

From duty for the right reasons

Teemu Toppinen*

word count: 8968

§1. *Moral worth*

Leading a massive horde of zombies away from a village, even at a significant risk to yourself, is, under many circumstances, the right thing to do. At least this is so if you are a superb sword fighter. But now consider two scenarios:

ZOMBIES 1. Michonne is a superb sword fighter. She observes a vast horde of zombies roaming toward the village. The measly wall surrounding the village won't hold against the horde, and the villagers' escape routes are completely blocked. Michonne believes that the only way to prevent the horde from stumbling into the village is to attract the zombies to another direction. This is going to be very dangerous, and is bound to involve fighting a considerable – but probably manageable – number of zombies. Michonne doesn't really care about the villagers, but engaging with the zombies allows her to learn more of the Way of the Sword. And so she leads the zombies away from the village.

ZOMBIES 2. Michonne is a superb sword fighter. She observes a vast horde of zombies roaming toward the village. The measly wall surrounding the village won't hold against the horde, and the villagers' escape routes are completely blocked. Michonne believes that the only way to prevent the horde from stumbling into the village is to attract the zombies to another direction. This is going to be very dangerous, and is bound to involve fighting a considerable – but probably manageable – number of zombies. Michonne decides that given that the lives of the villagers are at stake, and that she'll probably be able to handle what zombies she'll encounter while distracting the horde, this is the right thing to do. And so she leads the zombies away from the village.

In both scenarios, Michonne does the right thing. But in the first scenario her action is only accidentally right. Next time, the option that works optimally with regard to learning of the Way of the Sword may turn out to be one that is not morally permissible. Michonne's action reflects better on her in the second scenario. In this scenario, she does the right thing from what would seem like a good set of motivations. She wishes

*Thanks to Ron Aboodi, Graham Bex-Priestley, Thomas Hurka, Zoë Johnson King, Jimmy Lenman, Mark Schroeder, Robert Stern, the rest of the audiences at WiNE 2018, University of Sheffield, and University of Turku, and the anonymous reviewers for OUP for helpful comments.

to save the villagers; she wants to do the right thing. When Michonne’s action is motivated in this way, it is no accident that she does the right thing.

An action has moral worth, let us say – or is morally creditworthy – when it’s a morally right action (or close enough) and when it is motivated in such a way that its being right is not accidental. When an action is, in this way, non-accidentally right (or close enough), the agent is morally praiseworthy for doing the right thing. The action speaks well of the agent, in a certain kind of way.

Competing accounts have been offered of how, exactly, we should cash out the idea of non-accidentally right, morally worthy actions. According to one kind of view – let’s call this the *Right Reasons View* – an agent performs an action with moral worth, or is praiseworthy for doing the right thing, roughly to the extent that she does the right thing for reasons that make it right to act in this way. According to another kind of view, actions with moral worth spring from the ‘motive of duty,’ or are based on the agent’s justified belief or knowledge that she ought to act in the relevant way. These are both attractive ideas. But given certain plausible assumptions, these ideas are in tension with each other. Thus there is some tendency, on part of those who are inspired by the first idea, to downplay the second, and vice versa. I will suggest that we can perhaps do justice to both ideas, and that metaethics is relevant here.¹ The extent to which the two attractive ideas about moral worth – roughly: that morally worthy actions are performed for the reasons that make them right, and that morally worthy actions spring from good moral thought – are in tension with each other depends on how we are to understand the nature of moral thought. If that’s right, this is of some relevance to normative ethics.

I will first briefly present the Right Reasons View, and outline some challenges for it (§2), thus motivating views that give emphasis to the idea that morally worthy action springs from a motive of duty (§3). I then explore the difficulties that arise when we try to do justice to the idea of acting from a motive of duty in the context of the Right Reasons View (§4), and when we try to capture the idea of acting for the right sorts of reasons in the context of views that emphasize the centrality of moral thought to acting with moral worth (§5). Such difficulties can be avoided to a significant extent, I argue, if we drop certain metaethical assumptions – more specifically, if we drop the assumption of cognitivism, or the idea that moral beliefs are to be understood as purporting to represent moral reality (§6). This isn’t as bad as it may sound; I close with some comforting remarks (§7).

§2. *Right Reasons*

An attractive view of moral worth has been put forward by Nomy Arpaly and Julia Markovits, among others. In her 2003 book, *Unprincipled Virtue*, Arpaly (p. 84) writes:

For an agent to be morally praiseworthy for doing the right thing is for her to have done the right thing [...] for the reasons for which the action is right (the *right reasons* clause);

¹ For a recent reconciliatory, pluralist, take on moral worth, see also Isserow MS, which came to my attention too late in order to be discussed here.

and an agent is more praiseworthy, other things being equal, the deeper the moral concern that has led to her action (the *concern* clause). Moral concern is to be understood as concern for what is in fact morally relevant and not as concern for what the agent takes to be morally relevant.

Arpaly has revised the view in some respects. A more recent characterization is as follows (Arpaly & Schroeder 2014, p. 170):

[A] person is praiseworthy for a right action *A* to the extent that *A* manifests an intrinsic desire (or desires) for the complete or partial right or good (correctly conceptualized) [...]. Acting on an intrinsic desire for the right or good (correctly conceptualized) is the same as acting for the right reasons.

