

What Makes Actions Morally Good?

[Georg Spielthener](#)

[Department of Philosophy and Applied Ethics](#)
[University of Zambia](#)

ABSTRACT

When we evaluate actions from the moral point of view, we can do this in two very different ways. We can consider them as morally *right or wrong*, but we can also judge them morally *good or bad*. Even though the distinction between right and good is generally recognized by moral philosophers, there is a tendency in contemporary ethics either to oversimplify it or to blur it altogether. Most philosophers focus on motives when they investigate this problem. I will, however, show that there are also other good-making factors and moreover, I will argue that all of them are traits of the agent's personality. To this aim, I will in Sections (I) to (III) show that the moral worth of actions depends on more than motivation or the agent's character, and in (IV) I will argue that no factors *other* than personality traits determine the moral worth of actions.

Actions can be evaluated in various respects. When we evaluate them from the moral point of view, we can do this in two very different ways. We can consider them as morally *right or wrong*, but we can also judge them morally *good or bad*. Both evaluations are logically independent of each other and David Ross was certainly right when he emphasized that a clear distinction between the morally right and the morally good 'will do much to remove some of the perplexities of our moral thought.' (1) The study of right and wrong action has been dominated by the opposition between teleology (consequentialism) and deontology. According to teleologists, the right-making qualities of actions are only their consequences. This has been denied by deontologists who insist that an action can be right or wrong in *itself*. If a physician tells a patient the truth about his incurable disease, teleologists will judge the rightness or wrongness of this action by referring only to its consequences. A deontologist, on the other hand, may insist that it was right because truth-telling is intrinsically right, quite independently of its consequences. It is, however, obvious that the physician can tell the patient the truth for different reasons. If he is malicious, he may want to plunge him into despair; but he can inform his patient also out of benevolence, for instance, to give him the opportunity to prepare himself and his family for the worst. Despite their *disagreement* about the right-making factors, the teleologist and the deontologist will *agree* that the action is morally bad if done for the former reason, but morally good if done from the latter.

(2)

Even though the distinction between the right and the good is philosophers generally recognized among moral, there is a tendency in contemporary ethics either to oversimplify it or to blur it altogether. (3) For this reason, I will in this paper investigate what kinds of factors make actions morally good or bad. Of course, it is not only actions that are good or bad but also motives, intentions, emotions, or personal character, but since I am concerned about the distinction between the morally right and the morally good, I will focus here only on actions.

When philosophers deal with the problem of the morally good, they tend to concentrate on motives. I will, however, show that there are also other good-making factors and moreover, I will argue that all of them are traits of the agent's personality. I will thus defend the thesis that the moral goodness of actions depends solely on personality traits of the agent. To this aim, I will in Sections (I) to (III) show that the moral worth of actions depends on *more* than motivation or the agent's character, and in (IV) I will argue that *no* factors *other* than personality traits determine the morality of an action.

The purpose of this essay is thus quite limited. My aim is only to examine the kind of factors that are relevant to the moral goodness of actions. I do not intend to determine, for instance, which motives make actions good or which character-traits render them bad. This problem is very complex and its analysis goes far beyond the scope of a paper. However, my meta-ethical inquiry is not only a prerequisite for successful investigations of these normative ethical problems; it can also counteract the too restricted view about the moral goodness of actions widespread in contemporary philosophy.

I

It seems that most philosophers regard the *motives* of a person as factors that make her action morally good or bad. Apparently, some of them think that the motives are the *only* relevant factors for an action's moral worth; (4) others consider them as very important for this kind of moral evaluation, but not as exclusively relevant. (5) It is obvious that motives are important for the morality of an action. If a person spends money in order to help innocent civilians in a war-torn country, her motivation tends to make her action morally good. But if she spends the money only because she regards it as a lucrative investment, her action may be prudent but it would not be seen as morally praiseworthy. And if someone turns his radio up only to disturb his neighbour, he will be rightly blamed, but if he does this only because he likes loud music, his action is less blameworthy, even though not entirely morally flawless (as will be apparent shortly).

