

Book Reviews

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David Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. viii + 302.

This volume contains David Velleman's major papers in action theory and related areas since the publication of his seminal book *Practical Reflection* in 1989. With the exception of the introduction, the essays in this collection all have appeared elsewhere. This is an excellent collection that brings together several important essays. The introduction and chapters 6, 7 and 8 form the core of this volume. All deal with the question of what constitutes agency. Though these essays are not a unity, they provide a good picture of the development of Velleman's thinking about action theory since 1989.

The problem for any plausible theory of action, as Velleman sees it, is to find the necessary and sufficient conditions for determining whether some behaviour is an action. The traditional Humean answer to this question is the following: an action is behaviour that is caused by the desires and beliefs of the agent (p. 5). However, Velleman thinks it is not enough to distinguish between mere behaviour and those behaviours that are caused by the agent. We have to have a theory that enables us to make a second, fundamental distinction between the agent's actions and his activities. Here is an example. Sometimes we say something that we really did not mean to say. For instance, my father sometimes mixes up the names of his daughters, addressing my sisters by each other's names. When this happens, he is not aware that he is making such a mistake. Typically, he is surprised and embarrassed to find out that he did confuse my siblings' names – again. Such slips are not merely behaviour: they are things that the agent does and that are caused by his desires and beliefs. Therefore, they would count as action on the standard Humean account. However, it is clear that they are not instances of real full-blooded action. It is not something that my father intentionally and consciously does. It 'happens' to him. That is to say, these slips are not his actions, though they are his activities (pp. 1–5).

Velleman argues that we can make such a distinction between activities and actions because the agent does not really have a place in the explanation of the former. No doubt my father's mistakes are caused by some brain states that we functionally can characterize as his desires and beliefs. However, what does he have to do with this? How are these slips attributable to him? This is the traditional problem of agent causation. Velleman seeks to answer it in a way that is compatible with the scientific image of the world (p. 130). For Velleman this means that we have to find something like a desire that fulfils the functional roles that we identify

as those of the agent: we need to find the desire that is the agent (p. 137).

Velleman argues that such a desire should fulfil two functions. First, it should constitute a form of self-awareness. In the example given above, my father is unaware that he mixes up the names of his daughters. This unawareness is one reason why we are inclined to say that his behaviour is a mere activity, not an action. Second, this desire should be such that we can attribute to it the functional role of the agent. That is, it should determine, control and scrutinize the actions of the agent. Velleman's answer is that the desire for self-awareness, the desire to know what one is doing, has these two functions. Fulfilment of this desire obviously counts as self-awareness. It also leads to self-determination. Agents who know what they are doing will do those things that they have decided to do. A decision to ϕ comes with the expectation that one will ϕ . If one subsequently would not ϕ , one does not know what one is doing (p. 26).

Velleman goes on to argue that this desire has a special status among the desires of the agent. It is a pre-condition for agency. Otherwise, the agent might fail to have this desire without any impediment on her agency. This shows that the desire to know what one is doing is a constitutive aim. A constitutive aim is an aim that characterizes behaviour in so far as it is to count as a specific kind of behaviour. For example, suppose I am engaged in a competitive game. My behaviour is competitive, if and only if it is my aim to win. Once I no longer aim at winning, my behaviour is no longer competitive. Velleman thinks that action is characterized by the constitutive aim of knowing what one is doing. A behaviour is an action if self-awareness is its aim. Furthermore, it need not be the case that the agent has this aim under that description. In the example of the role of the aim of winning in a competitive game, I need not be moved by the *de dicto* desire to win. I could have this aim if I am moved to perform better than my opponent does in this game. That aim amounts to having the aim to win – though not under that description. Applying this to action, Velleman says that in all instances of full-blooded action we need not have the *de dicto* desire to know what we are doing. Rather, in the case of full-blooded action, the considerations that move us amount – among other things – to the aim of knowing what we are doing. This, in a nutshell, is Velleman's current theory of action.

Velleman's main contribution to the development of a plausible theory of action is that he gives us in straightforward naturalistic terms a way to make sense of the Kantian idea that practical rationality is a constitutive feature of agency. There is no need to refer to question-begging conceptions of autonomy or metaphysically 'odd' facts about our own nature to see that agency requires (some amount of) rationality.

Velleman writes crisply and clearly but it is never easy to follow him. The views in these essays are original, challenging and extremely well thought out. In addition to the chapters on action, there are beautiful contributions on the problem of free will, the notion of well-being, the theory of collective action, the psychology of desire and belief, as well as the status of formal theories of rationality. I recommend this book to anyone interested in action theory, philosophy of mind, meta-ethics, moral psychology and

practical rationality. It is very much worth the effort (for that it is!) of studying.

