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DISCUSSION – “THE GUISE OF A REASON”

The articles collected in David Velleman’s *The Possibility of Practical Reason* are a snapshot – or rather a film-strip – of part of a philosophical endeavour beginning with his first book, *Practical Reflection*, and continuing through many a paper produced since including many written after those collected here. The unity of theme and content across both the papers and the book is quite impressive; many of the articles involve attempts to develop, or better articulate, distinctions drawn and arguments made in the book. There is a single, large project here and having some of these articles collected together in a book gives us a chance to assess how this project is going – or at least how things were going on this particular film-strip. I find myself convinced by many of the arguments deployed and attracted by the philosophical intuitions that lie behind the project. And I find the intricate way many of the pieces fit together satisfyingly neat, indeed elegant. However, I will stick to convention and focus here on the places where I am still puzzled about how it is all supposed to fit together.

A fundamental philosophical motivation driving the project is an attempt to show how our conception of agency *could* be compatible with “our conception of how the world works more generally” – a conception according to which events are caused by other events or just happen randomly.¹ This is a conception of the world shaped by naturalistic conceptions of explanation in which causation is understood as consisting in “relations among events and states of affairs” (130).² I will call this the “causal conception” for short. Compatibility is shown by combining an analysis of the notion of agency, and other related notions, with an hypothetical model of how such agency could be instantiated or “realized in the world, as we otherwise understand it” (129). I will start by focussing on his account of



agency since that is of course central to his project, but this discussion will lead us eventually to wondering about the kind of compatibility we are looking for and with what.

Now, the standard belief-desire model presents itself as an account that has the request compatibility with the causal conception, but Velleman, like others, is not happy with the solution it provides. The standard model does not adequately account for our conception of the role that the agent plays in action. It does not show how the agent “forms an intention under the influence of reasons for acting” and it does not show how the agent “produces behavior pursuant to that intention” (124).³

Velleman therefore wants to replace the standard model with a different model that is nonetheless compatible with the causal conception. His strategy involves trying to think of mental states and events that could play the role of the agent where we, unlike the constructors of the standard model, now fully appreciate all that this role involves (137). The strategy thus looks very similar to a traditional reductionist project though it is crucially different. The traditional reductionist would claim that the purported entities of the reduced domain *are* just such-and-such entities of the reducing domain. Velleman commits himself only to the weaker claim that they *could* be. Despite this difference, though, both kinds of reductions face the following fact about most domains that one is tempted to reduce: the concepts we use to talk about such domains exist in networks – or as Velleman nicely puts it, they belong “to the same conceptual vocabulary” (7). Reduction can begin piecemeal but in the end one has to reduce the network as a whole. As Velleman repeatedly emphasizes, the relevant conceptual vocabulary of agency includes talk of reasons. My puzzles surround whether he has, or perhaps just how he is supposed to have, given a reduction of talk of reasons, in particular a reduction of the talk of awareness of the normativity of reasons.

As we have seen, at the heart of Velleman’s concerns about the standard model is its inability to model how intentions are supposed to be formed under the influence of reasons. To know what will be required of the reductive model, we need to know

what this involves. It is “the story of rational guidance” that provides the answer:

[A] reason for acting is a proposition whose truth would reflect well on, count in favor of, recommend, or in some other sense justify an action. A reason for performing an action exists so long as a proposition justifying the action is true. But an agent cannot act for this reason unless he has mental access to it – unless he believes the proposition or at least grasps it in some related fashion. And even if he has appropriately grasped the reason, and is in a position to act for it, he does not ultimately act for the reason unless his grasp of it results in his being influenced or guided by its justifying force. An agent acts for a reason, then, when the action-justifying character of a proposition prompts his action via his grasp of that proposition. (100)

Similar statements occur elsewhere (9, 11).

