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Alien Attributions and the Possibility of Missing the Mark: A Critique of Velleman's Account of Autonomy and the Constitutive Aim of Action

Matthew Todd Flummer

University of Missouri-St. Louis, mattflummer@yahoo.com

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Alien Attributions and the Possibility of Missing the Mark:
A Critique of Velleman's Account of Autonomy and the Constitutive Aim of Action

Matthew T. Flummer

M.Div., Christian Thought, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary – New Orleans,
2009

B.S., Exercise Science and Wellness, Jacksonville State University – Jacksonville, 2000

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Advisory Committee

John Brunero, Ph.D.
Chairperson

Eric Wiland, Ph.D.

Anna Alexandrova, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

David Velleman has argued that action has a constitutive aim. This constitutive aim is analogous to the constitutive aim of belief. The constitutive aim of belief, he argues, is to track the truth or arrive at the truth. This aim sets the standard of correctness for a belief. A belief is correct if and only if it is true. So reasons for belief are considerations that point toward truth either by guaranteeing truth or significantly raising the probability of the truth. Any belief that fails to track the truth misses the mark set by the constitutive aim of belief. Like the constitutive aim of belief, the constitutive aim of action sets the standard of correctness for an action. Velleman claims that action constitutively aims at self-knowledge (Velleman, 2000, 2006, 2009). Under this conception of action, an action is correct if and only if you know what you're doing when you perform the act. Thus reasons for acting are now given by this new constitutive aim of action. Reasons are considerations in light of which a person has a better potential grasp of knowing what they are doing. They help the agent make sense of their action.

Velleman's thesis functions both as an account of what autonomous action is and as the basis for a "constitutive aim" account of reasons. My argument will thus be divided into two parts. In part 1, I will argue that Velleman's account of autonomous action fails. I will do this by pointing out that the argument Velleman makes against Frankfurt's hierarchical model works against his own view. In part 2, I will critique Velleman's view of the constitutive aim of action. I will argue that if action has a constitutive aim, it cannot be the aim that he suggests. I will show this by pointing out that Clark's argument against Velleman's original view still works against his newer view.

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
1. Autonomous Action	6
1.1 Categories of Action	7
1.2 The Standard Model	8
1.3 The Hierarchical Model	10
1.4 Velleman's Criticism of the HM and His View of Autonomy	13
1.5 Knowing What You're Doing and Alien Attributions	16
2. Constitutive Aim of Action	20
2.1 Clark's Criticism	21
2.2 Velleman's New View	24
2.3 Clark's Criticism Works Against Velleman's New View	27
2.4 Knowing Why You're Acting	30
Conclusion	33
Works Cited	34

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Introduction

David Velleman has argued that action has a constitutive aim. This constitutive aim is analogous to the constitutive aim of belief. The constitutive aim of belief, he argues, is to track the truth or arrive at the truth. This aim sets the standard of correctness for a belief. A belief is correct if and only if it is true. So reasons for belief are considerations that point toward truth either by guaranteeing truth or significantly raising the probability of the truth. Any belief that fails to track the truth misses the mark set by the constitutive aim of belief.

Like the constitutive aim of belief, the constitutive aim of action sets the standard of correctness for an action. Velleman first argues that the aim is autonomy (Velleman, 1996). By 'autonomy,' Velleman meant 'conscious control.' According to this view an action is correct if and only if you are in conscious control of your action. Reasons for action are considerations in light of which the action is under conscious control of the person. Thus any activity that fails to be under conscious control of the person misses the mark set by this constitutive aim of action.

Philip Clark pointed out a problem with Velleman's view (Clark, 2001). Belief has the constitutive aim of tracking the truth. A belief fails to meet this standard when it fails to track the truth. As such, false belief fails to meet the requirement of the standard for correctness of belief. However, this part of the analogy fails for action. Fully intentional actions cannot be analogous to false beliefs. As Clark points out, an action

never fails to meet the standard of correctness for the constitutive aim of action. As a result, it is “impossible to criticize any fully intentional action as being contrary to the weight of reasons.”¹ Thus Velleman cannot say of any action, no matter how heinous, that another action better meets the standard of correctness for action. This is because every action meets the standard simply by being an action.

Perhaps as a result of this problem, Velleman changed his views on the constitutive goal of action from conscious control, to knowing what you’re doing (Velleman, 2000, 2006, 2009). Under this new conception of action, an action is correct if and only if you know what you’re doing when you perform the act. Thus reasons for acting are now given by this new constitutive aim of action. Reasons are considerations in light of which a person has a better potential grasp of knowing what they are doing. They help the agent make sense of their action.

Velleman’s thesis functions both as an account of what autonomous action is and as the basis for a “constitutive aim” account of reasons. My argument will thus be divided into two parts. In part 1, I will argue that Velleman’s account of autonomous action fails. I will do this by pointing out that the argument Velleman makes against Frankfurt’s hierarchical model works against his own view. In part 2, I will critique Velleman’s view of the constitutive aim of action. I will argue that if action has a constitutive aim, it cannot be the aim that he suggests. I will show this by pointing out that Clark’s argument against Velleman’s original view still works against his newer view.

¹ Clark, 581.