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Nathalie Sigot, *Bentham et l'économie. Une histoire d'utilité* (Paris: Economica, 2001), pp. viii + 265.

It is commonly acknowledged that Jeremy Bentham's moral and political thought exerted a considerable influence on the history of economics, whereas his economic writings were considered of secondary importance. In this book, Nathalie Sigot argues instead that Bentham was an original economic thinker, who provided a rigorous utilitarian foundation for economic analysis. Sigot's book contributes in a number of ways to the understanding of Bentham's economics. She analyses Bentham's theories of wealth, value and distribution, as well as those of growth, money, information and incentives. The book is divided into two parts: the first one discusses the relations between utilitarian philosophy and political economy in Bentham's thought; the second part examines the differences between Bentham's economics and that of classical and neo-classical authors. Sigot argues that the approach chosen by Bentham led him to analyse questions that were ignored by the Ricardians.

A central topic of the book concerns the relations between Bentham's economic and philosophical thought. Some of the issues raised here merit discussion. To begin with, the often-repeated argument that Bentham as an economist never ceases to be a philosopher is intrinsically ambiguous. It cannot be used to distinguish Bentham from other 'economists' of his time, such as Smith or Malthus, since both were philosophers and both shared Bentham's opinion that political economy was a branch of the science of legislation. However, Sigot seems to argue that a stricter connection between philosophical and economic thought was specific to Bentham and implied a lesser degree of autonomy of his economic analysis *vis-à-vis* contemporary authors. The question is then: What made an economic theory more or less independent according to the standards of that time? Bentham was certainly less systematic in his economic analysis. Most of his contributions are scattered in occasional pamphlets or in unfinished manuscripts. However, he tried to deal with some aspects of economic theory in a systematic way: An example is the analysis of the limits of government intervention he provided in *Manual of Political Economy* (c. 1795). Moreover, like his contemporaries, Bentham was conscious that political economy was a science rather than an art. Therefore, if one admits that such notions as *homo oeconomicus* or *Wertfreiheit* were still to come as criteria distinguishing 'economic' from 'philosophical' reasoning, it remains the traditional argument that what makes an economic theory self-referential is the foundation of analysis on a consistent theory of value and distribution. However, with this argument in mind, historians risk missing important contributions in fields in which Bentham, among others, was outstanding: the

economic analysis of law and politics, the economics of regulation, the economics of innovation, etc.

A more appropriate question would be to ask in what *specific* manner Bentham connected political economy to his philosophical thought. Bentham tried to give a rigorous foundation to the *normative* part of political economy. He was ready to acknowledge that Adam Smith and other economists had made considerable improvements in the positive analysis of economic relationships. However, he was convinced that the prescriptions made by them did not rest on a consistent normative basis. Sigot argues that the use of the 'principle of utility' made Bentham's contribution to economic theory original (pp. 11–12). It would be more rigorous to affirm that the analytical tools of *psychological hedonism* contributed to highlighting some parts of 'positive' economics, while the *ethical* principle of utility provided a framework for the analysis of normative problems. Another point made by Sigot is that Bentham's economic theory was not based on special *principles* of its own. However, this argument too could be applied among others to Adam Smith. For both philosophers, what made political economy an independent field of analysis were the specific *laws* inferred from the psychological and moral principles they had elaborated in their philosophical writings.

In chapter 2, Sigot divides Bentham's reflections on political economy into two 'stages', called 'self-contained economics' and 'economics open to legislation'. Broadly speaking, this distinction corresponds to that between political economy as an 'art-and-science' limited to the 'subordinate ends' of subsistence and abundance, and political economy as a branch of the science of legislation, in which the goals of security and equality also are fully encompassed. It is not clear whether this distinction is merely logical or chronological. Sigot argues that Bentham's early *laissez-faire* approach was later corrected by more interventionist views and by a more accurate integration between political economy and the legislative science (p. 47). Certain episodes indeed confirm Sigot's interpretation. Nevertheless, the textual evidence presented in this book – if correctly dated according to Bentham's original manuscripts – allows only a logical interpretation, if any, of the distinction proposed by Sigot. In fact, Bentham always considered political economy as a branch of the science of legislation and studied the applications of *all* the 'subordinate ends' of legislation to the field of 'trade'.

