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Counterfactual Situations and Moral Worth

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Abstract

What is the relevance to praiseworthiness and blameworthiness of what one would have done in other, counterfactual circumstances? I defend a moderate form of actualism: what one would have done is important, but less so than what one actually does.

It might not have been the way it was: Oskar Schindler might have been born in another era, or might have chosen to be something else than an entrepreneur and war profiteer – or might have chosen to ignore the plight of his workers. And any of these differences probably would have led to hundreds more deaths. If Schindler were born in another era, he likely would have lacked the distinctive opportunity to save many lives. If he had chosen another line of work, he might not have been able to protect Jewish workers. Or Schindler might have been situated as he was but simply chose differently: he might have failed to respond to the plight of his workers and thus made himself like far too many of his contemporaries. In these alternative possibilities, we would never have known about Schindler's particular moral excellence. Maybe he would have never *had* that particular moral excellence.

What is the relevance of these counterfactual circumstances and choices to Schindler's moral worth? By his "moral worth," I mean Schindler's deserved praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. I do not mean the praise and blame that others might casually happen to direct toward his observable actions. Instead I mean a moral evaluation of the factors more clearly relevant to Schindler's admirability as an agent: his motives, intentions, traits, and so on. What we might call the metaethics of moral worth will not be particularly important in the discussion that follows – that is, whether moral worth is best understood in terms of informed Strawsonian reactive attitudes, or in terms of motives and intentions as bearers of intrinsic value, or in some other way. Instead the focus is simply on what admiration Schindler deserves, especially in light of how things might have been otherwise.

We can think of how things might have been otherwise in terms of the notion of other possible worlds. Among all possible ways things might have been, the actual world is the possible world that actually obtains. Some near possible worlds are very similar to the actual world, differing only in morally trivial ways: the particular bottle of wine Schindler uses to bribe committed Nazis, the color of his suit. For most of the issues in this paper we will have no need to distinguish among these trivially-different worlds; call a set of near possible worlds that differ from the actual world in only morally trivial ways a counterfactual *situation*.[1] Other near possible worlds are similar to the actual world but contain morally *non*-trivial elements: for instance, the moment in the early 1940s when Schindler learns about the murder of Jewish

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[1] I will also generally use the term "actual situation" instead of "actual world" for claims about moral worth in what follows. The *actual situation* includes the actual world (itself also a possible world) plus those possible worlds that differ from the actual world in only morally trivial ways. This is a somewhat unusual grouping, but it should create no problems for the arguments below. See also footnote 12.

children, "galvanizing" him to act.[2] It is one situation (a collection of near possible worlds) if

Schindler learns about the children, another situation if he does not.

Schindler's configuration of motives might be such that he saves hundreds of people in

proportionally many or most situations. Or it might be such that he saves hundreds in few or no

situations.[3] Does it make a difference to Schindler's moral worth which of these two is the case?

To ask this question, we need to distinguish *manifest* or occurrent motives, intentions, effort and

other factors from *modal* or dispositional motives, intentions, effort, and other factors.[4] The

motives Schindler has in the actual situation are manifest motives. The motives Schindler *would*

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[2] See Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's List* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), pp. 127-33, 260; David Crowe, *Oskar Schindler* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), pp. 194-95. I thank Bob Adams for a discussion about Schindler that led me to ask the questions in this paper. For valuable comments, I also thank Shelly Kagan, Allen Wood, Roger Florka, Stewart Goetz, Apryl Martin, the anonymous referees, and various audiences who heard an earlier draft of this paper.

Distinguishing between morally trivial and morally non-trivial differences may be difficult in some cases. I will not distinguish the two in any precise way; I trust that our sense of the difference is reliable enough in most cases for the claims I want to make in this paper.

[3] It is important to emphasize that situations are sets of *near* possible worlds with morally trivial differences. There may be very *far* possible *worlds* where Schindler in fact tortures his factory workers or works as a sadistic guard at Auschwitz – after all, possible worlds talk is metaphysical talk, and metaphysically anything like this is possible. But there may well be no *situations* – again, *near* possible worlds – where Schindler does these monstrous things.

What an agent would do in far possible worlds has little or no relevance to her moral worth, so we will ignore them, because there is a far possible world where not only Schindler but Mother Teresa and Siddartha Gautama too are sadistic torturers. Far possible worlds tell us little distinctive about individual agents. Far possible worlds indict us all, or all of us not at all; so we have little reason to attend to them.

[4] For exegetical simplicity I will abbreviate the list of relevant moral worth factors in future references: I will simply talk in terms of the moral worth of *motives*.

have in counterfactual situations – that is, would *actually* have if a possible world *were actual* –

are modal motives. One central question of this paper is whether modal motives matter to moral

worth. Let me ask the same question using another term. "Robustness" concerns the

configuration of motives, intentions, effort, and other factors that an agent has across

counterfactual situations. Does moral worth vary with robustness?

If Schindler saves hundreds in many or most situations, his morally worthy motives are

robust. If he saves hundreds in few situations, his morally worthy motives are not robust. I think

that robustness is relevant to moral worth, and importantly so. I also think the actual situation

plays a particularly weighty role in evaluations of robustness and moral worth. In this paper I lay

out some possible views about robustness and defend what I take to be the most plausible view.

1.   Five Positions about Moral Worth

There are five general positions about the relevance of counterfactual situations to moral

worth. (1) One might think the actual situation is the only situation that matters; call this *Strong*

Actualism. (2) One might think *all* situations, counterfactual and actual, matter equally; call this

Equalism.[5] (3) One might think that actual and counterfactual situations both matter, but that the

actual situation matters more than any counterfactual situation; call this *Moderate Actualism*. (4)

One might think that actual and counterfactual situations both matter, but that (at least some)

individual counterfactual situations matter more than the actual situation; call this *Moderate*

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[5] The claim that "all situations matter equally" is ambiguous between two positions: (1) all situations *where the*

person exists matter equally (since there are some situations where the person does not exist); and (2) *in principle* all

situations matter, and count equally, but situations where the person does not exist have zero weight. These two

positions are functionally equivalent, so I will not distinguish between them in what follows.

Possibilism. (5) One might think that counterfactual situations matter but the actual situation does not; call this *Strong Possibilism.*[6] Let's examine each of these views in more detail.

(1) *Strong Actualism* is the view that counterfactual situations do not matter morally at all; only the actual situation is relevant to moral worth. On this view, what Schindler would have done in other circumstances has no relevance at all to his moral worth. All that counts are his configurations of motives manifest in history as it actually played out. Motives can be causes, and causes always imply something about counterfactual situations; Strong Actualism acknowledges this as a metaphysical point, but denies that facts of the matter in counterfactual situations matter morally. It does not matter whether Schindler would have saved hundreds in many counterfactual situations or none outside the actual situation. Robustness is irrelevant to moral worth.

