

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar
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1/31/07
Velleman, "Introduction"

- Traditionally, philosophy of action seeks to explain the difference between mere occurrences and actions.
 - One might think that this is just the distinction between the passive and the active. However, there might be activity that does not rise to the level of action (see the Frankfurt quotation). Velleman offers behaviors that have psychoanalytic explanations as examples.
 - After presenting Freud's discussion of a "slip of the tongue" case, Velleman concludes the following:

Such cases require us to define a category of ungoverned activities, distinct from mere happenings, on the one hand, and from autonomous actions, on the other. This category contains the things that one does rather than merely undergoes, but that one somehow fails to regulate in the manner that separates autonomous human action from merely motivated activity. The philosophy of action must therefore account for three categories of phenomena: mere happenings, mere activities, and actions. (4)

The latter 2 categories cover behaviors attributable to agents, but which involve different levels of an agent's involvement with those behaviors.

- The *Standard Model*, familiar from Davidson, is then presented. On the Standard Model, beliefs and desires combine to both cause and justify our behavior. And our beliefs and desires are, plausibly, closely connected to our identities. So, it is plausible that those behaviors which flow from our beliefs and desires are attributable to us. The Standard Model is supposed to be a model of action, but one might wonder if it is also, or instead, a model of mere activity. Velleman wonders this, at least.
 - A person is identified with his own rationality, so those behaviors that are caused by an agent's reasons-mechanism are attributable to him.

Hence causation via a person's rational faculties qualifies as causation by the person himself. (6)

Velleman accepts this, but rejects the Standard Model on other points.

- The Standard Model would count the inkstand example as an action, but Velleman denies that it is an action. The problem with the Standard Model is that actions must be done for reasons, but not all (content-sensitive) causally efficacious desires justify (to the agent) the behaviors they produce. The Standard Model is a correct model of activity, but not action.

- Velleman distinguishes the following 2 roles for beliefs/desires: motives and reasons.

I have argued that when desire and belief cause behavior in such a way as to operate as its motives, they do not necessarily operate as its reasons — that is, as reasons for which the behavior is performed. (10–11)

- Thought experiment: What needs to be added to creatures capable of motivated activity in order to make them autonomous agents?

- One natural answer is that some higher-order mechanism should be added that monitors and then either inhibits or reinforces these motivational states. This is Frankfurt's hierarchical model of agency.

In the hierarchical model, the behaviors that a person makes happen, in the fullest sense, are the ones that are caused by his first-order motives as reinforced by higher-order motives. Autonomous action, according to this model, is behavior motivated by the desires and beliefs by which the subject wants, or is at least content, to be motivated. (12)

- On the hierarchical model, the psychoanalytic cases do not count as autonomous because there is not the required reflective endorsement.

- Velleman objects to the hierarchical model by claiming that the agent could also be dissociated from his second-order desires. This is because the hierarchical model does not consider how the second-order desire was acquired (e.g., if it is responsive to the reasonableness of the first-order desire that it considers or due to some pathological condition). The example involving acting out of depression, on p. 13, is supposed to illustrate this.

- Velleman endorses a third model of action (the previous 2 were represented by Davidson and Frankfurt):

This model would define action as behavior whose first-order motives are perceived as reasons and are consequently reinforced by higher-order motives of rationality. (14)

◦ Velleman's idea is that agents are governed by a higher-order desire to be moved by the first-order motives that present the best reasons for action.

• Reasons justify in the sense of showing a course of action to be correct. But, what is the standard of correctness for action? See the analogy to belief, as discussed on pp. 16–19.

• Velleman returns to discussing slips of the tongue. He notes that we typically have an inhibition against talking until we know what we are going to say. He then generalizes this to produce a higher-order aim for all action.

I suggest that you go back to the drawing-board and add this aim to your design for autonomous creatures. To their existing capacities for motivation and self-awareness, add the sub-agential aim of knowing what they're doing. (22)

[Skip the *Choice and Belief* section.]

• Does this sound right?

I have suggested that what you should add to subjects of motivation, in order to create agents, is the higher-order aim of knowing what they're doing. Just design your creatures to gravitate toward knowing what they're doing, and they will do only those things which they have made up their minds that they're going to do; and so they will act by choice. (26)

◦ What is it to *know* what you are *doing*?

To know what we are doing is thus to grasp our bodily movements under concepts that set them in an explanatory context of motives and circumstances. Considerations of these motives and circumstances are what qualify, in my view, as reasons for acting. (27)

◦ See Velleman's application of this to the inkstand case, on pp. 28–29.

• Summary:

I have now brought my discussion back to its point of departure: the difference between autonomous action and mere purposeful activity. Purposeful activity is motivated by desire and belief, but

it may or may not be regulated by the subject's grasp of what he is doing. Autonomous action is activity regulated by that reflective understanding, which constitutes the agent's rationale, or reason — the reason for which the action is performed, and whose role as its basis is what makes it an action rather than a mere activity. (29–30)