

# Virtue and Salience

Richard Yetter Chappell and Helen Yetter-Chappell  
Bowling Green State University

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## Abstract

This paper explores two ways that evaluations of an agent's character as virtuous or vicious are properly influenced by what the agent finds salient or attention-grabbing. First, we argue that ignoring salient needs reveals a greater deficit of benevolent motivation in the agent, and hence, on the 'Quality of Will' account, renders them more blameworthy. We use this fact to help explain our ordinary intuition that failing to give to famine relief (for example) is in some sense *less bad* than failing to help a drowning child right before your eyes, in a way that's compatible with the consequentialist's contention that there's no principled reason to see the one life-saving act as any more or less choiceworthy than the other. Second, we argue that alleged 'virtues of ignorance' (e.g., modesty, believing better of friends than the evidence supports, etc.) are better understood as 'virtues of salience'. The modest person, for example, needn't have any *false beliefs* about their own accomplishments; what sets them apart from the immodest is instead that their own accomplishments aren't as *salient* in their thoughts—their attention is not constantly directed back towards themselves in the manner of the immodest. Virtue may thus make demands upon what we find salient.

## 1 Salience and Quality of Will

### 1.1 The Puzzle

Singer (1972) invites us to imagine a child drowning in a pond, whom we could save at the cost of ruining our expensive clothes in the muddy water. It seems clear that we ought to save the child, no matter the (comparatively insignificant) financial cost to ourselves. This then motivates what we can call Singer's *Insignificant Sacrifice Principle* (p.231): "[I]f it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it." However, as Singer goes on to point out, we are constantly violating this principle by failing to donate as much as we could to effective charities that address various serious-and-yet-easily-preventable harms caused by global poverty: malnutrition, lack of basic medical care, vaccinations, etc.<sup>1</sup> What should we think of this practical inconsistency?

When we reflect on what's at stake, it's not implausible to hold that we really should prevent these grave harms rather than buying unnecessary luxuries for ourselves. (Call this *the Act Evaluation*.) That much of Singer's argument seems right.<sup>2</sup> But the analogy between the drowning child and the global poor may also be taken to suggest a much more troubling conclusion, via the following argument:

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<sup>1</sup> For research into which charities are in fact the most effective, see [www.givewell.org](http://www.givewell.org).

<sup>2</sup> We won't be defending this claim any further here, but see, e.g., Unger (1996), Kagan (1991), and Cullity (2006).

1. It would be morally monstrous to do nothing and let the drowning child die.
2. Saving a distant stranger's life by donating to an effective charity is relevantly similar to saving a nearby drowning child.
3. So, it would be morally monstrous to let a distant stranger die when we could have saved their life by donating to an effective charity.

Here the conclusion is not just about the status of the *act* of helping — that it merits choosing, or ought to be done — but about the moral *character* of the agent who fails to act as they ought in this case. It is, according to this argument, no minor failure, but one that renders us *morally monstrous* or blameworthy to the highest degree. And this claim — call it *the Character Evaluation* — seems entirely incredible. It just isn't plausible that in failing to save distant strangers we reveal our moral character to be as bad as someone who callously watches a child drown and does nothing about it.

### 1.2 The Solution

Appeal to a *Quality of Will* account of blameworthiness can help to resolve this puzzle, showing how we can accept Singer's Act Evaluation without committing ourselves to the implausible Character Evaluation. According to Quality of Will accounts, an agent is blameworthy to the extent that their actions manifest an insufficient degree of good will towards others (Strawson 1962; Arpaly 2003). An agent may be understood as having a "sufficient

degree of good will” when their desires for others’ welfare are sufficiently weighty in relation to their personal or self-interested desires. The less that I care about others, and hence the more harms that I’m willing to impose on them for the sake of my own lesser benefit, the morally worse my character becomes. When I perform actions that manifest this lack of concern for others, I am blameworthy in proportion to the moral inadequacy of the desires that I thereby act upon. (Someone who acts with at least some minimal concern for others will be less blameworthy than someone who acts in complete disregard of others’ interests.)

So that’s the basic picture. But now notice the following fact about human psychology: Our actions are determined not only by the strengths of our standing desires (both self-interested and altruistic), but also by which desires are emotionally “activated”, or occurrently felt, and to what degree. Due to our limited cognitive capacities, we do not—and could not—constantly feel the force of everything that interests us or that we care about. Their full force is felt only when *triggered*, perhaps by certain thoughts or salient environmental stimuli.