The *intention* of an action is often not distinguished from its motive. Both concepts are related but they are not identical. (6) A simple example can show this. If *A* puts poison into *B's* coffee with the *intention* to kill him, his *motive* may have been the

hope to inherit *B's* wealth. Obviously, intentions are also relevant for the moral worth of our actions. (7) Oedipus intentionally killed an old man but unintentionally his father. If he had killed his father intentionally, we would judge his deplorable action differently. However, since the arguments put forward to show the moral relevance of intentions are not substantially different from those referring to motives, it is not necessary to treat intentions here separately. In what follows, I will show that it is *not only* motives (and intentions) that make actions morally good or bad.

Actions can be morally bad (to a certain extent) even if their motives are good. Suppose that a person *A* does something because she thinks it will make *B* happy. She is, however, aware that her action will harm *C* and *D*. *Ex hypothesi*, *A* is only motivated by her wish to make *B* happy. She is indifferent to *C* and *D*. *A* is therefore acting from a good motive (her wish to make *B* happy), but what she does is nevertheless not morally good. The reason for this is not her motive, but rather the *lack* of certain motives. (8) It is thus implausible to claim that only motives make action morally good or bad. If this view was correct, the good motive in our example would have rendered the action morally good and the motives that are *lacking* could not have made the action bad. But what made this action bad was the very fact that certain motives were *absent*. Ross (1939, 325–6) rightly emphasizes therefore that many actions are morally bad even though their motives are not blameworthy. Thefts, for example, are usually not committed out of malevolence, but are often solely motivated by the wish to get money and valuables. This motive, however, is morally neutral. Nevertheless, such thefts are morally bad because something is *missing*. The thieves are acting morally blameworthy because of their indifference or negligence. (9) They are not (or not sufficiently) motivated by their knowledge that they harm others.

That the morality of an action is *not only* determined by its *intention* is shown by the fact that unintentional actions can also be morally blameworthy. (10) Not all actions are done intentionally. If I sit at a dining table, reach out for my wine glass and by doing so knock over the vase, I have (on one description of this action) broken the vase. However, I did it unintentionally. My intention was to take my wine glass. Nevertheless, this unintentional action can also be morally blameworthy. Since my intention to take the glass was not morally bad and my breaking the vase was done unintentionally, it cannot have been my intention that made my action blameworthy. I will be blamed because I was careless. I was not sufficiently motivated to avoid a possible damage, and it is this lack of a certain motivation that makes my action blameworthy. I did not break the vase *in order to* get something or *in order to* prevent something. There was thus also no motive for my breaking the vase. If it was nevertheless morally blameworthy, then the moral worth of actions does not just depend on the intentions and the motives involved.

II

Since it cannot be the motives or intentions alone that make actions morally good or bad, some authors take the view that it is the agent's *character* which is decisive for the moral worth of his deeds. (11) Even though they define the concept of character quite differently, most authors agree that a person's character is motivational in the sense that it affects her behaviour. If a person is greedy, this character-trait will have an effect on the way she behaves; and it is only because we observe that this person acts in various situations in a certain way that we deem ourselves justified to call her greedy. Even though there is a relation between our character and our motivation, both must be clearly distinguished. (12) This can easily be seen if we consider the fact that we can be motivated to do something without having the corresponding character-trait (we can sometimes tend to spend much money even though we are not wasteful) and we can have a certain character-trait without always showing the corresponding motivation (even an extravagant person can sometimes want to save money). We can also see this distinction when we consider two different ways of *explaining* actions, namely motive-explanations and character-explanations. A motive-explanation refers to an aim of the agent, that is, to something he wants to get or to avoid. In a character-explanation, however, there is no reference to aims or goals. If we say that *A* saves money in order to buy a car, we give a motive-explanation. But if we say that *A* saves money because he is thrifty, we give a character-explanation. (13) A person's character must therefore be distinguished from her motivation. In what follows, then, I will briefly discuss some examples to show that we *do* often judge actions morally good or bad on the basis of the agent's character.

