

Chapter 1

The Deontic Relevance of Motives

I will call the problem that we examine in this book, ‘the deontic relevance of motives’. It is the question of whether the motive of an action is ever such that it changes the deontic status of that action. In other words, the question is whether the motive of an action can be the reason, or part of the reason, that an action is right or wrong. I believe that the answer to this question is ‘yes’. Many moral philosophers disagree. One of the interesting aspects of this question is that the philosophers who disagree belong to schools or traditions that otherwise differ in many respects. Prominent consequentialists like J. S. Mill and deontologists like W. D. Ross have claimed implicitly or explicitly that motives never have deontic relevance. Our question therefore will take us—via a rarely-traveled path—through some interesting points of comparison between the major moral theories currently under discussion. In this chapter I give a preliminary view of the problem. At many points the discussion will be sketchy, since the topics introduced will be examined more closely later.

I begin with a distinction that we ordinarily make in English. We say things of the form ‘S did the right thing for the wrong reason’. Let us suppose for now that S’s reason (for acting) is her motive. If so, then this expression implicitly distinguishes between the factor or factors that make S’s act right, and her motive. That is because it is saying that her action is right in spite of the fact that her motive is bad or inappropriate or without value. We can find great philosophers who seem to echo this important distinction. Aristotle writes, “Acts are called just and temperate when they are such as a

just or temperate man would do; but what makes the agent just or temperate is not merely the fact that he does such things, but the fact that he does them in the way that just and temperate men do.”ⁱ This seems to distinguish between the justness of an action, which even an unjust man may perform (although for the wrong reason or in the wrong way), and the justness of a person, who performs these actions for the right reason and in the right way.ⁱⁱ Kant—despite his emphasis on the moral significance of motives—seems to accept this point. He says that it is one thing to act “in conformity with duty” and another to act “from the motive of duty.” He illustrates this with an example of a grocer who does not overcharge his customers, but only for reasons of prudence.ⁱⁱⁱ Elsewhere he considers a person who helps others out of sympathy rather than a sense of duty: “I maintain that in such a case, an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, still has no genuinely moral worth.”^{iv} Kant distinguishes moral judgments about the rightness of an action from judgments about its moral worth or value. And he seems to be thinking of motives when he discusses the moral worth of an action. Thus Aristotle and Kant both seem to distinguish the rightness of an action from certain other moral judgments that take into account the agent’s motive for performing it: the character of the person performing it and the value (or moral worth) of the action.

It is not clear how much we can conclude from the fact that we make the distinctions just mentioned. For one thing, while we have the phrase ‘the right thing for the wrong reason’ we do not have an expression ‘the wrong thing for the right reason’. We can certainly understand this expression, but it is interesting that we don’t now have it in English. Furthermore, even if we sometimes say that someone did the right thing for the wrong reason, it does not follow that we can always separate the issue of motive and

rightness. And, as we will see in moment, the deontic relevance of motives need not be confined to cases of right or obligatory actions. Finally, it would be nice to have an argument as to why the rightness of an action can never depend on its motive, even if that is true. So we must examine the issue more carefully.

I

Deontic and Other Moral Concepts

Our topic is the deontic relevance of motives. I need to say something about deontic concepts, and how they are related to the many other sorts of moral concepts that we have.

Three deontic concepts will be of interest to us: the obligatory (required, a duty); the wrong (prohibited, forbidden); and the ‘merely permissible’. To say that an action is merely permissible is to say that the agent is neither morally required to perform it nor morally prohibited from performing it. We generally take it that many ordinary actions fall into this category. For example, the choice of a particular shirt to wear on a given day is merely permissible: the agent is not required to wear that shirt and she is not prohibited from wearing it. This concept of mere permissibility is to be distinguished from what we might call broad permissibility. An action is broadly permissible if it is not wrong. Broad permissibility includes both the merely permissible and the required. In this sense an obligatory action is permissible since an agent does nothing wrong in performing it (assuming that there are no ‘moral dilemmas’ in a strict sense).

I assume in what follows that all particular actions are either morally wrong, morally obligatory, or neither (that is, merely permissible): the three concepts are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive of all actions. Since no action belongs to more than one of these categories I am thus assuming that there are no moral dilemmas in a strict sense. If there were moral dilemmas in a strict sense then an action could be both required and wrong 'all things considered'.