Much of Sigot's interpretation rests on the classification of the content of political economy suggested by Bentham. He divided this subject into *sponte acta*, *non agenda* and *agenda*. According to Sigot, this distinction overlaps with that between government interventions that are respectively indifferent, harmful and favourable to the goals of subsistence and abundance. It is then difficult to justify Bentham's statement that *sponte acta* and *non agenda* practically coincide. How could an act of government be indifferent and negative at one and the same time? However, the textual evidence proposed by Sigot (pp. 64–5) does not fit well with this interpretation. It seems that Bentham intended to designate by *sponte acta* those *private* actions that spontaneously fulfil the goals of legislation, while he defined *non agenda* as those acts of government that interfere with the *same* private activities. On the one hand, Bentham observed the spontaneous course of a series of economic activities and

judged them favourable to the ends of subsistence and abundance. On the other hand, he considered the feasibility of government intervention in order to add to the benefits of private choice. He concluded that government intervention is in these cases generally harmful, and rarely indifferent.

Sigot masterfully analyses the arguments that Bentham uses in order to demonstrate the evils of government intervention. A first ‘Hayekian’ argument is that government lacks both the appropriate motives (*inclination*) and the mass of information (*knowledge*) that private agents on the whole possess. Moreover, according to Bentham, the government has no material means (*power*) to increase wealth, since ‘trade is limited by capital’. True, the government could generate a better allocation of capital than that spontaneously determined by the market. Unfortunately this is rarely the case. A second argument employed by Bentham refers to security as a fundamental condition of happiness. Individuals usually make their decisions in the expectation of future pleasures. Private property creates a sentiment of security because it makes individuals confident in the enjoyment of the pleasures they expect from their activities. Every re-allocative intervention of government is then an evil not only for those whose resources are reduced; any individual can feel it as a threat of further limitations of his income or of his liberty. Being less sure of the fruit of his work, he will then prefer idleness to activity. We are brought back here to the central role of the theory of incentives in Bentham’s economic theory, which Sigot has meritoriously highlighted in this book.

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Alan H. Goldman, *Practical Rules: When We Need Them and When We Don’t* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. xi + 210.

On the first two pages of a book called *Bridge Made Easy*, one finds the following advice: If you have a balanced hand with 16–18 high-card points and an ace, king or queen in at least three of the four suits, then your bid should be ‘1 No Trump’. What makes this advice good (assuming that it is) are certain underlying justifying considerations – considerations about balancing the conflicting aims of (1) winning very many points, if one makes one’s bid (which would favour very ambitious bidding) and (2) minimizing the probability of not winning any points at all, because of not making one’s bid (which would favour minimally conservative bidding). Some players give only as much weight to this advice as they do to its underlying justifying considerations. They ‘look through’ the advice to the reasons behind it. Others take the advice more seriously, giving it more weight in their deliberations than they would give simply to the considerations on which it is based. The difference between the players’ two ways of regarding this advice marks the boundary of the central concept in Goldman’s new book. The advice is a genuine *rule* for the players who give it extra weight, but not for the ones who do not.

Goldman's aim is to present a theory of when one should employ rules in one's deliberations (that is, when one should give extra weight to certain considerations), and when one should not. His account is a general one, appropriate not only (and not even primarily) for games, but also for other kinds of prudential reasoning, for legal reasoning, and, especially, moral reasoning, which is Goldman's principal concern. (He discusses moral reasoning at considerable length, then prudential reasoning and legal reasoning also at some length.) The overall thrust of his theory is that rules are important, but not in the circumstances in which they are typically thought to be important. So, Goldman can be seen as defending two theses. The first is a negative one: Although rules are commonly regarded as essential to ordinary practical reasoning, they are normally dispensable. The second is a positive one: There is a special, little-noticed class of circumstances that are 'paradigm' cases (p. 13), although not the only cases, in which rules are needed. I shall discuss each of these theses in turn.

According to Goldman, rules are commonly thought to be essential to practical reasoning. In regard to the moral case, he writes that 'the tradition has conceived of moral reasoning as the application of rules to cases' (p. 42). Rejecting this view, Goldman maintains that correct practical reasoning is analogical: Regarding certain cases to have been decided in certain ways (by one's considered judgements or by precedent), one is to decide new cases by analogy with the already decided ones. The task in moral reasoning, then, is to compare and to contrast cases in order to figure out whether a given new case is more like *these*, which have been decided in one way, or more like *those*, which have been decided in the other way. Rules, in the sense specified above (the sense having to do with certain considerations being given more weight than their underlying justifying considerations independently deserve), have no essential role to play (p. 32). Now Goldman's analogical account of practical reasoning is plausible enough, and he defends it ably. But Goldman's claim that his view is contrary to 'the tradition', because of its dismissal of rules (in Goldman's sense), is less compelling. For although moral reasoning is traditionally understood in terms of rules in *some* sense of 'rules', it is not traditionally understood in terms of rules in Goldman's special sense of 'rules'.

