Characterizing the Value of Morally Responsible Agency

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ABSTRACT

Moral influence theories of responsibility justify practices of praising and blaming by pointing to their effects on the development of our reasons-responsive capacities. Exercising these capacities has instrumental value—for example, they enable agents to act rightly and to flourish—but some argue that it is also intrinsically valuable. In this paper, I develop a value theory of morally responsible agency. I show how the value realized by exercising agency depends on the moral valence of the action performed and the skill with which agency is exercised. I then argue that moral influence theorists who accept this axiology have reason to adopt a more ambitious approach such that our responsibility practices should aim to cultivate maximally skilled and maximally good agents.

1. INTRODUCTION

Moral influence theories have posited as a goal or justification for moral responsibility practices the development of the kinds of reasons-responsive capacities that many believe to be necessary for moral responsibility. Moral responsibility practices of blaming and praising are instrumental in developing these capacities, and the justification of these practices rests on their instrumentality rather than any backward-looking considerations, such as the agent’s deserving blame or praise. But, one might ask, what is good about having such capacities? One obvious good would rest on their conduciveness to agents’ complying with morality—agents with well-developed moral capacities are more likely to do the right thing, which is a good thing. But other value questions can be posed about these agents. Are they happier, more productive, or more capable of flourishing? The answer might be yes, and the value of happiness, productivity, and flourishing would constitute grounds or reasons for reacting to and treating others in ways that foreseeably lead to the development of their capacities.

An alternative way to justify our moral responsibility practices would pin the reasons for developing such capacities not to some further value for which the capacities are instrumental, but to the intrinsic value of exercising of them. This approach is captured in Vargas (2015): “On the agency cultivation model, we justify the
responsibility norms, norms of moralized praising and blaming, in light of the role that the involved social practices plausibly play in cultivating a form of valuable agency..." (2015, 196) and “there is some reason to think that our moral considerations-sensitive agency is intrinsically valuable” (2015, 173). The idea is that individuals who act from, say, sufficiently reasons-responsive capacities are capable of exercising a robust form of agency, and this exercise of agency may, along with, for example, happiness, achievements and flourishing, have intrinsic value. If agency itself has such noninstrumental value, then we have a direct route to justifying the development of the slate of capacities that is necessary for realizing it. Our praising and blaming practices are at least partially justified because one of their effects is the realization of something intrinsically valuable. Although its relevance to moral influence theories of moral responsibility is clear, the value of agency has been appealed to in a wide range of philosophical discussions. Here, I’ll mention just a few.

Bradford has argued that in deciding the amount of effort that we would expect someone to take in order to avoid being ignorant about some morally salient feature of their situation (and thus avoid acting wrongly), we must factor in the value of the person’s agency:

This is what justifies that we blamelessly stop (investigating) before we understand everything we need to: the good of our own agency counts against the bad of the wrong. The threshold is not set by the difficult itself alone, but by its cost, namely the good of living your own life. The justification is that the good of the being the author of one’s own life—the good of exercise of one’s own agency—outweighs the bad of the wrong. (2017, 196)

Bradford’s idea is that we don’t have to do all that we can to avoid having false beliefs before we act—after a certain point it’s okay to stop enquiring, and any ignorance that remains will be blameless. Ever extended enquiry comes at a cost, namely that we can’t get on with our lives via the exercises of our agency. Although Bradford is alluding to the value of the exercise of one’s own agency and not just agency simpliciter, her claim is at least consistent with and may presuppose the view under discussion here. Moreover, it’s fair to presume that it’s the exercise of morally responsible agency, rather than some diminished, liminal analog in deciding how to live one’s life that we should add to the balance when deciding how strong our duties of inquiry are.

In debates about the nature and value of autonomy, Hurka argues that the value of the exercise of agency partially explains why we think that autonomy, and in particular, autonomous decision making has value.