So, let's suppose that Michonne's action of drawing the zombies' attention to herself is morally right because it helps to save the villagers' lives. On this view, Michonne is praiseworthy for acting in the relevant way to the extent that her action manifests an intrinsic desire for saving the villagers' lives.

Markovits (2010, p. 205) advances a similar view:

[...] my action is morally worthy if and only if my motivating reasons for acting coincide with the reasons morally justifying the action – that is, if and only if I perform the action I morally ought to perform, for the (normative) reasons why it morally ought to be performed. My motivating reasons for performing some action in this case will not be the duty-based reason “that the moral law requires it” but the reasons for which the moral law requires it.

Arpaly (& Schroeder) and Markovits accept, then, both of the following:²

RIGHT REASONS N. It is necessary, in order for an action to have moral worth, that this action is performed for reasons that make it right to act in the relevant way.

RIGHT REASONS S. It is sufficient, in order for an action to have moral worth, that this action is performed for reasons that make it right to act in the relevant way.

These theses seem pretty plausible to me. The first one, in particular – or something in its neighborhood – seems potentially worth holding on to. But both of the theses are controversial, and they both have been challenged, by Paulina Sliwa, for instance. She challenges the second thesis – the sufficiency claim – by

² Way 2017 also proposes a congenial account of creditworthiness of actions.

arguing that an action's being motivated by a desire for the right-making features leaves the connection to rightness too precarious. She offers the following case (Sliwa 2015, p. 398):

EMBARRASSMENT. Jean's friend missed her bus to work and frets over being late to an important meeting; coming late would be a great embarrassment to her. Wanting to spare her friend a great embarrassment, Jean gives her a ride. Let's assume that giving her friend the ride is the right thing to do in these circumstances and that the fact that it spares her friend a major embarrassment makes it right.

Sliwa continues:

Given Jean's motivation, it's not a fluke that Jean spared her friend a major embarrassment. But it is a fluke that she did the right thing. This is because there are plenty of circumstances in which [...] Jean's motivating *de re* desire would lead her to do the wrong thing. For example, Jean ought not to murder her friend's ex boyfriend, even if doing so would eliminate a major source of embarrassment in her friend's life.

A possible response would be that we need to look at Jean's motivational state as a whole and thus take into account how she acts in nearby possible worlds. The thought would be that Jean's motivational state must be such that her tending to do the right thing is modally robust. However, consider the following (see Sliwa 2015, p. 399; the point comes from Markovits 2010):

DOG-LOVER. A dog-lover risks his life to save a drowning stranger but he could easily have been motivated differently. In particular, had his dog been present, he would have been unwilling to abandon the dog – or perhaps too distracted to notice the stranger.

In this case, the agent's motivation to do the right thing is not modally robust. Yet we wouldn't wish to deny that her action has moral worth. Or that's, anyway, Sliwa's take on the matter. She suggests that the moral worth of an action depends on its actual motivation rather than on the motivational state of the agent in nearby possible worlds. If this is right, it may seem that the Right Reasons View doesn't capture the non-accidental rightness of morally worthy actions in quite the right way.³

³ Another possible response would be to suggest that in EMBARRASSMENT, Jean is not plausibly acting for reasons that make it right for her to give her friend a ride. Perhaps giving the ride is the right thing to do because it maximizes happiness, or because it benefits her friend without significantly harming others. It is fairly plausible, in any case, that whatever the credible account of the right-making features of Jean's action turns out to be, Jean's being sensitive to these features won't easily result in her killing her friend's ex. But perhaps we could devise other, more plausible, cases

Zoë Johnson King also takes issue with the idea that doing the right thing for the right reasons suffices in order for the action to have moral worth. She, too, thinks that the Right Reasons View leaves the connection between morally worthy action and rightness too accidental. According to Johnson King (MSa), the defenders of the Right Reasons View must appeal to something along the following lines:

NON-ACCIDENTAL. For someone to non-accidentally perform an act with property *F* it is sufficient that (a) she is motivated to perform it by the fact that it has another property *G* and (b) as a matter of metaphysical fact, the act's having property *G* makes it the case that it has property *F*.

This principle, Johnson King suggests, is vulnerable to counter examples. The following is, I think, in the spirit of those supplied by Johnson King:

SWORD. Michonne must choose between two swords. One of them has a sharp edge, the other one doesn't. Michonne intrinsically desires to have a sword with a sharp edge. Swords that have a sharp edge have, in virtue of this, the property of being well suited for slicing tomatoes cleanly. Michonne (weirdly) isn't aware of this, but as she is driven by a desire for a sharp sword, she chooses a sword that's well suited for slicing tomatoes cleanly.

Does Michonne accidentally choose a sword that slices tomatoes cleanly? Well, given her interest in sharp edges, she is a pretty reliable tracker of cleanly-slicingness in swords. Yet it *could* have been so that sharp edges did not slice tomatoes cleanly. It seems possible for tomatoes to have been such that you only got them sliced cleanly with a somewhat blunt edge. If things had been so, Michonne would not have been interested in cleanly-tomato-slicing swords. There is, then, an element of accidentality in Michonne's picking a cleanly-tomato-slicing sword. One might think that likewise, there is an element of accidentality in the way in which someone who acts on an intrinsic desire for the right-making features of actions does the right thing. At least this might seem to be so given that the right-making features of morally right actions do not necessitate the rightness of these actions.

