



Steven Sverdlik, *Motive and Rightness*

Motive and Rightness by Sverdlik, Steven

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Ethics, Vol. 122, No. 3 (April 2012), pp. 627-632

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/665615>

Accessed: 16/05/2013 01:13

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the standard buck-passer may be able to respond to Bedke's objections and offer a more unified, empirically adequate analysis of oughts and requirements.

The remaining papers in the volume make important contributions on a wide range of metaethical issues. One recent hot topic in metaethics concerns the debate over subjectivism and objectivism, or whether an agent's normative reasons are always grounded in facts about her motivational attitudes. David Sobel defends a version of subjectivism that allows one's future desires to ground facts about one's present reasons. This account, Sobel argues, avoids Derek Parfit's "Agony Argument." Chris Heathwood defends objectivism against the argument from matters of mere taste. Julia Markovits offers several fascinating arguments for her favored version of subjectivism that are independent of many of the standard philosophical motivations for subjectivism (e.g., reductive naturalism, the Humean theory of motivation).

Richard Joyce and Jonas Olson examine moral error theory. Joyce defends the surprising conclusion that several prominent metaethical theories, contrary to initial appearances, commit their proponents to a moral error theory. Olson argues that even if error theory is true, we should embrace genuine moral beliefs and assertions rather than adopt a fictive attitude toward them as moral fictionalists suggest.

Sarah McGrath's insightful contribution examines several ways in which experience plays a crucial role in the acquisition of moral knowledge, ways, she argues, that are consistent with that knowledge being a priori. Campbell Brown offers a new version of Frank Jackson's argument for ethical descriptivism, one that avoids making linguistic assumptions and is "metaphysical all the way through" (206). Paul Katsafanas rejects the common assumption in action theory that reflective actions are paradigm cases of agential activity. He argues that, since motives can influence the process of reflection itself, reflection does not suspend the effects of an agent's motives. Finally, Ralph Wedgwood defends the existence of instrumental rationality and, with characteristic care, delineates a general account of what is essential to it.

Like the previous volumes in Shafer-Landau's *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, volume 6 is characterized by careful argument and nuanced insight. It is essential reading for anyone with prior interests in metaethics.

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Sverdlik, Steven. *Motive and Rightness*.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 224. \$55.00 (cloth).

This book is essential reading for anyone interested in the question of whether the motive of an action ever affects its deontic status, and it will also be of interest to normative ethicists in general. Many prominent moral philosophers, including J. S. Mill, H. A. Prichard, and W. D. Ross, hold that motives never have deontic relevance, but Steven Sverdlik disagrees. His aim in this book is to establish the truth of the following thesis and to understand why it is true:

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. (4)

Sverdlik focuses on three deontic concepts: the obligatory, the wrong, and the merely permissible. He supports MM by responding to some of the familiar objections to the view that motive affects rightness (the consequentialist argument, the argument from the availability of motives, and the argument that moral obligations are categorical). Sverdlik responds to these objections throughout the book, but he doesn't provide a positive argument in support of MM. Instead, he relies heavily on our commonsense intuitions in a number of cases. Among the examples of where motive sometimes makes a deontic difference, he mentions the desire for money (in relation to actions such as having consensual sex, marrying someone, and putting a child up for adoption), cruelty, and racism. An example of racism is where S refuses to sell her house to T because T is black. This is intuitively wrong, but the same action would be permissible if it were done from doubts about T's creditworthiness (14–15).

Chapter 2 is devoted to conceptual issues. Sverdlik defines motive as "the ultimate desire of the agent that explains its occurrence, or some feature of it" (18). When a rational agent acts on ultimate and derived desires, there is a sort of rational structure to her activity itself: "A motive establishes an end for an agent, and she guides her activity accordingly. As she acts she will monitor her activity to be sure that it is succeeding in achieving her end, and she will modify it if it is not" (27). The bulk of the book (chaps. 3–7) is focused on the question of which substantive moral theory can provide the most plausible explanation for why motive sometimes makes a deontic difference.

In chapter 3, Sverdlik argues that "extrinsic" consequentialism can support MM. He begins by discussing what he calls a "quasi-Millian argument" for the falsity of MM, namely, that rightness depends on consequences; motives are not consequences; therefore, motives cannot affect rightness. Sverdlik rejects this argument, on the grounds that motives can affect consequences and thereby also rightness. Whenever an agent consciously acts on a motive, it guides her activity. It is therefore better to think of motive as contemporaneous with an action, rather than as prior to it. It follows that when the same kind of action is performed from two different motives, it may be performed in different ways, and so the consequentialist cannot hold that all acts are such that they produce the same narrow consequences regardless of motive (51–52). Sverdlik gives some useful examples of how motives can have extrinsic value, in the remainder of chapter 3.

In chapter 4, he considers a second response to the quasi-Millian argument, namely, that rightness cannot depend only on consequences because the consequentialist has to include in her calculation any intrinsic value that the action itself has (49–51). Sverdlik discusses Thomas Hurka's version of intrinsic consequentialism, which claims that some motives (and psychological states more generally) are intrinsically good and others are intrinsically bad (*Virtue, Vice and Value* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001]). Hurka argues that the value of an attitude depends on the value of its object, so, for example, the love of

knowledge for itself is intrinsically good because knowledge is intrinsically good. Sverdlik rejects this view because desires are attitudes whose function is to change the world in some way, suggesting that they are only extrinsically valuable. His conclusion, then, is that only extrinsic consequentialism can explain why motive sometimes makes a deontic difference.

