

BEING RESPONSIVE TO REASONS

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Bill is on fire, and Alan throws a bucket of water over him. Why? Because Alan hates fire, and looks to douse it wherever he can. Most would agree that Alan did the right thing. But they would likely add that he failed to achieve an important kind of moral success, given his motivations.

Following Julia Markovits,¹ I will call actions that succeed where Alan's failed *morally worthy*. In recent works, Markovits and Mark Schroeder² have offered independent but similar accounts of morally worthy action, understanding it in terms of a *match* between an agent's motivating reasons and the normative reasons for him to act. I argue that such "matching accounts" fall short. They are subject to counterexample, I claim—counterexamples that arise because morally worthy action requires an *explanatory connection* between normative and motivating reasons. Matching accounts approximate such connections, but fail to fully capture them. Finally, I discuss two further puzzles about morally worthy action. Solving these puzzles is an important step towards giving a full account of the explanatory connection in question.

(Note: Schroeder's account is actually presented primarily as a theory of *knowledge*, drawing on parallels between practical and epistemic reasons and between morally worthy action and knowledge as kinds of practical and epistemic success, respectively. I focus a good deal on these parallels, in particular to motivate the idea that the problems I raise for matching accounts echo the Gettier problem in epistemology.)

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¹ J. Markovits, "Acting for the Right Reasons," *Philosophical Review* 119, no. 2 (2010): 201–242.

² M. Schroeder, "Knowledge Is Belief for Sufficient (Objective and Subjective) Reason," *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* (Forthcoming).

It is tempting to think that morally worthy actions are done *because they are right*. Perhaps the most famous gloss on this idea is Kant's: Alan's mistake was in thinking about his preferences rather than his moral duty. Yet most reject this, for a *de dicto* concern with moral duty seems nearly as morally unworthy as Alan's selfishness.

This doesn't mean that we have to give up on the "because they are right" idea altogether, though, for the Kantian reading is not the only one available. We might think not that Alan's reason has to *be* the rightness of his action, but only that Alan's reasons need to be somehow *responsive* to that rightness. The hard question is what that responsiveness consists in.

Surely, Kant is right that at least *part* of the answer is that Alan had the wrong motivating reasons. The appeal of matching accounts becomes clear when we note that, on many views, the right thing to do is just what there is most *normative reason* to do. Putting these together, it seems plausible that Alan's failure lies in the mismatch between the two—his motivating reasons were one thing, the normative reasons that supported his action were another. Alan did the right thing, but only because, coincidentally, *his* reasons happened to support the same action as *the* reasons. Had his reasons been genuine normative reasons, he would have been appropriately responsive to them.

I worry that while a match between one's reasons and normative reasons typically indicates responsiveness to them, it does not guarantee it. In my view, responsiveness implicates an explanatory connection between normative and motivating reasons. And I think we have good evidence that when we try to capture an explanatory connection by talking about matches—even modally robust ones—counterexamples are likely.

One sort of counterexample I have in mind are cases in which an agent's motivating reasons match his normative reasons, but where the background psychology that leads him to *treat* them as reasons isn't of the right kind. For instance, suppose we ask Alan what his reason was for throwing water on Bill. He replies that he did it because Bill was on fire. Say we accept this answer, as well as

that Bill's being on fire really was a normative reason for him to throw the water. In that case, Alan's motivating and normative reasons would match, but his action would still not be morally worthy, for the further *explanation* for why he treated this as a reason (his hatred of fire, etc.) isn't of the right kind.

The natural reply, of course, is that we should not accept that Bill's being on fire was Alan's motivating reason. Surely, his motivating reason *also* included his hatred of fire, reaffirming the mismatch. I agree this is plausible. What I argue, however, is that this will not be plausible in *all* cases, and that in order to render it so, we would have to accept the independently problematic view that one's motivating reasons include all psychological factors that contribute to one's action.

I close with discussion of two puzzles (for both matching accounts and my explanatory view). This begins the work of clarifying the explanatory connection in question, moving us towards a better account of morally worthy action. The first puzzle concerns Huck Finn. Huck famously frees the slave Jim, despite believing that doing so is wrong. Most agree that Huck's action was praiseworthy. Assuming praiseworthiness is an indication of moral worth, it seems we should conclude that Huck's action was responsive to the normative reasons for him to save Jim. However, it is at least initially difficult to see how this could be the case.

The second puzzle comes from Schroeder's earlier work³: Nate loves successful surprise parties. Right now, Nate's friends are waiting at his home to surprise him. Arguably, Nate has a reason to go home. However, it seems Nate cannot be responsive to this reason, for were he to come to know about it, it would cease to be a reason for him. Assuming Nate has no other reason for going home, it might thus seem that though he *ought* to go home, his doing so could not be morally worthy. I suspect many will, like me, find this result unpalatable.

³ M. Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford University Press, 2007).