

Moral Worth and Moral Belief

According to some, when you do the right thing, your moral beliefs make no difference to your act's moral worth. Huckleberry Finn believes he is doing something wrong in helping Jim escape slavery. Yet his act reflects well on him. Some conclude that acting rightly reflects just as well on you whether you believe you are doing something right, wrong, supererogatory or neutral. I argue against this. Doing the right thing with certain moral beliefs can diminish the moral worth of doing it. In such cases, you do the right thing in the wrong spirit.

Even if you do the right thing, your act may be morally worthless. That is, it may not reflect well on your character or be to your credit. Kant's merchant deals honestly with customers, but only because this is in his interests. He does the right thing. But his acts have no moral worth.

Many reject what they think is Kant's explanation of this:

The Rightness Thesis: Doing the right thing has moral worth iff you do it because it is right.

Counterexamples abound. Loving parents do not typically take care of their children because it is right. But their acts still have moral worth. The husband who saves his wife

from drowning because it is right has one thought too many.¹ Huckleberry Finn enables Jim to escape from slavery despite believing that this is wrong. Huck does the right thing and his act has moral worth. But he does not do it because it is right. He does not even believe it is right.²

Many prefer

The Coincidence Thesis: Doing the right thing has moral worth iff you do it for the reasons why it is right.³

¹ Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–19. Cf. Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 453–66.

² Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch.3.

³ Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*; Nomy Arpaly, "Moral Worth and Normative Ethics," *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* 5 (2015): 86–105; Julia Markovits, "Acting for the Right Reasons," *Philosophical Review* 119 (2010): 201–42; Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder, *In Praise of Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Errol Lord, "On The Intellectual Conditions for Responsibility: Acting for the Right Reasons, Conceptualization, and Credit," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 95 (2017): 436–64. Christine Korsgaard attributes this view to Kant himself. See Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's Analysis of Obligation: The Argument of *Groundwork* I," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43–76, 60. Others accept coincidence as a necessary condition of moral worth. See Philip Stratton-Lake, *Kant, Duty and Moral Worth* (London: Routledge, 2000); Amy Massoud, "Moral Worth and Supererogation," *Ethics* 126 (2016): 690–710, 695; Jennifer Ryan Lockhart, "Moral Worth and Moral

Suppose Huck helps Jim because Jim is a person. Helping Jim is right because Jim is a person. So the reason why Huck does the right thing is also the reason why it is right. This is why his act has moral worth.

Some supporters of the Coincidence Thesis also support

The Belief Thesis: When you do the right thing, your moral beliefs make no difference to the moral worth of your act.⁴

Hobbies," *Ergo* 4 (2017): 611–36, 627; Jonathan Way, "Creditworthiness and Matching Principles," *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, ed. Mark C. Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7:207–28, 219.

⁴ Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*, 78, 84, 114; Markovits, "Acting for the Right Reasons," 215–17; Arpaly and Schroeder, *In Praise of Desire*, 15–16, 177–78, 181; Arpaly, "Moral Worth and Normative Ethics," 86–87. Cf. Massoud, "Moral Worth and Supererogation," 696n11; Lockhart, "Moral Worth and Moral Hobbies," 627; Way, "Creditworthiness and Matching Principles," 216n17. Some hold views that are close but not equivalent to the Belief Thesis. Alison Hills says: "The use of the concept of a duty or of moral rightness – or indeed the use of any explicitly moral concept – is not essential to morally worthy action." See Alison Hills, *The Beloved Self: Morality and the Challenge from Egoism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 207n22. This is compatible with holding that using (or misusing) explicitly moral concepts can enhance or diminish moral worth. Similarly, Lord says that to act in a (fully) morally creditworthy way you need not have mental states whose contents are conceptualized via normatively relevant concepts. See Lord, "On The Intellectual Conditions for Responsibility," 436–37. But he does not say whether he thinks mental states whose contents are conceptualized via moral concepts can diminish or enhance moral worth. The Belief Thesis is also closely related to the view Hills calls "Naivety" about virtue, according to which it is not

The case of Huck seems to establish this too. Huck believes he is doing wrong. Yet his act has moral worth. So it seems his moral beliefs are irrelevant to the moral worth of his acts. His moral beliefs might make him a worse person, or make him more likely to do wrong.⁵ But as far as moral worth is concerned, it doesn't matter whether you believe that what you are doing is wrong, or "merely good manners, or morally neutral 'reasonable behavior,' or ... supererogatory".⁶

