

Intention Versus Consequence: Separating the Rightness of Actions from the Praiseworthiness of Agents

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Abstract

This paper examines whether performing a right action for a defective motive makes that action morally wrong. It argues that the question conflates three assessments that moral philosophy keeps apart, namely the deontic status of an act, the moral worth of an act, and the standing of the agent who performs it. Drawing on the utilitarian and Kantian traditions and on the contemporary literature concerning moral worth, the paper argues that the second and third assessments are sensitive to motive in a way that the first is not, at least for actions that produce a benefit and create no separate harm. John Stuart Mill states the position directly, holding that an agent's motive bears on what the agent is worth without settling whether the act itself was right. Kant's distinction between acting from duty and acting merely in accordance with duty suggests, on one reading, that his claim about motive concerns the moral worth of an action rather than its rightness, although that reading is contested. The contemporary debate reinforces the distinction, because it treats moral worth as a status that only some right actions possess. The paper concludes that an action producing a benefit without causing separate harm remains right even when its motive is self interested, although such a motive reduces the credit its agent deserves and may justify caution about that agent in the future.

Keywords

Moral Philosophy, Moral Motivation, Moral Worth, Praiseworthiness, Utilitarianism, Kantian Ethics, Consequences, Intention.

1. Introduction

Imagine two people donating one million dollars to a children's hospital. The first donates out of genuine concern for sick children. The second donates solely to improve a public image. The hospital receives the same benefit in both cases, yet most observers would not regard the two donors in the same light. That reaction is widely shared, and it is the starting point of this paper. The reaction is also the source of a confusion. Two different judgments are being run together. One judgment concerns the donation and asks whether it was the right thing to do. The other concerns the donor and asks whether the donor is admirable for doing it. These judgments answer different questions, and they do not necessarily outweigh one another, so there is no reason to assume that a single verdict settles both. Once they are separated, the appearance of paradox in the case of the second donor begins to dissolve.

The underlying philosophical question is whether morality depends on what is done or on why it is done. Utilitarian thinkers locate moral value in the consequences an action produces. Kantian ethics locates it in the intention from which the action is performed. The dispute is old, and it is often presented as a straight opposition between outcomes and motives.

This paper argues that performing a right action for a defective motive does not make the action wrong. Moral judgment of an action should turn on what the action does rather than on inner motives that may never issue in harm. Motives bear on how an agent is assessed, and they bear

on whether an action deserves moral credit, but they do not determine whether a beneficial action is right.

The argument proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the contemporary literature on moral worth and shows that it already presupposes the distinction this paper defends. Section 3 separates three assessments that the initial question runs together. Section 4 argues that actions, rather than motives, form the appropriate object of public moral assessment. Section 5 develops the consequentialist case for the independence of rightness from motive. Section 6 examines the Kantian objection and argues that it is narrower than it first appears. Section 7 considers motives in relation to character and trust. Section 8 answers four objections, and Section 9 concludes.

2. The Moral Worth Debate in Recent Philosophy

Contemporary moral philosophy has a settled name for the issue raised by the second donor. The issue concerns moral worth, understood as the credit an agent earns for acting rightly, and a substantial literature has grown around it. Barbara Herman's study of the value of acting from the motive of duty reopened the question of what exactly is added when an agent acts from duty rather than merely in accordance with it [1].

The debate since then has largely concerned the conditions an action must meet in order to possess moral worth. Julia Markovits rejects a position often read into Kant, on which an act earns worth only when its agent is moved by the thought that it is required. Her alternative, which she calls the Coincident Reasons Thesis, locates worth instead in a match between the considerations that actually moved the agent and those that made the act obligatory [2]. Paulina Sliwa defends a competing position. On her Rightness Condition, an action has moral worth when it is motivated by the agent's concern for doing what is right together with her knowledge that the action is right, which makes moral knowledge a requirement of moral worth [3].

A further strand of the literature concerns agents who arrive at right action by unreliable routes. Zoë A. Johnson King examines cases of accidentally doing the right thing and the assessments appropriate to them [4]. Keshav Singh takes up the same difficulty and argues that neither of the two dominant accounts succeeds, since an action can satisfy either condition while still counting as a case of accidentally doing the right thing. He proposes instead that morally worthy actions are right actions motivated by moral reasons as such [5].

