

AGENCY AND NORMATIVE SELF-GOVERNANCE

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Abstract: We are agents: we can deliberate about what to do and then act on the basis of that deliberation. We are also capable of normative self-governance: we can identify and respond to reasons *as reasons*. Many theorists believe that these two capacities are intimately connected. On the basis of this connection they conclude that practical reasoning must be carried out under the guise of a justification. This paper explores two strategies for avoiding that conclusion. The first, which just denies the connection between agency and normative self-governance, is rejected as too costly, since it leaves the normative significance of agency unexplained. The second, which suggests that we can respond to a consideration as a reason without representing it as a reason, seems more promising, but it requires a reductive account of reasons for action. The upshot is that metaethics and action theory are entwined in ways few have realized.

1. Introduction

Human beings are agents. We can deliberate about what to do—reflecting on our desires and our circumstances—and then act on the basis of that deliberation. When we do, there is an important sense in which our actions are *up to us*: they are attributable to *us* rather than to attitudes or events occurring inside us. We are also capable of normative self-governance. We can identify reasons for action and

respond to them *as reasons*. That is, we can recognize the considerations that justify or count in favour of a particular action and then perform that action on the basis of those considerations and their justifying force. When we do, we govern ourselves normatively.¹

Many philosophers believe that these two features of human life go hand in hand and thus that human agency is an essentially normative phenomenon.² For these philosophers, our capacity to act for reasons is what distinguishes us from other animals. Although nonhuman animals can perform actions that are attributable to them, rather than to events or attitudes inside them, they cannot act for reasons. And because they cannot act on the basis of justifications, their agency falls short of the ‘autonomous’ or ‘full-blooded’ variety instantiated by humans.³ Although nonhuman animals are agents, they are not *rational* agents.

The idea that human agency is an essentially normative or rational phenomenon is often taken to have substantial implications for our understanding of the nature of practical reasoning. More specifically, the fact that human actions are performed for reasons seems to entail that such actions are necessarily performed under the guise of a justification and thus that practical reasoning is a distinctively *normative* mode of thought.

In light of the connection between agency and normative self-governance, this conclusion can seem irresistible. I want to resist it nonetheless, since I think that there are powerful arguments against the view that practical reasoning must be carried out under the guise of a justification. The most well-known arguments

1. The capacity for normative self-governance is what J. David Velleman [1992a: 4] calls our capacity for ‘rational guidance’.

2. See, for instance, Christine M. Korsgaard’s introduction to *The Constitution of Agency* [2008: 1]: ‘We . . . constitute ourselves as agents, by choosing our actions in accordance with the principles of practical reason, especially moral principles.’ See also Watson [1977], Quinn [1993], Buss [1999], and Tenenbaum [2007: chs. 1–2].

3. Here I borrow the honorifics used by Velleman [2000: 4, 1992b: 462]. See also Michael Bratman’s talk of ‘full-blown’ agency [2001: 312].

appeal to cases of clear-eyed *akrasia* or weakness of the will.⁴ These arguments are widely regarded to be inconclusive, though, since philosophers ‘under the influence of theory’ [Wiggins 1979: 251] can always find ways to reinterpret cases of apparent *akrasia* so that the relevant agents turn out not to be acting contrary to their better judgments. In other work [Silverstein, forthcoming], I have argued that a simpler (and less contentious) phenomenon is sufficient to demonstrate that practical reasoning is not carried out under the guise of a justification: I can deliberate about what to do even when I already know what I have most reason to do. That is, I can engage in practical reasoning even when I have settled the normative question of what I have most reason to do (or of what I ought to do). If I have already settled the normative question, then whatever further reasoning is required in order for me to arrive at an intention or action must be directed at settling some other question.⁵ Of course, when I take up this further question my view about what I have most reason to do may very well figure in my deliberation. But it might not. Consequently, I might arrive at an intention and act accordingly without casting my behaviour in a positive light. I might even conceive of my action in a negative light. At least occasionally, then, practical reasoning is not carried out under the guise of a justification.

