

Moral Justification

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1. *A curious divergence*

In epistemology, lots of spilled ink over epistemic justification

In ethics, comparatively little attention has centered on moral justification

This difference is surprising, given the way we use “justification” talk

- 11,642 occurrences of “justified” in Corpus of Contemporary American English - In the vast majority of these uses, “justified” is used to make a moral (or morally charged) evaluation of an action.

Examples “from the wild”:

- “He would have been justified in defending himself.” - nbc15.com
- “After review, police determined that the use of deadly force was not justified under the circumstances” – Saturday Evening Post
- “War is never justified.” – Truthdig.com
- “Israeli Soldiers Should Consider if It's Justified to Fight in Gaza” - Haaretz
- “There are times when the destruction of private property is justified” - Crooksandliars.com
- “Unlike the Iraq War, the war in Afghanistan was justified in the beginning.” - Concerned Veterans for America Foundation

Goal of the talk: Provide a unified account of moral and epistemic justification – an account that illuminates the important commonalities between the two

2. *Parallel Theoretical Roles*

One theoretical role for EJ is to capture a common factor between the “good case” and the “bad case”:

Good Vase: Gertie is gazing at what appears to be a red vase. She believes it’s red. She’s right.

Bad Vase: Bertie is gazing at what appears to be a red vase. He believes it’s red. As a matter of fact, the vase is white, but there is a cleverly disguised red light angled towards it.

Intuition: There is some sense in which Gertie’s belief and Bertie’s belief are normatively on a par.

Assume that the epistemic success condition for belief is truth. Then:

Theoretical role for EJ: Epistemic justification is a positive normative status that can be shared by both successful and unsuccessful beliefs – a status distinct from blamelessness or excusability.

The case for a parallel theoretical role in the moral domain:

Good Donation: Gwen intends to donate \$10,000 to Malaria Consortium. She googles Malaria Consortium, clicks on the first website, enters in the amount and her credit card info, and presses “Donate.” Her donation saves 4 lives.

Bad: Ben intends to donate \$10,000 to Malaria Consortium. He googles Malaria Consortium, clicks on the first website, enters in the amount and his credit card info, and presses “Donate.” Unbeknownst to him, he is actually on a decoy website funneling funds to a terrorist group. His donation goes to this group, and ends up killing 4 people.

Intuition: There is some sense in which Gwen and Ben's actions are normatively on a par.

Assume actions have a moral success condition: *objective rightness*. Then:

Theoretical role for MJ: Moral justification is a positive normative status that can be shared by both successful and unsuccessful actions – a status distinct from blamelessness or excusability.

A unified account of epistemic and moral j should capture these parallel theoretical roles.

3. Epistemic Reduction

One strategy for unifying EJ & MJ: reduce one sort of justification to the other, e.g.:

Epistemic Reduction: An agent A's ϕ -ing is morally justified iff A's ϕ -ing was motivated by an epistemically justified belief that ϕ -ing is objectively right.

Big problem for Epistemic Reduction: Your actions can be justified even if you don't believe (and hence don't justifiedly believe) that you are doing the right thing. 3 instances of the problem:

- i) The ethical error theorist: read too much Mackie and Joyce in college, consequently doesn't believe in moral rightness. But still reliably does the right thing in daily life. When she rushes into a burning orphanage to save the children, due to a concern for their wellbeing, it seems her action is justified, even though she doesn't believe she's acting rightly.
- ii) Huck Finn cases: does the right thing for the right reasons, but (falsely) believes that they are acting wrongly
- iii) Miners cases: Alice doesn't know which shaft the miners are in, so she leaves both open. Her action is justified. But, assuming Alice knows the objectively right thing is to save the most lives, she knows her action is not objectively right.

4. Moral Reliabilism

Better approach: Give an account of moral j that structurally parallels one's preferred account of epistemic j.

There are different ways of implementing this approach, depending on one's preferred account of epistemic j. A proof of concept: reliabilism.

Epistemic Reliabilism: A belief is epistemically justified if and only if it is produced by an epistemically reliable process, where a process is epistemically reliable if and only if it usually produces true beliefs rather than false beliefs.

Following the lead of virtue epistemologists, let's introduce a label - "performances" - for both beliefs and actions. Given our assumption that the success condition for belief is truth, and the success condition for action is objective rightness, we can give the following generalization:

Reliabilism Generalized: A performance is justified iff it is produced by a reliable process, where a process is reliable iff it usually produces successful performances rather than unsuccessful performances.

