The Explanatory Structure of Moral Worth

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1 RI and RMF

Right-Making Features (RMF) Morally worthy actions are motivated by the features of the action that make it right

Rightness Itself (RI) Morally worthy actions are motivated by the fact that the action is right

The heart of the debate is about accidentally/coincidentally/luckily doing the right thing. You can be motivated by right-making features while only coincidentally doing the right thing, making your action not worthy.

Bad Jean 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 major 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 the fact that it spares her friend a major embarrassment makes it right. However, Jean is so focused on saving her friend embarrassment that she would murder her friend's ex-boyfriend if that was the only way to save her friend embarrassment. [Sliwa, 2016]

The aim of this paper is to understand the concept of coincidence; it's connection to moral worth; and to defend a novel version of the RMF account which avoids such counterexamples.

2 Coincidence

Roughly speaking a coincidence has two parts. A striking match between component events and some sense of disconnection between those events. The relevant striking match is between the action performed and the moral facts – ϕ was performed and ϕ was right.

What is the connection that dispels coincidence? Two possible approaches:

2.1 Modal Approaches

Perhaps, a matching between events is non-coincidental if it could not easily have failed to hold. Problem: there are modally robust coincidences.

The numbers 31, 331, 3331, 33331, 333331, 3333331 and 33333331 are each prime but this is just a coincidence – 333333331 is not prime. [Lange, 2010]

Protons and Electrons Protons are positively charged. Electrons are negatively charged. However, the absolute value of their charge is the same. Specifically, protons have a charge of $1.602176634 \times 10^{-19}$ coulombs, while electrons have a charge of $-1.602176634 \times 10^{-19}$ coulombs. Imagine it's just a basic law of nature that protons have that charge, and separately, a basic law of nature that electrons have that charge. That would make the matching of charge nomically necessary, but still coincidental. [Bhogal, 2023]

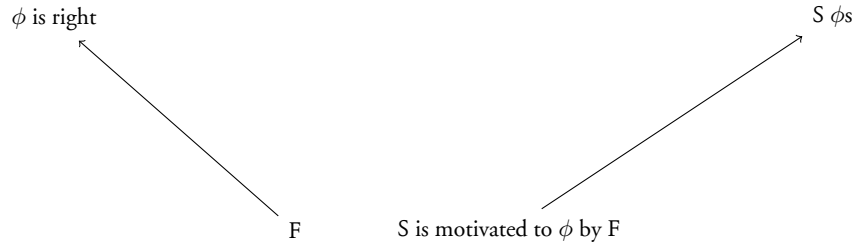More complicated modal accounts face difficulties too.

ϕ is right   S ϕs

F   S is motivated to ϕ by F

Figure 1: The Correlational RMF view

2.1.1 THE PERTINENCE CONSTRAINT

Distinguish moral worth and a broader evaluation of the agents character. What the agent would do in alternative situations seems directly relevant to the character of the agent, but not the worth of their actual action.

More generally, only the motives that *actually* led to action are determine moral worth, not counterfactual ones [Isserow, 2019]. (Though counterfactuals can be *evidentially* relevant to whether an action has moral worth.)

2.2 THE EXPLANATORY APPROACH

The explanatory approach looks more promising. In a coincidence the component events are explanatorily 'disconnected'. But what is explanatory disconnection?

3 FORMULATING THE RMF

The slogan of the RMF view is that an action has moral worth if it is motivated by features that makes the action right.

(In the moral worth literature 'motivation' is typically understood in a way that doesn't build in an explanatory connection between the action performed and the motivating fact. I'll follow this.)

3.1 CORRELATIONAL RMF

Correlational RMF An agent ϕ-ing has moral worth if (i) the action has some feature, F, that makes it right and (ii) the content of their motivation to ϕ is that ϕ has feature F. (See figure 1.)

But there are counterexamples.

Hiring Stephanie is a hiring manager and gives Yi-joon a job. The content of Stephanie's motivation is that Yi-joon is the most skilled programmer. Yi-joon is the most skilled programmer and that is a good reason to give them the job. However, Stephanie only believes that Yi-joon is most skilled because of incorrect racial stereotypes.

3.2 THIRD-FACTOR RMF

The obvious fix is to demand that the agent's motivation is actually explained by the relevant right-making feature F. (See figure 2.)