One could also question RIGHT REASONS N. Sliwa (2015, p. 410) offers the following counter example:

TESTIMONY. Anna's older sister is struggling with alcohol addiction; she lost her job, blew through her savings and is several months behind on rent. She asks Anna to "loan" her some money. Anna is conflicted. On the one hand, she does not want her sister to end up homeless. But she wonders whether her sister needs to feel the full consequences of her

along the lines suggested by Sliwa. This should be possible, assuming that what's right-making in one context may easily fail to be so in another.

addiction to finally seek treatment. Moreover, Anna's financial circumstances are modest and she has her own family to look after. Anna is uncertain about what the right thing to do is. She turns to a friend whom she knows to be trustworthy and to have good judgment for advice. Her friend tells Anna that she shouldn't give her sister money. Anna's friend is right [...]. Anna trusts her friend and acts on her advice.

On Sliwa's (2015, pp. 411–412) view, Anna is morally praiseworthy, but she cannot act for the reasons that make it right for her to act in the way that she acts. Perhaps what explains the rightness of her action is that it's good for her sister in the long run. But (we may suppose) Anna doesn't act for this reason. She acts for the reason that her friend's advice is such-and-such.

However, even granting that RIGHT REASONS N thus fails, one could insist that Anna still doesn't need to, and ideally shouldn't, act from a *de dicto* concern to do the right thing. She could be acting on the basis of *de re* concern for the right-making features plus a disjunctive belief. Her reason could be that refraining from giving her sister money is best for her sister, or best for everyone in the long run, or what follows from a categorical imperative, or... It's not wholly implausible that this will have to be the case if we wish to see Anna as being praiseworthy for doing the right thing. Acting for this disjunctive reason would not seem to amount to acting for a right-making reason, but the truth of the relevant disjunctive consideration would at least be evidence that refraining from giving her sister money would be the right thing for Anna to do. We could then propose something along the following lines:

RIGHT REASONS/EVIDENCE N. It is necessary, in order for an action to have moral worth, that this action is performed for reasons that make it right to act in the relevant way or provide (non-trivial) evidence that this is the right way to act.

In what follows, I will assume that RIGHT REASONS N is a plausible thesis. But what I say could easily be revised in accordance with the idea that we should rather be operating with something like RIGHT REASONS/EVIDENCE N.

None of what I have said in this section is meant to suggest that the Right Reasons View is, in my view, doomed, or that I'm entirely persuaded by the arguments from Sliwa and Johnson King. But their arguments raise interesting concerns regarding the Right Reasons View and motivate the proposals of their own, to which I turn next.

§3. *Motive of Duty*

Sliwa and Johnson King both draw, from their respective challenges to the Right Reasons View, the conclusion that morally worthy action springs from a motive of duty. Sliwa (2015, p. 394) proposes the following:

KNOWLEDGE VIEW. A morally right action has moral worth if and only if it is motivated by concern for doing what's right (conative requirement) and by knowledge that it is the right thing to do (knowledge requirement).

Johnson King (MSa), on her part, advances the following account:

ACCOMPLISHMENT VIEW.⁴ An act has moral worth if and only if it is an instance of someone's deliberately doing – of someone's trying and succeeding in doing – the right thing.

On both views, an action with moral worth must be based on a moral belief – on a belief that the action in question is the right or a morally permissible action. On neither view is it sufficient for an action to have moral worth that it is based on a suitable moral belief. But according to Sliwa, it suffices that the action is performed on the basis of knowing that it is the right thing to do. And according to Johnson King, it suffices that the action is based on the agent's belief that it is the morally right action, and that the agent succeeds, when guided by this belief, in performing the morally right action.

I noted above that I find the Right Reasons View attractive. I also find attractive the idea that morally worthy actions are performed on the basis of moral judgments, or at least I find very attractive the ideas that it is possible for morally worthy actions to be based on moral beliefs, and that an action's being performed on the basis of a judgment that it is morally right need not be a strike against the agent, morally speaking. Indeed, it also seems that an action's moral worth can sometimes be *enhanced* by the fact that it is based on a belief that performing this action was the right thing to do. Moral thought can and at least often does play a central role in acting with moral worth.

But even if the critics of the Right Reasons View are right in emphasizing the role of moral thought in morally worthy action, we should perhaps question their sufficiency claims. That is, we should perhaps admit that acting for the right-making reasons is a necessary condition for acting with moral worth. In the next two sections, I explore the prospects for combining this idea with the idea that acting with moral worth requires guidance by moral thought, or is at least compatible with such guidance. I suggest that given certain plausible assumptions, it is not possible to smoothly combine these ideas.

§4. *For the right reasons, from duty?*

According to what might be called the Standard Account, when we act on the basis of a certain belief (or: when our action is caused in the right way by our having a certain belief), the content of this belief gives our *motivating reason*, or the *reason for which* we act. Consider the following:

⁴ This isn't Johnson King's name for the view.

ZOMBIES 3. Michonne believes that the only way to prevent a horde of zombies from stumbling into a village is to attract the zombies into another direction. She leads the zombies away from the village because she wants to protect the interests of sentient beings and believes that doing so will best serve this aim.

