

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar
Prof. Funkhouser
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Velleman, “The Guise of the Good”

- According to the typical philosopher of action, when agents act intentionally they are always motivated by a desire that represents their action as some good.

This agent is conceived as being capable of intentional action — and hence as being an agent — only by virtue of being a pursuer of value. I want to question whether this conception of agency can be correct. (99)

- So, why have some thought that intentional action requires the pursuit of value? Some have thought this in order to bring together explanations of action in terms of motives and justifications. These stories can be brought together in various ways — e.g., one could try to reduce the justification story to the motivation story or vice versa. Velleman mainly considers those who attempt to build justification into motivation. About these philosophers, Velleman writes:

To this end, they incorporate the valence of desire into its content, by describing desire, not as a favorable attitude toward the representation of some outcome, but rather as an attitude toward a favorable representation of the outcome. (103)

Davidson is offered as a prime example.

○ Velleman offers two objections to this approach. First, he claims that it requires that those with desires possess evaluative concepts. However, there are some (like children) who desire without possessing evaluative concepts. Second, he claims that an agent can be motivated by a desire without grasping the justification that is supposedly contained in that desire. So, an agent can be motivated “without having mentally accessed anything that justifies his action”. (105)

- Beliefs and desires can be distinguished by their directions of fit. Desires represent propositions as to be brought about. One might think that this

already smuggles in a value judgment — e.g., that it would be good to bring it about.

- Here is a way of trying to exploit the concept of direction of fit to reconcile the two stories:

Thus, if an attitude combines the propositional object p with a direction of fit expressible by the predicate “good”, then it would seem to harbor justificatory force — not in its propositional object alone but rather in the combination of its propositional object and its direction of fit. And the agent can be imagined as having mental access, not only to the propositions that he grasps in various attitudes, but also to the attitudes’ direction of fit, as expressed by their constitutive predicates. (107)

- But Velleman objects that this proposal fails to account for the justificatory story. Velleman first clarifies:

Yet the cognitivist doesn’t merely claim that desire provides reason for acting; he claims that being moved by a desire amounts to acting for a reason. And this claim implies, as we have seen, that to fall under a desire’s motivational influence is to fall under the rational influence of a mentally grasped justification. (108)

One can be moved by a desire without grasping the reason for action that the desire contains.

- Though we can describe someone with a desire as finding the object of that desire attractive or good, this is an extrinsic fact. Even if this description is true, the person with the desire is not necessarily making any such judgment about the object of desire.
- Velleman distinguishes attitudes with the same direction of fit by their differing constitutive aims. With regard to the cognitive attitudes Velleman writes:

Belief and assumption are then described as two-tiered attitudes, combining the first-order attitude of acceptance with different second-order attitudes — namely, the different aims or intentions with which a proposition can be accepted. (113)

Belief is accepting a proposition as true with the aim of accepting what really is true.

- Q: Does desire aim at the good, as belief aims at the true?

○ There are various attitudes with desire's direction of fit. These attitudes are different ways of *approving of* a proposition. So, is desire the approval of a proposition with the aim of approving what really should be approved (i.e., the good)?

Velleman denies the analogy. Rather than aiming at the good, Velleman claims that it aims at the *attainable*. Desire has no subjective justificatory force.

○ Velleman's account also explains why desires can be perverse.

The ruler of Hell doesn't desire what he wrongly thinks is worthy of approval; he desires what he rightly thinks isn't. (119)

○ Reasons, like desires, can also be perverse. Example: acting out of, and in light of, despair.