These positions disagree sharply. For present purposes, however, what matters is a commitment they share. Singh states it plainly when characterising the subject of the dispute, calling moral worth "a status that some, but not all, morally right actions have" [5]. The accounts surveyed here therefore presuppose that an action can be morally right while lacking moral worth. They disagree about which further condition converts a right action into a worthy one, and none of them treats a defective motive as converting a right action into a wrong one.

The competing accounts differ over what must be true of an agent's motivation before credit is earned. Markovits locates the requirement in a coincidence between motivating and justifying reasons, Sliwa in the agent's knowledge of rightness, and Singh in responsiveness to moral reasons as such [2][3][5]. Singh presents his own account as succeeding where both of the dominant views fail rather than as extending them [5]. Yet all three take for granted that the actions under dispute are right, and argue only about what further condition a right action must satisfy to redound to its agent's credit.

This bears directly on the question at hand. The literature that examines motives most closely does not treat them as determinants of rightness. It treats them as determinants of a further status that right actions may or may not possess. That distinction is therefore not a departure from contemporary work on motives but a presupposition of it.

3. Three Distinct Evaluations

The confusion identified in Section 1 can now be stated precisely. Three assessments are in play, and the question of whether doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is wrong becomes tractable only when they are held apart.

The first assessment concerns the deontic status of an act. It asks whether the act was right or wrong, permitted or forbidden. The second concerns the moral worth of the act. It asks whether the act, having been right, was performed in a way that earns its agent credit for its rightness. The third concerns the agent. It asks what the act reveals about character, and what expectations about future conduct it supports.

The treatment of reasons for action given by Maria Alvarez and Jonathan Way supplies the apparatus for keeping the first two apart. Reasons for action can be understood in terms of justification, motivation, and explanation, and the reasons that make an action right need not be the reasons for which an agent performs it [6]. Normative reasons determine what an agent ought to do. Motivating reasons determine what actually moved the agent. The two can diverge without either ceasing to exist.

Mill states the resulting position with unusual directness. In the course of replying to critics of utilitarianism, he notes that writers in that tradition have insisted, more firmly than most, that “the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much with the worth of the agent” [7]. The remark is not an aside. It assigns motive and action to separate assessments and denies that either verdict settles the other.

Applied to the opening case, the framework yields a determinate result. The second donation is right, because it produces the benefit that makes such donations right. It lacks moral worth, because the donor is moved by reputation rather than by the considerations that make the donation right. The donor is accordingly less admirable than the first. Three verdicts are returned, and they do not conflict, because they answer three different questions.

The distinction is not beyond dispute. A Kantian may deny that moral worth is merely a further status attaching to acts already established as right, holding instead that the maxim on which an agent acts belongs to the assessment of the act itself. That denial is taken up in Section 6. What can be said here is that the distinction is not introduced merely to secure the conclusion, since the observability argument of Section 4 and the consequentialist argument of Section 5 support it independently.

The apparent paradox of the opening case arises only when a single verdict is demanded. Asking whether the second donor acted rightly or is admirable, as though one answer must serve for both, forces a choice that the phenomenon does not require.

4. Actions as the Object of Moral Assessment

A further consideration supports treating the act rather than the motive as the primary object of moral assessment. Morality is not solely a subject of philosophical analysis. It also functions as a shared standard that guides conduct and supports the coordination of behaviour among people who do not have access to one another’s minds.

Consider a person who returns a lost wallet because returning it is honest, and another who returns it only because a security camera is recording. The outcome is identical, since the owner recovers the wallet in both cases. The motives differ considerably. Yet it is hard to see how a plausible account of the situation could conclude that the second wallet ought not to have been returned, or that the owner has been wronged by its return.

The example indicates why the phrase “wrong reasons” is misleading. A reason may be unattractive without altering the practical effect of the action it produces. An action can therefore be right even when the reason for which it was performed is not admirable. Once the

action has produced its effect, it has already engaged the interests of other people in a morally relevant way, and the remaining question is whether a motive that was never expressed in harm should be permitted to reverse that verdict.