Here I shall argue against the Belief Thesis. It is an overreaction to the failure of the Rightness Thesis. When you do the right thing, your moral beliefs can affect your act's moral worth.

characteristic of a fully virtuous agent to explicitly grasp why what she does is right. See Alison Hills, "The Intellectuals and the Virtues," *Ethics* 126 (2015): 7–36, 11. As Hills reads them, Arpaly, John McDowell, and Julia Driver support Naivety, whereas Aristotle, Rosalind Hursthouse, Julia Annas, and Hills herself reject it. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3rd edn, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2019), 1105a28–33; John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62 (1979): 331–50; Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*; Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Julia Driver, "Moral Expertise: Judgment, Practice, and Analysis," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 30 (2013): 280–96; Hills, "The Intellectuals and the Virtues." Some who write on the epistemic conditions of moral responsibility appear committed to rejecting the Belief Thesis. See e.g. Paulina Sliwa, "On Knowing What's Right and Being Responsible for It", in *Responsibility: The Epistemic Condition*, ed. Philip Robichaud and Jan Willem Wieland (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 127–45.

⁵ Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*, 77–78, 114–15.

⁶ Arpaly and Schroeder, *In Praise of Desire*, 181.

However, this does not mean the Rightness Thesis is true. Nothing I say will blunt the force of the familiar counterexamples to the Rightness Thesis. My claim is not that you must believe you are doing the right thing if you are to do it because it is right, and you must do it because it is right for your act to have moral worth. In fact, moral belief is relevant to moral worth not, or not only, because certain moral beliefs are needed to do the right thing for the right reasons.

Much recent work on moral worth focuses on characterizing the reasons or motives that affect it. Some also consider whether doing the right thing with pleasure or displeasure, or the difficulty or effort involved, affects moral worth.⁷ My view is that

⁷ Elizabeth Lane Beardsley, "Moral Worth and Moral Credit," *Philosophical Review* 66 (1957): 304–28, 310–26; Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in *Virtues and Vices: and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1–18, 12–14; Richard G. Henson, "What Kant Might Have Said: Moral Worth and the Overdetermination of Dutiful Action," *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979): 39–54, 48–52; Holly M. Smith, "Varieties of Moral Worth and Moral Credit," *Ethics* 101 (1991): 279–303, 292–301; Christine M. Korsgaard, "From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble: Kant and Aristotle on Morally Good Action," in *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 174–206; Kelly Sorensen, "Effort and Moral Worth," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13 (2010): 89–109; Julia Markovits, "Saints, Heroes, Sages, and Villains," *Philosophical Studies* 158 (2012): 289–311, 297–300; Thomas Douglas, "The Relationship Between Effort and Moral Worth: Three Amendments to Sorensen's Model," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17 (2014): 325–33; Massoud, "Moral Worth and Supererogation," 707–10. Compare Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b5–9, 1105a9–11, 1117a32–36, 1171a33–b20; Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, ch.4; Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, ch.5.

there is more to moral worth than this. There is a cognitive component to moral worth that is independent of these other factors.

On my view, the role of moral belief in affecting moral worth is like that which pleasure and displeasure are sometimes thought to have. Some think that doing certain things (e.g. helping others) with pleasure or displeasure constitutes doing it in the right or wrong spirit. Analogously, I shall claim, having certain moral beliefs is part of doing the right thing in the right or wrong spirit.

I. PRELIMINARIES

As I use “right,” what it is right to do is what it is morally wrong not to do. What it is right not to do is what it is morally wrong to do. Many writers on moral worth use “right” this way, but not all do.⁸ When “right” is used this way, what is supererogatory is not right, because it is not wrong not to do what it is supererogatory to do.⁹

⁸ E.g. Paulina Sliwa, “Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 93 (2016): 393–418, 395; Jessica Isserow, “Moral Worth and Doing the Right Thing by Accident,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2019): 251–64, 252n2.

⁹ But a particular act can be an instance of doing both something right and something supererogatory. If the right thing is to give at least \$5, and it is supererogatory to give more, a particular act of giving \$10 is an instance of doing both the right thing and something supererogatory.