Many people put other persons' lives at risk. They do not intend this (mostly, they are not malicious) and sometimes they even do not believe that they might harm others, but in fact, their behaviour endangers other persons' lives. (14) Examples of this moral *recklessness* can be seen with drivers on our roads. When drivers overtake, they often do it in ways that objectively put others at risk. They do not consciously want to harm them. However, although they are usually aware that their risky driving may endanger others, they nevertheless overtake, for instance, on a bend. This recklessness is not a motive of their behaviour (they do not overtake in order to put someone at risk); it is rather a character-trait of these drivers. If we blame them because of their recklessness, we do not refer to their motivation but to a trait of character; and to call some overtaking manoeuvres reckless means to condemn certain actions on the basis of the agent's underlying character and not because of their motives.

Actions that are the result of *negligence* are also morally blameworthy. (15) We often deserve blame because we do not reflect carefully enough on our actions, both evaluatively and factually. Let us first consider *evaluative* moral negligence. A person may believe that we must never lie, and since she wants to do what is morally right, she never lies. However, this person's conduct can nevertheless be

morally blameworthy (to a certain extent) if she does not bother to consider carefully whether we really must tell the truth or not at all times. It is not the motive that renders her action blameworthy because the motive is to do what she regards to be morally right and such conscientious actions are generally considered to be morally good. The problem is her negligence in failing to consider carefully the question whether we really ought always to tell the truth. This negligence, however, is not a motive of the agent; it is rather one of her character-traits, and it this trait we refer to in our moral evaluation.

We can, however, also be morally negligent with regard to the *facts*. We do usually consider some consequences of our actions but often we act without proper thought. We consider, for instance, only some effects of our deeds and we do not consider carefully how serious and how likely others might be. If, for instance, we face a serious moral problem such as an abortion and if we are careless about the consequences, it is obvious that our action is blameworthy. But the moral relevance of negligence can even be seen when we consider cases that are more ordinary. If somebody walks his dog but does not, or not carefully enough, consider how the dog will react to cyclists and children playing, his action is blameworthy even if the dog does not attack anybody. What he does is morally reprehensible because he was too careless about the possible consequences of his behaviour. Once again, it is not the motivation that is bad. His motives might have been to relax and to take the dog for a walk. There is nothing wrong with this motivation. If we blame *him* nonetheless, we do so because of his negligence, that is, on account of a trait of his character; and if we morally reprehend his *behaviour* by calling it careless, we do this again by referring to his character.

We act *thoughtlessly* if we show a lack of concern about the possible consequences of our actions. Some people give noisy parties and apparently do not spare a thought for their neighbours. They deserve moral blame for something they *fail* to do, namely show concern about how their actions might affect others. Their motive, however, is not bad. They just want to enjoy themselves. Moral thoughtlessness is a character-trait, and to judge thoughtless behaviour as morally bad means to blame it because it is an expression of this blameworthy trait.

There is a similar problem with regard to *ignorance*. (16) It has a twofold effect on the morality of an action. On the one hand, it can be an excuse. This means, if an action is done out of ignorance, it is *less* blameworthy than it would have been if the agent had known the relevant facts. On the other hand, doing something in spite of ignorance can make an action morally *worse*. If someone is shooting at game in a populated area and accidentally kills a shepherd, it is not an adequate defence to say that he did not know that there were shepherds in the field tending their sheep. He should have made sure that they were *not* there. It is, however, not his ignorance as such that is blameworthy. We blame him rather because he pursued his hobby even though he was ignorant about whether his shooting might endanger someone. If we reprehend such a man and his behaviour, we do it not because of

his motivation but because of his carelessness and his negligence in failing to acquire the relevant knowledge; that is, because of a character–trait.