But the basic value remains that of agency. . . . To have ten options rather than just the best among them is to be able to say no as well as yes. It is to be able to say no nine times, and to be responsible for the fact that no was said. (1987, 376)

Hurka goes on to argue that the agential value realized by those who engage in explicit deliberation about which option best promotes some specific goal is greater
than the value realized by agents who simply pick from among a set of options without deliberating (1987, 376). In each case, one presumes that there is value in the exercise of the kind of rational capacities necessary for morally responsible agency, those that involve, for example, sensitivity to the relevant features of the options. These capacities are arguably more thoroughly engaged in explicit deliberation, which would explain Hurka’s claim that such agency is both more robust and more valuable.

My task in this paper is to undertake a general exploration of the proposal that morally responsible agency has intrinsic value, to identify its contours, and to show how one might appeal to this value to enrich discussions about moral influence theories of moral responsibility. Though much of what I say here is suggestive, I will argue that, depending on how this value is cashed out, there are concrete implications for forward-looking views of moral responsibility that justify our practices of praise and blame by appeal to the value of agency. Specifically, I’ll argue that such views will almost always have reason to adopt a more ambitious theory—one that may call for substantial revisions to our moral responsibility practices such that they would promote the development of more sensitive reasons-responsive capacities. It would, to modify Vargas’s turn of phrase, motivate building the best beings.

Here’s the plan for the paper. In sections 2 and 3, I clear the conceptual ground. In section 2, I discuss some distinctions in the moral responsibility domain with the goal of honing in on the target concept: exercises of morally responsible agency. In section 3, I distinguish between different notions of value and introduce a distinction, borrowed from literature on the value of freedom, between specific and nonspecific value of exercises of agency. This distinction is crucial in what follows and turns in the main on whether a given exercise of agency results in the performance of right or wrong actions. In section 4, I discuss how the value of morally responsible agency can be a matter of degree, such that skillful exercises of morally responsible agency realize more value than less skillful ones. In section 5, I bring the discussion back to moral influence theories of responsibility and attempt to show how the general axiological terrain that I’ve tried to map can enrich their development. In particular, I argue that there is reason to adopt a more ambitious and revisionist approach, such that the aims of our moral responsibility practices should include cultivating maximally skillful and maximally good agents.

2. DISTINCTIONS IN MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

In this section and the next, I introduce some distinctions that will help bring the target view into sharp resolution.

2.1 First distinction in moral responsibility: the exercise of morally responsible agency vs. being a morally responsible agent

In this paper, I am trying to characterize the value borne by the former. Just as a hedonist would maintain that particular, countable experiences of pleasure are the bearers of value according to their value theory, particular, countable exercises of agency that occur in the context of action or perhaps just deliberation are the bearers
of value for my purposes. There might be some good which would be realized by someone’s being an agent who is capable of exercising morally responsible agency. The latter option would also provide moral influence theorists with axiological reasons to adopt moral responsibility practices whose expected effect is to promote the development of capacities to exercise morally responsible agency. These practices would effectively increase the number of morally responsible agents in the world and would thus be value promoting. The source of the value would thus be in the existence of agents with the relevant capacities and not instances of the exercise of these capacities. Although this view is also plausible, I’ll bracket it for now and focus on the value of exercises of agency. As demonstrated above, this value is appealed to in a wide domain of discussions and merits separate treatment.

2.2 Second distinction in moral responsibility: the exercise of morally responsible agency vs. an agent’s being responsible (either blameworthy or praiseworthy, for example) for some act or outcome due to the exercise of morally responsible agency