A standard framed in terms of actions is also applicable in a way that a standard framed in terms of motives is not. Actions and their consequences can be observed and evaluated by others. Motives remain largely hidden within an individual's mind. A person may profess kindness or generosity, and there is no fully reliable procedure for confirming whether the profession is sincere. If the rightness of an action depended chiefly on the motive behind it, moral judgment would routinely depend on information that is in principle inaccessible to those who must make the judgment.

The difficulty is not merely practical. A standard that made rightness depend on motive would place the decisive fact beyond the reach of those entitled to complain. The beneficiary of an action, or the person injured by one, would be unable to determine what had been done to them without first resolving a question about another person's inner life. Moral criticism would become correspondingly unstable, since any charge could be met by an assertion about intention that no one is positioned to test.

An action based standard avoids this difficulty. It is possible to establish that someone returned a wallet, donated to a hospital, or rescued a stranger without first establishing the exact intention involved. For this reason actions furnish a more workable and more public basis for moral evaluation than motives considered alone.

None of this implies that intention is unimportant. It implies only that intention should not automatically override the moral significance of what a person has actually done. The work that intention does perform is taken up below.

5. Consequentialism and the Independence of Rightness from Motive

The utilitarian tradition provides the most direct support for the position defended here. On a utilitarian account, the moral quality of an action depends on the consequences it produces rather than on the motives from which it proceeds. Mill formulates the governing principle by holding that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" [7].

Mill also applies the principle to precisely the case under discussion. Answering the objection that utilitarianism neglects the moral significance of motives, he writes that "[h]e who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty, or the hope of being paid for his trouble" [7]. The rescue is right because of what it accomplishes. The rescuer's expectation of payment bears on what the rescuer deserves, not on whether the drowning person ought to have been saved.

The pattern recurs throughout ordinary moral life. A physician who treats a patient for financial gain has nonetheless treated the patient. A legislator who supports beneficial legislation merely to gain votes may still improve the circumstances of those the legislation protects. In each case the benefit is real and is not diminished by the presence of an additional self interested motive. Many social institutions rely on this fact rather than merely tolerating it. Commercial enterprises pursue profit, elected officials seek reelection, and individuals sometimes assist others in the expectation of reciprocity or recognition. These arrangements can benefit society nonetheless. Adam Smith made the point about economic life when he observed that "[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest" [8]. A social order that recognised only actions performed from unmixed motives would forgo a considerable part of this cooperation.

It should be granted that motives are not wholly irrelevant even on this account. A person reliably moved by self interest may act well only while self interest and benefit happen to coincide, and such coincidence is not guaranteed. That is a serious consideration, but it is a consideration about what the agent is likely to do next rather than about what the agent has already done. It bears on the prediction, not on the verdict, and Section 7 takes it up in that form. Two qualifications are required. The claim is not that self interest is itself good, and it is not that consequences exhaust the considerations relevant to morality. The claim is narrower. Where the outcome of an action is beneficial and creates no separate harm, it is difficult to argue that the presence of a self interested motive converts the action into a wrong one. A self interested motive may reduce the credit the agent deserves. It does not cancel the benefit the action produced.

6. The Kantian Objection and Its Limits

The most serious objection to this position comes from the Kantian tradition, which holds that an exclusive focus on outcomes neglects the intention of the agent. Kant maintains that the moral worth of an action lies in the principle from which it is performed rather than in the end it achieves. In the *Groundwork* he states that “an action done from duty derives its moral worth, not from the purpose which is to be attained by it, but from the maxim by which it is determined” [9].

This argument presents a significant challenge to consequentialism, because it suggests that outcomes alone are insufficient for evaluating moral behaviour. Applied to the opening case, the objection is forceful. One donor gives out of concern for those in need, the other in order to be seen giving. The financial benefit to the hospital is the same, yet the first donor seems morally superior in a way that an exclusive concern with outcomes appears unable to capture. Kant’s position explains that reaction, and any adequate account must accommodate it.