I assume that doing the right thing has moral worth if you are morally creditworthy or praiseworthy for your act or your act reflects well on your character.¹⁰ I do not assume that only the acts of the virtuous have moral worth. A person can deserve moral credit for doing the right thing even if her disposition to do such things is not well-entrenched enough for her to be virtuous.

Moral worth comes in degrees. Of two acts that reflect well on you, one can reflect better on you than the other does. A difference in degree of moral worth between two acts needn't be due to a flaw in either act. When I keep a promise to meet a friend for coffee, my act might have less moral worth than your rescue of a stranger from a burning building. This does not mean my act is flawed. Whatever enhances moral worth (perhaps the act's difficulty) is simply present to a lower degree in my act. To have less of an enhancer is not necessarily to have a defect.

I want to allow for the possibility – which I shall argue is actualized – that differences in moral worth can also be due to flaws. Perhaps doing the right thing from

¹⁰ This is how “moral worth” is standardly used in the literature. See Beardsley, “Moral Worth and Moral Credit,” 307, 318–19; Henson, “What Kant Might Have Said,” 42; Smith, “Varieties of Moral Worth and Moral Credit”; Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*, 69; Markovits, “Acting for the Right Reasons,” 203; Sorensen, “Effort and Moral Worth,” 90; Markovits, “Saints, Heroes, Sages, and Villains,” 290, 310; Arpaly and Schroeder, *In Praise of Desire*, 162; Massoud, “Moral Worth and Supererogation,” 691; Sliwa, “Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge,” 395; Lord, “On The Intellectual Conditions for Responsibility,” 436; Way, “Creditworthiness and Matching Principles,” 207; Isserow, “Moral Worth and Doing the Right Thing by Accident,” 252.

mixed motives or with unjustified irritation can have some moral worth, but is deficient in it. But it will not matter whether these are examples of flaws. What matters is the distinction between flaws and other factors that account for lower levels of moral worth.

Let us say that an act with moral worth, and with no defects that diminish its moral worth, has perfect moral worth. Other acts with moral worth have imperfect moral worth. One act can have greater moral worth than another even if both have perfect moral worth. And perhaps one act can have greater moral worth than another even if the first has imperfect and the second has perfect moral worth. Perhaps some heroic acts from mixed motives have greater moral worth than some ordinary acts of keeping promises.

II. THE MORAL VOLUNTEER

A. Father

My first argument against the Belief Thesis is based on cases of people who do the right thing for the reasons why it is right, but believe that what they are doing is only supererogatory.

Will takes good care of his children. But he believes he has no moral obligation to do so. He thinks it is supererogatory. He thinks only mothers have an obligation to take care of children. But he takes it upon himself to ensure that the children are properly clothed, cleaned, fed, and the like. And he does this for the reasons why (in fact) it is right (for instance, because they are his children).

Today, for example, Will fixes them breakfast and drives them to school. Let us suppose that these are the right things for him to do. That is, it would be wrong for him

not to do them. Will disagrees. He thinks he has no moral obligation to ensure that his children do not go to school hungry, or to ensure that they get to school at all. All of that is women's work. He is a sexist who believes a woman's natural role is to do all the childcare. He thinks his moral obligations are limited to making a token financial contribution to the children's upbringing. He even thinks he would have no moral obligation to feed them or get them to school if no one else did these things. In his view, he would be doing nothing wrong if he sat in his room and played videogames as they went hungry downstairs.

Still, he thinks it is morally good to take care of them. And because they are his children, he has decided to make them breakfast and drive them to school. He is feeling full of affection for his family, and is strongly motivated to do these things by the fact that they are his children. But he believes he is doing them and their mother a favor. He is babysitting for free. Let us add that there is no social pressure on him to hold beliefs like these. It is 2022 and Will lives in Iceland.

Will's acts are deficient in moral worth. Perhaps they have some moral worth. But they do not have perfect moral worth. And this is because of his moral beliefs. He is taking care of his children – fixing them breakfast, driving them to school – with the wrong attitude, or in the wrong spirit. He sees himself as a volunteer. Morality sees him as a conscript.

If this is right, the Belief Thesis is false. When you do the right thing, your moral beliefs can make a difference to the moral worth of your act. It is because of Will's moral beliefs that his acts have, at best, imperfect moral worth.

