

# AGENCY, MORAL AND AESTHETIC

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**ABSTRACT:** Many contemporary philosophers who study agency aim to develop ‘honorific’ theories of action, which regard action as a special type of activity that exhibits distinctively human values. A leading exemplar of such theories of action is J. David Velleman, who argues that human action is distinguished from mere activity by exhibiting a distinctive human drive toward intelligibility. I argue that Velleman’s theory provides an unnecessarily laboured account of how aesthetic activities can qualify as genuine actions. In doing so, I show how an understanding of aesthetic experience can inform our ethical theories of agency.

## § 1. INTRODUCTION

Theories of action developed by philosophers of mind and cognitive scientists are descriptive, seeking to understand the mechanisms by which psychological states can bring about mental and physiological behaviour. By contrast, many theories of action developed by moral philosophers draw a distinction that descriptive theories do not, between ‘mere’ intentional activity and ‘full-fledged’ or ‘genuine’ action. Such ‘honorific’ theories see genuine action as exhibiting distinctively human values that mere intentional activity does not. One recent proponent of such an honorific theory of action is J. David Velleman (2009), for whom action constitutively aims to make what we do intelligible to ourselves and other people.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I cast doubt on Velleman’s approach to action. I contend that his account implicitly diminishes the value of everyday aesthetic activities. To describe what people do when they cook a stew, climb a boulder, paint, dance, or just ‘goof around’ as full-fledged action, honorific theories should adopt a more pluralistic view of the aims of

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I use the term ‘activity’ to describe intentional behaviour that is a candidate to count as ‘action’, when the context requires neutrality about whether it in fact so qualifies.

action.<sup>2</sup> Much as Dominic McIver Lopes's (2018) recent work has shown how ethical theories of agency can inform our understanding of aesthetic values and practices, I aim to show here how an understanding of aesthetic experience can inform ethical theories of agency.

## § 2. HOW TO MAKE SENSE

Velleman's norm of agency can be briefly summarised as: 'Make sense!' In *How We Get Along*, he argues that humans are naturally endowed both with theoretical intelligence and with self-awareness, which allows theoretical intelligence to be turned toward the self (2009: 136). These endowments give rise to an intellectual 'drive toward self-understanding' that seeks to do what 'makes sense' (2009: 136).

What does it mean to do what 'makes sense'? For Velleman, it means behaving like an improvisational actor enacting a character. A good improvisational actor devises their character's behaviour so that it 'makes sense', or is 'intelligible', in light of the character's motives, traits, dispositions, and circumstances (2009: 13). Such intelligibility requires generalisation: 'To *com-prehend* something is literally to "grasp together" its particulars under synoptic patterns or principles' (2009: 63, emphasis in original). The more that a character's behaviour can be fruitfully and adequately explained 'under the pattern of promoting a single, ultimate goal in light of coherent beliefs', the more comprehensible that character will be (2009: 63). On this view, acts and utterances 'make sense' when they can be explained as reflecting the actor's roles and circumstances using simpler rather than more complicated theories.

Whilst Velleman relies on an analogy to improvisational actors to describe the nature of agency, this analogy has its limits for him: actors might sometimes play 'deeply

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent account of why cooking, climbing, dancing, and other everyday activities are important to our understanding of aesthetics, see Nguyen 2020.

conflicted characters in a convoluted plot, full of subterfuge, misunderstandings, and sudden reversals' (2009: 62). But for Velleman, self-enactment aims only at intelligibility: 'In self-enactment ... *entertainment is not on the agenda*: the point is to understand ourselves, not to have our brains teased in the process' (2009: 64, emphasis added). To truly act I must behave so that what I do will be understandable in terms of a simple, adequate, and fruitful explanation. This is not to suggest that 'making sense' requires that an agent have a conscious motivation to be intelligible. Self-understanding is, rather, a regulative aim that shapes how an agent pursues their goals (2009: 27); the intelligibility of an action is a feature that an omniscient observer could read off of the agent's behaviour, motives, traits, and dispositions.

Velleman's theory of action affords what he calls a 'Kinda Kantian' metaethical account of the normative grounds for moral obligations like truth-telling and promise-keeping (2009: 149). For example, keeping promises because one made them is, in most cases, the best way to make one's action simply and perspicuously intelligible. So, agents committed to understanding what they are doing typically have a rational incentive to keep their promises (2009: 86). But Velleman's theory is not confined to explicitly moral activities—it aims to capture *every* genuine action, from filing for divorce to dancing a tango to writing a sonnet.