The question of whether the Kantian can support MM is taken up in chapters 5 and 6. Prichard and Ross's claim is that "no actions that are obligatory owe this status, even in part, to any facts about the motives from which they are performed" (77). This claim does not entail that MM is false, for it is possible for there to be wrong-making motives even if there are no obligation-making motives. Sverdlik argues that the first (Universal Law) formulation of the Categorical Imperative does not provide us with a plausible explanation for why it is wrong to refuse to shake someone's hand from a racist motive (chap. 5). The second statement—the Formula of Humanity—takes malice to be a wrong-making motive, and hence supports MM, but does so only by sacrificing a largely objective conception of deontic status, that is, by holding that any act from malice is wrong (chap. 6).

In chapter 7, Sverdlik briefly examines the ways in which two versions of virtue ethics treat the deontic relevance of motives. He focuses on Rosalind Hursthouse's neo-Aristotelianism and Michael Slote's agent-based virtue ethics and argues that while the former cannot account for the deontic relevance of motives, the latter can do so only by sacrificing the idea that there are any objective obligations. He concludes that it is only extrinsic consequentialism that can account for the deontic relevance of motives while also providing an objective conception of deontic status.

Chapter 8 deals with an important question concerning the availability of motives: is it ever possible that at one time, an agent can choose to perform a certain type of action from one motive or choose to perform that type of action from another motive? In part 1, Sverdlik distinguishes four distinct psychological abilities: the ability of an agent to recognize the normative reasons she has to act, the ability to choose to act on those reasons, the ability to make the corresponding desires move her to act, and the ability to call forth certain distinctive feelings. These abilities underlie the epistemic, affirmative, operative, and affective availability of motives. While he grants that there are differences between the availability of the sense of duty and the availability of other motives (e.g., sympathy and self-interest), there are fundamental similarities (149–66). In part 2, Sverdlik argues that extrinsic consequentialism will acknowledge that it is possible at one time for an agent to act wrongly if she performs a certain action from one motive, and permissibly if she performs it from another, but that these cases are very rare (166–73). Finally, he argues that motives are also relevant to obligation (chap. 9); in some situations, the very fact that we are "in the mood" for doing something has a bearing on whether we ought to act. For example, suppose there is an important piece of research that must be carried out and there are a number of researchers available for the assignment. If S is interested in the phenomenon to be investigated and the others are not, then S may be obligated to undertake the assignment. He will be motivated to produce new knowledge about the phenomenon as an end, whereas the others would not

be. They would have to be provided with incentives in order to put the same amount of effort into the investigation as S would (184).

The book is interesting, well organized, and written in a style that is clear and accessible. I have three points of criticism, one about the overall aim and argumentative structure of the book and two about the treatment of virtue ethics. Sverdlik's aim is to show that motives can have deontic relevance. This at first appears to be a fairly controversial thesis, for as he notes, both consequentialists and deontologists have important objections to the idea. For the thesis to be true, it would seem, one has to find at least one example of a pair of actions that are identical in every respect, except for the agent's motive and the deontic status of the actions. However, when Sverdlik clarifies his thesis, his aim appears to be far more modest. He doesn't claim that for MM to be true it has to be shown that in any given case, the motive of an action is the only or complete reason why it has a certain deontic status (4). But if he accepts that a complete statement of the reason why an action is right or wrong may always include at least one factor apart from motive, then it is very likely that motive affects deontic status only indirectly, that is, by sometimes affecting one or more of these other factors (e.g., the consequences or nature of the action, or the circumstances the agent finds himself in). This thesis—that motive can affect deontic status indirectly—is far less controversial, and I don't think there are very many people who would deny it. Sverdlik provides a detailed argument in favor of the view that extrinsic consequentialism can support MM. The conclusion is correct, but obviously so. Few consequentialists, if any, would deny that motive can affect consequences. Mill writes, for instance, that "the motive, that is, the feeling which makes him will so to do, if it makes no difference in the act, makes none in the morality" (John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979], 18). Mill never claims that MM is false; what he claims is that the following thesis is false:

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 alone.

It also seems unlikely that anyone would disagree that the agent's motive can affect the circumstances he finds himself in and, hence, also the deontic status of his actions. This appears to be what happens in the examples of an agent having sex or getting married from a desire for money (14), as well as in the "mood" examples (183–84). Surely, the fact that S is interested in researching a particular phenomenon makes his circumstances relevantly different from those of his colleagues who do not share this interest.

Sverdlik's discussion of virtue ethics is far less thorough than his treatment of consequentialism and deontology, and this is particularly unfortunate since virtue ethics has many resources available when it comes to showing how motive matters. Sverdlik considers Hursthouse's account, namely, that:

(HC) An action X is right for S in circumstances C if and only if a completely virtuous agent would characteristically X in C.