1. Autonomous Action

There are philosophical problems in the philosophy of action such as the nature of autonomous action. Consider the old debate regarding free will and autonomy: how can someone honestly dissociate himself from an action or motivation? Consider when someone apologizes for their behavior the night before by saying, 'It wasn't me, it was the alcohol,' or 'Forgive me I just wasn't acting like myself.' These types of statements make me wonder if it wasn't you who was it? Or if you weren't yourself, who were you? One way that a person can attempt to remove the difficulty is to admit that they really were the one's acting. But then it is possible that they dissociate themselves from this endorsement as well and so on ad infinitum. Elijah Millgram explains, "Velleman's way of terminating the regress is to locate a psychological element from which an agent cannot dissociate himself. Because to act is to act for reasons, an agent cannot dissociate himself from a desire to act for reasons—not, that is, without ceasing to be an agent."²

Velleman points out a puzzle when it comes to action. He first assumes that determinism is true. As a determinist, he believes that every event is caused by a prior event. But he asks, if this is true, then how can I make anything happen? He answers the question in this way—I make things happen (I act autonomously) if and only if I act for a reason. Thus in order to understand autonomous action, we must explore what it means to act for a reason.

² Millgram, Elijah, "Practical Reason and the Structure of Actions," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2009, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/practical-reason-action/> (accessed 3/24/2011).

1.1 Categories of Action

Wittgenstein famously asked, “What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?”³ This question is supposed to point out the distinction between a mere bodily movement and an action attributed to me. Someone may give me a shock in the brain with an electrode and cause my arm to go up. Or I may raise my arm to grab the cookie jar off the top shelf. The former is obviously not an action because I had no part in it. But it seems that the latter is an action because we could say that I made something happen.

There is, however, at least one other category of human bodily movement. Harry Frankfurt called these bodily movements ‘mere activities.’ They are movements by me, to be sure, but they are movements that are done “altogether idly and inattentively.”⁴ For example, suppose someone scratches their head while engrossed in a book. If they are focused on the book, they most likely don’t even attend to the fact that they are scratching their head. Thus it seems that this action is missing something that would make it an action in the full-blooded sense.

Velleman claims that in order to understand action, we should consider these three categories of action: mere happenings, mere activities, and actions. Mere happenings are movements that include nervous twitches or involuntary reflexes such as removing my hand from a hot stove. We can also imagine someone giving me a shove so

³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), § 621.

⁴ Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 58-68.

that I bump into someone else. My bumping into them did not arise from within me, it simply happened to me.

Mere activities, on the other hand, are things that I do, but do not do on purpose or intentionally. An example of this is a verbal slip. Verbal slips aren't mere happenings. They are things that I do, rather than happen to me. But verbal slips seem to happen in spite of me. Suppose I am trying to keep a secret. Unfortunately I am a horrible secret keeper. Even as I try to keep the secret, I let out a verbal slip revealing the secret I wanted to keep. "There is a sense in which [my] utterance is produced despite [me], by a desire that [I] didn't intend to express."⁵

Velleman explains, "Mere activity is therefore a partial and imperfect exercise of the subject's capacity to make things happen: in one sense, the subject makes the activity happen; in another, it is made despite him, or at least without his concurrence. Full-blooded human action occurs only when the subject's capacity to make things happen is exerted to its fullest extent."⁶ And like mentioned before, according to Velleman, *I make things happen when I act autonomously and I act autonomously when I act for a reason.* It would be helpful to therefore turn to an examination what it means to act for a reason.

1.2 The Standard Model

Many philosophers have developed models in order to understand reasons for action. One of these is what Velleman calls the standard model. The standard model designates actions as those that are attributed to the beliefs and desires of the agent.

⁵ Velleman, "Introduction," *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

SM: A ϕ 's for a reason iff A desires to ϕ and A believes that ϕ -ing is a means to ϕ and A ϕ 's.

Thus the standard model explains reasons for action by pointing to our beliefs and desires. I desire something and believe that acting in such a way will satisfy my desire. This belief-desire pair causes my behavior. They also justify my behavior by being my reasons for acting.

Velleman argues that the standard model doesn't do enough to explain action because it allows things to count as actions that are mere activities. He asks us to consider the case of Freud's inkstand. Freud sat down to his desk one day to work and moved his hand forward in a clumsy way and knocked his inkstand off of the desk. He claims that there is a simple explanation for this seemingly accidental action. His sister had been in his office and remarked on how his inkstand didn't match the attractive new desk. Freud asks, "Did I perhaps conclude from my sister's remark that she intended to make me a present of a nicer inkstand on the next festive occasion, and did I smash the unlovely old one so as to force her to carry out the intention she had hinted at?"⁷ He answers that if this is true, then the apparent accidental breaking of the inkstand was not accidental after all. It was actually a carefully executed action "and understood how to avoid damaging any of the more precious objects that stood around."⁸

Velleman claims that the standard model failed because it allowed behavior to be counted as actions that were mere activities. This simply won't do because to understand action, we need to see it in its most full-blown sense, action *par excellence*. Normally, we

⁷ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey et. Al. (London: Hogarth Press. 1960). VI: 167-8, quoted in *The Possibility of Practical Reason*

⁸ Ibid.

see full-blooded action as things that we do, not things that happen to us. Searle makes this objection against the standard model in that a simple belief-desire causal model can designate actions as actions that are impulsive or forced on us. Consider a drug addict who has a desire for drugs and believes that what is before him is drugs. This belief-desire pair causes him to take the drugs. He doesn't deliberate and choose to take the drugs; he's caused to do it.⁹ He is not autonomous in his taking the drugs. Rather, his addiction forces him to do so, sometimes even against his will. Velleman explains that when someone does something that he unconsciously wants to do, he hasn't "necessarily seen any justification for his behavior, nor has his rationality been engaged..."¹⁰ Velleman concludes that full-blooded action must be autonomous action, or action that is controlled by the agent's will. The standard model is therefore, a model for mere activity but not for action.