The question about the deontic relevance of motives can thus be formulated using this statement:

Motives Matter (MM): There is an action X such that if X were performed from one motive it would fall into one deontic category, and if X were performed from another motive it would fall into a second deontic category in virtue of this difference in motives.

We will be asking if MM is true, or whether motives matter. This way of formulating the question brings out that the distinction discussed above doesn't address all the possibilities. It may be that every case of an obligatory action is such that it could be performed from any motive and still be obligatory. Hence, it could always be 'the right thing for the wrong reason'. But it still might be the case that an action is wrong because of the motive that led to it, so that if it had been performed from another motive it would have been permissible. (In that case we might say it was 'the wrong thing because of the wrong reason'.) This is another way that a motive could be deontically relevant.

MM does not say that the motive of some action is the only or complete reason that X changes its deontic status. It may be that whenever an action is obligatory (or permissible or wrong) a complete statement of the reason why it is wrong would include a number of factors or conditions. Our everyday way of thinking about rightness and

wrongness may therefore involve considerable (but understandable) simplification. We say things of the form ‘X was wrong because it was a lie’ or ‘S had to do X because she had promised to’. These sorts of statements might well require supplementation to capture fully all the relevant factors underlying their truth because the speaker was assuming that various background conditions held true. Even if the motive of an action is never the complete reason why an action has the deontic status it does MM is true when its motive is one of the relevant factors.

The phrase ‘in virtue of’ in MM can have different meanings. These meanings will be distinguished later. In Chapter 3, for example, I discuss what I call intrinsic and extrinsic consequentialism. These theories rest on different views about which features of motives make them relevant deontically. At this point we need to formulate the issue in a broad way that allows for further distinctions.

In order to see if there are any examples of an action where the motive is deontically relevant, we need to be sure that we have indeed found actions where it is rightness that turns on this factor. A number of authors have pointed out that beliefs about an agent’s motive may affect some other moral judgment besides that concerning the act’s rightness or wrongness. We have seen that Aristotle and Kant are among them. A complete list of the other sorts of moral judgment would seem to be this:

- 1) judgments about the moral value or disvalue of the act, being further divisible as
 - i) judgments that the act has value,
 - ii) judgments about how much value it has,
 - iii) judgments that the act is bad or blameworthy, and
 - iv) judgments about how blameworthy the act is;

- 2) judgments about the value or worth of the motive itself;
- 3) judgments about the character of the agent;
- 4) judgments about the reasonableness or conscientiousness of the agent's decision-making in this case, construing this as evidence about her character;^v
- 5) judgments about the general tendency of a motive to lead to right or wrong acts, where this is distinguished from judgments in category 2).
- 6) judgments utilizing “thick” ethical or virtue concepts such as ‘just’, ‘temperate’, and the like as applied to actions;
- 7) judgments about how wrong an action is.^{vi}

If we distinguish the moral concepts in these other judgments from deontic concepts it leaves open the possibility that, for example, acts that fall into the deontic category of the merely permissible have moral worth or value. This might be the correct way to characterize supererogatory actions. Likewise, it would be possible for acts that are wrong to have no moral disvalue or blameworthiness attaching to them. Such acts are often said to be ‘excused’. Wrong acts could even be valuable. And obligatory actions could be bad, or at least their motives could be.^{vii}

Finally, the deontic concepts that I am interested in are both ‘all things considered’ and objective. Many writers since Sidgwick’s day suggest that there is a subjective concept of rightness, or perhaps even more than one.^{viii} But it is clear that the deontic relevance of motives cannot be understood in terms of their significance for one sense of subjective rightness. Consider a motive that we will need to examine with some care: the sense of duty. Obviously, acting from a sense of duty will make an act subjectively right in the sense that it is believed to be right. (There are, however, other notions of subjective rightness for which it would not follow automatically from the fact

that an agent believes she is acting rightly that she is acting rightly.) The interesting question is whether it will make the act objectively—one is tempted to say ‘really’—right.

Once the deontic concepts are distinguished from all the other concepts listed above a question naturally arises. A philosopher might claim that the motive of an action has a bearing on one or more of the sorts of judgments listed above, but is never deontically relevant. And all philosophers claim that motives have relevance to some of those judgments: their relevance to morality in general is obvious. But then we ask: if motives are important with respect to these other moral concerns, why are they not ever relevant with respect to whether an action is right or wrong? Any sort of argument against MM is going to have to explain why deontic judgments work differently from the others mentioned above. We will see that some of the issues here have to do specifically with the deontic concept of obligation or requirement. That is, there might be an argument to the effect that obligations have certain characteristics that make motives irrelevant to their incidence.

