

STOP MAKING SENSE

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ABSTRACT: Many contemporary philosophers who study agency develop ‘honorific’ theories of action, which regard action as a type of activity that exhibits distinctively human values. A leading exemplar of such theories of action is J. David Velleman, who argues that action exhibits a distinctive human drive toward intelligibility. I show that honorific theories like Velleman’s provide an unnecessarily laboured account of how certain practices central to human life, such as many aesthetic activities, qualify as genuine action. In doing so, I show that our conceptions of action often embed contestable value judgments by valorising certain human drives and dispositions above others. I argue that ethicists should not attempt to resolve substantive first-order normative debates by smuggling presuppositions about what makes life worthwhile into a theory of action. Instead, action theorists should draw on a pluralistic sense of what activities contribute to a meaningful human life.

§ 1. INTRODUCTION

Theories of action developed by philosophers of mind and cognitive scientists are typically descriptive, seeking to understand the mechanisms by which psychological states can bring about mental and physiological behaviour. Such theories of action seek a purely descriptive understanding of the difference between mere reflexes and intentional activity. By contrast, theories of action developed by moral philosophers often draw a distinction that merely descriptive action theories do not, between ‘mere’ intentional activity and ‘full-blooded’ or ‘genuine’ action (see, e.g., Velleman 2000, 189). These thicker, ethical theories of action are ‘honorific’ theories in that they see genuine action as realising distinctively human values that mere intentional activity does not.¹ Honorific action theorists differ in which human characteristics they regard as the sine qua non of genuine action. For instance, for Hannah Arendt, activity qualifies as true action only when it manifests a distinctively human disposition to create new beginnings (1998, 178). For Christine

¹ 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.

Korsgaard, activity counts as action in the honorific sense only if it 'both achieves and springs from the integrity of the person who performs it' (2009, 25). And for David Velleman, action in the honorific sense constitutively aims to make what we do intelligible to ourselves and other people (2009).

Why might one want to develop a normatively infused, honorific theory of action rather than leaving the theory of action to cognitive scientists? For both Korsgaard and Velleman, the motivation is metaethical: both wish for a theory of action that can account for the distinctive role of morality in our practical lives. If it turns out that, *just in virtue of acting*, we are, at least in some weak sense, rationally committed to acting morally, we will have arrived at a foundation for moral normativity that holds for all agents. For example, Korsgaard melds normative ethics, action theory, and metaethics by arguing that insofar as we are human, we have reason to be agents; insofar as we are agents, we have reason to be good agents; and being a good agent requires acting in a way that comports with the categorical imperative. If a theory like Korsgaard's succeeds, it will accomplish a major metaethical desideratum: it will vindicate the indispensability of morality for human agents as such.

In this essay, I cast doubt on theories that take all action to realise a single distinctive human value. I contend that such theories explicitly or implicitly diminish the value of a wide array of aesthetic activities. In advancing this argument, I focus on Velleman's theory of action rather than Korsgaard's, because Velleman aims to build upon a minimal, naturalistic picture of human psychology, whilst Korsgaard's theory of action emerges as part of an architectonic Kantian philosophy that incorporates a more elaborate moral psychology. This makes Velleman's honorific theory of action easier to discuss in

isolation from a broader theory, as well as more likely than Korsgaard's to be palatable to readers without Kantian sympathies.²

I begin in § 2 by presenting Velleman's theory of action and showing why an honorific theory like Velleman's might be attractive. In § 3, I raise a direct objection to Velleman's theory: some aesthetic activities explicitly purport *not* to aim at intelligibility. I then show how Velleman can best accommodate this objection. In § 4 I argue that, even if Velleman's reply to this direct objection succeeds, a more indirect argument gives us good reason to resist his account. This argument proceeds by showing that Velleman's account has to resort to theoretical convolutions in order to explain how a wide array of aesthetic activities can qualify as genuine actions. In situating aesthetic activity so far from the core of human life that an account of it *as action* can only be reached via laboured circumnavigation, Velleman's theory implicitly devalues sources of human motivation apart from the drive for intelligibility. Finally, in § 5 I show how a more pluralistic view of the aims of action could do fuller justice to the value of aesthetic activity and to its significance for human life.³

§ 2. HOW TO MAKE SENSE

Velleman's account of the constitutive norms 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

² Whilst many of my arguments about Velleman apply to Korsgaard's theory as well, showing how they do so would require an extensive discussion of the mechanics of Korsgaard's theory, and so is a task for another occasion. See Gingerich n.d.

