

Because it's right

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Sally, in her hour of need, turns to you. You help her out, even though it costs you time, energy, emotion, and resources you would much rather have spent otherwise. Why did you help her out? Because she needed help, you say. Because she was suffering. Because it was the right thing to do.

That last reason—because it was the right thing to do—might appear to be clear and plain, just as clear and plain as the other reasons. Indeed, it might even appear that without that last reason the first two are mysterious. One might think, that is, that one could not take a person's need or suffering as a reason to help that person except that one thinks it right to help people in need or who are suffering. On this thought, that Sally is suffering gives one no reason to help her unless one thinks it wrong not to help a person who is suffering. Or, at least, one had better have the thought that indifference to her plight would be wrong if one is to spend the time, energy, emotion, and resources it costs to help her.

Actually, though, it's the thought that it's the rightness of the action that gives one a reason to perform it that is strange and mysterious. Better were that thought never to cross one's mind.

The trouble with the thought "it's the right thing to do" is not that we differ among ourselves, and even disagree, about what's right and what's wrong. It's true that we do disagree, and sometimes deeply. But set that aside. Our concern is with the thought that "it's the right thing to do" is a reason to do it. That concern is independent of whatever each of us individually takes the right thing to do to be. I'll take the right thing to do to consist either in treating a person with respect or in promoting the general good. But you may assign to the phrase "the right thing to do" whatever content you like.

Because it's a belief, the thought that it's the right thing to do, while it might guide an action, cannot itself stimulate one to perform an action. What gets one off the couch, rather, is the desire to do the right thing. The belief that it's the right thing to do will just sit there among all the rest of one's beliefs until it hooks up with the desire or want or preference to do the right thing. Only then do you move.

The belief that it's the right thing to do will get you off the couch (or, at least, will make you feel bad should you remain on the couch) as soon as it's paired with the desire to do the right thing. So what about the belief that Sally is suffering? Because it's a belief, it won't get you off the couch. What could get you off the couch is your desire that Sally not suffer. But notice: if your desire that Sally not suffer will get you off the couch (once, of course, you believe that you can alleviate Sally's suffering), you don't need either the belief that helping Sally is the right thing to do or the desire to

do the right thing. That Sally is suffering is by itself enough.

You don't need the belief that it's wrong not to help Sally in order to have a reason to help Sally. That Sally needs help is for you reason enough to help Sally, so long as you desire to help Sally when she's in need. We don't in fact need to think kindness, respect, and fairness are the right things to do in order to do them, and we don't need to think cruelty, contempt, or unfairness are wrong in order to renounce them. All we need is to like kindness, respect, and fairness and to dislike cruelty, contempt, and unfairness.

“So why, then, should we like kindness and dislike cruelty? Isn't this where the distinction between right and wrong gets its point? We should like kindness because it's right to be kind and dislike cruelty because it's wrong to be cruel.”

But consider what could be your reasons for thinking it's right to be kind and wrong to be cruel. These reasons could be nothing other than reasons to be kind and not to be cruel. If you have a reason to be kind, you have a reason to think it's right to be kind; alternatively, if you have no reason to be kind, you can't have a reason to think it's right to be kind. That means, though, that the thought that it's right to be kind plays no work at all. It's an idle thought, one you never need.

“So it's an idle thought. Is that really so bad? Why not let the thought that it's the right thing to do cross your mind, even if it doesn't play any role in your practical reasoning?” Well, here is how Betty reasons: Sally is in need; it would be wrong for me not to help Sally; so I will help Sally. And here is how Tony reasons: Sally is in need; so I will help Sally. I much prefer Tony's way of thinking to Betty's.