Again, the value borne by the former is my target. A separate question is whether there is distinct value in an agent simply being responsible for some action or outcome. Importantly, there is a straightforward metaphysical difference between the bearers of value in these two cases. Exercises of morally responsible agency are the transpiring of a process involving certain capacities of an agent and leading to an action (or omission). By contrast, whether someone is praise- or blameworthy for an act or outcome or other is a normative or metaethical fact. If we say that there is value in some exercise of agency, the value bearer in the world is the diachronic process gone through when an agent deliberates and acts. If we say that there is value in that agent being, say, praiseworthy for their action or its outcome, the value bearer is the fact about the agent and its relation to the action or outcome. Of course, all instances of the former co-occur and explain with the latter—when an agent exercises the capacities that suffice for morally responsible agency, they thereby are responsible for the relevant action or outcome. Nevertheless, philosophers who appeal to the value of agency seem to have in mind an agent’s tokenable exercises of the moral responsibility-relevant abilities. When a moral influence theorist justifies the practice or even particular instances of holding agents responsible on grounds that it realizes the value of moral responsible agency, it makes sense to characterize the value bearer as the agent’s exercise of the responsibility-relevant capacities rather than the obtaining of certain normative or metaethical facts. Still, one might maintain that there is some value that obtains simply from it being the case that an agent is responsible, but that is a concern for another paper.

2.3 Third distinction in moral responsibility: the exercise of morally responsible agency vs. holding someone morally responsible for such an exercise

This is perhaps the most obvious distinction, but it’s worth noting some possible relationships between the two. For example, one general strategy for defending
practices of holding people responsible is the foreseeable effects of fostering/developing morally responsible agency. Interestingly, if the practice of holding responsible even those agents who currently lack the relevant capacities for morally responsible agency is conducive to the development of these capacities, then these instances of holding an agent responsible actually help realize downstream instances of what you might call appropriate holding responsible—the agent who is held responsible actually is morally responsible. If there is some noninstrumental value in holding an agent responsible in a way that is appropriate, then earlier, perhaps inappropriate instances of holding responsible would have at least instrumental value.

3. DISTINCTIONS IN VALUE

3.1 First distinction in value: instrumental vs. intrinsic value
Here, I adopt a standard account of intrinsic value, according to which whatever it is that possesses intrinsic value is valuable simply in virtue of what it is—be it a pleasurable experience, an achievement, a bit of knowledge, or an aesthetic creation. Assuming that intrinsic value is both measurable and additive, the overall value of some world or state of affairs is increased simply by adding something of intrinsic value (provided this addition doesn’t come at any cost in term of the loss of something else of intrinsic value). The view discussed here is that there is intrinsic value in at least certain exercises of morally responsible agency, such that a world or situation may contain more intrinsic value simply by changing some facts about whether an action was performed via the exercise of morally responsible agency. Of course, exercises of morally responsible agency can also have instrumental value. By exercising responsible agency, one might realize all manner of intrinsically valuable things. For example, inasmuch as (a) preference satisfaction is intrinsically valuable, and (b) we prefer that we make choices or realize outcomes via the exercise of responsible agency, then the exercise of agency is straightforwardly instrumentally valuable.

3.2 Second distinction in value: specific vs. nonspecific value
This distinction that I am after is the analog to a distinction often deployed in discussions of the value of social freedom. There, the distinction turns, in the main, on how increasing the number of options available in one’s opportunity set affects the value of freedom the agent has in that choice situation (Carter 1999; van Hees 2010; Dowding and van Hees 2009). The specific value of freedom one has in a given choice situation is at least partly a function of the value one would place on the options in the relevant opportunity set. If someone would, for example, prefer a particular additional option, then giving it to them increases the specific value of freedom they face in their choice situation (even if they don’t eventually choose this option). So they are more free in the sense that they have more options, and the value of their freedom is also increased. By contrast, if someone doesn’t value a particular additional option, then giving it to them wouldn’t increase the specific value of their freedom though it perhaps increases the extent of their freedom—they have, after all, an extra option. For example, given my nut allergies, the value of my freedom to choose what I want to buy at the market is not increased by the presence of...
a new nut vendor even though I’m now more free in the sense of having more options for things to buy.