(2) Instead one might be an egalitarian or *Equalist* about moral worth and counterfactual situations. Here the actual situation has no special moral worth weight just because it is the actual situation. Instead, it counts exactly the same as any situation. Whatever might be metaphysically important about actuality over mere possibility, from the point of view of moral worth all situations count the same. To determine the moral worth of Schindler's rescue motives, we sum up the number of situations in which he has morally praiseworthy rescue motives – or more accurately, since there are an infinite number of situations, we look at that *proportion* of situations that include the motives at issue.[7] Each situation counts the same: the

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[6] The terms "actualism" and "possibilism" are often used in a purely ontological sense. In this paper I use them only for positions about moral worth. When I introduce metaphysical positions below, I will use different terms: modal realism, abstractionism, and fictionalism.

[7] It is problematic to talk about the "number" or "proportion" of situations or possible worlds, since there are an infinite number of them. For the purposes of the rough positions I am offering in this paper, I will set aside these

state of Schindler's motives manifest in the actual situation is no more significant to the praiseworthiness of these motives than his motives in counterfactual situations where he has a different career or chooses not to aid.

(3) On *Moderate Actualism*, both actual and possible situations have moral worth weight, but the actual situation has more. It matters whether Schindler's motive to rescue is a fluke, a rarity, or not: his actions in counterfactual situations constitute, at least in part, his moral worth. What Schindler would have done counterfactually makes up his broader character. But in fact Schindler *really had* manifest rescue motives in the actual situation, and this seems to be significant in some special way. Even if what Schindler would do in alternative circumstances matters, what he did in the actual circumstances matters most. The Moderate Actualist must answer two questions irrelevant to the first two views: what is the relative special moral worth weight of the actual situation – i.e., how *much* more does it matter than other situations? And might counterfactual situations count differentially (more or less than one another)? If so, what are the criteria for which counterfactual situations count the most?

(4) The *Moderate Possibilist* also believes that both actual and counterfactual situations have moral worth weight. But in this case the view is that the actual situation counts *less* than one or more counterfactual situations. What Schindler does in the actual situation is less important to the moral worth of his rescue motives than what he does in one or more other counterfactual situations.

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technical problems. Everything I say is fine for finite sets of situations. (Alternatively, one might think in terms of *probabilities* instead of possible worlds.) For some strategies for dealing with related problems regarding infinite numbers in ethics, see Peter Vallentyne and Shelly Kagan, "Infinite Value and Finitely Additive Value Theory," *Journal of Philosophy* 94:1 (1997), pp. 5-26.

(5) Finally, the *Strong Possibilist* believes that the actual situation does not count at all! Somehow, the property of actuality strips the actual situation of its relevance to moral worth. If we want to know how praiseworthy Schindler's motives are, the actual situation is the last place to look.

Which of these positions is correct? Metaphysics cannot save us here. Someone might think that the best way to adjudicate among these views is to determine the best metaphysical position, letting the best moral position fall naturally out of that. But even if we were supremely confident about our modal metaphysics – a tall order, given the opposing positions taken here by smart people – a metaphysical position would not necessarily entail an answer about moral worth. Why think that it should? Metaphysical theories are about what things are, not whether they matter. Rival metaphysical positions are almost always morally neutral. A decision between moral realism and emotivism would not necessarily tell us whether to be consequentialists or deontologists. A metaphysical account of color would not tell us whether skin color matters.[8]

My claim is not that metaphysics does not matter at all, or that it never matters. Taking a given metaphysical position may make belief in certain moral positions somewhat more or less costly, requiring one to bite fewer or more other philosophical bullets. The claim is simply that a position on modality and metaphysics does not logically entail a position on modality and moral worth.

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[8] I owe these lines to Shelly Kagan.

2.   Some Arguments for Moderate Actualism

An answer to the question about moral worth and counterfactual situations will have to

rest on moral, not metaphysical, arguments. For simplicity, I will suppose from here on that we

are metaphysical abstractionists (or as David Lewis calls us, ersatzists): i.e., those who believe

that counterfactuals are significant, but not ontologically significant in the way the actual world

is. This is a modest stipulation: for all the respect we have for David Lewis's philosophical

genius, most of us remain unrepentant metaphysical abstractionists; and fictionalists can slip in

the usual qualifications about possible worlds talk.[9] What should we now say about moral

worth? How should we adjudicate among the five positions from section 1?

I believe that we can boil down the five candidate positions to three fundamental claims

or prongs:

(1)   The actual situation counts for something – that is, it has at least some moral worth
weight.
(2)   The actual situation counts more than any other individual counterfactual situation.
(3)   One or more other counterfactual situations count for something – that is, one or
more counterfactual situations have at least some moral worth weight.

If we can determine whether each of these prongs is true or false, we should be able to identify

the correct position about modality and moral worth. The truth or falsity of each of these claims,

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[9] For a defense of what I am calling metaphysical abstractionism, see Alvin Plantinga, "Actualism and Possible

Worlds," in Michael J. Loux (ed.), *The Possible and the Actual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 253-73;

and Robert M. Adams, "Theories of Actuality," *Nous* 8 (1974), pp. 211-31, reprinted in Loux, *The Possible and the

Actual*, pp. 190-209. See also David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Gideon Rosen,

"Modal Fictionalism," *Mind* 99 (July 1990), pp. 327-54; and David Armstrong, *A Combinatorial Theory of

Possibility* (New York: Cambridge, 1989).

in various combinations, generates all five of the positions discussed above.[10] I believe that in

fact all three claims are true, and thus that Moderate Actualism is true. But let's allow the

plausibility of that thesis to emerge naturally as we discuss each of the prongs in turn.

Prong One. Start with Prong One – the claim that the actual situation has at least some

moral worth weight. This is an important claim: unless it is true, the first four positions (Strong

Actualism, Equalism, Moderate Actualism, and Moderate Possibilism) are all untenable. If it is

false, the fifth position, Strong Possibilism, is the only tenable position.

Could the actual situation have no moral worth weight at all? However counter-intuitive

it might seem at first, this is not entirely an implausible claim. A proponent of Strong

Possibilism might argue for it in this way. The actual situation is not the appropriate arena for

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[10] Here are the details to back up this claim. Recall the five positions about moral worth from section 1: (A) *Strong*

Actualism, (B) *Equalism*, (C) *Moderate Actualism*, (D) *Moderate Possibilism*, and (E) *Strong Possibilism*.

Now consider which of these positions can be (logically) true, taking each Prong *individually*:

> If prong (1) is true, A, B, C, and D could be correct; E cannot be correct.
> If prong (2) is true, A or C could be correct; B, D, and E cannot be correct.
> If prong (3) is true, B, C, D, and E could be correct; A cannot be correct.

Finally, consider what emerges from the truth and falsity of the prongs taken in combination, for a total of eight

possibilities:

> Prongs (1), (2), and (3) are true: entails that C must be correct.
> Prongs (1) and (2) are true but (3) is false: entails that A must be correct.
> Prongs (1) and (3) are true but (2) is false: entails that either B or D must be correct.
> Prongs (2) and (3) are true but (1) is false: incoherent, since (2) entails (1).
> Prong (1) is true but (2) and (3) are false: incoherent – if (1) is true and (3) is false, (2) must be true.
> Prong (2) is true but (1) and (3) are false: incoherent, since (2) entails (1).
> Prong (3) is true but (1) and (2) are false: entails that E must be correct.
> Prongs (1), (2), and (3) are all false: entails that there is no moral worth!

