A New Defense of the Motive of Duty Thesis

What is required for an action to possess moral worth?\textsuperscript{1} Inspired by Immanuel Kant many ethicists have defended versions of what I shall call the Motive of Duty Thesis; that a necessary condition for any action to possess moral worth is that the action is motivated, at least in part, by the agent’s taking the action to have a positive normative status.\textsuperscript{2} This thesis is both intuitively appealing and also provides a plausible explanation for why human actions can possess moral worth while animal action cannot—the class of agents who can perform morally worthy action overlaps with the class of agents who can make moral evaluations, and it is natural to suspect these facts are connected.

However, the Motive of Duty thesis has been subject to two powerful objections that have convinced many that it must be abandoned. Firstly, it has been accused of over-intellectualizing moral agency, requiring that all morally worthy actions demonstrate an implausible fixation on the moral status of our actions at the expense of a focus on the people these actions are intended to benefit. Secondly, it has been accused of giving the wrong verdict when it comes to people who do the right thing and whose heart is in the right place, but who hold false moral theories that convince them that their own actions are in fact morally wrong. The Motive of Duty Thesis seems to entail that such people’s actions cannot be morally worthy, but our intuitions strongly conflict with this verdict.

\textsuperscript{1} The idea behind moral worth is also sometimes discussed in terms of an actions being virtuous (for example, in Hurka [2006]), or in terms of a person being praiseworthy for an action. I will to use the term “moral worth” since this is the terminology traditionally used by those who defend the Motive of Duty Thesis.

\textsuperscript{2} I intentionally leave open at this point what kind of normative status is relevant here. I also leave open whether or not wrong actions could possess moral worth if the agent has good reason to think them right—for the purposes of this paper I will only consider right actions.
This has led many people to abandon the Motive of Duty Thesis, and to try to account for moral worth in other ways. However, as I shall argue, this is premature. Both of these objections can be convincingly answered if we adopt a version of the Guise of the Good view of action. According to the Guise of the Good thesis, for an agent to intend to φ requires that they take φing to be good. According to the version of the Guise of the Good view I will make use of in this paper, which I call the Attitude View, the positive normative evaluation is not a part of the content of the practical attitude. Instead, it captures how practical attitudes present their content. Intention does not present the content “φing is good.” Instead, it presents-as-good the content “φing”.

We might worry that the Guise of the Good will trivialize the Motive of Duty Thesis. The Motive of Duty Thesis was supposed to be able to explain why some actions lack moral worth—namely, because they failed to be motivated by a positive normative evaluation. But according to the Guise of the Good thesis, every intentional action is motivated in part by a positive normative evaluation that the action is good. However, I show that the Motive of Duty Thesis is not rendered trivial once we recognize a further necessary condition on moral worth—namely, that the agent recognize that their reason for action requires, rather than merely permits, their action. While no action lacks moral worth in virtue of the agent lacking any normative evaluation at all, an action can still lack moral worth in virtue of being motivated by the wrong normative evaluation, namely that the action is supported by permitting reasons rather than requiring reasons. This account of moral worth might seem to rule out the possibility that supererogatory acts can possess moral worth, but I show how my view can accommodate morally worthy supererogatory acts.

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3 For example, in Julia Markovits [2010] and Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder [2014].

4 There are a broad family of Guise of the Good views in the literature, differing along a number of dimensions. See Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good [Tenenbaum, 2010] for a recent collection of papers exploring various different approaches to the Guise of the Good.
1. Objections to the Motive of Duty

i. Over-intellectualism

Let us begin by examining the objections that have been taken to be fatal to the Motive of Duty Thesis. The first of the objections we will consider is the claim that it over-intellectualizes morally worthy action, an objection famously articulated by Bernard Williams. He considers a scenario in which a man can save only one of several people who are drowning, one of whom is his wife. Williams criticizes those who would claim that the man needs to be motivated by a normative assessment of the rightness of saving his wife in this situation, saying “this construction provides the agent with one thought too many: it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be that it was his wife, not that it was his wife and in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one’s wife” (Williams [1981, 18]). The thought that it is possible for the man’s deliberation to be worse for including “one thought too many” seems right, but why exactly is this extra thought problematic?

I think Williams’ point is best captured by looking at the agent’s reason for action; the motivating thought, fully spelled out, is the agent’s complete motivating reason for acting. So if the motivating reason of the husband in Williams’ example is that it is his wife and that it is morally right to save one’s wife in circumstances such as these, then he will be guilty of having one thought too many. In taking as one’s reason normative facts, rather than the features of the world that give one these reasons, one will be alienated from the concrete people and goals towards which one’s actions are directed. Reasons for action tell us what features of the world an agent is responding to in action.

5 Michael Stocker [1976] also presents a version of this same objection to the Motive of Duty Thesis. While I will focus on Williams’ discussion, what I say also applies to Stocker’s version of the objection.
But this means that, if my reason for action is that it is good to help those who suffer, then I am responding not to the suffering itself but instead to the abstract facts about reasons that this suffering gives rise to. In doing so, our concern is directed towards our loved ones, friends, and so on not as concrete individuals but instead merely as providers of opportunities for our own moral acts.6

Now can now better understand Williams’ challenge to the Motive of Duty Thesis. According to the Motive of Duty Thesis, a normative assessment of the action needs to have a role in motivating action for the action to have moral worth. The obvious way for this assessment to play such a motivating role is for it to serve as the agent’s reason for action, which would lead us straight to the one-thought-too-many objection. But if the normative assessment is not a part of the reason for action, then what role could it play in motivating action? As Markovits puts it, in response to the defense of the Motive of Duty Thesis by Christine Korsgaard [2008], “it’s not clear how the motive of duty could… relate to the action of, say, doing something in order to help one’s friend, except by providing a more fundamental motive: I did something to help my friend in order to do my duty. The duty, and not the friend, remains the primary target of one’s attention” (Markovits [2010]). This, then, is the challenge— to make clear how the Motive of Duty Thesis could play a role in motivating an action in a way distinct from providing a more fundamental specification of the agent’s motivating reason.