³ My argument in this essay thus parallels recent work in aesthetics, such as Dominic McIver Lopes's (2018) exploration of ways in which ethical theories of agency can inform our understanding of aesthetic values and practices. My argument here complements Lopes's work by showing how an understanding of aesthetic experience can, in turn, inform ethical theories of agency.

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’? The notion of intelligibility that Velleman invokes here is a folk psychological one, bound up with our sense of what makes for a believable human character. Velleman illustrates this notion by analogy to an improvisational actor enacting a character. A good improvisational actor behaves in ways that ‘make sense’, or are ‘intelligible’, in light of the motives, traits, dispositions, and circumstances of the character they are playing (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. In short, all action is, by definition, acting ‘in character’.

The improv analogy has its limits for Velleman: as he acknowledges, actors might sometimes play ‘deeply conflicted characters in a convoluted plot, full of subterfuge, misunderstandings, and sudden reversals’ (2009, 62). Non-fictional *self*-enactment, however, 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). In art, we can afford a level of convolution and subterfuge; in life, however, we must behave so that what we do will be understandable in terms of simple, adequate, and fruitful explanations. This is not to suggest that ‘making sense’ requires that an agent consciously try to be intelligible. Aiming at intelligibility need not involve thinking to myself ‘I should go for a run this morning, because that would make sense as the sort of thing that JG would do’ or anything of the sort. Self-understanding is, rather, a

regulative aim that shapes how an agent pursues their goals (2009, 27); the intelligibility of individual actions is something that can be read off the agent's behaviour, motives, traits, and dispositions taken as a whole.

If Velleman's theory succeeds, it 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). In Velleman's view, morality is not *guaranteed* by practical rationality—for instance, the rational incentive to tell the truth is often overcome by 'contingent motives in favor of deception' (2009, 150).⁴ But over time, the imperative to make ourselves intelligible exerts a pro-moral force on the ways in which we act (2009, 150).

Despite this metaethical agenda, Velleman's theory is not meant to be confined to areas of life in which moral obligations are highly salient. The theory aims to capture *every* genuine action, from filing for divorce to making coffee to dancing a tango. 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.

How, exactly, can the imperative to be intelligible permit us to be supple and complex characters? Nick Riggle's theory of 'personal style' provides a useful supplement to Velleman's notion of character here. For Riggle, 'a person's action is her style if and only

⁴ On my interpretation of Velleman, such rational incentives have the form of hypothetical imperatives: insofar as we want to satisfy our drive for intelligibility, we should keep our promises (unless circumstances make it more intelligible not to keep our promises).

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). Importantly, styles can be domain-specific, rather than globally encompassing a person's life. Actions exhibit a person's artistic style, sartorial style, culinary style, conversational style, and so forth when they express domain-specific ideals of art, 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, and yet maintains that to truly act, you must act *in character*.⁵ A good improv actor would recognise this when impersonating Manet, acting differently depending on whether the scene was his atelier or a stuffy dinner party.

§ 3. VELLEMAN AT THE CABARET VOLTAIRE

We have seen that Velleman's theory of action allows for interesting, multifaceted characters. And yet each of these characters' individual actions—with a few exceptions, which I will address shortly—must be *in character*. That is, they must aim to be intelligible in light of the (complex, supple, multifarious) motives, traits, dispositions, and beliefs of that character. This brings us to an initial challenge for Velleman: some activities intuitively qualify as actions, yet seem to explicitly aim at *unintelligibility*.

⁵ For an explanation of how Riggle's theory of action diverges from Velleman's, see Riggle 2017.

