

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar
Prof. Funkhouser
5/2/07
Class Summary

Reasons and Actions

- Q: Are *rationalizing (motivational) explanations* of actions also *causal explanations* of actions?
 - Davidson answered “yes”. For, we can make sense of *acting for a reason* only if reasons can be causes. And for Davidson, reasons are belief/pro-attitude pairs. Mele made his case for the causalist position in Chapter 2 of his *M&A*.
- Q: Are there external reasons for actions? Williams argued against them, but recall the responses by Korsgaard and Velleman (“The Possibility of Practical Reason”).

Agency and Action

- What distinguishes *doings* from *happenings*? What is it to be an *agent*?
 - Davidson argued that intention entails agency.
 - Frankfurt: Persons have second-order volitions. Frankfurt also distinguished mere *activity* from *action*.
 - Velleman exploited Frankfurt’s activity/action distinction and sought the marks of full-blooded or autonomous human action. Velleman also challenged Davidson’s Standard Model. Velleman argued that (non-deviant) belief-desire causation is the standard for activity, not action. Here, his psychoanalytic examples were prominent. Velleman argued that Davidson did not provide a role for the agent in action. Autonomous agents are governed by a higher-order desire to act for the best reasons.

Motivation (General)

- What kinds of states can motivate?
 - According to Hume reason cannot motivate; only desire-like states motivate. Recall Hume's arguments here, as well as Smith's direction of fit argument and Mele's Antecedent Motivation Theory.
 - Nagel argued against the Humean Theory of Motivation by allowing motivated desires that are the product of reasoning. And Korsgaard claimed that we should think of internalism as the view that moral judgments provide motives for rational people. In this way, she thinks that moral judgments can be the product of reasoning, can provide motivation, but do not essentially provide motivation (i.e., in cases in which we are not rational).
- Q: Are desire-like states essentially motivating?
 - On Hume's "impulse" theory passions or desires are essentially motivating. But, Mele denies this — e.g., Connie on the spaceship. Also, see Roth's examples in his discussion of motivational contextualism.

Motivation and Value

- Do we always pursue what we judge to be best? Or, is weakness of the will possible?
 - Recall that Davidson thinks motivational strength corresponds to value judgment. Nevertheless, he argued that his P1–P3 do not form an inconsistent triad. (His solution critically invokes the distinction between "all things considered" and unconditional judgments.) Watson offered some criticisms of Davidson's account. He also argued that weakness of the will cannot be distinguished from compulsion. Mele's discussion of motivational strength and self-control (Chapters 7 and 8) is also relevant here.
 - Stocker also presented cases in which we were motivationally indifferent to that which we judged to be worth pursuing.
- Q: Do moral judgments necessarily provide motivation?
 - Mele argues that they do not — see Chapter 5 of *M&A*. Velleman ("Is Motivation Internal to Value?"), Nagel, and Korsgaard all offer internalist-friendly alternatives.

Motivation and Imagination

- Does imagination provide a motivating role, analogous to that of desire, in at least some cases pretense?
 - Velleman (“On the Aim of Belief”) and Currie argued that there are desire-like imaginings that motivate pretense. Nichols & Stich, as well as Funkhouser & Spaulding, argued against this. They argued that something closer to the traditional Humean/Davidson motivational story holds for pretense as well.