Prong (2) entails Prong (1), but since independent consideration of Prong (1) reveals important issues, we will

examine it first and independently above. Note also that in only one combination do we get an indeterminate

answer: either B or D might be correct if (1) and (3) are true, but (2) is false.

assessing moral worth in the way that a given day's maneuvers by automobile drivers is not the appropriate arena for assessing driving capability. The only really adequate arena would be an agent's, or a car driver's, operations under *standardized conditions*, in some counterfactual situations. We have standardized driver's license tests, standardized IQ tests, and various other standardized tests, precisely for this reason. An agent's moral worth is in fact based on her performance in standardized, non-actual conditions. On this view, it is exactly the standardized-condition *counterfactual* situations that would be relevant to moral worth, not the actual situation! In that case Prong One would be false: the actual situation would have no moral worth weight.

Interesting though it is, this position has a fatal difficulty. It would be very strange to say that a given day's car accidents matter nothing at all to driving capability, or that someone's malicious infliction of pain on another person in the actual situation does not matter at all to his moral worth. I think any appeal this Strong Possibilist argument has owes instead to one or both of two other matters. First, the appeal might be merely epistemological. Maybe the actual situation is epistemologically irrelevant to an agent's actual moral worth, such that standardized conditions would tell us more than what we can know from the actual situation. But our inquiry in this paper is not epistemological: we want to know instead whether the actual situation is *metaphysically* irrelevant to an agent's actual moral worth. Insofar as the Strong Possibilist argument relies on epistemological intuitions, it does not answer our question. Second, the appeal might come from a sense that the actual situation is in fact metaphysically irrelevant, or perhaps not relevant enough, to an agent's real moral worth. Put another way, perhaps the agent's motives manifest in the actual situation are not the only constituents of his moral worth. But this is far less extreme than saying that his motives as they appear in the actual situation are

not constituents *at all*. If this is indeed the appeal behind the standardized conditions argument, then the argument does not show that the actual situation has no moral worth weight (and thus that Prong One is false). (A version of the standardized conditions argument could still serve as an argument for Equalism, or Moderate Actualism, or even Moderate Possibilism – views on which both actual and counterfactual situations have weight.)

So the standardized conditions argument does not seem to really show that Prong One is false after all. To reject Prong One, one has to believe that the actual situation is metaphysically irrelevant to an agent's moral worth; and that seems very difficult to believe.[11]

Prong One seems true. This means that Strong Possibilism is false, but the first four theories are still live options. We will need to turn to the other two prongs to tell which is correct.

Prong Two. The second prong claims that the actual situation counts more than any single counterfactual situation.[12] This is an important claim as well: if it is true, only Strong

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[11] We can safely set aside the following degenerate case. Suppose by luck the agent never actually faces any morally significant choices at all; then the actual situation would lack moral worth weight. But it is hard to imagine circumstances such that an agent never faces at least some morally important matters.

[12] Another note about the term "actual situation" is in order here. Some are attracted to Prong Two for metaphysical reasons: some may think that believing in metaphysical abstractionism gives one some reason to believe in Prong Two as well. But metaphysical abstractionism is about the actual *world*, not the actual *situation*; and Prong Two is framed in terms of the actual situation; so isn't this route to Prong Two in trouble? I think those attracted to Prong Two for metaphysical reasons have nothing to fear about the change in terms. The actual situation does indeed include possible worlds that differ in moral trivial ways from the actual world (see footnote 1 above). But since these included possible worlds are in fact morally *trivial*, this route to Prong Two is no worse off with respect to the change in terms.

Actualism and Moderate Actualism can be correct. I will argue that Prong Two best captures our case- and principle- level intuitions about the relative moral weight of the actual and counterfactual situations. Other considerations support Prong Two as well.

(A) Consider first the now familiar case of Oskar Schindler. Schindler is a hero to his fictionalizing biographer Thomas Keneally and to director Steven Spielberg.[13] Keneally and Spielberg seem attracted to several features about Schindler – the bare fact that he saved hundreds of lives at considerable personal risk when others did nothing, of course, but also other matters as well: the fact that his virtues resided among (and in some sense even depended on) interesting vices; his risk-taking and boldness in staging the rescue itself; and that he underwent a significant moral conversion from selfish war profiteer to compassionate rescuer. There is no question that Schindler is taken as praiseworthy in these works, even though praiseworthy in complicated ways. It matters that Schindler really felt and did these things in the actual situation; and Schindler accordingly deserves moral credit. Others who counterfactually might have done what Schindler did, but did not because they were born in other countries, or because they were blue collar workers and unable to act on such a scale, or because they had fewer opportunities for moral conversion, are not only less interesting as subjects of narrative art, but also, I think, less morally praiseworthy. For example, Keneally seems to think that Julius Madritsch, like Schindler an owner of a factory with Jewish workers, might have tried to rescue his workers under other, perhaps less complicated, circumstances. If so, Madritsch attempts a rescue in one or more counterfactual situations. But he did not attempt a rescue in the actual

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[13] Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's List*. Spielberg's 1993 film "Schindler's List" tracks Keneally's book relatively closely, except for some misguided scenes near the end of the movie. Somewhat less flattering and more broadly researched is David M. Crowe's *Oskar Schindler*.

situation; and that seems to make him less morally worthy, ceteris parabis, than Schindler. The example of Madritsch is important here. Keneally and Spielberg may not have had in mind the specific issue of the relative weights of the actual and counterfactual situations. But nevertheless the intuition is there for us to extract: we admire Schindler because he non-counterfactually cared about vulnerable people and took action to help them, and did so against a backdrop of moral horror. Our case-level reactions to Schindler support the view that an agent's motives as they are manifest in the actual situation have extra weight.

(B) The same is true for others we find praiseworthy: Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and more modestly someone like tobacco whistleblower Jeffrey Wigand. However many others *might* have objected to the ethical wrongs of tobacco companies in other circumstances, Wigand actually did so publicly, and that matters. Similar intuitions abound in non-moral cases. Most of us value the actualized violinist skill of Itzak Perlman more than the evident but unactualized talent of a promising violin student who gives up (or cannot afford) full days of practice. Larry Bird's highly actualized abilities were more admirable than the unactualized abilities of possibly many like him who do not infallibly practice their basketball fundamentals.

(C) In fact these cases are not clear and careful enough. Perhaps Jeffrey Wigand is morally praiseworthy because the actual situation counts more than any counterfactual situation; or perhaps instead he is morally praiseworthy because he whistleblows in more possible worlds than others. So these case intuitions underdetermine Prong Two. All similar real-world cases will suffer from the same problem. We will need to turn to a clean, abstract case.