This is not, of course, to say that Velleman thinks that you must write a sonnet in a way that somehow echoes how you would file for divorce, or that you must breakdance in the same way that you tango. Velleman claims that we should act 'in character', not that our characters should be rigid or inane. Nick Riggle's theory of 'personal style' more explicitly accounts for how a person's character or style can be multifaceted. For Riggle, 'a person's action is her style if and only if it expresses her ideals' (2015: 722), where ideals are 'characteristics that we think are worth our embodying, by way of becoming, or perhaps continuing to be, the kind of person we aspire to be' (2015: 721). According to Riggle, a

style can be domain-specific, rather than globally encompassing a person's life. Actions exhibit artistic style when they express their creator's artistic ideals. Likewise, actions exhibit a person's sartorial style, culinary style, conversational style, and so forth when they express domain-specific ideals of fashion, gastronomy, or conversation that the agent endorses. Such domain-specific styles can appear to clash with one another; as Riggle notes, 'Critics were surprised to see Manet dressed like a bourgeois gentleman in Fantin-Latour's 1867 portrait. They figured that whoever would so blatantly disregard artistic tradition must do so in dress, too. But ... Manet could have had rather different aims' in his sartorial style than in his artistic style (2015: 729-30). Perhaps Manet was thinking along the lines of his contemporary Flaubert, who advised, 'Be regular and tidy in your life like a bourgeois, so you can be fiery and original in your work' (quoted and translated by Riggle 2015: 717). Like Riggle's account of style, the best version of Velleman's view holds that you can be as *interesting* a character as you please, but maintains that to truly act, you have to act *in character*.<sup>3</sup>

### § 3 AESTHETIC AGENCY

An initial difficulty for Velleman's approach to thinking about action is that, sometimes, we seem to act *out* of character. There are many activities, particularly in the aesthetic domain, that do not, on their face, aim to make as much sense as possible. In much aesthetic activity, both receptive and creative, it seems that entertainment *is* on the agenda. Such activity seeks, for example, to amuse, delight, or even provoke oneself or others; arguably it does not, in the first instance, aim at intelligibility. As Tamar Schapiro points out, for example, you go 'to the theatre with the hope and expectation that the actors [will] make it possible for you to escape into the world of the play', which is 'a distinctively aesthetic demand, not an instance of a general cognitive demand' (2014: 19). As I argue

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<sup>3</sup> For an account of how Riggle's theory of action diverges from Velleman's, see Riggle 2017.

below, Velleman's theory nonetheless has the resources to classify aesthetic activities as genuine actions. But showing *how* it does so reveals a shortcoming.

First, consider aesthetic receptivity. Take the example of 'falling' for a person, a book, or a place. Sometimes, you fall in love with a book because it crystallises your values or illuminates longstanding commitments and shows how they hang together. But there is another, perhaps less frequent but more exhilarating way of falling in love with a book (or person), where in falling in love you become less coherent. For instance, my taste in fiction might be understood 'under the pattern of promoting a single, ultimate goal' (Velleman 2009: 63) if I exclusively admire realist novels because I hold political and aesthetic commitments like those of Raymond Williams. Williams polemicised against Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* on the ground that novels should aim to portray 'a whole way of life, a society, that is larger than any of the individuals composing it' (1958: 22). But then I might encounter *The Waves* and be enthralled by Woolf's focus on the inner lives of her characters and her use of stream of consciousness, even though my political and aesthetic commitments indict her emphasis on the interiority of individual characters. My love of Woolf's prose might captivate me in the way that erotic desire can; as Amia Srinivasan writes, 'Desire can take us by surprise, leading us somewhere we hadn't imagined we would ever go, or towards someone we never thought we would lust after, or love' (2018). I might eventually come to realise that my love of both *The Waves* and *Middlemarch* can ultimately be comprehended under a single synoptic principle (see Velleman 2019: 63). But I might not. I might be left with aesthetic commitments that pull in opposite directions, perhaps for the rest of my life. In falling in love with *The Waves*, simple and perspicuous intelligibility is not obviously on the agenda at all.

Perhaps an activity like falling in love with a book seems too passive to qualify as an action, but a similar challenge for Velleman's theory arises in more active cases of aesthetic whim. Consider the difference between two ways of ordering lunch at a ramen shop. First, I

might go for the spiciest dish on the menu because part of my self-image and social presentation is as a lover of spice and intense flavours, and I want my choice of lunch to be in character, whether or not this desire is conscious. (This would be to order as though I had asked myself, ‘What would JG do?’) Alternatively, I might just decide to try the dish that seems most intriguing to me in the moment, in light of my immediate engagement with the menu, other diners, the waiter, and the rest of my surroundings, even if this leads me in the direction of something that does not comport with my self-understanding.<sup>4</sup> Intelligibility seems to play a significant role in explaining the first manner of ordering, but not the second, where I simply respond to what is salient and attractive to me in the moment.<sup>5</sup>