1.3 The Hierarchical Model

We thus turn to another model of action that includes the agent's will in action—that of Harry Frankfurt. Frankfurt distinguishes between two types of desires: first-order desires and second-order desires. First-order desires are ordinary desires such as physical appetites. These include desires for food or drink and desires for love or money or other material things or to perform some action. Second-order desires are desires about first order desires. For instance, when a love struck teenager wishes that she didn't desire her

⁹ Searle, J. R., *Rationality in Action*.

¹⁰ Velleman, "Introduction," *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 9.

forbidden love. Or an alcoholic desires that he not have a desire for drink. Frankfurt notes that it's not enough to simply formulate this distinction. We need something more.

There may be multiple competing desires or the agent may be unaware or mistaken about her desires. But the desire which actually moves the agent to perform some action is the agent's will. "An agent's will, then, is identical with one or more of his first-order desires."¹¹ Thus, according to Frankfurt, the effective desire, or the one that actually moves the agent is his will.

An agent might have a second order desire to have some desire while at the same time having another desire for this desire not to be effective. Frankfurt asks us to consider a doctor who treats drug addicts. He supposes that it might be helpful to be able to experience what it is like to desire drugs in the way that the addicts desire them so that he can better treat the addicts. It is possible, however, that though he wants to have a desire to take drugs, he doesn't want his desire to be effective. He doesn't actually want to take drugs, just experience the craving. So his 2nd order desire to have the craving for drugs does not entail that he actually want this desire to be effective. A second order desire amounts to a reflective endorsement only when the agent desires that their first order desire be effective.¹²

On the other hand, suppose that I have a second order desire to have the desire to exercise. If when the time to exercise comes and I am moved to run by my desire to exercise, then what I want is actually what I want to want. But sometimes what I want to want doesn't move me to action. If I am moved to run out of fear of the pit bull chasing

¹¹ Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14.

¹² Ibid.

me then what I want to want, in that moment, is not what has moved me to action. Some other desire, such as self-preservation, has moved me to run.

Thus under Frankfurt's Hierarchical model, reasons for action come from reflective endorsement. An agent reflectively endorses an action they have a second order desire to have a particular first order desire and they want it to be effective in producing action.

HM: $A \phi$'s for a reason iff A desires to ϕ and A believes that ϕ -ing is a means to ϕ and A reflectively endorses his desire to ϕ and $A \phi$'s.

This entails that acting for a reason requires that agents have second order desires and the capacity to reflectively endorse one of their desires. Reflectively endorsing a desire simply amounts to wanting to have the desire on which one acts.

Frankfurt states that having second order desires is essential to being a person. He calls an agent who is always moved by his strongest first order desire and never has second order desires a wanton. Wantons are not persons because they have no second order desires. Wantons do not care about their will. Very young children and non-human animals are wantons.¹³ It is also possible for a normally functioning adult human to be a wanton if he acts without reflecting on his desires. This is illustrated by the difference between two drug addicts. One has the second order desire to not have the desire for drugs. The second simply acts unreflectively on his desire for drugs. He is a wanton because he never reflects on whether he wants to want drugs or not.¹⁴ The wanton addict

¹³ Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 15-16.

¹⁴ Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 17.

may even have conflicting first order desires: one for the drugs and one against taking drugs. He does not, however, prefer that one of his desires win out.

By endorsing his desire to not take drugs with his second order desire the unwilling addict identifies himself with this second order desire. “He makes one of them more truly his own and, in so doing, he withdraws himself from the other. It is in virtue of this identification and withdrawal accomplished through the formation of second order desire, that the unwilling addict may meaningfully make the analytically puzzling statements that the force moving him to take the drugs is a force other than his own, and it is not of his own free will but rather against his will that this force moves him to take it.”¹⁵ Thus acting autonomously according to the HM consists in being moved by the desires that the agent endorses.

1.4 Velleman’s Criticism of the HM and His View of Autonomy

Velleman points out that the hierarchical model is not without its problems. One of the problems is that a person can be dissociated from their higher order desires. He asks us to consider another of Freud’s examples. Freud tells the story of a President of the Lower House of the Austrian Parliament who opened a meeting by declaring it closed. He realized his verbal slip once everyone at the meeting laughed. Freud points out that it seemed that the President wanted to close the meeting. But it also seemed that he wanted to open the meeting. The president therefore has two conflicting desires, one to close the meeting and one to open the meeting.

¹⁵ Ibid, 18.

Velleman asks us to consider a revision of this story in which the President realizes his first order desire to close the meeting before he lets it slip out. But the president endorses his desire to say something inappropriate with a second order desire. He then declares the meeting closed. Velleman asks us to suppose that this second order desire is the result of boredom or depression. Velleman claims that since the president's second order desire to say something inappropriate was caused by something alien to himself—in this case boredom or depression, this desire is not an expression of his own will.

Therefore, a person can have the desire for something and believe that acting in such a way will satisfy their desire and endorse this desire with a higher order desire yet still not be autonomous because their higher order desire was the result of something alien to themselves such as boredom or depression. Velleman states, "What autonomy seems to require, then, is not just the capacity for higher-order motives in general but particular higher-order motives, which would reinforce the agent's first-order motives insofar as the latter were perceived as reasons."¹⁶ In other words, the HM fails to require that a person have the right kind of second order desires. This model fails to distinguish why or how the agent endorses his desire. Velleman explains that in order to explain action we can't just point to any desire or the endorsement of a desire. We must look to a particular desire that the agent cannot be dissociated from. Velleman explains that his project is to find a desire that we cannot be dissociated from.