This view is obviously controversial, but since I have argued for it at length elsewhere, I shall not defend it further here.⁶ Instead I want to explore some of its

4. See, for instance, Stocker [1979] and Velleman [1992a].

5. The nature of this further question depends on the constitutive aim of practical reasoning. I cannot offer an account of that aim here. For a crude example of what such an account might look like, however, consider Jeremy Bentham’s psychological hedonism: ‘Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone . . . to determine what we shall do’ [1780: 11]. For Bentham, the question we ask ourselves when we engage in practical reasoning is: What is the most pleasurable (or least painful) course of action available to me? More plausible than hedonism is the familiar *instrumentalist* conception of practical reasoning associated with the Hobbesian and Humean traditions. According to instrumentalists, the aim of practical reasoning is to help us achieve our ultimate goals or satisfy our intrinsic desires. See, for instance, Gauthier [1986: ch. 2]. For a rather more complex and compelling account of the aim of practical reasoning, see Velleman [1989, 2009].

6. For other defenses of this view, see Bratman [2003], Frankfurt [2004], and Setiya [2007: 21–67].

implications. If practical reasoning is not necessarily carried out under the guise of a justification, how should we understand the relation between agency and normative self-governance? One option is just to deny that agency has anything to do with normative self-governance. I argue in section 3 below that we should reject this approach as too costly: although it avoids the conclusion that practical reasoning is necessarily carried out in normative terms, it leaves the normative significance of agency unexplained. In section 4 I suggest that we can preserve the compelling idea that human agency is an essentially normative or rational phenomenon even if we reject the view that practical reasoning is a distinctively normative mode of thought. If we can respond to a consideration as a reason—that is, respond to the normative or justifying force of that reason—without judging or taking it to be a reason, then we can act for that reason without thereby acting under the guise of a justification. I also argue, however, that this way of preserving the connection between agency and normative self-governance requires a controversial metanormative complement in the form of a reductive account of normative reasons for action. The upshot is that metaethics and the philosophy of action turn out to be entwined in ways few metaethicists and action theorists have realized.

2. The Guise of a Justification

Let me begin by introducing the argument that runs from the connection between agency and normative self-governance to the conclusion that practical reasoning must be carried out under the guise of a justification. This argument has two premises. The first states that in order to act for a reason, an agent must do more than respond to (or be influenced by) the consideration that is the reason. The agent must also respond to (or be influenced by) that consideration's justifying or normative force; he must respond to it *as a reason*. This means that in his deliberations the agent must somehow register or grasp the normative status of the

reasons for which he acts. An explanation of an action performed for a reason must therefore adduce not only the agent's awareness of the reason but also his awareness of its justifying or normative force. If, for example, I suffer from extreme pyrophobia, then I may panic and immediately sprint to the nearest exit upon realizing that the fire alarm has been activated. When I do, I respond to a reason: the fact that the fire alarm has sounded is indeed a reason for me to exit the building, and I flee because I am aware that the alarm has been triggered. I do not, however, respond to that reason's normative or justifying force, at least initially. I do not respond to that reason *as a reason*. In my panicked flight, I do not even register the fact that the sounding of the fire alarm *counts in favour* of my leaving the premises: my phobic reaction involves no awareness of the normative force of the fact that prompts that reaction. And that is why my behaviour falls short of action for a reason—why we attribute that behaviour to an attitude inside me (namely, my irrational fear) rather than simply to me.⁷

Of course, we can act for reasons that do not actually justify our actions. That is, we can act for bad reasons—reasons that have no justificatory or normative force whatsoever. When we do, though, we are still exercising our capacity to respond to reasons as reasons. When we act for bad reasons, we are still influenced by their *apparent or putative* normative force. If, then, we respond to a reason without responding to or being influenced by that reason's (at least apparent) normativity, we are not responding to it as a reason, in which case we are not acting for that reason. And if we are not influenced by any reason's (at least apparent) normativity, then we are not acting for a reason at all. Agency is, at least functionally speaking, a normative capacity.⁸

The second premise states that an agent can respond to the normative force of some consideration only by *taking* that consideration to be a reason in favour of

7. Philosophers who have endorsed this premise include Nagel [1986: 142], Velleman [1992a: 4], Raz [1999: 8], Dancy [2000: 97], Kennett and Matthews [2008], and Marcus [2013: 519–21].

