘MIN’) has struck some commentators as unduly restrictive. Yet many attribute a stronger claim still to Kant: that actions must be carried out *solely* from duty if they are to have moral worth. It’s hard to dispute that the latter, stronger claim (henceforth, ‘MAX’) is supported by textual evidence. Kant is fairly insistent that morally worthy actions must be performed “solely from duty”—that they must “altogether exclude the influence of inclination” (1785/1996, pp.398-400).

While these exegetical questions are instructive starting points, my primary interest in this paper does not lie with what Kant did in fact say or ought to have said, but with a particular innovation to the Kantian framework; one which promises to liberate it from the trouble that it is usually thought to land in. I’ll get to that innovation shortly—first, to the trouble. There is a longstanding suspicion that a Kantian approach to moral worth cannot be harmonised with our considered moral judgments, insofar as it subscribes to MAX or MIN. This suspicion finds expression in a number of distinct challenges. I will restrict my critical focus here to just two.

The first challenge arises from MAX. While Kant may not discourage us from *having* positive feelings towards others, he does seem to hold that we cannot *act from* such feelings if our actions are to have moral worth. Many find this hard to swallow. We don’t ordinary take actions to be precluded from having moral worth simply because they were motivated (in part) by love or compassion. Indeed, those who help others out of the goodness of their hearts usually strike us as *especially* fitting candidates for moral esteem. This outlook is, then, much too restrictive; it rules out too many actions from having moral worth. Call this the ‘One Feeling Too Few’ (or ‘OFTF’) problem.

A second challenge that arises—and MIN alone is enough to give it traction—is that some actions seem morally worthy (partly) because they are *not* carried out from duty. This is a lesson often drawn from Williams’s (1981) discussion of a husband who must choose between saving his drowning wife or a stranger. There would seem to be something morally untoward about a husband who was only spurred into action after having convinced himself that “...in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one’s wife” (Williams, 1981, p.18). If any actions can be said to have moral worth under such circumstances, it would surely be those of a husband who was simply motivated by direct concern for his wife—who did not see fit to subject the rescue mission to any sort of permissibility test. Accordingly, there

seems to be a special kind of moral value that actions can only have when they are *not* guided by one's conscience or sense of duty. Indeed, it may be characteristic of certain kinds of "human gesture" that they *bypass* one's conscience completely, and issue from other-regarding concerns directly (Williams, 1973, p.227). Far from contributing to the moral worth of an action, then, the motive of duty may sometimes *undermine* it. Perhaps some actions simply cannot have moral worth if they are motivated by duty. This challenge has come to be known as the 'One Thought Too Many' ('OTTM') problem.²

Now to the proposed solution. It is customary for Kantians to understand duty as a *primary motive*; it is commonly thought that the consideration that a morally worthy action is required or good must be what determines the agent's acting as she does—that this must be her reason for action, what motivates her, what rationalises her choice. The Kantian innovation that I want to focus upon, however, understands duty as a distinct kind of motivational resource: not as a primary motive, but as a secondary one. Advocates of primary motive views can, to be sure, take the motive of duty to be capable *of operating* in this secondary capacity (see Herman, 1996, pp.13-6). What is distinctive about the secondary motive view is that it takes a secondary rather than primary motive of duty to be necessary for moral worth.

In its capacity as a secondary motive, duty operates as a regulatory device; as a background concern that constrains an agent's choice of action (Baron, 1995; Herman, 1996; Benson, 1987; Stratton-Lake, 2000). For secondary motive theorists, an agent can qualify as acting from duty, so understood—and her action can be a candidate for moral worth—when she helps others from primary motives such as love or sympathy. For this to be so, her conduct need only be regulated (in a manner soon to be specified) by a background concern for

² The OTTM problem should be distinguished from thematically similar but distinct reservations about acting from duty. A related concern pertains to the fact that we expect our loved ones to be motivated non-derivatively by love and concern for us. An agent furnished with the motive of duty, however, may appear to treat their loved ones in an objectionably instrumental sort of way—as mere occasions for discharging their moral responsibilities—and such treatment would seem to lack moral worth. This challenge to the moral worth of acting from duty is well-known. It draws inspiration from both Smith's (1994, p.75) discussion of 'moral fetishism', and Stocker's (1976, pp.461-462) talk of 'moral schizophrenia'. But it is distinct from the OTTM problem, and it will not be my focus here. I thank an anonymous referee for helping me to clarify these distinctions.

morality. This approach is thought to hold the key to addressing the OFTF and OTTM problems; for it seems to allow for morally worthy actions that issue from love or sympathetic concern directly, without any consideration as to what duty requires.³

On closer inspection, however, it's not clear that the secondary motive of duty really is the panacea that it promises to be. There are different ways of precisifying the notion of a secondary motive, and it is my contention that all face substantial challenges. Some understand a secondary motive as a kind of moral sieve; as a mechanism that tends to 'filter out' the impermissible options available to an agent. On further examination, these proposals do not achieve sufficient theoretical distance from the primary motive view. (Or so I contend in Section 3.) They therefore inherit familiar problems. Others take a secondary motive to be akin to a moral bodyguard that lies in the background of an agent's psychology—as a kind of moral security system that is typically activated whenever she is poised to act wrongly, and which prevents her from doing so. The secondary motive of duty, so construed, avoids familiar problems for primary motive views. Yet it cannot, I argue (in Section 4), form the basis of a plausible account of moral worth. Finally, some philosophers seek to shift our attention away from the motives that underlie particular actions in our theorising about moral worth. They encourage us to focus instead upon the general quality of an agent's character, of which her secondary motive of duty forms an important part. Whether one is ultimately persuaded by such proposals will depend upon what sort of work one wants an account of moral worth to do. Although there is room for reasonable disagreement on this score, I will argue (in Section 5) that character-based proposals fall short of fulfilling a number of important functions that we should want an account of moral worth to serve. I conclude by reflecting upon the approach to moral worth that my arguments may ultimately favour.

Before examining secondary motive views in greater detail, it will be helpful to canvass some of the solutions that primary motive theorists have offered to the OFTF and OTTM problems, and the obstacles that confront them. It is precisely these difficulties that motivate serious consideration of secondary motive views.

³ It should be noted that a *secondary* motive is distinct from a *second-order* motive or second-order desire. A second-order desire is a desire that one's first-order desires be a certain way (that one have a desire with a certain content), whereas a secondary motive is—roughly, and to use the language of desire—a desire to act on one's first-order desires only if particular conditions hold.

2. Duty as a primary motive

Traditionally, the motive of duty is understood as a primary motive, where the ‘primary’ designation serves to distinguish primary motives from secondary ones. I will follow secondary motive theorists in taking primary motives to be characterised by three key features:

1. Primary motives reflect the sorts of considerations the agent herself would usually appeal to in order to explain why she acted as she did (Stratton-Lake, 2000, pp.66-67).
2. Primary motives have ‘motivational oomph’; they “...contribute to causing action” (Herman, 1981, p.72), providing “...the main impetus to action, the thing that moves [one] to act” (Barron, 1995, p.113).
3. Primary motives are the sorts of considerations that usually figure in deliberation, and form part of the basis for the agent’s choice; they reflect the “...concern...that determined his acting as he did”, the “...motive...on which the agent acted” (Herman, 1981, p. 369).⁴

When the motive of duty is understood as a primary motive, however, the Kantian seems to run headfirst into the OFTF and OTTM problems. I don’t want to pretend that advocates of the primary motive view are still out at sea here. Indeed, and as I will argue below, they seem perfectly capable of circumventing the OFTF problem insofar as they are willing to abandon MAX, as secondary motive views do explicitly. However, it remains unclear whether primary motive views have the resources to address the OTTM problem. As we shall see, it is precisely this latter challenge to which secondary motive views are thought to be immune.⁵

Primary motive views seem to have trouble overcoming the OFTF problem insofar as they adhere to MAX, requiring that duty be the *sole* motive that underwrites morally worthy actions. To demonstrate why, it will be useful to work with one such ambitious variety of the primary motive view, owing to Herman (1996, pp.11-12). Herman proposes to address the OFTF problem with the aid of the following insight: an agent’s *acting* solely from the motive of duty need not prevent her from *having* other motives that also favour the action, such as love or

⁴ A primary motive seems to reflect the metaethicist’s notion of a *motivating reason*; the reason for which an agent acts, what she sees in her action, why she favours acting as she does. (Though secondary motive theorists are not always explicit about this.)