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6 Indeed, an agent whose motivating reasons for action is just that their action instantiate some positive moral property would be a very unfamiliar kind of agent. It seems more likely that someone who seems to be motivated to perform actions simply because they instantiate a moral property is in fact doing so as a means to some other goal. We might suspect that such a person is in fact performing good actions so as to be seen as good by others, or perhaps by a concern with their own moral purity, someone with a “narcissistic fascination with [their] own standing in the space of reasons”, as Douglas Lavin [2011] puts it. While it is conceivable that someone’s motivating reason is truly just to perform an action because it is good, the tendency to seek a further motivation underneath this is evidence of how unusual and bizarre such a motivation would be.
ii. Reverse akraia

The second major objection to the Motive of Duty Thesis has its roots in the influential discussion by Jonathan Bennett [1974] of Huckleberry Finn. In Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Huck travels along the Mississippi on a raft with Jim, an escaped slave. At some point, Huck begins to reflect on the morality of his actions. Guided by the racist moral code of the society he inhabits, Huck concludes that his moral obligation is to turn Jim in. But he finds himself unable to do so, and instead he helps Jim avoid discovery. All the while, Huck berates himself for his wickedness, eventually deciding that morality is perhaps just not for him. Huck suffers from what has been called “reverse akraia”—he acts against his better judgment, but in a way that is to his credit, acting against a false and pernicious moral judgment.

Bennett’s original point concerns the conflict between sympathy and the explicit moral code that we accept. However, the case of Huck Finn is also relevant to understanding moral worth. As Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder [1999] point out, not only does Huck do the right thing, but his action also appears to possess moral worth. However, his action runs contrary to his explicit moral judgment. According to the Motive of Duty Thesis, for Huck’s action to have moral worth he must have a positive moral assessment of the action. But how can this be true of Huck, who believes on the basis of his mistaken moral code that the action is wrong?

We could try to deny that Huck Finn makes a genuine moral judgment. Perhaps when he judges that morality requires him to turn Jim in, he is using morality in an inverted commas sense, thinking about what society would judge to be moral without himself making a genuine moral judgment to that effect. This would make room for the claim he does in fact have a normative judgment in favor of concealing Jim, but fails to recognize it as such.  

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7 See, for example, Clea F. Rees [2006].
But this move would undercut the motivational conflict that Huck faces. Huck need not care overly much for what others think, or for social convention. But he faces a true motivational conflict over whether to turn Jim in, and feels guilt when he acts against his moral judgment. This is not the picture of someone who thinks they are merely acting against what society would call “morality”, but of someone who is genuinely acting against his conscience. Our response, then, must show how Huck’s particular action possesses moral worth according to the Motive of Duty Thesis, while still accounting for the motivational conflict that Huck experiences.

Both of these objections has been considered by many to be fatal to the Motive of Duty Thesis. However, I shall argue in the next section that both can be convincingly answered using the resources provided by the Guise of the Good theory.

2. The Guise of the Good

i. The Attitude View

The central claim of the Guise of the Good theory is that the content of practical attitudes, such as intention or desire, must be taken to be good by the agent. There are many versions of the Guise of the Good, with differing views of how to understand this “taking to be good”. One option is that “good” is part of the content of a belief, or other theoretical attitude, that accompanies the conative state. On this version of the Guise of the Good view, if I intend to φ then I must also have a belief with the content “φing would be good” (see [Raz, 2010]). Alternatively, “good” might be part of the content of the practical attitude itself. Oddie [2009], for example, argues that desires are a kind of perception with normative content—to desire P is for it to appear to one that P is good. Jennifer Hawkins [2008] argues that “good” is a part of the content of desire, but that it does not display all of
the marks of fully conceptual content.$^8$ On all of these versions of the Guise of the Good, “good” is part of the content of an attitude, either the practical attitude itself or some suitably related theoretical attitude.

I want to suggest an alternative approach, which I call the Attitude View. According to the Attitude View, “good” is not the content of any attitude whatsoever, but instead captures the distinctive way in which practical attitudes represent their content. Rather than representing the content that \( \phi \) is good, intention represents-as-good a non-normative content, \( \phi \). We can also apply a version of the Attitude View to theoretical attitudes. A belief that \( P \) presents-as-true \( P \). This can help explain the link between belief and truth, a link that is evidenced by the fact that we can ordinarily only form beliefs that we take to be true and by the paradoxical nature of statements like “I believe \( P \), but \( P \) is false”.$^9$ It’s worth noting how implausible an analogue of more traditional Guise of the Good views would be for belief. We would have to claim that all beliefs must be of the form “\( P \) is true.” But obviously most of our beliefs do not contain “true” as part of their content. Thus, the Attitude View is much better positioned to offer a unified account of belief and intention than other

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$^8$ As Hawkins puts it, it is a “mental capacity that while concept-like in certain respects, also falls short of all the marks of a mature concept” (Hawkins [2008, 253]).

