

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar
Prof. Funkhouser
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Velleman, “Is Motivation Internal to Value?”

- Velleman will argue for a limited version of internalism, the thesis that normative statements must motivate in at least some situations. His limited version of internalism will only concern statements about one’s intrinsic good. Everyone should care about their own good, even if they do not care about being moral or rational.
- Velleman expresses sympathy for Railton and Sidgwick’s claim that “the existence of value entails the existence of beings to whom things can matter”. (86) This claim is supposed to give intuitive support for internalism.

◦ The Railton claim also tells against absolute value:

The story also suggests that introducing potential subjects of concern into a world lays a basis for value only by introducing potential subjects of value — that is, creatures for whom things can be good or bad. The arrival of sentient beings in a world of stones wouldn’t render anything potentially good or bad *for* the stones, since the stones would remain as impassive as before. And if things could have value absolutely — a value that didn’t consist in being good or bad for someone — then why would that value depend on their chances of mattering to sentient beings? Absolute value is precisely the sort of value that something ought to possess even if it were the only thing in the world. (87)

The idea is that things have value only relative to the person for whom it can matter.

◦ Railton’s claim connects value with mattering, but says nothing about the connection between value and motivation. And Velleman revises his understanding of internalism in light of this distinction.

I am therefore tempted to reject the formulation of internalism as a thesis about the relation between value and motivation. I am

inclined to formulate it instead as a thesis about the relation between value and affect, which encompasses motivation and more. (89)

Corresponding to these different ways of understanding internalism — in terms of motivation or affect — there are two senses of ‘a person’s good’. In one sense, it refers to whatever a person ought to seek for himself given his motives (practical good). (93) In another sense, it refers to how a person is doing (well-being).

- Q: Does internalism, in Velleman’s senses, depend on some “ought implies can” principle?

There are both prima facie obligations and prima facie options. Velleman claims that:

I am thus prepared to hypothesize that whatever isn’t at least a prima facie option cannot be even prima facie obligatory. (96)

This claim carries some weight when it comes to the question of internalism:

And this hypothesis entails that something cannot be good, in either sense, for a creature who is constitutionally incapable of caring about it self-interestedly, in the corresponding way. For if a creature is incapable of caring about something, then caring about it is not a prima facie option for him, and so he cannot be under even a prima facie obligation to care about it. And unless the creature ought prima facie to care about the thing self-interestedly, it isn’t intrinsically good for him. Thus can a plausible version of internalism about the good be derived from a plausible version of the principle ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. (96)

- Velleman’s conclusion is rather limited:

What’s prerequisite to a thing’s being good for a person is simply that which is prerequisite to its being such as he prima facie ought to care about for his own sake; what’s prerequisite to its being such as he prima facie ought to care about is that his caring about it be a prima facie option; and his caring about it is a prima facie option so long as caring about it is possible for a creature like him — meaning, I take it, so long as there are some conditions or other under which a creature like him would care about it. (97)