⁵ This isn’t to suggest that understanding duty as a secondary motive is the *only* way to avoid the OTTM problem while preserving (certain aspects of) the Kantian framework. As I explain later on, a suitably developed pluralist account which takes a primary motive of duty to be sufficient but not necessary for moral worth—and which comes attached with certain caveats—may very well be a viable alternative.

affection. Indeed, Herman even allows that these other motives can be present at the time of acting. All that is needed for the agent to qualify as acting solely from duty—and thus, for her actions to have moral worth—is that motives of love and affection not be operative; what leads the agent to act must be the motive of duty alone.

One prominent concern for this strategy is that it may turn out to be rather difficult to make good on the claim that there can be motives that don't motivate. Indeed, some take this idea to be approaching incoherency:

There seems to be an open contradiction in saying: I have two motives, A and B; each would lead me to do action C; I do perform action C, but I do so purely and simply from motive A alone. How can there be two motives pointing in the same direction, but only one of them actually effective in the determination of the action? (Beck, 1955, p.171).

Of course, some may object that this disagreement between Herman and her opponents is really symptomatic of a deeper disagreement concerning the psychology of action.⁶ According to the familiar, empiricist account of motives that Herman's opponents assume, motivational states such as desires are causes. It is for this reason that it is a strain to speak of desires that have no influence upon choice; for one is, in effect, speaking of causally operative factors that do no causal work. For Herman (and other Kantians), however, desires are in the first instance *incentives*. Although an incentive has motivational *potential*, it does not qualify as an agent's motive—and thus, as part of what underwrites her choice—unless it is incorporated into her *maxim*; unless (roughly) it is something that she chooses as her reason for action. For Kantians, then, sympathy (say) can be among an agent's incentives without constituting one of her motives, insofar as it is not the grounds on which she chooses to act. (See Baron, 1995, pp.87-88; Herman, 1996, pp.11-12).

I cannot hope to settle this more fundamental disagreement here. However, it's not clear to me that Herman's strategy can be made to work even once this empiricist backdrop is removed. Suppose that we were to agree with the proposed assessment: sympathy can be among an agent's incentives without being among her motives. This assessment doesn't really speak to the OFTF problem; for it does not allow sympathy to do any interesting motivational work. Such motives are, following Ferguson (2012, p.313), entirely "screened off" from influencing the agent's choice. All of this points towards a fundamental problem for Herman's proposal: although she "...succeeds in making it safe to *have* emotions, she fails to

⁶ For edifying discussions, see Baron (1995, pp.189-90) and Ferguson (2012).

make it safe to *act on* one's emotions" (Weber, 2007, p.70, n.14). And it is the latter that is really needed to address the OFTF problem.⁷

It may be thought that the real lesson of the OFTF problem is that Kantians simply ought to be giving up on MAX in favour of MIN.⁸ Yet this line of reply still leaves the primary motive view vulnerable to the OTTM problem. At bottom, the OTTM problem seems to amount to the complaint that the very motive that Kantians take to be necessary for moral worth sometimes *cannot* be among an agent's motives if her action are to have moral worth. It is here that secondary motive views have an edge. They reject MAX in favour of MIN. (Given the above, one suspects that primary motive views may ultimately need to do the same.) However, and as we shall see, they also promise to address the OTTM problem in a more satisfactory way.

3. The secondary motive as a filter

The first model of secondary motives owes a great intellectual debt to the work of Baron (1995) and Herman (1996). Baron, though concerned to make room for sympathy and other affective responses in her account of moral worth, emphasises the importance of putting one's "...affective responses through a filter rather than acting on them with no thought of

⁷ Views such as Herman's have traditionally been developed with an eye to avoiding worries having to do with motivational over-determination. On Henson's proposal, for instance, actions underwritten by multiple motives (by both duty and sympathy, say) can have moral worth, provided that the motive of duty alone would have sufficed to move one to act rightly (1979, p.48). Herman's worry with such proposals is that they render one's acting rightly problematically accidental. An agent may very well act rightly from duty and sympathy when the two happen to align. But she may fail to act rightly from the same pair of motives when sympathy favours the wrong course of action (1996, ch.1). Herman's account is designed to avoid this result by requiring that duty be the agent's only motive. For a criticism of Herman's arguments, see Ferguson (2012, pp.306-11). For further discussion of motivational over-determination and moral worth, see Benson (1987) and Smith (1991).

⁸ Indeed, Ferguson (2012) pursues a compromise solution which counsels precisely that. See also Henson (1979, pp.48-49) and Johnson King (2020, p.204). Others have responded to the OTTM problem by drawing upon Kant's (4: p.398) suggestion that actions driven by (say) compassion may still be "amiable" and "worthy of honour" even if they lack moral worth (see Wood 2008, p.27). Many have also questioned the force of the OTTM problem (Baron, 1995, pp.137-39; Baron, 2017; Herman, 1996, pp.41-42). I engage with some such arguments in Section 3. For the time being, I frame things from the perspective of those who believe that the OTTM problem is indeed a problem—and one that the secondary motive view is uniquely well-placed to solve.

what it is right to do” (1995, pp.134-35). This filtering role is carried out by a secondary motive of duty, which functions, in Herman’s words, as a “limiting condition” upon one’s conduct. The secondary motive of duty, so construed “...fits a general pattern of motives that do not themselves have an object (in the ordinary way), but rather set limits to the ways (and whether) other motives may be acted upon...” (1996, p.14).

The picture that emerges, then, is this. The purpose of a secondary motive of duty is to place limits upon an agent’s capacity (or, if one prefers, willingness) to act on other motives. Insofar as an agent has a secondary motive of duty, she is disposed to perform the action under consideration only on the condition that she judges doing so to be morally right or permissible. Suppose that Beth is motivated to help her friend John to move to a new house. If she judges that this would be permissible, then she can lend her seal of moral approval to the proposed course of action, leaving herself free to arrive at John’s side purely out of love, friendship and care. But if she judges that helping John would conflict with other, more weighty obligations (perhaps there’s currently a disaster relief effort underway, and Beth’s medical expertise is needed there), then she will not approve of the proposed course of action; in instances such as these, she will be disposed to refrain from acting as she is initially inclined to. An agent’s secondary motive of duty, then, functions as a kind of filter. Impermissible actions won’t typically make it through her ‘moral sieve’ (she will rule these out as available options), whereas permissible actions will be granted safe passage.⁹

This picture addresses the OFTF problem insofar as it leaves the agent free to act as she wishes—from motives of love or friendship, say—when doing so doesn’t conflict with her moral obligations. Importantly, it would also seem to address the OTTM problem; for the agent’s reasons for action are by all appearances free from considerations of duty. Her reasons are given by a *different* set of considerations; namely, those that (in light of considerations of rightness or permissibility), she did not see fit to refrain from acting upon—that she made a promise to her friend, or that she was in a position to relieve his burden, for example.

While these insights from Baron and Herman are instructive in filling out the basic elements of the filter model, neither of them actually endorses it. Herman, as we have seen,

⁹ I say ‘typically’ because secondary motive theorists need not take agents to be *morally infallible*. (Though, as we shall see, many theorists do appear to take the disposition involved in having a secondary motive of duty to suggest a strong degree of moral reliability).

thinks that morally worthy actions must be carried out from a primary motive of duty.¹⁰ And Baron's considered view (discussed in Section 5) focuses upon the quality of an agent's wider conduct, rather than the moral worth of particular actions. Let me, then, consider someone who does seem willing to get behind the filter model, or something sufficiently close.

