

Autonomy in Agency: You Are What You Do

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What happens when someone acts?

J. David Velleman believes that this particular question poses difficulties with the standard story of human action, which he considers to be understood as occurring through causal processes which follow a standard course that ultimately consummates an action, all the while being constituted by a motivating desire and belief as a reason for acting.¹ Velleman claims that the standard story of human action “omits the agent, not because it fails to mention him by name, but rather because it fails to mention anything that plays his intermediating role.”² Consider Davidson’s causal theory of action which suggests that having a belief-desire pair, or reason, is sufficient for an action to be intentional. In this sense, if an agent’s movements are intentional because of a belief-desire pair and could not have happened otherwise, then it appears that the agent is not actually *doing* anything. In addition, Velleman suggests that accounting for an agent’s activity as carried out by psychological elements also does not account for the agent’s participation in their own activity. Velleman’s criticism tell us something important about Davidson’s account and other like his—namely that an agent takes a submissive role in their actions; that is, an agent is a sort of “passenger” in their actions. However, I believe that Velleman’s notion of autonomy sufficiently accounts for the role of the agent in action because an agent’s motives are functionally identical to the agent in that they are distinctive of the agent, and thus functional to the whole of their action.

I. AUTONOMY AS CONSTITUTIVE OF AGENCY

Velleman’s suggestion is that what actually moves an agent to act is an agent’s inclination towards autonomy and that in virtue of aiming at autonomy, an agent is “self-governing.” Velleman’s notion of autonomy is not only constitutive of his agency but I believe it illustrates that an agent can have knowledge of their own motives without

observation because an agent is able to provide “why” an action was carried out without having to necessarily observe a cause for the action. This imparts the ability of an agent to identify with the specific motivations she has in a given instance of action because they are identical to her in that they are hers. In turn, this implies that an agent can provide a reason simply because they know the reason for their action which also suggests that the agent chose this particular reason for acting. However, it often seems to be the case that we are able to identify multiple reasons for acting. For example, I am doing homework, in which case I identify both my enjoyment of homework and my desire to excel in class as reasons for doing my homework. Although I identify both motivations as reasons for my movement, it is actually the case that I am doing homework because I do not want to fail class. This example shows that an agent cannot only identify multiple motives with which they act but that these motives vary in strength. In other words, although I may have been doing homework because I both enjoy it and desire to excel, I can clearly identify my motive for not failing class as being stronger than both of my other motives for doing homework. Velleman’s notion of autonomy accounts for this variance in strength of motives as differing correlatively to the agent in accordance with whatever particular action an agent aims to bring about. In this sense, although I may enjoy homework or desire to excel, these motives may not be quite as functional to the actuality of my doing homework in the same way that my motive for not failing class is.

Yet, simply identifying various motives does not provide sufficient account for acting on a particular motive. Velleman claims that philosophical realization would generally have us assume that the best reason for acting is the result of our strongest motive or strongest combination of motives.³ Accordingly, Velleman claims that in being autonomous an agent can intervene and intermedicate among motives so that she can add force to these higher-order attitudes of which belong to her because “the agent *is* another motive”; thus ensuring that the strongest combination of motives always prevail.⁴ In other words, in being able to identify multiple motives for doing my homework I am able to intermedicate among them so that my particular motive for not failing class brings about my doing homework- which is also what I identify as being my best reason and strongest motivation for doing homework. In this sense an agent is able to add force to higher-order attitudes not because she identifies with them but because they are functionally identical to her; that is, an agent’s higher-order attitudes are distinctly her own and contribute to the completion of her action. Velleman’s claim that the agent is another motive is particularly unique in that it makes it possible for an agent to make a weaker motive prevail “in the sense that she can throw her weight behind the weaker of those motives which are vying to animate her behavior and are therefore objects of her practical thought.”⁵ In this sense, an agent’s operative motive influences higher-order attitudes because they are functional to the whole of action; that is, an agent’s motives are what “constitute her activity.”⁶ This makes it possible for an agent to determine her aim in action by throwing her weight behind whatever particular motive she desires to prevail so as to bring about an action.

However, Velleman’s account of agency does not require that an agent necessarily know the motive for their action, as is the case in reflex.⁷ For example, I know that my leg indeed kicked when my knee was tapped by the doctor’s rubber mallet without

necessarily having to observe the doctor tapping my knee with the rubber mallet. Velleman claims that this sort of knowledge without observation is *directive knowledge* rather than receptive knowledge because an agent is able to know what she is doing without observation; which additionally implies that if an agent *knows* then she is also *aware*. An agent is aware in the sense that she is conscious of what she is doing; for example, I am aware of the kicking of my leg. This awareness allows me to know what I am doing and in turn allows me to consciously control what I am doing. It is this awareness that allows me to intervene among motives, including those that are known without observation, so that one may prevail over another. This is essentially what allows an agent the possibility of controlling their actions.