This dialectic about the difference of deontic and other moral concepts has an epistemological version. It might be said that it is often difficult for other people to know what an agent’s motive for acting is. And there is now a widespread conviction that an agent may be unconscious of her own motives. Hence, it could be said, there is a problem in supposing that motives have deontic relevance. But these epistemological difficulties would exist for all of the other moral judgments listed above, where motives are admittedly relevant. So, again, a philosopher opposing MM on the basis of

epistemological concerns would need to explain why these do not apply to the other moral concepts.

II

The Three Basic Arguments

In the following chapters, among other things we will be looking closely at three arguments that have been used, if only implicitly, to show that MM is false. At this stage I will briefly state them. They derive from consequentialism and deontology.

1. **The Substantive Consequentialist Argument.** Some well-known writers in this tradition have more or less explicitly denied that motives are deontically relevant. Perhaps the most famous passage to this effect occurs in Mill's Utilitarianism. Mill insists that we must distinguish "the very meaning of a standard of morals", which provides "the rule of action," from the motive of the action. He continues:

...utilitarian moralists have gone beyond almost all others in affirming that the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much to do with the worth of the agent. He who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty or the hope of being paid for his trouble; he who betrays the friend that trusts him is guilty of a crime, even if his object be to serve another friend to whom he is under greater obligations.^{ix}

Mill seems to distinguish the deontic relevance of motives and their relevance to character or virtue judgments about the agent. (It is a fair interpretation to say that Mill's "morality of the action" is another way of speaking about its deontic status since he goes on to speak of "what is morally right".)

Why is the motive irrelevant? The passage is not clear. It suggests (but only suggests) this point: for any sort of consequentialism (including utilitarianism) the

rightness of an action depends only on its consequences. The right act is the one that produces the best consequences. Different versions of consequentialism may determine what is best in different ways, that is, they may have different theories of intrinsic value. Utilitarianism maintains that the only thing that has intrinsic value is pleasure, so that the right act produces the most pleasure. Another sort of consequentialist theory holds that other things are intrinsically valuable, such as knowledge or friendship.^x In this sort of pluralist consequentialism the right act produces the most of these intrinsically valuable effects. But whatever view is taken about the evaluation of consequences the following point seems to hold: the motive of an action, as such, is one of the causes of it and thus belongs to the history of the world preceding the action. A completely ‘forward-looking’ theory of rightness like consequentialism cannot allow that the antecedent of an action affects its rightness. Or so the argument goes. Consider Mill’s case of saving the drowning person. Suppose that S and T on separate occasions have the option of saving someone from drowning. In each case the best consequences will result if they do so. The fact that S would be acting from a higher motive and T from a lower motive cannot alter the fact that saving the person has the best results.^{xi}

This argument derives from substantive claims about which facts about actions are deontically relevant. Its conclusion that MM is false collapses if we reject its claim that only features of the world after the action are relevant to its rightness and wrongness. Many deontologists in fact reject this claim. One reason some of them do so is that they believe that some facts about the past are relevant to obligations of reparation and promise-keeping, for example.^{xii} Nonetheless, some deontologists offer their own

arguments against MM. The two further arguments I turn to stem ultimately from Kant. They focus on the concept of moral obligation.

2. The Availability of Motives. In a well-known passage Kant discusses the biblical commands to love one's neighbor and one's enemy. He says that love as a feeling or an inclination cannot be commanded. These commands, then, must be understood as requiring actions and not feelings, "practical and not pathological love, residing in the will and not in the propensions of feeling."^{xiii} This passage seems to contain an argument that partly supports the conclusion that motives cannot affect the obligatoriness of an action. Many motives are emotions, and these latter are not under our immediate control. I cannot here and now feel sympathy for another person. But another person may here and now need my help, and I may be morally obligated to provide it. If the content of the relevant moral rule were, roughly, 'help others from sympathy', then I would be obligated to perform an action that I could not perform. But if the rule required only that I help others, then I could do what I am obligated to do. Hence, moral rules that characterize actions as obligatory must do so without mentioning that they be performed from any particular emotion. This argument implicitly appeals to the dictum, also deriving from Kant, that 'ought' implies 'can': if I am obligated to do something then I can do it.^{xiv}