$^9$ Given the analogy I propose between belief and intention, we might expect “I intend to \( \phi \), but \( \phi \) is not good” would also be Moore-paradoxical. The fact that it is not Moore paradoxical, then, might seem to be a mark against my view. However, the term “good”, unlike the term “true”, has a variety of different senses—morally good, prudentially good, aesthetically good, and so on—and there is no single term that unambiguously picks out all the kinds of good that factor into practical reasoning. Thus, we tend to hear phrases like “I intend to \( \phi \), but \( \phi \) is not good” as merely denying one kind of goodness to \( \phi \), in particular the moral good, which is perfectly consistent with it being chosen under the guise of the good in a more general sense. I do think there is a practical analog of Moore’s paradox, but it occurs not in the straightforward statement of intention like the one above, but rather in situations such as Kavka’s toxin puzzle (1983). Intending to drink the toxin, while recognizing that there is no reason at all to do so, possesses the same kind of internal incoherence as the Moore-paradoxical statement, which is why it is so hard to get oneself to intend in this case. The Moore paradoxical nature of this pair of attitudes is more apparent because “reason”, unlike “good”, is naturally taken to refer to all the kinds of considerations that could speak in favor of action, rather than just a subset. For a more in depth discussion of practical analogues to Moore’s paradox on the guise of the good view, see (Tenenbaum 2009).
versions of the Guise of the Good view. On the Attitude View, theoretical and practical attitudes are distinguished from one another by the way in which they present their content. Belief, and theoretical attitudes more generally, present-as-true their content, while intention, and conative attitudes more generally, present-as-good their content.\(^{10}\)

What does it mean to present-as-true or present-as-good some content?\(^{11}\) I hold that these notions are primitive elements of rational psychology, so they cannot be given reductive definitions, at least not in terms of other psychological attitudes.\(^{12}\) But we can get a better sense of how these notions operate. Take the belief that snow is white. In believing that snow is white, I am committed to the truth of the proposition that snow is white. But this is not due to the content of the mental state. The content is just the proposition that snow is white, and I can consider this very same proposition without any commitment to its being true.\(^{13}\) Perhaps I come across the sentence “snow is white” and this causes me to idly consider the thought that snow is white, without taking it to be either true or false. Furthermore, adding truth to the content of the belief does not bridge this gap. I can also consider the proposition that it is true that snow is white, and this is no closer to committing me to this claim. Instead of presenting “it is true that snow is white”, belief involves presenting-as-true

\(^{10}\) Some other defenders of the Guise of the Good have held views that resemble this one. See Tenenbaum [2007], Schafer [2013], Lavin and Boyle [2010]. Uriah Kriegel (2018) also attributes a very similar view to Brentano.

\(^{11}\) I cannot give a full defense of the Attitude View in the present paper. Instead, I want to outline the basic elements of the view, in order to show how they can be of help in defending the motive-of-duty thesis.

\(^{12}\) If physicalism about the mental is true, then taking-as-true will be identical to some physical state or other. Still, there will be no reduction in psychological terms.

\(^{13}\) Some states, such as perception, present-as-true their content without the agent being committed to the truth of that content. In these cases, the presentation-as-true explains the rational relevance of the content of the state to the agent’s deliberation about what to believe, rather than the commitment to the truth of the content. See below for more detailed discussion of the relation between belief and perception.
“snow is white”. Truth is not part of the content, it characterizes the way this content is presented to the agent.\(^{14}\)

Similarly, on the attitude view intention is not a presentation of the content “\(\phi\)ing would be good”. It is instead a presenting-as-good of the content “\(\phi\)ing”. Just as the relation between belief and truth is explained by the fact that belief presents-as-true its content proposition, the commitment to act as one has intended to act is explained by the fact that the intention presents-as-good the action.\(^{15}\)

It might seem that presenting-as-good will commit the agent only to an intellectual claim—that \(\phi\)ing would be good, for instance—not to an actual action. However, one of the core claims of this version of the guise of the good is that the presentation-as-good is both a representation of the action as being a certain way and also a motivation for the agent to act in the way so represented.\(^{16}\) It is, to use Kant’s terminology, a representation that is the cause of what it represents (a cause of the action, that is, not a cause of the action’s being good).\(^{17}\)

\(^{14}\)This may sound similar to the Fregean notion of “modes of presentation”. However, for Frege, modes of presentation are still part of the content of the attitudes. The mode of presentation is a feature of the concepts used in the judgment. On the Attitude View, the mode of presentation is not a part of the content at all. What is presented-as-true is the entire proposition, rather than the conceptual components of the proposition themselves being modes of presentation of some referent. The idea is closer to the Fregean notion of “force”—the same content might be presented with imperatival force, as a command, or with assertive force, as an assertion (see Schafer \[2013\]).

\(^{15}\)Technically, the commitment to act is explained by the presentation-as-good plus the agent’s endorsement of that presentation. In the case of desire, which presents-as-good without endorsement, the presentation-as-good explains the rational relevance of desire to the agent’s practical deliberation. See below for further discussion of this point.

\(^{16}\)Some philosophers have argued that there could not be such a mental state because it would have two incompatible “directions of fit” (Cf. Velleman 1996, Smith 1994). However, the notion that there are two incompatible directions of fit for mental states has been criticized by Kim Frost (2014) and Sergio Tenenbaum (2006), among others, and this work shows there is no barrier to existence of such a state.