In *Kant, Duty, and Moral Worth*, Stratton-Lake argues that an action has moral worth just in case the agent acts upon both (i) relevant right-making reasons (that is, for the reasons in virtue of which the action is right), and (ii) from a secondary motive that disposes her to act upon such reasons just in case she judges the action to be right (2000, p.64). On this model, Beth's helping John to move house has moral worth insofar as (i) she is motivated at the primary level by the reasons that explain why the action is morally right—because John needs her help, or because she promised it to him, say—and (ii) she is only disposed to act on such reasons insofar as she judges doing so to be right. As I interpret Stratton-Lake, his proposal affords duty an important filtering role. If an agent's conduct is to have moral worth, then considerations of rightness or permissibility must inform her decision to sign off on the proposed course of action. She will do so only if (and because) the action is morally right. Clearly, this proposal can safely handle the OFTF problem. Although duty is still present in some capacity, other motives are permitted to play a role in leading the agent to act as she does.¹¹ Trouble arises, however, once we turn our attention to the OTTM problem. It is not clear that the filter model fully succeeds in its ambition to leave this problem behind.

Our initial worry was that insofar as duty features among Beth's primary motives, she would seem to have one thought too many. The suggested innovation is to assign duty a secondary role. Yet even once we do so, it remains true that Beth will typically only take John's needs to merit her attention insofar as helping him is in accordance with morality. She will arrive at his side only if she judges doing so to be morally right. If what John had been hoping for was a "human gesture" on Beth's behalf—for her to respond to his needs directly, her help not hostage to the dictates of conscience—then he may very well be disappointed by this result. It's true that Beth does not arrive at John's side *merely* as a means of fulfilling her moral duties; her desire to help him is not an instrumental one. Yet it is equally true she

¹⁰ Though she emphasises the wider importance of the motive of duty as a regulative device within the agent's psychology (1996, pp.13-16).

¹¹ Provided, of course, that they reflect right-making reasons. On Stratton-Lake's view, Beth's helping John would not have moral worth if she were motivated at the primary level by considerations that were irrelevant to what she morally ought to do, such as a desire to impress him.

will not act upon this desire unless she judges that doing so is morally permissible.¹² Insofar as we began with the idea that dutiful motives can undermine the moral worth of an action, then, we do not seem to appease this concern simply by assigning duty a secondary role. We set out by supposing that certain kinds of actions must *bypass* one's conscience if they are to have moral worth, and actions underwritten by a secondary motive of duty don't seem to bypass one's conscience any more than actions that issue from a primary motive of duty do.

Some may want to insist that it is not objectionable for Beth's helpful act to be hostage to considerations of duty in this way. Even if John's need constitutes a sufficiently good reason for action in Beth's actual circumstances, things may have been otherwise; her medical expertise may have been needed to aid a disaster relief effort, in which case it would have been wrong to help John. Put differently, John's need is not an *unconditionally* valid reason for action.¹³ Beth's secondary motive of duty suggests that she is responsive to this fact; that she is not willing to help John under just any circumstances.

Indeed, there is something suspicious in the suggestion that we should *want* Beth's choice to be lacking in any such moral sensitivity. Personal attachments can create "moral blind spots" in our thinking (Baron, 2017, p.43; see also Sliwa, 2016, p.398). Our investment in a friend may lead us to prioritise their interests when we morally ought not to do so. Given this, it seems highly *undesirable* for one's choices to be completely amputated from considerations that pertain to their permissibility. If Beth *weren't* disposed to put her plans to help John through some kind of moral filter—if she were willing to help him move house, come what may ("better the world should perish than John should be hung out to dry!")—then this would surely make matters morally *worse*, not *better*.

These considerations cast doubt upon our starting assumption that we should want Beth's actions to bypass her conscience; that certain actions can only have moral worth if they are not influenced by considerations of rightness or permissibility *at all*. If a "human gesture" can only be purchased at the cost of moral insensitivity, then we may want to question

¹² This serves as a useful illustration of how the OTTM problem comes apart from the related but distinct concern that acting from duty amounts to treating others in an objectionably instrumental way (see footnote 2). Stratton-Lake's proposal is vulnerable to former worry, but not the latter; for Beth does not help John *merely* as a means of fulfilling her duties. She does so because she wants to relieve his burden and keep her word (though her acting on these desires is of course contingent upon her judging it permissible to do so). See Dreier's (2000) related and helpful discussion of conditional and contingent desires.

¹³ This point is raised by Herman (1996, p.42) in her discussion of Williams's original example.

whether it is really worth the price. To be sure, some do think that it is a price worth paying. Wolf (2015, p.159) notes that too much moral sensitivity can undermine our pursuit of personal relationships and other projects that give our life meaning. To commit in advance to benefit our loved ones only on the condition that doing so is permissible would be to compromise our engagement in these relationships; for it would reflect a willingness to forsake them whenever morality came calling. Insofar as we have a strong investment in these life projects, we have strong reasons not to render them wholly answerable to moral concerns.

Wolf's is one rationale that speaks against the desirability of our actions being governed by a secondary motive of duty. However, it is not one that is of much help to us here, since it does not answer to the question of moral worth specifically. Wolf may be right that placing one's choices through a moral filter is undesirable from some *more general* normative vantage point. From a distinctively moral perspective, however, it is difficult to see why paying mind to moral considerations ought to prevent one's action from having moral worth. Acts of love or friendship may lack certain desirable qualities (even morally desirable ones) when they are made to pass some moral test. A secondary motive of duty, then, may poison the well; it may *detract from* the moral value of an action. But it seems bizarre to claim that it should *eliminate* moral value completely—that a concern for morality ought to *preclude* one's actions from having moral worth. Although secondary motive theorists must reject the idea that the absence of a secondary motive of duty is sometimes necessary for moral worth, then, it's hard to see why this should spell their downfall.

I take what I have said so far to suggest the following: it should not reflect badly on a moral agent or her actions if, with the aid of her secondary motive of duty, she has managed to overcome her moral blind spots. At the very least, this should not *rule out* her actions from having moral worth, as proponents of the OTTM problem would have it. Some will still want to say that once the secondary motive of duty enters the picture, it transform Beth's pure human gesture into something less morally impressive. And perhaps they are right. But I don't think that anyone can reasonably claim that Beth's secondary motive renders the help she offers to John *completely devoid* of moral worth.

So, does the filter model escape unscathed? I now want to suggest that this would ultimately be the wrong lesson to draw. I have suggested that it should not reflect badly on agents that they have overcome their moral blind spots. But what I now want to argue is that we should not *require* agents to do so in order to be capable of morally worthy actions either; moral worth is consistent with some moral unreliability.

More specifically, I now want to propose that the real issue with the filter model lies in its taking the *presence* of a moral filter to be necessary for moral worth. The problem is not that duty is sometimes one thought too many *to have*, but that it is generally one thought too many *to require* an agent to have; for it seems that actions *can* have moral worth even when they aren't made to pass any sort of moral test. Consider parents who make incredible sacrifices for their children. Not all such sacrifices may be constrained by background considerations of permissibility. A parent may, for instance, act rightly in attending to their child's needs on a particular occasion, without placing this choice through any sort of moral filter—without, that is, only being disposed to respond to these needs on the condition that doing so is permissible. Insofar as their choice is not tethered to considerations of permissibility, it may be true that they still would have proceeded *even if* the action had been wrong; even if it had involved breaking a promise to someone else whose needs were comparatively greater, say. Yet it's hard to see why this ought to cast doubt upon the moral worth of their *actual* sacrifice, which is, *ex hypothesi*, not morally wrong at all. Insofar as the parent's motives are responding to matters of moral significance (such as the child's need) and their actions *do* pass the relevant moral test (they are right or permissible), it seems rather stringent to insist that their sacrifice is devoid of moral worth simply because they didn't subject it to any such test.