In this scenario, Michonne would seem to lure the zombies away from the village partly for the reason that this will best protect the interests of sentient beings. It is quite plausible, then, that things work the same way also when someone performs an action partly because she thinks that this action is morally right. Consider:

ZOMBIES 4. Michonne believes that the only way to prevent a horde of zombies from stumbling into a village is to attract the zombies into another direction. She lures the zombies away from the village because she wants to protect the interests of sentient beings and believes that doing so will best serve this aim, and also because she wants to do the right thing and believes that leading the zombies away is the right thing to do.

In this scenario, Michonne would seem to lure the zombies away from the village for the reason that this protects the interests of sentient creatures as well as for the reason that this is the morally right thing to do.

At least this seems to be what we should say assuming the truth of the very plausible Standard Account and a *cognitivist* view about the nature of moral belief. According to cognitivism, moral beliefs are like beliefs about the shape or color or function or price of some object. Their job is to represent things as being a certain way. On a cognitivist view, just as I may represent a PS4 console as angular, pretty slim, white, relatively pricey, and as having among its functions that of allowing people to entertain themselves by playing video games, I may represent an action as being morally right. My beliefs about colors and shapes have the *telos* of fitting the way the world is, and offer me a map with which to steer in pursuit of my goals. My beliefs about rightness and wrongness work the same way. Or that's what the cognitivist view about the nature of moral belief says. The cognitivist may think, of course, that moral beliefs are special in some ways. But they share their representational function with beliefs about shapes, colors, prices, etc.⁵

If this kind of cognitivist view is true, then we should say that in ZOMBIES 4, Michonne leads the zombies away from the village for the reason that this is the right thing to do. Moreover, to the extent that we focus on Michonne's performing this action under the guidance of her belief that it is the right thing to do, Michonne's ultimate, non-derivative motivation is to do the right thing, and she acts ultimately for this reason. She also non-derivatively wants to protect the interests of sentient beings, and so, in acting on this

⁵ Some views are sometimes called 'cognitivist' despite emphasizing that moral beliefs are not representational in this way. I'm thinking of Terence Horgan's and Mark Timmons's (2006) 'cognitivist expressivism,' in particular. Their view is an expressivist one, in my book. T. M. Scanlon's (2014) and Derek Parfit's (2011, 2017) views may also fit the bill (see Dreier 2015). If so, they aren't cognitivist, as I use the term.

desire, she also acts ultimately for the reason that leading the zombies away is the best way to protect the interests of sentient creatures. Or this is what we should say about the relevant scenario, given the Standard Account and cognitivism about the nature of moral belief.

But now consider the Right Reasons View again. On this view, an action has moral worth to the extent that it manifests an intrinsic desire for the right-making features of the action. Let's suppose that leading the zombies away from the village is made right by the fact that it is the best way to protect the interests of sentient beings. Michonne's action, in ZOMBIES 4, then manifests an intrinsic desire for the features of the action that make it right. But it also manifests a desire to do what is right, *de dicto*, and this property – the property of being right – is not one of the right-making properties of the relevant action. To the extent that Michonne's action is being guided by her belief that it would be right to lead the zombies away, she is not acting for a right kind of, right-making, reason.

Consequently, one might think that, given the Right Reasons View, being motivated by a belief that a certain course of action would be morally right is a problem, or a *minus*, when it comes to moral worth. Whereas in ZOMBIES 3, Michonne is doing the right thing for the reasons that make it the right thing to do, in ZOMBIES 4 Michonne's action is driven also by other considerations. Wouldn't it be better, then, for Michonne not to be guided by moral thoughts? Indeed, it is not clear that the fact that Michonne's action would be morally right is any kind of reason to perform it (see, e.g., Dancy 2004, Stratton-Lake 2000). Perhaps this consideration – that the action is morally right – only serves to tell us that there are some other considerations that are the reasons for performing the action. If this is correct, then adding moral thought to the motivational mixture convicts the agent of acting for (motivating) reasons that are not (normative) reasons to act in the relevant way.

Perhaps there is no deep problem here. It is far from obvious what we should say about whether the rightness of an action can be a reason to perform it (see, e.g., Johnson King MSb). And a defender of the Right Reasons View could, in any case, suggest that it is *OK* to be motivated by one's belief that acting in a certain way would be morally right, given that one's action is motivationally overdetermined, and suitably manifests a concern for the right-making features of the action. However, this doesn't seem entirely satisfying. Let us consider another variation on Michonne and the zombies:

ZOMBIES 5. Michonne observes a vast horde of zombies roaming toward the village. The measly wall surrounding the village won't hold against the horde, and the villagers' escape routes are completely blocked. Michonne believes that the only way to prevent the horde from stumbling into the village is to attract the zombies into another direction. This is going to be very dangerous, and is bound to involve fighting a considerable – but probably manageable – number of zombies. Bracketing moral considerations, Michonne doesn't see much reason to save the villagers, to whom she bears no special relations. Nevertheless Michonne decides that given that the lives of the villagers are at stake, and that she'll

probably be able to handle what zombies she'll encounter while distracting the horde, this is the right thing to do. And so she leads the zombies away from the village.

