

# Many Faces of Virtue

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Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder defend an alternative to what they see, I think rightly, as the excessive intellectualism of much recent work on moral psychology and moral worth, an alternative centred on what they call “plain desire.”<sup>1</sup> They first give a desire-based account of acting “for a reason” on which this involves behaviour that is not only caused by a belief and desire that rationalize it but caused by or in virtue of the fact that they rationalize it. They then present the account of desire Schroeder defended in *Three Faces of Desire*.<sup>2</sup> It denies that a desire is identical to a disposition either to act or to feel pleasure, though in normal humans it usually has those effects. It’s instead a state of the brain’s reward system, so to desire P is to have that system strengthen neural connections that produce P. Finally, they give desire-based accounts of the related concepts of virtue and praiseworthy action, on which each involves desires for the right objects thought of in the right way, which is a “plain” rather than an intellectualist way.

I’ll leave their book’s moral-psychological claims to those who know that subject better and concentrate on the normative claims in its third part, which I’ll discuss from a broadly sympathetic point of view. Though connected to the earlier claims, they’re to some extent independent of them. They go best with some desire-based account of acting for a reason and some view that distinguishes desire from just any impulse to act, but these needn’t be the precise ones Arpaly and Schroeder give.

For them the core of both virtue and praiseworthy action is “good will,” or intrinsically desiring the right or the good, correctly conceptualized or under the right concepts. What are these concepts? Any right act has some property that makes it right, and different normative theories give competing

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<sup>1</sup> Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder, *In Praise of Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); page references are to this book.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Schroeder, *Three Faces of Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

accounts of what this is. Utilitarianism says the one right-making property is maximizing happiness, Kantianism says that it's respecting persons, and Ross's theory posits several right-making properties such as promoting the good, keeping a promise, and so on. For Arpaly and Schroeder, to desire a right act in the right way is to desire it as having its right-making property, so if utilitarianism is true, it's to desire it as maximizing happiness, if Kantianism is true to desire it as respecting persons, and so on. But it's not to desire it *as* right, or from a *de dicto* desire for the right. Nor is it to think of the right-making property as right-making or in any way that involves normative concepts. It's just to desire, for its own sake, to maximize happiness, respect persons, or whatever. It's to have what I'll call a non-evaluative desire for what's right, one directed at the property that makes an act right without conceptualizing it in terms of rightness.

The idea that non-evaluative desires can have worth runs against a strong current in recent philosophy, but early in the last century it was widely held. In 1907 Hastings Rashdall said virtue involves "a desire of objects which Reason pronounces intrinsically good, although the man may not pursue them consciously because Reason pronounces those objects to be good,"<sup>3</sup> while for Ross one form of virtue was "the desire to bring into being something good" and another "the desire to produce some pleasure, or prevent some pain, for another being." Though another's pleasure is good, he explained, the second desire differs from the first because it's for the pleasure only as pleasure and not as good.<sup>4</sup>

Kantians sometimes deny the worth of non-evaluative desires by saying they don't reliably lead to right action; Barbara Herman gives the example of a person whose sympathy leads her to help a man with a heavy package that in fact is a painting he's stealing from a gallery.<sup>5</sup> But this argument fails in two ways.

It wouldn't be counted an objection to the motive of duty if someone who in Herman's example cares only about the duty to help people, and not about any duty concerning property, acts wrongly. It's assumed that a Kantian agent knows and is motivated by all her duty. But it's likewise no objection to the Arpaly-Schroeder view if someone with only a non-evaluative desire to help and no such desire about property doesn't act rightly. To be ideally virtuous by their lights he must have non-evaluative desires for all relevant right-making properties, with their strengths perfectly propor-

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<sup>3</sup> Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), vol. 1, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), pp. 160–1.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Herman, "On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty," *Philosophical Review* 90 (1981): 359–82, pp. 364–5.

tioned to those properties' moral importance. Barring interfering factors, he'll then act just as reliably rightly as a Kantian agent.

The Kantian argument is also beside the point. The question is whether non-evaluative desires are intrinsically good, and that they can sometimes lead to wrong action shows only that they can be instrumentally bad, which is consistent with their being good in themselves. If in Herman's example the person's sympathy leads her to help the thief it has bad effects, and there's also something intrinsically flawed in her lack of concern for property. But considered by itself her sympathy is good.