\(^{17}\)See Tenenbaum (2007) and Schafer (2013) for other discussions of a form of representation which is intrinsically motivational.
Other cognitive attitudes, such as perception, also presents-as-true its content. Inaccurate perceptions seem faulty, in a way that is similar to the fault with false beliefs. So what differentiates belief and perception? Both a belief that P and a perception that P involve representing-as-true P. Furthermore, there are “intellectual seemings” that present-as-true their content without being perceptual, such as the felt temptation to fall for the gamblers fallacy, while still not being all-out beliefs. Thus, the attitude view will need some way of distinguishing these other cognitive attitudes from belief. If the difference between belief and perception lay in the way in which they presented their content, then the difference would be something the agent was passive with respect to. But such an account would have trouble explaining the difference in way we hold agent’s responsible for their beliefs and there perceptions. There is something faulty in an inaccurate perception, but we do not blame the agent themselves for having the perception. Having a false belief, on the other hand, is the kind of thing for which we hold agents accountable. This leads me to favor the view that the difference is that, in the case of belief, the agent themselves endorses the presentation of the state as true, while in perception and intellectual seemings the presentation is not (yet) endorsed.

We can adopt the same strategy to explain the difference between desires and intentions. Desires present-as-good their content, and when this presentation is endorsed by the agent it becomes an intention. This would make both the formation of both belief and intention into a form of agential activity, a view argued for by Matthew Boyle [2009] and Pamela Hieronymi [2009b]. Of course, the agent’s endorsement of a perception or desire must not itself be an action, or else it will presumably need to be an intentional action (since an unintentional action couldn’t provide the kind of agential endorsement that differentiates belief from perception). If it is an intentional action, we will ask about the intention with which this action is performed, which will presumably itself need to be an endorsed desire, and this instance of endorsement will itself need to be an intentional action and so on. So the relevant kind of endorsement cannot be any kind of action, not even a mental action. Instead, it would
be a form of rational activity that itself explains, in part, our capacity for intentional action, by allowing us to form intentions. This approach resembles the interpretation of Kant proposed by Henry Allison [1990], which he calls the incorporation thesis, whereby inclinations can only cause action by being incorporated into an agent’s maxim. This incorporation into the maxim is one model of how we could understand endorsement in a way that clearly distinguishes it from being an action. Thus, we can distinguish between belief, which presents-as-true its content in a way the agent themselves endorses, and other cognitive states which present-as-true their content but which the agent does not yet endorse.

As Karl Schafer [2013] has argued, this kind of account is well positioned to explain the rational force of desire and perception. Intuitively, perceptions make a great deal of difference for what it is subjectively rational to believe. Having a perception of a plate in front of you makes it subjectively rational to form the corresponding belief unless the agent knows of some defeating condition for the perception. Desires play the same rationalizing role for our intentions. Desiring to go for a walk makes it subjectively rational to do so, absent some special circumstance.

On the Attitude View, we can explain why perception and desire have the rational relevance they do for belief and intention. Perception presents some content as true, presenting it as a candidate for belief. Forming a belief on the basis of perception is thus a matter of endorsing a particular appearance of what is true and, assuming a modest default entitlement to trust perception, this will be enough to render the belief subjectively rational, other things being equal. Similarly, desires present an action as good, presenting their content as a candidate for intention, and we can form an intention to

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19 Even once we have formed a belief the contrary perceptual and intellectual seemings may well persist. In the case of the Müller-Lyer illusion, for instance, it may seem strange to say that our belief that they are the same length “presents-as-true” this content, since it still seems, visually, that they are different lengths. But this is just a case of different presentations conflicting with one another. Our perception continues to present-as-true the claim that they are different lengths even when we have endorsed the contrary presentation-as-true that they are the same length.
perform that action by endorsing that appearance of the good. Other things being equal, this will render the intention subjectively rational.

Finally, we can also use the attitude view to give an account of acting for a reason. Consider the attitude an agent takes towards their reason for acting, the attitude of taking something to be a reason.²⁰ We can then ask how this attitude presents its content. To take P as a reason for φing, on my view, is to have P presented as showing-good φing. Again, showing-good is not a part of the content of the attitude. Instead, it is the way in which the content is presented. In this case, there will be two contents, P and φing, so the attitude will be an attitude towards an ordered pair of propositions—it will present-as-showing-good <P, φ>. Just as in the case of intention, the normative term does not feature as part of the content of this attitude; the content is just the ordered pair <P, φ>.

This allows us to provide a compelling account of how acting for a reason works. To act for a reason is to take some consideration, P, to show φing to be good, and to take φing to be good on that basis. Given the Attitude View of taking as a reason and intending, this is identical to saying that you take P to be a reason to φ, and you come to intend to φ on that basis. This is still a schematic account—there is further room to elaborate on this story, particularly on the question of what exactly is meant by “on that basis” in the account. But this schematic account is still illuminating, helping us to see the relation between reasons for action and intending.²¹

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²⁰ The folk psychological term for this attitude is just “reason” or perhaps “the agent’s reason”, but since these terms are systematically ambiguous between the attitude and the content of the attitude, I shall use the more cumbersome terminology to make clear that the focus is on the attitude itself.