Now I must admit that I’m not completely sure how to interpret some of what Velleman says both here and elsewhere. Part of my confusion arises because some of what he says about the analogous situation regarding reasons for belief seems wrong. Consider the following:

The premises of an inference are propositions whose truth guarantees or makes probable the truth of the conclusion; and in this sense they favor believing the conclusion solely by virtue of their content, antecedently to any attitude in which one might fix them. In order for a particular set of premises to become one’s reasons for drawing a conclusion, one must somehow be influenced, in grasping them, by their antecedently favorable relation to the conclusion. (101)

But this cannot quite be right. Here is a natural way to state the premises and conclusion of an inference:

- (P1) The grass is green.
- (P2) If the grass is green, then it has been raining.
- (C) It has been raining.

The truth of the propositions P1 and P2 would guarantee the truth of the conclusion, but the propositions do not, as far as I can see, favor believing the conclusion “antecedently to any attitude in which one might fix them”.⁴ They are antecedently related to the conclusion, but I am not sure what it means to say that they are *favorably* related. Once one *believes* that P1

and P2, then there may be a normative requirement to believe C or give up one of the premises.⁵ Normativity, in this case, only kicks in, so to speak, when one has the relevant attitudes.

What is right though about the view is that in order for the agent to be actually drawing the conclusion – as opposed to the belief that C simply popping up in his head – the agent must be aware that the logical relations between the propositions combined with the fact that they are fixed in the attitudes of belief bring into play a normative requirement. Being aware that the belief that C stands in a “favorable” relation to the premises *is not* just a matter of being aware of the logical relations between the propositions – of knowing that the truth of the premises would guarantee the truth of the conclusion. The normative relation one is aware of cannot be reduced, as far as I can see, to the logical relation. The attitudes have to come into the picture somehow.

When we now return to the story of rational action, we may worry about whether some similar mistake is being made there. Velleman says,

When an agent acts for a reason, he acts not only because his attitude toward the reason is more like belief than disbelief but also because the proposition involved militates in favor of his action rather than against it. The agent’s attitudes are thus conceived as having propositional objects that intrinsically favor a particular action, and their favoring the action is conceived as crucial to their behavioral influence. (101)

Now, this particular quote arises from a context in which Velleman wants to argue that the attempt to fit the story of rational guidance with the story of motivation provided by the belief-desire model leads to the mistaken view that in desiring *x*, I, in some sense, take *x* as good and thus act “under the guise of the good” (99). So the story of rational guidance is introduced in order to explain why philosophers are led to a mistaken view of desire and action, but it seems clear that Velleman endorses the story of rational guidance.

The puzzle for us is to identify the propositions that supposedly “intrinsically favor” particular actions. Consider his example of a practical inference (197):

- (P1) I want to save the glass.
 (P2) I could save the glass by extending my hand.
 (C) So I will extend my hand.

I will focus on (P1). As Velleman points out, in the standard model (P1) expresses the desire itself, but for Velleman (P1) expresses an awareness of the desire (198).

But does the proposition (P1) “*intrinsically* favor” (101, my emphasis) a particular action? Does it have an “action-justifying character” that could prompt action “via his grasp of that proposition”? As in the theoretical case, I find myself puzzled about what this talk comes to though the puzzle, as we shall see, is a bit different.

Before I go on to explain what I mean, let me separate out one possibility that I will discuss later, namely, the option of “normative ascent” where we explicitly build a normative term into the propositional content; for example: I want to save the glass is a reason to save the glass. I will treat that second because my hunch is that Velleman does not want normative ascent in the paradigm cases of action.

Recall that in the theoretical case what was important for Velleman’s story were the logical relations between the propositions. What is the analogy here? In Velleman’s model it is explanatory relations. To put the point in its simplest form (P1) and (P2) fit into an explanation of the action described in (C) (26–27). Again, as in the theoretical case, notice that it seems implausible to think that it is just the propositions themselves that can do the favoring. Surely the attitudes are crucial too.

More importantly the reason why it is explanatory relations that play the role of the logical relations of the belief case is that in the case of action the role of the agent in the reducing domain is played by the aim of self-knowledge. In most of the papers he talks of this as a higher-order motivation – as a desire for self-knowledge – but he prefers talk of it as an aim to emphasize that it can be instantiated in the mechanisms governing the mental states as opposed to being one of the mental states themselves (19). Now, “the constitutive aim of action

determines an internal criterion of success for action” and it is in relation to this criterion that “considerations qualify as reasons for acting” (26). We do not have action unless the behavior is under the control of this aim. We talk of an agent considering his desires and circumstances in order to figure out what to do – in order to form an intention – but what really plays the role of the agent is the aim of self-knowledge. This motivational state throws its weight behind those desires or beliefs acting on which would result in better self-knowledge – a better “explanatory grasp” of his behavior (26).

