

Manifestations of Virtue

Arden Ali

Northeastern University

July 2, 2018

(Draft; please do not cite without permission)

Not all permissible acts are praiseworthy. Even an uncaring person might step in front of a drunk driver's vehicle to stop them from driving off and endangering the lives of others. But if we find out that this person stopped the drunk driver with hopes of being injured and securing an insurance payout, I doubt many of us would be inclined to praise him for his behaviour. Similarly, a mean-spirited person might help her friend beat an alcohol addiction, but only because she needs leverage in their friendship. Such an act is permissible, perhaps even required, but the mean-spirited person doesn't appear to deserve praise.

The difficulties facing any virtue theory of permissibility are familiar. Even those who are sympathetic to virtue theory in general are skeptical about attempts to analyze deontic concepts in terms of virtuous traits of character.¹ Recently, an even deeper skepticism about virtue theory has emerged. These philosophers resist any attempt to analyze *praiseworthy* action in terms of the virtues.² Their objection is that the praiseworthiness of an action does not appear to depend on the virtuousness of the person who performs it. In this essay, I examine this objection closely. I reject an ambitious reply from some virtue theorists who insist that fully praiseworthy acts *do* in fact issue from virtue. In its place, I argue that virtue plays an indirect but essential role in explaining moral worth. Though praiseworthy acts are

¹ For example, see Williams 1995 and Thomson 1997.

² When I say 'virtue' in this essay, I mean 'virtuous disposition' unless otherwise specified.

not manifestations of virtue, these acts are manifestations of motivational states that are themselves inexplicable without an allusion to the virtues.

1. The skeptical argument and an ambitious reply

Though they grant that acting from virtue is sufficient for full praiseworthiness, my opponents are doubtful that acting from virtue is necessary in order to warrant full praise for an act. Roger Crisp (2015) imagines a malicious gangster, Ronnie, who once saves someone from danger because he genuinely wishes to help. Although Crisp accepts the value of Ronnie's good motives, he wonders: '...should we accept that Ronnie would have been *more* praiseworthy for acting in the way that he did had his action been based on a disposition? I think not' (2015: 14 his emphasis). Since Ronnie's act is fully praiseworthy, Crisp concludes that the virtues have nothing to add to an account of praiseworthiness.

The argument implicit in Crisp's example is this:

- (P) A right act is fully praiseworthy if and only if it is performed from good motives.
(C) So, the concept of virtue *per se* plays no role in the analysis of praiseworthy action.

There is no shortage of examples to support the premise above. Thomas Hurka describes a cowardly soldier who jumps on a grenade in order to save the lives of his comrades on one occasion.³ Even though he lacks bravery, Hurka claims that such an act is fully praiseworthy. The goodness of the act rests not in his character, but rather in his reasons for jumping on the grenade.⁴ Similar examples appear in Julia Markovits' account of moral

³ This example appears in Hurka 2006: 72 and Hurka 2013: 12-13

⁴ In the same paper, Hurka (2006) describes walking down the street with a companion, who stops to give \$20 to someone in need 'apparently from concern for that person for his own sake' (71). We can imagine that Hurka's companion is generally unkind and mean to strangers and so this action may be

worth, which differs from Nomy Arpaly's account precisely because Markovits denies the role of an agent's broader dispositions in the assessment of her actions.⁵ Markovits imagines a fanatical dog-lover who saves a drowning stranger, but who would ignore the stranger if his dog were present.⁶ The dog-lover lacks virtue, but Markovits insists that his act is morally worthy if he acts from good motives.

Still, some virtue theorists are inclined to deny the premise. They say that an act merely performed from good motives would have been morally better had it also issued from the relevant virtue. Such a reply requires that the virtue theorist explain *why* good motives are insufficient for full moral worth. Unsurprisingly, this challenge has been a tall order.

Consider Brad Cokelet's attempt to meet this demand. He describes an agent named Randy, who does not value his son or their relationship very much, but attends his son's soccer game on one occasion. Cokelet says that 'the value and worth of Randy's showing up (for good reasons) will wax and wane with his overall values; his act of showing up will 'mean less' and be less good and praiseworthy, if he is a bad dad than if he is a good one' (2015: 240). Since his overall values are an embodiment of his character, Randy is more praiseworthy if he acts from virtue and not merely from good motives.