²¹ This account is partly inspired by, and bears substantial similarities to, the account of reasons for action developed by Pamela Hieronymi [2011], although Hieronymi herself rejects the Guise of the Good view of intentions (see Hieronymi [2009a]).
We might wonder whether a version of the guise of the good view that does not appeal to a new type of attitude to explain acting for a reason could do just as good a job. For instance, acting for a reason could be a matter of believing that P shows φing to be good, and coming to present-as-good, i.e. intend, to φ on this basis. The main difference in this account is that it requires that the normative concept, showing to be good, be part of the content of an attitude, rather than being part of how that content is presented to the agent. Because of this, the alternative account requires that the agent possess and deploy the concept “good” in order to act for a reason. This is problematic for two reasons. First of all, even agents who lack the ability to deploy the concept “good” in general belief still seem capable of acting for a reason. Young children, for instance, act for reasons before they have can form explicit beliefs about the good (or about what shows something to be good).22 Thus, this account requires too much conceptual sophistication of agent before they can act for reasons. Second of all, there are cases where people act for reasons in a way that is wholly divorced from their normative beliefs. An akratic individually might have no belief at all that any feature of the situation shows their action to be good, but they may nonetheless act, and act for a reason. By having acting for a reason be a species of conative attitude, rather than a belief, we can allow for individuals whose practical reasoning draws conclusions about what to present-as-good that do not correspond to their intellectual judgments about goodness. This idea will be further fleshed out in our discussion of Huck Finn below.

It is tempting here to see the Attitude View as a dispositional account of belief and intention. Presenting-as-true that P, we might think, is just to be disposed to treat P as true, and the same for presenting-as-good. But the Attitude View denies this. Instead, the fact that belief presents-as-true P

22 The attitude view itself escapes a similar charge because the form of the concept “good” deployed in presenting-as-good some action is not necessarily one that is available to the agent for use in general cognition. The ability to present-as-good some action does not entail the ability to think about what is good more abstractly, or to deploy the concept in theoretical inference.
is supposed to provide an explanation of why the agent is disposed to treat \( P \) as true, and presenting-as-good explains why the agent is rationally disposed to \( \phi \). Similarly, the fact that beliefs present-as-true their content is not just a matter of belief having a certain normative status. It is true that beliefs, in some sense, ought to be true or are defective when false. But again, the fact that beliefs represent-as-true their content explains this fact, it is not equivalent to it.

ii. Responding to the Objections

With the essential elements of the Attitude View in place, we can now see how it answers the challenges to the Motive of Duty Thesis. First consider the charge that the Motive of Duty Thesis over-intellectualizes moral agency. As we saw in section 1, the heart of this challenge is that the agent’s reason for acting should not be to perform an action that has a particular normative status. The challenge for a defender of the Motive of Duty Thesis, then, was to identify a motivational role for the normative thought that the Motive of Duty Thesis holds to be necessary for an action to have moral worth without making this normative thought part of the content of the agent’s reason for action. The Attitude View allows us to identify just such a motivational role. On the Attitude View, the assessment of the action as good, or the reason for action as showing it to be good, is not part of the content of an attitude. Instead, the normative assessment is contained in how these practical attitudes present their content to the agent.

Consider Williams’ case of the drowning wife. The original challenge was that the motive of duty account entailed that his motivating reason for acting was not that his wife was in danger, but rather was that his action would be good. But applying the account of acting for a reason introduced above, we can see that this is not the case. According to the Attitude View, if the man’s reason for jumping in the water is that his wife is in danger, then the content of his motivating reason is just that his wife is in danger. However, this content is presented-as-showing-good an action, the action of jumping in to save her. This then explains why the man presents-as-good the action of jumping in,
which constitutes his intention to do so, and he then proceeds to act on this intention. The normative assessment is an essential part of the man’s motivation—after all, the danger his wife was in wouldn't have been his motivating reason for action without it. But it is not a part of the content of his motivating reason. It is part of what makes the consideration that his wife is in danger into his motivating reason for action. Thus, the Attitude View provides a distinct motivational role for the normative thought required by the Motive of Duty Thesis.

Next, let’s consider the objection that the Motive of Duty Thesis cannot account for cases like that of Huckleberry Finn. The original worry is that, since Huck accepts a false moral code on which helping Jim escape amounts to stealing, and is thus wrong, he seems not to be motivated by an awareness of the fact that helping Jim is the right thing to do. But, according to the Attitude View, this description of the situation is incomplete. Huck acts intentionally in concealing Jim, and as such he must represent-as-good his concealment of Jim. So he does have a positive normative assessment of helping Jim after all. This normative assessment can thus satisfy the requirement set out in the Motive of Duty Thesis, and thus explain why Huck can have moral worth despite his false moral beliefs.

We must also account for how, despite presenting-as-good concealing Jim, Huck is nonetheless weak-willed. Huck suffers from “reverse akasia”— he acts against his better judgment, but rather than this being a moral failing, it is a moral strength. Still, from the point of view of Huck’s psychology, there is no difference between so-called reverse akasia and any other instance of weakness of will. Thus, we are left with the familiar puzzle of how the Guise of the Good can allow for weak-willed action. Defenders of the Guise of the Good have offered several accounts of akasia, the most famous being the account offered by Davidson [1980]. But these responses have been criticized by
some philosophers, who argue that these accounts are not true to the phenomenon of *akrasia*. Some cases of *akrasia*, these critics insist, can feature an agent with full-blooded, all-out judgment that one option is best who still intentionally acts otherwise.

