

9

Moral Worth beyond Right Reasons

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9.1 Introduction

Philosophers assume that when two agents who do the same thing differ in their praiseworthiness, the difference must be traceable to a difference in the reasons for which they act. To act with moral worth is to do the right thing for the “right reasons.” But this is not so. Two agents moved by the very same feature can nonetheless differ in moral credit. The challenge is to explain how this is possible.

My claim is that *no* view that situates moral worth solely in the content of an agent’s motivation can fully account for these differences. Content-based accounts presuppose that once the overt feature of the action and the content of agent’s motivation are fixed, so is the moral worth of the act in question. But certain cases show this assumption to be false. The upshot is that moral worth has a neglected dimension. The moral worth of an action depends both on the reasons for which the agent acts and the agent’s *stance* toward those reasons. An action possesses genuine moral worth only when the agent takes what I will call a *categorical stance* toward the reasons for which she acts, treating their force as independent of her contingent desires and preferences in a sense I will seek to characterize. The argument turns on two parallel cases. The first is the Moral Hobbyist, an agent who is non-derivatively concerned with a right-making feature—helping the needy—but relates to it in the way one might relate to a pastime like gardening or stamp collecting: as something to be pursued for its own sake, but only insofar as doing so remains appealing. The second is the True Philanthropist, who is moved by the very same right-making feature but who treats it as categorically reason-giving. The Hobbyist and the Philanthropist act for the same reason: to help the poor. Yet the Philanthropist is praiseworthy while the Hobbyist is not. This contrast will be the focal point of the argument.

While much has been said in the present debate concerning the *content* of morally worthy motivation—in particular, whether it is directed at the right-making features or “rightness itself”—there has been little discussion of the *nature* of the state whose content is at issue. Most parties to the debate are happy to speak of generic “desire,” seeing the worthy act as an action done from a desire or “concern” with a suitable content. My argument shows that this is a mistake; understanding the conditions under which we are praiseworthy for acting rightly requires a more fine-grained individuation of *ways of caring*. Morally worthy motivation is not just a matter of being motivated *by the right things*, but also of acting on a motive *of the right kind*. The view of moral worth I defend, unlike its predecessors, satisfies two important desiderata: it explains why some agents who act for right-making reasons are praiseworthy, while “moral hobbyists” are not.

The structure is as follows. Section 9.2 introduces the background framework and relevant terminology. Section 9.3 presents the Moral Hobbyist case and addresses two objections to its significance. Section 9.4 introduces the True Philanthropist and develops the contrast with the Hobbyist. Section 9.5 surveys and rejects content-based strategies for explaining the contrast and shows that *no* content-based view can succeed. Section 9.6 gives an overview of candidate non-content-based criteria and introduces the categorical concern proposal. Section 9.7 develops and defends the categorical concern proposal in more detail. Section 9.8 shows how the account extends to other cases, Section 9.9 responds to objections, and Section 9.10 concludes by summarizing the state of play.

9.2 Content-Based Accounts of Moral Worth

By a *content-based* account of moral worth, I mean any view on which an agent’s praiseworthiness for a right act depends wholly on the content of her fundamental motivating reason. Such views treat the “what” of motivation—the consideration in light of which the agent acts when she performs a right act—as decisive. The assumption is that if the agent’s action is rationalized by a desire with an appropriate content (whatever that may be) the act has moral worth, and not otherwise.

Some terminology: I will use “right-making feature” (RMF) to mean a feature in virtue of which an action is morally right, such as that it relieves suffering, keeps a promise, is fair or kind, or treats someone with respect.

A *motivating reason* is the consideration in light of which the agent acts; that is, the feature she takes to count in favor of what she does and for which she acts. When an agent is moved by the right “de re,” her motivating reason is that her act is *F*, where *F* is a feature that makes the act right; when she is moved by the right “de dicto,” her motivating reason is simply *that the act is right*.¹

There are two main rival content-based accounts of moral worth. Roughly following Kant, one view holds that morally worthy action must be done from a non-instrumental desire to do what is right as such, and that doing the right thing just because it is right *suffices* to secure moral worth.² We can call this the Rightness Itself View (RIV). The Right-Making Feature View (RMFV) instead says that it suffices for moral worth that the agent be directly motivated by some feature that makes the act right; a de dicto concern with rightness is not required.³ Its defenders cite cases in which an agent seems praiseworthy for acting rightly even if he has a false view about its moral status, such as Huck Finn, who helps Jim (a runaway slave) escape out of concern for Jim’s interests despite believing that helping Jim is wrong. Hybrid accounts allow either a de dicto moral motive or a de re concern for the right-making features to suffice.⁴ All these accounts focus on the content of the motivating reason as the criterion for praiseworthiness.

Content-based views are attractive because they offer a simple view of why agents aren’t praiseworthy in paradigm cases. Consider Kant’s shopkeeper, who gives his customers the correct change but only to preserve his reputation. He is not praiseworthy for acting rightly. Why? A plausible answer is

¹ This terminology comes from Smith (1994: 75).

² See Sliwa (2016) and Johnson King (2020a) for defenses of the view that de dicto motivation is what underlies moral worth, with Sliwa adding a knowledge condition. (Sliwa’s view does not treat motivation by rightness as strictly sufficient for moral worth—knowledge of rightness is also required—but the addition of the knowledge requirement does not affect my argument here.) See also Herman (1981).

³ Arpaly (2002), Markovits (2010), and Weatherson (2014) are proponents. Markovits’ (2010) Coincident Reasons Thesis specifies that moral worth requires only that the agent’s motivating reasons coincide with right-makers. Arpaly (2002) also considers the agent’s degree or depth of concern to be relevant to moral worth, but this does not affect my argument here.