Consider, for instance, the performances that took place at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich. In late March 1916, Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Janco, and Tristan Tzara performed their ‘simultaneous poem’ titled ‘The Admiral Looks for a House to Rent’ (Hulsenbeck, Janco & Tzara, 1916, 6-7). In this performance, Tzara, Huelsenbeck, and Janco simultaneously performed three different texts, one in German, one in English, and one in French, all interspersed with nonsense words and vocalisations and accompanied by a drum, whistle, and rattle (Rasula 2015, 20). The only convergence between the three speakers is in the final line of the poem, when all proclaim together, in French, ‘the admiral found nothing’ (Hulsenbeck, Janco & Tzara, 1916, 7, translation mine). What did Tzara, Huelsenbeck, and Janco think they were doing? For ‘dadas’ like Tzara, the whole point of the performance was to produce *unintelligibility*. As Tzara explained (or, perhaps, refused to explain) in his ‘Dada Manifesto 1918’,

DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING... DADA was born out of a need for independence.... We don't accept any theories.... Liberty: DADA DADA DADA, the roar of contorted pains, the interweaving of contraries and all contradictions, freaks and irrelevancies: LIFE (Tzara 2013, 4-14).

Tzara’s account of what dasdas were doing at the Cabaret Voltaire appears to present a challenge for Velleman’s theory of action. For Tzara, dada aims to confound rather than to make sense. Tzara, who claimed to be ‘against principles’ (2013, 3), would be loath to portray his actions as explicable ‘under the pattern of promoting a single, ultimate goal in light of coherent beliefs’ (Velleman 2009, 63). At the same time performances such as Tzara’s seem like a very distinctively human phenomenon, and many commentators regard them as exhibiting considerable aesthetic value (see, e.g., Melzer 1973). For this reason, it seems strained to deny that the recitation of ‘The Admiral Looks for a House to Rent’ was a genuine, full-fledged action.⁶

⁶ Clea F. Rees develops a similar argument against Velleman’s theory of action by drawing on the example of a character who ‘is simply tired of who she is and become[s] somebody different

How, then, might Velleman explain how dada aesthetic activities can qualify as genuine actions? Velleman's most plausible approach to accounting for the Cabaret Voltaire is to insist that 'The Admiral Looks for a House to Rent' constitutively aims at intelligibility, even as it intentionally resists interpretation. Velleman notes at one point that sometimes what makes most sense for an agent is to 'let go of self-awareness altogether' (2009, 24 n.16); for instance, in some circumstances 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). The Cabaret Voltaire might simply be another context in which the thing that makes most sense to do is not to try too hard to make sense, or even to try not to make sense. This is not to suggest that there is no 'rational incentive' to avoid excessive convolution at the Cabaret Voltaire. These relatively weak incentives might simply be less pressing than the other forces that shape what it makes sense for Tzara and the others to do. For instance, Velleman might point to comments from Tzara suggesting that the destruction of World War I called for irrationality and spontaneous action as a response (see Wilson 2020, 46). In this way, Velleman might insist that dada performances that outwardly purport to aim at unintelligibility nonetheless aim at intelligibility at a deeper level, and so qualify as genuine actions.

Moreover, Velleman might point out that even artists who act in an unexpected or convoluted manner must still, in some sense, want their audiences to 'get it'. Of course, it is by no means clear that artists always want their audiences to 'get' their work by *making sense of it*, rather than being disturbed, wound up, aesthetically provoked, or even confounded by it. But Velleman might insist that a confounding work like 'The Admiral

without that somebody making sense to herself and others' (2014, 28). My argument departs from Rees in focusing on actions that explicitly aim at unintelligibility.

Looks for a House to Rent' would not provoke or disturb its audience in the right way if were not intelligible as part of a larger genre of 'avant-garde performance art' that audiences expect to be confounding, understanding that this is the whole point. Even here, then, intelligibility would remain 'a precondition for satisfying' Tzara's aesthetic aim to create a disturbing, provocative work of art (Velleman 2014, 35).