In my view, then, the filter model variant of the secondary motive view inherits a familiar problem for the primary motive view: it is much too restrictive. The sphere of morally worthy actions seems wider than any view which insists upon duty shaping one's choices (whether at the primary or secondary level) can allow. I think that this perspective becomes especially plausible when we consider children and the cognitively impaired. These individuals may not have a complete grasp of moral concepts, and they may lack the degree of moral maturity needed to govern their actions in accordance with duty. If we persist with the idea that a (secondary or primary) motive of duty is necessary for moral worth, then, we appear to have decided in advance that neither class of individuals is capable of morally worthy actions. To be sure, some may take this to be the right result; perhaps only full-fledged moral agents ought to be capable of morally worthy conduct. This brings us into the terrain of a separate dispute, and it is not one that I can hope to adjudicate here. That being said, it strikes me that our first-pass intuitions do seem to favour the hypothesis that children's actions can

have moral worth; we often take children to be suitable candidates for moral praise when their actions demonstrate sympathy or kindness.¹⁴

Some philosophers will take issue with my suggestion that such actions—those of overly-devoted parents, children, or the cognitively impaired—have moral worth, on the grounds that the agent’s acting rightly in such cases is problematically accidental. But this strikes me as the result of our having started with particular theories of accidentality, rather than where we perhaps should have started: with our familiar moral judgments.¹⁵ Many of us do take the sacrifices that our parents have made for us to have moral worth. Actions that issue from a commitment to fulfilling one’s parental responsibilities or a strong responsiveness to the needs of one’s child seem worthy of distinctively moral esteem. And they do not strike us as accidentally right in the manner that, say, a politician’s convenient visits to children’s hospitals are whenever he falls behind in the polls. Rather than re-considering our judgments about the moral worth of (say) our parents’ sacrifices, then, my own view is that we should instead reconsider the accounts of non-accidentality that led us to doubt the moral worth of such actions in the first place. In Section 4, I appeal to an achievement-based framework that I believe would be well-suited to this task.

It will be helpful to take stock. As we have seen, the filter model proposes to handle the OFIF and OTTM problems by pushing the motive of duty into the background. This strategy permits considerations such as a friend’s need to enter the foreground of one’s deliberations, and so, the proposal overcomes the first problem. But it would seem that the motive of duty hasn’t been pushed quite *far enough* into the background. It continues to play a meaningful role in shaping the agent’s behaviour—and this is sufficient for the second problem to gain a foothold. Insofar as Beth’s actions are governed by a secondary motive of duty, they remain hostage to considerations of moral permissibility; such actions, then, cannot plausibly be said to bypass her conscience. Yet if this is all that remains of the OTTM problem once it is applied to secondary motives, then it’s no longer clear how much of a *problem* it really is. In this context, the bypassing worry seems to reduce to the complaint that Beth’s conscience ought to be out of the picture completely. And perhaps it should be in order for John to enjoy the

¹⁴ Admittedly, we sometimes praise children in a purely instrumental fashion; praise is doled out not because it is fitting, but with the aim of encouraging good behaviour. Yet this need not always be the case.

¹⁵ Familiar moral judgments are of course *defeasible*. But the fact that an account does conflict with such judgments can at least motivate serious consideration of alternative proposals.

full benefit of some kind of human gesture. But it's not clear that it must be in order for her actions to have moral worth.

For these reasons, I do not think that we should try to sink the secondary motive view by stubbornly persisting with the idea that considerations of duty—even when they function in a merely regulative capacity—sometimes eliminate moral worth. The real issue is not that applying a moral filter amounts to having one thought too many, but that not applying a moral filter need not amount to having one thought too few. Insofar as we insist that a moral filter is *necessary* for moral worth, we fail to make room for morally worthy actions that aren't subjected to any such moral test. I am therefore sceptical that this variant of the secondary motive view constitutes a significant improvement on the primary motive view. While the filter model is certainly *less* restrictive than the primary motive view, it inherits the familiar problem of ruling out too many actions from having moral worth.

4. The secondary motive as a bodyguard

There is a well-known tradition of likening a moral conscience to a security system. Just as a security system does not sound any alarms when there is no danger, so too does an agent's conscience remain in standby mode when she is not poised to act wrongly. But should she ever be poised to act wrongly, the moral alarms are sounded; considerations of right and wrong become salient to her, prompting her to act as she morally ought.

This metaphor has traditionally found favour among those who view duty as a motive of last resort. Richard Brandt described a moral conscience as a kind of "...back-up system, which operates when spontaneous personal caring fails to motivate us to do as we ought" (Brandt, 1989). Rashdall similarly thought that "love of mankind" would be enough to get us by in an ideal world, but that there was a real need for a motive of duty in a world such as ours, where agents often struggle to fulfil their moral obligations (1907, p.128). More recently, the security system metaphor has also been recruited by consequentialists seeking to harmonise motives of friendship with obligations to promote the good. Pettit, for example, suggests that a good consequentialist can be expected to

...help a friend to move an apartment without a second thought—certainly without one thought too many for the preservation of friendship—but [they] will not necessarily help a friend to move a body; such a request will put on the red lights and call for full deliberative consideration (Pettit, 2015, pp.8-9; see also pp.220-221, and Railton, 1988, p.111).

Although this tradition is not concerned with moral worth specifically, we can extract from it a promising alternative model of a secondary motive of duty. On this model, a secondary motive of duty represents a kind of *moral bodyguard*. If Beth is motivated to help John move, and doing so wouldn't be wrong, then the moral bodyguard remains asleep; Beth is free to arrive at John's side purely out of friendship. If, however, helping John would conflict with more weighty obligations, then the moral bodyguard is awoken, and it swiftly intervenes, preventing Beth from acting as she is initially inclined to. Considerations of duty make it salient to Beth that her help is desperately needed elsewhere, and she directs her resources there instead.

Though they may appear superficially similar, there is an important contrast between the bodyguard model and its predecessor. An agent with a secondary motive of duty, understood on model of a filter, is disposed to perform an action only if she judges doing so to be right or permissible. When the secondary motive is understood on the model of a bodyguard, however, there is no need for the agent to judge her action to be permissible or right prior to proceeding with it. Rather, she is disposed to perform such actions without paying any mind to considerations of rightness or permissibility at all—*unless* some feature of her situation signals to her that she is in danger of acting wrongly. It is only if there *is* such a signal that she will be prompted to engage in anything resembling moral deliberation, at which point she will not proceed with the action insofar as she judges it to be wrong. (It may therefore be helpful to imagine that the moral bodyguard is usually asleep, with a wire attached to his toe that jolts him awake whenever a threat arises. If the bodyguard were always alert and on the moral lookout, then there would be less distance between this model and the filter one.¹⁶) While this difference may seem minor, it has important implications that will become apparent shortly.

The bodyguard model is a more or less faithful reconstruction of Paul Benson's (1987) variety of the secondary motive view.¹⁷ Benson allows that actions prompted by sympathy or love can have moral worth, provided that the agent is guided by a wider commitment to morality (1987, p.379). As Benson characterises this commitment, it “functions in the background of one's actions” (1987, p.378), supporting

¹⁶ Thanks to Pei-Lung Cheng and Doug Portmore for encouraging me to spell out these differences.

¹⁷ It has also been attributed to Baron, but she has clarified that this is not the proposal that she has in mind (1995, p.140, n.22).

...counterfactual obedience to moral demands...without functioning as the sole determining reason for action. [This] moral motive could function as a higher-order constraint on lower-order, nonmoral motives, allowing them to issue into appropriate action when they align with duty, blocking their efficacy when they would inhibit dutiful action (1987, p.377).