As a special case:

Moral Reliabilism: An action is morally justified if and only if it is produced by a morally reliable process, where a process is morally reliable if and only if it usually produces objectively right actions.

Performance	Success Condition	Justification Condition
Belief	Truth	Produced by a process that usually produces true beliefs
Action	Objective Rightness	Produced by a process that usually produces right actions

What's an action-producing process?

- Reliabilist typically analyze belief-forming processes as functions from input states of the agent (e.g., background beliefs, perceptual states) to further beliefs.
- Similarly, we might analyze action-producing processes as functions from input states of the agent (background beliefs, perceptual states, and desires) to actions.
 - E.g., in Good Donation, we might think of the inputs to Gwen's action-producing process as her beliefs about the actions available to her and their respective consequences, the evidence on which these beliefs are based, as well as various conative states (e.g, her desire to help prevent malaria transmission). And the output of her action-producing process is the action of entering in the credit card info and hitting "donate".
 - In Bad Donation, Ben's action-producing process is much the same.

Virtues:

- Captures the shared theoretical role for e_j and m_j
 - Gets the result that both Gwen's and Ben's actions are morally justified - both are using a process that would normally produce the objectively right action
- Inherits some of the selling points of epistemic reliabilism:
 - Epistemic reliabilism captures the idea that there is an important connection between e_j and truth. Moral reliabilism captures an analogous connection between m_j and objective rightness.
 - Epistemic reliabilism eschews any higher order requirements on e_j (e.g., that justified belief requires having a justified belief that one has a justified belief). Consequently, it avoids overintellectualizing e_j - this is a status that can be attained by small children & animals. Similarly, moral reliabilism eschews any higher order requirements on m_j : morally justified action does not require any beliefs, let alone justified beliefs, about the normative status of one's action.
- This last point enables moral reliabilism to avoid the problems for Epistemic Reduction.
 - The ethical error theorist acts in a way that reliably results in objectively right action; her actions are thus justified.
 - Similarly, Huck Finn acts in a manner that would usually produce objectively right actions; his refusal to turn Jim over to the authorities is thus justified
 - In the miner's case, Alice's process is doing whatever maximizes expected moral value; in many circumstances, this process will yield objectively right actions¹

¹ How frequently it does so will depend on the details of one's theory of objective rightness. Another (maybe better?) option is to refine our definition of reliability. Rather than taking the success condition for action to be objective rightness, we could take it to be a graded notion such as objective moral value. We could then say that a process is morally reliable iff it produces a sufficiently high degree of objective moral value across a relevant range of circumstances.

5. Expanding our Conceptual Toolkit

Once we've added MJ to our conceptual toolkit, maybe we should also make room for a moral analogue of knowledge. This would be a status that:

- Entails moral justification (counterpart of a justification condition on K)
- Unlike MJ, entails objective rightness (counterpart a factivity condition on K)
- Unlike MJ, satisfies an anti-luck condition (counterpart of anti-luck condition on K)

Moral analogues of Gettier cases:

Nearly Bad: Jen intends to donate \$10,000 to Malaria Consortium. She googles Malaria Consortium, enters in the amount and her credit card info, and presses "Donate." Unbeknownst to her, she is actually on a decoy website funneling funds to a terrorist group. However, due to an extremely unlikely glitch in the payment processing software, the money is rerouted back to Malaria Consortium, saving four lives.

To model this moral anti-luck condition, take your favorite analysis of K and generalize it, e.g.:

Knowledge-like performances as safe: A performance is knowledge-like iff it is safely successful – i.e., it is reliably produced and it succeeds in all relevantly close worlds where it is produced by the same process.

Performance	Justification Condition	Knowledge-Like Condition
Belief	Produced by an epistemically reliable process	True in all nearby worlds where it is produced by the same process
Action	Produced by a morally reliable process	Right in all nearby worlds where it is produced by the same process

Knowledge-like performances as apt: A performance is knowledge-like iff it is successful in virtue of being the output of a reliable process.

The status of being knowledge-like bears an intriguing resemblance to the notion of "moral worth". Big debates about how to understand moral worth, but most agree that:

- Moral worth entails objective rightness
- Moral worth satisfies an anti-luck or anti-accidentality constraint: if your action has moral worth, it's not merely accidental that you are doing the right thing

	Blamelessness	Justification	Knowledge	Moral Worth
Success Condition?	No	No	Yes	Yes
Reliability Condition?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Anti-Luck Condition?	No	No	Yes	Yes

Perhaps, then, we can use the status of being knowledge-like to provide a new account of moral worth.