There are two significant costs to accommodating the Cabaret Voltaire in this way. First, there is a cost internal to Velleman's theory. By insisting that even the most apparently unintelligible dada poetry still aims at intelligibility, Velleman would appear to greatly limit the force of the 'rational incentive' to do things like keep promises and tell the truth. For, in nearly any situation in which people are tempted to lie, there will be *some* possible explanatory psychological account of why lying makes sense in this particular context, much as the war provided an explanatory psychological account that Velleman could invoke to explain the intelligibility of dada unintelligibility. If even a case as extreme as Tzara's does not involve a failure to be coherently and perspicuously interpretable (see Velleman 2009, 65-66), it is hard to see how any conscious human activity could ever fail to instantiate the aim of self-understanding.⁷

Second, Velleman's accommodation of dada comes at a cost for our understanding of dada aesthetics, in that it requires dismissing these artists' own conception of their work as uncompromisingly hostile to coherent and perspicuous interpretation. Velleman must say to the dada artist, 'You just do not understand that, ultimately, what you are doing is playing the intelligible character of a dada artist. Your belief that you are trying to be unintelligible is a self-misunderstanding, not a successful attempt to defy coherent interpretation.' This cost might be acceptable for Velleman: after all, many theories of art

⁷ Note that this limitation of the 'pro-moral' force of Vellemanian practical reason is not necessarily intolerable for Velleman, since his theory does not purport to guarantee the supremacy of morality but merely claims that the constitutive aim of agency 'push[es] us in directions that are recognizably moral' and 'favor[s] morality without requiring or guaranteeing it' (2009, 149).

downplay the intentions of artists (see, e.g., Barthes 1977). But insofar as we take Tzara's description of his own art to be important evidence of the fundamental character of his activity, we should worry that Velleman's approach requires us to write it off with an error theory. Adopting such an error theory requires us to reject the substantive aesthetic agenda of dada art on non-aesthetic grounds.

Some readers are likely to be altogether unconvinced by Velleman's accommodation of the Cabaret Voltaire. Insofar as these readers regard the Cabaret Voltaire as a case of genuine action, they will likely want to reject Velleman's theory of action. My own inclination is to concede that Velleman's theory provides an internally consistent account of how dada art performances can qualify as genuine actions. In the following section, I will argue that even readers who, like me, think that Velleman can accommodate the Cabaret Voltaire case, should nonetheless hesitate to endorse intelligibility-centred honorific theories of action like Velleman's. Moreover, I will show that this is not an isolated problem for Velleman's theory that only arises in the context of intentionally abstruse avant-garde art. Indeed, as we will see, a wide array of aesthetic activities will raise similar challenges for Velleman.

§ 4. AESTHETIC ACTION

In the previous section, I considered an attempt to refute Velleman's theory of action by counterexample. As I just noted, I do not think that this direct argument succeeds against Velleman, since his theory can offer an internally coherent explanation for cases of seemingly unintelligible action. In this section, I will consider a more indirect, and to my mind more successful, critique of Velleman's theory. This critique contends that Velleman's theory implicitly devalues sources of human motivation aside from the drive for intelligibility, such as our drives for creativity and play.

To see how Velleman's theory implicitly devalues activity motivated by the deep human dispositions to play and to create, we need to consider a wider array of aesthetic

activity. By aesthetic activity, I mean here activities that are not carried out for instrumental purposes or out of moral duty, but rather for the sake of engaging in the activity itself (see Nguyen 2020b, 117-18). Such activities are aesthetic in that they are *autotelic*, meaning that it is the activity itself that provides the agent with the motivation to undertake it.⁸ These activities are also aesthetic in the sense that they involve the agent's own, individual response to the stimuli that they encounter. That is, these activities are *aesthetically autonomous* in the minimal sense that the agent does not pursue them because someone else tells them to or because they are incapable of exercising their capacities of choice.⁹

Aesthetic activities, as I understand them here, are characteristically, although not necessarily, pleasurable.¹⁰ Such activities often seek, for example, to amuse, delight, or even provoke oneself or others. In these cases, it seems clear that entertainment *is* on the agenda. 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 in the case of dada art, I think that Velleman's theory has the resources to classify all these aesthetic activities as genuine actions. But showing *how* it does so will reveal shortcomings in the theory. Let us consider three cases of aesthetic activities where entertainment seems to be 'on the agenda'.