This fact about the variable efficacy of desires shows that not all failures to help others (even holding fixed the magnitudes of the relevant costs and benefits) will necessarily reveal the same insufficiency of good will, and hence the same degree of blameworthiness. In particular, a failure to help others may be more blameworthy (because revealing a greater deficit of good will) in cases where others’ needs are especially *salient*, and hence any altruistic

desires in the agent can be expected to function at full efficacy. This principle is illustrated in the case of Singer's pond: We feel that a person who could watch a child drown before his eyes must be *unusually* callous. The child's need is so obvious, and so emotionally gripping (for anyone with a modicum of good will), that to fail to act in this case reveals a truly monstrous lack of concern for others.

By contrast, ordinary people with a modicum of good will towards others regularly fail to act in ways that would save the lives of distant strangers. There are many possible explanations of this, but plausibly at least part of the story is that the needs of distant strangers are much less *salient* to us in our everyday lives.<sup>3</sup> A child drowning before our eyes shocks us out of complacency, activating whatever altruistic concern we may have, whereas the constant suffering of the global poor is easier to ignore. (Though, as aid fundraisers quickly learned, a photo and brief life story of a starving child can help to some degree.) This means that our failure to aid the distant does not necessarily reveal a monstrous lack of concern for others. It may be that our moderate concern for others is simply not being activated, and hence fails to guide our actions as it otherwise might.

This analysis secures the common-sense result that the Character Eval-

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<sup>3</sup> "Slippery slope" worries may be another common source of inaction, as we worry that helping today would commit us to helping again tomorrow, without any end in sight. In this way, the "expected cost" of saving one may be much higher in the donation case than we might otherwise expect from looking at the case in isolation. Put another way: Saving a unique drowning child is less likely to cause pangs of guilt when we return to normal the next day.

uation is mistaken: Failure to help the distant needy is typically not as blameworthy as inaction in the case of Singer’s pond would be. Moreover, this result is secured on the basis of what, intuitively, seems like the right explanation, namely that *it would take a much worse person* to let a child drown before their eyes, whereas any ordinary non-saint does less than they could (and even, arguably, *should*) for the distant poor.

There are two notable features of this analysis. Firstly, it helps to support Singer’s argument (and consequentialism more broadly) by showing that we can accept the Act Evaluation without committing ourselves to the implausible Character Evaluation. Second, it shows how facts about what’s psychologically *salient* to an agent can alter our assessment of their moral character. In the next section, we’ll go on to explore how virtue might sometimes *require* us to find some things more salient than others.

## 2 Virtues of Salience

In recent years, some philosophers have defended the surprising thesis that some virtues essentially involve ignorance or epistemic bias. We will discuss two cases in particular: whether the virtue of modesty involves ignorance, and whether friendship demands that we believe better of our friends than the evidence warrants. In both cases, we will argue, these alleged “virtues of ignorance” are better understood as “virtues of salience”—placing demands on our *attention* and initial *inclinations* to believe, not on our *settled beliefs*.

### 2.1 Modesty and Ignorance

Driver (1989, 1999) argues that the virtue of modesty consists in a disposition to moderately *underestimate* one's own worth. This explains the "Moore-paradoxical" infelicity of the assertion:

1. I am modest.

On Driver's account, the infelicity of (1) is to be explained in terms of the general infelicity of claiming that one's own belief is false: If you think it's false, then how can you believe it? Likewise: If you think you're underestimating your self-worth, then isn't that just to say that you actually think your self-worth is rather higher than previously intimated?

Driver notes that "behavioural" accounts of modesty, either in terms of *under-stating* one's true worth, or a general reluctance to brag, can also account for the oddity of asserting (1). But they fail for the reason that they cannot distinguish sincere from false modesty. The difference, for Driver, is that the genuinely modest person does not merely behave as though she has less worth, she really believes it.

We may wonder: If modesty really involves ignorance in this way, then how is it a virtue? Driver (1989, 383) suggests that it is because modesty-as-ignorance typically arises from "a reluctance to dwell on one's good qualities" or give much thought to rankings, and it is *this* disposition, rather than the resulting ignorance as such, that is truly valuable (at least instrumentally, and perhaps intrinsically as well). But in that case, why not take this

valuable disposition, rather than the contingently resulting ignorance, to be constitutive of the virtue of modesty?

Driver (1999, 829) backtracks after considering a case where the two come apart: Albert the scientist puts a great deal of thought into ranking, and then publicly declares himself to be (as he now believes) the fifth best physicist in the world, though in fact the evidence shows that he is third best. Driver bites the bullet and insists that, since he underestimates himself, Albert is modest — albeit in an “anomalous” fashion, “modest *in spite of* his overzealous ranking behaviour.” This strikes me as a mistake. It seems much more plausible to think that Albert is not really modest at all, in any normatively significant sense. He is instead (mildly) epistemically irrational, in addition to being immodest. He cares too much about his own rank, and despite all his efforts he isn’t even able to accurately assess what it is. He is, in this way, doubly flawed.