⁴ Isserow (2020) offers a pluralist account: morally worthy actions can be grounded either in de dicto motivations. In “Praiseworthy Motivations” (2020b), Johnson King defends a more expansive view of the content of praiseworthy motivation: is good to be motivated by honesty, fairness, equality, and by rightness itself (de dicto)? Moral worth is applicable up the hierarchy of metaphysical features, from right-making features, to features that make those features obtain, up to rightness itself.

that his fundamental motivating reason, self-interest, is only accidentally connected to the act's rightness. This is a content-based explanation. In addition, content-based views preserve a straightforward connection between moral worth and a simple conception of quality of will. The picture is this. In acting, we are moved to do one thing rather than another by our beliefs about the action and by desire-like motivational states. What we do thereby expresses what we want, care about, value, and take to matter. These conative attitudes are subject to content-based norms governing the kinds of things we ought to care about (Strawson 1962). A well-motivated person cares, to some degree, about the right kinds of things (such as the welfare of others or moral rightness). Content-based views are then motivated by the natural thought that an act is praiseworthy when it reveals a notably good quality of will, and blameworthy insofar as it reveals an objectionable pattern of concern, so understood—indifference to the good or devotion to what is bad.⁵

For now, I set aside the well-trodden dispute between the RIV, the RMFV, and hybrid accounts. My aim is not to settle that dispute. It is to ask a prior question: suppose an agent does a good thing for the sort of reason specified by the best content-based view. Is that enough to make her praiseworthy? I will now argue that it does not.

9.3 The Moral Hobbyist

For definiteness, I will assume that the RMFV—arguably the dominant view—gives the correct account of the content of morally worthy motivation. As noted, the RMFV holds that a virtuous person cares about doing what is in fact right. An agent's right act has moral worth if she is directly motivated

⁵ The focus has been especially pronounced since Arpaly's *Unprincipled Virtue* (2003), which advanced a minimal Humean account of the agency underlying moral worth: acting for the right reasons is simply a matter of having intrinsic desires that instantiate good will. Subsequent debate concentrated on specifying the content of those intrinsic desires (whether they must be directed at right-making features or at rightness itself). But this way of framing the contrast has earlier roots in Michael Smith's discussion of praiseworthy motivation in *The Moral Problem* (1994), where he denied that de dicto motivation by rightness could contribute to moral worth and instead branded it "fetishistic." A substantial debate arose over whether de dicto desires can underwrite moral worth (see, e.g., Lillehammer 1997; Svavarsdóttir 1999; Olson 2002; Copp 1997; Dreier 2000; Zangwill 2003; Toppinen 2004; Strandberg 2007) which focused entirely on motivational content.

by its right-making feature (that is, insofar as they constitute her motivating reasons), even if she is mistaken about (or indifferent to) its moral status.

But acting on a non-instrumental desire for a right-making feature does not suffice for moral worth. Consider

Moral Hobbyist: Anastasia's week is divided between two passions: tending her garden and volunteering at a local shelter for people in need. She rises early to tend to the garden and ensure that each plant flourishes. Later the same day, she might be found serving meals to the hungry. In each domain, she is moved by an intrinsic attraction to the activity's internal goal: she wants her plants to thrive, and she wants the poor to fare better for their own sake. Yet she regards both as personal projects, whose value is conditional on their speaking to her tastes. If she lost the gardener's delight in flourishing plants or the volunteer's pleasure in alleviating need, she would see no reason to continue. She relates to the poor as she does to her roses: both matter to her only so long as the activity of promoting their flourishing retains its appeal.

There is something deficient in the way Anastasia relates to her charitable acts. She is not indifferent to the poor; she non-instrumentally cares about improving their condition. Yet her commitment is "conditional" in a way that undermines her claim to moral credit. She regards the poor much as she regards her plants: as an optional source of reasons. She happens to care about the poor now; but she would not regard failing to care as a mistake. And inasmuch as this is so, her actions lack full moral worth.

To bring out this intuition, consider the kinds of statements Anastasia is inclined to make about her motives. When praised for her work with needy families, she does not just say, "I helped because their need was desperate" or "I couldn't stand by while they suffered." Instead, she adds: "Isn't it wonderful that I found something that speaks to me so deeply!" When asked why she quit, she explains: "Why would I continue something that no longer moves me?" Such remarks are jarring. They show that the people Anastasia helps are merely the fortunate beneficiaries of her current passion; she helps them simply because she happens to have a personal interest that lines up with a right-making feature, and not because she appreciates their significance. When basic welfare is at stake, treating one's reasons for promoting that welfare as conditional on attraction shows a failure of moral orientation: Anastasia is making a normative mistake that undermines her deservingness of credit.

This “hobbyist” pattern of moral motivation appears in recent literature. Singh (2020) describes Jack, who saves a stranger’s life not because he sees it as morally significant but because saving lives happens to interest him in the same way that draining venom from wounds intrinsically interests him:

Venom*. Jack’s fundamental motivating reason for making the incision [to drain venom from a snakebite] is that it will save the stranger’s life [. . .] But this is not because he sees anything particularly morally significant about saving lives. He has no concern for doing the right thing. Rather, he is simply intrinsically interested in saving lives. (162)

Jack’s reason for acting coincides with the act’s right-making feature yet Jack is not praiseworthy for acting rightly. Singh frames the problem in terms of accidentality. A widely shared assumption is that moral worth requires a form of non-accidentality: it must not be a matter of luck that the agent’s motive connects to the rightness of the act. But when an agent with hobbyist motivation just happens to have a personal interest that lines up with a right-making feature, the connection between motive and rightness is merely accidental. It is the product of a fortuitous alignment between desire and morality. Related examples appear in Lockhart (2017)⁶ and Cunningham (2022).⁷

Two confusions must be avoided. The first is to deny that Anastasia acts for the right reason. A proponent of the RMFV may argue that the hobbyist does not (contra my description of the case) in fact act on the reason the act is right. When asked to describe our reason for gardening or stamp collecting, we might say something like “because I want to” or “because it interests me”. And this may be taken to suggest that our ultimate motivation for pursuing hobbies is to satisfy our desires or to do what interests us. On this view, her real motive is the satisfaction she takes in the activity, with the relief of the poor serving merely as a means. If that were true, any content-based view could explain why her actions lack moral worth, since her ultimate reason would be self-regarding.

