

Velleman's self-referential theory of action

Jeff Speaks

October 12, 2004

1 Velleman on the standard story

The view of action which Velleman calls 'the standard story' is the view from "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" with which we are by now familiar. Velleman claims that the standard story fails to make room for the fact that in paradigm cases of intentional action, the agent, rather than belief/desire pairs occurring within the agent, are the cause of the action.

In an important sense, this is confusing. Some philosophers, like Chisholm and Bishop, believe that intentional actions involve irreducible instances of agent causation — cases of causation which we cannot reduce to any kind of event causation. Velleman does not share this view; but he does think that the standard story has underestimated the reasons for its appeal. So it is best not to see Velleman as rejecting the attempt to the standard story to reduce agent causation to event causation, but rather as rejecting the version of that reduction offered by the standard story.

His argument for this conclusion is that in some cases in which agents satisfy the requirements of the standard story, they yet fail to be the causes of their actions in the sense we intuitively require of cases of full-blooded intentional action. He emphasizes two such cases: (i) cases of addiction or compulsion, (ii) cases of unconscious causation of action.

(i) is also emphasized by Frankfurt. An agent can have the desire for some heroine, and believe that going to his dealer will satisfy this desire, and go to his dealer because he has this belief/desire pair, and yet not, in some strong sense, intentionally go to his dealer. Frankfurt says, rightly I think, that in these cases we can say that the agent is a "helpless bystander to the forces that move him." (This should leave it open whether these actions are intentional in some more minimal sense.)

(ii) includes cases in which an agent has an unconscious belief and desire which motivate (and cause) him to act. In many such cases, we can say that the action in question was not intentional (e.g., Velleman's case of offending his friend),

even though we can imagine unconscious beliefs and desires in whatever combination required to provide a counterexample to some version of the belief/desire theory.

Chisholm's alternative (468-9).

2 Frankfurt on identification

Frankfurt's idea is that what is missing in cases like (i) and (ii) but present in cases of full-blooded intentional action is the agent's identification with the motives that cause him to act. This may suggest adding something to the standard story (though as we've seen, Frankfurt himself objects to the causal aspect of the standard story as well as its account of reasons for action): perhaps we should say that to act intentionally, the agent must have the right belief/desire pair, and identify with the relevant desire. If so, the problem of explaining intentional action becomes the problem of explaining what it is for an agent to identify with a desire.

Frankfurt's first idea was that what it is for an agent to identify with a desire is for the agent to have a second-order desire to the effect that the original desire move him to act. The problem with this, as Watson noted, is that an agent may fail to identify with a second-order desire as well as with a first-order desire.

Watson suggests that the desire should be closely tied to the agent's values: perhaps he should value the desire, the object of the desire, or simply have values consistent with fulfillment of the desire. Velleman objects that we can be alienated from our values as well as from our second-order desires.

Frankfurt later suggested (though this is not discussed by Velleman) that identification should be a matter of the agent's highest-order desire, whatever that is in a given case.

Self-identification as a primitive mental state, and a return to the problem of agent causation.

3 Velleman's alternative

Velleman suggests that in order to find the mental state which will help us give a reductive account of agent causation, we cannot look for a mental state 'whose behavioural influence might come up for review in practical thought at any level.' (477) There are two reasons for this. First, if it can come up for review, then the agent could fail to identify with it; but we are looking for the nature of identification with motives itself. Second, the agent always directs the

process of critical view, and we are looking for a mental state to play the causal role played by the agent himself.

Velleman's somewhat puzzling suggestion is that the role of the agent is played by the desire to act in accordance with reasons (478). Given that reasons are considerations which make an act intelligible to the agent of the act, this can also be put as the claim that the role of the agent is played by the desire to do what makes sense (is intelligible) to the agent.

Velleman points out a few advantages of this view: (1) An agent cannot suppress this desire without also suppressing his capacity to be an agent. This indicates that this desire is playing the role of the agent. (2) We sometimes think of the role of agents as intervening between desires to choose the best reason for acting. A desire to act for the best reason could be the kind of thing which, when thrown behind some collection of desires, makes those desires issue in action.

Criticisms of the view: (a) Has Velleman changed the subject? Does this qualify as an account of intentional action of the same kind as the standard story? (b) The account seems to equivocate between taking the relevant desire to be that of acting for reasons and that of acting for the best reasons. The first has the advantage that an agent plausibly cannot lose this desire without losing the capacity to act as in (1) above, while the second has the advantage that we could then see the agent in her role as deciding between motives and choosing one, as in (2). But it does not seem that either can play the other role. An agent can surely lose the desire to act for the best reasons while remaining an agent, and can desire to act for reasons without this playing any role in deciding between two competing sets of reasons as reasons for action.

References

- Bishop, John, 'Agent-Causation', *Mind*, 92 (1983), pp. 61–79.
- Frankfurt, Harry, *The Importance of What We Care About*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- Velleman, David, 'What Happens When Someone Acts', *Mind*, (1992), pp. 461–481.
- Watson, Gary, 'Free Agency', in: Watson, Gary, editor, *Free Will*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 205–220.