The relation that, at least, *makes* a consideration a reason for an action then is that it can fit into an explanation of the relevant action.⁶ This property has its home – or at least its other home – in the domain of theoretical reason, in the scientific business of trying to explain, understand, and comprehend phenomena (26–27, 158–160).

In the conceptual vocabulary of agents, reasons and justification, we talk, as Velleman emphasizes, of the agent being “aware” of a reason and its “justifying force” or “normative force” – in short of its normativity. In the conceptual vocabulary of the reducing domain we know what is supposed to play the role of the agent – it is the motive of self-knowledge – but what plays the role of the awareness and of the normative force? Let us grant that the agent is aware of a proposition like (P1) and aware perhaps of the relevant attitude towards (P1). What else is there to be aware of? Well, we can also grant that there is awareness of the above mentioned relational property of being explanatory, property *E* as I will call it from now on. Is our normal talk of awareness that a consideration is a reason to be expressed in the conceptual vocabulary of the reducing domain as the awareness that the consideration has the property *E*?

Notice that the answer is not obvious. As I emphasized above, we could think that the property *E* *makes* a consideration a reason without thinking that that is what constitutes the consideration’s being a reason. One could think that, as in the case with other normative properties, a consideration will not have the property of being a reason *barely* – as Steve Darwall puts it.⁷ The property *E* could be reason-making, without the

property *E* being identical to the property of being a reason. But one could not stop there of course. Recall that we are trying to give an account in the reducing conceptual vocabulary of awarenesses of the normativity. Where the property *E* is merely reason-making, an agent, and so presumably also whatever plays the functional role of the agent, could be aware of *E* without being aware that the consideration has the property of being a reason, but it is the awareness of the property of being a reason that surely constitutes the awareness of whatever normativity is involved. Let me put this last point again this way: being aware that a consideration justifies an action just seems to be conceptually equivalent to being aware that the consideration is a reason for the action.⁸

It is also hard to see how something could play the *role* of normativity as opposed to just being the normativity involved. How could we not want action to be in response to the normativity of the considerations even in the reducing model? I can see, perhaps, what it would be for a mental state to play the role of the agent – that is for something that is not an agent to play the *role* of the agent – but I have a harder time seeing how something that was not normative was supposed to play the role of the normative.

In short, then, I am asking for Velleman's metaethics and I am claiming that without providing the metaethics he has not really shown that he has a model of agency compatible with the causal conception. I suppose I have also been claiming that what he does say about being guided by the action-justifying character of the relevant propositions does not amount to a clear position on the issue.

But why not take the simple route and simply read Velleman as asserting the identity? Having the normative property of being a reason just is having the property *E*? Our talk of the agent responding to the justifying-force of the consideration is translated into talk of the motive of self-knowledge responding to the belief that the consideration has the property *E*? Is not that the obvious way to read the view? It is important to be clear here about the option under consideration. The claim is not that something nonnormative is playing the role of the

normative. The claim would be that the normative property just is the property *E*. But if this is the claim then it is hard to see how some version of the open question argument would not raise its old-fashioned head.

We will consider some other metaethical options in a moment, but this is a good point to return to the deferred issue of “normative ascent”. Whatever may happen in paradigm cases of action, surely sometimes we have the explicit thought that my desire is a reason to act. Now here the normative concept of a reason occurs explicitly as part of the content of my thought. Whatever story we tell of how, in our hypothetical model of agency, what plays the role of the agent is aware of the action-justifying character of a consideration has to fit our account of the content of this explicitly normative thought. Now, notice that a straightforward reduction of the normative property of being a reason to *E* would require claiming that the truth conditions of the explicit normative statement were just that the consideration has the property *E*. The open question argument would seem to raise its head because it is hard, I think, to see how the concept of being a reason could just be the concept of having the property *E*.