I worry that opponents of the virtue theory will find Cokelet's example unpersuasive. As Cokelet notes, Randy's act has primarily symbolic value. The value of attending his son's game is that it communicates Randy's support to his son. This message would not be communicated if Randy were generally unsupportive or disingenuously supportive on this occasion. So, it is no surprise that Randy's act is more valuable if he is a good dad; being a good dad is required for the act to have value in the first place. In other words, Randy's act

thoroughly out of character. Hurka insists that his companion's act is fully praiseworthy. If his judgment is correct, praiseworthiness simply requires the right kind of motive; an agent's virtue is largely beside the point.

⁵ See Arpaly 2002 and Markovits 2010 for this debate.

⁶ See Markovits 2010: 210

only has greater value if it issues from good character because it is the kind of act that wouldn't have *any* value if it didn't issue from character in some sense. I gather that Cokelet notices this feature, but he nonetheless thinks that the case vindicates the 'core virtue ethical thesis' that character can affect the ethical value of acts. I think the results for the virtue theory of praiseworthiness are more devastating. The virtues still bear no general relationship to moral praiseworthiness. The virtues are relevant to praiseworthiness only when they are needed in order to have the appropriate good motives; otherwise, they fall out of the picture.

Cokelet's account runs into more serious trouble elsewhere. Cokelet claims that the value of giving \$20 to someone in need is diminished if the agent undervalues the loss of \$20. He says: 'if the person has been inducted into a strange religious cult, disvalues having money in her wallet, and is therefore disposed to give her money away to anyone who asks, then her act is less generous than it would be if she values what she gives away' (2015: 242-3). Again I doubt that opponents of the virtue theory will be convinced. Suppose Cokelet is correct that an action is less praiseworthy if the person undervalues what she sacrifices. It appears then that an agent can increase the praiseworthiness of her actions by valuing morally irrelevant things. A stockbroker who gives \$20 to someone in need is more praiseworthy than the person inducted into the strange cult. This is not intuitive. In fact, on Cokelet's proposal, the stockbroker is worthy of more praise *because* he cares about money. It seems especially egregious to base any boost in moral praiseworthiness on the stockbroker's concern for something that lacks any intrinsic moral significance.

One can generate other troubling cases. Suppose my friend does not care about his physical appearance at all. In contrast, I am especially concerned about how I look. If we both jump into the lake to save a drowning child, and thereby ruin our clothing and hairstyles, Cokelet must say that I am more praiseworthy than my friend. For him, I deserve more praise simply because I care about my clothing and hairstyle. But these things are not morally

significant in the present context. When someone's life is at stake, my concern for my appearance is irrelevant. It seems inappropriate to praise me more highly because I *also* care about something relatively trivial. Given this consequence, I am unconvinced that Cokelet has offered a satisfactory reply on behalf of virtue theory.

2. Two models of acting from good motives

I am going to pursue a different line of response. For my opponent's inference to go through, they must assume that praiseworthiness can be analyzed using concepts that do not themselves require explication in terms of the virtues. I argue that this cannot be done. First, I claim that my opponents rely on a technical conception of acting from good motives. Then, in the next section, I claim that they cannot get a grip on this particular conception without an allusion to virtue.

What does it mean to act from good motives? I want to start by considering two familiar approaches. The first is *cognitive*, according to which someone acts from good motives when she takes the appropriate consideration as her reason for acting. The second is *conative*, according to which someone acts from good motives when she is moved by the appropriate foregrounded desire.⁷ These views are not mutually exclusive nor exhaustive; they are merely representative. For the sake of my argument, these models are cast at the highest level of generality. The first model focuses on the agent's beliefs about why she is acting. The second model focuses on the desire that appears in the deliberative episode that precedes her act. Although it may already be apparent that these models cannot work for my opponents, it will be instructive to say precisely why this is the case.

⁷ I use 'foregrounded desire' following Michael Smith & Philip Pettit (1990). I say more about this idea later.