Suppose that Veronica and Wendy are both near a drowning toddler (though not particularly near each other). Trees block their visual field, so neither yet knows of the need for rescue; each would be motivated to rescue if she knew about the toddler. In other words, there is

a counterfactual situation where each would have morally worthy rescue motives. There is an additional factor that has an even 50/50 chance of occurring: either the wind blows the trees west such that Veronica sees the toddler and is motivated to rescue, or the wind blows the trees east such that Wendy sees the toddler and is motivated to rescue. Assume that whoever sees the child, given the particular actual direction of the wind, performs a successful rescue. So the structure of the case excludes both from having actualized rescue motives:

> If the wind blows east, Veronica has rescue motives and rescues the child.
> If the wind blows west, Veronica has no rescue motives and does not rescue the child.
>
> If the wind blows west, Wendy has rescue motives and rescues the child.
> If the wind blows east, Wendy has no rescue motives and does not rescue the child.

Suppose the wind blows east: Veronica is the one with manifest rescue motives. Is Veronica more morally worthy than Wendy? I think so. The agent with the manifest rescue motives seems more praiseworthy. Veronica is the one with instantiated, active, actual rescue motives. It is important to subtract the fact of the successful rescue from our intuitions. We might do this by supposing that what looked like a toddler drowning turned out to be a large doll, and that anyone, Veronica and Wendy included, would have mistaken the doll for a toddler. Still, Veronica seems better for manifesting rescue motives, even if she rescued nothing more than a doll. This intuition supports the claim that actual, manifest motives count more than merely possible modal motives. And the argument generalizes: we can run similar cases for other pairs of actual and possible motives, such that all actual motives count for more than their merely possible counterpart motives.

(D) Not only case-level intuitions, but also principle-level intuitions support Prong Two. For instance, evils in merely counterfactual situations strike us as much less compelling and serious than evils in the actual situation. The firmness of this principle-level intuition is reflected

in the repulsion we feel to a statement such as this: "What is wrong with actualizing evils, since they will occur in some other possible world anyway, if they don't occur in this one?"[14]

(E) Prong Two is an instance of a more *general* claim that is often at work in the history of philosophy. The claim that the actual is more important than the possible, in a non-moral and perhaps moral sense as well, is an important premise for Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and others.

Aristotle thought that natural entities are characterized by change and rest, operating from some principle of change and rest internal to them.[15] This principle of change, or a "nature," is a trajectory toward a favored set of counterfactual situations. For Aristotle, there is something better about those entities which reach maturity by actualizing points later along this trajectory. Entities are at their best when they have moved from potential states to actualized states.[16] "At

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[14] The question is raised by Robert M. Adams in "Theories of Actuality," in Loux, p. 195, against Lewis's modal realism; but I think it is relevant here as well.

In fact, Moral Moderate Actualism may seem to give a modal realist like Lewis an answer to Adams's objection on the metaphysical front. If Lewis opts for Moral Moderate Actualism, he can say that actualizing possible evils is bad from the point of view of any counterpart in any possible world (see Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds,* pp. 126-28). That is, since the actual world has special *moral* weight, even though it has no special *ontological* weight, it *is* bad to actualize evil in one's own world. Thus Adams's objection seems to lose its point.

There is a compelling rejoinder available to Adams. First, Lewis's answer is *ad hoc,* especially for Lewis himself, since it invokes deontological considerations that Lewis does not want to affirm elsewhere. Second and more seriously, it leaves no room for the relevance of consequences to moral rightness; but any plausible moral theory claims that consequences are in some way relevant to moral rightness.

[15] Aristotle, *Physics* II.I (192b13-14).

[16] For related considerations, see Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially pp. 102-16, 292-93, and 295-305. Aristotle believes the best state of a natural entity is not only when it actualizes the endpoints of its internal principle of change and rest, but does so actively or as an activity. Activity is the highest level of actuality for a natural entity.

their best" for Aristotle seems to mean both best *for them* (i.e., in terms of their well-being or flourishing) *and* best from the point of view of praiseworthiness or excellence. In a sense not unrelated to the one we have been considering, the actual has more weight than the possible for Aristotle.

Kant also believed something like this claim, which may come as a surprise to those who only know him through the *Groundwork*. For Kant, the path to becoming a good human being requires both a change of heart and a "gradual reform of sensibility" – that is, a reform of one's sensible or empirical nature.[17] One's "sensibility" includes inclinations and passions and other mental states that an agent has passively, with no active contribution of his own. For Kant, agents with high moral character have actualized those counterfactual situations where one's sensible nature is brought more into accord with reason and the moral law. Agents who have done so are moral not so much by *habit*, since that connotes something merely mechanical and automatic, but instead by what Kant calls *proficiency* or *facility* [*Fertigkeit*].[18] Actualizing counterfactual situations where one is morally proficient has a very high moral value for Kant. That Kant's considered position is close to Aristotle's is a surprise to many.

Hegel claimed something similar. Of highest value in Hegel's ethics is the actualization of certain human possibilities, with freedom as the centerpiece. For Hegel, a human being is at her best when she has actualized herself through her own activity – that is, when her identity has

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[17] Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* 6:47. (I will cite Kant's works by volume and page of the German Academy edition, which are indicated in the margins of most current translations.)

[18] Kant discusses "proficiency," or the "subjective perfection of the capacity of choice," in *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:407. He also says this elsewhere: "Reason gradually draws sensibility into a state of proficiency (*habitus*)" (*Reflexionen* 5611, 252; quoted in G. Felicitas Munzel, *Kant's Conception of Moral Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 91-92).

been formed through her own setting and achieving of ends within concrete social roles in a harmonious society. Important for Hegel is not so much *willing* to do certain actions in counterfactual circumstances, but willing them and doing them in the actual situation. Mere wishes and unactualized dispositions mean little compared to the value of those that issue in action in the world. For Hegel, the actual has special weight.[19]

A more general version of Prong Two also seems to play a role in Anselm's and Descartes's versions of the Ontological Argument. Among the least controversial of that argument's premises is that it is more perfect to exist in reality than to exist in the mind alone. A related premise strikes many of us as also relatively uncontroversial: it is more perfect to exist in actuality than to exist as a mere possibility.

(F) Consider another argument for Prong Two; call it the Scaffolding Argument. The most morally worthy motives tend to be strong and reliable loves of goods and hatreds of bads, and it is usually not possible to have them *ex nihilo*. Having morally worthy motives at high levels of strength and stability usually requires that one have earlier instances of them at lower levels of strength and stability. Matters here are not unlike the case of musical or athletic talents: Perlman could not play at his peak without playing at a moderate level of capability years before that; and playing at a moderate level of capability in turn required previously playing at lower levels. Some mature, strong, reliable motives seem to be like this: instances of them seem to require actualizations of less mature instances. Highly praiseworthy benevolence or conscientiousness may require that one first have moderately praiseworthy benevolence or

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[19] See for instance Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* § 124. Allen Wood's editorial notes on this section in the Cambridge edition of this text (New York: Cambridge, 1991) are helpful as well. See also Allen Wood, "Hegel's Ethics," in Frederick C. Beiser (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 211-33.

conscientiousness.[20] We can also put it this way: actualization of some of the most morally

worth motives depends on the actualization of other, often lesser morally worthy motives. Call

these lesser motives *scaffold* motives, since they make stronger and more reliable motives

possible.