Arpaly and Schroeder are therefore right that non-evaluative desires can be virtuous, but they defend a very strong version of this view, on which *only* such desires can be virtuous. More specifically, they deny that *de dicto* desires for the right or good have any worth. If someone's led by non-evaluative sympathy to act rightly, his act is no better if he's also motivated by a desire to do his duty. Nor do acts motivated only by the desire to do your duty have any value. That desire is no part of virtue.

This wasn't the view of the earlier writers. Rashdall thought it's virtuous to desire something good either without or with thoughts about goodness; Ross's forms of virtue included, alongside the non-evaluative desire for another's pleasure, the desire for something good because it's good and the desire to do what's right. The most common view in their day held, against both Kant and Arpaly-Schroeder, that an ideally virtuous person is motivated both by the desire to do what's right and by non-evaluative desires such as sympathy. To have either without the other is not to be fully virtuous.<sup>6</sup>

Arpaly and Schroeder don't give a rationale for their denial of evaluative virtues; maybe they think extremism in the opposition to Kant is no vice. But two features of their view tell against it.

One is their own central example of Huckleberry Finn (178). Huck, recall, thinks it's his duty to return the escaped slave Jim to Jim's owner but out of sympathy for Jim helps him escape. Arpaly and Schroeder rightly say Huck's non-evaluative motive is virtuous, but there's another feature of his psychology they don't discuss. While helping Jim, Huck is internally conflicted and reproaches himself for not following his conscience. On their view this is irrelevant to his virtue. He'd be just as admirable if he said, "I know it's wrong not to return Jim—and really wrong, not just what people say is wrong—but I don't care about right and wrong. I want to help him and I will." In fact, on their view he might then be more virtuous. As they

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. H. A. Prichard, *Moral Writings*, ed. Jim MacAdam (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 15–16, 59–61; E. F. Carriv, *The Theory of Morals* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 47–8; A. C. Ewing, *Ethics* (London: English Universities Press, 1953), pp. 53–4, and *Second Thoughts in Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), pp. 139–40.

observe, the belief that an act-type is right can generate non-evaluative desires for it; thus false moral beliefs can be corrupting (186). But if Huck's concern for a duty to return slaves has produced a desire to do so, it's reduced his virtue.

This doesn't seem right; the internally conflicted Huck seems more admirable than the one who with no hesitation does what he thinks is wrong. That also seems to have been Mark Twain's view, since he included the reproaches in what he intended as a sympathetic portrayal of Huck. But they can only contribute to that portrayal if a *de dicto* desire for the right is to some degree virtuous.

The second feature is an explanatory claim they make. If it's virtuous to have non-evaluative desires to promote others' happiness, keep promises, and so on, why is that? What makes those properties good to desire? The answer is that these properties tend to make acts right. But if rightness makes other properties objects of virtuous desire, why is it not such an object too? How can a derivatively worthy object be virtuous to desire but the one that makes it worthy not?

Arpaly and Schroeder also discuss a person who has false beliefs about what's right and, unlike Huck, follows them and acts wrongly. Again they say his *de dicto* desire to do what's right has no merit, and again that seems wrong.

If a person has innocently false moral beliefs, say because he was raised to have them by parents who were otherwise loving and trustworthy, his desire to do what he thinks right does seem virtuous, however regrettable its effects. The same holds in the seemingly more favourable case for Arpaly and Schroeder of someone with culpably false beliefs. They describe a character whose strongly egoistic desires lead him to accept, by rationalizing self-deception, Ayn Rand's theory that everyone should promote just his own pleasure, so selfishness is the only virtue (185). His moral beliefs have a vicious origin, but, as Ronald D. Milo has argued, the fact that he has to have them—that he can't act on his selfish desires without first persuading himself that doing so is right—shows that he has some concern, however minimal, for morality. This concern isn't enough to make him get true beliefs, but it does make him go through the process of rationalization. And the minimal amount of virtue that involves makes him less completely vicious than someone who knows what he's doing is wrong but with no qualms does it anyway, because he has no concern whatever for right and wrong.<sup>7</sup>