B. Promise-Keeper

My second argument is based on cases of people who do the right thing for the reasons why it is right, and believe that it is right, but have the false belief that they have no moral obligation to a certain person to do it.

Eric is a racist slaveholder. He frees his slave because he promised his abolitionist lover that he would do so and because his slave is a person. He believes that freeing his slave is right. But he believes he has no moral obligation *to his slave* to free him. He believes he only has a moral obligation to his lover to do so. He believes that freeing his slave is right because he promised his lover he would do it. But he believes that the fact that his slave is a person makes it only morally good to free him. This was the most that his lover could persuade him of. Still, his inspiring conversations with his lover left him strongly motivated to free his slave by the fact that his slave is a person.

Eric has no excuse for his false moral beliefs. He has always lived in a country where slavery is illegal and widely condemned. He came to own a slave because he inherited him from a distant relative in a country where slavery is legal, and he holds his slave in that country. His lover also gave exceptionally powerful arguments against his beliefs. But Eric remains attached to his racist ideology. He believes that the fact that someone is a person makes it only morally good, not right, to free them from slavery if they are of his slave's race. The moral facts of the case are that freeing his slave is right; it is right both because the slave is a person and because he promised to do it; and he has a moral obligation both to his slave and to his lover to do it.

Eric's act is deficient in moral worth. Perhaps it has some moral worth. But it does not have perfect moral worth. And this is because of his moral beliefs. Therefore, the Belief Thesis is false.¹¹

III. OBJECTIONS

A. The Confusion Objection

A defender of the Belief Thesis might reply as follows. These agents' moral beliefs do reflect badly on them. But their moral beliefs do not affect how well their *acts* reflect on them. That is, their moral beliefs do not affect their acts' moral worth. "Moral worth," remember, is an expression used to talk about how well an act reflects on a person's character, or about the moral credit she deserves for it. It is certainly to Will's discredit that he *believes* that fixing his children breakfast is supererogatory. But his *act* of fixing his children breakfast reflects just as well on him as it would have if his beliefs had been sound, all else being equal. After all, he does it for the right reasons. We must not let our negative evaluation of him for holding these beliefs cloud our judgment when we evaluate his act. These arguments rest on a confusion between how the agent's beliefs reflect on him and how they affect his act's moral worth.¹²

¹¹ If these agents' acts have some moral worth (and I leave this open), these are not counterexamples to the Coincidence Thesis. That thesis is only a claim about the necessary and sufficient conditions of an act having some moral worth rather than none. These agents do the right thing for the reasons why it is right. So if their acts have any moral worth, the Coincidence Thesis stands.

¹² I thank John Hyman and a referee for suggesting this objection.

I think two considerations tell against this.

As the objection emphasizes, “moral worth” is an expression used to talk about the moral credit someone deserves for an act, or how well her act reflects on her character. Two ways of attributing what philosophers call “moral worth” are to say: “It is to her credit that she ...” or: “It reflects well on her character that she ...,” followed by a verb phrase for her act. We can say that it is to her credit that she stood her ground, kept her promise, treated everyone fairly, or made a donation, and we can say that it reflects well on her that she did these things.

Any particular act is an instance of many general kinds. A particular act of saving a person from drowning is an instance of saving a person from drowning, but it might also be an instance of doing something during the afternoon, doing something at sea, achieving an aim, acting heroically, preventing a death, fulfilling a promise to save one’s brother from danger, and so on. The truth of judgments of the form, “It is to her credit that she ...,” or “It reflects well on her that she ...,” depends on the general kind we pick to complete it. It may be to her credit that she saved someone from drowning, but not to her credit that she did something during the afternoon, even though her act is an instance of both. An act can be to your credit in one respect but not others.

This suggests one test of whether an act has perfect moral worth. The test is to consider whether there is any true completion of “It is to her discredit that ...” with a report of her act (e.g. “she lied”). If there is, her act does not have perfect moral worth. If there is also a true completion of “It is to her credit that ...” with a report of the same particular act, then her act has some moral worth. But it has imperfect moral worth.

Let us apply this test to Will and Eric. According to the confusion objection, their acts have perfect moral worth, despite their moral beliefs. It is to Will's discredit that he believes fixing his children breakfast is supererogatory. But if the objection is right, there should be no true completion of "It is to Will's discredit that ..." with any report of his *act* of fixing his children breakfast.