⁶ A “Moral Hobbyist” is explicitly discussed by Lockhart (2017), but her interpretation diverges from the one I advance here (see note 14).

⁷ Anastasia’s case resembles Kant’s “sympathetic person,” but that figure is exegetically fraught: is his fault acting for pleasure, acting on whim (Arpaly 2002: 235), or something else? I introduce the Hobbyist instead to avoid resting the argument on contested Kantian interpretation. The case is designed to foreground what I take to be decisive—not acting on whim or “mere inclination” but the conditional orientation it reveals. The aim is not Kant exegesis but getting closer to the true view of what moral worth requires.

But this misrepresents the hobbyist's psychology. Just as a dedicated gardener wants her plants to flourish for their own sake (or for the sake of producing a beautiful garden), Anastasia wants the poor to fare better for their own sake. Consider what it's like to be actually engaged in hobbies. We aren't thinking about our own satisfaction at all; we are absorbed in the activity itself. Someone who is intent on building a model airplane, for instance, is simply thinking about how to correctly build the model, not about how to gain as much pleasure as possible from the activity. Indeed, hobbies would not bring us joy in the absence of such intrinsic desires. Anastasia would not take pleasure in helping the poor if she did not care about it for its own sake, just as a gardener would not take pleasure in the flourishing of her plants if she did not intrinsically desire it. We take pleasure in hobbies *because* we find them intrinsically attractive, not vice versa. What makes serious hobbies compelling is that the enjoyment they yield flows from pursuing an aim one takes to be non-instrumentally valuable. So the right-making feature can be the genuine object of intrinsic desire, even when one relates to it in a hobbyist way.

A second confusion is to treat Anastasia's case as one of mixed motives. On this view, her motivation is a cluster: she is moved both by the right-making feature and by the satisfaction she expects from the work (Worsnip & Fogal 2024). But this too is a misdiagnosis. As I intend the case, Anastasia's enjoyment does not function as a motivating reason at all. It serves instead as a background condition for the stability of her desire: something that she treats as explaining why F is a reason without being part of the reason itself (Shroeder 2007).⁸

To be more precise: Anastasia's motivating reason is wholly constituted by the right-making feature; the fact that her attraction is necessary for the persistence of this reason does not introduce a second, self-regarding component into the content of her motivation. She is disposed to act only while she retains a strong attraction to the activity, but this attraction is a sustaining cause of the motive from which she acts and does not itself figure in the account she would give of that-for-the-sake-of-which she helps. Instead the hobbyist treats enjoyment or attraction as necessary condition for the presence of a reason.⁹ The situation is analogous to a stamp collector who would

⁸ In "What the Cluster View Can Do for You," Fogal and Worsnip (2024) explicitly defend *cluster* reasons (where the agent's reason can include desire-facts like "I find this interesting"). This is the most direct, sophisticated version of the "mixed-motive" reply. For background on how "which fact we cite" may mask the underlying structure, see Fogal and Worsnip (2021).

⁹ In *Slaves of the Passions* (2007), Schroeder defends a Humean view where desires function as background conditions: they explain why considerations are reasons but are not part of their

abandon her hobby if she lost interest, but whose motivating reason for collecting is simply a passionate desire to complete her collection. Insofar as this motivational structure is *possible*—and there is no reason to think it is not—then a counterexample to the RMFV is available (even if mixed motive cases are also possible).

In fact there is good reason to think that this sort of motivation is not only possible, but that it characterizes actual hobbyist motivation. Hobbies track real, objective goods, such as the beauty of a well-designed stamp. But because the goods at stake are optional (we are not required to take an interest in them), one rationally sees them as worth pursuing only if one finds them attractive—that is, if one is able to engage with the relevant goods. But when one does, it is those very goods that one pursues. There is nothing mysterious about this rational-motivational structure: it seems to mirror normative reality. So the mixed-motive objection mischaracterizes serious hobbyist psychology generally.

Finally, a third confusion is that Anastasia's fault is simply a matter of degree: her concern is not strong or deep enough to count as morally worthy. "Strength of concern" is not strictly a content property, but some defenders of the RMFV already allow that the depth of the agent's concern for the right-making feature modulates praiseworthiness. Arpaly (2003), for instance, holds that the "die-hard philanthropist" who helps despite strong countervailing feelings is more admirable than the "fair-weather" friend whose inclination makes the task easy (236).¹⁰ Yet Anastasia's problem is not that her concern is weak or fleeting or easily overridden. On the contrary, Anastasia's commitment to helping the poor could be intense, sustained over years, accompanied by substantial sacrifice, and a matter of priority in her structure of desires. Ordinary hobbies are rarely whims; they are often serious and absorbing.

Here lies the problem for the RMFV. By its standard—whether one is moved by the right-making feature—Anastasia is exemplary. She acts from a non-instrumental desire for the very feature that makes her act right. We can even imagine her motivational set ideally proportioned, so that as she

content. I take the Hobbyist's outlook in the same way: she sees her attraction to helping as what makes the poor's need a reason for her.

¹⁰ Arpaly writes: "The first agent is more praiseworthy . . . because to act benevolently for moral reasons while one is depressed takes more concern . . . than to do so in happy times" (2003: 87). But my claim is not about how much the Hobbyist cares. She may care intensely whenever she is attracted, yet her motivation vanishes once the attraction fades. Her fault is not insufficient concern, but conditional concern.

acts she has just the right level of concern for the various right-making features of this act and the alternatives.¹¹ Yet her concern is personal and optional in a way that precludes moral worth. The RMFV cannot account for this deficiency.

Up to this point, I have treated the Moral Hobbyist as a problem for the RMFV, granting that moral worth lies in being moved, non-instrumentally, by the feature of the action that makes it right. Of course, the defender of the RIV will object. She will say: “The case makes trouble for the RMFV, but it does refute content-based views of moral worth. It just shows that we have focused on the wrong content.” Moral worth, on this view, requires a *de dicto* concern for doing what is right as such. The Hobbyist fails because she is motivated by a non-instrumental desire to help and not by the moral rightness of helping. In what follows, I argue that we cannot solve the problem by moving to the RIV. Though moral hobbyists are not praiseworthy, some agents who act for right-making reasons (and not rightness itself) are, despite lacking *de dicto* moral concern.