Michonne's action in this scenario seems completely morally praiseworthy.⁶ But her motivations are not overdetermined in that she would be willing to protect the villagers also independently of moral considerations. It takes her some moral thought to come up with sufficient motivation to risk her life by engaging with the zombies. It is only because she believes that leading the zombies away is the right thing to do that she is motivated to do so, to a sufficiently high degree.

It seems, then, that being motivated by a judgment that it would be right to act in a certain way, or being moved by duty, is not just something that isn't necessarily detrimental to the moral worth of an action. The moral worth of an action can be due to the fact that it springs from such motives. Moreover, even if Michonne's desire to protect the villagers was sufficiently strong independently of her moral thought, her acting *also* on the basis of her judgment that leading the zombies away is the right thing to do would plausibly enhance the moral worth of her action. (I'll spare you the details of the relevant zombie case.) These phenomena seem to be difficult to account for, given the Standard Account plus cognitivism plus the Right Reasons View.

§5. *From duty, for the right reasons?*

We may also have a look at these issues from the perspective of the Knowledge View and the Accomplishment View – of views that emphasize dutiful motivation, as we might put it. These views also face problems given the Standard Account of motivating reasons and a cognitivist account of moral judgment. Or let's rather put it this way: Even if morally worthy actions may be performed for the reason that they are right, and even if it is a necessary condition of an action's having moral worth that it is dutifully motivated, one might still think that we should make room for the idea that acting for the right-making reasons is also essential to moral worth. And it's not clear how we can make adequate sense of this given the combination of the Standard View and cognitivism.

Let's first consider the idea that it's *sufficient*, in order for one's action to *max out* in terms of moral worth, that the agent tries to do the right thing and succeeds in this. Or the idea that it's sufficient, in order for one's action to max out in terms of moral worth, that the agent does the right thing on the basis of her knowing that it's the right thing to do. Assuming that we can have knowledge of what is right and wrong through testimony, Michonne should then be morally praiseworthy for doing the right thing in the following scenario:

ZOMBIES 6. Michonne observes a vast horde of zombies roaming toward the village. The measly wall surrounding the village won't hold against the horde, and the villagers' escape

⁶ Note that the description of the case doesn't involve the claim that Michonne lacks non-derivative concern for the villagers' wellbeing. The relevant concern of hers would just be a morally-laden concern.

routes are completely blocked. Michonne's Guru tells her that the right thing for her to do is to lead the zombies away from the village, but she doesn't tell Michonne why this is right. Michonne intrinsically desires to do the right thing, and so she decides to lead the zombies away from the village.

It seems problematic to suggest that Michonne's action lacks nothing in terms of moral worth. This is a familiar idea from the literature on moral testimony. While many writers on the topic believe that it is possible to transmit moral knowledge through testimony, there is widespread (although by no means universal) agreement that there is something problematic about deference in moral matters. It has been suggested that the problem has to do with the moral quality of the action, or with such action being faulty with regard to praiseworthiness or moral worth, and that the explanation for this is that acting on the basis of moral testimony precludes having understanding of why it is right to act in the relevant way (see Hills 2009, McGrath 2011). Even if this is not *the* problem with moral deference (see, e.g., Fletcher 2016), this is plausibly *a* problem. Of course there are dissenters. Perhaps there is nothing problematic about acting on the basis of moral testimony (see, e.g., Sliwa 2012, 2015). But the idea that action that is based on moral beliefs acquired through moral testimony therefore are lacking moral worth-wise is not implausible.

One could propose that while acting from a motive of duty is a necessary condition for performing an action with moral worth, performing such action – or at least maxing out in terms of moral worth – also requires acting for reasons that make it right to act in the relevant way. However, simply being motivated to perform an action both by the fact that it is the right thing to do as well as by its having certain features such that make it the right thing to do doesn't seem sufficient. Here's Michonne again:

ZOMBIES 7. Michonne observes a vast horde of zombies roaming toward the village. The measly wall surrounding the village won't hold against the horde, and the villagers' escape routes are completely blocked. Michonne's Guru tells her that the right thing for her to do is to lead the zombies away from the village, but she doesn't tell Michonne why this is right. She omits the information that leading the zombies away is the right thing to do because it's the best way to protect the interests of sentient beings. Michonne intrinsically desires to do the right thing, and so she decides to lead the zombies away from the village. She also intrinsically desires to protect the interests of sentient beings, and believes that leading the zombies away serves this goal, too. But she has no idea that leading the zombies away is the right thing to do because it is the best way to protect the interests of sentient beings.

According to Johnson King (MSa), when we act for the right-making reasons, our doing the right thing may nevertheless be accidental. So, perhaps in ZOMBIES 3, Michonne is *praiseworthy for protecting the interests of sentient beings*, but she may nevertheless fail to be *praiseworthy for doing the right thing*. Likewise, one might

suggest, when, in ZOMBIES 7, Michonne performs the right action for the reason that it is right, she is praiseworthy for doing the right thing. One might suggest that as she also performs this action for the reasons that make it right, she may, moreover, be praiseworthy for protecting the interests of the sentient. Yet she fails to be *praiseworthy for doing the right thing for the right reasons*. Or: she fails to be praiseworthy, in doing the right thing, for acting for the right reasons. And one might suggest that this amounts to a failure with regard to the moral worth of her action.

