

24.231 Ethics – Handout 21 Nomy Arpaly, “Moral Worth”

1. What is moral worth? What are we saying about an action when we describe it as morally worthy?
 - Can we make sense of the idea of an action’s *meriting* praise or blame in a way that comes apart from its consequences, and from the consequences of our praising it, even if we’re, say, utilitarians?
2. What are *motivating*, as opposed to *justifying*, reasons?
 - Answer the question “what were the agent’s reasons for doing that?”; offer a certain kind of explanation of an agent’s actions, but not any explanation...
 - Will we always be aware of the reasons that motivate us?
3. What must be true of an agent’s reasons for her actions to have moral worth? If moral worth is a matter of degree, what kinds of factors contribute or detract from the worth of an agent’s actions?
 - **Arpaly:** “Praiseworthiness as responsiveness to moral reasons (revised version): for an agent to be morally praiseworthy for doing the right thing is for her to have done the right thing for the relevant moral reasons—that is, in response to the features that make it right (the right reasons clause); and an agent is more praiseworthy, other things being equal, the stronger 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 morality.” (p. 233)
 - The morally worthy agent has a concern for morality *de re*: she acts out of concern for what is *in fact* morally relevant (whether or not she recognizes it to be morally relevant).

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Arpaly, Nomy. “Moral Worth.” *Journal of Philosophy* 99, 5 (May 2002): 223-245.

4. Can we get a grip on what it is to have a greater concern for morality in this sense?
 - Compare Arpaly’s *fair-weather*, *die-hard*, and *capricious philanthropists*.
 - How do we decide which category someone falls into? (E.g., my fanatical dog-lover example...)
5. How are we to understand the idea (found in Kant as well as Arpaly) that in the case of morally worthy action, it’s *no accident* that the agent acts rightly?
 - Two readings:
 - (i) it’s no accident that the agent’s *actual* motive produced the *right* action
 - (ii) it’s no accident that *this agent* did the right thing...
 - The kind of accidentality is ruled out by the “right reasons clause”; the second kind is supposed to be addressed by the “concern clause”...

- Can the second kind of accidentality ever be avoided? Does it reflect on the moral worth of actions? (Do we think worthy actions *more worthy* if the agent would have performed them in under more difficult circumstances as well? If not, why think them less worthy if the agent would have failed to perform them in circumstances different from the ones in which she acted?) Also, think about the analogy to the epistemic case...
6. What factors might make an agent's actions particularly *unworthy*, or *vicious*?
 7. Are actions performed for *wrong-making* reasons – from motivations that are *essentially* in conflict with morality – always more vicious?
 8. Describe *akrasia* and *inverse akrasia*. How does whether an action is akratic influence its moral worth? And relatedly, how do an agent's moral beliefs affect the moral worth of her actions?
 9. When and how does ignorance excuse?
 - Should we treat cases of normative ignorance (ignorance of moral facts) and nonnormative ignorance (ignorance of nonmoral facts) differently?
 - Does it matter whether the agent is at fault for his ignorance?
 10. Is an action performed with a guilty conscience (i.e. in violation of one's conscience) necessarily less worthy? Is there anything worthy about acting in accord with your conscience *per se*?
 11. What about actions performed out of the desire to avoid a guilty conscience (e.g., to "sleep easier"), when our consciences guide us well? Or, relatedly, right actions performed for the pleasure the agent takes in helping others?
 12. What about actions performed for the sake of being moral? Are they morally worthy? Or perhaps *unworthy*?
 13. Can *wrong* actions ever be partially morally worthy? Can we adapt Arpaly's thesis (or whichever account of moral worth we favor) to allow for this possibility?
 14. Arpaly deliberately detaches her discussion of what makes actions *morally worthy* from any discussion of what makes them *right*. Of course, since, on her view, we'll have to discover whether someone acts on *right-making* reasons to know whether they're acting worthily, we'll need to think about what makes actions right before we can tell if they're morally worthy. But Arpaly hasn't appealed, in her defense of her account of moral worth, to any particular theory about what makes actions right. Nonetheless, can thinking about moral worth along the lines Arpaly suggests teach us anything about what theory of the rightness of actions is most plausible? For example, what implications would Arpaly's account of moral worth have for the plausibility of the act-utilitarian account of rightness?

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