This version of the argument can only be used to show that no obligation includes a reference to a motivating emotion. But H. A. Prichard and his colleague W.D. Ross generalized it to cover all motives, as they understood them. Ross wrote as follows:

It is not the case that I can by choice produce a certain motive (whether this be an ordinary motive or the sense of obligation) in myself at a moment's notice, still less that I can at a moment's notice make it effective in stimulating me to act. I

can act from a certain motive only if I have the motive; if not, the most I can do is cultivate it by suitably directing my attention or by acting in certain appropriate ways so that on some future occasion it will be present in me, and I shall be able to act from it. My present duty, therefore, cannot be to act here and now from it.^{xv}

Ross later summarized his position thus: “it is our duty to do certain things, and not to do them from certain motives.”^{xvi} Let us call this claim PRC, in honor of Prichard and Ross:

Prichard and Ross’ Claim (PRC): All actions that are morally obligatory are specified without mentioning their motives.

I will say that PRC entails that moral obligation is a completely objective deontic status.

PRC does not entail that we have no obligation to alter or control our motives. It would be very odd if that were true, since we have seen that morality contains many evaluations of motives. PRC allows for the possibility that we have obligations to extinguish certain motives, and cultivate others. But if S has an obligation to, say, cultivate her sense of duty then Prichard and Ross’s claim is that S can carry that obligation out from any motive whatsoever. S’s obligation to alter her own motivation would be strictly comparable to the merchant’s obligation to return the correct change.

Mark Timmons has noted that a statement like PRC also allows for the fact that motives can be relevant to obligations in another way.^{xvii} It may be that someone else’s motive for previously acting in a certain way can be relevant to S’s obligations now. S may have an obligation to perform a certain service for T only because T acted sympathetically to S in the past. But if PRC is correct, then S’s obligation of gratitude to T can itself be carried out from any motive. It is again strictly comparable to the merchant’s obligation to return the correct change.

In saying that PRC entails that moral obligation is completely objective I am referring to its exclusion of motives—which comprise one kind of subjective state—from its content. I am not addressing whether an agent’s beliefs—which comprise another kind of subjective state—are relevant to another question about moral obligation. This is the question of whether an agent’s beliefs are relevant to the existence of an obligation that she has. The existence of an obligation on S to, say, assist T might be thought to depend on whether S believes that T is in need of assistance, or at least should believe this, given what else she believes. There is some controversy about this claim, and hence about whether obligation is objective in this second way.^{xviii} We will not examine that question.

This second argument for MM (or at least PRC) is not based on substantive moral considerations. It is based on a conceptual claim about our concept of moral obligation, and on a psychological claim about our ability to act from a motive at a given time.

3. Moral obligations are Categorical. There is a way to blunt the force of the argument about the availability of motives. But doing so creates another problem.

Let us represent an action from a motive as ‘X from M’. And let us represent an action from a specific motive M1 as ‘X from M1’. Michael Stocker pointed out that Prichard and Ross’s claim at best shows that I cannot be obligated to X from M1 when I am not already motivated to X from M1. But I can X from M1 when I am motivated to X from M1. When this is true I could therefore be obligated to do X from M1.^{xix} There is no difficulty in this situation generated by the dictum that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. For example, I may not be able to act from sympathy when I do not feel sympathy. But sometimes I do feel sympathy. And then I could be obligated to act from it.

Stocker does not endorse the position whose possibility he notices. And he does not add that it creates another problem. It in effect contradicts another important Kantian claim about moral obligations, namely, that they are ‘categorical imperatives’. Suppose that all motives are desires. Following Stocker we could then suppose that there are cases where a desire of S creates an obligation for her. This is a hypothetical imperative in Kant’s sense. But his great authority stands behind the assertion that a hypothetical moral imperative is a contradiction in terms.

Why is the idea of a hypothetical moral imperative self-contradictory?

Hypothetical imperatives tell an agent what she must do if she is to achieve a certain end.

But, Kant remarks:

an action necessary merely in order to achieve an arbitrary purpose can be considered as in itself contingent, and we can always escape from the precept if we abandon the purpose; whereas an unconditioned command does not leave it open to the will to do the opposite at its discretion and therefore alone carries with it that necessity that we demand from [moral] law.^{xx}

Moral obligations constitute things that we ‘must’ do in a special way. They must be done even if we strongly want not to do them. And they must be done even if we have no desire to do them. But a hypothetical moral obligation would be, precisely, an obligation to do something if we want to do it. This contradicts the idea that moral obligations are categorical imperatives.

