GETTIER IN ACTION:
CORRECTNESS AND SUCCESS IN ETHICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

In this paper, I argue that knowledge, as the pinnacle of epistemic achievement, is but one instance of a broader class, what I call *accomplishment with respect to a normative standard*. My narrow interest here is the implications for *morally worthy action*—accomplishment with respect to the standards of morality. More broadly, the paper showcases the advantages of seeing various kinds of normative achievement as members of a single species, allowing us to draw from work in one area (here, epistemology) to provide insight in another (ethics).

Consider a case of *success:* a lawyer gets her client acquitted. Activities with success conditions typically also have standards of *correctness*: here, the legal norms associated with defending a client. It is natural for us to offer an overall appraisal of a legal defense in light of both of these features. We would be less laudatory if we found out that she got her client off by breaking the law, or despite mounting a lazy defense. And even if she mounted an excellent defense, we would have been less laudatory if her client had been convicted.

A tempting view is that *accomplished* defenses are those that are both correct and successful: the lawyer mounts a legally adequate defense (by some reasonable standard that does not entail success) and her client is acquitted. But there will be cases where this is coincidental. Perhaps the defense was adequate, but without jury bias, it wouldn't have gotten her client off. At this point, the analogy with knowledge should be clear. For a long time, we thought that knowledge was the conjunction of justification and truth. Then we realized that justified belief can be *coincidentally* true—i.e., that there are Gettier cases.

Consider a recent account of knowledge: Mark Schroeder[1] holds that knowledge is belief for reasons that are both *subjectively* sufficient (i.e., doxastically justifying) and *objectively* sufficient (i.e., roughly, truth-guaranteeing). If we generalize this as an account of accomplishment, the results are intuitive. 'Subjectively sufficient' is *sufficient with respect to a standard of correctness*.[2] In the legal case, this means a defense that is both consistent with legal procedure and adequate. 'Objectively sufficient' is *sufficient for realization of a success condition.* In the legal case, this means a defense that gets the client acquitted. Thus, on an extension of Schroeder's account, a defense is *accomplished* if it is legally adequate *and* sufficient to get her innocent client off—thus avoiding the 'legal Gettier case' where the defense is adequate but the client is acquitted only because of jury bias.

In the case of morality, however, we find a surprising departure. According to Julia Markovits' recent account, morally worthy action is simply action taken for objectively sufficient reason.[3] This is structurally similar, but importantly different from, Schroeder's account, in that it takes *subjective* sufficiency (correctness) to be unnecessary for moral worth. Markovits' view is not idiosyncratic, for it draws on widely held intuitions. For example, most agree that Huck Finn's freeing his slave friend Jim was morally worthy, despite his sincerely believing that doing so was wrong (and thus, apparently, being unjustified in doing so).

There is tension here, for at least on the face of things, it is hard to see why the standards for moral accomplishment should be lower than for epistemic or legal accomplishment. One potential response draws on the fact that unlike in the law and in epistemology, for some normative standards there is an entailment between correctness and success. In the activity of *addition,* for example,

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[1] "Knowledge Is Belief for Sufficient (Objective and Subjective) Reason," *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 5 (2015): 226–52.

[2] Perhaps including an intentionality clause, since in at least some cases, it may be possible to follow the rules by accident.

[3] "Acting for the Right Reasons," *Philosophical Review* 119:2 (2010): 201–242. As I discuss in the paper, it is clear that Markovits (and Kant, from whom she borrows the term) consider morally worthy action to be the pinnacle of moral achievement (though also, unlike knowledge on most accounts, to be gradable).

correctness entails success: if I properly add 2 and 2, I will get 4. The reverse is not true; I might add incorrectly and still somehow arrive at right answer. Conversely, in the activity of *playing chess,* success entails correctness: I have not won the game unless I have followed the rules. The reverse is not true; I can certainly follow the rules and lose. If morality is relevantly like chess, we might be inclined to infer from the fact that Huck acted for objectively good reasons (say, Jim's welfare) that he was justified in doing so.[4]

I suspect this *is* the explanation for our intuitions in Huck's case, but I take this to undercut, rather than vindicate, Markovits' view. For if Huck *was* justified, his case cannot be used to vindicate the idea that only objective sufficiency is required for moral accomplishment. That would require showing that it is *never* possible for one to unjustifiably act for a right-making reason. But this is implausible. The fact that Balki is on fire may well be a sufficient moral reason for throwing water on him. Suppose 'Balki is on fire' is Larry's reason for throwing water on him, but only because Larry hates fire. His reason is right-making, but surely his (wholly selfish!) act is not morally worthy.

I conclude that whether or not we should accept Schroeder's particular account (and I raise some concerns about this), we should continue to expect symmetry between our accounts of knowledge, worthy action, and other kinds of normative accomplishment. Here, I have targeted a particular view of morally worthy action. But the insight has broader implications; the hope is that going forward, by expanding our view to normative accomplishment, rather than just piecemeal to knowledge, worthy action, etc., we can improve our understanding of each.

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[4] It is an interesting question whether any normative standards are biconditional; I can't think of any.