8. I say that it is a normative capacity only *functionally speaking* because we exercise this capacity even when the reasons to which we are responding are not normative reasons at all.

his action. If our being moved or influenced by a particular consideration is not sufficient for our being guided by its normative or rational force, what more is required? The only obvious answer is that we must not only grasp the consideration that is the reason *but also take this consideration to be a normative reason*.⁹ What is involved in taking something to be a reason? There are various possibilities. Taking something to be a reason might require *judging* or *believing* that it is a reason.¹⁰ Or it might merely require something's *seeming* or *appearing* to be a reason. For my purposes here, the crucial point is that taking a consideration to be a reason involves *representing* it as a reason, where that involves applying the *concept* of a reason. According to the second premise, then, if I do not represent the triggering of the fire alarm as a reason, then I cannot respond to that consideration as a reason—I cannot be influenced by its normative or justifying force. In order to act for this reason, I would have to represent the sounding of the fire alarm as counting in favour of my action: the cogitation that produces my action would have to incorporate my representing the action in a positive normative light. But as I have described the situation I do not represent the sounding of the fire alarm in any normative light, and so I do not respond to that consideration as a reason. I do not respond to its normative or justifying force.

Taken together, these two premises entail that an agent cannot act for a reason without taking that reason to justify or count in favour of his action. And if

9. This conclusion is sometimes stated in evaluative rather than normative terms—perhaps most famously by Donald Davidson. In 'How Is Weakness of Will Possible?' [1980a], Davidson describes the conclusion of practical reasoning as a value judgment. And in 'Intending' [1980b: 102, 86], he claims that desires 'constitute' or are 'expressed by' value judgments. For an explanation of how Davidson arrives at these conclusions that resembles my account of the argument from the connection between agency and normative self-governance to the conclusion that practical reasoning is performed under the guise of a justification, see Velleman [1992a: 6–7].

10. The suggestion that taking something to be a reason involves *judging* or *believing* that it is a reason might seem to invite the problematic regress presented by Lewis Carroll [1895]. But what starts that regress is not Achilles's asking the Tortoise to accept *modus ponens*, but rather the Tortoise's accepting it *as one of the premises of his reasoning*. Hypothetical reasoning might require a belief in *modus ponens* not as a premise, but rather as some sort of background or enabling condition for the application of the rule. For more on this distinction as well as some doubts about it, see Boghossian [2014: 7–8].

practical reasoning is just the kind of deliberation that yields action for a reason, then it follows that practical reasoning must be carried out under the guise of a justification. Reasoning cast entirely in nonnormative terms could never produce a full-blooded action, since the action with which that reasoning concluded would not be performed for a reason.

3. Severing the Connection

At the centre of this argument is a nice and tidy story about how we respond to reasons when we act. I think this story is true some or even much of the time: we often do respond to a reason by judging that it is a reason. I do not think this story is true all of the time, however. Practical reasoning is not always carried out under the guise of a justification. But what, then, should we say about the argument I have just presented?

One strategy for resisting the force of this argument is to reject the first premise and thereby deny any essential connection between agency and normative self-governance. Proponents of this strategy include Harry Frankfurt [2004], Alfred Mele [2004: 74–6], and Kieran Setiya [2010: 86–93].¹¹ Frankfurt's view is the most radical of the three. He insists that 'a person can make choices and decisions, and he can be in active states of mind, even without engaging his reason at all' [2004: 122]. According to Frankfurt, then, we can exercise our agency without engaging in any sort of reasoning and so without acting for a reason. Setiya's view is more moderate. He acknowledges that agency involves the capacity to act for reasons but maintains that this agential capacity to act for reasons is distinct from the normative capacity to govern one's behaviour in accordance with one's conception of the normative reasons one has. Like Frankfurt, then, Setiya rejects the idea that agency essentially involves the functional capacity to respond to (or be influenced by) normative reasons.

11. See also Stocker [1979] and Arpaly [2003: ch. 2].

In its place Setiya offers an account of agency rooted in G. E. M. Anscombe's suggestion that what distinguishes actions performed for reasons from other forms of human behaviour is that they are 'actions to which a certain sense of the question "Why?" is given application' [Anscombe 1957: 9]. According to Setiya, I can give application to this question merely by providing an explanation of what I am doing. That is, I do not refuse application to the question 'Why?' by providing a purely descriptive account of my behaviour: 'The answer to that question is not a proposition about what justifies one's action, but about its explanation' [Setiya 2010: 91]. Just as I can recognize *your* reason for acting without thinking of it as *a* reason for action, so can I identify *my* reason for acting without thinking of it as *a* reason for action:

"Why are you running outside in your underwear?"

"Because the house is on fire!"

"What about your family? Won't they be trapped by the flames? In a circumstance like this, the fact that the house is on fire is a reason to rush upstairs and rescue them, not to look after your own safety while they burn!"