Stocker showed that the second argument, even in its Rossian form, still does not hold with complete generality. There are agents whose psychological abilities do not prevent them from carrying out an obligation to perform an action of the form ‘X from M1’. But the third argument applies even in the case of such putative obligations. Kant

asserts that there is something incoherent in the idea of desires, even when available, creating obligations. PRC could therefore be true for this reason.

The second and third argument are based on different conceptions of what denying PRC would involve. If we deny PRC then we are saying that some obligatory actions are specified as including a motive or motives. Ross noted that there seem to be only two ways that this could be true. On the one hand the idea could be, “I ought first to have the motive, and in consequence to act under its influence.”^{xxi} On the other hand, the idea could be, “it is your duty to act from a certain motive if you have got it.”^{xxii} These possibilities lead to a dilemma created by the two arguments. The first idea will mean sometimes violating the dictum about ‘ought’ and ‘can’, according to the argument about the availability of motives. The second idea yields a hypothetical moral imperative, which the third argument asserts is impossible. Hence, we may conclude, PRC is true.

However, it is evident that the second and third arguments, whether singly or together, cannot go so far as to establish that MM is false. These two arguments only apply to the deontic status of obligation; they say nothing about wrongness or permissibility. They cannot show, then, that a motive is never a wrong-making feature of an action, for example. If a motive is ever a wrong-making feature of an action then motives are deontically relevant and MM is true. So if a philosopher somehow establishes that PRC is true she has not established that MM is false. In other words, it is possible that MM and PRC are both true. I will present some examples shortly of cases where motives certainly seem to be wrong-making.

We will need to examine the second and third arguments in any case. This is because if a philosopher admits that there are wrong-making motives she may have to

admit that there are right-making (obligation-making) motives. This will compel her to confront these arguments, or else to explain why she only admits the existence of wrong-making motives. Ross himself not only asserted PRC—which seems to be all that follows from his availability claim—but also MM. He writes, “‘right’ and ‘wrong’ refer entirely to the thing done, ‘morally good’ and ‘morally bad’ entirely to the motive from which it is done.”^{xxiii} So the deontologist Ross agreed with the utilitarian Mill that MM is false.^{xxiv}

It is important to add that deontological theories may have the resources to show that motives are sometimes relevant deontically. In the case of Kantian moral theory this is conceivable because of its procedure for testing ‘maxims’. One part of Kantian theory tells us that if a maxim fails a certain moral test, then the acting on that maxim is wrong. As we will see, it is plausible to think of maxims as containing a reference to the agent’s motive. So it would be a serious mistake to suppose that deontologists must reject MM. But if they do not reject it, we will need to see how they are going to combine acceptance of MM with claims about the availability of motives and the categorical nature of moral requirements.

III

Some Examples

I can begin to motivate the discussion that follows by describing a few examples. These can be thought of as counterexamples to the claim that motives never have deontic relevance.

I will mention three types of motive where such relevance seems to exist. For some purposes it is just as useful to give examples of moral judgments that my readers do not accept themselves. This is because two of the arguments just presented are based in part on conceptual claims. So if there are cases where someone seems to base her judgment of an act's deontic status on her views about the agent's motives, then the proponent of these arguments must not merely show that the person making the judgment is mistaken but that she is confused conceptually or misunderstands what is psychologically possible. And these errors are less plausibly made. It is one thing to say that act type X is not morally wrong. It is another thing to say that anyone who believes it is wrong is conceptually mistaken or believes that something that is not psychologically possible is psychologically possible. But my examples are also meant to suggest that sometimes motives do make a deontic difference.

The first motive I will mention is the desire for money. Mill says that an agent who saves someone from drowning "does what is right" even if her motive is "the hope of being paid" for her trouble. This may be so. But I think that many people would say that if someone had sex with someone else "in the hope of being paid," the agent would be acting wrongly. On the other hand, if this same agent had sex with another person because he loved the other person, the act would not be wrong. If so, it seems to be the motive that differentiates the two agents and has the effect of making one agent act wrongly and the other permissibly. There are other acts besides having sex with someone that also seem to mix badly, as it were, with the desire for money. A related one is marrying someone. A third is putting a child up for adoption.