But it seems to me that there is. It is to Will's discredit that he does the childcare as a favor. Maybe it's to his credit that he does the childcare. But it's to his discredit that he does it as a favor. I said above that the problem with Will is that he does the right thing in the wrong spirit. Saying he does it as a favor is one way of describing the spirit in which he does it. Other reports of his act that characterize it this way also generate true completions of our test formula. It is to Will's discredit that he fixes his children breakfast as a favor to their mother. After all, fixing them breakfast today is his responsibility, not hers. Equally, it is to his discredit that he does something he is morally required to do for his children merely as a favor to them.

These claims concern Will's act. They don't only concern his beliefs. It is to his discredit that he *did* these things as a favor. If our test is sound, the truth of claims like these shows that Will's act does not have perfect moral worth.

One response is to deny that the test is sound. Maybe saying it's to his discredit that he did the childcare as a favor doesn't imply that *his act* is to his discredit in any respect. Maybe this claim comes out true simply because the belief is to his discredit. After all, "He took care of them as a favor" reports *both* an act and a belief. And maybe,

if anything to his discredit is reported in the scope of “It is to his discredit that ...,” the whole claim comes out true.

But that doesn’t seem right. Suppose we report both his act and another discreditable belief in the scope of “It is to his discredit that...”. Suppose we say: “It is to his discredit that he did the childcare and believes in apartheid.” That is either false or hard to assess. But it shouldn’t be if the response in the last paragraph is correct. If it’s clearly to his discredit that he believes in apartheid, the whole claim should be clearly true.

The test gives the same result for Eric. It is to Eric’s discredit that he frees his slave in the belief that he has no moral obligation to his slave to free him. It is to his discredit that he frees his slave as a favor to him.

A second reason to think that Will and Eric’s moral beliefs affect their acts’ moral worth is that, as I said above, their moral beliefs affect the spirit in which they do the right thing. There are many other cases where the spirit in which you do something affects the moral worth of your act.

For example, it can be to your discredit that you do something with an inflated sense of how good a person you are for doing it. You might help out at a soup kitchen for the right reasons. But you might falsely and smugly believe that you are something of a saint for doing it, and that doing it makes you morally superior to your friends who don’t help out at soup kitchens. You combine a genuine concern for people in poverty with a conceited self-regard. It is to your discredit that you work your shifts at the soup kitchen in the belief that it makes you saintly and morally superior. Plausibly, it is still to your

credit that you help out at a soup kitchen, given that you are doing it for the right reasons. But your act has imperfect moral worth because of the conceited spirit in which you do it.

The fact that you did the right thing with pleasure sometimes seems to affect the moral worth of your act. Many think that, at least sometimes, it is to a person's credit if she helps others with pleasure. But it can also be to your discredit to do the right thing with pleasure. Consider discipline and punishment. When it is right to discipline or punish someone, it is often inappropriate to do it with pleasure. It might be right for a teacher to discipline a certain student, whom she dislikes for no good reason. She might discipline her for the right reasons, and not because she dislikes her. But she might enjoy it because she dislikes her. It is to her discredit that she disciplines her with pleasure. Similarly, a judge might pass the right sentence for the right reasons. But she might do so with enjoyment because she likes making criminals suffer. She does the right thing for the right reasons, but in a sadistic spirit. It is to her discredit that she administers justice in this spirit.

It can also be to your credit that you do certain things without embarrassment, shame, or disgust. Suppose you are a high school student who decides, for the right reasons, to sit with the unpopular kid at lunch and talk with him. It is to your credit if you do this without being embarrassed to be seen with a loser, or mortified that you are associating with one. You could have done this for the right reasons and still have felt that way. Maybe that would have been excusable (you are in high school, after all). But it is to your credit if you do it without such attitudes.