The nonspecific value of freedom, by contrast, is not a function of the value one places on the particular options one faces. The nonspecific value of freedom rests merely on one’s having a set of opportunities from which to choose, whatever they are. Increases in the number of options one has in a choice situation results in an increase in both the extent of their freedom and the nonspecific value of their freedom. The addition of a new nut vendor would thus increase the nonspecific value of my freedom simply given that I now have more options.

Here, I will deploy an analogous distinction in the context of the value of morally responsible agency. Just as the specific value of freedom depends in some way on what the agent is free to do, the specific value of agency would be a function of what some instance of morally responsible agency is effective in realizing or perhaps of the kind of action that is performed. Importantly, not all exercises of morally responsible agency result in the agent doing the right thing. Agents who are blameworthy for acting wrongly or otherwise badly may do so despite having sufficiently developed capacities to weigh and respond to moral reasons. When things go wrong, it might be because the agent suffers weakness of will or fails to take sufficient care as they deliberate about what to do. Such agents exercise morally responsible agency, albeit imperfectly. Turning to the value question, one might think that the value of some exercise of agency is diminished or even eliminated if the result is morally bad or imprudent or if the moral valence of the action is somehow bad. A similar move might be made by hedonists or desire satisfactionists who maintain that the value of pleasure or desire satisfaction depends on what causes the pleasure or what the content of the desire happens to be. For example, pleasure experienced or desires satisfied in the course of an agent harming another person may be less intrinsically valuable, if they are valuable at all. Similarly, exercises of morally responsible agency that result in the performance of a wrong action might be less specifically valuable, if they are valuable at all. It matters to the specific value equation what the exercise of agency results in. By contrast, just as the nonspecific value of freedom is insensitive to the values agents place in (elements of) their option set, the nonspecific value of agency is insensitive to what the exercise of agency results in. On this view, instances of exercised agency are valuable solely because of what they are—instances of exercised agency. In what follows, I discuss the specific and nonspecific value of agency in more detail.

3.2.1 Agency’s specific value

The specific value of morally responsible agency is a function of what agents actually do with their agency. Consider, first, an agent who acts on a capacity that is sufficiently reasons responsive but who performs some morally neutral action, such as spinning a fidget spinner. Despite being an action that utterly lacks moral salience, it is nevertheless an exercise of morally responsible agency if the agent would have been responsive to sufficiently strong considerations not to fidget-spin at that time. The fact that her agency realizes no act or consequence of any moral significance positive or negative, may lead some to think that this exercise of agency lacks
(much) value. Just as adding the option to fidget spin wouldn’t affect the specific value of freedom in someone who placed no value on fidget spinning, an agent who exercises agency in the performance of this morally neutral action wouldn’t realize any specific agential value, according to this view. Consider, by contrast, someone who exercises morally responsible agency by, say, acting rightly or realizing something good. Here, a proponent of the specific value of agency would maintain that value is realized. The thought here, roughly, is that the world is made better when right or beneficial actions are attributable to agents who are exercising whatever rational or behavioral capacities are sufficient for responsible agency than it is if these actions were performed by say a compulsive do-gooder. In the latter cases, the actions would not stem from the exercise of the kind of agency that is sufficiently sensitive to relevant moral reasons, and so the agents performing them fail to realize the value of agency under discussion.

But what about agents whose exercise of reasons-responsive agency results in the performance of some wrong, bad, or imprudent action? Why think that morally responsible agency that leads to such negatively valenced actions has any specific value? A comparison with the specific value of freedom may help clarify the issue here. Whether the addition of a given option affects the specific value of one’s freedom is asymmetric along the dimension of the degree to which one values it. If one does value the option, then it contributes to the value of one’s freedom to choose it, but if one doesn’t value the option or indeed if it’s disvalued, that doesn’t diminish the specific value of freedom that the agent faces in that choice situation. The value of one’s freedom when such an option is added to the choice set is simply unchanged. Similarly, we might think that the moral valence of the purposes to which some moral agency is put is also asymmetric in its effect on agential value. Agency that results in actions with positive moral valence confers positive agential value, and agency that results in negatively valenced actions confers no agential value. The thought here is that, even though the latter agent is genuinely exercising morally responsible agency, the fact that they act wrongly makes it less plausible to think that there was something intrinsically good about the fact that they exercised their agency.