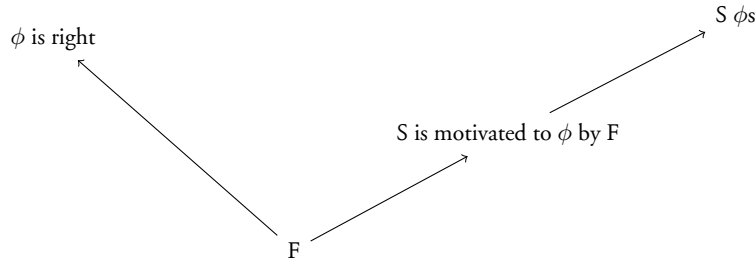But **Bad Jean** is a counterexample.

φ is right   S φs

S is motivated to φ by F

F

Figure 2: The Third-Factor RMF view

4 STAPLING TOGETHER EXPLANATIONS

These RMF views allow for cases that we explain why ϕ is right and why the agent did ϕ, but not satisfyingly explain *why the agent did the right thing*.

> One may explain each side of the coincidence in as much depth as one likes – going into wonderful normative depth about why family and friendship are valuable, and wonderful scientific depth about why we were selected to think this. But all this goes nowhere toward explaining the thing that really needs to be explained, namely the coincidence itself. [Street, 2016, p. 31]

Often a good explanation of a realizer of a fact isn't a good explanation of the fact itself.

To avoid coincidence we need a *unified explanation*. Consider *Arbuthnot's regularity*: In each of the 82 years (1629–1710), the number of males births in London exceeded the number of female births.

A microphysical explanation isn't going to dispel coincidence here – it can explain the realizer of the regularity but doesn't satisfying explain the regularity itself. But there is a unified evolutionary explanation – based on the evolutionary tendency to produce a 1:1 sex ratio at the time of sexual maturity.

We have a unified explanation of why the agent did the right thing when the best explanation of why the agent did the right thing isn't merely an explanation of the agent doing ϕ and ϕ being right.

Unified Explanation RMF For an agent's doing ϕ to have moral worth (i) the agent must be motivated by right-making features of ϕ and (ii) there must be a unified explanation of why the agent did the right thing – that is, the best explanation of why the agent did the right thing cannot be just an explanation of why the agent did ϕ and why ϕ was right.

5 UNIFIED EXPLANATIONS AND RIGHTNESS ITSELF

If an agent does right thing non-coincidentally there is a unified explanation of why the agent did the right thing, not just an explanation of why the agent did ϕ and why ϕ was right. But this means that rightness itself, and not just the details of the right action, has an explanatory role to play.

How might rightness itself play an explanatory role, and an agent act non-coincidentally rightly, without the agent being motivated by rightness itself?

Perhaps a moral insight or a good moral education can provide such a connection.

6   Cases

6.1   Jean

What is the explanation of why Jean did the right thing? In **Bad Jean** the best we can do is explain why Jean did ϕ and why ϕ is right. So my view says that Bad Jean coincidentally does the right thing.

Or rather, I say this about some versions of the Jean case. The fact that she would act wrongly in related situations is strong evidence that her actual action isn't appropriately connected to the moral facts. But it's not conclusive evidence.

My view says that Bad Jean can sometimes act rightly, even if she would do terrible things in some related situation. This is the right result – there are people who actually do terrible things and can still act worthily, even if, of course, their character is flawed.

6.2   Venom

Venom   Jack, a surgeon, is hiking when he sees a stranger get bitten by a venomous snake and faint. He immediately makes an incision near the bite so that the venom will drain out. Making the incision is the right thing to do, and Jack's reason for doing it (that it will allow the venom to drain out) is part of what makes it right. But Jack doesn't have any particular concern for doing the right thing in this case, nor does he conceive of his reason as one that makes his action right. He is simply intrinsically interested in draining venom out of wounds. [Singh, 2020, p. 162]

But what about the variant where Jack is intrinsically motivated by helping others? Singh thinks his action is still not worthy. But in this variant case it's much more likely that his action is explanatorily connected to the actual facts about rightness.

6.3   Huck Finn

Huck is a white teenager living in south of the USA in the mid-19th century. He befriends an escaped slave, Jim. At a key point he is conflicted about whether to turn Jim in or to help him escape. He ends up helping Jim escape even though he thinks it is morally wrong since it amounts to stealing from Jim's 'rightful owner'.

Many think that Huck's action has moral worth, but it's not easy to capture the idea that Huck non-coincidentally does the right thing.

My view rules out coincidentally right actions like Bad Jean and Venom while allowing that Huck acts with moral worth.

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