We may also note that it's not sufficient, in order to save the idea that an action has moral worth to the extent that it is performed both for the reason that it is right and for the right-making reasons, to add that the agent must believe that the right-making reasons make her action right. For consider one more variation on Michonne and the zombies. This is just like ZOMBIES 7, with the following addition:

ZOMBIES 8. [ZOMBIES 7...] However, as she starts heading off to the woods, making noise and drawing her sword from its scabbard, her Guru yells after her: "It's the right thing to do because it best protects the interests of sentient beings!"

As Michonne runs into the woods waving her sword at the zombies, her actions have not gained any extra moral worth thanks to her now having formed the true belief (we're assuming) that leading the zombies away is the right thing to do because it best protects the interests of sentient beings. She is responsive to those considerations, alright. And she is guided by her moral judgment. But what is lacking, morally speaking, in Michonne's action, is being guided by moral judgment in a way that would manifest responsiveness to the considerations that make it right to act in the relevant way.

Again we see that combining the Standard Account with a cognitivist account of moral thought spells trouble for understanding moral worth. Of course some are happy with the Right Reasons View and see no need to accommodate any significant role for moral judgment when capturing the idea of moral worth. And some others might not be too troubled by the fact that this combination of views makes it difficult to see how one could act, in virtue of being guided by judgments about what's right, for the reasons that make it right to act in the relevant ways. But these options seem costly. In the next section I suggest that things start to look quite different, and potentially more flattering to us *qua* moral agents, if we drop the assumption of cognitivism and try casting these issues in an expressivist light.

§6. *Metaethics matters*

Suppose we accept the following:

RELATIONAL EXPRESSIVISM. For *S* to believe that she ought to perform an action, φ , is (a) for *S* to have a (suitable) desire-like attitude toward φ -ing, where this attitude is based on *S*'s beliefs about the descriptive properties of φ -ing (and perhaps accompanied by certain other attitudes), or (b) for *S* to be in a 'relational' state realized by a (suitable) desire-

like attitude toward actions with some descriptive property plus a belief that φ -ing would have that property (where this relational state perhaps needs to be accompanied by certain other attitudes).

Let's unpack that a little. First, this is a disjunctive view that covers both views that take having ought-beliefs to consist in having a certain kind of desire-like attitude (see, e.g., Blackburn 1998, Lenman 2003), and views that take it to consist in having one's desires and descriptive beliefs related in a certain way (see, e.g., Schroeder 2013, Toppinen 2013, Ridge 2014). The former sort of view is sometimes called *pure expressivism*; the latter sort of view often goes by the name *relational expressivism*.

The latter view perhaps is not very familiar. I should illustrate it a little. So, suppose Michonne and Rick both plan, if in Michonne's shoes, to lead the zombies away from the village.⁷ But whereas Michonne plans to do this because she plans to protect the interests of sentient beings and believes that leading the zombies away from the village best protects the interests of sentient beings, Rick plans to do this because he plans to perform actions that follow from Categorical Imperative and believes that in Michonne's circumstances leading the zombies away from the village follows from Categorical Imperative. While the contents of Michonne's and Rick's respective plans and descriptive beliefs differ, their plans and descriptive beliefs are similarly related to each other. They both are in the same relational state of mind in that they both plan to do actions with a certain descriptive property and believe that leading the zombies away from the village has that property. Their minds just realize this multiply realizable relational state in different ways.

The pure and the relational view are quite similar. Just like the relational view, the pure view, too, involves the idea that in order for Michonne to believe that she ought to perform some action, her desire-like attitudes and descriptive beliefs must be related in a certain kind of way. And neither of the views dictates what the contents of the relevantly related attitudes and beliefs are to be. Perhaps the pure view is a relational view of sorts; perhaps the relational view is not that impure.

The disjunctive expressivist view, as stated above, does not say anything about specifically *moral* beliefs. Here's a somewhat revised thesis:

RELATIONAL MORAL EXPRESSIVISM. For S to believe that φ -ing would be **morally right** in her circumstances is for S to have a (suitable) desire-like attitude toward φ -ing, where this attitude is based on S 's beliefs about **suitable sorts of** descriptive properties of φ -ing (and perhaps accompanied by **certain other attitudes**), or for S to be in a 'relational' state realized by a (suitable) desire-like attitude toward actions with some **suitable sort of** descriptive property plus a belief that φ -ing would have that property (where this relational state perhaps needs to be accompanied by **certain other attitudes**).

⁷ The talk of plans and shoes is, of course, inspired by Gibbard 2003.

If Michonne's ultimate grounds for endorsing leading the zombies away have to do with protecting the interests of sentient beings, this already gives a moral flavor to her attitude. Also, we could demand that in order for Michonne's attitude to count as a moral belief, this attitude would need to have certain further properties – such as being stable to some sufficient degree, or being accompanied by certain higher-order attitudes, or by attitudes demanding similar responses from others, etc. (cf. Blackburn 1998). The issues concerning how, exactly, normative judgments more generally, and moral judgments, in particular, should be understood within an expressivist framework are very much open to debate. It's also not clear that any very good expressivist account is available. But I shall adopt the kind of view outlined above as my toy theory. I hope it's useful enough in order to illustrate how casting the issues concerning moral worth in an expressivist light may turn out to have interesting results.