However, we may be tempted to say that it would be better if the wrong action or bad effect were “on someone.” A world in which fewer moral transgressions and lamentable outcomes are attributable to exercises of morally responsible agency (i.e., agents who are potentially blameworthy) may seem worse than one in which agents are on the hook for what they did. At first glance, it would be difficult to establish this claim if no value were realized by the exercise of agency that results in wrong actions. Note, however, that the value-differences between these worlds may rest on the value distinguished above of agents being morally responsible (or blameworthy in this case) for their actions and outcomes and not the value of morally responsible agency exercised by the agents. Of course, the fact that an agent’s exercise of morally responsible agency will always co-occur with that agent’s being responsible for the relevant action will make it difficult to isolate which of these factors is the (sole) bearer of value. Thus, if it’s the case that there is at least some value in a wrong action or bad effect being attributed to some morally responsible agent rather than it
being not so attributable, and if every case of attributed wrongdoing is attended by some exercise of agency, then we’d have to remain agnostic about whether the asymmetry thesis is true with respect to agency’s specific value. Below, when discussing how the value of agency can be measured, I will discuss a possible way of indeed isolating what the value bearer is in this kind of case.

3.2.2 Agency’s nonspecific value

The nonspecific value of morally responsible agency, by contrast to the foregoing, would be grounded solely on the exercise of agency and would be unaffected by the moral valence of actions or consequences that stem from it. In the value of freedom literature, the nonspecific value of freedom rests solely on the number of available options from which the agent has to choose and is insensitive to the nature of the options. Consider two agents who can choose from among the same five different beers at a pub. The nonspecific value of their freedom is the same—the value of their freedom is just a function of the size of their opportunity set. It wouldn’t matter to the magnitude of the value of nonspecific freedom that one agent thinks all five are sufficiently tasty and the other finds all but one undrinkable. Analogously, one might think that the value of morally responsible agency is grounded solely on the exercise of, say, the kind of capacities that suffice for morally responsible agency in the performance of some action and that it would be insensitive to the (moral) nature of the action or its effects. Hurka captures something in the vicinity of such a view when he compares the value of agency to the value of knowledge.

To have knowledge is to stand in a certain relation to the world, the relation where one’s beliefs match what the world contains. And those who value knowledge think it better to stand in this relation on more occasions. If knowledge consists in true beliefs, it is better to have more true beliefs . . . . Agency as I have described it is the obverse of knowledge. Instead of one’s beliefs conforming to the world, the world comes to match one’s aims, through successful intentional action. And again there is a value in number. Just as it is better to have more items of knowledge, so it is better to have more intentions one has achieved. (1987, 371)

One way of achieving more intentions, on Hurka’s view, is to make a choice via the consideration of features that make it preferable to the other options rather than simply plumping for some option. The latter exercise of agency involves forming the intention to choose the option plumped for, whereas the former involves intending to choose some option that has some desirable feature F, intending not to choose options that have defect G, and intending to choose the option that has F (1987, 367). Making such a deliberative choice involves the exercise of “more” agency than mere plumping does, simply due to the quantity of intentions achieved. As discussed above, although Hurka doesn’t characterize this in terms of morally responsible agency, his claims about the value of agency could plausibly be restricted to agency that would meet the standards defended by responsibility theorists. An agent who, in Hurka’s terms, achieves intentions as a result of compulsion, brainwashing, or via the
exercise of sufficiently insensitive cognitive or volitional capacities may not realize
the kind of nonspecific agency value that we see when, for example, a fully morally
responsible agent deliberates about which career path, electoral candidate, or car seat
to choose. This way of measuring the value of agency, as it makes no reference to
the agent intending to choose to do any particular action, would be best understood
as measuring the nonspecific value of agency.