Here is a summary of Velleman's argument against the HM:

1. I make things happen iff I act autonomously
2. I act autonomously iff I act for a reason

¹⁶ Velleman, 2000, p 14.

3. I act for a reason iff I reflectively endorse my action (according to the HM)
4. If an action is attributable to something alien to me, then the action is not autonomous (Velleman's argument against the HM)
5. But, I can reflectively endorse my action and my action can be attributable to something alien to me.

Therefore, reflectively endorsing an action does not necessarily mean that I am acting autonomously.

Velleman suggests that we could amend the HM by adding an particular higher order desire, the desire to act on a desire as a reason. Thus reflective endorsement would amount to having the desire to act on a desire as a reason. One worry would be that this would require a person to have the concept of a reason for acting. Velleman states, "It would require a person to have the concept of a reason in order to be capable of acting at all. Indeed, it would require him to have, not only the generic concept of a reason, but a specific conception of what counts as a reason, and what makes some reasons better than others."¹⁷ Those who have no such concept would apparently be incapable of acting in the full-blooded sense. They would be similar to Frankfurt's idea of a wanton.

Velleman claims that what he has been referring to as the particular higher order desire need not literally be a desire. He states, "The problem with the hierarchical model, we found, is that it can be satisfied by any higher-order motive at all, whereas the mechanism that constitutively regulates action must somehow connect it to reasons for acting."¹⁸ He simply used the desire terminology in his attempt to revise the HM. He therefore believes that the particular higher-order desire that the HM requires is the desire for self-understanding. This is not necessarily a desire but an aim.

¹⁷ Velleman, 2000, p 15.

¹⁸ Velleman, 2000, p 19.

The standard model and the hierarchical model are unsatisfactory. I am now in a position to explain Velleman's of acting for a reason. This is what I'll call the self-knowledge model (SKM).

SKM: A ϕ 's for a reason iff A desires to ϕ and believes that ϕ -ing is a means to ϕ and A knows what he's doing when he ϕ 's.

According to this self-knowledge model, an agent must not only have the relevant belief desire pair, they must know what they are doing when they act. Velleman explains reasons for action according to the SKM. They are considerations in light of which a person has a better potential grasp of knowing what they're doing. These reasons help them make sense of what they are doing.

Velleman says that because all agents have the aim of knowing what they're doing, they won't perform an action without knowing what they're doing first. For if they don't know what they're doing before they do it, then they won't be acting. They will just be engaging in mere activity. Anscombe makes a similar point in *Intention*. An intentional action is one in which the question 'Why?' has application. So suppose if I ask you, 'Why are you X-ing?' and you answer, 'I wasn't aware I was doing that.' You would be rejecting the question 'Why?' and would not be acting intentionally.¹⁹

1.5 Knowing What You're Doing and Alien Attributions

The same argument that Velleman used against the hierarchical model can be used against the self-knowledge model. When arguing against the hierarchical model, Velleman claimed, "Higher order satisfaction with one's motives doesn't necessarily make for autonomy. Insofar as the president's satisfaction with his own motivational state

¹⁹ Anscombe, *Intention*, 2000.

was attributable to depression or ennui, it would not have been an expression of his own will. If anything it would have expressed a lack of will on his part...²⁰ So a person could meet the standard of HM and not be acting autonomously. I will show that a person can perform an action that meets the criteria set by the SKM and not act autonomously. This is possible if the endorsement of their desires is a result of something alien to them. The following example will demonstrate this possibility.

Consider Velleman's reformulation of Freud's example of the President of the Austrian Parliament. Suppose the President's psychiatrist told him prior to the meeting that he was suffering from depression and his desire to say inappropriate things was the result of this depression. Then later at the meeting, the President knows that he's depressed, he recognizes that his desire to close the session is probably motivated by this depression and he calls the meeting to a close anyway. It seems that he knows not only what he's doing but why. We could say that his action even made sense to him in light of the fact that he was depressed. Yet we could also say that even though he knew what he was doing, his action was not attributable to his will because it was attributable to his depression. Therefore, he knew what he was doing but his action was not autonomous, according to Velleman's argument against the HM.

We could use Anscombe's question and ask the president why he closed the session. If he was able to give an answer, such as, 'The thought of saying something inappropriate excited me. So I decided to close the session.' He has answered the question 'Why?' in the relevant sense. He has also shown that he knew what he was doing before he did it. According to the SKM, he is also acting in the full-blooded sense.

²⁰ Velleman, 2000, p13.

We could strengthen the example with Velleman's discussion of choice.

Velleman claims that choice and belief are similar in two ways. First, they have the same direction of fit. Normally 'direction of fit' is explained in the following way: Beliefs have world-to-mind direction of fit and desires have mind-to-world direction of fit. Basically, this means that with our beliefs we try to change our minds to fit the way the world actually is. With desires, the world is not how we want it to be so we attempt to change the world in some way in order to fit our desires. Velleman is claiming that choice has the world-to-mind direction of fit in the same way that belief does.²¹ Now, this terminology might be a little misleading so I'll elaborate.

