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Review - "Motive and Rightness" by Steven Sverdlik

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Motive and Rightness

"Does the motive from which an action is performed ever determine whether that action is morally right or morally wrong" (vi)? In *Motive and Rightness*, Steven Sverdlik's answer is a qualified 'yes.' Somewhat surprisingly, he also contends that some version of extrinsic consequentialism provides the best theoretical account of why this is the case. Though he has "tried to present the material in a way that [is] comprehensible to an educated reader," he notes that the issues are often highly abstract and hence there are portions an "education reader should probably skip" (vi). The resulting book is likely to be of interest primarily to ethical theorists and moral psychologists. But it also develops a highly nuanced account of what it means for moral motives to be "available" to an agent which counseling psychologists may appreciate too.

Sverdlik contends that any acceptable moral theory should yield a "largely objective conception of deontic status" (16). By this he means that the moral rightness, wrongness or permissibility of an action cannot depend on the agent's beliefs about it. Rather, it depends on facts about the situation, most of which are completely external to or independent of the agent in question. Since motives are subjective features of agents, this means that they can only be one of the relevant factors in any complete explanation of what agents morally ought to do. Importantly, Sverdlik does not argue that motives are always relevant to the deontic status of acts (he acknowledges, for example, that agents frequently act rightly even when they do so from a bad motive). But he does believe there are some actions that, while morally right when performed from one motive, would be wrong if performed from another. This belief is supported through examples of actions motivated by (i) the desire for money, (ii) cruelty, and (iii) prejudice.

Chapter 2 shores up these claims by clarifying the nature of motives, which Sverdlik defines as "ultimate desires" that establish "the agent's end in acting" (19). Here the distinction between explanatory and normative reasons is crucial. Motives can explain why an agent acted as he or she did -- why she thought a particular end worth pursuing, or why he decided to perform one action rather than another. But motives do not serve as justifying reasons on their own, since the fact that an agent believes he should perform a particular act does not tell us anything about whether those beliefs are correct. Sverdlik further notes that motives can only serve as intentions when they are conscious, and points out that the typical relation between motive and action is "many many" (the same action can have many different motives, and the same motive can lead to many different acts). These and other distinctions are used to clarify exactly how motives are relevant in the three examples mentioned above. For example, it is only in cases where money is an agent's "ultimate desire" that Sverdlik thinks it can count as potentially wrong-making. And even then, the desire for money is only one of the relevant factors in determining whether the action itself is right or wrong.

The explicit goal of Chapters 3-7 is to see "if some substantive moral theory can explain" why motives are relevant in this limited way (p. 41) though exactly how they are relevant is also further clarified by the discussion. These chapters are extremely technical, and only the broadest outlines will be covered here. Pace classical utilitarianism, and other versions of consequentialism that make the moral status of an action depend solely on its effects, he argues that motives sometimes do have extrinsic value. Suppose, for example, that my refusal to shake another person's hand is motivated by racism. That avoiding contact with members of that race is my "ultimate end" may not be apparent in every circumstance (for example, if I also have a cast on my right arm, it may not be

evident that may failure to shake hands is snub), but when it *is* evident the other person will feel the pain of being victimized by prejudice. This is a negative consequence, and therefore can change the moral status of the act. Nonetheless, Sverdlik thinks kantian, virtue ethical, and intrinsic consequentialist accounts are mistaken to suggest that the intrinsic value (or disvalue) of some motives can ever be sufficient to explain why actions are right or wrong. The argument here is two-pronged. First, he notes that such claims typically assume that intrinsically bad motives, such as "prosecuting from malice," always lead to procedural violations, excessive cruelty, and the like (cf. Slote 2001). Even if this assumption is warranted, that just shows that the extrinsic consequences are what ultimately explain the moral wrongness of the act. And second, he argues that even if some motives do have intrinsic value, no moral theory to date has provided an adequate account of precisely how such motives affect the moral status of acts. Though readers who do not share Sverdlik's intuitions about cases are unlikely to be fully convinced by this latter claim, he does at least show that his own intuitions are plausible.

This brings us to Sverdlik's thesis about "availability," which is developed in Chapter 8. Here Sverdlik shows that there are at least four different issues in play:

epistemic availability – whether the agent knows or believes she has reason to act.

affirmative availability – whether the agent consciously acts for that reason.

operative availability – whether the agent can ensure that his conscious ends are what actually drive his behavior, and

affective availability – whether the agent has, or can muster up, the appropriate feelings or emotional states.

Distinguishing these four issues is important to Sverdlik's project, since it provides him with further reasons to find both Kantian and virtue ethical accounts inadequate (for the arguments, see pp. 149-66). But it is also important in a more general way. For there do seem to be cases in which agents are aware of two or more competing desires (i.e., in which each desire is both *affirmatively* and *operatively* available, and if they are emotional motives they will each be *affectively* available too) and Sverdlik's account clearly shows that what is at stake for such agents is an *epistemic* choice. Readers can appreciate this point even if they remain unconvinced that extrinsic consequentialism does the best job of guiding such choices. And it is a point worth considering even for those who doubt that moral theories can be action guiding at all. In such situations, there is no way for agents to avoid the question of what they themselves ultimately believe they should do.

Reference

Slote, Michael. *Morals from Motives* (Oxford, 2001).

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