If somebody justifiably believes that she should do a certain action from the moral point of view, but does not do it because something else is more important for her, her action is morally blameworthy (to a certain extent). (17) For instance, if a person believes that she is morally required to spend a considerable part of her income on the education of her children but does not do so because she prefers to spend her money on the latest fashion, then her action is morally reprehensible. The reason for this, however, is neither that spending money on fashion is as such morally wrong nor that the motivation to do so is intrinsically morally bad. What makes her behaviour morally blameworthy is rather the preponderance of her non-moral (not *immoral*) motive over her moral motive. We base our moral evaluation of her behaviour on an imbalance that prompts her to attach too little importance to moral consideration. This again is related to character.

At this juncture, I should mention the so-called *weakness of the will* (*akrasia*). Roughly said, a person shows weakness of the will if she does intentionally what she believes she should not do, all things considered. That is, an *akratik* person does something that she regards as wrong (or does not what she considers right) even though she does not want to do it (or does want to do it); and the reason for this is usually that she cannot resist her present desires and emotions. (18) This weakness of character also has an influence on the morality of an action which can be illustrated by a simple example. A smoker can feel morally obliged to abandon his habit, for instance, because it is a health hazard also for other people, and he will thus be motivated to some extent to stop smoking. But he can be overwhelmed by his craving for another cigarette and may thus be unable to give it up. There is, however, no reason to criticise his motivation; it will even be regarded as morally good. This means that we do not blame his smoking on the basis of his motives but because of the agent's character. Telling someone that he is acting intemperately is a negative evaluation which is based on the character of the agent that led to this action.

III

The examples given in Section II show sufficiently that we often refer to character when we judge an action to be morally good or bad. However, some further examples will show that the moral worth of an action is also influenced by factors that do *not* pertain to character; and from this it follows that character is *not* the basis of all moral evaluations of actions.

It is widely recognized in philosophy and in everyday life that *emotional reactions* are relevant for the moral evaluation of persons. We judge a person *ceteris paribus* more negatively when she is pleased about someone's harm than when she feels sorry for him. However, emotions also have an effect on the evaluation of the moral

worth of *actions*. (19) If somebody does not help an injured person out of fear of doing something wrong, this emotion is an excuse for his omission. His behaviour is therefore less blameworthy; and from this it follows that an emotion such as fear has an influence on the morality of our behaviour. In addition, emotions also affect our thinking. (20) If a person is angry, she may interpret a situation differently than she would have had she been relaxed. For example, if in a moment of anger someone considers a person's request as an impertinence and gives her therefore very short shrift, her behaviour can be partly excused by referring to her emotional condition. This shows again the effect of emotions on the moral evaluation of actions. However, emotions are not part of our character; they are a component of our *personality*. (21) If we want to determine the basis on which we evaluate actions as morally good or bad, we must therefore refer to the broader concept of personality which includes, among other things, character and emotions.

Habits are not aspects of our character but of our personality. They must therefore be distinguished not only from motives and intentions, but also from character-traits. If somebody has the habit of staying up late, he does not do it in order to reach one of his goals. He may have had a goal at the time he started staying up late, but as soon as this has become a habit, his goals are not any longer sufficient to explain this behaviour. Habits are thus different from motives and intentions. But they are also different from traits of character. This can be shown by the following observation: When our actions are based on our character, we *decide* to do them. However, when we do something habitually, we do *not* decide to do it. If I have the habit of locking my front door, I do not decide each time to lock it; I do it almost without thinking. However, if I lock the door because I am wary (a trait of character), I do decide each time to lock it. (22) Our habits also have an impact on the morality of our actions. This can be seen when we consider this simple example: John has the habit of slamming the door of his car when he drives off early in the morning. In winter, this habit does not disturb his neighbours' sleep because they have their windows closed, but in summer, it rudely awakens them every day. It seems to me obvious that John's slamming the door of his car is morally less blameworthy than it would have been if he had not slammed it habitually but with the intention to disturb his neighbours. I do not claim that habits always have such a mitigating effect, but the example shows that habits sometimes have an influence on our moral evaluation of actions. (23)