I doubt that my opponents endorse the cognitive model. On this model, someone acts from good motives when she has the appropriate motivating reason for acting. Though this term is now used in a myriad of ways, my use here follows Jonathan Dancy: a person's motivating reason for an action is the consideration 'in the light of which the agent did that action' (2000: 1). In this sense, a person's motivating reasons are the "considerations that someone took to count in favor of an action, whether or not they actually count in favor of it—those considerations someone *treated as* 'normative' reasons' (Hieronymi 2011: 411). T. M. Scanlon (1998: 19) uses the term 'operative reasons' to refer to this concept; Jonas Olson and Frans Svensson (2003) chose the term 'deliberative reason' for it; and John Hyman says these are facts that 'someone is said to have been guided by' and which the agent 'took [] into consideration, when he modified his thought or behavior in some way, or decided what to think or what to do' (2011: 351)

Although philosophers disagree about exactly what it means to take a consideration as one's reason for acting in this sense, we needn't wade into this debate to see that someone can *delude* themselves about why they act. That is, someone might *take* one consideration as their reason for acting even though she is quite obviously motivated by another consideration altogether. Markovits, whose view sits in direct opposition to the virtue theory, acknowledges the possibility of delusion: 'If people were always perfectly self-aware and sincere, their account of what prompted them to choose to act as they did would always provide us with their [actual motives]. But people can, of course, be self-deceptive about their motivations...' (2010: 222). A selfish person might perform an act of charity, and convince herself that she acts out of moral concern, but it might be apparent to a third party that she is moved only because her interests happen to be served from altruism in this case. I may want to believe that I am a good person, and so convince myself that I am motivated to recycle out of concern for future generations or those in poor countries. But it takes no stretch of the imagination to

suppose that I am entirely deluded about the goodness of my character.

It may help to consider one actual view of what it means to act for a reason. In his *Reasons without Rationalism*, Kieran Setiya says '[to] take p as one's reason for doing ϕ is to have the desire-like belief that one is doing ϕ for the reason that p ' (2007:46). I see no grounds for thinking that beliefs of this sort are immune to distortion and influence by wishful thinking. If someone wanted to maintain the view that they are virtuous, they might form the belief that they are acting for altruistic reasons—and so technically *take* altruistic considerations as their reasons for acting on Setiya's view—even though they are actually an opportunistic altruist. This is consistent with the view that people cannot form beliefs deliberately for practical reasons.⁸ One merely needs to say that people can form beliefs about why they are acting—and so technically act for those reasons—even though they appear delusional.

Someone who is delusional (in the way just described) acts from good motives on the cognitive model. This would significantly weaken the core premise in my opponent's argument. If she does not want to allow that delusional people are fully praiseworthy for their actions, she must revise her claim that acting from good motives is sufficient for full praiseworthiness. Her argument against virtue theory depends on this premise, so the cognitive model can't be what she has in mind.

The conative option, according to which someone acts from good motives when she acts from the appropriate foregrounded desire, is equally unattractive. I take the term 'foregrounded desire' from Michael Smith & Philip Pettit (1990). For them, a desire 'figures in the foreground if and only if the agent reaches that choice via the recognition that he has that desire and that [his chosen] option has the desirable property...of promising to satisfy the desire' (Smith & Pettit 1990: 567-568). Importantly, Smith and Pettit (1990) do not think the

⁸ See Williams 1981: 94-100

relevant kind of recognition is always conscious; they say: ‘a desire may be in the foreground, as in implicit deliberation, without being consciously considered’ (Smith & Pettit 1998: 568). They hold that foregrounded desires appear ‘somewhere in the process leading to action’ and thus have the property of ‘engaging deliberation’ (1990: 566; 568). In short: to say that someone acts from a foregrounded desire is to say that this desire appears in the best representation of the deliberative episode that led to their action. An observer is allowed some latitude in reconstructing another person’s deliberative episode—for example, she might insert the implicit attitudes that pull together the agent’s explicit thoughts—but there are usually enough constraints to make the project feasible and informative.