Thus far, I’ve only mapped part of the landscape here, and there is certainly much
more to say. Nevertheless, these distinctions are intelligible enough that they should
enable a more detailed discussion about further factors that affect the magnitude of
the value of morally responsible agency and to explore how appeals to it might in-
form moral influence theories.

4. DEGREES OF MORALLY RESPONSIBLE AGENCY AND MAGNITUDE
OF AGENTIAL VALUE

So far, the discussion has been framed as if morally responsible agency were some-
thing that, when one exercises it, is exercised fully or not at all. It’s tempting to main-
tain that the performance of an action results either from full-blown responsible
agency or the absence of it. If the conditions for morally responsible agency are
threshold conditions, then agents would either meet them or not, and presumably,
the realization of the agential value would also be an all or nothing affair. But, just as
one might think that blameworthiness or praiseworthiness—two ways in which one
might be responsible—admits of degrees, the exercise of morally responsible agency
might also admit of degrees in some relevant sense. If exercises of agency are under-
stood to be, at bottom, exercises of capacities to respond to relevant moral reasons,
and if these capacities can be more or less sensitive, then there is space to argue that
the exercise of more sensitive capacities realizes more value than the exercise of less
sensitive capacities, even if both exercises result in the same action. Colloquially, we
might say that the former agents exercise their agency more skillfully than the latter.
If the amount of value realized by exercises of agency varies directly with skillfulness
with which the agency is exercised, then we’ll need an account of the latter that it
makes sense to deploy in the current context.

In order to get a handle on how exercises of morally responsible agency can be
more or less skillful, a concrete comparison might be helpful. Compare: (a) an older
child or adolescent who acts rightly in response to the relevant moral reasons in a
given situation, but who would have faltered had the situation been somewhat differ-
ent, and (b) an adult who performs the same action in the same situation, and would
have done the right thing across a broader range of situations. They each exercise
morally responsible agency, but the fact that the adult would have responded ade-
quately to the relevant moral reasons across a wider range of situations indicates that
the capacities that she engages as she exercises agency are more reasons-sensitive
than the adolescent’s. The different modal profiles of these capacities entail that the
adult is more skilled than the adolescent regarding the action type at issue, namely
that of performing that right action. Shepherd’s analysis of degrees of controlled ac-
tion is helpful here (2014, 399–406). According to this account, the degree of
control that an agent possesses when they perform act in pursuance of a particular goal is a function of their "success rate" at achieving that goal when measured across a range of counterfactual circumstances. Shepherd compares novice and professional dart players who both hit a bullseye, but where the latter would have had hit the bullseye in a much wider range of circumstances. Though they perform the same action, the professional does so with a higher degree of control. Although, this analysis of the degree of control exhibited by agents is deployed in the context of a very specific goal (i.e., hitting the bullseye), it is deployable in more general contexts as well. In my example above, the adolescent and the adult almost certainly lack the explicit goal of “acting morally,” but the counterfactual analysis can still indicate that with respect to performing the right action, the adult possesses more control, given that they would have succeeded in doing so in a wider range of circumstances. For my purposes, I will take degree of skillfulness to be equivalent to degree of control such that we can say generally that if A exercises morally responsible agency in a way that is more controlled (in the sense just canvassed) than B, then A’s exercise of agency will be more skilled than B’s.

So, if morally responsible agency is something that can be exercised with greater or lesser degrees of skill, it’s natural to suspect that the value realized by this exercise will reflect this. Most straightforwardly, skillful exercises of agency are capable of bearing more agential value than less skillful exercises of agency. If the bearer of some value is something that can come in degrees along some relevant metric, then it’s natural to infer that the amount of value realized by an instance of it should be indexed to this degree.