The 'most interesting' (p. 12) and 'paradigm' (p. 13) cases in which rules are needed, Goldman writes, 'have not been explicitly noticed before' (p. 12). He characterizes these cases as ones in which the effects of *each* of a series of different agents' acts are desirable, all things considered, but in which the (cumulative) effects of *all* of the acts are undesirable (p. 67). One of Goldman's examples has to do with 'Using resources such as water or electricity during shortage'. In these cases, he writes, 'each benefits far more from using the resource than she harms particular other people, yet all suffer from the collective overuse' (p. 51). In such circumstances, Goldman says, rules (e.g. against using the resource) are needed, in order to keep individual gains from adding up to a collective loss. But it is unclear whether such cases even exist, and this worry is not much allayed by Goldman's protest that it is 'undeniable' that they do (p. 67). For Goldman stipulates that the individual decisions are desirable from the same moral or collective perspective from which their cumulative results are quite *undesirable* (so these cases are not ones of

self-interest vs. collective interest); and the agents are not *mistaken* when they deem their individual decisions to be desirable on the whole – Goldman says that these are cases in which ‘individually correct decisions, involving no errors in reasoning, can nevertheless have cumulatively bad results’ (p. 147; see also pp. 47, 48 and 53). On the other hand, in additional remarks on such cases, Goldman repeatedly mentions thresholds (see, for example, pp. 13, 44, 48, 72, 74 and 146), refers to agents’ ‘inability ... to take account of the overall effects’ of their actions (p. 43), and contrasts ‘the subtle kind of fallibility I have been emphasizing’ with ‘obvious epistemic liabilities’ (p. 48; see also pp. 13 and 47). These remarks might be taken to suggest that Goldman has in mind cases in which some relatively *non-obvious* epistemic liability prevents agents who are at thresholds from appreciating the real costs of their decisions. Although this interpretation saves Goldman from the strange metaphysical commitments involved in positing cases in which *every* agent does collective good while *all* somehow do collective harm, it obviously does not square with Goldman’s rather explicit positing of such cases, or with his claim that the cases in question have not been explicitly noticed before, since threshold cases are perfectly standard fare. Ultimately, Goldman’s account of his ‘paradigm’ cases presents some interpretive problems whose solution remains elusive.

Thus I find Goldman’s negative thesis to be plausible but not as significant as he suggests, and his positive thesis to be intriguing but problematic. On a broader view, Goldman’s book is mixed in other ways as well. Its many clear examples save the reader a lot of speculation and confusion (the trouble with the positive thesis notwithstanding), but its dense style of argument and Goldman’s relative unconcern with explicitly laying out the structure of his arguments can leave the reader wondering whether, in a particular passage, Goldman is introducing a claim, clarifying it, defending it, entertaining an objection to it, or qualifying it. Overall, then, this book requires a fair bit of work per page to get through, but this should not dissuade readers who are interested in a competent, illuminating and compact – if not ultimately compelling – discussion of an important question about practical reasoning.

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John Rist, *Real Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. viii + 295.

Like Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, John Rist believes moral theory cannot succeed without the supernatural. Like them, too, Rist underestimates moral theories in the mainstream of academic discussions. To his credit, he frames his discussion in terms of moral theory, making only limited – and warranted – excursions into political philosophy. His arguments, moreover, are grounded in an admirably sophisticated understanding of the history of philosophy.

Rist recognizes that he defends a form of ethical theory now out of favour amongst philosophers (pp. 140 ff.). He argues that ‘the only genuine

alternatives' are 'a realist theory of moral foundations, of a Platonic sort or (better) overtly theistic' or 'an ultimately unintelligible view' that morality depends on choice (p. 271). He believes that either 'Platonism is true' or 'there is no moral universe' (p. 201) and we are left with Thrasymachean nihilism (p. 17), which is unable to criticize even the most heinous crime (p. 21). According to Rist's 'real' – read: 'Christianized Platonic' – ethics, without a 'transcendental aspect', morality is man-made (p. 28). This, though, can mean that morality follows either from arbitrary fiat or the being of mankind; only the former seems Thrasymachean.