We think that scaffold motives are instrumental goods. And we think they are good

because they are a means to actualizing something – stronger and more reliable motives. But

this means that instrumental goods are good because they change the stronger and more reliable

motives from being merely possible (which they already were without the instrumentally good

scaffold motives) to actual (for which the instrumentally good scaffold motives are needed). But

how could moving something from possible to actual be the source of value for the

instrumentally good scaffold motives unless it is more morally worthy to be actual than possible?

So the actual matters more than the possible.

We have seen a number of arguments in favor of Prong Two, but we should turn to an

important objection. The objection is that Prong Two relies on intuitions that are in fact only

epistemic. The objector says this: we do indeed have intuitions that the actual situation counts

more than counterfactual situations, but only because it is the one situation we know the most

about. We are not confident that we know what agents would do in other counterfactual

situations; the only reliable evidence we have about their motives is the evidence from the actual

situation. The only reason we are attracted to giving the actual situation extra weight is

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[20] I say "may" require, because it is possible that one can jump immediately to having highly praiseworthy

benevolence or conscientiousness through some sort of moral *conversion*. Perhaps this is the best way to interpret

Oskar Schindler, but I am not sure: It is difficult to determine whether to think of Schindler's rescue motives as the

result of sudden moral conversion, steadier moral growth, or some interesting combination.

psychological and epistemic in just this way. Were we not epistemically crippled, we would count all counterfactual situations, including the actual situation, the same in moral worth evaluations. Or so the objector says.

It is certainly plausible that some of our intuitions in favor of Prong Two owe to epistemic limitations; but I do not think all of them do. We have been supposing in this paper that we have a God's eye view: we have been examining our intuitions about moral worth and modality under the assumption that we know what an agent's motives are like in other counterfactual situations. Even when epistemic limitations are set aside in this way, I find that my actualist intuitions in favor of Prong Two survive. Schindler's rescue in the actual situation still seems morally significant in a way that it would not were it merely possible and unrealized.

Prong Three. If Prongs One and Two are correct, then either Strong Actualism or Moderate Actualism must be true. Only these two positions claim that both (1) the actual situation has positive moral worth weight, and (2) the actual situation counts more than any other individual counterfactual situation. Strong Actualism and Moderate Actualism disagree about Prong Three: whether *counterfactual situations* have at least some positive moral worth weight. I will argue that Prong Three is in fact correct. Prong Three captures our case- and principle-level intuitions about the weight of counterfactual situations. So Moderate Actualism is true.

(A) Let's begin with clean abstract cases. (We will in fact need two cases for this discussion.) Recall the circumstances of the drowning toddler discussed above. Consider those situations where two agents, Xavier and Yves, both see the toddler and the danger he is in.

In the first case, both Xavier and Yves are motivated to rescue the child in the actual situation, and in fact both succeed in rescuing the child. They are equal in all relevant respects in

the actual situation. But they differ when it comes to counterfactual situations: Xavier rescues in

all counterfactual situations at issue; Yves rescues in none.[21] If Prong Three is false, then we

must conclude that Xavier and Yves are equally morally worthy. But most of us have the

intuition in this case that Xavier is more morally worthy than Yves. Xavier's rescue motives are

more rich and robust than Yves's.

This first case is not adequate by itself to support Prong Three. The first case, taken on

its own, supports at most a very *weak* version of Prong Three. A weak Prong Three says that

counterfactual situations count only insofar as some related morally worthy motive exists in the

actual situation. In other words, counterfactual situation moral worth merely "piggybacks" on

actual situation moral worth. But our original Prong Three claims something stronger than this:

that counterfactual situations matter in their own right, independent of what happens in the actual

situation. We will need a second case in order to argue for this stronger claim.

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[21] This is a good time to indicate again that I am using "counterfactual situation" as a technical term for a set of *near*

possible worlds that differ in only morally trivial ways (see the first pages of this paper). Yves of course rescues in

some possible worlds – worlds that differ from the actual world in whether the number of hairs on Yves's head is

even or odd, or where a bird is in a tree to Yves's left. And perhaps Yves rescues in some *far* possible worlds. The

case asks us to imagine that Yves rescues in no near possible world, or set of possible worlds.

Some may find it difficult to imagine even this: motives are transworld entities, so perhaps it is impossible

for Yves to be motivated to rescue in the actual world without also being motivated to rescue in at least some

counterfactual situations. If so, imagine Yves rescuing in *few* other counterfactual situations. Yves's motives and

the traits that support them are then weak and fragile enough that he rescues only very rarely – perhaps only if he

finds himself in the exact same situation(s) at some future actual time (representing a kind of temporal robustness

that seems anemic compared to counterfactual robustness of the sort that is our focus here). This still distinguishes

him from Xavier such that we think that Xavier is more morally worthy.

In the second case, both Xavier and Yves are *not* motivated to rescue the child in the actual situation; neither attempts a rescue. Here we might imagine that the conditions of the toddler are such that a rescue is extremely dangerous and unlikely to succeed. Again both agents are equal in all relevant respects in the actual situation. But again they differ when it comes to counterfactual situations: Xavier rescues in all counterfactual situations at issue; Yves rescues in none. If Prong Three is false, then we must conclude that Xavier and Yves are equally morally worthy! But most of us have the intuition in this case that Xavier is far more morally worthy than Yves. I think our intuitions are particularly strong here. There is *no* nearby counterfactual situation in which Yves rescues – not even when the rescue costs him nothing but brief and insignificant effort. Yves has absolutely *no* rescue motives, manifest or modal. It seems very difficult to believe that Yves is as morally worthy as Xavier, who is motivated to rescue in all but this actual, maximally risk-filled-rescue situation. So Prong Three is true: counterfactual situations matter to moral worth.

(B) Schindler's case supports Prong Three as well. Here I think it is the interesting *complications* of the Schindler case that help. It seems to me that whatever positive moral worth we think Schindler has because of his motives manifest in the actual situation, the counterfactual situations temper or reduce that moral worth weight. If this is correct – if Schindler's moral worth is lowered by what he would do in counterfactual situations – then counterfactual situations matter.

Despite Keneally's often hagiographic treatment, one has the sense that Schindler's rescue motives were not particularly robust. Schindler's life, both before and after World War II, was characterized by a love of risk, and it seems no small attraction to him that saving his workers required an exciting mix of daring, boldness, and luck. Had the rescue been boring and

mechanical, one wonders whether he would have been interested, or at least interested enough to

see it through. The success of the rescue itself owes much to raw luck, and also very much to the

work of the people who assisted him: it is significant that all other major risks he took, again

both before and after the war, were failures.[22] There is also the matter of Schindler's moral

conversion. This moral conversion is morally admirable, especially when set alongside the

failures of his contemporaries. But the fact that he had to have a conversion – that is, that he had

to be awakened to the moral weight of the exploitative and later savage circumstances of his

Jewish workers – in some sense taints his praiseworthiness. Schindler's early motives (and to

some degree even his later motives) seem to have included fear about being found with dirty

hands after the war.[23] The point is this: that Schindler needed such a conversion is an indication

that in many other near counterfactual situations, where the circumstances for such a moral

conversion were unavailable, he would have had few or no rescue motives.[24] Not all the

evidence goes against robustness. Schindler was generous and benevolent in various

circumstances, far more so than his contemporaries, and many of his rescuees seem to believe

that he would have aided them in a number of counterfactual conditions. He had the sort of

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[22] Keneally reports that Schindler's estranged wife Emile said without any particular bitterness in 1973 that "Oskar

had done nothing astounding before the war and had been unexceptional since. He was fortunate, therefore, that in

that short fierce era between 1939 and 1945 he had met people who summoned forth his deeper talents" (Keneally,

pp. 396-97). Schindler's failures included two bankruptcies from major business failures after the war; he became

financially and emotionally dependent on his Jewish former workers (Crowe, pp. 476-586). It is morally and

historically fortunate that the most important risk Schindler took was one that did indeed pay off.