9.4 The True Philanthropist

Consider:

True Philanthropist: Eleanor spends time each week helping the poor. Like Anastasia, she is motivated directly by a genuine non-instrumental concern to help those in severe need. Moreover, she does not take herself to be acting from a concern for “rightness as such” and has no standing desire to “do the morally right thing” in the abstract. She has heard about morality, but has doubts about what it might ask her to do in other cases, and in any case she is not inclined to think in moral terms. Her motivation is sourced in the recognition that the programs she supports will actually alleviate suffering and save lives, and she takes these facts as decisive reasons whose force is not dependent on her attractions. They move her even when she is tired or burdened by other interests, and when all attraction has dissipated.¹²

¹¹ Thus the Hobbyist meets the counterfactual tests invoked by views that tie praiseworthiness to degree of concern: her priorities track the comparative value of the goods at stake (cf. Markovits 2010: 235).

¹² True Philanthropist is intended to make the same point as the case of Huck Finn, using a less distracting and fraught example. The case of Huck Finn is frequently used to support the

Eleanor has no standing desire to “do what is right.” She is uninterested in whether her actions are morally good or required by the correct moral theory. What moves her is a desire to help the poor. But unlike Anastasia, her concern is grounded in a recognition of the categorical importance of their wellbeing: its unconditional reason-given force. The right-making feature—that *helping will improve their plight*—is what she takes as categorically significant, and it directly motivates her.

In acting from this recognition, Eleanor acts with full moral worth. Eleanor is a paradigmatic case of someone whom we would praise for acting rightly: she cares deeply and intrinsically about helping the poor, and helps because takes their interests to matter categorically. Yet RIV must deny this, since her motive is not directed at rightness as such.

The two cases present a puzzle. Eleanor and Anastasia share the same aim. Both devote serious effort to it and reliably respond to the reasons it affords. Yet their stances toward the right-making feature diverge. For Eleanor, it registers as a claim—a reason whose force is independent of what she finds appealing; for Anastasia, it does not. This structural difference, I contend, grounds the difference in our moral appraisal. But what, exactly, is the relevant psychological difference? It cannot be explained by a difference in whether the agent cares about various RMFs or rightness itself. In the next section, I will offer a principled argument that no content-based theory can succeed at characterizing it.

9.5 The Insufficiency of Content

With these cases in view, the core phenomenon is clear: two agents act for the same reasons, yet only one is praiseworthy. The difference must lie in some further feature of their motivation. Yet one might wonder whether the possibilities for a content-level fix have really been exhausted; I will show now that no such fix is available.

A tempting proposal is to refine the account of moral worth so that the right-making feature is specified in explicitly moralized terms. For example,

RMFV. But philosophers diverge in their intuitions about Huck. Johnson King (2020a) argues that Huck is not praiseworthy, since he merely happens to act on morally relevant considerations. I agree Huck can be read that way—in which case he resembles the Hobbyist—but I hold that there is also a non-accidental way of acting on right-making reasons: by treating them as having force independent of one’s desires. This ambiguity in Huck’s case is why I introduce the True Philanthropist as a clear contrast with the Hobbyist.

we might require that the agent's motivating reason be not merely *that the act will help the poor*, but *that the act will help the poor, and this is something I must do*. At first glance, this looks like a content-level fix; we have just specified a different proposition for the motivating reason to pick out. But there is a critical ambiguity in what this "must" might amount to in Eleanor's motivational structure. On one reading—the one that makes Eleanor admirable—the "must" expresses a thought about her motivating reason, or an attitude toward it: a way of regarding the reason that treats it as binding on her will whether she finds it appealing or not. So construed, the "must" does not figure in the content of her motivating reason. Rather, it identifies a structural feature of her psychology: the stance she takes toward the reason that moves her. A theory that builds this stance into the conditions of moral worth is no longer a purely content-based account.

Alternatively, one might treat the "must" as part of the content of Eleanor's motivating reason, which would then be something like: a desire *to help the poor because I must*. (This is similar to Worsnip and Fogal's "mixed motives" proposal.) But this reintroduces the problem. Nothing in the content of this desire ensures that its grip on her—its motivational force for her—is categorical rather than conditional. A hobbyist could just as easily feel she must help while remaining motivated only so long as doing what "must" be done strikes her as appealing. Such a motive would be as accidental as before. So whether the "must" is read as pointing to a structural feature of the agent's motivational set (and the view ceases to be content-based) or as part of the content (and the hobbyist problem returns), the move fails to preserve a genuinely content-based account.

This exposes the more general problem for any content-based account of moral worth, no matter how the content is specified. For any candidate feature we take to give the content of the agent's motivating reason, the agent may be oriented toward that feature in the hobbyist way or the "categorical" way. Even if we say, along with proponents of the RIV, that the relevant feature is rightness itself, we can imagine an agent whose relation to that aim is purely hobby-like. This "de dicto hobbyist" might regularly perform acts she conceives of as right but only when the prospect of doing the right thing strikes her as appealing. When she is tired or lacks enthusiasm, she feels no claim on her to do the right thing. Her pattern of motivation is thus structurally identical to that of the "de re hobbyist." The point is that *however we specify the content of the motivating reason*, this appeal-dependent motivational structure will be possible, and it will undermine praiseworthiness by

rendering the connection between the agent's motivation and the morally relevant features of her action accidental.