The Attitude View allows us to show how Huck can indeed have just such an all-out judgment. Huck does have an all-out judgment that turning Jim in is obligatory, but this is a theoretical judgment, not a practical judgment. In other words, Huck presents-as-true that he ought to turn Jim in. This is an all-out theoretical judgment with a normative content. However, he still presents-as-good helping Jim escape—an all-out practical judgment whose content is just the action itself. There is a clear rational tension between these two judgments, and this helps to explain Huck’s motivational conflict, but it does not involve attributing contradictory beliefs or intentions to Huck. The theoretical judgment tells Huck that, were his practical reasoning fully rational, he would present-as-good turning Jim in. At the same time, his practical reasoning has instead concluded in a judgment that presents-as-good concealing Jim. These judgments are logically compatible—both could be perfectly accurate. Even if fully rational reasoning would conclude in a certain judgment, a different judgment might be the accurate one, since one’s evidence may be misleading. Still, clearly there is a rational tension in affirming the outcome of a course of reasoning while thinking that, were that reasoning conducted rationally, it would have arrived at a different outcome. So the Attitude View can explain how Huck

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23 See Bratman [1979] for a clear example of this criticism.

24 The two judgments would be incompatible if the belief was about what would make the practical reasoning successful, rather than rational, since the success condition of intention is just that the action is good, and thus does not concern the agent’s evidence. On my account, thinking about what I should do is thinking about what intention I should form. It is thus analogous to a belief about what I should believe—both are cases of forming a belief about what mental state I should hold on the basis of deliberation. When I form a belief about what I should believe, this meta-belief is about what it would be rational for me to believe, not what first order belief would be successful. After all, my first order belief is already my take on what belief would be successful. The second order belief is distinctive in directing my attention to the process by which the first order belief was formed—raising the question of its rationality. A belief about what I should do, then, is similarly a meta-belief
faces rational tension between his judgments and has a clear-eyed belief about what is best, but nonetheless act contrary to it, since it is his practical judgment rather than his belief that constitutes his intention.

3. Combining the Motive of Duty and the Guise of the Good

The Guise of the Good theory might seem incompatible with the Motive of Duty Thesis, or at least reduce it to irrelevance. If every intention involves presenting-as-good the object of that intention, then what difference does it make if we require an agent to have a positive evaluation of an action for it to have moral worth? Every intended action will be accompanied by such an evaluation, by the very nature of intention. As I shall show, however, the Motive of Duty Thesis can still play a role in explaining why some actions lack moral worth. Furthermore, seeing how this is so will reveal an independently interesting further dimension to our account of moral worth. As I will argue in this section, moral worth requires not just that the agent have a positive evaluation of their action, but that they correctly recognize the character of the reasons for which they act, whether permitting or requiring. Even if someone acts for all of the right reasons, and recognizes that they are reasons, their action may fail to have moral worth if they take their reasons to permit, rather than require, the action they perform.25

It would be implausible to require the agent to have an explicit belief about whether their reasons are requiring or permitting reasons. But we can see that people treat their reasons for action about the process by which I formed an intention, and thus concerns the rationality, not the success, of the first order attitude, in this case the intention.

25 Why is the requirement that the agent see their action as supported by requiring reasons, rather than just that they see the action as required? This is to make room for morally worthy actions that are not in fact required, such as supererogatory actions or actions fulfilling wide duties. I will discuss this in more detail further on.
very differently based on whether they take them to be requiring or permitting, showing a functional
difference that does not depend on explicit belief. For example, when I take myself to be acting on a
permitting reason, I am free to change my mind about my action without needing to cite a particular
reason. I might be on my way to get a burrito for lunch, and on a whim decide to get a sandwich
instead, without having changed my mind about the reasons for or against either option. But if I am
on my way to meet a friend for a previously agreed upon meeting, I will not abandon this plan unless
I come to reevaluate the force of the reasons for some alternative action.26 Below, I show how the
Attitude View can be expanded to show that not only does having an intention involve judging the
object of that intention to be good, but having a motivating reason involves seeing the object of the
motivating reason as either a requiring or a permitting reason, and that this too is matter of how these
attitudes present their content.

i. Permitting and Requiring Reasons

Actions can clearly be permissible or required. As Joshua Gert [2004] has argued, in order to
to account for these normative features of action, we must recognize that reasons for action are also
categorized as either requiring or permitting reasons.27 That is, reasons can either support an action
by tending to render it required or by tending to render it permissible.28 Which actions are all-things-

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20 We will see further examples of the kind of functional difference this makes below when we get to the example of Sally below.

27 See also Gert [2007, 2012, 2016] for further discussion of the importance and role of this distinction. Gert himself does not talk about requiring and permitting reasons, instead he talks about reasons having requiring and permitting force. This is because Gert holds that all reasons possess both requiring and permitting force, although often in different degrees. However, for ease of exposition I will continue to talk of requiring and permitting reasons; these can be thought of as specifying instead the permitting or requiring force of a particular reason without any effect on my arguments.

28 Gert calls the two dimensions requiring and justifying, rather than requiring and permitting. I find the “justifying” to be somewhat misleading, since we might think that a reason can justify an action
considered permissible and required will depend on the strength of the various permitting and requiring reasons, much like what one has an all-things-considered duty to do depends on the strength of the prima facie duties supporting various actions. However, the interaction between permitting and requiring reasons and the status of the actions they support is more complex than the relation between prima facie duties and what one has an all-things-considered duty to do. It is not a matter of just summing up the weight of the requiring reasons to determine what is required. We must also account for the permitting reasons to do alternative actions, which may make an otherwise required action merely permissible after all. Even if one action is supported by the weight of requiring reasons, that action may be permitted rather than required if the agent has sufficiently strong permitting reasons to perform an alternative action.