The problem here is not delusion, but deviance. Suppose the desire to make other people laugh is the desire that motivates praiseworthy people to tell jokes. Alp may have the desire to make you laugh and his recognition of this desire may make him nervous and uptight. When he notices his nervousness, and sees how badly he wants to impress you, he might anxiously repeat a joke, even though he thinks that the joke is not worthwhile and has committed himself to never repeating it. The best representation of the deliberative episode that led to Alp’s behaviour includes the desire to make you laugh. In fact, if you inquired about why he told the joke, Alp might say that he told the joke because he wanted to make you laugh. It was precisely this thought that set him on the course to telling the joke. But, although the desire to make you laugh moved Alp, this desire moved him deviantly. That is, the appropriate desire moved Alp via his nervousness. Given his commitment to never repeating the joke, Alp seems to have made a mistake in telling the joke on this occasion. His behaviour is apparently *accidental* in the sense that usually precludes praiseworthiness. Since I doubt that my opponents want to allow that accidents in this sense are fully praiseworthy, the conative view also weakens the core premise in the argument against virtue theory.

The problem raised in the example above is not simply the general problem of causal deviance that worried philosophers like Donald Davidson.⁹ The kind of deviance at issue here needn't involve any interference from the agent's emotional or physiological states. The desire to make someone else laugh might move Caligula to tell someone a joke. If Caligula tells a joke, his desire to make someone else laugh might figure in the best representation of the deliberative episode that led to his act. But suppose Caligula is moved in this way only because he also knows that laughing will cause this person tremendous pain. If the appropriate desire in this case is the desire to make someone laugh, Caligula acts from good motives on the conative view; he is moved by the appropriate foregrounded desire. But no one wants to allow that Caligula's act is fully praiseworthy. Thus, if the conative model were correct, my opponents would need to revise the core premise in their argument. So I take it that my opponents do not want to adopt the conative model.

Notice that it makes no difference to change our account of the appropriate desire in Caligula's case. Even if the appropriate desire were different—for example, suppose it were the desire to lighten someone's mood—the problem would remain. Imagine that Caligula acts from the desire to lighten my mood, but only because he knows that I will make a terrible moral mistake if my mood is elevated. My opponents do not want to allow that such a person is fully praiseworthy so—unless they are prepared to give up their core premise—they must reject the conative model.

One might revise the conative model by adding the further stipulation that the appropriate foregrounded desire must be *noninstrumental*. Noninstrumental desires are held for their own sake; they do not owe their existence to the presence of any other desire. The proposed revised model says that someone acts from good motives when she is moved by the appropriate foregrounded noninstrumental desire. Caligula's desire to make someone else

⁹ See Davidson 1973

laugh is paradigmatically instrumental. He wants to make someone else laugh because he desires to cause someone else pain and believes that telling the joke is a means to achieving this end.

Although this stipulation resolves Caligula's case, it does so at the cost of becoming too conservative. It seems to me that many praiseworthy acts are performed by people for whom the appropriate noninstrumental desire is missing from the deliberative episode preceding their act.¹⁰ That is, in many cases, praiseworthy people do not deliberate from the appropriate noninstrumental desires by any stretch of the imagination. Suppose that an attentive and loving father signs his daughter up for extracurricular classes that are designed to help her perform well on an upcoming standardized examination. In the ordinary case, his deliberative episode might include few foregrounded desires, like the desire that his daughter pass the upcoming examination; that she attend the university of her choice; that she feels prepared for the examination; or even that she is gainfully employed after leaving school. Some of these will not be explicitly rehearsed, but they might nonetheless appear as steps in the best representation of the father's deliberative thought on this occasion. But notice that none of these desires are among the loving father's noninstrumental desires. The father desires that his daughter pass the examination, and attend her chosen school, and succeed in her chosen career, simply because he has the noninstrumental desire that his daughter is happy and flourishing. Indeed, this seems like precisely the kind of noninstrumental desire that warrants praise. But, if this noninstrumental desire does not appear in the loving father's deliberative thought, it is not foregrounded. So, if the revised conative model is correct, it turns out that the loving father does not act from good motives. In turn, if the premise in my opponent's argument is true, the father also doesn't deserve praise for his act. This strikes me

¹⁰ One such case is Huckleberry Finn, who Arpaly (2002) and Markovits (2010) say is praiseworthy for helping Jim escape slavery, even though Huck explicitly believes that helping Jim is impermissible.

as the wrong result. If my opponents intend to keep the core premise in their argument, they must reject even the revised conative model.