⁸ For an argument that the characteristic feature of aesthetic experiences is their autotelic nature, see Dokic 2016.

⁹ For a discussion of the central role of aesthetic autonomy in Kantian aesthetic theory, see Matherne 2019.

¹⁰ Aesthetic hedonists will view all aesthetic activity as pleasurable. I do not take a position here on the aesthetic hedonist thesis that all aesthetic value is a form of hedonic value.

First, consider receptive aesthetic activities. Take the example of ‘falling’ for a person, a book, or a place.¹¹ 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 individual interiority. 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 find a way to subsume my love of both *The Waves* and *Middlemarch* 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 my

¹¹ It might be thought that receptive aesthetic activities are not the sort of thing that could create a deep problem for a theory of agency, because they are passive rather than active. Action theorists, of course, differ as to how and where to draw the line between action and mere passivity. Velleman, in particular, suggests that agents must actively ‘step in’ to a situation to transform it from mere behaviour to action (2009, 39). Personally, I am sympathetic to thinking of purely receptive activities as more central to agency, but the question addressed in the text is orthogonal to this issue because the example that I am about to discuss—falling in love with a book—is not a case of purely passive aesthetic appreciation. A reader falling in love with a book is not simply bowled over by external stimuli and left incapable of any sort of choice or deliberation. But readers who disagree with me here are welcome to rely on the subsequent examples, which involve less receptive, more actively creative, aesthetic activity.

encounter with *The Waves*, simple and perspicuous intelligibility is not obviously on the agenda at all.

Velleman might try to minimise this sort of conflict by pointing out that what I am left with after falling in love with *The Waves* is a tension between values that need not manifest itself in action, since no further action is currently required. If I need to whittle down my collection of books before I move house, I will have to resolve the conflict of values in some way, deciding what to make of my new love for Woolf in light of my longstanding commitments to the realist novel, thereby reintegrating my conflicting values.

But it is by no means clear that the only way to winnow down your library is by first putting all your values into reflective equilibrium. I may end up giving away my copy of *Middlemarch* when I next move, not because this is the action that best reconciles my love of Woolf with my Williamsian aesthetic commitments, but because in the moment when I am packing up my flat, my realism is momentarily ebbing and my love of Woolf flowing.

A similar challenge for Velleman's theory arises in more immediately active cases of aesthetic whim. Consider the difference between two ways of ordering lunch at a ramen shop. I might go for the spiciest dish on the menu because part of my self-image and social presentation is as a lover of 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 eat?') 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 a mild fish broth that does not comport with my self-understanding. 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. This second way of deciding, unlike the first, is aesthetic in that it involves my distinctive individual response to stimuli, where that response is autotelically motivated by my interest in eating ramen.¹² Intelligibility seems to play a significant role in explaining the first way of deciding, but not second, where I simply respond to what is salient and attractive to me in the moment.¹³

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 counting feet 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 the whole project of 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 aims. The case of the rebellious poet is one instance of a more general phenomenon, in which people want to escape from being 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. Not only that; these activities also seem distinctively human. A theory of

¹² It might be objected that gustatory activity cannot be aesthetic because it is not 'disinterested'. However, I follow Servaas van der Berg (2019) and C. Thi Nguyen (2020a) in thinking that an activity is disinterested even when it involves the pursuit of proximal goals, so long as those goals are themselves pursued for the sake of making the goal-pursuing activity possible (van der Berg 2019, 464).

¹³ A similar point is made by Denise Meyerson in raising an objection to earlier work of Velleman (1994, 172).

agency that did not classify them as actions would reduce much of human life to mere behaviour and would fail to afford the ‘action’ honorific to a great deal of activity that intuitively appears to be just the sort that makes human life worth living.