If both evaluative and non-evaluative desires can be virtuous, is one more so than the other? The answer seems different in different contexts. The best-known counterexamples to the value of acting from duty—about visiting a friend in hospital or saving your wife rather than strangers from

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald D. Milo, *Immortality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 111.

drowning<sup>8</sup>—involve personal relationships. These non-evaluative desires seem primary. It's an exaggeration to say a friend should have no thoughts about rightness; while visiting the hospital he may properly think doing so is his duty and get some extra motivation from that thought. But his primary impulse should be a non-evaluative concern for his friend's welfare. Now consider a judge ensuring that she gives similar sentences for similar crimes. She seems more virtuous if she's motivated by thoughts about what's just or right than if she acts from just a non-evaluative preference for proportional punishments.

If complete virtue involves perfectly proportioned desires for all right- or good-making properties, there can also be partial virtue. It has two possible forms.

Arpaly and Schroeder describe one when they define partial good will as involving a desire for something there's a *pro tanto* reason to bring about (166). This fits a theory like Ross's. If there are *pro tanto* duties to promote happiness and to keep promises, and you desire the one but have no concern for the other, you're in that way partially virtuous; likewise if you desire a right-making property either more or less than you should.

A second form is when the content of your desire overlaps partly but not wholly with a right-making property, either the only one or one among several. This can be so if the desire's content is conjunctive, for example if you want to do acts that both promote happiness and have some other, morally irrelevant property, so neither feature on its own motivates you but both must be present. Arpaly and Schroeder implicitly address this possibility in an interesting discussion of partiality.

Most of us don't desire happiness impartially but care much more for the happiness of our family, friends, and even compatriots. And though some degree of partiality may be proper, many of us go beyond that. Assume for simplicity's sake that we ought to care impartially for everyone. If you have a much stronger desire for your compatriots' happiness than for foreigners', how virtuous, if at all, is your desire?

Arpaly and Schroeder seem to take a restrictive view when they discuss a nationalistic Turk they call Mushin, who hates Kurds and has three intrinsic desires: a strong desire that Turks have what's good *so long as this doesn't help any Kurds*, a weak desire that everyone have what's good *except Kurds*, and a strong desire that Kurds be harmed. They say he has no good will whatever, because he has no intrinsic desire for anything there's a *pro tanto* reason to bring about. Even when he acts from a strong desire for a fellow Turk's happiness, his act has no worth (196–8).

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 453–66; Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–19.

Mushin has two vicious desires: that Kurds not be benefited and that they be harmed. But these desires can't be essential to the claim that he has *no* good will, which should stand even given just his other desire: that everyone except Kurds be benefited. This desire is conjunctive: it's for anything that is both, say, happiness and not a state of Kurd, or both happiness and a state of a Turk or Bulgarian or Romanian or... If Arpaly and Schroeder think this desire isn't virtuous at all, they must require the content of a virtuous desire to exactly match a good- or right-making property; since the good-making property here is just happiness and the conjunctive property isn't identical to that, Mushin has no virtue.

This seems a very harsh view. In human history many people have had conjunctive desires like Mushin's. Many ancient Greeks cared only about the happiness of fellow Greeks and not at all about non-Greeks'; even more people have cared only about the happiness of humans and not at all about that of animals. If a virtuous desire must be for an exact good-making property, none of these people acted at all virtuously when they acted from a strong intrinsic desire for a fellow Greek's or human's happiness.

Elsewhere Arpaly and Schroeder take a more permissive view. They also describe Alparslan, who has a weak desire for the good of everyone and a much stronger desire for the good of Turks. They say he has some slight good will in virtue of his weak impartial desire, and also has "strong partial good will" in virtue of his desire about Turks (195–7). But that second desire is also conjunctive: it's for anything that is, say, both happiness and a state of a Turk. If this conjunctive desire involves some good will, why not also Mushin's? If Mushin's desire must exactly match a good-making property, why not Alparslan's? I think their better view is their more permissive one about Alparslan, and it points to a form of partial virtue that hasn't to my knowledge been discussed before: when a desire's content overlaps only partly with a good- or right-making property because it's conjunctive, requiring not only that property but also some other, morally neutral ones.