3. Setting up the modest reply to the skeptical argument

If the premise used in the skeptical argument against virtue theory is true, then my opponents do not appear to have the cognitive or conative models in mind. In her essay, Markovits notes that someone acts from good motives when the appropriate consideration appears in the rationalizing explanation of her action.¹¹ This means that Markovits does not conceive of acting from good motives in first-personal terms. Instead, she is interested in what R. Jay Wallace calls the *third-personal explanatory perspective*:

Here we are contemplating an action that has already been performed, and asking why it was done; in posing this question, we abstract from the immediate deliberative horizon of the agent, and adopt a standpoint that brings the agent herself into view, as an object of reflection. (Wallace 2003: 432)

One takes the third-personal explanatory perspective in order to identify the considerations that moved someone to act, granting that those considerations may not appear in her first-personal reflective or deliberative thought. From this perspective, one can determine why someone acted in the light of the agent's broader self, which includes the agent's cognitive, conative, and affective attitudes at the first-personal, sub-personal, or non-

¹¹ She says: 'I cannot be using the term 'motivating reason' as it is often used - to pick out (exclusively) belief-desire pairs. I propose that motivating reasons are the kinds of facts we are after when we ask about an agent, "what were her reasons for acting as she did?" - those that appear in what have been called 'rationalizing explanations'' (Markovits 2010:221).

personal levels. This gives us the resources to explain away cases of delusion and deviance. A deluded selfish person acts for altruistic reasons from the perspective of her first-personal deliberative agency, but her selfish motives may be evident from the third-personal explanatory perspective. Likewise, a person like Caligula is moved to make someone laugh from the first-personal perspective of his deliberative agency, but again this may not be true from the third-personal explanatory perspective.

My opponents have something like the third-personal explanatory perspective in mind when they talk about acting from good motives. Michael Smith and Phillip Pettit also have this stance in mind when they describe *backgrounded* desires, which they say may not appear in the agent's deliberation, even unconsciously, but can nonetheless explain or rationalize her behaviour from the intentional stance.¹² Unlike my opponents, however, Smith and Pettit are clear that ascriptions made from this perspective are fundamentally *dispositional*. To explain why someone acted from the third-personal explanatory perspective is to attribute a certain disposition to them. In his seminal paper, Donald Davidson (1963) seems to take this position too. Though he does not use these terms, he appears to think that 'primary reasons' for acting are revealed from the third-personal explanatory perspective. The main component of a primary reason is a pro-attitude, which Davidson takes to be an attitude "of an agent directed toward action of some kind" (1963: 686). Given the role he wants this attitude to play, it is hard to see how it could be anything *but* dispositional:

...the word 'attitude' does yeoman service here, for it must cover not only permanent character traits that show themselves in a lifetime of behavior, like love of children or a taste for loud company, but also the most passing fancy that prompts a unique action, like a sudden desire to touch a woman's elbow.

¹² See Smith & Pettit 1990: 565-572.

(Davidson 1963: 686)

Since they are interested primarily in the third-person explanatory perspective, I think my opponents also make a dispositional ascription when they say that someone acts from good motives. This is precisely why the third-person explanatory perspective solves the problems of delusion and deviance that plague the earlier proposals. A selfish person can delude themselves into thinking that they are altruistically motivated, but their disposition will bear their selfishness on its face. It will plainly show that the selfish person is disposed to act altruistically only when their interests happen to align with the altruistic thing to do. Moreover, Caligula's disposition precludes him from having good motives. He is disposed to tell the joke when it will cause his listener pain; if he were acting from good motives, he would be disposed to tell the joke when it will make his listener laugh.¹³