This shows that *no content-based theory of moral worth can succeed*. It also undermines the main rationale for RIV: securing non-accidentality. A hobbyist could be motivated to “do the right thing” but only when it appeals, so RIV fails to deliver. Adding a knowledge requirement (Sliwa 2016) or a justified-belief requirement (Isserow 2019) does not help, since one may know an act is right yet still care about rightness in a hobbyist way. In this respect, RIV fares no better than RMFV. The phenomenon of hobbyist motivation thus grounds an independent critique of RIV (beyond the counterexamples due to Arpaly and others) that applies equally to RMFV, and so points to the need for a new account of moral worth.

9.6 Non-Content-Based Criteria: Initial Ideas

If the contrast between the Moral Hobbyist and True Philanthropist cannot be explained by appealing to the content of their motivation, the difference must turn on some further property of their motivational psychologies that affects moral worth. As argued earlier, a simple “depth of concern” proposal cannot work, as hobbyist motivation can be serious and deep. In this section I outline several non-content-based features. This list is not exhaustive, but it gathers the most natural proposals for identifying the structural condition that makes for genuinely praiseworthy motivation.

- (1) **Counterfactual robustness**—The Philanthropist would help even if attraction waned; the Hobbyist would not.
- (2) **Reflective endorsement/conscious belief**—The Philanthropist may consciously believe that her reason to help is independent of her inclinations, and her belief may ground her disposition to help when attraction wanes. The Hobbyist has no such belief.
- (3) **Categorical orientation**—A less intellectualized version of (2): The Philanthropist may act from a felt normative demand that manifests in her phenomenology as the experience of being constrained independently of her attractions, but not in a way that requires a conceptualized overt belief about the categorical force of her reasons. The Hobbyist's reasons do not strike her in this way.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider these proposals in detail. But (1) and (2) face clear difficulties.

Counterfactual robustness (1) is not enough. If this were the whole story, there might be nothing in the occurrent psychology of an agent who is acting with moral worth to distinguish her from a hobbyist who gets no credit. But it seems clear that our attitudes of praise and esteem are meant to track something in the agent's conscious conception of her activity as it pertains to her actual motivation in acting. We admire her, or not, for her conscious person-level response to her moral predicament. Merely dispositional features that do not show up in her construal of her conduct at the time of action cannot ground the appropriateness of attitudes of this sort, and so cannot exhaust the relevant condition in the account of moral worth.

Reflective endorsement (2), by contrast, is too demanding. One lesson of the RMFV literature is that many admirable agents lack the capacity or inclination for such reflection. Children, the morally unreflective, and those in morally charged or repressive contexts (such as Huck Finn) may act from excellent, non-accidental motives without ever asking whether they "ought" to have them, or while explicitly disavowing them.

The most promising proposal is (3): categorical orientation. It fits the cases while avoiding over-intellectualization. The next section develops this idea under the label of *categorical concern*. Eleanor is praiseworthy because she is motivated to help because she appropriately *regards* the interests of the people she helps as categorically significant, while Anastasia *sees them as* a contingent source of reasons, like the interests of her plants.

9.7 Categorical Concern

The contrast between the Hobbyist and the Philanthropist points to a neglected dimension of moral psychology. What separates them is not what they are moved by—both respond directly to the feature that makes their action right—but *how* that feature moves them. The Philanthropist relates to the poor's need as a standing claim or constraint on her agency, one that binds her regardless of whether it presently appeals. The Hobbyist treats the same feature as binding only so long as it engages her interest. Moral worth is partly determined by this structural difference.

I propose that praiseworthiness requires what I call *categorical concern*. An agent has categorical concern for a right-making feature (or for any other morally relevant feature of her action) when she treats it as a reason whose

authority is independent of her contingent attractions or preferences.¹³ To act from categorical concern is to regard a consideration as reason-giving “unconditionally,” in the sense that its force does not derive from, and is not hostage to, one’s psychological contingencies. In this way, categorical concern introduces a distinct dimension of moral motivation: it marks the agent’s *stance toward her reasons*—a structural dimension of agency that content-based views cannot register.

More explicitly, categorical concern is a mode of concern for a right-making feature characterized by:

- (1) **Non-instrumentality**—the feature is treated as reason-giving in its own right, not as a means to some further end.
- (2) **Categorical guise**—the agent is moved by the feature *because* she takes it to make a claim on her will independently of contingent attraction.

The “taking” that figures in the second clause need not be conceptually articulated, but it must be (at least potentially) phenomenologically real. When we reason from “p” and “if p then q” to q, we *take* the premises to constitute a reason for the conclusion in a way that shows up in our experience of the transition, even if we lack the concepts required for *believing* that the inference is cogent (Boghossian 2014). And in virtue of this “taking,” there is a phenomenological difference between reasoning and free association. When we *treat* a consideration as a practical reason for a choice, we do something similar. The state I call “categorical guise” is like this, but more determinate. I must take the reason to be a reason that binds *anyway*, “whether I feel like it or not.” This orientation can be as unreflective as a child’s sense that promises must be kept, or as reflective as a Kantian acting on the belief that reasons are categorically binding. What matters is not the propositional content of the reason or the subject’s explicit beliefs about reasons, but rather the *guise under which it is taken*.

¹³ Lockhart (2017) defends a similar idea: that the Hobbyist acts on conditional reasons and praiseworthy agents on unconditional ones. However, she holds that when an agent’s motivating reason is conditional, its being her reason depends on a further fact that she also takes as a reason (e.g., that acting is pleasurable or satisfying). On my view, by contrast, such further facts need not be among the agent’s reasons at all. For the Hobbyist, pleasure or satisfaction functions instead as a background condition that determines whether she experiences the need as reason-giving in the first place.

At this point it may be tempting to offer a fuller analysis of what it is to take a consideration as a categorical reason—for instance, by reference to certain dispositions of response. While it would be nice to have a fuller account, I do not think it is necessary here. For present purposes, the notion of “taking as categorical” should be treated as primitive. We get a grip on it phenomenologically: it is the difference in how a reason is experienced when it presents itself as binding “whether I feel like it or not,” as opposed to merely conditional on one’s inclinations. In this sense the contrast between categorical and conditional guises can be recognized in both reflective and unreflective forms, and it is a contrast we can grasp without reduction.

