

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar

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1/31/07

Velleman, "What Happens When Someone Acts?"

- The standard story of human action, associated with Davidson, is as follows:

There is something that the agent wants, and there is an action that he believes conducive to its attainment. His desire for the end, and his belief in the action as a means, justify taking the action, and they jointly cause an intention to take it, which in turn causes the corresponding movements of the agent's body. Provided that these causal processes take their normal course, the agent's movements consummate an action, and his motivating desire and belief constitute his reasons for acting. (123)

- Velleman's main objection to this story is that it leaves out the *agent*:

Psychological and physiological events take place inside a person, but the person serves merely as an arena for these events: he takes no active part. (123)

Further:

In a full-blooded action, an intention is formed by the agent himself, not by his reasons for acting. Reasons affect his intention by influencing him to form it, but they thus affect his intention by affecting him first. (124)

- Q: So, what *is* the role of the agent in action?

The agent thus has at least two roles to play: he forms an intention under the influence of reasons for acting, and he produces behavior pursuant to that intention. (124)

These two roles suggest two ways in which an agent can fail to properly participate in an action.

◦ The agent can fail to participate even in cases in which there isn't a deviant causal chain. Example: visiting an old friend. (126) His actions follow from his desires in a non-deviant manner, but *he* did not participate in the actions. The standard story fails to account for this role for the agent.

◦ Note that these are still actions that the agent performs, even though he does not participate in them. They just lack the feature that Velleman thinks is distinctive of *human* action. (128)

• On the scientific, naturalistic view everything is to be explained in terms of event-causation (if it is to be explained at all). Chisholm's agent-causation rejects this view. On his view, agents are irreducible causes. Because Velleman accepts the naturalistic view, he denies agent-causation in the irreducible sense. Instead, Velleman holds that the agent's role must reduce to event-causation.

◦ This is all independent of, though parallel to, the mind-body problem.

Just as the mind-body problem is that of finding a mind at work amid the workings of the body, so the problem of agency is that of finding an agent at work amid the workings of the mind. (131)

• Frankfurt offers a naturalistic and reductive account of the role of the agent in those actions with which she participates. Frankfurt claims that a person does not participate in her actions if she does not *identify* with the motives that move her. Frankfurt originally claimed that second-order motives constitute this identification, but later claimed that decisions play this role.

◦ Frankfurt claims that we cannot be alienated from this self-identification. Velleman objects, however, that this claim assumes agent-causation, which is what we are trying to account for.

For if self-identification is something that cannot occur without the agent's contributing to it, then it cannot occur without agent-causation, and we cannot assume that it occurs without assuming that agent-causation occurs — which is what we set out to show, in the first place. The question is whether there is such a thing as a person's participating in the causal order of events and states, and we can't settle this question simply by positing a primitive state or event that requires the person's participation. (136)

This makes Frankfurt's reductive project appear hopeless.

Since self-identification won't serve our purpose unless it's conceived as something to which the agent contributes, rather than

something that happens to him, reducing self-identification to mere events and states is unlikely to be any easier than reducing action itself. (137)

- Velleman suggests that we look for mental events that occupy the functional role that we standardly associate with the agent. But, what is this functional role? Frankfurt's answer is as follows:

The agent's role, according to Frankfurt, is to reflect on the motives competing for governance of his behavior, and to determine the outcome of the competition, by taking sides with some of his motives rather than others. For the moment, then, I shall adopt Frankfurt's assumption that the agent's role is to adjudicate conflicts of motives (though I shall subsequently argue that such adjudication is best understood as taking place among reasons instead). (138–139)

Again:

The functional role of agent is that of a single party prepared to reflect on, and take sides with, potential determinants of behavior at any level in the hierarchy of attitudes; and this party cannot be identified with any of the items on which it must be prepared to reflect or with which it must be prepared to take sides. (139)

So, this functional role cannot be occupied by any mental event that could be scrutinized as such.

- So, what does Velleman then offer as occupying this function role? Velleman claims that there is a distinctive motive for practical thought (agency). This is the desire to act in accordance with reasons.

What mental event or state might play this role of always directing and never merely undergoing such scrutiny? It can only be a motive that drives practical thought itself. That is, there must be a motive that drives the agent's critical reflection on, and endorsement or rejection of, the potential determinants of his behavior, always doing so from a position of independence from the objects of review. Only such a motive would occupy the agent's functional role, and only its contribution to his behavior would constitute his own contribution. (139)

- Q: Is Velleman too much of a rationalist when he writes the following?

The agent's concern in reflecting on his motives, I believe, is not just to see which ones he likes better; it's to see which ones provide

stronger reasons for acting, and then to ensure that they prevail over those whose rational force is weaker. What animates practical thought is a concern for acting in accordance with reasons.
(140)

- Note Velleman's support, in the last section, for the claim that we are always motivated by the strongest motives.