Gert offers a functionalist account of these two kinds of normative character in terms of their effect on the overall normative status of an action. A requiring reason is a reason whose introduction can make an action go from permissible to impermissible, while a permitting reason is a reason whose introduction can make an action go from impermissible to permissible. Adding a requiring reason to give money to charity can make the otherwise permissible option of spending the money on a new car go from permissible to impermissible, while adding a permitting reason to take a night off can make taking a night off go from impermissible to permissible. The key point is that, on this view, a reason for action has not just a degree of strength, but also a particular character, either requiring or permitting.\textsuperscript{29}

I will show that a requirement on moral worth is that the agent take their motivating reason for action to be a requiring, rather than a permitting, reason. To show how this requirement works, by requiring it, and since I focus on the moral case in which permissions are salient, I adopt a slightly different terminology.

\textsuperscript{29} For an argument that we cannot explain permissibility and requirement in terms of a single kind of reason, see Gert [2004, 85-110].
we need to see how the attitude view can make room for the agent not just seeing an action as good, but as required or permitted. Recall our earlier account of the attitude of taking something to be a reason. To take P as a reason for φing is to have P presented as showing-good φing.

So intention presents-as-good its content, and taking something as a reason presents-as-showing-good its content. But actually, there are two distinct species of intentions. They share the same genus of attitudes that present-as-good their content, but these two species of intention present-as-good in different ways, either as a required good or a permitted good. We might say that one species of intention either presents-as-a-good, for acts we take to be permissible, while the other presents-as-the-good, for acts we take to be required. We clearly are aware in acting of a distinction between those actions we treat as required and those we treat as merely permissible, and this isn’t due to the content of the practical attitude. The content of an intention to φ is just “that I φ”. An intention with the content “that I φ permissibly” would express a commitment to φing if it is permissible, not that the agent takes the φing itself to be permissible. Intention, then, is made up of two distinct species of a common genus. All intentions share the genus of attitudes that present-as-good their content, but one presents-as-a-good, while the other presents-as-the-good.

Furthermore, this same distinction is present in the way we present our reasons for acting. Just as there were two species of the genus “intention”, depending on whether the action is taken to be permissible or required, there are two species of the genus of taking as a reason. One will present-as-showing-to-be-a-good <P, φ>, which corresponds to taking P to be a permitting reason for φing, and the other will present-as-showing-to-be-the-good <P, φ>, which corresponds to taking P to be a requiring reason.

ii. The Requiring Reason Requirement on Moral Worth
With the distinction between requiring and permitting reasons in hand, we can recognize a further requirement on moral worth, which I shall call the Requiring Reason Requirement. For an action to have moral worth, the agent must recognize that their motivating reason for the action has requiring character, rather than permitting character. The right action, even when done for the right reason, may nonetheless lack moral worth if the agent takes their reason to be a permitting, rather than a requiring, reason for the action. The difference between requiring and permitting reasons is not a matter of the strength of the reason. If my lifelong dream is to climb mount Everest, the corresponding reasons may have a great deal of strength. But no matter how strong the reasons are, they will remain permitting reasons, not requiring reasons. Both the Motive of Duty Thesis and the Requiring Reasons Requirement are jointly necessary requirements on an action possessing moral worth; this is still not intended to provide a sufficient condition for moral worth.

To see the plausibility of the Requiring Reasons Requirement, let’s look at a case where it is violated. Consider Sally, who every Mondays goes to a local pool to swim, and every Tuesdays spends her time helping those in need, volunteering at soup kitchens or raising money for charities for example. We can also stipulate her reasons for action in each case—her reason for going swimming is that swimming is an enjoyable form of exercise, and her reason for volunteering is that people are in need. Sally’s reason for going swimming is a permitting reason, not a requiring reason. The fact that swimming is an enjoyable form of exercise does not require Sally to go swimming—she could go jogging instead. And of course it does not require her to go swimming every Monday. She could go on any day of the week, and she could skip a week or go several times in the same week. Furthermore,

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30 If all reasons are both requiring and permitting, but with different strengths, then this will need to be adjusted slightly. In taking some consideration as their motivating reason, the agent will be responding to either the requiring or permitting character of that reason. So what is required for moral worth is that the agent act from the requiring, rather than the permitting, character of their reason for acting.
we can add that Sally treats her reason to go swimming as a permitting reason. When given an opportunity to swim on a Thursday, she declines, and if pressed she says that Monday is her swimming day. She would enjoy the swim just as much on Thursday as she does on Monday, and the exercise would do as much good for her. Still, since the enjoyable exercise is only a permitting reason, there is nothing wrong with Sally’s deciding not to swim on Thursday, even though the situation is identical to that on Monday, and Sally recognizes this.

Now imagine, however, that Sally treats her reason to help others in the same way. She takes herself to have a merely permitting reason to help others, not a requiring reason. When, on Friday, she encounters a person in need of aid who she could help at no real cost to herself she just continues on her way. For instance, she sees a person in obvious medical distress, who she could help just by phoning an ambulance, but she doesn’t bother to do so. When pressed about why she didn’t stop to help, she just says that Tuesday is her day for helping people. She knows that helping would in this case require very little effort, and she knows that the same reasons support helping people on Friday as they do on Tuesday, but she still decides not to help.