In this sense, if an agent has conscious control to guide what she is doing, then it stands to reason that the agent is guiding their action towards some sort of goal. However, Velleman clarifies that the aim to be autonomous is not to be mistaken as a goal or any end in particular that the agent may have. Rather, it is the case that the agent having their particular aim towards whatever goal they may have is the constitutive aim of action that is consciously directed. This particular aim of autonomy is constitutive in the sense that it is characteristic of what Velleman believes to be a paradigm case of action—namely a “full-blooded action.”⁸ Velleman claims that conscious control is the constitutive aim of a full-blooded action that can only manifest in an agent’s inclination towards autonomy, which ultimately suggests that an agent’s inclination towards autonomy is the constitutive goal of action. In this sense, Velleman claims that “your behavior amounts to a full-blooded action only when it is performed in, and out of, a knowledge of what you’re doing—or, as [I] have said, after and because you know it.”⁹ In this regard, acting autonomously is not just moving in accordance with one’s idea of movement, it is acting in accordance with one’s idea of a law of motivation. So, if motivation is the constitutive aim of autonomy, this particular motivation is the law by which an agent abides that ultimately constitutes an agent’s ability to consciously control their directive knowledge, or motives. In this sense, an agent following a law of motivation is functional to an agent’s conscious ability to control what they are doing.

II. POSSIBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE AS AN AUTONOMOUS AGENT

Although motives are functional to action, there is no particular requisite that motives bring an action to fruition. Velleman builds upon Anscombe’s specification that intentional actions are a sub-class of the class of things known without observation to show that motives are not causes of a resultant action but that motives are directional to the fulfillment of action.

In her work *Intention* (1957), Anscombe particularly focuses on the distinctive effect that observation has in knowing one’s own actions, especially in actions that are considered “involuntary.” In particular, the class of bodily movements that are known in a purely physical description directly pertain to the types of actions that exemplify what Anscombe designates as “involuntary”; for example, a reflex.¹⁰ Anscombe claims that the experience of a reflex, such as kicking when the doctor taps your knee, illustrates how it is possible for one to know that they did in fact kick when their knee was

tapped even without having to observe their knee being tapped.¹¹ In this sense, involuntary actions that are truly known without observation are a class of movements, in a purely physical description, where there is no such thing as a cause known without observation.¹² Since the agent in action is the only one able to identify the cause for their action, this cause appears to parallel a “mental cause.” However, Anscombe clarifies that although the colloquial understanding of “motive” suggests that motives are what *moves* or *causes*, motives are not causes at all; that is, motives are not mental causes. In a sense similar to Velleman, Anscombe eliminates the notion of motives as being carried out by psychological elements; that is, as being mental causes. Anscombe stipulates that mental causality is distinctly different from “intention” and “motives” in their relation to action. Intention in action is an expression of what one is doing in the sense that it is what an agent aims at or chooses: for example, I do *P* in order that *Q*.¹³ In contrast, an agent’s motive in action is what *determines the aim* or choice of an action because being motivated to act for whatever particular reason allows me to express my intention for the action that I am motivated to carry out. In other words, in being motivated to do my homework, I am able to express my intention, namely that I am doing my homework in order that I do not fail, in the action of doing my homework. In this regard, Anscombe specifies that there is an application for “motive” other than the applications of “the intention with which a man does.”¹⁴ So although doing homework can express my intention for doing homework, it is my motive for doing my homework that essentially determines my choice for actually doing homework; that is, my motive determines the aim of my action.

III. AUTONOMY AS A BI-LEVEL PROCESS

Building on the notion proposed by Anscombe that “motives determine aim,” Velleman claims that motives do in fact determine aim in action and that that aim is determined by the agent with the use of the agent’s knowledge. Although Velleman aligns himself with Anscombe in the sense that intention is a state that potentially embodies knowledge, he suggests that what Anscombe meant by “knowledge without observation” is that there is knowledge that is productive rather than receptive of what is known.¹⁵

For this reason Velleman claims that an agent uses their directive knowledge rather than receptive knowledge because an agent does not have to observe what she is doing to know what she is doing, which allows for motives to be consciously controlled and ultimately productive. According to Velleman, this sort of conscious control of motives in action suggests that an agent has a sort of epistemic authority over what she does because she knows what she is doing since she is the one doing it. In other words, my being motivated to do my homework determines my aim to do homework because it is functionally identical to me in that it is necessary to my actually doing homework. This notion of autonomy allows for the inclusion of the agent because an agent consciously controls the aim of their action with their motives by virtue of being autonomous. In this sense, Velleman suggests that an agent is endowed with authority of their actions in that the agent is the creator and designer of their actions with the use of their motives.¹⁶ This suggests that the agent, or more specifically the agent’s motive,

is essential to the fulfillment of an action.