[23] Keneally, pp. 173, 370; Crowe, p. 626.

[24] The topic of this paper is the moral worth of motives across worlds. A different and important evaluation – one

on which Schindler might do better – concerns the moral worth of motives across *time*.

dispositions that made his moral conversion possible. The summary of considerations such as these is that while Schindler deserves moral credit for his rescue motives manifest in the actual situation, that credit has some limits. Our intuitions are that Schindler's rescue motives are not entirely stable and robust, and his praiseworthiness has a modest ceiling.

All of this fits Prong Three's picture of moral worth and modality. Schindler's heroic rescue motives in the actual situation are tempered by his motives in counterfactual situations, because counterfactual situations count toward moral worth.[25]

(C) Prong Three is also intuitively attractive in its own right as a theoretical principle – or so it seems to me. On every metaphysical theory about the nature of motives in counterfactual situations, it seems attractive to think that counterfactual situations are relevant to moral worth. What one would do counterfactually has moral worth weight because this constitutes the stability and robustness of one's actual motives. Whether an agent's motives manifest in the actual situation are metaphysically representative of him depends importantly on the shape of those motives in counterfactual conditions.

(D) Besides case- and principle-level intuitions, the issue of *luck* supports Prong Three. The argument is this: to reject Prong Three is to allow luck to count far too much. Unless counterfactual situations have some moral worth weight, luck plays an inappropriately large role in moral worth.

Schindler's successful rescue was to a significant extent a matter of luck. Poldek Pfefferberg says that he came close to shooting him when Schindler first came to Poland;[26] and

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[25] This argument draws on facts about the actual situation – facts that are in some ways partly modal. Someone who rejects Prong Three agrees that facts about the actual situation are *metaphysically* partly modal; he simply thinks they are not *morally* relevant.

[26] Keneally, pp. 49-55; Crowe, pp. 89-91.

inspectors of Schindler's 1944-45 munitions plant nearly discovered that Schindler was ensuring that the factory produced bad shells. Such a discovery would have sent hundreds of people (including perhaps Schindler himself) to their deaths. Luckily this did not happen. More interestingly, perhaps we can identify some moment that is crucial to Schindler's moral conversion – some nexus or narrow passage through which he must pass if he is to develop his dispositional benevolence to a level at which he is willing to perform a bold rescue. That moment might be when Stern quotes a key Talmudic verse about rescuing to Schindler,[27] or the moment when Schindler learns of a new level of shameless public brutality from the SS.[28] Plausibly, if these circumstances (or ones very much like it) do not luckily occur, Schindler remains a mere war profiteer, albeit one with less dispositional cruelty than Amon Goeth and the rest of Schindler's circle of Nazi acquaintances. Schindler was significantly lucky in both sorts of case: Pfefferberg did not shoot, and Schindler had the crucial experiences that set the conditions for moral conversion. The worry here is that luck is exerting an undue or improper influence on our moral evaluations. If the actual situation is all that matters, Schindler smells more like a rose than he really is. To put it in terms I invoked earlier, if Schindler has been disproportionately lucky, the actual situation is not metaphysically *representative* of what his motives *really are* at the end of the war. To say that counterfactual situations have no moral worth weight is to count luck far too much.

We can imagine a clearer case than Schindler's – one with fewer temporal changes and thus fewer other factors that might be doing moral work. (A) Suppose Zander has almost

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[27] Keneally, p. 48; Crowe, pp. 99-102.

[28] Keneally, pp. 126-33; Crowe, pp. 192-95. Crowe believes Schindler's moral transformation was somewhat more gradual (Crowe, pp. 128-32, 177, 194-95, 624-25).

entirely morally unworthy dispositions: he is amazingly cruel, self-interested, and callous. In exactly one situation his cruelty motive fails and he is instead kind to a stranger.[29] If this situation is the actual situation, and if counterfactual situations do not count at all, we are stuck with the view that Zander is morally worthy. That is a bullet few will be willing to bite. We have a strong sense that Zander's brief kindness is not metaphysically representative of him – it is a fluke, an anomaly, something unusual that comes over him. (B) Imagine the opposite: imagine that in exactly one situation – which turns out to be the actual situation – St. Francis has some ill-will towards lepers. In every other counterfactual situation, St. Francis is benevolent and loving to lepers and all others. St. Francis's ill-will in the actual situation is metaphysically unrepresentative and anomalous.

To reject Prong Three is to leave too much of moral worth at the mercy of luck. Anyone who believes that this sort of luck should not exert so strong an influence on praiseworthiness and blameworthiness will be drawn to the view that counterfactual situations have some moral worth weight. Whatever role luck has in moral worth, its role must have limits.

With luck on the table, now is a good time to mention another objection to Prong *Two*. This new objection claims that it is inappropriate to count luck *at all* in moral worth evaluations. But Prong Two *does* let luck count, so it cannot be true. Prong Two counts luck in the following

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[29] Again, some may find this difficult to imagine: motives are transworld entities, so perhaps it's impossible for Zander to be motivated by kindness in the actual situation without also being motivated to rescue in at least some counterfactual situations. In that case, imagine Zander motivated by kindness in very *few* other counterfactual situations. The thought is that Zander's kindness is weak and fragile, and present at most when one or a very few particular situations repeat at some actual future time.

way. Which situation is actual is to some degree a matter of luck.[30] But if the actual situation

has more moral worth weight than counterfactual situations (as Prong Two claims), then the

situation that most affects an agent's moral worth does so partly as a matter of luck. And this is

contrary to our deepest views about praiseworthiness and blameworthiness; so Prong Two must

be false, the objector argues.

Affirming Prong Three makes matters even worse, the objector continues. Our last

argument for Prong Three ("D") used worries about luck as an argument in favor of Prong Three.

But the objector thinks that this is an unstable appeal to luck. If luck is a problem, it is a problem

all the way down, and is so in a way that the fan of Prong Three cannot accommodate. The fan

of Prong Three argues that counting only the actual situation leaves our evaluations too much at

the mercy of lucky circumstances and results,[31] such that evaluations based only on the actual

situation may be unrepresentative of an agent's true motive robustness; accordingly,

counterfactual situations count. But once we are on this path, the objector continues, why not go

all the way: why not count all the counterfactual situations as much as the actual situation? For

only then would the effects of luck be completely mitigated. In sum, the objector claims that

Prong Two is false because it lets luck count; and the fan of Prong Two who goes on to also

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[30] The specific concern here is what Thomas Nagel calls "circumstance luck" (see "Moral Luck," in Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 24-38).