"You're right. I can't justify my action at all: the danger is not a reason for me to flee; but it is the reason for which I am doing so."

[Setiya 2010: 91]

According to Setiya, the concept I deploy here when I identify *my* reason—or the reason *for which* I flee—is purely *explanatory*. It is therefore different from the *normative* concept I apply when I agree that the danger is *a* reason for me to race upstairs. So, when I flee, I think of the danger as my reason even though I do not think of it as counting in favour of my action: I act for a reason but not under the guise of the normative. Moreover, even though I respond to the danger, I do not respond to it as a reason—that is, I do not respond to its putative or apparent

justifying force. And so I do not engage my capacity to respond to a justification. For Setiya, then, we have two distinct capacities involving reasons: the capacity to be guided by an explanation of what we are doing and the capacity to be guided by a justification of what we are doing. Only the former is required for autonomous or full-blooded agency.¹²

Setiya's account of the relation between explanation and justification looks perfectly coherent, and it does avoid the conclusion that practical reasoning must be carried out under the guise of a justification. I believe we should reject it nonetheless, for it leaves a crucial connection unexplained: Setiya's view saddles us with two distinct capacities but provides no explanation for why these capacities are always found together.

Let me elaborate. It is our having the functional capacity to respond to justifications that licenses various normative practices. If we could not be influenced by the normative or justificatory force of reasons—that is, if we were incapable of normative self-governance—it would make little sense to criticize one another for acting for bad reasons, to recommend actions on the basis of the reasons that count in favour of them, and so forth. Of course, if we can act for reasons, then there is a sense in which we are thereby subject to standards of practical reason: the reasons for which we act can be evaluated as good or bad reasons; we can reason well or badly. But being subject to normative standards in this way is not sufficient for us to be participants in the normative practices in question. Consider the sort of criticism we are likely to level at the agent in Setiya's example. After learning that he has fled his burning house even though his family

12. Interestingly, it is not clear whether Anscombe accepts the distinction Setiya draws. On the one hand, she contends that the chain of 'Why?' questions receives a definitive answer only when we arrive at a 'desirability characterization' of the action in question [1957: 74]. She also mentions a 'conceptual connection' between the terms 'wanting' and 'good' [ibid.: 76]. On the other hand, she seems to accept that various answers count as 'desirability characterizations' even though they are not framed in explicitly normative or evaluative terms [ibid.: 75]. Then again, as Setiya acknowledges, Anscombe also believes that the question 'Why?' is not refused application when the answer is 'For no particular reason' [ibid.: 25]. This suggests that Anscombe does not think that all intentional actions are performed for a reason.

remains inside, we declare that he has acted for a bad reason. What does this charge amount to? On the one hand, we might simply be criticizing the agent for acting on the basis of his own safety, where that consideration happens to be a bad reason (at least in this situation, with his family in danger). On the other hand, we might be criticizing him for acting for a bad reason, where that reason happens to be one having to do with his own safety. The difference between these two sorts of criticism is subtle but important. In the latter but not the former, the normative status of the agent's reason falls within the scope of our criticism; it is part of what we are criticizing him for doing. I think it is clear that our normative practices involve this latter sort of criticism: when we declare that an agent has acted for a bad reason, the badness of the reason is part of the content of our criticism. Yet it makes no sense to direct this sort of criticism at an agent who is not susceptible to the normative force of reasons. That is, it makes no sense to criticize an agent for acting on considerations that are bad reasons—or for failing to act on considerations that are good reasons—if he is incapable of responding to their goodness or badness *as* reasons.¹³

If that is correct, then Setiya's view saddles us with one capacity that is responsible for our being agents and a separate capacity that is responsible for our being participants in normative practices like criticism and recommendation. The problem is that these two capacities appear to be necessarily linked. The agential capacity to act for a reason seems to be both necessary and sufficient for participation in our normative practices. All of the creatures we know that can act for reasons are also creatures it makes sense to criticize for acting for bad reasons. Moreover, any creature that falls short of agency is thereby an inappropriate target of this kind of normative engagement. One obvious explanation for this tight

13. The same goes for the normative practice of recommendation: it makes no sense to recommend an action on the basis of good reasons—where the goodness of the reasons falls within the scope of the recommendation—if the recipient of the recommendation cannot be influenced by the justifying force of those reasons. I am indebted to David Velleman for helping me formulate this objection to Setiya's view.

connection is that the two capacities in question are not distinct after all. If the agential capacity to act for a reason just is the normative capacity to be influenced by an apparent justification, then we should expect agency and being an appropriate object of normative assessment to go hand in hand.¹⁴ If, on the other hand, the capacities are distinct, we need some other explanation of the connection.