On my most charitable reading of my opponent's premise, acting from good motives involves the manifestation of a special disposition. Call it disposition *S*. This admission changes the landscape for the argument against the virtue theory. We are no longer comparing someone who acts from a disposition against someone who acts from an occurrent attitude. Rather, the relevant comparison is someone who manifests the virtuous disposition and someone else who manifests disposition *S*. With this in mind, the inference in the argument against virtue theory begins to look suspicious. Here's why:

If disposition *S* is supposed to explain praiseworthiness, it must be possible to give some general characterization of it. This disposition has at least two features. First, disposition *S* is broad enough that it rules out cases of delusion and deviance. Second, disposition *S* deviates from virtue in some significant regard; it is narrower, more ephemeral,

¹³ See Hyman 2013 and Setiya 2016:17 for the idea that dispositions may be useful in avoiding deviance generally.

or less robust than the virtuous disposition.¹⁴ The task of balancing these features is far from insurmountable. But I want to insist that this task cannot be completed without an allusion to virtue as an indispensable guidepost.

It is not obvious that disposition *S* is inherently significant. Without more, any candidate specification of disposition *S* may appear arbitrary. What is inherently significant about acting from a disposition that falls short of virtue in *x* ways? Why does the disposition that falls short of virtue in *x* ways have significance while other dispositions (for example, those that fall short of virtue in *y* or *z* ways) do not?

Notice that one cannot rely on first-order moral theory to explain why disposition *S* is significant. As far as I can tell, moral theory tells us something about *virtue*, not disposition *S*. If utilitarianism is true, then virtue is the disposition to maximize utility.¹⁵ If Rossian pluralism is true, then virtue consists in the seven distinct dispositions that embody respect for each of Ross' *prima facie* duties.¹⁶ It is not clear how one is supposed to fix the parameters for disposition *S* in the light of these characterizations of virtue. So it cannot be assumed that disposition *S* is morally significant.

In response, my opponents have two options. This first is to say that disposition *S* has *brute* moral significance. G. E. Moore apparently took this position. For Moore, when someone acts from good motives, 'it cannot be denied that the state of the man's mind, in performing [the act], contains something intrinsically good' (1903: 177). If Moore is right, there may be nothing more to say about why disposition *S* is worthy of praise. But then the premise in my opponent's argument is trivialized. It may be true that one can analyze

¹⁴ Some believe the virtues may be quite fine-grained. Social psychologists have noted that people exhibit only 'highly contextualized dispositions or 'local' traits' (Doris 2002: 64). In light of the data, these psychologists and philosophers have suggested that we replace attributions like 'courageous' with attributions like 'sailing-in-rough-weather-with-one's-friend-courageous' (Doris 2002: 115). If virtues are narrow in this way, then the dispositions involved in acting from good motives must be *even narrower*. Nothing said here hinges on the situationist critique of virtue.

¹⁵ This point is made in Foot 1983.

¹⁶ Ross 1930

praiseworthiness in terms of manifestations of disposition *S*, but this explanation is possible only because disposition *S* has been given a circular characterization. It is simply *stipulated* that disposition *S* is the disposition that one must manifest in order to warrant praise.

The second option is more appealing. My opponents may grant that disposition *S* is not inherently significant, but they may insist that it derives its significance from its relationship to other normative concepts. For example, one might claim that disposition *S* is responsive to the right-making normative reasons.¹⁷ In other words, one might say that disposition *S* embodies sensitivity to the facts in virtue of which an action is morally right. Now the charge of arbitrariness reemerges. The relevant virtuous disposition presumably *also* embodies sensitivity to the right-making facts. If disposition *S* falls short of virtue, then it somehow embodies *less* sensitivity to the right-making facts when compared to the virtuous disposition. This could mean that disposition *S* is simply narrower in breadth than virtue; while the virtuous person is disposed to act whenever the right-making features obtain, the person who manifests disposition *S* is disposed to act only in some of those cases. But, of course, there are *many* dispositions narrower or less sensitive in this regard than the virtuous disposition, so again it becomes arbitrary to insist that disposition *S* is *the* morally significant disposition for praiseworthiness.