The objection is nevertheless narrower than it first appears, and the reason is found in Kant’s own treatment of the issue. Kant distinguishes between acting from duty and acting merely in accordance with duty, a distinction standardly treated as central to his account of moral worth [10], and he introduces it through a commercial example. A merchant, he observes, is bound not to exploit a customer who cannot tell when the price is too high; and where trade is competitive a shrewd one will in any case charge all buyers alike, so that even a child is served on the same terms as anybody else. Kant’s verdict on the case is exact. He writes that “Men are thus honestly served; but this is not enough to make us believe that the tradesman has so acted from duty and from principles of honesty” [9].

The structure of that example tells against the strong reading of the objection. Kant does not suggest that the prudent tradesman has done anything wrong, nor that the customers have any ground for complaint. They are honestly served, and the honesty is genuine. What Kant denies is that honesty resting on commercial advantage displays the ground that confers moral worth. The example therefore separates two of the three assessments distinguished in Section 3, and it does so in Kant’s own text [9].

The crucial point is what the claim does not assert. Kant does not hold that an action merely in accordance with duty is thereby wrong. He holds that it lacks a particular kind of value. The tradesman moved by commercial advantage is not charged with wrongdoing, since no customer is defrauded and the fair dealing is real. What the tradesman lacks is the credit attaching to fair dealing undertaken because it is required.

Read in this way, the Kantian objection and the position defended here are largely addressed to different questions. The objection establishes that motive determines moral worth. It does not by itself establish that motive determines the rightness of an action that produces a benefit and creates no separate harm.

One qualification must be entered, since it marks the limit of the argument. In Kant's procedure the maxim submitted to the test of universal law may itself incorporate the agent's purpose, as it does in the case of the deceitful promise, where the purpose of obtaining money on a promise known to be false forms part of the maxim that is found to be impermissible. To that extent a purpose can bear on rightness for Kant. The claim defended here is narrower, namely that a self interested motive accompanying an action whose maxim is otherwise unobjectionable does not make that action wrong. A Kantian may hold that the agent's purpose always enters the maxim under assessment. Even so, a distinction remains available within that view, since Kant's own tradesman acts "merely with a selfish view" and is still not charged with wrongdoing, whereas the deceitful promise fails the test of universal law. The narrower claim defended here concerns self interested maxims of the first kind rather than the second [9]. The contemporary literature surveyed in Section 2 is consistent with this reading, since that literature is concerned throughout with the conditions of moral worth and treats the rightness of the actions in question as already settled [1][2][3][5].

A residual point should be granted. Motives can reveal features of an agent's character, and a settled disposition to act well only when observed is a defect in an agent. But such a disposition is a defect in the agent, and it exists as a mental state until it is expressed in conduct. A self interested thought that never issues in harm remains different in kind from a self interested action that produces harm. The effects of actions, by contrast, exist in the world and bear on the lives of others. Since morality is closely bound up with how people affect one another, actions and their outcomes carry the greater weight in determining whether a particular action was right.

Kant may therefore be correct that motives matter to the assessment of an agent's moral standing. That conclusion does not establish that a beneficial action becomes wrong because it was performed from an imperfect motive.

7. Motives, Character, and Trust

Critics may argue that motives are essential to moral judgment because they reveal a person's character and help predict future behaviour, and an account that ignored them would be incomplete. A person who performs good actions only when it is advantageous may be less reliable than a person who acts from settled concern for others, and many moral traditions attach weight to intention for this reason.

The work that motives perform here is largely predictive. A friend who helps only when there is something to gain has still helped, but others may reasonably hesitate to depend on that friend in circumstances where no advantage is available. Motives matter here because they shape expectations about conduct in situations that have not yet arisen, which is why they are especially important in relationships that extend over time.

This connects to philosophical accounts of trust. Carolyn McLeod observes that trustworthiness depends not only on competence but also on whether a person is willing to do what they are trusted to do [11]. Motives supply evidence about that willingness. They indicate how an agent is likely to behave when incentives change, and an agent whose good conduct is contingent on observation gives correspondingly weaker grounds for confidence.