[31] Even the Equalist (who is most likely to advance the objection above about circumstance luck) may be stuck with yet another kind of luck – what Nagel calls "constitutive luck." Even if we were to subtract the influence of circumstance and results luck from our evaluations, we would still face the fact that the features of agents that give them the set (and contents) of possible worlds in which they exist are to some degree also a matter of luck. See Nagel, "Moral Luck." I will set aside considerations about constitutive luck in this paper.

affirm Prong Three is in even more trouble, since an important argument for Prong Three is that letting luck count too much is a mistake.

Note how this objection relies on a very strong premise: that proper moral worth evaluations must be stripped of *all* luck considerations. The Stoics and perhaps even Kant found this premise plausible. Cicero, for instance, thought that both negligent captains of two different ships, one carrying cannonballs, one carrying people, are exactly equally blameworthy for their equal negligence in piloting the ships to disaster. And Kant thought that a good will is good no matter what, through luck, "it effects or accomplishes."[32] Nevertheless, I do not think the premise is compelling in the end. (Briefly, it has various counterintuitive implications; it is difficult to imagine what it would be to mitigate absolutely *all* influences of luck; and we lose some attractive *benefits* that come when luck plays some role in moral worth evaluations.[33]) In any event, there is nothing logically inconsistent or philosophically implausible in affirming both Prongs Two and Three. To claim that both Prong Two and Prong Three are true is to claim that luck plays *some* role in moral worth (Prong Two) but that this role has limits (Prong Three).

Consider other objections to Prong Three. The first comes from the radical libertarian. Some radical libertarians believe that there are no true propositions corresponding to what an

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[32] Kant, *Groundwork* 4:394.

[33] See Margaret Urban Walker, "Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency," in Daniel Statman (ed.), *Moral Luck* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 235-50; and Robert M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 144-70. For an opposing argument that moral worth evaluations must include all luck or none at all, see Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

agent would freely do in any other non-actual circumstances,[34] and that moral worth depends only on what an agent would freely do. If this is the case, the only situation that matters is the actual situation, since it is the only situation where there are true propositions about what an agent would freely do. Counterfactual situations are not relevant to moral worth.

I find radical libertarianism implausibly strong. What we might call *centrist* libertarianism is less unattractive. A centrist libertarian believes that *not all* propositions about what agents would freely do in counterfactual situations lack a truth value. Some propositions of this sort *are* true, and so certain non-actual situations can be relevant to moral worth. This centrist libertarian believes that there is more than one kind of freedom worth wanting. One kind of freedom is that most commonly associated with libertarians: being the unique originating cause of a chain of events.[35] But another kind of freedom is responsiveness to good reasons; and this second kind of freedom is compatible with determinism, and so allows for the view that some propositions about free actions in counterfactual situations are true. This centrist libertarian believes that both sorts of free choices are valuable and relevant to praiseworthiness and blameworthiness.[36] Accordingly, he can still affirm Prong Three: he can believe that there exist counterfactual situations with moral worth weight.

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[34] See William Hasker, "A Refutation of Middle Knowledge," *Nous* 20:4 (December 1986), pp. 545-57. See also Robert M. Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977), pp. 109-17.)

[35] Robert Kane defends the value of this sort of libertarian freedom in *The Significance of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[36] Kane ultimately seems to be this sort of centrist libertarian. See *The Significance of Free Will*. For one further articulation of reasons-responsiveness compatibilism about freedom, see Susan Wolf, *Freedom within Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Radical libertarians willing to make a certain concession can believe in Prong Three after all. The concession concerns unfree choices – unfree in either the classic libertarian or reasons-responsiveness compatibilist way just discussed. A libertarian of any stripe that allows unfree choices to count towards moral worth can affirm Prong Three. For this libertarian, there are various motives and other internal states that an agent is not free to originate, keep, or discard, on *any* of the standard accounts of freedom. The claim is that these states are nevertheless relevant to moral worth. Suppose Smith is brainwashed such that he is subject to cruel desires and fantasies. He is now stuck with these desires and is unable to stop himself from feeling them. Even so, this libertarian thinks he is blameworthy for having them: Smith feels shame about these states, and he is right to – they are the proper objects of attitudes of shame.[37] A libertarian with this view can accordingly affirm Prong Three. There exist true propositions about Smith's unfree internal states and motives. A libertarian can believe these counterfactual situations count toward moral worth.

The first, centrist libertarian *expands the range* of what libertarians counts as free; the second kind of libertarian counts as relevant to praise and blame elements *outside the range* of freedom. The two kinds of libertarianism are not mutually exclusive, of course. Both can also affirm Prong Three with no inconsistency.

Centrist libertarians might propose a different objection to Moderate Actualism. Centrist libertarians believe that there are true propositions about what an agent would freely do in *some* non-actual circumstances, but not all. Call the former *determinate cases* and the latter

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[37] For a defense of a very similar claim, see Robert M. Adams, "Involuntary Sins," *Philosophical Review* 94 (January 1985), pp. 3-31.

indeterminate cases. The centrist libertarian notes that to believe there are indeterminate cases is not yet to say anything about the *importance* of these cases to moral worth in comparison to determinate cases. A centrist libertarian might claim that the indeterminate cases matter a little, a lot, or something in between. If the indeterminate cases matter substantially, or if they matter little but are disproportionately many, or even in fact if they generally matter little but the defining choice of one's life is among the indeterminate cases – say, Luther's nailing his theses to the door – it is possible that *most* of an agent's motive robustness is indeterminate. And this may appear to undercut some of the things the Prong Three fan would like to say.

I do not think it undermines anything *important* the Prong Three fan would like to say. The prong is untouched: even if there is substantial motive robustness indeterminacy, one can still believe that counterfactual situations count. What the Prong Three fan is unable to offer, if centrist libertarians are right, is the *final word* on an agent's motive robustness. But this is no crucial loss. It would simply amount to a limitation on what can be said about motive robustness. About Schindler, a centrist libertarian Prong Three fan can say this: "There may be many indeterminate cases – cases in which there is no true proposition about what Schindler would freely do – so an assessment of Schindler's character is based on only the determinate cases, where there are true propositions. And this much can be said: his rescue in the actual situation was enough well-motivated to be interestingly praiseworthy, but this praiseworthiness is somewhat undercut by the determinate cases in which these rescue motives would not have issued in action." The lack of true propositions about indeterminate cases does not prevent the Prong Three fan from adjusting moral evaluations of actual situation motives in light of the

shape of those motives in determinate cases. What *can* be said about robustness still takes the form the Prong Three fan says it does.[38]

I have argued that Prongs One, Two, and Three are all true. There is only one position that emerges which is compatible with the truth of all three claims: Moderate Actualism. For the Moderate Actualist, the actual situation counts, and counterfactual situations count, but the former counts more than the latter. This position does seem to fit our best intuitions and reflection about modality and moral worth.