However, as Velleman later amends, portraying an agent as autonomous suggests that the agent is “unduly self-absorbed.”¹⁷ In particular, Velleman suggests that viewing an agent as autonomous seems to imply some sort of intellectualism to the extent that the action of an autonomous agent seems to be reached only through the process of reasoning. That is, I only act for what I have identified as being the best reason. Velleman later tries to amend this discrepancy by suggesting a considered view about the constitutive aim of action that views the aim of our intellects as focused on ourselves—agents aim at knowing what they are doing.¹⁸ Velleman suggests that practical knowledge is the obvious shortcut in identifying this aim because it can only be motive that drives practical thought so that an agent can critically reflect on the potential determinants of their behavior to be able to intervene among their motives. In this way, an agent is able to endorse or reject potential determinants of behavior from a position of independence from the objects of review. Only such a motive to know what one is doing would occupy the agent, functionally speaking, and only the agent’s contribution to her behavior would constitute her own contribution.¹⁹

In this sense, I believe that what Velleman is suggesting is that motives determine the aim in action because motives are functionally identical to an agent. As an autonomous agent, I am able to identify my motives because they are mine, which also makes them functionally identical to me in that it is impossible to distinguish my motives independently of me and my action. In addition, my motives determine the aim in action and are functional to the fulfillment of my action. So, even though I need not necessarily identify all of my motives, my motives constitute my actions because they are not only mine but they ultimately contribute to the whole of my action. However, merely identifying a motive, regardless of what particular motive it is, does not provide sufficient reason for bringing about the achievement of an action. Velleman overcomes this discrepancy by claiming that an agent’s motive to be autonomous is the additional force that couples with the motives that an agent identifies to ultimately bring about an action. In this sense, motivation in action as Velleman has explained suggests a bi-level process in which there exists a primary foundational motive to be autonomous and an additional level that correlates to an agent’s stronger and weaker motives. In other words, on one level I am motivated to be autonomous and on another level I am able to identify my various motives in being autonomous. It is only through the conjunction of both levels that ultimately enables me to choose a particular motive to prevail in order that I bring about my actions, regardless of the strength of my motives. In this sense, it is possible for my various motives to determine the aim of my action because they are functionally identical to me and my action; that is, my motives are necessary for my action which I would be unable to bring about without the fundamental motive to be self-governing and autonomous.

Considering that an action is brought about as the result of the strongest combination of motives, I believe that the particular necessity of the fundamental operative motive to be autonomous guarantees that an agent is in control of their actions, which ultimately accounts for the role of the agent. If my motives were not functionally identical to me, then I would be unable bring about particular actions because I would not be able to determine an aim for my action. Without this bi-level distinction, an agent

would be unable to bring about actions, thus disowning the agent as the author of their own actions. And, if the agent is not the author of their own actions, then agency fails to account for the role of the agent.

NOTES

1. Velleman, *What Happens When Someone Acts?*, 461.
2. By “standard story,” Velleman is particularly referring to a view proposed by Donald Davidson. *What Happens When Someone Acts?* (1992), 475.
3. Velleman, *What Happens When Someone Acts?*, 480.
4. *Ibid.* 480.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.* 471.
7. Originally, Anscombe uses the example of a reflex to elucidate the notion that it is possible to have knowledge without observation; an example that Velleman also uses to explain directive knowledge.
8. Velleman defines a full-blooded action as that in which an intention is formed by the agent himself, not by his reasons for acting. These reasons affect his intention by influencing him to form it, but they thus affect his intention by affecting him first. Thus the agent moves his body in execution of his intention; his intention does not move his body. *What Happens When Someone Acts?* 462.
9. Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, 724.
10. Anscombe elucidates this point in example (b) of “involuntary.” *Intention* (1957), §7.
11. Anscombe includes the identification of a sensation by which one knows their reflex, i.e. movement of their body, to incorporate her notion of expressions of intention as justified reasons for acting, which I will forgo as that particular point is not one I shall discuss in this paper. *Intention* (1957), §8.
12. The latter half of this condition requires clarification; i.e. what does it mean to have an action where there is no cause that can be known without observation? Anscombe explains that when someone is asked “why did you do that?” they are generally being asked to provide a cause for their action; a cause that is known only by the agent. In this sense, the cause cannot be known by the observer which is why the agent has to be asked to identify the cause which an agent is able to do without necessarily having to observe the cause. Since the cause is only known by the agent, it would appear that the cause specified parallels a “mental cause.” Given that this is the case, Anscombe particularizes that mental causality is “not restricted to choices or voluntary or intentional actions”; rather that mental causality is restricted to the wider field of things the agent knows about not as an observer, so that it includes some involuntary actions. *Intention* (1957), §12.
13. Anscombe, §22.
14. Anscombe, §12.
15. Velleman, *Précis of The Possibility of Practical Reason*, 233.
16. In particular reference of Aquinas, Velleman employs the notion that “God has knowledge of His creation(s)” to suggest that in this same way, an agent has knowledge of their creations, i.e. actions. *Ibid.* 227.
17. Velleman is aware of the implications that viewing an agent as autonomous has on the part of the agent and offers an introductory narrative in an attempt to correct this; a correction which he acknowledges he does not defend elsewhere in his book *The Possibility of Practical Reason*. (Velleman, *Précis of The Possibility of Practical Reason*, 236.)
18. Velleman acknowledges that this is a view that is not directly defended in any of the papers collected in the volume “The Possibility of Practical Reason” (Velleman, *Précis of The*

Possibility of Practical Reason, 236).

19. Velleman, *What Happens When Someone Acts?*, 477.

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