Setiya claims that he can provide at least a partial explanation. The capacity for normative control of one's actions depends on the agential capacity to know what one is doing and why: 'If I have no idea what my reasons are, I am in no position to stop myself from acting on considerations that are not, as I believe, good reasons to act' [Setiya 2010: 92–3]. One cannot have the normative capacity without also having the agential capacity; the latter is necessary for the former. This seems right as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. It explains why agency is *necessary* for normative self-governance but not why it is *sufficient*. That is, it does not explain why agents are *ipso facto* appropriate objects of authoritative criticism. As it stands, if Setiya's view is correct, we should be able to imagine agents that are capable of performing autonomous or full-blooded actions but that are incapable of normative self-governance and are thus inappropriate targets for authoritative criticism. I cannot prove such agents are impossible, but I have a hard time imagining them. The idea of an agent who on the one hand is capable of performing intentional actions—actions that are fully attributable to him as an agent rather than to attitudes or events occurring within him and that are performed on the basis of practical reasoning—but who on the other hand cannot appropriately be criticized for acting irrationally or for bad reasons (or praised for acting rationally or for good reasons) strikes me as deeply counterintuitive. I suspect most action theorists find the idea counterintuitive as well, given that they generally treat agency and normative self-governance as complementary phenomena. Surely the

14. I return to this possibility in section 4 below.

more intuitive view is that, as Mark Schroeder [2007: 167] puts it, ‘an agent who was incapable of responding to her reasons would be no agent at all’.

Philosophers attracted to Setiya’s strategy for avoiding the conclusion that practical reasoning is necessarily carried out under the guise of a justification must therefore choose between a pair of unpalatable options. The first option is to accept that there are agents who act for reasons but who cannot properly be criticized for acting for bad reasons. This involves rejecting the intuitive view that rational agency and normative self-governance are closely linked. The second option is to accept that view but leave the crucial link unexplained.¹⁵ Although neither option is incoherent, each is sufficiently problematic that together they constitute a presumptive case against Setiya’s approach.

4. Responding to Reasons *De Dicto* and *De Re*

Rejecting the first premise of the argument outlined in section 2 has proved to be costly, and so we should turn our attention to the second premise. If we can respond to some consideration as a reason without *taking* it to be a reason, then we can avoid the conclusion that practical reasoning is always carried out under the guise of a justification—even if we accept that agency and normative self-governance are necessarily linked. This is the approach Velleman favours. Like Frankfurt, Mele, and Setiya, Velleman holds that we sometimes act autonomously in ways that we do not endorse or take to be justified. Sometimes, in other words, we believe that the reasons for which we are acting are not good reasons. Yet even in such cases, Velleman maintains, we still respond to the putative justificatory force of the reasons for which we act. That is, we remain normatively self-governed even though we do not act under the guise of a normative reason.

¹⁵. Setiya points out that his account does not rule out the possibility of an explanation, but he also acknowledges that it lacks the resources to provide one itself [2010: 93]. The lack of an explanation here would render the sufficiency of autonomous agency for normative self-governance a ‘brute necessity’, something Setiya elsewhere [2014: 232] agrees we should avoid.

How can we respond to a reason *as a reason*—respond to its putative justificatory or normative force—without judging or taking it to be a reason? According to Velleman, an agent can respond to a reason as a normative or justifying reason without responding to it *in those terms* or *under that description*: ‘an agent can be influenced by considerations in their capacity as reasons without necessarily conceiving of them as such’ [2004: 291]. To see how, recall that in order to respond to a reason as a reason, we must somehow respond to that reason’s putative normative or justificatory force. If we are influenced by a reason without being influenced in any way by its putative normative force, we can hardly be said to be responding to that reason *as a reason*. The plausible thought underlying the second premise of the argument we are considering is that we can respond to the apparent normative force of some consideration only by having some attitude or representation *about that force*.¹⁶ This is what leads so many philosophers to conclude that the connection between agency and normative self-governance entails that action is always performed under the guise of the normative. Yet this conclusion follows, Velleman observes, only if we interpret the descriptions of the relevant attitude or representation *de dicto* rather than *de re*.¹⁷ After all, an attitude can be about the putative normative force of a reason without incorporating the concept of a normative reason, just as an attitude can be about Superman without incorporating the concept of Superman. Put another way, I can represent the justifying force of some consideration without representing it *as* normative force. We can therefore accept that when agents act for reasons they must have attitudes about the putative justificatory force of those reasons without accepting that action