Velleman states, "Choosing entails settling a question in one's mind, it requires more than representing an answer as *to be* arranged."²² When I choose to act, I make it true that I am going to act at the moment of choosing. It is not true that I act in the future, but it is true that my mind is made up to act in the future. Thus when I choose, I settle in fact something about my state of mind—that I'm going to do something.²³

The second way that choice is similar to belief, Velleman claims, is that choice aims at the truth. Choice is not like imagining or assuming. These two mental states involve accepting a proposition as true hypothetically. When I choose to act, however, I aim to do so only insofar as I will in fact act. My mind cannot remain made up that I am going to do something if I don't think I'm going to do it or in the face of evidence that I won't do it.²⁴ This is similar to Moore's paradox about belief. Someone cannot say, 'I

²¹ Velleman, 2000, 24

²² Velleman, 2000, 25.

²³ Velleman, 2000, 25.

²⁴ Velleman, 2000, 25.

believe that it is raining—but it's not.' Likewise, one can't say, 'I believe that I will raise my arm, but I won't.'

Since the president knew the relevant facts about his depressed mental states based on what his psychiatrist told him, we could say he had a choice of whether or not to act on his inappropriate desire. Velleman states, "The times when we choose our words are times when we don't utter them until we have them properly in mind—which, I have suggested, are times when they are regulated by the aim of knowing what we're saying."²⁵ Thus in my reformulation, the President chose to act on his desire to say something inappropriate. He knew what he was doing and why and his behavior was an action in the full-blooded sense.

But this would imply that someone can perform an action that meets the criteria of the SKM, yet not be an autonomous action. This is because, as Velleman pointed out, the president's action is not an expression of his will but to something alien to him. This example suggests that the SKM is false. Even though the president knew what he was saying, his behavior was not an expression of his will. Therefore, the conditions on the right-hand-side of the biconditional are met, yet the agent's action in the example is clearly not autonomous.

Therefore, my argument against Velleman's conception of autonomous action takes the same form as Velleman's argument against the Hierarchical model:

1. I make things happen iff I act autonomously
2. I act autonomously iff I act for a reason
3. I act for a reason iff I know what I'm doing (According to the SKM)
4. If an action is attributable to something alien to me, then I am not acting autonomously (According to Velleman's argument against Frankfurt)

²⁵ Velleman, 2000, p22.

5. I can know what I'm doing and my action can be attributed to something alien to me

Therefore, knowing what I'm doing when I am acting doesn't necessarily mean I am acting autonomously.

2. Constitutive Aim of Action

Velleman considers what would happen if we assume that Hume was right and that “the only considerations that can qualify as reasons for someone to act are considerations appealing to his antecedent inclinations—that is, his desires or dispositions to desire.”²⁶ In Williams's terminology, what Hume described are *internal* reasons—those reasons that are such only because they are connected to a person's desires. *External* reasons, on the other hand, are reasons for someone no matter what desires they happen to have. If Hume is right, then all reasons are internal reasons. If not, then perhaps there are reasons by virtue of some fact other than a person's subjective desires.

Velleman claims that this is a false dichotomy. We don't have to choose between internalism and externalism when it comes to reasons for action. He doesn't want to go the route of externalism because externalism requires that there be reasons for particular actions whether or not a person has any desire to perform those actions. He states, “[Externalism] must identify particular features of an action as constitutive of reason for taking it, whether an agent cares about them or not, and it must criticize and agent as irrational if he should fail to care about those features.”²⁷ On the other hand, he also

²⁶ Velleman, 1996, 695.

²⁷ Velleman, 1996, 698.

wants to “a conception of reasons that isn’t relativized to the inclinations of particular agents.” His goal therefore is to outline a theory that would link reasons to a desire that every rational agent has simply by virtue of being an agent.

We may think that full-blooded action is simply goal-directed behavior. But this is subject to obvious counterexample. We could describe reflexes as goal-directed, but we wouldn’t count those as full-blooded actions. For instance, say that you touch a hot stove and you immediately recoil. We could describe this movement as having the goal of avoiding getting burned. But we wouldn’t say that this behavior is a “full-blooded exercise of your agency.”²⁸ It is different than say purposely grabbing the eye of a stove in order to clean it. Velleman claims that the former is missing some additional goal that every intentional action shares.²⁹ This additional goal is that intentional action is “directed by you.”³⁰

When you recoil after touching the hot stove, you quickly pull your hand back before you even know it. It happens so quickly that you wouldn’t even have a chance to control your behavior if you wanted to. But in fully intentional actions the behavior is under your direct control. This control is not simply hand-eye coordination. Velleman asks us to consider another case of reflex action when a glass is accidentally brushed off of the table and you reflexively catch it without thinking about it. He states, “The reason why the falling glass leaves you no time to perform a full-blooded action is that, although it leaves you time to stick out your hand, it doesn’t leave you time to do something else that’s essential to a full-blooded action—that is, to exercise conscious control of your

²⁸ Velleman, 1996, 715.

²⁹ Velleman, 1996, 715.

³⁰ Velleman, 1996, 717.

catch.³¹” Therefore there are two things that you must do in order to consciously control your action: you must extend your hand to catch the glass and exercise control over extending your hand.