Admittedly, Benson's description of this higher-order motive makes it less than fully clear whether his proposal wouldn't be better captured by the filter model. (This will depend upon precisely what it means to say that the higher-order motive is "allowing" non-moral motives to translate into action.) If that's so, however, then we can simply frame the challenge disjunctively: if the filter model is what Benson really intended, then his proposal will be vulnerable to the set of problems surveyed earlier, whereas if it is the bodyguard model that he has in mind, then it will be vulnerable to a different set of problems—viz., those outlined below. Let me, then, proceed on the assumption that Benson does indeed have something in the neighbourhood of the bodyguard model in mind.

The bodyguard model yields both good news and bad news. The good news is that the proposal safely handles our two problems. The OFTF problem is easily handled insofar as the agent is permitted to act on the basis of considerations such as a friend's need. Importantly, the bodyguard model also does a much better job of addressing the OTTM problem. Here, there is no grounds for the concern that one's conscience is ever-present and ever-watching, actively filtering out impermissible options. So long as it is not wrong to lend help, there is no need for the secondary motive of duty to intervene. It remains squarely in the background of the agent's psychology; considerations of rightness or permissibility are nowhere to be found in deliberation—they are safely bypassed.

Now to the bad news. I have suggested that the bodyguard model does exactly as advertised. It is precisely in virtue of understanding duty as a secondary motive that the Kantian can withstand these two challenges. The problem is that the cure here may very well be worse than the disease. The bodyguard model achieves its desired result by pushing the motive of duty into the background. Yet it seems that it has been pushed *too far* into the background, in a manner that yields a highly unattractive account of moral worth. In what follows, I draw attention to two fundamental worries that arise for the bodyguard model; that it runs the risk of making the motive of duty irrelevant, and that it places unreasonably demanding constraints upon the performance of morally worthy actions.

4.1 An Irrelevance Problem

I'll begin with the first worry—the *irrelevance problem*. Beth, recall, helps John to move to a new house because she wants to relieve his burden, and because she promised to do so. An advocate of the bodyguard model contends that Beth can be praiseworthy for acting rightly from these motives. But for this theorist, what *grounds* or *explains* Beth's praiseworthiness are *not* the motives that actually led her to help John. What explains Beth's praiseworthiness, rather, is the fact that (given her secondary motive of duty) Beth is such that she wouldn't have helped John had it been wrong to do so—had her talents been needed to aid a disaster relief effort, for example. Yet this seems to locate the explanation for Beth's praiseworthiness in the wrong place. If Beth is praiseworthy for having helped John, this is not plausibly owing to facts about what she is motivated to do in other possible worlds where there is a disaster relief effort underway. Indeed, such facts seem utterly irrelevant to the moral worth of the action that she actually performs. To bring this out, consider the following case:

Beth finds herself in the all too familiar predicament of having to complete a group assignment at university. This so-called group assignment—which is supposed to involve working in pairs—swiftly transforms into a single-person assignment. Beth's partner Don has a raft of excuses not to do his share of the work, leaving her to complete the entire project by herself. In the end, the project is a success, earning both parties a high grade. Feeling slightly embarrassed, Don assures Beth that he would have quickly stepped in to help had she fallen ill, or had circumstances somehow conspired to prevent her from completing both sets of work.

I take it that Don's assurances here make for a rather feeble attempt at an apology at best. At worst, they strike one as a pathetic attempt to claim partial credit for the project's success. For our purposes, it is instructive to note *why* we do not attribute the project's success (even in part) to Don's heroic counterfactual intervention. It is, I submit, because Don had absolutely no role to play in the project's *actual* success. It seems to me that we should offer a similar assessment of Beth's secondary motive of duty when it remains unactivated; when she is not prompted by external cues to engage in anything resembling moral reflection, and simply proceeds with the action on the basis that she promised to help John. Here, Beth's moral bodyguard seems just as irrelevant to her moral success as her nominal project partner

does to her academic success. Although each of these background factors would have contributed to Beth's success in altered circumstances, neither makes any contribution to her success in the circumstance under consideration, where Beth succeeds on her own accord.¹⁸

It may be objected that facts about Beth's behaviour in other possible worlds are not in fact irrelevant to the moral worth of her actions. Beth's counterfactual behaviour reflects her *moral dispositions*, and these are not merely admissible but *essential* pieces of evidence as far as the moral worth of her actual behaviour is concerned. Insofar as we lack any assurance that Beth wouldn't have helped if doing so had been wrong, we lack any assurance that her acting rightly wasn't merely a matter of luck. As Benson puts it,

Someone who does what duty requires only because it happens that her sympathetic aim to help another person picks out, in those circumstances, the act which accords with duty, is doing the right thing only by accident. The fact that, with the same motive but in different circumstances, this person would have done what is wrong suffices to show that the actual act is only right accidentally. In this case, failure to do what is right in nonactual situations is not only relevant to assessment of the actual action's moral worth; it is sufficient to establish that the act lacks genuine moral worth (1987, pp.370-71).¹⁹

Yet the cogency of this challenge hinges on precisely what it is that we are objecting to when we object that an action is only accidentally right. It is natural to frame the challenge here in modal terms, as Benson does; if the same motives would have led the agent to act wrongly in other (presumably nearby) worlds, then her acting rightly with those motives in the actual world seems to come down to some sort of problematic fluke. For my part, however, I do not take this to be the best way of lending substance to the accidentality charge. There is good reason *not* to take this particular species of reliability to be necessary for moral worth. If we insist upon this sort of modal guarantee, then we are, in effect, requiring that the agents

¹⁸ The example bears an interesting structural similarity to Frankfurt (1969) cases, in which an agent does as a matter of fact choose to act wrongfully but couldn't have acted otherwise, owing to some counterfactual intervener. Intuitively, such an agent is blameworthy for her wrongful conduct, even though a particular background factor wouldn't have permitted her to act rightly. What matters is what she actually chose to do. Likewise, I am proposing that an agent (Beth) can be praiseworthy for morally good conduct whether or not a particular background factor (her secondary motive) wouldn't have permitted her to do otherwise; what matters is how she actually chose.

¹⁹ For further discussion of counterfactual situations and moral worth, see Stratton-Lake (2005), Markovits (2010, p.210), Sorensen (2014), Sliwa (2016), Isserow (2019) and Howard (2021).

behind morally worthy actions be reliable moral actors; that they be good and dependable moral agents. This strategy ultimately leaves the moral worth of our actions beholden to the moral quality of our characters—a move I will take up arms against shortly.

But perhaps there are other ways of lending substance to the idea that Beth's helping John on the basis of the promise-keeping motive is accidental. Johnson King has argued that "For all types of acts A, someone accidentally As if she has no idea that she is performing an act of type A when she does so" (2020, p.196). To her mind, an action qualifies as non-accidentally right, and is thus as a candidate for moral worth, only if "...it is an instance of someone's *deliberately* doing the right thing" (2020, p.201). Beth, however, has no idea whether helping John in this context is the right thing to do; she is merely concerned to keep her word. It would certainly be a stretch to say that she *deliberately* does the right thing. So Johnson King would likely classify this as an accidentally right action—and thus, as lacking moral worth. However (and unlike the modal approach outlined above) Johnson King's proposal it is not ultimately of much help to the secondary motive theorist. The bodyguard model is supposed to be consistent with actions having moral worth even when the moral bodyguard is *not* called upon—even when the agent does not do what is right *deliberately*, but acts solely on the basis of relevant moral concerns.

Indeed, Johnson King's understanding of non-accidentality is not of much help to me either. In fact, it poses a problem for my way of seeing things; for I am in agreement with the secondary motive theorist that Beth's action can have moral worth even if she does not deliberately act rightly. The question that now arises is why we *shouldn't* take Beth's helping John from the promise-keeping motive to be accidentally right—and thus, to lack moral worth. Let me, then, explain why I want to resist Johnson King's construal of non-accidentality, in favour of an alternative understanding which allows for Beth's helping under such circumstances to qualify as non-accidentally right.