Why insist on a guise at all? Why isn’t it enough that the motivating reason *in fact* be inclination-independent? The agent takes it as a reason, and this is not counterfactually sensitive to her inclinations (in the good case). It does normally feel a certain way to be “pulled” rather than “pushed.” But one view is that that is not part of the story of moral worth. Another is that you need to be called by the reason, and take yourself to be called by it. That is what the idea of a “categorical guise” captures. I favor this interpretation, though one could reject the guise without great loss to the spirit of the account.

A further worry is that this smuggles in normative content: doesn’t “taking categorically” just mean acting on the proposition that the reason has desire-independent force? Not so. To act under a categorical orientation is not to endorse any claim about the metaphysics of reasons, but to occupy a practical posture: relating to the feature as binding regardless of one’s contingent states. This posture may be avowed, but it can also be implicit or intuitive.

Let me be more specific. When we are moved by a feature under the guise of a reason, what we take to support the action is not the moralized proposition, “A has F, A’s having F is a reason to perform A,” but simply “A has F.” What the guise contributes is not propositional content but a mode of uptake: it casts F in a light that presents F-promoting acts as to-be-pursued. The categorical guise operates in the same way, but with a stronger orientation: it casts F in a “must”-generating light, presenting it as a basis for action regardless of one’s attraction. Thus it construes F as having a certain kind of force—independent of inclination—without participating in the content of the motivating reason.

But the skeptic may press: can there really be such different ways of “taking” the same reason? Here the epistemic parallel is instructive. As Boghossian (2014) observes, two people may reason from the same premises but count as making different kinds of inference depending on how they take the premises to support the conclusion: deductively or inductively. Likewise

in the practical case: two agents may be moved by the very same feature, yet one may take it to support the action categorically, while the other takes it only contingently, as dependent on attraction.

Of course, in any given case it may be difficult to tell whether one acts on a reason under a categorical guise, and this raises questions about moral worth in cases of mistake. Suppose you feel like a hobbyist but in fact regard the reason categorically, as revealed through your dispositions. While acting, it seems to you that you would stop if your inclinations changed, but later it becomes clear that you regarded the reason categorically—perhaps when you continue to act on it even without attraction. In such a case, you discover that you were not really a hobbyist after all. More often, however, the error runs in the opposite direction: we may feel as if we are acting under the categorical guise (sometimes through self-deception), yet our dispositions later reveal a merely hobbyist orientation. In those cases, we do not receive full credit for acting rightly, despite consciously taking the reason to be categorical. But this limitation concerns our self-knowledge, not the adequacy of the criterion of moral worth. What matters for praiseworthiness is whether one was in fact moved by categorical concern for the right-making feature, not whether one believed oneself to be. Indeed, the possibility of error shows that even in cases of “inverse akrasia”—like Huck Finn, who believes he acts wrongly and for bad reasons—one may nonetheless act from categorical concern and thereby earn moral credit.

The upshot is this: categorical concern picks out a distinctive species of motivation. We are generally reliable at distinguishing categorical from conditional reasons, recognizing that we have reason to help the needy, keep promises, avoid harm, and treat others kindly regardless of inclination. Still, mistakes occur in both directions: we may treat a categorical reason as conditional (as the Hobbyist does) or a conditional reason as categorical (as in someone who mistakes his taste for crêpes Suzette as binding on all). In general, however, we are subject to norms that require categorical concern for considerations that matter beyond our interests, and the good-willed person treats such considerations as unconditionally binding.

9.8 Non-Accidentality and Extensions to Other Cases

Categorical concern underlies moral worth for an intelligible reason: only by treating right-making features as categorically significant can an agent’s motivation fully register their significance. To see a reason as categorical is

to see that its force does not ebb with our interests, and that failing to give it weight would be a lapse. When the reason really is like this—as the reasons given by the right-making features are—the only *apt* response to the reason is categorical concern. The Hobbyist treats genuine reasons as reasons; but they misconstrue the nature of those reasons in a way that undermines the moral worth of the resulting act.¹⁴

The idea of categorical concern arose from the Hobbyist–Philanthropist contrast. But it will be useful to test the proposal against two additional cases: Kant’s cheerful versus dutiful philanthropist and cases of inverse akrasia.

Kant’s Dutiful versus Benevolent Philanthropist: Kant contrasts the dutiful philanthropist, whose grief “extinguishes all sympathy with the fate of others” yet who “tears himself out of this deadly insensibility and does the action . . . solely from duty,” with the benevolent philanthropist, who, “without vanity or self-interest,” takes “inner satisfaction in spreading joy” and delights in others’ contentment. Kant holds that only the former acts with moral worth. This is often taken to show that acting “because it is right” is essential to moral worth. My view suggests otherwise. The dutiful philanthropist, though lacking attraction, acts from a standing commitment to the needs of others as claims on him; his motive is appeal-independent yet he still takes the happiness of others as his end. The benevolent philanthropist helps only while it gratifies him, with pleasure or appeal as the background condition. The dutiful philanthropist acts with moral worth not because he desires rightness rather than happiness but because he maintains a categorical stance toward others’ welfare. This is why the dutiful philanthropist’s right act is non-accidental—his connection to rightness is secured not by a fortuitous alignment of attraction with a morally relevant feature but by his categorical orientation to that feature itself.