So I suggest that Will and Eric are instances of a broader phenomenon: doing the right thing in the wrong spirit. This is not reducible to doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. This phenomenon deserves more attention, though some instances of it (such as doing the right thing with unwarranted displeasure) have been discussed.¹³ It is not confused to think that Eric and Will's moral beliefs affect their acts' moral worth, because their moral beliefs make a difference to the spirit in which they do the right thing. Will does the right thing in a sexist spirit and with the wrong attitude to his children. Eric does the right thing in a racist spirit.¹⁴

One might reply that all of these judgments are confused: in all such cases, your attitude is creditable or discreditable, but this makes no difference to your act's moral worth. But defending that view will be an uphill struggle. The concept of moral worth is meant to capture how an act reflects on your character. The fact that you did something in a certain spirit can reflect well or badly on your character – no less than the fact that you did it for certain reasons. The fact that you talked to the unpopular kid without embarrassment says a lot about you. The fact that the judge sentenced the defendant with

¹³ See footnote 7.

¹⁴ Note that this account does not appeal to the fact that these agents' moral beliefs are false to explain why these beliefs diminish their acts' moral worth. It appeals to the fact that it is to the agents' discredit that they did the right thing in the spirit in which they did it (for instance, in the belief that it is supererogatory). This is a strength of the account, because false moral beliefs about what you are doing needn't diminish the moral worth of doing it. A person who does something heroic and supererogatory might believe that they are only doing their duty, without this false belief diminishing the moral worth of their act.

glee reflects poorly on her. The fact that Will did the childcare as a favor manifests his chauvinism. So it is hard to see on what grounds we can dismiss such attitudes as irrelevant to the act's moral worth.

This picture of how moral beliefs relate to moral worth differs from the one suggested by the Rightness Thesis. The Rightness Thesis suggests that you need certain moral beliefs in order to do the right thing for the right reasons. You need to believe that what you are doing is right in order to do the right thing because it is right. On this picture, it is acting for certain reasons, not having certain moral beliefs per se, that affects your act's moral worth. Having certain moral beliefs is just a necessary condition of acting for certain reasons, acting for which affects your act's moral worth.

This picture is, at best, incomplete. The problem with Will and Eric is that they have certain moral beliefs, having which diminishes their acts' moral worth. It is not, or not only, that they lack moral beliefs they would need in order to act for certain reasons. This is obvious if they are already doing the right thing for all the right reasons.¹⁵ But we don't need to assume this to establish the point.

Suppose that, instead of believing that childcare is supererogatory, Will knows that it is right and understands why. But he still does it for exactly the reasons why he does it in Father (e.g. because they are his children), not because it is right. It seems to me that, other things being equal, his act has greater moral worth than it does in Father. He

¹⁵ A supporter of the Coincidence Thesis will hold that they are, because they are doing the right thing for the reasons why it is right.

is not doing it because it is right, but he is not doing it as a favor either. Maybe his act would have had even greater moral worth if he had done it for other reasons (e.g. because it is right). But it has greater moral worth than it does in Father.

If so, then the problem with Will in Father cannot be only that he fails to act for certain reasons. And the problem with the state of his moral beliefs cannot be only that he lacks moral beliefs he would need in order to act for certain reasons. The problem is (at least) that he has certain moral beliefs, having which diminishes his act's moral worth. They spoil the spirit in which he acts.

B. The Generality Objection

One might object that Will and Eric's moral beliefs are compatible with perfect moral worth. There are other possible cases in which it is right for Will to do the childcare, he does it for the reasons why it is right, he believes that what he is doing is only supererogatory, and yet his beliefs do not diminish the moral worth of his acts. This suggests that, even if Will's acts lack perfect moral worth in Father, this is not because of his moral beliefs.

Consider the following:

Patriarchy. Will holds the same moral beliefs, and on the same grounds, as in Father. But he does not live in Iceland in 2022. He lives in an exceptionally patriarchal culture. He has had no exposure to non-sexist moral views about parenting. The moral education he received and the social milieu he lives in would

make it hard for anyone to realize that childcare is morally required of them. In these circumstances, he fixes his children breakfast and takes them to school, for the reasons why it is right, in the belief that it is only supererogatory.

Judgmental. Will holds the same moral beliefs as in Father, but on different grounds. It is not that he thinks it is a mother's responsibility to take care of the children. Rather, he is concerned about judging parents too harshly. He reasons that, if he has a moral obligation to take his children to school and fix them breakfast, other parents do too. And he is unwilling to judge that other parents, particularly his children's mother, do something wrong if they do not do these things. That, he thinks, would be too judgmental, so the judgment must be mistaken. So he concludes that it would not be wrong for him to fail to fix them breakfast or take them to school today. It is supererogatory. Holding these views, he fixes them breakfast and takes them to school for the reasons why it is right.