He claims that her account denies that motives have deontic relevance, and he

appears to do so solely on the grounds that HC doesn't include reference to motive (130–34). This conclusion is far too hasty. Consider the case of an agent who succeeds in helping someone in need but does so solely to impress his mother. Has he performed a right action, according to HC? The answer will depend on how demanding a view one holds of “what the completely virtuous person does.” In particular, do the agent's motive and attitude form part of “what he does”? Among virtue ethicists who support something like HC, there is some disagreement. According to Julia Annas, for example, the right thing to do can range from what the learner does to what the truly virtuous person does. The learner acts in a way that is dependent on the teaching of others, and so he does the right thing only in the sense of doing something acceptable, whereas the truly virtuous person acts on the basis of her own understanding and does the right thing in the sense of doing something admirable. If we accept that a completely virtuous agent would help the person in need, then the agent acts rightly, even though he doesn't act for the right motive or with the right attitude. In this view, “right” is a thin concept; the claim that the agent acts rightly does not tell us very much at all. For a richer evaluation, we have to turn to the language of virtue (Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 16–51).

By contrast, according to a more demanding view, “what the agent does” includes not only the action—helping someone in need—but also his reasons or motive for acting, whether he knows what he is doing, as well as his attitudes and feelings when he acts. This is the view supported by Hursthouse, who writes: “What you *do* does not count as right unless it is what the virtuous agent would *do*, say, ‘tell the truth, after much painful thought, for the right reasons, feeling deep regret, having put in place all that can be done to support the person on the receiving end afterwards.’ Only if you get all of that right are you entitled to the satisfactory review of your own conduct. . . . Simply making the right decision and telling the truth is not good enough to merit approval” (Rosalind Hursthouse, “Are Virtues the Proper Starting Point for Morality?” in *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, ed. J. Dreier [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006], 108–9). Sverdlik therefore overlooks the way in which Aristotelian virtue ethicists can account for the intuition that motive can affect rightness, for he mistakenly assumes that they all support Aristotle's distinction between a virtuous act and action from virtue, which Sverdlik, following Ross, interprets as a distinction between an action that is right and one that is well motivated (130). Virtue ethicists tend to sidestep this distinction by instead speaking of acting well. When they do use the term “right action,” it is often not in the sense of an action that is obligatory or permissible but rather in the sense of an action that is good, virtuous, or praiseworthy.

Finally, there is an unfortunate omission in the list of normative theories that Sverdlik chooses to discuss. One prominent virtue ethicist who supports the distinction between a right act and an act that is well motivated, while at the same time allowing that motive can affect deontic status, is Christine Swanton (*Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], 227–48). Swanton develops a target-centered account of right action, and she uses “right action” in the traditional sense of an action that is either obligatory or permissible. Sverdlik mentions her work in a footnote (130 n. 12), where he

admits to having some difficulty in fully accepting the contrast between Hursthouse's and Swanton's theories. He notes that Swanton explicitly states that motives can be deontically relevant but that her formal definition of rightness categorizes many actions deontically without respect to their motives. This, presumably, is the reason why he doesn't discuss Swanton's account of rightness.

This is an important omission in a book dealing with the deontic relevance of motives. A brief explanation is called for. Swanton defines a right action as one that hits the target(s) of the contextually appropriate virtue(s). Hitting the target of a virtue involves responding successfully to items in the field in which the virtue operates, according to the aim or aims of the virtue. The targets of a particular virtue depend on context. In contexts in which there is considerable need, for example, one may be said to have performed a generous act if one donates a large amount of money, even if the donation is made with bad grace. However, in contexts that are more personal, in which one's hostility or ill grace is noticed by the recipients, the target of generosity is to alleviate need in the right way, where 'in the right way' makes reference to the manner of giving and even motivation (Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 236–37). In short, then, target-centered virtue ethics allows for motive to make a deontic difference in much the same (indirect) way that Sverdlik believes consequentialism does: rightness is not defined in terms of motive; rather, it is defined in terms of some other feature (consequences, hitting the target of virtue), which, it is then argued, is sometimes affected by motive. However, Swanton's account of success in action is much more nuanced than the standard consequentialist view and should have been considered more seriously.

Motive and Rightness suffers from a defect too often found in books on normative theory, namely, that the author feels compelled to include discussion of virtue ethics as the "third major normative theory" but then fails to do it justice. Nevertheless, the book makes a valuable contribution to an often neglected topic in normative ethics, and it will appeal to scholars who have a particular interest in consequentialism and Kantianism, moral psychology, and action theory.

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Taylor, Robert S. *Reconstructing Rawls: The Kantian Foundations of Justice as Fairness*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2011. Pp. 60. \$74.95 (cloth).

Discussion of Rawls's reliance on Kantian metaphysics has been largely dormant for more than twenty years, following his explicit disavowal of it with the publication of his "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical" (*Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 [1985]: 223–51). Rawls's considered view was that his conception of justice, Justice as Fairness, need not rely on contentious metaphysical claims about the nature of the self. He argued that Justice as Fairness could be justified by the fact that it is the focus of an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines, of which the Kantian comprehensive doctrine is but one.