Mental disorders also are relevant to the moral goodness and badness of actions. For instance, persons who suffer from compulsions are not only a burden on themselves but their behaviour can also be very irritating to other people. If someone is persistently controlling whether everything in his apartment is exactly in the place it is supposed to be, his behaviour can be very disturbing for his family. But if we are told that he suffers from a compulsive disorder, this information will change our moral evaluation. If his compulsion is very severe, it may even be inappropriate to evaluate his behaviour morally at all. In both cases, his mental

disorder influences our moral evaluation. However, compulsions are not traits of our character; they are aspects of our personality. We refer therefore also in this and similar cases to personality when we evaluate the moral worth of an action. (24) I think that these examples suffice to show that we refer not only to motives and the agent's character when we judge actions morally good or bad but also to traits of personality. "Personality" is a broader concept than "character". It encompasses the latter (all traits of character are thus personality-traits) but it includes also motives, emotions, habits, mental disorders, and other aspects. (25) I therefore hold the view that we refer finally to the personality of an agent when we judge his actions as morally good or bad; or, in other words, that it is the agent's personality which renders his actions morally good or bad.

IV

The account presented here could be objected to by referring to E. Beardsley's thesis that the *circumstances* of an action are also relevant to its moral goodness. (26) She distinguishes between two kinds of moral goodness, i.e. 'moral worth' and 'moral credit', and she claims that both are judged according to two different standards that are not reducible to each other. An action's 'moral worth' is judged on the basis of the agent's motives and character. However, if we evaluate the 'moral credit' of an action, we refer to its circumstances. These circumstances can be divided into *internal* ones (e.g. the agent's intellectual and emotional condition or his special faculties) and *external* ones (e.g., the social milieu of a person or her financial situation). We can take the well-known biblical story of the poor widow's offering as an example to illustrate the importance of the external circumstances (the internal ones are no problem for my account because they are aspects of the personality). (27) Even though the widow gave very little money, she was praised because she gave in spite of her poverty, that is, despite difficult external circumstances. But poverty is not a personality trait and this seems to show that factors that are not part of the agent's personality are relevant to the moral goodness of actions.

However, in my view, external circumstances are relevant to the moral goodness of actions if, and only if, we can draw conclusions from them relating to the agent's personality. The following twofold argument will show why I think so. (a) Two persons *A* and *B* donate the same amount of money to a relief organization (e.g. for a worldwide polio vaccination campaign that aims to eradicate this disease) and both have the same motive, namely, to help children. Their action has therefore the same 'moral worth'. We are then told that *A* is very affluent while *B* is badly off. According to Beardsley, *B*'s action has a greater 'moral credit' because of the adverse external circumstances of her donation. However, it seems to me obvious that what renders her action morally better are not these circumstances as such. They are only relevant because they allow us to draw conclusions with reference to

B's character. We can infer from *A*'s action that he is not entirely indifferent to some others and that he is willing to help them. *B*'s donation allows us to draw the same conclusion. Furthermore, however, it shows that she is prepared to make sacrifices for others and it is because of this additional quality that we judge *B*'s action morally better than *A*'s. The external circumstances are thus only relevant because they allow us to conclude to a trait of *B*; we can call it 'willingness to make sacrifices', and we judge *B*'s action morally better because it exhibits this trait. (b) When we have *no* information about the financial means of *A* and *B*, but know, for instance, only that they are forty-one and forty-two years old respectively, we will evaluate the moral goodness of their donation equally. We do so because this information does *not* allow us to draw conclusions with reference to their characters and since it does *not* allow such inferences, it is *not* relevant to the moral goodness of the action.

The first part of this argument indicates that external circumstances are relevant for the morality of actions *if* they allow conclusions with reference to the agent's character. The second part gives a reason for the belief that circumstances are *not* relevant if they *do not* allow such conclusions. Both parts together, therefore, support my thesis that external circumstances are relevant for the moral goodness of actions *if and only if* they allow conclusions with reference to the agent's personality. Beardsley's thoughts are interesting and important for the problem of moral evaluations. However, they do not refute my thesis that it is personality which basically renders our actions morally good or bad.