This leads to the natural suggestion on Velleman’s behalf that though the properties may indeed be the same, in some sense the way we conceive of them is different, or the mode of presentation is different, or what have you. But I am not sure this helps. As I have said above, being aware that a consideration justifies an action seems to be equivalent to being aware that the consideration is a reason to act. I worry then that if being aware that a consideration has the property *E* where one conceives of it under this description is not conceiving of it under the description of being a reason, then one is not conceiving of it as justifying the action. Notice however that when we shift down to the level of the states that are supposed to play the role of the agent all we have is an awareness that the consideration has the property *E* and thus we would not have the awareness that the consideration is a reason.

I have been focussing on cognitivist responses, but perhaps we should consider noncognitivist alternatives. To think that a

consideration is a reason would be to have a normative thought about the consideration. A standard noncognitivist approach would then be to the claim that such a statement expresses a motivational attitude of some kind towards the consideration in question – or perhaps towards the consideration having the property *E*. It is this motivational attitude towards the consideration that is at the heart of the story of justificatory force – of its normativity – rather than some property that the consideration has. As Velleman himself puts it, though, such a

noncognitivist story diverges from the commonsense story of rational guidance in one important respect: it reverses the order of explanation between justificatory and motivational force. In the commonsense story, the agent is moved toward an action because his reasons justify it; whereas in the noncognitivist story, his reasons justify the action in virtue of moving him toward it. The noncognitivist thus treats motivation as a constituent rather than an effect of justification. (102)

It is clear, I think, that Velleman would take such a departure as a cost and he clearly does not explicitly take this route. But could he?

Perhaps, but the first thing to note is that more needs to be added to his story of agency if he does take this route. We need to know what the motivational state is that constitutes thinking that a consideration is a reason and that would be expressed by the statement that the consideration is a reason. Furthermore, surely, this motivational state cannot just be an idle part of the psychological economy of the agent. But where would we fit this motivational state into the mechanisms of the agent as Velleman portrays it?

I do not think the motivational state can be one of the motivations already in the picture. The justifying force cannot just be the motivational force of, say, the desire that gives me a reason. In that case there would be no difference between being moved by the desire and being moved by the justifying force of the consideration of the desire. Furthermore, the justifying force would completely pull apart from the property *E*. What we would need, I suspect, is a motivational attitude directed towards the proposition that the desire has the property *E*. The puzzle is then how this motivational attitude interacts with the

motive of self-knowledge. In any case, I suspect that some serious philosophical work would need to be done to show how a noncognitivist account of the normativity of reasons could be grafted onto Velleman's model of agency.

Perhaps it is a mistake to focus so much on the talk of awareness of "intrinsic action-justifying character" (100). One might object that this focus seems to ignore Velleman's emphasis on how constitutive aims help account for normativity – it is the constitutive aim of action that, as he says, "lends reasons their normative force" (29). The normativity resides, so to speak, in norms "internal to the nature of action" (16). The analogy is with belief: "Belief aims at the truth in the normative sense only because it aims at the truth descriptively, in the sense that it is constitutively regulated by mechanisms designed to ensure that it is true" (17). A system of mental states regulated by mechanisms would not count as a system of beliefs unless the mechanisms were designed to ensure the truth. So if such a system is to be a belief system it has to be governed by norms – here norms of correctness for belief. The talk of awareness of justifying-force is better understood as awareness of norms. The mechanisms regulating the mental states embody both the constitutive aim and implement, or instantiate, these norms and so the system of states and mechanisms plays the functional role of the agent and the agent's awareness of these norms – the system plays the role of the agent being guided by, or following, these norms.

There are two issues here. First, whether one is willing to accept that the constitutive motive succeeds in playing the functional role of the agent will depend on how demanding one's conception of what it is for the agent to be guided by normative principles was in the first place. We can see what is at stake by looking at such a demanding version according to which the agent is required to be aware of the normative principle and guide himself in light of it.⁹ Sometimes one finds the insistence that guidance must be more than causal disposition (more on this in a moment). In any case the agent mediates in some way between an awareness of the normative principle and its implementation. The normative principle is

not simply a causal law that governs the agent's behavior. Once the role of the agent is put in this form, it is hard to see how the motive of self-knowledge, embodied in the regulative mechanisms, could play the functional role of the agent. After all the constitutive motive of self-knowledge just seems to be the presence of a causal mechanism connecting the attitudes towards the premises with the conclusion. It seems hard to see how we can distinguish between something that we can identify as the normative principle and something else that implements it, enacts it, applies it or is guided by it.