16. This plausible thought can be denied. Some philosophers claim that when we act for a reason we are directly influenced by the justifying force of that reason—without our representing that force or having an attitude that takes it as its object. See, for instance, Dreier [1997], Wedgwood [2006], and Smith [2009]. The problem with this approach is that it cannot make sense of irrational action or action for a bad reason. When we act for a bad reason, the reason for which we act does not justify our action, and so it has no justifying force that might influence us.

17. Velleman makes this point most explicitly in the introduction to *The Possibility of Practical Reason* [2000: 14–20, especially n. 20, and 28 n. 34]. See also Velleman [1992b: 478].

for a reason is always performed under the guise of a justification, so long as we interpret the relevant attitude reports *de re*.

Velleman's approach allows us to resist the argument laid out in section 2 without jettisoning the connection between acting for a reason and responding to reasons as reasons or justifications. It makes it possible for us to accept that practical reasoning must be deliberation about what we have normative reason to do while denying that it must therefore be cashed out in normative terms. Agency remains a normative capacity, functionally speaking, even though it does not require the deployment of normative concepts. The link between acting for a reason and responding to a reason as a reason—or between agency and normative self-governance—is thereby preserved.

But at what cost? Notice that Velleman's approach presupposes that there is always some other description under which agents can respond to the normative or justificatory force of reasons for action. That is, it presupposes that there is some feature of reasons such that in responding to that feature agents are *ipso facto* responding to the normative force of those reasons. Velleman takes the feature in question to involve intelligibility: 'an agent is exposed to the [normative] force of a reason when he perceives its explanatory relevance to the action for which it is a reason' [2004: 291]. Yet this could be the case only if the explanatory relevance of a reason *just is* its normative force. Just as a thought framed in terms of Clark Kent can thereby be about Superman only if Clark Kent and Superman are the same person, so too my attitude framed in terms of the explanatory relevance of some consideration can thereby be about the justificatory force of that consideration only if explanatory relevance and justificatory force are the same property. And this will hold for any feature of reasons with respect to which it is the case that in responding to that feature we are thereby responding to the normative force of reasons. It turns out, then, that the sort of solution to the problem of agency and normative self-governance favoured by Velleman requires there to be some property of reasons for action that can be picked out in nonnormative or purely descriptive

terms and that is nevertheless identical to the property of normative force. It requires, in other words, a reductive account of the normativity of reasons for action.¹⁸

Might we make do with anything less than a reduction here?¹⁹ I do not see how we could. Normative self-governance involves being sensitive to normativity—not merely being sensitive to considerations that are normative. That is, it requires more than merely responding to considerations that have normative force; it requires responding to that normative force itself.²⁰ So, for Velleman’s approach to work, explanatory relevance must be *identical* to normative force. If these two properties are merely co-extensive, then Velleman’s view will allow agency and normative self-governance to come apart: it will allow us to respond to the explanatory force of some consideration (and thereby exercise our agency) without responding to that consideration’s justificatory force (and thereby governing ourselves normatively). Nothing less than a reduction will do, at least if we are to avoid the conclusion that practical reasoning must be carried out under the guise of a justification.

This is surprising on a couple of levels. First, although at one point Velleman flirted with the project of reducing the normativity of reasons [2000: 16–17], he has since explicitly disavowed it [2004: 291–7, 2009: 139 n. 27]. He has even disavowed metaethics more generally, insisting that ‘analyzing the semantics, metaphysics, and epistemology of [ethical statements] will reveal very little about the

18. Nadeem Hussain [2004: 268–70] makes a similar observation about Velleman’s view. Note that the reduction cannot be analytic or conceptual, since that would just reintroduce the guise of a justification. Instead the reduction must be metaphysical: the property of being a reason for action must be identical to a property we can pick out using purely descriptive terms. For more on this metaphysical sort of reduction, see Railton [1993: sec. 2]. Note also that the reduction need not be naturalistic: the property of being a reason for action must be identical to a property that can be picked out in purely *descriptive* terms, but those terms may turn out to be irreducibly different from the terms employed by the natural or physical sciences.