Again, although Velleman’s theory can explain how all these aesthetic activities could qualify as actions in his honorific sense, it must contort itself to do so. How might the explanation go? As in the case of the Cabaret Voltaire, 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 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. This allows Velleman to claim that apparently dis-integrating activity nonetheless qualifies as genuine action because it is, in fact, the most intelligible thing to do in these particular circumstances.¹⁴ Note, however, that some of the examples I have invoked involve an agent who becomes more convoluted not just over lunch or for the duration of an episode of intense grief, but for the rest of their life. My love of Woolf and my commitment to novelistic realism might always pull me in different directions. In order to accommodate this, 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.¹⁵

¹⁴ 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 § 5.

¹⁵ The spectre of triviality that we saw in the dada case will return if Velleman chooses this route. Just as it was hard to see how, if even dada art aims at intelligibility, *any* conscious human activity could fail to do so, one might think that an intelligibility-based theory of agency that gets in the habit of accommodating life-long theoretical tensions of this kind will end up ruling out too little to afford a robust distinction between action in character and activity that is too far out of character to count as action.

Whilst Velleman's theory can provide an internally consistent account of how the aesthetic activities I have described constitute genuine actions, the 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. This roundaboutness does not only make 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 human motivation eligible to convert our behaviour into 'action' implicitly treats the drive toward self-understanding as more central to being human than, for instance, a drive to create. Whilst Velleman is surely right that our capacity for sense-making plays an important role in action, this is not the only importantly human capacity that action realises. Velleman claims that 'trying to understand yourself is inescapable' (2009, 16 n.8); but complicating and surprising yourself in ways that confound your antecedent self-understanding may be, if not inescapable, equally indispensable.

To illustrate the normative-ethical stakes of this concern, consider how we might decide between a view like Velleman's and a competing theory of action like that of Arendt, for whom all action has a 'character of startling unexpectedness' (1998, 178). Insofar as we are talking about honorific, *ethical* theories of action, such a dispute can hardly be resolved without considering the ethical values that the competing theories implicitly elevate. 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 agree with Velleman about the importance of our desire for self-understanding but also regard further sources of human motivation—such as the drive toward novelty that Arendt postulates—as equally fundamental to our humanity, then we may be drawn to a more

pluralistic theory of action. Such a theory would allow both a Vellemanian drive toward self-understanding and an Arendtian drive to create new beginnings, and perhaps still more human motivations and dispositions, 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, as we have seen, what Velleman's view gains in simplicity by minimising the list of agency-conferring drives, it correspondingly loses when it comes to explaining the possibility of aesthetic action. This rebound of theoretical convolution is easiest to see when we compare how Velleman would account for two contrasting cases of aesthetic activity, one of which much more clearly aims at intelligibility than the other. 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. This means that Velleman's take on how writing *Finnegans Wake* counts as an action will be indirect in a way that his take on how writing *Pride and Prejudice* counts as an action is not. Moreover, Velleman's account of *Finnegans Wake* will be less parsimonious than that provided by Arendt's theory. For Arendt, writing *Finnegans Wake* qualifies as an action because it manifests the drive to create new beginnings (in this case, new beginnings for the form of the novel). Arendt's explanation thus does not require the somewhat strained step of showing that a work that apparently does not aim at intelligibility in fact does so: on Arendt's account writing *Finnegans Wake* wears its action-conferring properties on its face.

To take stock, I have offered two arguments against intelligibility-focused honorific theories of action like Velleman's. The first is a direct attempt to refute the theory by counterexample, and whilst some readers might think that this attempt succeeds, I think it does not. More successful, in my view, is the second, more indirect critique that I offered, to

the effect that Velleman's view implicitly elevates one source of human motivation above all others in a way that yields an impoverished or distorted picture of what makes life go well.

In evaluating ethical theories of action, direct arguments, such as the argument of § 3, are often thought to be 'stronger' than more indirect arguments, like that of § 4. But it would be a mistake to discount arguments that focus on where a theory places its emphasis, or on what it implicitly values and devalues. The ethical theories of action that I have mentioned—Korsgaard's, Arendt's, Velleman's—each convey judgments about the relative importance of certain aspects of human life. Insofar as these theories implicitly elevate or demote certain sorts of activity, this should be relevant to ethicists evaluating the theories. When faced with multiple internally coherent theories of action, attending to such differences is likely to be the most fruitful way to expose the ethical stakes of the choice between them. In such a situation, defenders of each of the competing theories are likely to deny (often convincingly, as we saw with Velleman) that their theory falls prey to counterexamples or is totally incapable of accommodating important human values. We are left, then, to consider what overarching picture of human life is painted by each theory's choices about what sort of activities to centre and what sort to decentre.