The problem noted above will follow my opponents if they explain the derivative significance of disposition *S* in terms of morally good backgrounded desires or any other attitude. If the significance of disposition *S* is that it embodies a morally good backgrounded desire, and the virtuous person shares these morally good desires, then it must be true that disposition *S* embodies the desire to some *lesser* extent than the virtuous disposition (or, more likely, disposition *S* embodies a *weaker* desire than the desire embodied by the virtuous disposition). But presumably many dispositions embody morally good desires to a lesser

¹⁷ This is probably the route most appealing to Markovits (2010).

extent than the virtuous disposition; why should disposition *S* have special significance?

There is a way to avoid this predicament. If my opponents understand the moral significance of disposition *S* in terms of its relation to virtue, they can rely on virtue theory to reply on their behalf. Suppose they take the position that people who act from good motives manifest a disposition that *approximates* or *resembles* virtue. The specific kind of approximation or resemblance is a substantive issue. It may be that disposition *S* is *ephemeral* virtue; someone who acts from good motives is momentarily disposed like the virtuous person. It may be that disposition *S* is *prodromal* virtue; someone who acts from good motives is disposed like someone on the cusp of virtue. It may be that disposition *S* is *nascent* virtue; someone who acts from good motives is committed to developing virtue. Or, if the virtues are modular or decomposable into discrete areas of mastery, it may be that disposition *S* is simply *partial* virtue; someone who acts from good motives has a disposition that reflects her achievement of some important stage in the development of full virtue. There are many possible views, but we needn't survey all of them here. The important point is that none of these proposals can be charged with arbitrariness. That is, if disposition *S* is ephemeral, prodromal, nascent, or even partial virtue, its moral significance is explicable and non-arbitrary. One can argue that disposition *S* characterizes an important or noteworthy stage in the development of full virtue, and since the virtuous disposition has moral significance, disposition *S* also has (derivative) moral significance. There is no lingering puzzle about the special status of disposition *S*.

4. The modest reply to the skeptical argument

I have been arguing that someone acts from good motives when she approximates the relevant virtue in some respect. I have not taken a stand on the nature of this approximation

or resemblance. My conclusion must be true if one hopes to (1) maintain the premise in the argument against virtue theory and (2) avoid arbitrariness and emptiness in the analysis of praiseworthiness.

The upshot is that the virtues cannot drop out of the analysis of praiseworthy action, even for those that prefer to speak in terms of good motives. When I say that the virtues must appear in our analysis of praiseworthiness, I am making a claim about *explanatory priority*. This means that the final analysis of praiseworthiness should appeal to virtue rather than good motives or occurrent attitudes. Views about explanatory priority are familiar. When consequentialists take the position that goodness is prior to rightness, they take a stand on the explanatory priority of goodness over rightness. Timothy Williamson's 'knowledge first' approach in epistemology is best understood as the claim that knowledge has explanatory priority over other epistemological notions.¹⁸ When Michael Dummett says that language is prior to thought, he too makes a claim about explanatory priority.¹⁹ The claim in this essay is meant to have the same force as these more familiar positions in analytic philosophy.

It should be noted that the argument offered in this essay is consistent with neutrality about the epistemological priority between virtuous dispositions and praiseworthy acts. One could hold that all praiseworthy acts must be identified by first identifying the relevant virtue, or, on the other hand, one could hold that all virtuous dispositions must be identified by first identifying relevant cases of praiseworthy conduct. I suspect an intermediate (albeit perhaps unsatisfying) position on this issue is correct. In some cases, our grasp of the relevant virtue may be clear, so it will make most sense to identify praiseworthy acts by first identifying the relevant virtue. In other cases, when our grasp of virtue is less complete, the opposite strategy may be more appropriate. This is the view that Gopal Sreenivasan calls the 'modest agent-

¹⁸ Williamson 2001:2-5

¹⁹ Dummett 1991: 315

centered view,' according to which 'some [virtuous] acts can be identified as [virtuous] without reference to any [virtuous] person, while other [virtuous] acts *cannot* be so identified except by reference to a [virtuous] person' (2017: 254-255 his emphasis).

