

# Motive and Rightness

## Summary of Contents

### Chapter 1: The Deontic Relevance of Motives

The topic is introduced. The deontic concepts (obligatory, wrong, merely permissible) are distinguished from other moral concepts. The central question to be examined in this book is whether the following statement is true.

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.

A number of deontologists and consequentialists have suggested that MM is false. Three arguments have been offered for this conclusion. 1. Consequentialists sometimes suggest that only the consequences of an action are relevant deontically and that motives are not consequences. 2. Prichard and Ross generalized a well-known argument in Kant about emotions that they took to lead to the following conclusion.

PR: All actions that are morally obligatory are specified without mentioning their motives.

3. The idea that a motive made an action obligatory would entail that there is a hypothetical moral obligation. But this is absurd. Actually, even if PR is true, MM could also be true. This could be so because there are wrong-making motives but no obligation-making motives. There do seem to be examples of wrong-making motives. For example, if S refuses to sell her house to T because T is Jewish, that act of refusal is wrong. On the other hand, if S refuses to sell T her house because T represents a financial risk, that is permissible. This example establishes a sort of presumption in favor of the truth of MM. We will need to see if any familiar moral theory can explain why MM is true in cases (such as this one) where it seems to be true. On the other hand, moral theory also needs to support the idea that deontic status is largely objective.

### Chapter 2: The Nature of Motives

Motives can be categorized as desires. To explain an action by citing its motive is to give a certain sort of explanation of it. This sort of explanation is sometimes called 'rationalizing'. So motives are types of explanatory reasons. But they are connected to 'normative' reasons. In a 'standard case', a motive explanation of an action articulates the agent's normative reason for acting, that is, what she finds desirable in performing it. Since rational action often has a means/end structure in a wide sense we should only speak of the desired end as a motive, not the desired means. This suggests that we could define a motive as an ultimate desire. Consideration is given to the relation of the motive of an action and its intention, as well as to certain complicating phenomena like unconscious desires. The definition of a motive is as given as follows

The motive of an action is an ultimate desire of the agent that would be satisfied by some feature of it, or its effects, if she succeeds in doing what she intends to do, and that explains its occurrence, or some feature of it.

If we want to use ordinary words we can say that an agent's motive establishes her end in acting. The relation between motives and actions is 'many-many'. A given sort of action can be performed from many motives; a given sort of motive can lead to many different sorts of action. To desire something as an end is not necessarily to believe it is intrinsically valuable. Given what motives are, there do indeed seem to be examples of them that are relevant deontically.

### **Chapter 3: Consequentialism and Motives**

Consequentialists have been interested in motives. A number of them seem to have affirmed PR. This is to say that an action that has the best consequences (as compared to the alternatives) need not be performed from any particular motive. But given certain general assumptions about which features of an action are relevant deontically it is possible to construct an argument to the effect that motives are never wrong-making, either, and that MM is false. Mill and Moore are two consequentialists who explicitly deny MM. But the argument for the falsity of MM has two flaws. First, it ignores the possibility that an action has intrinsic value or badness. Second, motives can have effects besides their production of actions as such. Motives effect how an action is performed. And people often care about why an agent performed a given action. So consequentialism should affirm MM, not deny it. I give a schematic example to show how consequentialism can support the claim that a motive like racism is sometimes wrong-making. Familiar versions of consequentialism will see motives as relevant only because of their effects. I call this family of theories 'extrinsic consequentialism'. It includes utilitarianism. An unusual form of consequentialism claims that motives themselves are sometimes intrinsically valuable or intrinsically bad. This is intrinsic consequentialism. Hurka has recently defended such a theory. It has added resources for claiming that MM is true, since it claims that motives are deontically relevant for two sorts of reason, while extrinsic consequentialism claims that motives are relevant only because of their effects. We examine this theory further in Chapter 8.