Because non-accidentality has been a central theme in discussions of moral worth, it is worth spelling this out exactly. To do the right thing non-accidentally, it is not enough that (1) the agent does what is right and (2) her motive happens to line up with the right-making feature. (This is what Singh’s Venom case and the Hobbyist case shows.) Nor is it enough that (1) the agent

¹⁴ Compare Rozeboom’s account of moral credit, according to which what matters is not the content of one’s motivating reasons but the quality of regard they express (2016). On his view, an agent may deserve moral credit not because she acted on the proposition “x is morally right” but because her motivation manifests the right kind of valuing relation to others. While Rozeboom’s account of the relevant valuing attitudes is broader than my focus on categorical concern, it shares the spirit of locating moral worth in attitudinal stance rather than just content.

does what is right and (2) her motive happens to line up with the rightness of the action. (This is what the case of the “de dicto hobbyist” brings out.) What we want is for the explanatory role of the right-making feature in the normative story to be mirrored in the agent’s motivational psychology. The account of moral worth secures exactly this. The True Philanthropist treats the poor’s welfare as a reason because she takes it to be categorically reason-giving. And that matches the explanation for the right-making feature’s normative status: the need of others is a right-making feature precisely *because* it is categorically significant, making a claim on us independently of our interests. Her motivation therefore does not merely coincide with the right-making feature; it tracks the very ground of its normative status.¹⁵ This guarantees that the agent’s motivation does not just “happen” to line up with the right-making feature: it is valued for the very same reason that it earns its status as a right-maker.

Inverse Akrasia: Cases of inverse akrasia, such as Huck Finn’s decision to help Jim escape despite believing it to be wrong, present a different challenge. Huck cannot be said to act from a desire for “rightness as such,” nor does he possess a moralized conception of the feature motivating him. Yet, on my account, his action can still have moral worth. If Huck’s concern for Jim’s personhood has the structure of categorical concern, involving taking Jim’s humanity as exerting a claim on him independent of his own attractions, then he is praiseworthy, even if he does not avow these motives and even if he does not recognize them in himself. This appears to be the prevailing—if often implicit—reading of the case. When Markovits writes that Huck “is motivated at least in part by his recognition of Jim’s value as a fellow human being—that is, by facts that morally justify his choice” (2010: 208), this heavily invites the interpretation that Huck indeed registers the desire-independent significance (“value”) of Jim’s humanity and interests.¹⁶ Huck does not help Jim because he finds it pleasant or attractive (indeed, he finds it frightening and contrary to the obligations he recognizes) but treats Jim’s interests as mattering categorically even as he intellectually repudiates their

¹⁵ In other words, the agent’s background principle—treating F as a non-instrumental reason because she takes it to have categorical significance—mirrors the normative background principle that makes F a right-making feature, namely that it exerts a claim on agents regardless of their desires or preferences.

¹⁶ Arpaly similarly writes that “to the extent that Huckleberry is reluctant to turn Jim in because of Jim’s personhood, he is acting for morally significant reasons” (2003: 230). The phrase “because of Jim’s personhood” likewise invites a normatively loaded reading of Huck’s recognition.

significance. If Huck is instead acting from a narrower, appeal-dependent benevolence—much as a gardener might be moved by affection to save her plants without any sense of being bound by them—then Huck is not deserving of moral credit.¹⁷

The extension to these cases confirms that categorical concern captures a unifying thread in our judgments about praiseworthiness and our thinking about moral worth more generally. Theories of moral worth that obscure it, including the contemporary *de re* and *de dicto* views, miss something important. But if the proposal is to stand as a satisfactory theory on its own, it must also confront potential objections. I now turn to addressing the initial objections that arise.

9.9 Objections and Replies

9.9.1 Does the Account Over-Intellectualize Moral Worth?

One objection is that the categorical-reason guise threatens to over-intellectualize moral worth. On its face, the requirement that an agent “take the right-making reason to be categorical” appears to demand a rather sophisticated grasp of normative structure—one that is implausible to attribute to many intuitively praiseworthy agents, including Huck Finn. Surely Huck does not explicitly entertain the proposition that his reason to aid Jim would survive the loss of his desire to do so; nor does he seem in a position to distinguish “categorical” from “hypothetical” reasons in anything like Kant’s terms. If moral worth requires such a reflective grasp, then the account would exclude too many ordinary cases of praiseworthiness.

The view, however, does not require this sort of philosophical sophistication. To regard a right-making feature as a categorical reason, in my sense, is not to deploy any specialized vocabulary or even to formulate the thought in explicitly counterfactual terms. It is instead to have a practical orientation toward the feature that treats it as reason-giving independently of one’s

¹⁷ This ambiguity in Huck’s case is why I introduce the Dedicated Philanthropist as the clear contrast with the Hobbyist. Johnson King (2020a) argues that Huck is not praiseworthy, since he merely happens to act on morally relevant considerations. I agree Huck can be read that way—in which case he resembles the Hobbyist—but I hold that there is also a non-accidental way of acting on right-making reasons: by treating them as categorical. Johnson King’s account of non-accidentality, which requires awareness of acting as type A, is too strict. The relevant non-accidentality is secured whenever the agent’s explanation for taking F as a reason coincides with the explanation of why F is a right-maker.

present desires—to be disposed to regard it as a reason that remains in force even in the absence of attraction. This orientation can be realized in a variety of ways: in a perceptual-like seeming that the feature calls for action “no matter what”; in a simple judgment such as “I have to help him, whether I want to or not”; or in an ingrained habit of practical sensitivity that operates without explicit articulation. It is possible to treat something as if it were an F—in ways that are only appropriate if it is an F—without representing it as an F.

Ordinary moral experience shows that such an orientation is not beyond the reach of untutored agents. Children often display it when they insist on keeping a promise even after the fun of doing so has vanished because they have internalized the idea that a promise is binding regardless of current desire. Adults display it when they resist the temptation to abandon a friend in need, not because they are still eager to help but because they take the friend’s need to demand their help *anyway*. Huck, at least on some interpretations, exemplifies this structure. Although he explicitly believes that helping Jim is wrong, he experiences Jim’s humanity as making a claim on him that he cannot ignore; it exerts a kind of “must” on him that is not conditional on wanting to help. This is the practical analog of taking the reason to be categorical—and it is enough for moral worth, even without the philosophical apparatus.