A second motive that seems to affect the deontic status of actions is cruelty, the desire to hurt or kill a living thing as an end. Some examples concern our relations to the natural world. Suppose one person goes into the woods and kills many birds for the sheer fun of it. In contrast, another person in similar circumstances could kill the same number of birds in the same way as a measure to insure a proper population of them. There would be cases of the same contrast in the treatment of persons, but they are harder to find. This is because certain kinds of acts such as whipping or shooting a person are normally wrong no matter what the motive. But there do seem to be acts which affect persons where the motive does make a deontic difference. If an adult makes a joke about a child out of annoyance in order to embarrass her, this would be wrong. In another instance, the same joke (in terms of its content) might be meant 'in fun'.^{xxv}

Third, there are the motives of racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and so on. Racism sometimes is simply a sort of racially based cruelty, or desire to do ill to members of a particular race. Here again we cannot cite an example where, say, S beats T because T is black. Such an act would be wrong even if racism were not its motive. Racism here is relevant to judgments of S's blameworthiness (of types 1 iii and 1 iv above), and to judgments about S's character (see types 3 and 4), but it is not what makes the act wrong. We can find examples, however, where an otherwise permissible act seems to be made wrong when motivated by racism. For example, S may refuse to sell T her house because T is black. The very same act of refusal would be permissible if it were done from fear stemming from doubts about T's creditworthiness.

I believe that other examples could be given of motives that make a difference to the deontic status of an action. But my purpose is not to make an exhaustive catalog. The

main point to be made is that motives do seem to have deontic relevance. It should be noted that the examples I have given do not seem to stem from any one recognizable moral tradition in our culture. I conjecture that every tradition that utilizes deontic concepts at all will sometimes make the rightness of an action hinge on its motives. I do not want to say that all of these examples will stand up under examination as instances of the deontic relevance of motives. They at least give us food for thought. It is interesting that all of the motives mentioned would count as wrong-making. This suggests that the strategy of accepting both PRC and MM has some plausibility.

IV

Our Agenda

We now have a number of issues to investigate. They are the following.

1. What is a motive?
2. Do the examples presented really tend to support the truth of MM? Is it really the motive that is making a deontic difference in these cases?
3. If MM is true, what sort of moral theory can explain why it is true?
4. Is Ross correct in holding that motives are generally unavailable?
5. If MM is true is that because motives are sometimes wrong-making but never obligation-making? That is, is PRC true as well?
6. If motives ever are obligation-making do we then have cases of hypothetical moral obligations?
7. Are hypothetical moral obligations self-contradictory?

Before we begin answering these questions it is important to make a final set of observations. I will try to show that motives sometimes do have deontic relevance. But, at the same time, I will grant that very often they do not. And that fact is presumably a part of the reason why many philosophers have argued that they are never deontically relevant. It does seem that for many actions their deontic status is fixed independently of their motive. Kant's example of the store keeper who gives correct change can be mentioned here. So any acceptable theory about the deontic relevance of motives must show why motives are sometimes relevant deontically but often are not. Or, we could say that any acceptable theory should yield a largely objective conception of deontic status. That is, it should not only yield a largely (and possibly entirely) objective conception of obligation, but a largely objective conception of mere permissibility and wrongness. In the latter case this means that generally acts are wrong whatever motive leads to their performance. In considering how various moral theories approach MM it will thus be useful to structure the discussion in the following way. We first try to see how the theory makes deontic status largely objective. This would help to explain why it can seem to be wholly objective. We then see if motives can on occasion be relevant, so that there are some exceptions to the objective conception of deontic status.

In this sense, the sort of account we are looking for is necessarily modest. And it must defend a middle position between those who reject MM by claiming that motives are never relevant deontically and those who say that the only deontically relevant feature of actions is their motive. Something like this position has also been defended. I will try to show that it is also mistaken.

To say that an acceptable account of the deontic relevance of motives is necessarily modest is not to say that it is unimportant. Part of its importance lies in understanding precisely how substantive moral theories that determine rightness are going to take account of motives. But part of its importance lies in seeing how much truth there is in certain conceptual claims about the nature of moral obligation and in general assertions about human volitional psychology. When we are dealing with these conceptual claims and assertions about human psychology the number of cases we have to consider is unimportant. If we have even one case, or could have one case, where the motive of an action is deontically relevant we have something that takes us into deep waters.

ⁱ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics II iv, trans. J.A.K. Thomson, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1976), p. 98.