§ 5. A PLURALISTIC APPROACH TO AGENCY

I have argued that honorific theories of agency that enthrone intelligibility as the sole action-making feature of activity implicitly diminish the value of many of the non-integrative, or perhaps even dis-integrative, activities that make life worth living. Just how substantial one takes this problem to be for moralised theories of action—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. Whilst Velleman's account of aesthetic activity seems strained, his account of moral activity like promise-keeping seems much more parsimonious, since norms of coherence and consistency are particularly at home in the

domain of moral rights and duties. For someone who thinks that much or all of human life should be about fulfilling one's duties, a slightly convoluted treatment of aesthetic activity might 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 more pluralistic account of the constitutive aims of action.

Consider, for instance, a pluralistic (but still honorific) 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 an account might postulate multiple drives that supplement the intellectual drive towards self-understanding, such as one 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 2010).¹⁶ Whilst many honorific theories of action, including those we have discussed, appeal to a single feature to confer the title of 'action', the pluralistic theory I have just mentioned allows multiple aspects of human nature to raise human behaviour to the status of full-fledged action. When faced with aesthetic activity, rather than attempting to route its account of this activity through some more moral or cognitive drive, this pluralistic theory can point directly to a standing disposition to entertain oneself, to create change, or to tell stories to explain how a wide variety of aesthetic activities qualify as actions.¹⁷ Such a pluralistic

¹⁶ For an example of a pluralistic theory of agency, albeit one with a different motivation and structure than the theory I describe here, see Fleming 2010.

¹⁷ A different way of being pluralistic would be to adopt a more pluralistic view of what makes behaviour intelligible. Rather than regarding intelligibility as requiring generalisation of 'particulars under synoptic patterns or principles' (Velleman 2009, 63), an honorific action theorist might conceive of intelligibility as an aim that is much more easily satisfied. Taking this approach, however, will tend to undercut the ability of a theory of action to show how the constitutive aim of action exerts pro-moral force on the ways in which we act, which was one of the principal reasons

theory also makes it easier to account for differences internal to aesthetic life. For instance, it would allow us to explain the difference between writing *Finnegans Wake* and writing *Pride and Prejudice* by appealing to the idea that aesthetic action can have more than one constitutive aim.

The downside to adopting a more pluralistic theory of action is that, insofar as such a theory allows motivations and aims that are not inherently allied with morality to confer the honorific of ‘action’, it loses its power to show that morality binds human agents *as such*. Perhaps the lesson to take away here is that first-order normative and metaethical debates cannot be circumvented by shifting the focus of fundamental theory to action and agency. For once we recognize that our conceptions of action themselves embed contested value judgments by valorising certain human drives and dispositions above others, these debates will once again rear their heads in the evaluation of competing theories of action. Ethicists should not attempt to resolve substantive first-order normative debates by smuggling presuppositions about what makes life worthwhile into a theory of action. Nor should they attempt to foreclose scepticism about the authority of morality by appeal to the nature of agency.¹⁸

I have argued that those who want an honorific theory of agency—one that builds in a normative assessment of action as constitutively realising distinctive human goods—are best off acknowledging multiple sources of genuine action. A pluralistic account of the nature of action can better explain the eudemonistic importance of activity involving creativity, play, spontaneity, and incitement to change. Alternatively, one might wish to

that a theory like Velleman’s was attractive in the first place. I am grateful to Massimo Renzo for raising this point.

¹⁸ Another reason that one might wish not to adopt a pluralistic theory of the aims of action is that, in adopting such a theory, we would give up, to some extent, a commitment to first-personal intelligibility in favour of a more intelligible, less convoluted philosophical theory. I am grateful to John Callanan for raising this point.

abandon honorific accounts of action altogether, leaving the task of theorising action to descriptive philosophy of mind and cognitive science.¹⁹

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