Second, I think there are deep worries about whether we really get the right kind of normativity out of such constitution accounts. I admit I have a hard time thinking through the issues involved and I certainly will not be able to do them justice here, but I will just point to some of the issues by considering Velleman's own analogy to chess (187–188). Imagine two computers playing chess with each other. The first computer's regulatory mechanisms are a combination of the relevant regulatory mechanisms that embody the rules of chess (which moves are legal) and various mechanisms aimed at winning. The other computer also has various mechanisms aimed at winning including, and here is the problem, a mechanism to occasionally violate the rules of chess when it can avoid detection (tell whatever sci-fi story you want: the other computer is not always watching because its CPU has to focus on occasionally backing up RAM to the hard drive or whatever). What is natural to say is that it is cheating, but the question of course is why we should say this as opposed to saying that it is not playing chess at all. And if it is not playing chess then it cannot be violating the rules of chess. Following a norm requires being able to violate it and the puzzle about internal norms is that apparent violations threaten to simply change the game being played and thus the relevant norms.¹⁰

The story's harder to tell with human players because we immediately import teleological notions. This is revealing because it shows that the puzzle above occurs when the mechanisms are understood in purely causal terms. Even with the computers one is tempted to appeal to the aims of the designer

or those setting up the game. Velleman seems to be aware, at least in the last essay, “On the Aim of Belief”, that things would go wrong if one were to really try to eliminate the teleological. In a footnote he makes clear that he does not think that the reduction “can dispense with teleology. Any reduction will have to allude either to the subject’s aims or to the design of his cognitive systems, both of which are teleological notions” (252 n. 16). Now in the case of the constitutive aim of action we are not talking about the subject’s aim so we will have to talk of the design of the system and this talk of design is now to be irreducibly teleological.

This brings us back though to the fundamental motivation for the whole project which was to show how our conception of agency could be compatible with “our conception of how the world works more generally” (130). My worry now is that I am not quite sure what Velleman takes our more general conception of the world to involve, and so I am not quite sure what precisely our conception of agency is supposed to be compatible with, and thus what the standards for success here are. Originally what seemed central to the relevant conception of the world were naturalistic conceptions of explanation and causation understood as “relations among events and states of affairs” (130). But once we allow ourselves the irreducibly teleological as part of the reducing domain, then the world “as we otherwise understand it” (129) turns out to have more resources than standard issue naturalistic explanation and causation. Given that the project is neither merely conceptual analysis nor an investigation into how things are, it is hard to know precisely what the criteria of success are, and why we should care about them, without knowing what the constraints on the hypothetical story are supposed to be and without hearing more about why the particular constraints chosen are the interesting ones.

NOTES

¹ David Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4, 130 (all further references to this

book will be indicated parenthetically in the body of the text). See also J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 5–8 and 10–11.

² I return at the end to a brief discussion focusing on what more specifically might be involved in this conception of the world.

³ See also Velleman, *Possibility of Practical Reason*, 9.

⁴ Quoted above.

⁵ A normative requirement in John Broome's sense, see John Broome, "Normative Requirements," in *Normativity*, ed. Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000). I do not think anything turns here on the details of Broome's view.

⁶ The emphasis on "makes" will become clear below.

⁷ Stephen L. Darwall, *Philosophical Ethics*, ed. Norman Daniels and Keith Lehrer, *Dimensions of Philosophy Series* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 7.

⁸ I put aside for now the obvious complexity that even though one may have a reason to ϕ , ϕ -ing may not be justified because there are stronger reasons not to ϕ .

⁹ I am thinking of the kind of view expressed in Christine Korsgaard, "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, ed. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Obviously some of the worries that Korsgaard has focused on in her work and some of the extensive rule-following literature are all relevant here.

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