Driver goes on to defend the claim that it is really the ignorance (rather than the anti-ranking disposition) that we value, by considering a case where the two come apart in the opposite direction: Bob knows, on the basis of reliable testimony, that he is the best, though he hasn’t himself engaged in any ranking exercise to confirm this. Driver objects that “[a]ny professions of inferiority on his account would constitute false modesty”, and hence be found objectionably patronizing and condescending by knowledgeable observers. Now, we agree that any such dishonest attempts to placate the presumed jealousy of his audience would constitute condescending rather



than modest behaviour. But the mere *possibility* of behaving condescendingly cannot be sufficient to show that an agent is *actually* immodest. (Note that Driver believes Albert, above, to be modest. But he too could behave condescendingly, e.g., by dishonestly reassuring his colleagues that he's "not even in the top ten".)

Suppose that Bob never gives a moment's thought to his relative ranking. His attention is instead directed outward, to opportunities out there in the world, and insofar as he assesses himself at all he does so in non-comparative terms, noticing where he has room for improvement (Brennan 2007). He doesn't think of himself as better than other people, for he doesn't think in terms of comparative rankings at all. (In this way, he differs from the falsely modest person who merely *pretends* not to think of himself as better than others.) In this case, Bob strikes me as a paradigmatically modest person. This is so even though he could, if asked, retrieve from his dusty memory banks the information that the top-ranked person in the world happens to be...him.

On this account—call it modesty-as-salience, in contrast to Driver's account of modesty-as-ignorance—the virtue of modesty need not involve any epistemic error or impairment. It merely requires that the agent not dwell overmuch on her own ranking or status. She may know the truth of the matter, but it isn't something she *cares* about.<sup>4</sup> And so it isn't something

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<sup>4</sup> Schueler (1997) offers the related proposal that modesty consists in not caring *whether others are impressed* by you. But as Driver objects, one might disdain others' opinions out of extreme arrogance rather than modesty (though cf. Schueler's (1999) response). Our

that tends to grip her attention, or intrude into her thoughts.

Both Driver's account and ours agree that a modest agent will typically not be aware of her ranking or comparative worth. But we diverge when it comes to explaining *why* this is so. Driver proposes that the modest agent must not *believe* the truth about her self-worth, she must instead underestimate it. We instead propose that, rather than giving the wrong answer, the modest agent simply does not *attend* to the question.

We can distinguish these two views by employing a "Fate of the World" test. Suppose an evil demon will destroy the world unless Charlie offers an accurate assessment of his abilities. Would Charlie's answering correctly prove that he lacks modesty? On Driver's view, it would. If modesty requires underestimation, then Modest Charlie's best effort at answering the question will yield an incorrect answer. But on our view, this need not be so. Modest Charlie does not dwell on his accomplishments, so the answer may not immediately spring to mind. He may even be *initially* inclined, just as a matter of first appearances, to underestimate himself, due to giving such little thought to his many achievements. But when the stakes are high, he is able to override his characteristic disposition to refrain from self-assessment or ranking behaviour, and assess the evidence in an accurate and dispassionate light. So, upon considering the matter in depth, he is able to give the demon the correct answer. Then, the immediate need having been met,

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proposal avoids this worry, since the arrogant person is still interested in ranking, it's just that he assumes that others are lower-ranked than he, and disregards their opinions on that basis.

his attention will once again drift away from himself, and back to what he considers to be intrinsically more important matters.

This account of modesty-as-salience has two major advantages over Driver's modesty-as-ignorance view. First, it yields verdicts that are intuitively more plausible in the cases of Albert, Bob, and Charlie, discussed above. Second, it seems more appealing on theoretical grounds. The only distinctive value of Driver's modesty-as-ignorance would be if we cared a lot that people be able to sincerely reassure us that they aren't so amazing as the evidence indicates. Knowledgeable agents like Bob are unable to do this—any such professions of inferiority from them would, as Driver points out, be insincere and condescending.