The constitutive aim of action comes from the preceding analysis. We perform many actions that involve various behaviors, “but they also share an additional, higher-order activity, the activity of consciously directing these behaviors. This activity is constitutive of action, in the sense that its addition is what makes a full-blooded action out of a merely reflexive or unintentional movement. If this higher-order activity entails the pursuit of a goal, then there may indeed be a constitutive goal of action.”³² This constitutive aim of action will help us identify reasons. They are connected to autonomy. Velleman states, “Considerations will turn out to qualify as reasons—also in Kantian fashion—by virtue of their relevance to our autonomy rather than their relevance to our interests or our good.”³³

2.1 Clark’s Criticism

According to Phillip Clark, the naïve view of reasons for action states that reasons are connected to what is good for the agent. Velleman also wants to avoid relativism about reasons, which comes by connecting reasons to an agent’s desires. He also wants to avoid the idea that reasons are not connected to desires or that they are connected to some ‘queer’ properties out in the world. He finds middle ground by finding a desire that every agent has simply by virtue of being an agent. So the reasons aren’t ‘queer’ and they aren’t

³¹ Velleman, 1996, 718.

³² Velleman, 1996, 718.

³³ Velleman, 1996, 719.

relative from one agent to the next. They are objective. This desire that all agents have is the desire to act autonomously.

Clark begins his criticism of Velleman by stating the implications of his view. Velleman's argument has two parts. First, nothing counts as a fully intentional action unless it is under the conscious control of the agent. Second, an agent cannot control their action without aiming to do so. From these two parts, we are to conclude, "nothing counts as full-blown intentional action unless the agent aims to exercise conscious control over her behavior."³⁴ Clark points out that unlike belief, which often fails to hit the mark set by its constitutive aim, "no fully intentional action can fail to achieve the constitutive aim of action."³⁵ Because of this, no fully intentional action "could ever be rationally criticisable."³⁶

Clark thinks that it seems that we perform unreasonable actions regularly. This is true with beliefs as well. For instance, some people believe that the holocaust never actually happened. It seems that this belief is against the weight of reasons. Clark points out that the problem for Velleman comes when he tries to invoke a parallel explanation in regards to action. "[Velleman] cannot say, of some fully intentional action that someone is doing, like strangling one's next-door neighbor, that some other course of action is better suited to the constitutive goal of action. For by hypothesis, any fully intentional action reaches that goal...Consequently, Velleman must deny that any fully intentional action is contrary to the weight of reasons."³⁷

³⁴ Clark, 582.

³⁵ Clark, 582.

³⁶ Clark, 582.

³⁷ Clark, 583.

Clark compares Velleman's view with the naïve view where reasons for action are related to the agent's good. "What qualifies safety, excitement, and glory as reasons, if they are reasons, is the fact that they are desirable, that is, they are things that it makes sense to want in one's life."³⁸ Thus just to perform some consciously controlled action does not mean that the agent chose well according to the naïve view. As a result, according to this view, "Fully intentional action is not automatically successful from the point of view of reason. Rational assessment requires that we ask a further question, namely, whether the action is consistent with the agent's good. This is how it can turn out that a fully intentional action is contrary to the weight of reasons."³⁹

2.2 Velleman's New View

Perhaps as a result of Clark's criticism, Velleman revised his view of the constitutive aim of action from conscious control, to self-knowledge. He explains reasons for action by comparing reasons for action with reasons for belief: A reason is a consideration that shows that something is correct. To be shown to be correct, something must be subject to a norm of correctness. Beliefs are shown to be correct in virtue of their being true. Thus reasons for belief are considerations that show the belief to be true. According to Velleman, we should avoid "the temptation to think that the norm of correctness for actions is that they should be supported by the strongest reasons."⁴⁰ We should do so because "what counts as a reason for acting depends on what justifies action; which in turn depends on what counts as correctness for action; which cannot

³⁸ Clark, 583.

³⁹ Clark, 583.

⁴⁰ Velleman, 2000, p 15.

depend, in turn, on what counts as a reason.”⁴¹ That would be circular. Therefore, we need an independent norm of correctness, one that doesn’t depend on what counts as a reason.

The analogy of belief may be helpful. Velleman states, “The norm of correctness for belief is not open to question because it is internal to the nature of belief itself.”⁴² The concept of belief just is the concept of a propositional attitude that a person takes to be true. In this way it could be said that belief constitutively aims at the truth. “If there were something at which action constitutively aimed, then there would be a norm of correctness internal to the nature of action. There would be something about a behavior that constituted its correctness *as* an action, in the same way as the truth of a propositional attitude constitutes its correctness as a belief. This standard would not be open to question: actions meeting the standard would be correct on their own terms, so to speak, by virtue of their nature as actions, just as true beliefs are correct by virtue of their nature as beliefs. And this norm of correctness for action would in turn determine what counts as a reason for acting.”⁴³

If action has an aim in this sense it would be a function of the mechanisms that produce and control action. A proposed model would point out behavior that is caused by beliefs and desires but regulated by a particular higher-order desire. The object of this particular higher-order desire should qualify as action’s constitutive aim because this model implies that it is constitutive of action to be regulated by this motive.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Velleman, 2000, p 15.

⁴² Velleman, 2000, p 15.

⁴³ Velleman, 2000, p 16.

⁴⁴ Velleman, 2000, p 17.