Sally is blameworthy for refusing to help the ill person on Friday. But furthermore, once we realize that Sally takes her reason to help others as merely permitting, rather than requiring, her to help, I am also inclined to revise my assessment of the moral worth of her volunteering at the soup kitchen. Sally’s volunteering on Tuesdays lacks moral worth, and this is because she treats her reason to help others as a permitting, rather than a requiring reason. Helping others is just a hobby for Sally, not something she does out of recognition of the way that the needs of others are binding on her. In other words, when we consider Sally’s overall pattern of conduct, we retract our earlier judgment that Sally’s action of volunteering on Tuesday’s has moral worth.

This is not because one must be morally perfect, or even a good person, for an individual act to have moral worth. Instead, the later actions cast new light on the nature of Sally’s reason for acting
in helping other’s on Tuesday. It is similar to a case where someone performs an action that seems to possess moral worth, perhaps saving a child in danger, but then their later actions suggest their motive was the attention of being thought a hero rather than the child’s own interests. The later actions can cause us to retract our original judgment, not merely because the later actions are bad, but because they reveal the true nature of the reasons for the original action. In this case Sally’s actions do not show that she had a different reason for action than we originally thought, but that she treats this reason for action as merely permitting rather than requiring her action, and this is why her later actions can cause us to re-evaluate the moral worth of her earlier conduct.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with Sally choosing to spend Tuesdays rather than other days volunteering her time helping at soup kitchens, and not volunteering her time on other days. This kind of volunteering is an wide duty; we have a duty to devote some time to helping strangers in need, but there is no precise amount of time or effort that is required by this duty. Choosing to volunteer on Tuesdays is a perfectly acceptable way of fulfilling this wide duty—if Sally had been asked to help out at a fundraiser for the poor on Friday and responded that Tuesday was her day for helping others, this would be a perfectly appropriate response. More generally, my view does not require that the agent see this particular instance of an action as required for the action to have moral worth. It is enough that they see it as supported by requiring reasons. And even though wide duties do not require any specific action, any particular action that satisfies the duty will itself be supported by requiring reasons. So an action that fulfills a wide duty will have moral worth as long as the agent recognizes that the action is supported by requiring reasons—and this matches our intuitions that actions that fulfill wide duties can have moral worth.

The issue in the case of Sally is that our reason to help others in need gives rise to narrow as well as wide duties, and calling an ambulance for a person in medical distress is an example of a narrow duty of this sort. This means that Sally acts wrongly in refusing to help. But more importantly Sally’s
refusing to discharge her narrow duty just because Tuesdays are her day for helping suggests that she treats her reason to help others the same way she treats her reason to go swimming—as a permitting reason, not a requiring reason. And since the same basic moral requirement, the requirement to help others, gives rise to both the wide and the narrow duty, this suggests that when she volunteers on Tuesdays, she takes herself to be acting on a permitting reason. She treats her volunteering as a hobby, not as the fulfillment of a wide duty, and this is incompatible with her action possessing moral worth.\(^{31}\)

We might worry that this account will require too much intellectual sophistication of agents like Sally. They may well not have given much thought to the distinction between requiring and permitting reasons, or they may be philosophers who explicitly reject the argument that there are these two distinct types of normative reasons. Does this mean they cannot perform morally worthy actions? As with Williams’ worry about over-intellectualism, the Attitude View can address this worry. The required recognition of one’s reason for action as a requiring reason is provided by the nature of the attitude one holds towards this reason. The agent presents the content of the reason as either a requiring or permitting reason. This does not require the agent to have any particular theoretical view, and is compatible with having beliefs with the content “there is no such thing as a requiring reason”.

My requirement on moral worth might seem to implausibly deny that supererogatory acts can have moral worth. Part of the definition of a supererogatory act is that it is permissible. But the requirement I propose is not that the agent take their action to be all-things-considered required. Instead, it is that they must take their reason for action to be a requiring reason. Take a paradigmatic supererogatory action, such as risking one’s life to save a child drowning in icy water. The action is all-things-considered permissible, because risk to one’s own life is a very strong permitting reason, tending

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\(^{31}\) To be clear, Sally’s failure to act on her narrow duty is here playing an evidential, not a constitutive, role in our assessment of her moral worth. What is important in assessing the moral worth of Sally’s volunteering is how Sally treats her reason in that particular case. Her failure to call an ambulance is evidence for how she sees her reason, it is not what makes it the case that she sees her reason one way rather than another.
to make refraining from the act permissible. This permitting reason prevents the action of saving the child from being required. But the reasons in favor of saving the child still have requiring force. So when someone heroically jumps into the water, they can and indeed generally will be responding to reasons with requiring force, and can recognize this fact. Thus, their action can still have moral worth.

On its own, the Guise of the Good would trivialize the Motive of Duty thesis, by implying that no actions ever actually lack moral worth because of a lack of the proper morally regarding motivation. Once we recognize the Requiring Reason Requirement, however, we can see that having the appropriate recognition of the normative facts remains crucial for moral worth, although the precise kind of normative recognition has shifted. No action lacks moral worth in virtue of the agent having no moral judgment whatsoever about the action—the Guise of the Good denies that this is possible. But actions can lack moral worth if the agent fails to recognize the kind of normativity appropriate to that action—if they take it to be supported by permitting reasons when it is in fact supported by requiring reasons.

References