Given an expressivist view of the relevant kind, Michonne's belief that it would be morally right to lead the zombies away may consist, roughly, in her approving of leading the zombies away, where this approval is based on her belief that, among her options, this action would best protect the interests of sentient beings. Or it may consist in her approving of actions that best protect the interests of sentient beings, plus her belief that leading the zombies away has that property. By the Standard Account of motivating reasons, if Michonne now leads the zombies away, on the basis of her believing that this would be the right thing to do, this is just a matter of her doing so for the reason that this would best protect the interests of sentient beings.

Given that Michonne's attitudes really count as having a belief that it would be right to lead the zombies away, the Standard Account suggests that Michonne performs this action also for the reason that it is the right thing to do. But on the expressivist view, Michonne's acting on this reason amounts to nothing over and above her action being rationally explained by her having suitably related desire-like attitudes and descriptive beliefs (where these must perhaps be accompanied by certain other attitudes). In our example, Michonne's action springs from her desire-like attitudes plus her belief that leading the zombies away best protects the interests of sentient beings. And so, Michonne's performing the action of leading the zombies away for the reason that it's the right thing to do amounts to nothing over and above Michonne's being moved to act, through certain attitudes of a suitable sort, for the reason that leading the zombies away best protects the interests of sentient beings.

By contrast with the cognitivist understanding of the case, Michonne's being moved by a belief about the moral rightness of leading the zombies away doesn't now add an independent motivating reason into the picture. Rather, Michonne's action may be guided by her moral judgment, and be, in virtue of this very fact, performed for the reason that it optimally protects the interests of sentient beings. Michonne may act on the basis of her rightness-judgment, and – in virtue of this very fact – act for a right-making reason.⁸

⁸ How about cases where the agent is uncertain about what the right-making features are? We could utilize the idea that the agent may have a disjunctive belief about the potential right-makers, plus the thought that it suffices for acting with moral worth that the agent is being sensitive to facts that give (non-trivial) evidence that she is acting in a morally

This allows us to see many of the challenges facing the different accounts of moral worth in a new light. In the previous section, I suggested that it is difficult, for someone attracted to the idea that acting with moral worth involves acting on moral thought (or from a motive of duty), to make entirely satisfying sense of the idea that when someone acts with moral worth, she is praiseworthy for doing the right thing for the right reasons. But as I have just explained, once we understand beliefs about what's morally right in an expressivist vein, along the lines suggested above, capturing this idea becomes easy.

In section 2, I also suggested that if we are attracted to the Right Reasons View as well as to a cognitivist account of moral belief, we should worry about the idea that acting with moral worth requires acting on moral thoughts. On the cognitivist picture, when Michonne acts on her belief about moral rightness, this isn't just a matter of her acting for potentially right-making reasons. This naturally raises the worry that acting on such belief is a minus, when it comes to moral worth – a manifestation of moral fetishism (cf. Smith 1994, pp. 71–76). Or at least this suggests that acting on such a belief cannot be essential to, or enhance, the moral worth of an action. Things look different, given an appropriate expressivist view. When Michonne acts on the basis of her belief that leading the zombies away from the village would be

right way (see section 2, above). This isn't wholly satisfying, though. We would also want to know how to understand (i) cases where the agent cannot articulate her grounds for thinking that it would be right to act in the relevant way, and (ii) cases where the agent is fundamentally morally uncertain, or uncertain about which features would be morally relevant, or potentially right-making. The former issue (i) may not be so difficult to deal with. Michael Ridge (2014, 2015), who defends a form of relational expressivism, proposes that the descriptive belief component in normative thought usually involves a demonstrative element and picks out the properties that the thinker is sensitive to without the identity of these properties being clear to the thinker. For analogy, consider hearing a piece of music and thinking “I just love music like that!” while being unable to articulate what it is about the music that is so awesome. Now, likewise, when Michonne thinks that distracting the zombies would be morally right, this might be a matter of her believing that distracting the zombies would be *like that* (mentally “pointing” toward the option of distracting zombies) or *like those* (mentally pointing toward certain actions that in her view are paradigms of right action) – where what it is to be *like that* or *like those* would be determined by Michonne's relevant desire-like attitudes. What should we say, in this case, about the reasons for which Michonne acts? On one hand, it is natural to say that her motivating reasons are rather inarticulate: she distracts the zombies because the action has *that property* – one that she can only pick out using moral terminology. On the other hand, if what Michonne is being responsive to is the property of being best promotive of the interests of sentient beings, then it is also plausible to say that she distracts the zombies for the reason that it best promotes the interests of sentient beings. She's just not aware of what it is that motivates her. Either way, Michonne may end up acting for the right-making reasons on the basis of her rightness-judgment: we might think that her action is right because it is *like that* – or, if we are capable of a richer articulation: because it is best promotive of the interests of sentient beings (or whatever). We might then have differing views about the relevance of the level of articulation in the agent's motivating reasons to questions of moral worth; I shall not attempt any discussion of this issue here. As for (ii), here I can only note, rather disappointingly, that questions regarding fundamental moral uncertainty seem to be very good questions for expressivists quite generally. It remains to be seen how these questions should be answered (for a recent take on this, see Ridge forthcoming), and what implications the answers will have for questions regarding moral worth.

morally right, this may just amount to her acting for the reason that this is the best way to protect the interests of sentient beings. Michonne's fundamental motivations can be entirely based on the right-making features of her action. Moreover, this can be so even if Michonne would not be (sufficiently) motivated to risk her life in protecting the villagers independently of moral considerations (see ZOMBIES 5).