If this is right, this shows that there are actually multiple ways in which the specific value of agency can be impacted in a given case. In addition to the moral valence of the action having an impact on agency’s specific value (such that morally neutral and morally negative actions have no agential value and morally positive actions have positive agential value [see section 3.2]), the degree of skill with which morally responsible agency is exercised in the performance of a specific action or the bringing about of some specific outcome will also have an impact. For example, the adult who acts rightly but does so via the comparably skilled exercise of her capacities would realize more agential value than the adolescent who performs the same action with the same positive moral valence but who does so in a less skilled way. However, the relatively less skilled adolescent who acts rightly may realize more agential value than an adult who performs a morally neutral action via a very skillful exercise of her capacities. The agential value of twirling one’s hair or fidget-spinning likely isn’t buoyed by its being done by someone who’s reasons-responsive capacities are exceptionally sensitive. This is because, plausibly, the specific value of agency, as it’s been characterized above, is simply not realized at all in the performance of morally neutral actions.

Thus, when it comes to the question of how much specific value some exercise of agency realizes one must look both to the moral valence of the action performed and the level of skill with which it was performed. Although it will, of course, be difficult to make fine-grained assessments of how much value a given exercise of agency will realize, these two factors can be taken into account when thinking generally about
what the effects of certain agency promoting practices are likely to be in terms of specific agential value. I will turn to this in section 5.

An understanding of exercises of agency as more or less skillful also shows that there are multiple ways in which the magnitude of the nonspecific value of agency can be impacted. In addition to the checking the quantity of specific intentions formed in the making of a choice, we’d also have to assess the quality—whether more or less skillful—of morally responsible agency that was exercised in making them. If, for example, I have to choose from among five charities to support, then I realize more agential value than my counterpart who only had to choose from three—my choice, if it involves consideration of all five, requires me to make more intentional omissions than my counterpart’s choice, if it involves consideration of all three. But, if I made my choice (and formed all the attendant intentions) via the exercise of capacities that were somewhat dulled, and my counterpart made her choice via the exercise of extremely sensitive capacities, then the difference in the value of nonspecific agency will be less in my case. Again, just how these two factors interact in coming to some determinate amount of nonspecific agential value for give exercise of agency is beyond my scope here, but in the next section, I indicate how they might impact different approaches one might take toward developing moral influence theories.

5. APPLICATION TO MORAL INFLUENCE THEORIES

In this section, I want to bring elements of the discussion above more directly to bear on moral influence theories of moral responsibility. Although there are a number of distinct approaches philosophers have taken in the development of moral influence theories, a shared emphasis is the impact that responsibility practices, including our practices of holding others responsible, have on our moral development. But, as I set out in the beginning, there are many distinct forward-looking considerations to which moral influence theorists can appeal in motivating their view. The foregoing distinctions between kinds of agential value and the factors that affect them should amplify the number of approaches one might take in defending moral influence theories. If (one of) the relevant forward-looking consideration(s) is the development of agents who are capable of exercising morally responsible agency, and if this very exercise has what I and others have called agential value, then the structure of the moral influence argument is straightforward, provided one attends to the various distinctions I lay out above. Moreover, as I will argue below, one’s theory of agency value—whether one accepts specific or nonspecific agency value or whether one thinks degrees of agency affect amount of realized agency value—should influence the content of the moral influence theory as well. Moral influence theories can be more or less ambitious. A less ambitious theory might maintain that one of the “jobs” of holding agents responsible is developing or preserving, say, some minimal degree of general reasons-responsive capacities in either the person being held responsible or in others who might be affected in the relevant way. This theorist would maintain that we should go in for that set of moral responsibility practices that would result in sufficiently widespread development and maintenance of minimally sufficient reasons-responsive capacities. A more ambitious theory would be guided by “more is better” and would strive to inculcate stronger, even maximally strong,
reasons-responsive capacities. Of the various axiological positions I sketch in this paper, most should push theorists in the direction of a more ambitious theory.