A third challenge for Velleman concerns the multiplication of a character’s goals. Consider an artist who creates in a way that makes their corpus less coherent or consistent. We might imagine a poet who has always written in iambic pentameter taking to writing in free verse because they grow bored of metre patterns or simply find the challenge of free verse interesting. We might further imagine that this poet’s shift to free verse expresses neither Vellemanian character nor even Riggelian style but instead arises from fatigue at, frustration with, or even rebellion against self-enactment. Writing free verse does not seem to conduce to the goal of making the poet more easily intelligible or comprehensible as an actor, for it multiplies rather than consolidating the poet’s goals. The case of the bored poet is one instance of a more general phenomenon, in which people want to escape from being

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to deny that the procedures I follow in ordering—how I speak to the waiter, for instance—are part of a larger, intelligible pattern of dining in restaurants (cf. Velleman 2009: 71). What is not explained by an aim of intelligibility is my decision to try the earthy tsukemen rather than the spicy ramen.

<sup>5</sup> A similar point is made by Denise Meyerson in raising an objection to earlier work of Velleman (1994: 172).

precisely who they are. This is the appeal of costume parties, the anonymity of the city, and travel to places where nobody knows you.

Intuitively, the aesthetic activities I have described should count as actions: they are guided by intentions, they involve decisions, and they are attributable to the individual who performs them. A theory that could not classify these activities as actions would reduce much of human life to mere behaviour. As I am about to argue, Velleman's theory must contort itself to explain how any of these aesthetic activities could qualify as actions in his honorific sense.

How might this explanation go? Velleman might say that in the examples I have invoked, what makes most sense for an agent is to 'let go of self-awareness altogether' (2009: 24 n.16); in some circumstances, Velleman concedes, the most intelligible thing to do is to 'let oneself grieve mindlessly', rather than trying to guide one's grieving by one's understanding of how it makes sense for a character such as oneself to grieve (2009: 24 n.16.). In the big picture of my life, it might 'make sense' to suspend sense-making when I am reading a novel, ordering noodles, or writing a poem, instead simply responding to my immediate inclinations, at least insofar as these do not lead me into immoral activity. Note, however, that some of the examples I have invoked involve an agent who becomes more convoluted not just for the duration of an episode of grief, but throughout their life. My love of Woolf and my commitment to novelistic realism might always pull me in different directions. Velleman's theory must maintain that it can 'make sense' to have some features of my life, like my love of *The Waves*, that *never* fully make sense in the context of my other goals and projects, like my commitment to the realist novel.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In accounting for these actions, Velleman might wish to draw on Matthew Noah Smith's narrative theory of identity, according to which norms of self-coherence are subsidiary to an 'aesthetic norm' of narrative construction that governs how disparate narrative themes can be woven together in one's life (2010: 14-16). The less emphasis placed on coherence in such an approach, the further it will move in the direction of the alternative, pluralistic theory that I consider below.

Whilst Velleman's theory thus provides a consistent explanation of how the aesthetic activities I have described constitute genuine actions, his account remains strained and epicyclical. For Velleman, the poet's switch from metre to free verse can count as an action only insofar as, looking at the poet's life as a whole, it makes most sense for the poet to suspend sense-making here. Velleman must claim that this apparently dis-integrating activity qualifies as genuine action because it is, in fact, the most intelligible thing to do in the circumstances. Another theory might provide a more straightforward account of how the activity in question qualifies as action. Consider a toy theory of action according to which, to truly act, I must behave in a way that constitutively aims at self-understanding, *or* at changing who I am, *or* at manifesting creativity, *or* at avoiding boredom. Such a 'pluralistic' theory of action might postulate one or more drives that supplement the intellectual drive toward self-understanding that Velleman postulates, such as a drive that 'demands that there shall be change' (Schiller 1967: 97; see Matherne & Riggle 2020), or a drive to avoid boredom (see Millgram 2004) or to create new beginnings (see Arendt 1998) or to tell stories about oneself (see Smith 2009). Whilst Velleman must appeal to a background aim of intelligibility to confer the title of 'action', the toy theory I have just mentioned can point directly to a standing disposition to entertain oneself to explain how the poet's decision to try free verse qualifies as action.

This roundaboutness not only makes Velleman's theory of aesthetic actions less parsimonious, it also implicitly suggests that such activity is less than central to human life. For Velleman, theoretical reason and self-awareness are 'distinctively human endowments' (2009: 17); this distinctive humanness is why 'action' functions as an honorific in Velleman's theory. Singling out intelligibility as the only distinctively human aim eligible to confer the honorific status of 'action' implicitly treats the drive toward self-understanding as more central to being human than, for instance, a drive to manifest creativity. Whilst Velleman is surely right that our capacity for sense-making plays an important role in

action, it is not the only importantly human capacity that action realises. As Velleman claims, ‘trying to understand yourself is inescapable’ (2009: 16 n.8); but, arguably, so is complicating and even surprising yourself in ways that might well confound your antecedent self-understanding.