What is the content of this higher order desire, which turns mere behavior into full-blooded action by regulating how it is motivated? Velleman contends that it cannot be a desire to act for a reason. For if it is a motive to act for reasons, then acting for a reason would be the constitutive aim of action. But this leads us into a vicious circle because action aims at acting for a reason but what counts as a reason is that action aims at it.⁴⁵

Velleman claims that an agent may not realize or be cognizant of this desire to act for a reason. He asks us to consider the analogy of belief. A person's desire to track the truth with their beliefs may be the result of "sub-personal cognitive systems that are designed to track the truth, independently of the subject's desires."⁴⁶ So when a person changes her belief in light of evidence we may say that she 'changed her mind' or 'she was trying to find the truth.' But this might simply be a function of her mind which tracks the truth whether or not she is aware of doing so. Similarly, a person may act for a reason because of a "desire for the relevant aim while, at other times, being due to psychological mechanisms in which the aim is implicit."⁴⁷

Now consider again the President in Freud's example: his closing the meeting was not a full-blooded action because it was a verbal slip. But when we describe it in this way, we are implying that it slipped past something. According to the story, the President only realized his mistake when he heard the laughter of those present. This shows that he didn't know what he was saying when he said it. This can be said of any slip of the tongue. This is true even when the speaker catches himself mid-sentence. He must catch

⁴⁵ Velleman, 2000, p 18.

⁴⁶ Velleman, 2000, p 19.

⁴⁷ Velleman, 2000, p 19-20.

himself because he spoke without knowing what he was saying. This kind of verbal slip is often stopped beforehand by a desire to “keep our mouth shut until we know what we’re saying.” Velleman states, “Our inhibition against saying we-know-not-what is thus the negative manifestation of a positive aim: the aim of knowing what we’re (already) saying.”⁴⁸ Many times we might not be aware of this aim because it is what Velleman calls a *sub-agential* aim. He explains that our behavior is often regulated by sub-agential aims. For instance, we walk around and avoid bumping into pieces of furniture without thinking about avoiding them or avoiding the pain associated with bumping into them. As such, “our behavior is regulated by an aim that isn’t our end.”⁴⁹

Velleman claims that in the same way our speech is regulated by the aim of knowing what we’re saying, our behavior in general is regulated by the aim of knowing what we’re doing. He states, “My examination of a Freudian slip has now lead me to an hypothesis about the nature of choices or decisions. I first identified the inhibition that fails when we commit a slip; it’s the inhibition against doing things without knowing what they are. I then imagined this inhibition as being exerted by a second-order aim of knowing what we’re doing, which would regulate what we do, by guiding us toward things that we already know about.”⁵⁰

2.3 Clark’s Criticism Works Against Velleman’s New View

For purposes of clarification, it will be helpful to spell out which view is which. Velleman’s original view (OV) is that action constitutively aims at conscious control. His

⁴⁸ Velleman, 2000, p 21.

⁴⁹ Velleman, 2000, p 21.

⁵⁰ Velleman, 2000, p 23-24.

new view (NV) is that action constitutively aims at self-knowledge. I will now argue that Clark's critique is as damaging for NV as it was for OV. It seems that by not knowing what we're doing we simply aren't engaging in full-blooded action. Anscombe claimed as much when she stated that knowledge without observation is a requirement for intentional action. The claim that 'I wasn't aware I was doing that' is a rejection of the question 'Why?' Hence all full-blooded action implies that we know what we're doing. Likewise, any fully intentional action must be under the conscious control of the agent. If the agent fails to exert control over their behavior, they are not acting; they are engaging in mere activity.

This leads me to ask, what is it for an action to be unreasonable or contrary to the weight of reasons under the NV? If reasons are considerations in light of knowing what you're doing and/or being in conscious control, then an unreasonable action would be not acting in light of knowing what you're doing or not being in control? Are unreasonable actions then not actions? For it seems that we're back to Anscombe's question. If I answer, 'I didn't know I was doing that' then I'm not performing an intentional action.

In light of Clark's criticism of Velleman's earlier view, is there an analogue of a false belief for the new view? Can an action fail in the same way that a belief can miss the truth yet remain a belief? Can an action remain an action and fail to achieve the constitutive aim of action?

It doesn't seem that an action can be against the weight of reasons and remain an action. For if a behavior is not consciously controlled then it is not an action. Also, if a person is unaware of what they are doing, then the behavior is also not a fully-blooded

action. So Clark's criticism still packs a punch even against the NV. Any intentional, or full-blooded action can never be criticizable as being against the weight of reasons.

We can see this in Clark's example of strangling one's next-door neighbor. Suppose that someone desires to dispatch his neighbor quietly and believes that strangling her is the best way to do so. If he's not depressed or bored, then the action is not attributable to something alien to him. He is in conscious control of his action and he knows full well what he's going to do before he does it. When he strangles her, his action is therefore a full-blooded action.⁵¹ Clark's criticism was directed toward OV, but it seems to me that Clark's criticism can easily be applied to the NV.

One way that Velleman might respond is simply to 'bite the bullet' and agree that no fully intentional action is against the weight of reasons. The bullet biting response is highly unlikely because Velleman's project is to provide a framework with which to explain reasons for acting. Another way Velleman might respond is to give up the view that the constitutive aim of action is some form of autonomy. I think this is unlikely as well because Velleman wants to provide a standard of rationality that all rational beings are subject to. He states, "The appeal of this view, for me, is that it locates autonomy in the part of the personality from which you truly cannot dissociate yourself...you can dissociate yourself from other springs of action within you, by reflecting on them...but you cannot attain a similar distance from your understanding."⁵² The third response is to refer back to the analogy between belief and action. Velleman could show how a fully intentional action could be against the weight of reasons even though the analogy between correct belief and correct action isn't perfect. If he could do this, then Clark's

⁵¹ Clark, 583.

