

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar

Prof. Funkhouser

4/25/07

Davis, "The Antecedent Motivation Theory — Discussion"

- Davis considers whether Mele is correct in claiming that desires always temporally precede both beliefs and practical reasoning (AMT), whenever such desires join with beliefs to cause action. Davis points out that there is nothing in the Aristotelian position, which Mele quoted, that commits one to this thesis. I.e., the Humean Theory of Motivation alone does not demand this temporal precedence. Davis will object to Mele's arguments for AMT, and he will provide counter-examples as well.

- Davis distinguishes two types of practical reasoning: instrumental and evaluative.

- The former type is familiar means-end reasoning. We desire an end, we believe that some course of action is a suitable means to achieving that end, we form a desire to pursue that course of action, and then we do pursue it. (251) The example involving Edna is supposed to illustrate how the desire for the end need not temporally precede the means-end belief.

Davis also objects to Mele's analysis of the Roberta case:

It is not at all clear that such desires *themselves* contribute to Roberta's desire to help the struggling textile workers. They certainly do not do so by anything like practical reasoning. Roberta's reason for wanting to help the textile workers was not to avoid suffering herself, or prevent her mother and sister from suffering. Nor is her desire not to suffer herself a plausible cause or explanation of her desire to help the textile workers. It is much more plausible that both desires result from a common cause, such as Roberta's recognition that suffering is awful. (252)

- Evaluative practical reasoning is reasoning that results in the belief that some course of action is the best, or at least a good enough, thing to do. But the conditional desires that are supposed to connect such beliefs with action need not temporally precede these evaluative beliefs. For example:

But the temporal relation could just as well be different. Thus we may have awakened one morning to a foot of snow. Kathy may ask, “Given that there is so much snow, what shall we do?” When cross country skiing is suggested, the conditional desire to go cross country skiing if there is a lot of snow may combine with the belief that there is a lot of snow to motivate us to go skiing. (254)

Davis also challenges the claim that there is always a generic desire in the background that connects evaluative beliefs with more specific desires (to perform particular actions).

Or consider these examples, in which the conditional desires follow the evaluative belief:

Imagine a kleptomaniac who always knew that refraining from stealing was the right thing to do, but never had the conditional desire to refrain from stealing given that it is the right thing to do until his psychiatrist found the correct medicine. Or imagine a woman who never saw a reason to be moral until she had a revelation and became religious. She may have believed all along that helping others was the moral thing to do. But it was not until she acquired the desire to do as God commanded that she wanted to do something given that it was the moral thing to do. So it was only then that she became motivated to help others. (255–256)

Q: But do such cases pose any problem for Mele?

- Davis claims that it is no more mysterious how a belief can cause a desire than it is how a desire for an end can combine with a means-end belief to cause a desire for the means. (257) (But isn't this talk of causation, rather than justification, misplaced?)

- Does Mele's AMT really possess an advantage over the Cognitive Engine Theory in accounting for the source of motivation? Mele does not explain where motivation comes from in the first place. So, what reason does he have to deny that motivation can come from evaluative beliefs?