But why should we want such reassurances in the first place? Driver suggests that they may be instrumentally useful in defusing problematic social emotions like jealousy that can arise when faced with superior others. But for those others to erroneously claim a lower rank is just one possible way of dealing with this problem. Another, more appealing, solution is for them to refrain from making unnecessary comparative judgments altogether. This is another way that high-achieving agents can defuse jealousy and be less socially threatening. Insofar as their anti-ranking perspective is picked up and shared by those around them, destructive feelings of inferiority may be avoided. So modesty-as-salience shares the instrumental value of modesty-as-ignorance. More importantly, insofar as it consists in the internalization of important moral truths—such as that one's own achievements aren't all

that important in the grand scheme of things, that each of us is but one person amongst moral equals, and that comparative rankings lack intrinsic importance—modesty-as-salience has a kind of *intrinsic* appropriateness that befits its status as a genuine *virtue* (rather than merely being a contingently desirable disposition, of no intrinsic moral import).

## 2.2 Friendship and Epistemic Partiality

Keller (2004, 329) uses the following incident from the sitcom *Friends* to suggest that friendship requires epistemic partiality, or thinking better of our friends than the evidence warrants:

Joey and Chandler are playing a game where the latter gives immediate, unreflective and unfiltered answers to the questions asked by the former. Joey has just landed an acting job in Las Vegas, which he hopes will be his big break. He asks Chandler, ‘Is this job going to be my big break?’, to which Chandler reflexively answers ‘No,’ putting their friendship in crisis. Chandler’s lack of belief in him causes Joey to feel betrayed, and Chandler to feel guilty, suggesting that their friendship involves normative expectations to think well of each other—even in the absence of evidence warranting such optimism.

Stroud (2006, 508) similarly argues:

[T]he bias of the good friend will normally take the form of casting what she sees or hears in a different light, shading it differently, placing it in a different optic, embedding it in a different overall

portrait of her friend. Where our friends are concerned, in short, we become spin doctors.

Both Keller and Stroud conclude that friendship places demands on our *beliefs*. As in the previous section, we want to resist any such strong conclusion, and replace it instead with a more subtle demand on what we find *salient*. We agree with Stroud's characterization of how friendship requires us to *see* things in a more positive light. But we don't see any reason to see friendship as further requiring that we refrain from *correcting for this biased impression* before coming to a settled belief.

Again, we can distinguish the alternative views on offer by means of a "Fate of the World" test: Suppose that an evil demon will destroy the world unless Chandler answers correctly whether Joey's new job will be his big break. And suppose that Chandler's initial inclination was (contrary to what was in fact portrayed in the episode) very favourable towards Joey: He's more aware of Joey's strengths than his weaknesses as an actor, which inclines him towards over-rating his friend. And further, his deep hopes for Joey's career link in with the natural human inclination towards wishful thinking, further contributing to Chandler's initial impression that Joey will do well. But then, as the stakes are so high, he pauses and reflects more carefully on the question. He recognizes that, as a friend, he's naturally going to be a bit biased in Joey's favour, so he explicitly adjusts his credences down to correct for this. Further, he tries to take an "outside view", noting that the inductive evidence from Joey's past career failures—not to mention the low

base rate of success in the acting business—count against him. Weighing it all up carefully, Chandler concludes (against his initial inclination) that the answer is in fact ‘No’.

When his process of belief-formation is spelled out in this way, does Chandler still seem like he has been in any way a bad friend? Surely not. The crucial difference between the original case and this one is that while Chandler still comes to a negative conclusion about Joey’s career prospects, in our case his initial inclination was more positive. And this seems all that friendship, intuitively, demands. A good friend finds his friend’s strengths to be more *salient* than his weaknesses, which naturally leads to an initial inclination towards overestimation. But there is no requirement that we settle for first appearances. We can (if pressed) correct for our biases, and so reach a more accurate final conclusion, without in any way violating the norms of friendship. The problem with Chandler in the original case is not that he *believed* poorly of Joey, but that it didn’t even *appear* to him that Joey would do well.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the two-way relation between salience and good character. First, we saw that our evaluations of an agent’s moral character needs to take into account what they find salient, since neglecting a salient need reflects a greater deficit of beneficent motivation than does neglecting

an objectively similar but much less noticeable need. In this way, facts about salience can serve as an important “input” to our moral assessments. But in the second half of the paper, we saw that the connection also goes the other way: Finding some things more salient than others can be an important “output”, requirement, or downstream consequence, of good character. In particular, we argued that the virtue of modesty consists in not finding one’s own achievements excessively salient, and that a good friend will find his friends’ better qualities to be more salient than an impartial stranger would find them. Our proposals differ from previously floated views, in both cases, because we insist that there’s no further requirement for the agent to *believe* in line with initial appearances—he may instead correct for any biases introduced by what he finds more or less salient.

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