In these cases, according to the objection, Will's moral beliefs do not diminish the moral worth of his acts. In Patriarchy, Will is like Huckleberry Finn. He does the right thing for the right reasons despite a terrible moral education. This is admirable, and surely has perfect moral worth. He can hardly be blamed for his false moral beliefs when the conditions for seeing the truth are so unfavorable. In Judgmental, his belief that what he does is supererogatory expresses humility and compassion for parents. This belief cannot

plausibly detract from the moral worth of his conduct. This suggests that in Father, where he has the same moral beliefs, they do not diminish his acts' moral worth either.¹⁶

One question this objection raises is whether it reflects badly on Will that he holds these moral beliefs about childcare in the new cases. The gist of the objection is that this doesn't reflect badly on him. In Patriarchy, Will has an excuse for believing that the childcare is supererogatory. In Judgmental, his beliefs express humility and compassion. So it seems his beliefs do not reflect badly on him in either case.

But if that is how the cases are to be understood, they are different from Father. In Father, Will's moral beliefs do reflect badly on him (likewise for Eric in Promise-Keeper). He has no excuse for believing that the childcare is supererogatory in contemporary Iceland, where he should know better. His beliefs there reflect sexism, not compassion or humility.

This means we cannot use the new cases to argue that Will's moral beliefs do not diminish his acts' moral worth in the original case. If his beliefs do not diminish his acts' moral worth in the new cases, a natural explanation is that holding these beliefs does not reflect badly on him in the new cases. What Father, Judgmental, and Patriarchy suggest is that there is a correlation between how his moral beliefs reflect on him and how they affect his acts' moral worth. It is to his discredit that he did the right thing in the belief that it was supererogatory only if it is to his discredit that he believed that it was supererogatory.

¹⁶ I thank a referee for this objection.

The Belief Thesis is false if moral beliefs ever make a difference to moral worth. I claim that they do in *Father* and in *Promise-Keeper*. But I do not claim that the same moral beliefs make the same (or any) difference to moral worth whenever they are present.¹⁷

IV. THE CONSCIENCE OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

If the arguments above are successful, the Belief Thesis is false. Let us now consider why it has seemed true. It has seemed true because of cases like that of *Huckleberry Finn*. In fact, however, this case doesn't support the Belief Thesis.

Huck believes that helping Jim escape slavery is wrong. Yet, some would say, his act has at least as much moral worth as it would have had if his beliefs had been sound. The view that these considerations support the Belief Thesis rests on something like the following assumption. Believing, of the right thing, that it is wrong puts you as far from

¹⁷ It does not help the objection if we suppose that Will's moral beliefs *are* to his discredit in *Patriarchy* and *Judgmental*. We could suppose that his society's attitudes to childcare are so blatantly unfair in *Patriarchy* that he is at fault for acquiescing in them. And we could suppose that, in *Judgmental*, Will is non-judgmental to a fault. It's to his discredit that he lets his reluctance to judge other parents blind him to what he owes his children. Fine. But now his beliefs again seem to diminish his acts' moral worth. In *Patriarchy*, he is now doing the right thing in a sexist spirit and has no excuse for it. It seems to me that it again reflects badly on him that he does the right thing in a sexist spirit. And in *Judgmental*, it now reflects badly on him that he thinks he is doing his children a favor by feeding them. If it reflects badly on him that he regards this as a favor, it reflects badly on him that he does it as a favor.

the moral truth about it as you can be. So if this moral belief does not diminish an act's moral worth, surely no moral belief does.

However, some people who believe, of the right thing, that it is wrong are not far from the moral truth about it. Some of them see that there are strong moral reasons to do it. Some of them even see that the reasons why (in reality) it is right are among the strong moral reasons there are to do it. They think it is wrong, nonetheless, because they mistakenly believe that these reasons are outweighed by considerations that make it right to do something else instead.

