

Review of: *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency* Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency By Nomy Arpaly Oxford University Press , 2003 . x + 204 pp . £35.00

By: [Terrance C. McConnell](#)

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Article:

The ultimate goal of this book is to develop an account of what makes a person praiseworthy or blameworthy for performing a particular action. The book is divided into five chapters, with Arpaly's positive theory presented most prominently in Chapter 3. While the views of historical figures, such as Aristotle and Kant, and contemporary philosophers are discussed, this work is not principally polemical.

Chapter 1 motivates the entire project by showing that assessments of moral agents are neither simple nor straightforward. Difficult cases are presented, cases that show our ambivalence about judgments of worth. Two such cases are 'inadvertent virtue' and 'misguided conscience'. The former refers to cases in which an agent does the right thing, but not for morally plausible reasons; the latter, to cases in which a person sincerely believes that she is doing good though she is in fact committed to a morally irrelevant cause.

Chapter 2 shows that the complexity of assessing agents is even deeper than it first appears. Arpaly argues at length against the common view that acting against one's best judgment—*akrasia*—is always irrational. She presents numerous cases to convince the reader of this. The moral psychology of agents is more complex than most have thought, she argues.

In Chapter 3, Arpaly argues for her "quality-of-the-will based theory of moral worth" (p. 115). The idea is that people are praiseworthy for acts of good will and blameworthy for acts of ill will or the absence of good will. And the amount of praise or blame that agents deserve varies with the depth of their moral motivation or the extent of their moral indifference. Arpaly articulates a specific principle—"Praiseworthiness as Responsiveness to Moral Reasons" (pp. 72, 84)—that captures this idea. Part of the development of this view is to show how it contrasts with others. So Arpaly argues, against some Kantians, that for a right action to have positive moral worth, it is neither sufficient nor necessary that it results from the agent's interest in the rightness of his action. That it is not sufficient is shown by "the Extremist" (p. 74). This is the person who does the right thing—refrains from killing another—and does it because he believes correctly that refraining from murder is the right thing to do. But he does not do the right thing for the *relevant* moral reasons. He refrains from killing the other not because she is a person, but because she is a Jew (p. 75).

Lack of necessity is demonstrated by what Arpaly calls cases of "inverse *akrasia*"—cases of an agent doing the right thing against his best judgment. The best known case of inverse *akrasia*, that of Huckleberry Finn, is discussed at length (pp. 75–78). Huckleberry believes that helping a slave escape is wrong. Nevertheless he helps his friend, Jim, escape. Though Huck acted against his own principle, Arpaly argues that he is morally praiseworthy for his action: "he is a deliberative racist and viscerally more of an egalitarian" (p. 76). Arpaly's interpretation is that Huck's action stems from a morally significant reason—his perception of Jim's personhood—and that, not his false principle, demonstrates his good will.

Taking on Kant, Arpaly argues that the motive of duty is not the most important thing in determining positive moral worth (pp. 87–89). She considers two philanthropists. One cares so much for her fellow human beings that “she would act benevolently even if severe depression came upon her”. The other, benevolence’s fair-weather friend, “acts benevolently as long as no serious problems cloud her mind” (p. 87). Arpaly suggests that Kant would discount the moral worth of the second agent because she acts out of inclination. But Arpaly thinks that both of these philanthropists act benevolently *for moral reasons*. The difference instead is that the first cares more about moral reasons, revealing a difference in the quality of their wills.

Taking on Aristotle, Arpaly wonders why anyone should believe that the praiseworthiness of an individual performing an action depends on the character from which that action flows. Character is understood as “a stable disposition of some sort” (p. 94). But why, she asks, should the positive moral worth of an agent performing a right action be any greater just because we learn that he has performed similar actions for twenty-six years? Mere frequency or predictability does not matter to moral worth; they are apparently relevant only because they “are taken to be signs of *deep moral concern* in the agent” (p. 95). But it is the depth of moral concern, the quality of will, not stability, that makes for positive moral worth.

In contrast with most contemporary views, Arpaly’s theory makes no use of the concept of autonomy. This is apt to give rise to many objections, and Chapters 4–5 anticipate and respond to those. In Chapter 4, she distinguishes eight different meanings of ‘autonomy’, suggests that agent-autonomy is the one most emphasised by competing theories of worth, and argues that it is not as important to moral responsibility as most assume. Chapter 5 considers a number of examples which appear to show that agent-autonomy is a necessary condition of moral praiseworthiness or blameworthiness. Arpaly’s strategy is to show that her theory can handle each case without appealing to agent-autonomy.

This is an interesting and stimulating book; it is difficult to do justice to it in a short review. It lays out a new theory and challenges many conventional views. I recommend it to anyone interested in the difficult topic of assessing moral agents.