The Moderate Actualist has questions to answer that other positions do not: namely, (I) how *much* more the actual situation matters than other counterfactual situations, and (II) whether other counterfactual situations count differentially. Let me describe some rough and only minimally defended answers to these questions.

(I) Consider three basic answers to the first question. First, the Moderate Actualist might think counterfactual situations count very little – so little that even if in *all* of them an agent had a blameworthy motive, one opposite to his motive in the actual situation, the actual situation motive would still count more than all the counterfactual situation motives combined. Second, and on the other extreme, one might think that each counterfactual situation counts nearly as much as the actual situation, such that it takes not much of a proportional majority of blameworthiness in merely counterfactual situations to outrun praiseworthiness in the actual situation. As few as two counterfactual situations that include blameworthy motives might count more than the single actual situation that includes a praiseworthy motive. I think the truth is

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[38] Yet another sort of libertarian is willing to make statistical average generalizations about free choices in indeterminate counterfactual circumstances.

somewhere in the middle between these two extremes: a third view is that the actual situation weighs considerably more than any single counterfactual situation, but a significant proportion of counterfactual situations with one valence can, in some circumstances, outrun an opposing valence of the actual situation. In evaluating moral worth, the actual situation dominates all but a significant array of counterfactual situations.

This answer to the first question fits the Schindler case. Schindler's heroism in the actual situation is tempered by what his motives seem to be in counterfactual situations. On the answer at hand, blameworthiness in enough other counterfactual situations can outrun the praiseworthiness of motives manifest in the actual situation. I think this comes imaginably close to happening in the case of Schindler. The counterfactual situations in which Schindler has limited or no rescue motives are proportionately many and various and rather near – many and various and near enough, I think, to reduce his praiseworthiness. Nevertheless, Schindler's rescue motives are overall praiseworthy: they are *somewhat* robust, and importantly, they are actual.

(II) On the second question, counterfactual situations seem to count differentially. First, proximity matters. Situations closest to the actual situation seem to count the most; situations further from it count the least. Less near counterfactual situations may concern circumstances remote enough that they may have little or no bearing on the objects of our evaluation. Thinking about proximity reveals another important way in which the actual situation disproportionally influences moral worth: the actual situation sets a center which in turn affects which counterfactual situations are nearer and thus more relevant.[39]

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[39] I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me for clarification in this area.

Second, the quality of the motives seems to matter. If an agent has particularly evil (or good) motives in a situation or set of situations, even if they are somewhat less near, these situations may be as important as proximate situations.

A fuller account of counterfactuals and moral worth would need to say something about the relative weight of these factors – proximity, quality of motive, frequency – and perhaps others. For instance, consider a conflict between proximity and frequency: suppose counterfactual situations where Schindler lacks rescue motives are more frequent than situations where he has them, but the situations where he does have them are nearest to the actual situation. Which factor dominates? My sense is that proximity counts more: Schindler's moral admirability is more about the near than the many. But of course more needs to be said about these factors and their relations.

3.   Moderate Actualism and Situationism

John Doris and Gilbert Harman, among others, have argued that there are in fact few significant differences in moral character among human beings. Appealing to interesting and surprising social science experiments, Doris and Harman argue that people do not differ significantly in the likelihood with which they will respond to various morally weighty circumstances, such as helping someone in need or distress. More specifically the claim is this: the dominant factor in behavior is not moral character, but rather non-moral features of an agent's situation: whether circumstances are rushed, or whether an unexpected windfall has just come her way. On this view, presumptive differences in motive robustness among people tend to wash out across counterfactual situations. Apparent character differences in fact reduce to differences in circumstance luck: the seemingly most virtuous among us are such mostly because

they have been dealt a favorable set of situations in which to act. Doris and Harman seem to

believe that there are no significant differences in motive robustness among human agents. For

any given motive M, the proportion of M is more or less the same for each agent once all

counterfactual situations are taken into account.[40]

A number of premises in this argument are questionable. A large variety of experiments

do indicate that character differences play less of a role in human action than ordinary folk

psychology suggests. But most of the experiments do indicate at least some *low* correlation

between character and behavior.[41] Doris for one is careful to point out that the studies actually

show that people are *overestimators* of the importance of character to action. A lower than

expected correlation is still a correlation. It may well turn out that there are fewer character

differences among us than folk psychology leads us to expect: the range of human moral worth

may be surprisingly limited. But that would be no argument against valuing such differences as

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[40] John Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," *Noûs* 32:4 (1998), pp. 504-30; *Lack of Character* (New

York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue

Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999), pp. 315-31; "The

Nonexistence of Character Traits," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (2000), pp. 223-26. Doris's position

is more subtle and careful than Harman's; for instance, Doris concedes that there is significant cross-situational

consistency among people with respect to "beliefs, goals, values, and attitudes" (*Lack of Character*, p. 87).

[41] See for example the studies quoted in Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology," pp. 324-27, and

Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," p. 523, note 23. Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett's *The Person and

the Situation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), the primary social science text that Harman and Doris draw upon, is

also careful to note that there is some correlation between character and behavior.

I do agree for the most part with Doris's normative conclusions: we might get better moral *consequences* –

more bang for our buck – if we focus less on building character and character education and more on offering people

morally favorable circumstances.

there are. If human motive robustness tops out earlier and less frequently than we have hoped, we may have reason to value it all the more for its rarity.

A second point is this: Doris argues that the correlation between character and action – *external, observable* action – is lower than more people expect. External, observable action is of course what the empirical experiments can test. What is *not* accessible for empirical testing is the range of *internal* constituents of character: motive strength and quality, intentions, effort, reactive attitudes, and so forth. Some of these constituents will manifest themselves in external behavior; but I think it is plausible to believe that not all of them will, even when test subjects are observed under a variety of circumstances. On the view that these internal items matter to moral worth apart from their external consequences – and I have argued elsewhere that they do[42] – the possibility of a broad range of character differences remains.

But the most important point to make is this. Doris and Harman seem to think their argument shows that all agents have roughly the same moral worth.[43] If the proportion of any given motive M is the same for all agents across all counterfactual situations, they think it follows that all agents have the same moral worth. But there is a hidden premise here: that Equalism is true (and thus that Prong Two is false). But I have argued that Equalism is false; Moderate Actualism is instead true. Even if the rest of the Doris/Harman premises were true, Moderate Actualism gives us the resources to maintain that agents differ importantly with respect to moral worth. Agents with actualized good motives are more morally worthy: the

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[42] Kelly Sorensen, "The Paradox of Moral Worth," *The Journal of Philosophy* 101:9 (September 2004), pp. 465-483; "Effort and Moral Worth," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13:1 (2010), pp. 89-109. See also Robert M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[43] See for instance Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology," p. 316, and Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," p. 506.

circumstantial luck of the actual situation makes for differences in the moral worth of agents after all.

In sum, an idea behind the Doris/Harman arguments seems to be this: the empirical data should convince us that there are very few meaningful character differences among us; so we should give up making moral worth judgments and give up trying to improve human character. But there are few meaningful character differences among us only on the assumption that actual and counterfactual situations count the same. I have tried to show that the cost of thinking so is too high.