19. I am indebted to an anonymous referee for pressing this question so forcefully.

20. More precisely, it requires responding to *apparent* or *putative* normative force. As I noted above, we govern ourselves normatively even when we act for bad reasons—that is, even when we act on the basis of considerations that have no genuine justificatory force.

fundamental nature of [ethics]' [2009: 157].²¹ Yet without an account of the metaphysics of reasons (or, more precisely, of the metaphysics of the normative force of reasons), Velleman cannot defend his claim that whenever we respond to the explanatory relevance of a reason we thereby also respond to that reason's normative force. Responding to the former could necessarily involve responding to the latter only if they are one and the same—only if they are identical. And that looks like a straightforwardly metaphysical (and thus metaethical) matter.

More importantly, though, the revelation that Velleman's approach requires a reductive metaethic shows that it is not as easy as we might have supposed to keep our theorizing about agency and action separate from our theorizing about the nature of normativity, especially if we take the subject of the philosophy of action to be *action for a reason*. Put another way, once we reject Setiya's view that agency and normative self-governance are distinct phenomena, we cannot disentangle ethical theory from action theory. If, on the one hand, we accept the view that actions are always performed under the guise of a justification, then we must wait for ethicists to deliver a normative theory of reasons before we will be in any position to explain what is involved in sound practical reasoning. If, on the other hand, we reject this view, then we must acknowledge that agents can respond to the justificatory force of a reason without responding to it under that description. And we can acknowledge that only if we think that there is some feature of reasons, describable in nonnormative terms, that *just is* the justificatory force of reasons—only, in other words, if we think that the normativity of reasons can be reduced.²²

21. Although Velleman gestures in the direction of reductionism in some of his recent work on moral relativism [2013: 50], he has little to say about the metaphysics and semantics of normativity.

22. This link between action theory and ethical theory forged by Velleman's approach runs in both directions, at least if we deny (as I think we should) that practical reasoning is always carried out under the guise of a justification. Against the background assumption (rejected by Setiya but defended above) that acting for a reason involves responding to that reason as a reason, any action-theoretical view about the kinds of considerations that figure in practical reasoning will have to pass muster as a reductive account of reasons for action. Conversely, any reductive account of reasons for action will have to pass muster as an action-theoretical account of practical reasoning and action for a reason.

5. Conclusion

Where does that leave us? We can now see that the following three philosophical principles are mutually inconsistent:

1. Action for a reason is not always carried out under the guise of a justification (or, more broadly, under the guise of the normative).
2. In order to act for a reason, an agent must respond to that reason *as a normative reason* by responding to its (apparent) normative force.
3. The normative force of reasons is irreducibly normative.

These principles cannot all be true. This is a surprising conclusion, especially since we might have thought coming in that 3 (a familiar metaethical view) has little to do with 1 and 2 (both action-theoretical views). It turns out that the philosophy of action and metaethics are entwined in ways few philosophers have realized.²³

But what, then, should we think about the relation between agency and normative self-governance? That depends on where we start: anyone can construct an argument against one of the above principles by starting with the other two as premises. I have already argued that the costs of Setiya's approach (which involves rejecting 2) are too high. Philosophers staunchly opposed to metaethical reductionism will undoubtedly say the same about Velleman's approach (which involves rejecting 3). Does that mean we should embrace the guise of the normative thesis after all? I certainly do not think so. The evidence against that thesis strikes me as particularly forceful: I engage in practical reasoning even though I already know what I ought to do, or what I have most reason to do. And I act contrary to my judgments about what I ought to do all too frequently. Confronted with that sort of direct evidence, only someone who is, as David Wiggins [1979: 251] puts it, 'under the influence of theory' could maintain that practical reasoning is necessarily carried out under the guise of a justification. Our evidence in favour of principles 2

²³. Various philosophers have thought that the philosophy of action and *normative* ethics are closely linked. See, for instance, the constitutivist theories of Korsgaard [2009], Katsafanas [2013]; and of course Velleman [2009: ch. 5].

and 3 is much less direct, and so we are better off rejecting one of those. I have defended a reductive account of reasons for action elsewhere [Silverstein 2016], and so it will be clear where my sympathies lie. However we proceed, though, we can no longer assume that our commitments in the philosophy of action will not bleed over into our metaethical theorizing (and vice versa).²⁴

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