While Johnson King's proposal captures some important sense of 'accidentality', it is not clear to me that it captures the kind of accidentality that ought to be of interest to us here. Consider a talented junior philosopher—someone skilled at devising creative solutions to philosophical problems, and identifying unrecognised flaws in existing arguments, say—who suffers from imposter syndrome. From her own perspective, she is simply trying her best to scrape by with mediocre papers. From the perspective of those in her sub-discipline however, she is producing ground-breaking work. The junior philosopher is not deliberately trying to produce excellent papers; in her view, this is simply not a realistic possibility for her.

But it seems wrong to say that, insofar as she does produce excellent philosophy, she does so entirely *by accident*.²⁰ The resulting work would likely strike us as an academic achievement for which she is praiseworthy; her success still seems to be a non-accidental product of her competence, even if she does not believe that she has any.²¹

Thinking about matters in these terms—in terms of when our success is properly attributable to our competence—can, I believe, help us to get clear on precisely what we *are* meaning to say when we object that an action is merely accidentally right, and thereby lacking in moral worth. I think that we are in such cases meaning to deny that the action constitutes a *moral achievement*. Achievements involve both a process and a product, whereby the process is related to the product in the right sort of way (see Bradford, 2015). It is precisely because the process and the product come apart in actions that issue from morally questionable motives (selfish ones, say) that they strike us as morally unworthy. Although the agent acts rightly, the process that leads to this result isn't *appropriately related to* the action's rightness; for the motives that underwrite the action are utterly devoid of morally relevant concerns. It is for this reason that the charge of accidental rightness seems to stick here. Yet the same reasoning does not appear to carry over to Beth's case. Beth acts rightly because she wants to relieve John's burden and to honour her promise to him. It is difficult to maintain that *these* ambitions reflect morally irrelevant concerns, or concerns that are not in any way related to the rightness of her actions. After all, these considerations are precisely what *grounds* the rightness of the action (see Markovits, 2010, p.211).

²⁰ See von Kriegstein's (2019, p.398) 'Able Pessimist' case for a similar example. It should also be noted that this is not an extended treatment of Johnson King's proposal, and as such I do not take my arguments here to be anything close to the final word against it. My main purpose in putting forward these considerations is simply to suggest that there may be other senses of accidentality that matter to us aside from the one that she homes in on.

²¹ As an anonymous referee rightly points out, not all successes that occur under epistemically compromised conditions (or conditions of unawareness) seem to reflect competence in this way. We should want to distinguish the philosophical competence of the junior philosopher from, say, the lack of chess competence of someone who always happens to move her knight at suitable stages in the game, but only does so because she likes L-shapes and thinks they are pretty. (I thank the referee for the example.) In my view, the account of achievement alluded to below has the resources to do so. On this view (roughly) the player would not qualify as chess competent, since her (prettiness-based) motives are not appropriately related to the suitability of the move; that L is a pretty shape does not explain why it is fitting to move one's knight at any stage in the game.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that this achievement-based way of thinking captures a sense of accidentality that seems especially relevant to moral worth (Isserow, 2019, pp.260-62). According to this framework, Beth's action qualifies as non-accidentally right (and thus, as a candidate for moral worth) just in case it constitutes a moral achievement. In order for the action to constitute a moral achievement, the product (Beth's moral success, her acting rightly) and the process which leads to it (her motives) need to be related in such a way that the right action is something that she competently brings about. The basic idea here is that if Beth's moral success is to be attributable to her moral competence, then she must act from motives that showcase that competence—from motives that are appropriately related to the rightness of her action.²² The motive of duty would certainly seem to qualify (for it explicitly concerns the action's moral status). But so too, I believe, would motives such as a desire help or to keep one's word; for these motives pick up on *the right-making features* of Beth's action—the very features that *explain* its rightness (see Isserow, 2019, p.260).²³

This framework accommodates the sorts of cases canvassed earlier. In Section 3, I suggested that the sacrifices of overly devoted parents can plausibly have moral worth. We can now see why. While such actions wouldn't qualify as non-accidentally right on the modal understanding (being *overly* devoted, the parents may act wrongly in similar circumstances) or on Johnson King's construal (they do not deliberately act rightly), they plausibly would qualify on the achievement-based framework. Insofar as these agents are motivated by considerations that pertain to their children's welfare or their parental responsibilities, their motives pick up on features of moral relevance—features that ground the rightness of their actions. Their moral success (that is, their acting rightly) is therefore attributable to their moral competence, in a way that it wouldn't be if they had instead been motivated by (say)

²² As I have noted previously (Isserow, 2019, p.260), we should resist offloading *all* of the explanatory work onto motives here. Actions are, after all, the products of beliefs as well as desires, so we shouldn't focus on one to the exclusion of the other in deciding whether an action constitutes an exercise of moral competence, to which one's success can be attributed. Someone may very well succeed in acting rightly from the motive of duty. But if she believed that the action was right as a result of having consulted some tea leaves, then her acting rightly should clearly strike us as problematically *accidental*. Acting in a morally competent manner, then, isn't merely about being motivated by morally relevant considerations, but also by relevant beliefs. I set this complication to the side here, but readers would do well to keep it in mind.

²³ This way of thinking dovetails with the emerging appreciation that *explanationist* frameworks often capture non-accidentality intuitions better than modal ones. See Faraci (2019) and Korman & Locke (forthcoming).

self-interest or financial considerations. Something resembling this achievement-based framework, then, seems well-placed to capture the sense of non-accidentality at issue. The important question is not whether the agent is sufficiently morally competent to have succeeded in all manner of similar moral tasks that may have faced her, or whether she showcased moral competence in a particular sort of way (viz., by deliberately trying to act rightly). The question, rather, is whether she was sufficiently morally competent to succeed in the task that she did face.

This achievement-based approach to non-accidentality won't offer us any strong modal guarantee—but that is just a feature of achievements more generally.²⁴ Consider: an aspiring artist can achieve something when she creates a beautiful self-portrait, even if she would have created something far less appealing in altered circumstances. Suppose the artist is unaware that on cloudy days, colours appear warmer. If she'd used the very same paints on a cloudy day, then, the colours would have been too warm, and the painting less appealing as a result.²⁵ The junior artist lacks the robust artistic insight and skill that would have protected the quality of the work against vagaries of circumstance. Yet it doesn't seem to follow from this that the beautiful portrait no longer constitutes an aesthetic achievement. What I have suggested is that a similar lesson applies to morally worthy actions; it seems to me equally mistaken to take a robust degree of moral commitment or insight to be a precondition for *moral* achievements. If this is right, however, then the non-accidentality-based justification for the secondary motive of duty starts to look far less persuasive. If we want to guard against the sort of accidentality worth worrying about, then there is no need for those of us theorising about moral worth to take out this particular form of modal insurance.

An additional virtue of this way of seeing things is that it makes room for what might be called *moral idiosyncrasies*. There are limits to people's willingness to undergo sacrifice for the sake of others—and the sacrificial buck doesn't always stop where the call of duty does. Someone who agrees to hold a stranger's baby to help them board a train may have refused to do so had she been wearing a Gucci blouse. That is to say, she may have been disposed to act wrongly (to refuse help) in slightly altered circumstances—something which any agent

²⁴ See Ho (2018) for a relevant discussion. To be clear, my point here is not that achievements are *never* modally robust, but that they *need not* be.

²⁵ Many thanks to Jessica Keiser, an accomplished artist, for her input here.

with a well-functioning moral bodyguard would not have been disposed to do.²⁶ But it's not clear why this ought to cast doubt upon the moral worth of what she does in her actual circumstances. Insofar as her motives ensure that the right action is attributable to her moral competence, should it really matter to us that her moral commitment is not quite as steadfast as it ideally ought to be—that it is not strong enough to override an excessive fussiness with her clothing? If we insist that it does matter, then the sphere of morally worthy actions begins to look vanishingly small. As Markovits observes, “We all have our breaking points”; if we were to require that morally worthy actions be underwritten by a fairly robust moral concern, then “virtually no acts at all would qualify” (2010, p.212). For these reasons (as well as others spelled out below), I think we ought to resist the temptation to take an agent's counterfactual adventures—even adventures that are relatively close in possibility space to her own—to decide the moral worth of her actions. A certain kind of alignment between an action's rightness and an agent's motives is, to be sure, needed to guard against accidentally right actions. But it is not the sort of alignment that will always ensure reliable conformity with duty.