The literature on moral worth makes a related point about the reliability of the connection between agent and right action. Sliwa's Rightness Condition requires that the agent know the action to be right [3]. Singh's account requires that the agent be moved by moral reasons as such, and he advances it precisely in order to exclude cases in which an agent arrives at right action accidentally [5]. Both conditions concern the security of the link between the agent and the rightness of the act rather than the rightness of the act itself.

Understood in this way, motives serve largely as evidence bearing on the agent rather than as determinants of the rightness of the act. They are among the better indicators available of how an agent will behave when circumstances change, which is why they are attended to so closely in practice. Evidence about a person's future conduct, however, is not the same thing as a verdict on a past action, and treating the two as interchangeable is the confusion identified at the outset.

Reliability, however, is partly a prediction about future conduct and not necessarily a verdict on a present action. Character and action are closely related but distinct. A self interested person can perform right actions, and a well intentioned person can bring about serious harm. Motives accordingly influence how much praise an agent deserves and whether others are warranted in relying on that agent. They do not override the result of an action when the question is whether that particular action was right.

8. Objections and Replies

Four objections merit direct consideration.

The first holds that the position renders moral assessment shallow, since it appears to permit indifference to why people act. The reply is that the position removes motive from one assessment only. Motive remains central to the moral worth of the action and to the evaluation of the agent, as Sections 6 and 7 maintain. Far from ignoring motive, the account assigns it a determinate role and explains why the reaction to the second donor is appropriate rather than confused.

The second objection concerns accidental rightness. If rightness is insensitive to motive, then an agent who does the right thing through luck or confusion performs an action as right as one performed with full understanding, which seems mistaken. The reply draws on the contemporary literature on moral worth. Non accidentality is a condition on moral worth and hence on creditworthiness rather than on rightness. Singh criticises rival accounts of moral worth precisely because they still permit an agent to hit upon the right act by accident [5]. The agent who acts rightly by accident has performed a right action and earned no credit for it. That verdict registers the difference without denying that the action was right.

The third objection is that bad motives frequently produce harm, so that separating motive from rightness underestimates their danger. The reply is that the account already addresses such cases. Where a defective motive issues in harm, the harm renders the action wrong, and the account delivers that verdict directly. The thesis is restricted to actions that produce a benefit and create no separate harm. It is silent about actions in which a defective motive expresses itself in damage to others, and those actions are wrong in virtue of the damage.

A fourth objection deserves brief notice. It might be urged that the account licenses cynicism, since it appears to tell agents that their reasons for acting are of no consequence so long as the outcome is acceptable. This misreads the scope of the thesis. The thesis concerns how actions are to be assessed by others, not what an agent has reason to care about. An agent deciding how to live has every reason to want to act from concern for others rather than from calculation, because the former disposition is what makes good conduct dependable and what earns the credit discussed throughout this paper. The account gives no encouragement to cynicism; it holds only that when a benefit has been conferred and no separate harm done, the conferral is not retrospectively annulled by the discovery of a disappointing motive.

9. Conclusion

Doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is not morally wrong. Where an action produces a beneficial outcome and creates no separate harm, the action remains right notwithstanding an imperfect motivation.

Motives retain their significance. They affect the moral worth of the action, the credit its agent deserves, and the confidence others are entitled to place in that agent. These assessments, however, are distinct from the evaluation of the action itself. A person who donates for the sake of attention deserves less admiration than one who donates out of compassion, and the donation assists the same children to the same extent.

A moral framework that assigns excessive weight to intention risks judging private mental states more severely than the public consequences of conduct. Morality should accordingly give priority to what people do and to how their conduct affects others, while continuing to recognise that motives are relevant to the assessment of character and to the distribution of praise.

Three limitations should be acknowledged. The paper does not attempt a general assessment of the two traditions; it argues the narrower point that, on the question of motive, the Kantian objection is best understood as concerning moral worth rather than rightness. It addresses individual actions and does not extend to institutional or collective agency, where the attribution of motive is considerably more complex. And it relies on a contemporary literature in which the conditions of moral worth remain contested, so that the boundary between right action and worthy action is drawn here only in outline.

The ideal agent is presumably one who does the right thing for the right reasons. Doing the right thing for imperfect reasons nevertheless remains better than failing to do it at all.

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