⁵² Velleman, 2000. 30.

criticism wouldn't pack as much punch. This is the best solution for Velleman and the one that I will focus on in the remainder of this paper.

2.4 Knowing Why You're Acting

No analogy is perfect. Therefore, like any other analogy, the analogy between belief and action falls apart at some point. Beliefs are binary. They are either true or not true. A belief is correct if and only if it is true. So according to this standard, beliefs are either correct or not correct. There is no in-between. But perhaps action is not quite like this. Perhaps actions aren't either correct or not correct. All actions are correct in some sense (as full-blooded actions), but it would seem that some actions would have to be more correct than others. Perhaps the correctness of actions is not binary; perhaps they come in degrees. Instead of only two options there are many options. When acting against the weight of reasons an agent is choosing an action that gives them less self-knowledge than they would have had if they had chosen another action. Velleman hints at this, "Roughly speaking, the better reason will be one that provides a better rationale—the better potential grasp of what we are doing."⁵³ When a person acts in a full-blooded way, they must know what they are doing to some extent. But some actions will be known or better understood than others.

Velleman relates this idea back to the case of Freud's inkstand. He claims that if Freud had become aware of his desire to break the inkstand, he would have realized that he had more reason to refrain from breaking it. Thus when he broke the inkstand he might have wondered 'What am I doing?' He would have wondered why a person such

⁵³ Velleman, 2000, p29.

as himself would ever act in such a way in the first place. Therefore, he wouldn't have fully known what he was doing. Velleman argues that not knowing why anyone like himself would ever act in such a way indicates that he would have more fully known what he was doing if he had chosen to do something else. Thus in this reformulated example Freud, if he had been aware of his desire, would have acted against the weight of reason had he broken his inkstand.

I think that there are several ways of interpreting this example. Velleman stated, "Even though he would have subsequently known that he was destroying his inkstand, in moving his arm, he might have wondered, 'What am I doing?'"⁵⁴ Either Freud knew what he was doing or he didn't. If he didn't know what he was doing then moving his arm was not an action, it was a mere activity. Velleman must think that he actually did know what he was doing because Freud's moving his arm must be an action in order for it to be against the weight of reasons. Thus Freud's question, 'What am I doing?' must mean something other than 'What am I doing?' I'll come back to this question later.

For sake of argument, let's say that Freud does know what he's doing. This leads us to ask if Freud moving his arm was done with or without conscious control. If it was without conscious control, then the moving of his arm was not an action—it was a mere activity. Therefore, he could not have acted against the weight of reasons because he didn't act. If, however, he was in control when he moved his arm then it seems that it would have been a full-blooded action according to the old view. Velleman supports this conclusion by suggesting that Freud chose to move his arm. He says that Freud "Would have had a better idea of what he was doing if he had *chosen* to do something else

⁵⁴ Ibid.

instead.”⁵⁵ (emphasis added) This suggests that Freud knew what he was doing. This also suggests that Freud, though he said, “What am I doing?” really meant something else. Perhaps he meant, ‘Why am I doing this?’ I think this is common when we choose a course of action and then reconsider or forget what we are doing.

I’ve been shopping many times when I’ve forgotten what I had intended to purchase. I found myself walking down the aisles of a store aimlessly and asked myself, ‘What am I doing?’ But I know exactly what I’m doing; I’m shopping. I just forgot what I’m shopping for, or why I’m shopping. Perhaps the lack of knowledge is not in what I’m doing, but why I’m doing it.

Imagine Freud thinking, ‘I want a new inkstand, if mine were to break, my sister would buy me a new one.’ Then imagine him choosing to knock the inkstand off the desk in order to break it. In the moment before he actually goes through with the action he asks, ‘Wait, what am I doing?’ But he doesn’t mean ‘What am I doing?’ because he knows exactly what he’s doing—he’s breaking his inkstand. In saying ‘What am I doing?’ he’s saying it in the sense of ‘Why would I do such a thing?’ In asking ‘Why?’ he’s asking himself why he would choose this particular means to meet his desire for a new inkstand. It would make more sense to just go out and buy a new one or wait and see if his sister would get him a new one at the next special occasion. Therefore, he’s not in doubt about what he’s doing, but why he’s doing it or maybe why a person such as himself would do such a thing.

Why is this important? It gives Velleman a response to Clark. An agent can act in a full-blooded sense according Velleman’s new view, yet be against the weight of reasons

⁵⁵ Velleman, 2000, p29.

because another course of action would have provided him with more self-knowledge. When acting in a way that the agent knows what he's doing, he might not know exactly why he is doing it or he might not realize that another course of action better suits his purposes. In Freud's case, breaking his inkstand in order to get another isn't the best means to his end. In this case knowing why you're doing something is a part of self-knowledge that an agent might not have even though they know what they're doing. Some impulsive actions such as breaking an inkstand might be under Freud's control and he might know what he's doing. But after further reflection Freud realizes that some other course of action better suits his purposes.

Conclusion

I have argued that Velleman's account of both autonomy and the constitutive aim of action are flawed. First, I used Velleman's argument against the hierarchical against his own argument. Second, I demonstrated how Clark's criticism against Velleman's original view of the constitutive aim of action still holds against Velleman's revised view of the constitutive aim of action. I then offered a suggestion about how Velleman might respond to Clark. If we included knowing why you're doing something within action's constitutive aim, then perhaps it is possible that a fully intentional action is against the weight of reason.

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