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Velleman, J. D. 2008. *How We Get Along,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

This book is based on The Shearman Lectures delivered by David Velleman at University College, London, in May 2007. Chapter 1, 2, 3, and 5 are taken from these lectures with minor corrections. The rest of the material is new. Despite of this apparent disparity, Velleman has managed to unify the whole book by keeping the style largely colloquial. He notes at the preface that the new chapters were written with 'the same voice' than the original lectures, that is, 'as if presenting additional lectures' (p. x). And this choice has proven to be fruitful. Velleman's philosophical style is perfectly matched for the purpose of this book, which is to offer a kind of compact and unifying overview of his impressive body of work up to date, as it appears in *The Possibility of Practical Reasons* (2000) and *Self to Self* (2006).

At the core of Velleman's new book is his familiar conception of autonomous or rational agency. Although Velleman has sometimes removed autonomous agency from the foreground of his theory (see his Introduction *to Self to Self* (2006)), here he starts again by exploring this particular domain of selfhood. According to Velleman, autonomous action is a process of individual self-enactment guided or constituted by the aim of intelligibility. This must sound familiar to any reader of Velleman. In 'What Happens When Someone Acts' (1992), Velleman endorsed a version of this claim after looking for necessary and sufficient conditions needed for a piece of behaviour to be a 'full-blown action'. Then Velleman's agenda was to supplement the explanatory components of the standard theory of action by attending to what is missed in cases of alienation and externality. In *How We Get Along* the overall purpose is different. Velleman is now interested in how his conception of rational agency could be integrated into the social realm, paying special attention to what Bernard Williams called 'the institution of morality'. For this general purpose, however, Velleman needs a different unifying image, one beyond the slips of tongue's cases of verbal alienation or those impulsive fellows that inhabited his previous work on agency. Such image had to help him illuminate,

among many other themes, the nature and function of some social emotions such as shame and guilt (chapter 2), the conditions for successful cooperation and the place of social identities and conventions in such interactions (chapter 3), the social aspects of conscience and its role in our autonomous self-management (chapter 4), and the shape and authority of our moral norms (chapter 5 and 6). These are the most important topics treated in this book. All of them can be unified, Velleman notes, by a certain image about our agency.

But which image is this? The answer, surprisingly, is coming from theatre. Velleman argues that the process of individual self-enactment at the core of autonomous agency is analogous to the one carried out by a certain variety of improvisational actor, one that is also the audience of her own performances. Velleman's improvisational actor, like any good actor, will pick up the action that would better hang together as an intelligible whole - once she considers her motives, her situation and the options that are open to her. The image animating this book is thus simple: we are all improvisational actors performing in agreement with the aim of making sense of ourselves *to ourselves* in folk theoretical terms, i.e. with the aim of placing our behaviour into an explanatory pattern composed by beliefs, desires, intentions, and some basic emotions.

Velleman extracts a lot from this core statement. He claims that emotions and other basic responses are also regulated in terms of intelligibility (p. 39-42). **His argument is a version of constitutivism about norms of practical rationality, which is qualified against some influential objections such as David Enoch's ('Agency, Shmagency: Why Normativity Won't Come from What Is Constitutive of Action?' (2006)). According to Velleman, the authority and objectivity of norms of practical rationality is 'woven into the fabric of agency' (p. 147), that is, it is 'fixed by an aim that is naturally inescapable' (p. 140). The inescapable aim is intelligibility in the sense noted above. In essence, Velleman argues that norms of practical rationality are normative because every time we follow them we attain a better self-understanding of ourselves (p. 138). Although Velleman's theory of action is humean in spirit, he aligns himself with Kant in rejecting the appeal of any imagined or? true criterion that tries to justify our norms of practical rationality. As with Kant,**

attending to the nature of our will would do the trick to explain the force of norms of practical rationality.

But Velleman is not only interested on foundational questions. In fact, a great deal of the potential appeal of his book for non-philosophers is its focus on questions of sociality. And at this level Velleman goes to argue that when we put interaction with other 'performers' into the mix we are not only improvisational actors performing in agreement with the aim of making sense of ourselves *to ourselves*. We are also performing with the aim of making sense *to others* improvisers, trying to attain mutual intelligibility so to speak. Velleman suggests that we could attain mutual intelligibility by assuming that others are also moved by this aim, and by assuming that others assume that we assume that, and so on and so forth (p. 59-65 and 173). But this would be very costly, both in time and in cognitive resources. It is more useful, Velleman notes, if we converge on the ideal of mutual intelligibility by collectively enacting roles and identities (p. 70), by collectively favouring conventional scenarios or 'scripts' (p. 75), and by dispensing with distinctions between performers that are not themselves favouring mutual intelligibility – racial epithets, some gender-related terms, etc. (p. 82-84). In all these cases intelligibility is the key explanatory factor. Intelligibility is thus the real source of sociality (p. 76).

An outcome of this collective process of convergence around mutual intelligibility is especially relevant for the nature and authority of moral norms. There is a lot of interesting stuff here. Basically Velleman argues that although moral norms (understood as norms that favour *universality*, *transparency*, and *mutuality*) are supported by the very same ideal of intelligibility that guides our practical reasoning in the social realm, it does not give us any a priori guarantee to claim that moral conduct will be rationally required of every agent at all times (p. 2). At most, Velleman notes, intelligibility offers us a framework to identify some rational pressures that favour over time a way of life structured around universality, transparency, and mutuality. But there is no conceptual necessity here, as Kant famously argued. Morality is more a matter of contingency and endless variation, variation over the single tune of intelligibility (p. 161).

I will close this review by noting two points. The first one is about the relevance of the material contained in the book. Velleman's basic insight is more methodological than substantive, more about the way to expose his theory (around the notion of intelligibility through the improvisational metaphor) than about the content of the theory itself. Although there are important clarifications about the proper way to model autonomous agency and rational deliberation (see especially pages 26 to 33), there is no substantive departure from Velleman's well-known theory of agency. The same goes for his theory of normativity (with the exception of his rebuttal of Enoch's criticisms on the constitutive intuition). The main novelty is thus Velleman's expositive shift. A plausible explanation for this shift is that talking about improvisational acting, audience, performances, or scripts is better suited for his overall purpose of integrating autonomous agency *as intelligibility* at the core of several phenomena located in the realm of sociality.

The second point is about the intended audience of this book. This is a book for philosophers, with special emphasis on those who are working on topics related to agency and responsibility. But as far as its topic is *sociality*, i.e. the nature of interactions between rational or autonomous agents, and the kind of value that can be extracted from these interactions, this book could be of interest for those working on the social sciences – economists, sociologists, etc. The problem is that those people usually work with the assumption that social phenomena are not necessarily grouped/affected? by a general explanatory principle. And Velleman, as I noted above, defends just the opposite. For him, *intelligibility* is the master principle to understand a bunch of phenomena at the core of sociality – certain emotions, moral norms, conventions and social identities, etc. Thus an interesting question for Velleman to answer is how his philosophical account of sociality could be put together with the kind of methodological approach favoured by social scientists. But this is a minor point, and it cannot hide the fact that this book is a fine starting point to think about the complex relations between agency and sociality.