I should make a final remark about the cases that motivate the argument against virtue theory. Crisp insists that the malicious gangster, Ronnie, can be fully praiseworthy for an act of kindness. This possibility is left open by my argument here. I wanted to show only that Crisp has no grounds to rule out the basic virtue-theoretic explanation of Ronnie's praiseworthiness. According to this explanation, Ronnie is praiseworthy because he manifests a disposition resembling virtue. I haven't taken a stand on the exact nature of this resemblance, but I hope to have shown that the skeptical argument does not justify the wholesale rejection of this approach to moral worth.²⁰

²⁰ For help and encouragement, special thanks to Nomy Arpaly, Olivia Bailey, Nashid Chaudhury, Nilanjan Das, Sanford Diehl, Ryan Doody, Lyndal Grant, James Harold, Sally Haslanger, Richard Holton, Brendan de Kenessey, Joshua Keton, Doug Kremm, Julia Markovits, Sam Mitchell, Kristi Olson, Sofia Ortiz-Hinojosa, Milo Phillips-Brown, Bernhard Salow, Scott Sehon, Kieran Setiya, Katia Vavova, Stephen Yablo, and audiences at DePauw University, Mount Holyoke College, MIT, Australian Catholic University, and the City University of New York Graduate Center.

References

- Arpaly, Nomy. 2002. "Moral Worth." *Journal of Philosophy* 99 (5): 223–45.
- Cokelet, Bradford. 2015. "Dispositions, Character, and the Value of Acts." In *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, edited by Christian Miller, R. Michael Furr, Angela Knobel, and William Fleeson. Oxford University Press.
- Crisp, Roger. 2015. "A Third Method of Ethics?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 90 (2):257–73.
- Dancy, Jonathan. 2000. *Practical Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Donald. 1963. "Actions, Reasons, and Causes." *Journal of Philosophy* 60 (23): 685–700.
- Davidson, Donald. 1973. "Freedom to Act" *Essays on Freedom of Action*, edited by Ted Honderich. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Doris, John M. 2002. *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dummett, Michael. 1991. "The Relative Priority of Thought and Language" in his *Frege and Other Philosophers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foot, Philippa. 1983. "Utilitarianism and the Virtues." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 57(2): 273-283.
- Hurka, Thomas. 2006. "Virtuous Act, Virtuous Dispositions." *Analysis* 66 (289): 69–76.
- Hurka, Thomas. 2013. "Aristotle on Virtue." In *Aristotelian Ethics in Contemporary Perspective*, edited by Julia Peters. Routledge.
- Hyman, John. "Acting for reasons: Reply to Dancy." *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 6 (3):358-368
- Hyman, John. 2013. "Desires, dispositions and deviant causal chains." *Philosophy* 89: 83-112.
- Hieronymi, Pamela. 2011. "Reasons for Action." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 111: 407-427
- Korsgaard, Christine M. 2008 *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, David. 1979. "Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow," *Noûs* 13: 455–476.
- Markovits, Julia. 2010. "Acting for the Right Reasons." *Philosophical Review* 119 (2): 201–42.

- Moore, G. E. 1903. *Principia Ethica*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Olson, Jonas & Svensson, Frans. 2005. Regimenting Reasons. *Theoria* 71(3): 203-214.
- Ross, W. D. 1930. *The Right and the Good*, edited by Philip Stratton-Lake. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scanlon, Thomas. 1998. *What We Owe To Each Other*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Setiya, Kieran. 2007. *Reasons Without Rationalism*. Princeton University Press.
- Setiya, Kieran. 2016. *Practical Knowledge: Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Michael & Pettit, Philip. 1990. "Backgrounding Desire." *Philosophical Review* 99(4): 565-592.
- Sreenivasan, G. 2017. "Acts, Agents, and the Definition of Virtue." *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 1997. "The Right and The Good." *Journal of Philosophy* 94(6): 273-98.
- Wallace, R. Jay. 2003 "Explanation, Deliberation, and Reasons." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76 (2): 429-435.
- Williams, Bernard. 1981. *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1995. "Replies." in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the ethical philosophy of Bernard Williams*, edited by J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williamson, Timothy. 2000. *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.