We might now also be in a position to explain, in a way consistent with the idea that acting with moral worth involves acting for the right-making reasons, how it is that an action's being motivated by considerations of rightness can enhance its moral worth. Suppose that moral beliefs involve especially strong or stable attitudes, or attitudes that are coupled with resistance to change, or occupy an especially central place in our web of attitudes. Morally-laden motivations will then be especially robust. *If* a right action's being motivated in such a way that the agent could easily have ended up doing the wrong thing is a minus with regard to the action's degree of moral worth, then an action's being morally motivated would, on this picture, turn out to be a moral plus. (However, see Sliwa's example of the dog-lover in section 2, above.)

Choice between cognitivism and expressivism may be relevant also for the prospects of the idea that acting for the right-making reasons is *sufficient* for acting with moral worth. For if we understand acting for a reason in a demanding enough way – as requiring sophisticated enough attitudes on part of the agent – it is not such a big stretch to claim that when someone (Huck Finn, say) acts for a certain reason (helps Jim for the reason that Jim is a human being just like himself), he at least implicitly believes, of the fact that is his motivating reason, that it is a normative reason for acting in the relevant way. This kind of idea would seem to be more plausible given an expressivist view of normative beliefs than it is on the assumption of cognitivism. If so, accepting that acting on the right-making reasons suffices for acting with moral worth might be somewhat easier for those who are inclined to think that one only acts with moral worth when one's actions are guided by normative thinking.

§7. *Conclusion*

My aim has been to suggest that our stance on the issue of cognitivism vs. expressivism in metaethics may have interesting consequences for our attempts to form an adequate understanding of what it is to act with moral worth, or to be praiseworthy for doing the right thing. In particular, I've suggested that some of the difficulties in forming such an understanding may evaporate given an expressivist account of moral thinking.

Expressivism is, of course, super controversial. But it's also – uncontroversially – a significant contender in contemporary metanormative theory. Importantly, accepting expressivism doesn't require accepting that there are no moral truths, or that moral truth is subjective or relative, or that there's no reason to act in accordance with the demands of morality. As is quite familiar these days, expressivists tend to be quasi-realists. They wish to earn the right to speak as the realist does – to such extent that many now find it difficult to draw any distinction between expressivist and realist views. There is a distinction, though,

in how these views explain the nature of normative thought (see above and, e.g., Dreier 2004). And this difference is significant in the context of theorizing about moral worth.

If what I've said is right, expressivism gives us more leeway with regard to doing justice both to the idea that acting with moral worth is a matter of acting for reasons that make it right to act in the relevant way, and to the idea that acting with moral worth involves moral thought. Perhaps, if we keep the expressivist option on the table, this makes it easier to approach the insights produced by the work on moral worth in a reconciliatory spirit.

REFERENCES

- Arpaly, N., 2003. *Unprincipled Virtue*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Arpaly, N. & T. Schroeder, 2014. *In Praise of Desire*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blackburn, S., 1998. *Ruling Passions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dancy, J., 2004. *Ethics without Principles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dreier, J., 2004. "Metaethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18: 23–44.
- Gibbard, A., 2003. *Thinking How to Live*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Hills, A., 2009. "Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology," *Ethics* 120: 94–127.
- Horgan, T. & M. Timmons, 2006. "Cognitivist Expressivism," in T. Horgan & M. Timmons (eds.): *Metaethics after Moore*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Isserow, J., MS. "Pluralism about Moral Worth."
- Johnson King, Z., forthcoming a. "Accidentally Doing the Right Thing," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- Johnson King, Z., forthcoming b. "We Can Have Our Buck and Pass It, Too," in R. Shafer-Landau (ed.): *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Volume 14*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lenman, J., 2003. "Non-Cognitivism and the Dimensions of Evaluative Judgment," in J. Dreier & D. Estlund (eds.): *BEARS* (<http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Philosophy/bears/homepage.html>).
- Markovits, J., 2010. "Acting for the Right Reasons," *Philosophical Review* 119: 201–242.
- McGrath, S., 2011. "Skepticism about Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism," *Journal of Philosophy* 108: 111–137.
- Parfit, D., 2011. *On What Matters, Volume 2*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, D., 2017. *On What Matters, Volume 3*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ridge, M., 2014. *Impassioned Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ridge, M., 2015. "Summary," *Analysis* 75: 433–442.
- Ridge, M., forthcoming. "Normative Certitude for Expressivists," *Synthese*.
- Scanlon, T. M., 2014. *Being Realistic about Reasons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sliwa, P., 2012. "In Defense of Moral Testimony," *Philosophical Studies* 158: 175–195.
- Sliwa, P., 2015. "Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 93: 393–418.
- Smith, M., 1994. *The Moral Problem*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Stratton-Lake, P., 2000. *Kant, Duty and Moral Worth*. London: Routledge.
- Toppinen, T., 2013. "Believing in Expressivism," in R. Shafer-Landau (ed.): *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Volume 8*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Way, J., 2017. "Creditworthiness and Matching Principles," in M. Timmons (ed.): *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, Volume 7. Oxford: Oxford University Press.