Rist recognizes that some will think a non-realist view can provide objectivity (p. 48), but believes that 'every alternative to a morality of realism must be a variant on the claim that autonomy itself, expressed in choice, is the supreme, indeed the only ultimate value' (p. 186) and that all such theories are ultimately incoherent as they require that we are better off if we increase our choices (p. 188). He believes, moreover, that since a choice for rationality cannot be made rationally (p. 276), choice-based theories cannot have their foundations established (p. 45) and so are nihilistic (p. 58). Rist argues that without a known end practical reason is impossible and so we need to know what a good human life *needs* (pp. 181–2). A choice-based account, though, may consider choice a constituent intrinsic good (using Raz's terminology) *because it is part of an autonomous life*. Since a person who continuously chooses for the sake of choosing (e.g. choosing X, not-X, X, etc.) is not merely confused, but unable to act and so not autonomous, on such an account his choice would be of no value. By contrast, Rist thinks choice is only ever instrumentally valuable so that if we were in heaven, it would have no value (p. 201; cf. p. 69). If the Good is an autonomous life, though, the value of choice is built-in.

Rist's concern with 'what we are or could be' (p. 61) leads him to oppose any form of psychological reductionism (see e.g. p. 45) which divides the self, takes one of the divisions as primary, and shows no concern with reunification (he thinks such theories predominate: p. 67). He takes the fact that we change to be evidence that we are not 'complete', not unities (p. 102). Moreover, he doubts that we can attain full unity (p. 71). Still, Rist (p. 75) is firmly with the ancients in indicating that we should seek to move from what we are (disintegrated; bad) to what we ideally can be (unified; good). The question, then, is how to pursue unity.

As seeking completion in other humans is apt to lead to disappointment, we should, Rist thinks, seek it in God – who would 'not be thus unreliable' (p. 99). God alone can counter 'our "surd"-factor, our self-expanding capacity to lose sight of our "desired" moral unity' (p. 263). Where others seek 'personal correction' (p. 219) in community alone, Rist insists there must be a transcendental guarantor of soundness – preferably, God (pp. 108–25). This nonetheless requires a social context, for man is a social animal (p. 210) and so any self-directed activity must take place in a 'framework of more or less coherent past practices, habits, and dispositions' that allow for non-random choices in pursuit of unity (p. 68). Community helps us move from our 'present empirical (and divided) self' to something 'beyond ... *what we are now*' – to our 'real' self' (pp. 221–2). (Rist fears 'moral atomism' and 'radical' and 'anti-social' individualism, which he does not consider straw-man views (pp. 217–19).) A

social and political framework is necessary for responsibility and 'taking or declining responsibility ... is a key to reducing or increasing the splitting of the self which indicates ... moral progress or regression' (p. 205). The next problem, then, is political – statecraft is soulcraft.

Platonists envision a specific risk of diversity: the democratic soul, 'ever more multiform in his principles'. The fear is that by tolerating all ideas, the individual 'comes to value none of them – unless the arbitrary choices of fascist fanaticisms – while at the same time he grows ever more homogenized'. Such individuals have no sense of their own traditions, accept everything, and thereby accept nothing. Citizens thus become 'so homogenized in their banal desires and aspirations that they can be manipulated with ever greater success' (p. 234). This social commentary seems spot on. As our 'Western tradition ... has found itself confronted by so many different traditions ... it has had no time to assimilate or reject them. The result is an uncritically respected cultural pluralism' (p. 236). This, in turn, leaves politicians thinking that 'the public must be soothed into believing that harmony can be achieved by some kind of non-divisive politics of healing or at least of caring' (p. 237). Rist thinks this democratic hell is the 'political analogue to a world where "choice" is the highest value'. It is a 'world without any sense of the common good' which, he thinks, is dependent on God (p. 241).

At bottom, Rist deplores the rootlessness of both contemporary philosophy (see pp. 242–3) and the contemporary individual. He notes:

the end of a tradition in a rootless individual who frequents (or haunts) our city streets, or in his often suicidal and frenetic avatars in contemporary literature and popular culture seeking to hide their isolation in mindless sex, drugs and whimpers about their alienation and how 'screwed' they have been by their parents and society. (p. 244)

One can't help but sympathize with these concerns. Still, Rist's worship of the past is not necessarily better than the complete rejection of it he abhors and we have been given no conclusive reason to believe, as he does, that Nietzsche was right 'that after the "death" of God there could be no foundation for morality' (p. 260). Those sympathetic to Rist's theistic view – that 'for morality to function God must function both as final and (at least in great part) as efficient cause of our moral life' (p. 257) – may find useful argumentative artillery in *Real Ethics*. Since, as Rist admits, debate between theists and non-theists regarding 'the foundations and the justification of morality' is likely 'to come to an abrupt halt before what is the effect of the theistic brick wall' (p. 260), non-theists may prefer to walk past it.

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