9.9.2 Categorical versus Moral Guises

Keshav Singh (2020) defends a *Guise of Moral Reasons* view of moral worth: a right action has moral worth iff it is motivated by sufficient moral reasons *as such* (157). To act under this guise is to be motivated by a consideration “in virtue of taking it to contribute to the overall moral status of the action” (171). On Singh’s account, agents like Jack in *Venom* lack praiseworthiness precisely because they fail to act under the guise of moral reasons. My own account and Singh’s share a virtue: both exclude hobbyists by requiring that praiseworthy motivation involve a distinctive orientation toward the right-making feature. The difference is that Singh makes this orientation depend on the agent’s classificatory stance—that she regard the reason *as moral*—whereas I require only that she respond to it under a categorical guise.

This difference matters. Some agents act from an unqualified sense of the claim a right-making feature makes on them without conceptualizing that

claim in moral terms. The True Philanthropist may think simply: “I must help the poor because their plight demands it.” If she responds under a categorical guise, her action seems no less worthy for not failing to label the relevant reason “moral.” Singh’s account would exclude her.

The harder case presses in the other direction. Suppose an agent responds to a morally relevant consideration under an aesthetic guise, treating it as aesthetically valuable, or under a prudential guise, treating it as part of her good. Both aesthetic and prudential reasons may be categorical. Does my view then mistakenly count such agents as praiseworthy?

The worry rests on a confusion. To act with categorical concern is to treat the right-making feature itself as a non-instrumental reason—one that continues to bind regardless of its relation to further values. To treat the fact that helping the poor alleviates suffering *because it contributes to beauty or prudence* is precisely not to treat that feature as categorically and non-instrumentally relevant; it is to treat it instrumentally. Talk of acting on the same feature under a “moral,” “aesthetic,” or “prudential” guise is unstable, since only the first takes the feature itself to ground a claim, independently of its relation to further values. Singh’s demand that one act under the guise of *moral* reasons builds in a *de dicto* requirement—that one act because the act is morally right, out of concern for rightness—which I take to be too strong.

Another way to see the point is this. Reasons fall into different domains. There are moral reasons (having to do with the rights and interests of others), aesthetic reasons (having to do with beauty), and prudential reasons (having to do with one’s own good). Within any domain, reasons can bind categorically (independently of desire) or only hypothetically (in virtue of desire). In this sense, it is plausible that there are categorical reasons in the aesthetic and prudential domains as well. Yet on the present account, such reasons cannot ground moral worth, since they are not right-making features. They concern what is beautiful or prudentially beneficial, not what is relevant to the rights or interests of others.

My proposal is that moral worth derives from adopting a categorical stance toward features in the moral domain—that is, the right-makers—which we can roughly demarcate by appeal to the rights and interests of others. What matters is that *the very features that make an act right* are treated by the agent as categorically reason-giving. Aesthetic or prudential reasons may be categorical in their own domains, but since they are not right-makers, they lie outside the scope of reasons that can ground moral praiseworthiness.

9.9.3 Does the Account Exclude Supererogation?

One might object that some right-making features themselves are desire-dependent. Consider supererogatory acts, where the fact that performing the act would be good seems to generate an optional rather than a binding claim. Does the present account therefore require agents to mischaracterize such features—say, the value of saving someone from a burning building—as categorically binding? The answer is no. The point is not that every right- or good-making feature must generate requirement, but that praiseworthy motivation treats such features as reasons whose force is desire-independent. Supererogatory acts may involve features of a weaker sort—ones that render the act good but not obligatory—yet praiseworthiness attaches only if the agent takes those features to provide reasons independently of her contingent desires. Thus one may admire an agent who undertakes supererogatory sacrifice not because she mistakes it for a requirement but because she registers the value as genuinely reason-giving in its own right. By contrast, an agent who enters the burning building merely because it appeals to her would lack praiseworthiness. The categorical stance, then, applies across the moral domain: to all right- or good-making features whose normative significance is not conditional on attraction.

9.9.4 Can Humeans about Reasons Act with Moral Worth?

A fourth objection presses on the metaethical implications of the view. If moral worth requires that the agent see the right-making feature as a categorical reason, then agents who sincerely hold a Humean theory of reasons, according to which all reasons are desire-dependent, cannot meet the condition. On such a view, there simply are no reasons whose authority outlasts the desires of the agent; all putative “reasons” are either desire-dependent in content or rest on desire as a background condition. Would this not entail that committed Humeans cannot act with moral worth?

I think the answer is that it does entail it—but far from being a *reductio*, this is a virtue of the account. To regard one’s own desires as partly constitutive of the authority of moral considerations is to stand to morality in a way that is structurally akin to the Moral Hobbyist. The Hobbyist’s error is not that she has the wrong content—she does act for the right-making feature—but that she treats her reason for action as contingent on her attraction to it. The thoroughgoing Humean does the same, albeit in reflective theoretical

form. Both fail to accord the right-making feature the unconditional claim that is constitutive of good will, and it is precisely this failure the account is designed to capture.

That said, the bar for moral worth is practical, not doctrinal. Someone who professes Humeanism in the seminar room may nonetheless, in practice, treat certain reasons as binding regardless of her desires—just as an expressivist might behave as if moral judgments were truth-apt. In such cases, the practical stance satisfies the condition, even if the professed theory denies it. What rules an agent out is not their metaethical vocabulary but their actual mode of responding to the right-making feature: whether they take its claim on them to depend on their desires.

9.10 Conclusion

I have argued that accounts locating moral worth solely in the content of an agent's reasons cannot succeed. The contrast between the True Philanthropist and the Moral Hobbyist shows that two agents can act from the same right-making feature yet differ in praiseworthiness. The difference lies not in what reason they act on but in how they are related to it. Acting with moral worth is not just doing the right thing for the "right reasons," but doing so with regard for the categorical significance of moral considerations. The present account preserves what is most attractive in both RMFV and RIV while avoiding their drawbacks. Like the RMFV, it recognizes that good agents are moved directly by right-making features. Like the RIV, it explains why such motivation must not be accidental: the agent must treat those features as categorically binding, not merely appealing. In this way, the view retains the insights of each without inheriting their problems. The lesson is that debates over *de re* and *de dicto* content were always tracking something important, but mislocating it: moral worth turns not just on which features move us but on the categorical stance we take toward them.

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