### **Chapter 4: Testing Kantian Maxims**

Certain themes in Kant's moral philosophy suggest that he denies MM. But, in fact, there seem to be ways that allow him to affirm it. The First (or Universal Law) Formulation of the Categorical Imperative describes how 'maxims' of action are to be tested for moral permissibility. Maxims incorporate a description of the agent's motive, so in principle a maxim of the form 'X from M1' could pass the test of permissibility and another maxim 'X from M2' could fail it. (M1 represents one sort of motive and M2 another.) If this took place, and another condition held, we could say that M2 is here a wrong-making motive. I describe some of the logical relations between the results of the testing of maxims and deontic judgments like 'X is wrong'. I distinguish between strong and weak wrong-making motives, and strong and weak obligation-making motives. To say that a motive is strongly wrong-making is to say, roughly, that whenever an agent acts from it she acts

wrongly. I then examine the Practical Contradiction Interpretation of the Universal Law Formulation that has been defended by Christine Korsgaard. I show that it asks us to suppose that two sorts of social processes occur in the 'universalization situation'. These are Reversed Role Processes and Victim Protection Processes. If these processes lead to a 'practical contradiction' for the agent in the universalization situation then her maxim fails the test and acting on it is said to be wrong. A practical contradiction is a situation where it is impossible for the agent to succeed in reaching her goal. This test of maxims requires us to reconceive of the content of some motives, sometimes radically. To even begin to generate Victim Protection Processes we need to have maxims that are universally quantified in two respects. To generate reversed Role Processes we sometimes need to change the very description of what agents find desirable in acting. I go on to discuss the verdict that the test would give to a suitably formulated racist maxim that roughly corresponds to the action discussed in the previous chapter. I show that a maxim of refusing to shake someone's hand from racism passes the test. This indicates a defect in Kantian theory, since one would expect it to fail the test. I conclude by contrasting how the Universal Law test responds to motives and how consequentialism does.

### **Chapter 5: Treating Humanity as an End**

The second formulation of the Categorical Imperative might yield an acceptable treatment of the deontic relevance of motives. To see if this is so we need to interpret the components of the 'Formula of Humanity'. Part of it concerns using people as means. But the means that an agent employs do not constitute her motive, so any principle about the permissibility of using certain means lies outside our topic. Still, it is interesting and helpful to examine the idea that the prohibition on using persons simply as a means is the basic principle of morality. Parfit has shown that treating another simply as a means is not sufficient for wrongdoing. In fact, Kant himself seems to grant that this is so because of his distinction between acting from duty and acting in accordance with duty. There are a number of counterexamples to the claim that treating a person simply as a means is necessary for wrongdoing. One is failing to help. 'Bad Samaritans' do not use the people they fail to help simply as means. These conclusions require us to focus on the portion of the Formula of Humanity that requires us always to treat people as ends. Kant makes clear that 'end' is here being used in a special way. He is presenting us with the idea that rational agents are 'objectively prescriptive', to use a phrase of Mackie. This is an attractive suggestion for our purposes since it helps to explain why deontic status is largely objective. Using this as a rough guide for our purposes we can consider what Kant would say about the deontic status of actions prompted by a motive like malice. There is some material in the *Metaphysics of Morals* to help us see what Kant thinks about this. This material is fragmentary, but it seems that he thought that any action from malice, even where the motive is concealed, is wrong. That is, he takes malice to be a strongly wrong-making motive. There are two problems with this position. One is that it creates a structural tension: no type of action can be obligatory, whatever the motive leads to its performance. That is, PR is false. Furthermore, we can test the claim by means of hypothetical cases. This is done in the next chapter. We can see that the two formulations of the Categorical Imperative give radically different answers about the deontic relevance

of bad motives like malice and racism. Consequentialism has a better and more nuanced position.