Notes

- (1) See Ross (1930, 7).
- (2) It may be objected that Kant would not consider an action morally good if it is done out of benevolence. But most deontologists do not share Kant's moral rigorism and regard also benevolence as a good-making property (see, for instance, Ross, 1930).
- (3) See, for instance, Slote (2001). Even though he claims that his virtue ethics can make this distinction in a correct way, it in fact obscures it, which is in my view an unavoidable consequence of his 'agent-based' approach.
- (4) See e.g. Brandt (1996), Frankena (1980; 1981), Gibbard (1990), Hossenfelder (2000), McInerney (1997), Nowell-Smith (1957) or von Wright (1993).
- (5) Cf., for instance, Blum (1980), Broad (1949; 1971; 1985) or Ewing (1953).
- (6) Many authors stress the difference between intentions and motives. However, they distinguish them in very different ways. See, for instance, Anscombe (1963), Bennet (1995), Broad (1985), Heckhausen (1977), McClelland (1987), Runggaldier (1996) or von Wright (1963; 1983). It would, however, require too much space, to discuss these differences.

- (7) See to this also Frankena (1980, 49), Hutcheson (1986, 162–3) or A. Smith (1994, 137–65). As already mentioned, intentions can also be the objects of our moral evaluations, but in this paper I will focus only on actions.
- (8) See Ross (1939, 306–7).
- (9) Cf. also Milo (1984, 140–84).
- (10) See to this also Bennett (1995, 195) and Broad (1985, 63).
- (11) D. Ross (1930, 155), for instance, claims that morally good is only what is a certain sort of character or is related to a certain sort of character in one of certain ways ...’ (see also p. 161); and Nowell–Smith (1957) writes: ‘[A] breach of a moral rule is only considered culpable when it is attainable to the agent’s character ...’ (p. 265); see also Brandt (1959), Hospers (1970) and Ross (1939).
- (12) Cf. to this, for instance, John and Gosling (2000) and McAdams (1995).
- (13) Compare to this Alston (1967, 400) and Nowell–Smith (1957, 111).
- (14) See Milo (1984, 98).
- (15) Compare, for instance, Milo (1984, 82–114) and A. Smith (1984, 155–58).
- (16) See, for example, Aristotle EN 1113b30 – 1114a3), Koch (1907, 119) or Nowell–Smith (1957, 256–62).
- (17) Cf. Milo (1984, 185–218).
- (18) Cf., for instance, Milo (1984, 115–39) who distinguishes different kinds of akrasia. A more precise explanation is given by Davidson (1969) who explains akratik actions as follows: ‘In doing x an agent acts incontinently [akratik] if and only if (a) the agent does x intentionally; (b) the agent believes there is an alternative action y open to him; and (c) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do y than to do x ’ (p. 94).
- (19) Cf. to this e.g. Adams (1988), Broad (1985, 185–6), Hutcheson (1986, 136–61) and Oakley (1992, 53). See also Aristotle EN 1106 b 15–29.
- (20) See, for example, Izard (1991, 70–2) or Oakley (1992).
- (21) See, for instance, Izard (1991; 1993) or Pervin (1993; 2000).
- (22) See to this also Brandt (1988, 76) and Nowell–Smith (1957, 108–9).
- (23) Cf. also Koch (1907, 120–1) and von Wright (1963, 143).
- (24) I have mentioned here only some examples of personality traits. There are, however, many others that also contribute to the moral worth of our actions; for instance, intelligence, extraversion, anxiety, or neuroticism. As said, it goes far beyond the scope of this paper to investigate *how* they influence moral goodness. For my present purposes it is only important to show *that* personality traits have an effect on the morality of actions.
- (25) This is the case if we understand the character of a person as is usual in philosophy and psychology. Some, however, define “character” so broadly that it does not substantially differ from “personality”. For instance, Blum (1980) claims that character is ‘a kind of totality which encompasses ways of behaving, attitudes, and emotions’ (p. 205), which means that ‘character’ and ‘personality’ have more or less the same meaning. I think, however, that this is an unduly broad definition.

(26) See Beardsley (1957; 1970).

(27) See Mark 12. 41–44 and Luke 21. 1–4.

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