This, I suggest, is how we are imagining Huck. Nomy Arpaly describes him as follows:

He believes, as everyone in his society “knows,” that helping a slave escape amounts to stealing, and stealing is wrong. He also believes that one should be helpful and loyal to one's friends, but loyalty to friends is outweighed by some things, such as property rights, and does Miss Watson, Jim's owner, not have property rights?¹⁸

¹⁸ Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*, 75. Compare Markovits, “Acting for the Right Reasons,” 208. For a recent argument against Arpaly's reading of the novel, see Steve Clarke, “Huckleberry Finn's Conscience: Reckoning with the Evasion,” *Journal of Ethics* 24 (2020): 485–508.

This is a picture of a person torn between what he recognizes as strong moral reasons to do one thing (which is in fact the right thing), and what he mistakes for competing moral reasons to do something else instead.

Indeed, Huck is even closer to the truth than this. He doesn't just see that the reasons why it is right to help Jim escape – considerations of personhood, friendship, loyalty, and so on – are strong moral reasons to do it. On the natural way of imagining him, Huck also sees that these considerations give him a moral obligation to Jim to help him escape. He thinks this obligation is outweighed by a competing moral obligation to Miss Watson to respect her property rights. So he thinks it is wrong to fulfill his obligation to Jim. But he still sees that he has it and why he has it. That is what makes his crisis of conscience so acute. He thinks he faces a conflict of moral obligations. The case of Eric showed that you can see that something is right without seeing that you have a moral obligation to a certain person to do it. The case of Huck is the converse. Huck sees that he has a moral obligation to Jim to help him without seeing that helping him is right.

In claiming this, I am not claiming that Huck believes he has an all-things-considered obligation to help Jim. We often describe the right thing to do as what you have an "all-things-considered obligation" to do. You can't have an all-things-considered obligation to do something that is not right. I am not suggesting that Huck believes, inconsistently, both that he has an all-things-considered obligation to help Jim and that helping Jim is not right. Nor am I claiming that it is possible to have (or that Huck thinks he has) conflicting all-things-considered obligations. I am saying that Huck sees he has a

moral obligation to Jim to help him, in a familiar use of “obligation” in which obligations can conflict and it is wrong to fulfill the obligation that loses the conflict.¹⁹

This case therefore does not support the conclusion that moral worth requires only “concern for what is in fact morally relevant and not ... concern for what the agent takes to be morally relevant.”²⁰ Huck sees much of the moral relevance of what is morally relevant here. He sees that the reasons why (in fact) it is right to help Jim are strong moral reasons to help him. He also sees that they give him a moral obligation to Jim to help him. So he is not as far as can be from the moral truth about what he does.

There is a second problem with using this case to support the Belief Thesis: Huck is a child. This creates pressure to suppose that the false moral beliefs he does have about what he is doing (e.g. that it is not right) are not to his discredit. We have seen some reason to think that false moral beliefs that are not to an agent’s discredit do not diminish her act’s moral worth. So if Huck’s false moral beliefs do not seem to diminish his act’s moral worth, we can’t conclude that such beliefs cannot diminish an act’s moral worth.

¹⁹ The existence of obligations that are not all-things-considered explains why we add the qualification “all-things-considered” in the first place. The loser in a conflict of obligations is like an outweighed reason, which remains a reason to do what it is a reason to do even when there is stronger reason to do something else instead. For arguments that the loser in a conflict of moral obligations is still a moral obligation, see Alida Liberman and Mark Schroeder, “Commitment: Worth the Weight,” in *Weighing Reasons*, ed. Errol Lord and Barry Maguire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 104–119, 106.

²⁰ Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*, 84.

A third problem is that Huck does something difficult. He overcomes his bad upbringing. Helping Jim is more difficult for him than it would have been if his upbringing had been good and he'd believed he was doing the right thing. Plausibly, the difficulty of his act enhances its moral worth. But if so, we can't conclude, from the fact that his act has no less moral worth than it would if he'd believed he was doing the right thing, that his false moral beliefs do not diminish his act's moral worth. Even if they do diminish it, his act might end up with at least as much moral worth as it would have had if his beliefs had been sound, because it is more difficult. The beliefs might diminish, while the difficulty enhances, its moral worth.

V. CONCLUSION

The Belief Thesis is false. When you do the right thing, your moral beliefs can affect your act's moral worth. They can affect the spirit in which you do the right thing. Doing it with certain moral beliefs constitutes doing it in the wrong spirit. When it is to your discredit that you do the right thing in the wrong spirit, your act lacks perfect moral worth.