This type of desire is very common, found not only in cases of partiality but also when you want to keep promises but only when that will not be too costly for you, or to do acts that both are heroic and will be seen by others as heroic, or when a state fights wars only when there's both a just cause and some connection to its self-interest. These conjunctive desires are less virtuous than ones that are just for a right-making property, and they're also less virtuous the more additional conjuncts they involve; a person with one of them is also indifferent to something he should care about, such as keeping costly promises. But he surely has some virtue, and to allow that an account of virtue should find some value in desires whose object overlaps partly but not wholly with a right-making property.

Arpaly and Schroeder raise another interesting issue when they ask about the virtue of a person all of whose motivation comes from a false moral theory. Such a person is unrealistic, since most of us have non-evaluative desires that are independent of our moral beliefs. But they say that if someone like this existed, say a whole-hearted Kantian who wants only to do acts that are universalizable when utilitarianism is true, she would have no virtue and no good will (198–9). That too seems harsh.

It again denies any virtue to the *de dicto* desire to do what's right, which I've argued is a mistake, and also seems wrong about her non-evaluative desires. They say these desires embody no good will because she "only cares about how her actions cause suffering or happiness insofar as she can see this to affect their universalizability—which sometimes it does and sometimes it does not." The objection here could be that she only cares about happiness when it meets a further condition of universalizability, but then her desire is just conjunctive like Alparslan's and should be partly virtuous. They could instead object that even when she desires happiness it's under the wrong description, as universalizable rather than just as happiness. But the duty to do universalizable acts generates several derivative duties, which for Kant included a duty to promote others' happiness. And the properties mentioned in these duties, though not ultimately right-making, are right-making nonetheless; that an act will promote another's happiness can, for Kant, make it right. But if the whole-hearted Kantian has non-evaluative desires corresponding to all her duties, both ultimate and derived, does she not have some virtuous desires?

The issue here is the level at which one must desire the right. Imagine that an ultimate right-making property *A* generates more concrete derivative right-making properties *B*, *C*, and *D*. We could say that what's virtuous is only desiring acts as having *A*, but seems too restrictive. Someone who desires a *B* act just as *B* and without thinking of *A* still seems virtuous to some degree. But then the holders of false moral theories can have considerable virtue. Though differing about ultimate explanatory principles, competing moral theories often overlap about concrete duties; thus almost all say there's at least a derivative duty to promote others' happiness. This allows an adherent of a false theory who has non-evaluative desires corresponding to all its duties to have some that are partly virtuous.

There's a final issue Arpaly and Schroeder don't explicitly address. They discuss praiseworthiness, which is a property only of acts, and virtue, which if not a disposition is the categorical basis of one, involving a state of the brain that tends to issue in occurrent acts and feelings but needn't do so. What's primarily valuable here? Is it just the virtuous desire, or is it the acts and feelings it can generate?

They often say a person can have virtue even if he's unable to express it in the normal ways; thus he can have the desires that constitute love for

another even if he has no capacity for acts or feelings about her (149–50). They even call these acts and feelings “appearances” of the love, which suggests that not they but the love has primary worth. Aristotle famously disagreed, saying that since virtue can be had by someone “asleep or in some other way quite inactive,” the chief good must consist in its active exercise, as in occurrent virtuous acts.<sup>9</sup> I find that the more persuasive view. If depression or a similar obstacle prevents someone from expressing his virtue in acts and feelings, his life doesn’t contain what’s most valuable in virtue. It’s not that virtue as such has no value; it may have some. But the primary good is its expression in concrete occurrent mental states.

I’ve argued that Arpaly’s and Schroeder’s account of virtue is at several points too narrow, not recognizing legitimate forms of virtue. But my criticisms have been based on agreement that many central virtues involve what they call plain desire, which can be for something good or right but doesn’t think of it as good or right. Their book highlights the importance of plain desire for a variety of topics and thus gives more realistic accounts of phenomena such as deliberation and love than the more high-minded ones in the recent literature. To a large extent it does the same for praiseworthiness and virtue.

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 1095b32–33, 1098b32–1099a6.