4.2 The demandingness problem

I have suggested that we ought not to demand too much of agents counterfactually as far as the moral worth of their actions is concerned. Moral achievements are not only the province of reliable moral actors. Moreover, and insofar as want to make room for moral idiosyncrasies, we should not require that the motives underlying morally worthy actions be especially strong or dependable ones.

As it turns out, however, Benson believes that an agent *must* harbour a rather robust commitment to doing what is right if her actions are to have moral worth:

If the interest in the right on which one acts is not strong enough to overcome the resistance of interests which would challenge it in other possible situations, then one's commitment to morality is too weak to convey moral worth to one's conduct...one's moral concern must be durable and resourceful enough to meet the challenges of motives which could lead one to act wrongly (Benson, 1987, p.378).

²⁶ The example assumes that (i) the baby poses a fairly minimal risk to the welfare of the blouse, and (ii) that it is wrong to refuse others help at small cost to ourselves. But the point is a general one that does not stand or fall with the details of this particular case.

This outlook parts ways from tradition, which typically distinguishes moral worth from moral virtue.²⁷ And what I believe Benson's proposal makes plain is the pressing need to do so; for the absence of a robust commitment to morality does not plausibly prevent moral worth from attaching to one's actions. Such an outlook sets the bar for moral worth much too high. To bring this out, consider the following case:

Don is an incredibly selfish human being. His commitment to morality is woefully weak, and he is wont to prioritise self-interested concerns above all else. On one occasion, however, Don spots a child who is trapped inside a building that is on the verge of collapse. Typically, he would not feel even the slightest inclination to attempt a rescue. But on this occasion, something rather different happens. Don is overcome with compassion and concern for this child. Being Don, he does of course feel the pull of self-interest as well, and he finds it more difficult than most to put these sorts of self-interested concerns to the side. 'It's not exactly *my* child, is it?' he thinks to himself. 'And it's not as though I'm a firefighter; why should *I* be the one to brave the danger?' But as the child's cries grow louder, he finds himself thinking that he simply *must* help her, despite his fears and his temptation to let someone else do the moral work instead. Ultimately, he rushes into the house to save the child, taking on significant personal risk in the process.

Given Benson's variety of the secondary motive view, Don's action is not even a candidate for moral worth on account of the general deficiency of his moral commitment. But this seems wrong. An ascription of moral worth is surely fitting in Don's case—whatever the general strength of his devotion to morality happens to be. We may of course have good instrumental reasons not to *outwardly* praise Don for his efforts. Perhaps lending Don praise would leave him with a smug sense of self-satisfaction. This may, in turn, deprive him of any motivation to attempt such heroics in the future, his life's quota of good deeds having (to his mind) already been met. But to say that we may have such reasons not to *express* praise for Don is not to say that Don is not *praiseworthy*. That is a matter to be determined by whether his act is one for which praise is fitting. And it seems to me that it is.²⁸

I should emphasise that none of this is to deny that Don falls short of being an exemplary moral agent. What I am resisting is the idea that one must be an exemplary moral agent in

²⁷ See Herman (1996, p.10), Wood (2006, p.38, n.1), Markovits (2010, pp.240), Sverdlik (2001, p.296). I engage with those who distance themselves from this orthodoxy in Section 5.

²⁸ Sliwa (2016, p.413) seems to concur, suggesting that "Even deeply flawed agents can perform an action that has moral worth" if they act from the right sorts of motives.

order to be a candidate for moral praise. Acts of moral worth are not merely the province of the morally virtuous. Admittedly, Don is something of an extreme case. But the lesson would seem to apply to a great deal many of us. As Markovits (2010, p.212) observes, very few people genuinely have duty as a secondary motive in the robust sense that Benson and others have in mind. I agree. A great deal many of us plausibly lack the firm degree of moral commitment to which Benson alludes. Yet this carries the troubling implication that a great deal many of us are incapable of acts of moral worth. Insofar as our moral intuitions strongly counsel against this conclusion (as I believe they do), it is not a result to be taken lightly.

That's not to say that it may not have been precisely the result that Benson intended. He may very well stand his ground, insisting that it is mistaken to take the strength of an agent's moral commitment to be irrelevant to the moral worth of her actions. Suppose we were to grant that such commitments *are* relevant. It is still far from obvious that they are relevant in the manner that Benson takes them to be. One may very well think that Don's deficiency of moral commitment makes *his* saving the child *especially* morally worthy. Presumably, it would take more work for someone as selfish as Don to do what is right than it would for someone who harboured a deep concern for morality. Don's action may very well have *greater* moral worth, on account of the greater effort required on his part. It is not at all clear that our assessments should go one way rather than the other.²⁹

This concludes my examination of the bodyguard model. Unlike the filter model, this incarnation of the secondary motive view can withstand the OFTF and OTTM problems. However, the very features that explain why it is able to do so also render it a highly implausible account of moral worth. In its capacity as a moral bodyguard, the motive of duty is too far removed from the action to furnish the agent with one thought too many, or to eclipse her other motives. But it is also too far removed to be relevant to the action's moral worth at all. Moreover, and insofar as the secondary motive constitutes a robust commitment to morality, the bodyguard model ties moral worth too closely to moral virtue. Doing so sets a problematically high standard; if we set the bar for moral worth at the level of moral virtue, then few if any of us will be able to clear it ³⁰

²⁹ Wood (2006, p.38, n.1) gestures at a very similar point. For a discussion of the relationship between effort and moral worth, see Sorensen (2010).

³⁰ The latter is, of course, only a problem for those who take the moral bodyguard to be *global*—to reflect a general disposition or character trait. The objection would not apply to a secondary motive theorist who only insisted upon a *local* bodyguard; who merely required that *as far as the moral worth of this particular action* was

It is, however, worth scrutinising the latter complaint further; for there may be a wider theoretical rationale for welding worth and moral virtue more closely together. Such scrutiny will be the task of the following section.

5. Moral Worth and Moral Character

I have argued that we should be wary of making the moral worth of our actions beholden to the moral worth of our characters. However, it may be argued that there are good reasons to do so. In a number of works, Baron has developed the suggestion that it is an agent's overarching commitment to morality that ought to matter to moral worth. This outlook is grounded in the Kantian psychology of action. Within this framework, recall, an agent is not moved to action by psychological forces, but acts on those reasons that she takes to justify her choice (Baron, 1995, pp.134-35). To put the point in more familiar Kantian vocabulary, an agent acts on *maxims*, and it is here that moral worth resides:

...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...[in] the principle of the volition, in accordance with which the action is done ... (Kant, 1785/1996, 400)

As Baron is concerned to emphasise, maxims are not properly viewed in a psychological vacuum; they are not driving forces that merely happen to pop into one's deliberation on particular choice occasions. A maxim reflects an agent's *general principle* of action, what she takes to justify this action and others like it more generally. Maxims therefore guide not merely token actions, but an agent's conduct over a lifetime (Baron, 2006, pp.87-8).