First, let’s consider how specific vs. nonspecific agential value matters for how one might develop a moral influence theory of responsibility. An influence theorist for whom only the realization nonspecific agential value was relevant need not attend to the frequency with which sufficiently well-developed agents act morally or not. For them, the value of morally responsible agency is realized whenever it is exercised and whatever the moral valence of the action performed. Such a theorist could stably maintain a view such that our responsibility practices should result in a threshold degree of responsiveness to moral reasons at which point such agents would realize nonspecific value with nearly every exercise of their agency. Such a “conservative” view might even hold that our current set of practices are justified given that most adult humans subjected to them come to meet the threshold. Of course, failures to act morally are widespread, but these imperfect exercises of morally responsible agency still realize nonspecific agency value. It’s simply not the case that more nonspecific agency value stands to be realized if a different set of practices resulted in agents who were more morally perspicacious and who acted rightly with more frequency.

Notably this threshold view would not be stable for an influence theorist who went in for the specific value of agency. For them, the specific agential value realized by some set of moral responsibility practices would, by contrast, be sensitive to differential effects these practices have on whether agents exercise their agency by acting rightly with more frequency. Consider for example a set of moral responsibility practices that included harsher forms of blame for wrongdoing or more enjoyable forms of praise for those who act rightly. This set of practices might induce the development of agents who are more sensitive to moral reasons and who would actually choose to act rightly more frequently than they would have under a more lax set of practices. If these agents act rightly more frequently under this harsher set of responsibility practices, then they will realize more specific agency value than they would under the more lax set. Since there will always be axiological reasons to foster the development of agents who are increasingly more sensitive to moral reasons (which causes them to act rightly with more frequency), the conservative position highlighted above is unstable if one accepts the specific value of agency picture. Influence theorists who appeal to the specific value of exercising morally responsible agency should defend more ambitious and perhaps revisionary moral responsibility practices, if these are indeed conducive to the development of agents who, due to being more responsive to moral reasons, will more frequently exercise their agency by acting rightly. How exactly these responsibility practices might differ from those that would be supported by the realization of nonspecific agential value is a question for another day.

Second, let’s consider what would follow if influence theorists accepted the view discussed in section 4 that the skillfulness displayed in exercises of responsible agency positively impacts agential value. Again, moral influence theorists can be more or less ambitious, and it would seem that there are axiological reasons to adopt responsibility practices that result in agents who are capable of exercising agency more skillfully, which is to say that when they act, they do so by recruiting capacities
that are more sensitive to moral reasons. It seems clear that, if such agents realize more agency value with each exercise of their agency, then less ambitious theories may be leaving a significant amount of value on the table. To the extent that a moral influence theory is aiming to realize agential value, they have reason to be ambitious with respect to the aims of our responsibility practices. This means that the conservative, satisficing view characterized above is unmotivated from an axiological standpoint on the assumption that more skillful exercises of agency realize more agency value. Thus, influence theorists should maximize and not satisfice. Again, this might underwrite a different and perhaps revisionary set of responsibility practices.

6. CONCLUSION
This paper took some initial steps in developing a value theory for morally responsible agency. After discussing some distinctions in the moral responsibility domain with the goal of honing in on the target concept: exercises of morally responsible agency, I distinguished between different notions of value and introduced the distinction between specific and nonspecific value of exercises of agency. I then showed how the value of morally responsible agency can be degreed, such that skillful exercises of agency realize more value than less skillful ones. Finally, I canvassed some implications of this value theory for moral influence theories of responsibility, and I argued that there are agency-value-based reasons to adopt a more ambitious and perhaps revisionist approach such that the aims of our moral responsibility practices would include cultivating maximally good and maximally skilled agents.3

NOTES
1. Of course, choosing to fidget spin entails omitting to do some alternative action that would have realized more good, such as calling a friend. One might think that this makes fidget spinning a morally objectionable use of one’s time. But, if that’s the case, then it wouldn’t be a morally neutral action after all.
2. Whether harshness of blame or profuseness of praise would actually have this effect is an empirical question, of course.
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