### **Chapter 6: Doing the Right Thing from Malice**

We can continue to test Kant's claim that malice is a strongly wrong-making motive by considering a case going back to Abelard. This involves an executioner carrying out his duty from malice. If we suppose that he acts without (extra) cruelty we believe that he does the 'right thing for the wrong reason'. So acting from a bad motive like malice is not necessarily wrong. There is a sense in which writers like Judith Thomson and Peter Singer draw the wrong conclusion from such an example. They suggest that deontic status is completely objective, and that motives are never relevant deontically. Since we have found examples where motives are relevant deontically, we can see that this is false. A consequentialist can grant that in practice certain motives are so unlikely to lead to permissible actions that virtuous agents should always try to avoid acting from them. But it is possible that she will not go this far. In any case, consequentialists must deny that any motive is such that it necessarily leads to wrong-doing. I turn to examine the treatment of motives by Michael Slote. Slote's work is in the virtue ethics tradition. He uses judgments about the admirability of certain character traits and characters to generate deontic judgments. A crucial claim of Slote's is that certain motives are such that no admirable person would ever act from them. Hence, any action from these motives is wrong. Slote thus accepts that there are strongly wrong-making motives. We have just seen that consideration of the executioner case leads us to deny that this is so. Furthermore, we can see that Slote has a problem in drawing the critical line in his theory between permissibility and wrongness. He seems to grant that actions from self-interest are not necessarily wrong. But, as Parfit showed, someone acting from self-interest can be indifferent to the humanity of others. This represents quite a distance normatively from the motives that Slote regards as most admirable. But if acting from such a motive is not necessarily wrong, it is hard to see why acting from malice necessarily is wrong. So Slote's way of establishing the existence of strongly wrong-making motives fails. We now have more confidence that consequentialism offers us the best way to understand the deontic relevance of motives.

### **Chapter 7: The Availability of Motives**

Some writers have discussed an issue in moral psychology that they call the 'availability of motives'. It has been said that Kant believed that the 'motive of duty' is always available to rational agents, in contrast to emotional motives like sympathy. We examine the general question of the availability of motives. I distinguish four types of availability: epistemic, affirmative, operative and affective. All motives have epistemic preconditions.

For every motive, if it is epistemically available to a rational agent it is affirmatively available to her. She can practically affirm the normative reason it embodies and seek to achieve it. For every motive, if it is affirmatively available to a rational agent it is incompletely available operatively. She may only affirm one reason for acting but other reasons may also be operating. Emotional motives like sympathy have a propositional core. If this propositional core is epistemically available to a rational agent then it is affirmatively available to her. If the propositional core of an emotional motive is affirmatively available to a rational agent then it is incompletely available operatively. These conclusions suggest that the contrast between the availability of the motive of duty and emotional motives is generally overdrawn. These distinctions help us to address the question of what motives are deontically relevant. All motives that an agent practically affirms are operative, but not all operative motives are affirmed. One example is an unconscious motive. A consequentialist must say that some operative motives that are not affirmed are relevant deontically. I use an example to show how an unconscious operative motive could be relevant deontically. In the final section I consider two cases in order to see whether an agent who would act impermissibly if she acted from one motive is capable of acting from another motive that would allow her to act permissibly. In other words, I consider the extent to which the availability of motives enables an agent to evade any prohibitions on acting from certain motives. Given the epistemic preconditions on acting from any motive, and the relevance of operative motives, there is only a limited room for such 'motive hunting'.

### **Chapter 8: Three Remaining Questions**

I begin by examining Hurka's 'recursive theory of value'. This theory asserts that certain mental states have intrinsic value and intrinsic badness. If it is correct then some motives have intrinsic value, and some have intrinsic badness. I reject the theory for three reasons. 1. The abstract argument that Hurka gives for it suffers from an equivocation. 2. A number of important specific modifications of the basic view that Hurka makes are most plausibly seen as responding to the different ways that mental attitudes lead to the production of intrinsically valuable states of affairs. 3. The desire to produce new knowledge as an end can be plausibly seen as extrinsically valuable, pace Hurka. These three points lead us to the conclusion that motives have only extrinsic value. Hence extrinsic consequentialism is the best way to understand the deontic relevance of motives. With this conclusion in hand we can answer some questions first posed in Chapter 1. Extrinsic consequentialism must deny PR. If some motives have bad effects that can make an otherwise permissible action wrong, there must be good motives that can make an otherwise permissible action obligatory. So there must be obligation-making motives. These would not violate the dictum that 'ought' implies 'can'. Drawing on Ross I show why this is so. The resulting position does suggest that obligation-making motives constitute hypothetical moral imperatives, but I show that there is nothing objectionable in principle to such an idea. In fact, Kant's notion of a duty of imperfect obligation might also allow for this. In the final section I explain why it would be difficult to feel confident that a given agent is obligated to perform a specific action from a certain motive. If that is correct, then extrinsic consequentialism does not make claims that are very different from the convictions of moral common sense, which has some inclination to affirm PR