

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar
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Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason"

- Q: Are the only reasons for actions considerations that appeal to an agent's pre-existing desires? The first paragraph offers a two premise argument for a "yes" answer.

- A distinction: internal and external reasons.

In Williams's terminology, "internal" reasons are those which count as reasons for someone only by virtue of his antecedent inclinations; "external" reasons are those which count as reasons for someone independently of his inclinations. (171)

The Humean position (internalism) is that all reasons are internal in this sense. Velleman will argue that the choice between internalism and externalism is a false dilemma.

- Korsgaard's position: All rational agents have a reason to do what morality requires, even if some lack the corresponding inclinations. This is just partially constitutive of being a rational agent. So, those who lack these inclinations are simply irrational.

- Williams, on the contrary, would hold that if the agent does not possess these inclinations, then these moral "reasons" are not reasons for her at all.

In assuming that an agent's imperviousness to a consideration impugns its status as a reason, rather than the agent's rationality, Williams assumes that its status as a reason cannot be established independently. (174)

- The challenge for the externalist:

What are the prospects for showing that something is a reason for someone whether or not he has the inclinations to which it would appeal? How will the externalist demonstrate that there are considerations by which any agent ought to be moved? (174)

The externalist will need to come up with some substantive claims regarding which inclinations are rational. (175)

- formal objects: “The formal object of an enterprise is a goal stated solely in terms of, or in terms that depend on, the very concept of being the object of that enterprise. Thus, for example, winning is the formal object of a competitive game, since “winning” just is the concept of succeeding in competition.” (176)

But all enterprises with a formal object also must have a substantive object. So, what is the substantive object of practical reasoning? This is a question that the externalist is obligated to answer, according to Velleman. Velleman thinks this obligation is very hard to meet. So, he looks for an alternative to internalism and externalism.

Note: Internalists have no problem explaining why we should care about that which we have reason to do.

It says that things count as reasons for someone only if he is inclined to care about them, and so it leaves the normative question of whether to care about them entirely open. (180)

- Velleman compares action to belief, and practical reasoning to theoretical reasoning. The substantive object of theoretical reasoning is to arrive at true belief (or something like that).

- Q: If someone did not care about truth, would some consideration that points to the truth of a belief still count as a reason for this person to so believe?

Velleman thinks that the following is a false dilemma:

If someone weren't inclined to believe what seemed true, would signs of truth in a proposition no longer count as reasons for him to believe it? Or would he no longer qualify as a rational believer? (181)

Velleman says that someone who isn't respectful of truth-conducive (evidential) reasons is not a believer at all.

- There are propositional attitudes besides belief that are regarding-as-true attitudes — e.g., assuming and imagining. So, how do these attitudes differ from belief?

But we believe a proposition when we regard it as true for the sake of thereby getting the truth right with respect to that proposition:

to believe something is to accept it with the aim of doing so only if it really is true. (183–184)

Then note the two ways in which Velleman says one can be indifferent to the truth. (185)

○ Velleman explains why the “internalism or externalism?” question poses a false dilemma with respect to theoretical reasoning.

The question of whether reasons for belief are internal or external reasons thus presents a false dichotomy. Reasons for belief are like internal reasons in that they exist and exert an influence only in relation to a particular inclination; but they are like external reasons in that the inclination on which they depend is embedded in the attitude of belief, so that they can count as reasons for belief per se, in abstraction from motivational differences among individual believers. (187)

Velleman thinks that the same is true of practical reasoning.

● So, for Velleman, behavior counts as action only if it has a substantive aim. Not all goal-directed behavior is action. Rather, there is some particular, substantive goal that all actions have in common.

Here’s a candidate: all actions aim at the good. But Velleman thinks it is simply false that all actions have this substantive goal. For example, there are truly perverse actions.

● Velleman claims that *conscious control* is what separates reflexes from full-blooded action (“work performed under management” (190)). Maybe the constitutive goal of action is to be found here, with what Velleman also calls *autonomy*.

○ What is conscious control?

In sum, instead of reacting before you know it, you react after and because you know it, and that’s what makes your behavior an autonomous action. You act autonomously because you extend your hand in, and out of, knowledge of what you’re doing. (196)

So, autonomy is the constitutive goal of action, in the following sense.

Here, then, is how autonomy can serve as the constitutive goal of action. The goal-directed movement of your hand comes under your conscious control because it is prompted by your accepting that you will perform such a movement. And it is prompted by

that acceptance because of your inclination toward conscious control of what you're doing — which is just an inclination toward autonomy. Your movement thus becomes autonomous precisely by manifesting your inclination toward autonomy; and in becoming autonomous, it becomes a full-blooded action. (196)

- In the closing pages Velleman explains that behavior can be motivated by beliefs and desires without being full-blooded action. Again, as from Chapter 1, this is mere activity.
- Conclusion: “The inclination that makes one susceptible to a reason for acting is just the inclination that makes one an agent.” (199)