ⁱⁱ W.D. Ross, who argues at length for the separation of motive from rightness, cites this passage and gives it this interpretation. W.D. Ross, Foundations of Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 139.

ⁱⁱⁱ Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals, trans. H.J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 65 (397). Hereafter this work will be abbreviated by ‘G’ and the corresponding page in the Prussian Academy edition will also be given, as here.

^{iv} G 66 (398). Emphasis added.

^v For this suggestion, see Thomas Scanlon, Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame (Harvard University Press, forthcoming), chap 1, sec. 4. I am grateful to Scanlon for providing me with a copy of his manuscript. For the idea of motives as evidence for character judgments, see also John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), p. 18, n. 2. (Hereafter abbreviated as ‘U’); John Rawls, A Study in the Grounds of Ethical Knowledge: Considered with Reference to Judgments on the Moral Worth of Character, Ph.D. Dissertation Princeton, 1950, pp. 140, 172.

^{vi} It might seem intolerable that considerations about an act’s motive could affect a judgment about how wrong an act is without affecting the judgment that it is wrong at all. But this possibility cannot be eliminated on conceptual grounds alone.

^{vii} Confusion about the relation between deontic and value (or axiological) concepts has sometimes led writers to deny that the three deontic categories are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive (e.g. Roderick Chisholm, “Supererogation and Offense: A Conceptual Scheme for Ethics,” Ratio 5 (1963), pp. 1-14). The hesitations of Lawrence Blum about the moral significance of motives seem rooted in this point. Lawrence Blum, Friendship, Altruism and Morality (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 142-63.

^{viii} Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics, 7th ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1981), p. 207. (Hereafter abbreviated as ME). William Frankena, in effect summarizing discussions over the half century following Sidgwick, finds that there are four morally relevant senses of the word ‘ought’. William Frankena, “Obligation and Ability,” in Max Black, ed., Philosophical Analysis: A Collection of Essays (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1950), pp. 157-75. We are interested in his ‘ought (2)’.

^{ix} U 17-18.

^x A well-known historical example is G.E. Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903). A contemporary example is David Brink, Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

^{xi} A contemporary consequentialist quite explicit about this point is Julia Driver, Uneasy Virtue (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 68-70.

^{xii} W. D. Ross, The Right and the Good (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), pp. 34-5. (Hereafter abbreviated as RG.)

^{xiii} G 67 (399).

^{xiv} This is noted by Ross. RG 5. The Kantian provenance of this principle is discussed by Roger Sullivan, Immanuel Kant’s Moral Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 320, n. 6.

^{xv} RG 5. Prichard deserves the credit for first developing this argument. H. A. Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” Moral Obligation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 1-17, at 6-7 (first published, 1912). See also Prichard, “Moral Obligation.” Ibid., pp. 87-163, at 129-35 (written 1937). It should be mentioned that Ross also presented a well-known argument that we cannot be obligated to act from the sense of duty, since that would generate an infinite regress. RG 5-6. This argument applies to only one motive, although Ross also believed that the sense of duty is the only motive that could plausibly be supposed to be included in the content of an agent’s duty. The argument based on the availability of motives is more general, and, I think, more important. Ross developed some other arguments in his later work, Foundations, op. cit., ch. 6.

^{xvi} RG 23.

^{xvii} Mark Timmons, “Motive and Rightness in Kant’s Ethical System,” in Kant’s Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretive Essays, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 261-2.

^{xviii} There is a good discussion of this in Scanlon, Moral Dimensions, op. cit., ch. 2, sec. 3.

^{xix} Michael Stocker, “Intentions and Act Evaluations,” The Journal of Philosophy 67 (1970), pp. 589-602, at 589-90.

^{xx} G 87 (419). Cp. G 84 (416).

^{xxi} Ross, Foundations, op. cit., p. 115.

^{xxii} Ibid., p. 116.

^{xxiii} RG 7. My emphasis.

^{xxiv} Ross believed that “the main lines of ethical theory” agreed in accepting PRC (and, it seems, rejecting MM). Foundations, op. cit., pp. 138-40.

^{xxv} It is interesting that when writers who are discussing moral epistemology try to give examples of self-evident moral truths, they often use cruelty as their exemplar. See, e.g.,

J. L. Mackie, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1977), p. 41; Judith Jarvis Thomson, The Realm of Rights (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 18; Robert Merrihew Adams, The Virtue of Faith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 98, 129.