Baron takes these observations to lead us in the direction of a character-based understanding of the motive of duty. What is of interest is not an agent's motive on any isolated occasion, but the principles by which she conducts herself more generally (Baron, 1995, p.134). The motive of duty, understood in these terms, is a commitment that has wider relevance for one's conduct; it is a commitment to prioritising one's moral duties should they ever come into conflict with other things one may want (Baron, 1995, pp.132-3). For Baron,

concerned, the agent must be such that she would not have proceeded *with this action* if doing so had been wrong. (I am grateful to Edward Elliott for suggesting this possibility.) A more localised bodyguard model would likely overcome the demandingness problem. It would not, however, overcome other concerns that I have raised; if we want to make room for moral idiosyncrasies, for example, then we should reject local bodyguards as well as global ones.

then (as for Benson), an agent can still qualify as acting from duty—and her actions can remain candidates for moral worth—when she attends to a friend’s need for reasons other than the action’s rightness; because she wishes to relieve their burden, say. In order for such actions to have moral worth, they need only be governed by a commitment not to act on such reasons whenever doing so would be wrong.

While Baron’s framework yields similar results to Benson’s, it may be less vulnerable to the irrelevance problem. The irrelevance problem, as it applied to Benson, was that it seemed implausible to say that duty plays any meaningful role when moral considerations play no role whatsoever in leading an agent to act as she does. For Baron, however, the motive of duty has other manifestations besides keeping the agent on the path of the straight and narrow; it is not merely a moral security system. A secondary motive of duty also prompts “reflection on how one ought to live” and entails a “readiness to revise one’s moral beliefs and one’s plans and aims in light of one’s reflections” (Baron, 1995, note 22). The secondary motive of duty, so construed, shapes an agent’s moral outlook, and how she approaches moral situations more generally. Given this, it is less of a stretch on Baron’s view to say that an agent

...acts from this commitment, even in instances in which she gives no thought to the ethical nature of her conduct before proceeding with the intended action ... a very rich explanation of any nontrivial choice or action, e.g., the sort of explanation that a novelist might give, would make reference to [its many other] manifestations... (Baron, 1995, p.140, n.22).

One may suspect that Baron’s proposal is nonetheless vulnerable to the demandingness problem. Yet to raise these concerns against Baron’s view would, I feel, be problematically question-begging. The demandingness problem, as I have framed it, is the problem of setting an unreasonably high standard on the moral worth of particular actions. Baron, however, does not think that we ought to be especially concerned with the moral worth of particular actions. It is the moral worth of an agent’s *wider conduct* that she believes ought to matter to us—and it is not implausible that there is a higher bar to clear if we are concerned with conduct more generally. The real question, then, is not whether Baron sets the bar for moral worth too high (given her stated aims, I do not believe this to be the case), but whether it really is *conduct* that we should be concerned about when examining moral worth.

For my part, I do think that Baron builds a persuasive case for supposing that Kant ought perhaps to have subscribed to such a view (Baron, 1995, pp.176-77). Yet the same may not necessarily be true of the rest of us. The literature on moral worth has, for better or worse,

outstripped its Kantian origins. We may have reasons for caring about the moral worth of particular actions that Kant did not. We may, for instance, want an account of moral worth to acknowledge not only expressions of a will that is good, but also expressions of a corrupt will that has some goodness left in it.³¹

Recall Don: he would seem to lack a good will by most measures (including Baron's). Yet Don is not a complete moral write-off; he is *somewhat* sensitive to moral considerations, even if he is regrettably selfish for the most part. It seems to me that we should want to acknowledge this moral potential that Don has in him. Indeed, acknowledging the moral potential of corrupt individuals is often important for recognising their capacity for redemption. Morally flawed individuals do not transform into virtuous ones overnight. It is through expanding their moral sensitivities and developing their capacities to act for the right reasons that they may hope to improve. It is in this sense and others that, as Markovits (2010, p.203) observes, "...morally worthy actions are the building blocks of virtue—a pattern of performing them makes up the life of a good person". What I want to propose is that these building blocks—or appropriately motivated dutiful actions—shouldn't only be taken to have moral value at the point at which Don has cemented his commitment to morality. They would also seem to have moral value insofar as they constitute expressions of his capacity to develop such a commitment—of the goodness that can be found in a will that is not fully good. Insofar as Don does exhibit some (admittedly circumscribed) capacity to act for the right reasons, his actions should remain candidates for moral worth.³²

We should, moreover, also want to be able to distinguish between cases in which Don does and does not deserve credit for doing what is right. Insofar as Don saves the child for the right reasons, he would seem to deserve credit for his moral accomplishment. On this occasion, Don's heroics are an expression of the good in him, of his (limited) sensitivity to moral reasons. On other occasions, however, Don's acting rightly may be an expression of the bad in him; he may do right by others merely for reasons of self-advancement. Under such circumstances, Don's actions would not qualify as moral accomplishments for which he would be praiseworthy; such actions would be devoid of moral worth. The distinction

³¹ This possibility is raised briefly by Herman: "I see no reason why good willing cannot be present in a will that is not altogether good" (1996, p.13, n.20). See also the extended discussion of "partial good will" and "partial ill will" in Arpaly & Schroeder (2014, pp.162-171).

³² My arguments here have a thematic affinity with a well-known challenge to virtue ethics, according to which agents may sometimes act 'out of character'. (See, for example, Das, 2015.)

between these cases seems straightforward enough. Yet it is a distinction that is difficult to maintain insofar as we restrict our focus to Don's *character*, as Baron does. *None* of Don's actions derive from a good will, and so, none can be said to have moral worth on the character-based view. We must therefore place all instances in which Don acts rightly in the same 'no moral worth' basket. This is an undesirable result. There is a meaningful distinction to be drawn between those of Don's actions which constitute moral achievements and those which do not. An account of moral worth would seem to do better insofar as it is capable of recognising that distinction.

Conclusion

Despite its advertised promise, I have argued that the secondary motive of duty is not the philosophical cure-all that it is often made out to be. Some variations of the secondary motive view simply take us back to the drawing board; they rule out too many actions from having moral worth, even if they are slightly less restrictive than the primary motive view with which we began. While other variations are less vulnerable to familiar problems, they tie the moral worth of our actions too closely to the moral worth of our characters. I have argued that doing so is a mistake. The motive of duty, construed as a robust moral commitment, is not well-suited to underwrite a plausible account of moral worth.

Some readers may understandably be left wondering which (if indeed any) account of moral worth can withstand the preceding arguments. While respecting a non-accidentality constraint upon morally worthy actions is important, I've argued that we ought not rely upon a secondary motive of duty to do so. And while my arguments are consistent with the possibility that actions motivated by a primary motive of duty can have moral worth, they do suggest that we cannot hope get by with a primary motive of duty alone; for we may very well want to capture the moral worth of actions not motivated by duty at all—viz., those 'human gestures' that bypass conscience entirely. Is any account of moral worth consistent with this configuration of conclusions?

I believe so. In particular, a pluralist account of moral worth which takes either a primary motive of duty or more concrete moral concerns to be suitable motives for morally worthy actions would, to my mind, be consistent with the arguments developed throughout this

paper.³³ My arguments in Section 4 suggest that neither sort of motive ought to be excluded on the basis of accidentality concerns. Each moral orientation can be taken to reflect moral competence—and when an agent’s acting rightly is attributable to her moral competence, her action plausibly qualifies as non-accidentally right. This pluralist approach, moreover, easily handles the OFTF problem, for it does not insist upon duty being the agent’s only motive. It is also consistent with what I ultimately suggested (in Section 3) was the right lesson to take away from the OTTM problem; viz., that certain actions performed from duty may have moral worth, even if they would have had more moral worth still had they been underwritten by concerns of a more personal nature. ‘Human gestures’ underwritten by such personal concerns are also perfectly good candidates for moral worth on this pluralist picture, which does not take the motive of duty to be necessary for morally worthy actions.

Defending a pluralist approach to moral worth has not of course been by primary objective in this paper. And more work would no doubt need to be done to transition smoothly from this paper’s arguments to such a conclusion. Nonetheless, a pluralist view is, I believe, one promising direction in which the arguments of this paper may ultimately lead us.³⁴

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³³ Ross (1930/2002) seems to have endorsed a kind of pluralism about morally good motives. For recent defences of pluralism about moral worth specifically, see Hurka (2014), Isserow (2020), and Portmore (forthcoming).

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