Likewise, many aesthetic activities arguably aim to provoke and confound, rather than make sense. For instance, it is safe to say that *Finnegans Wake* is more confounding than *Pride and Prejudice*. Of course, both novels are subject to indefinitely many interpretations—otherwise, they would not be great works of art—but *Finnegans Wake* intentionally frustrates the reader’s interpretive project in ways that *Pride and Prejudice* does not. Velleman might respond to this observation by claiming that both works nonetheless constitutively aim at intelligibility. For even in *Finnegans Wake*, intelligibility ‘remains a precondition for satisfying’ Joyce’s other aesthetic aims (Velleman 2014: 35): even artists who act in an unexpected or convoluted manner still, in some sense, want their audiences to ‘get it’. But it is by no means clear that artists always want their audiences to ‘get’ their work by *making sense of it* rather than, for instance, being disturbed or frustrated by it.

It is open to Velleman to insist that *Finnegans Wake* succeeds by being *intelligibly* unintelligible. In that case, Velleman’s view of action seems not to be susceptible to falsification by counterexample. This impasse reveals an important methodological question about constitutivism. How could we decide between a view like Velleman’s and a competing constitutivist view like that of Hannah Arendt, for whom all action has a ‘character of startling unexpectedness’ (1998: 178)? Even if Arendt and Velleman could both show that their proposed aims were present in every case of genuine action, this would not yet establish that either aim was *constitutive* of action. Insofar as we are talking about honorific, *ethical* theories of action, I contend that such a dispute can only be resolved by considering the *ethical* values that the competing theories implicitly valorise. In singling

out our ‘voracious cognitive appetite’ as the sole agency-conferring drive, Velleman evinces a contestable view of what is important in human life (2009: 17). If we regard drives beyond the drive toward self-understanding—such as the drive toward novelty that Arendt postulates—as fundamental aspects of our humanity, then we may be drawn to a more pluralistic theory of action, like the one I sketched above. Such a theory would allow both a drive toward self-understanding and a drive to create new beginnings, and perhaps yet more human drives, to count as sources of genuine action.

Velleman might here claim that his view is more parsimonious than such a pluralistic theory since he only postulates one constitutive aim of agency. But Velleman whittles down the constitutive aims of action at the cost of explanatory depth: his proposed explanation of how, for example, writing *Finnegans Wake* qualifies as an action is less direct and informative than the explanation provided by Arendt’s theory. A pluralistic theory would allow us to explain the difference between writing *Finnegans Wake* and writing *Pride and Prejudice* by appealing to the idea that aesthetic agency can have more than one constitutive aim.

#### § 4. AGENCY, MORAL AND AESTHETIC

I have not argued directly against Velleman’s theory of action. Instead, I have presented several cases of aesthetic activity that we might intuitively regard as actions. Whilst Velleman’s theory can self-consistently categorise these examples as instances of genuine action, I have argued that his account of these aesthetic activities enthrones intelligibility in a way that implicitly diminishes the value of many of the non-integrative, or perhaps even dis-integrative, activities that make life worth living.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Clea F. Rees argues more directly against Velleman’s theory of action. Drawing on the example of a character who ‘is simply tired of who she is and become[s] somebody different without that somebody making sense to herself and others’ (2004: 28), Rees contends that Velleman *cannot* provide an adequate account of how someone can behave ‘out of character’ whilst still genuinely acting (2004: 27-28). Whilst I am sympathetic to Rees’s view that ‘it is possible to act without making sense in Velleman’s terms’ (2004: 27), my argumentative strategy here is different: rather

Just how substantial one takes this problem to be for Velleman's theory—indeed, whether one regards it as a problem in the first place—may depend on how central to human life one takes obligatory moral activity to be. Velleman's account of aesthetic activity seems strained in a way that his account of moral activity like promise-keeping does not, since norms of coherence and consistency are particularly central to the domain of moral rights and duties. For someone who thinks that much or all of human life should be about fulfilling one's moral duties, Velleman's slightly convoluted treatment of aesthetic activity would be a small price to pay for a theory of agency that provides an elegant foundation for morality. If, on the other hand, one's view of human life is more broadly ethical, in Bernard Williams's (2006) sense, then one might want a different account of the constitutive aims of action. One might adopt a pluralistic but still honorific theory of action, like the toy theory I described in §3, if one wanted one's theory of agency to build in an assessment of action as constitutively realising distinctive human goods such as spontaneity, creativity, play, incitement to change, and lively, interested engagement with the world. Alternatively, one might wish to abandon honorific accounts of action altogether, leaving the task of theorising action to descriptive philosophy of mind and cognitive science.<sup>8</sup>

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than claiming that it is impossible for Velleman's view to adequately explain all instances of genuine action, I argue that Velleman emphasises intelligibility at the expense of other important aspects of human agency.

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