

Velleman on Reacting and Valuing

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How We Get Along articulates an original and richly systematic view of ethics and moral psychology in a thoroughly engaging way. It is the first book I have read in many years that is rigorous and original enough to be a new contribution to the discussions of professional philosophers while being at the same time sufficiently approachable and interesting that I have recommended it to a intelligent non-academic who wants see what is going on in philosophy. I recommend it wholeheartedly.

Here I focus on the novel account of value and reasons for valuing that Velleman articulates. I will discuss some cases of 'wrong kinds of reasons' and of evaluative conflict that look like they might be counterexamples to Velleman's view. But my goal is not to establish that they are counterexamples. I want to use them as tools to get clearer about the theory. I am primarily interested in trying to put some of Velleman's interesting ideas to work by applying them to my problem cases, and in giving him an occasion to improve on my initial efforts to do so.

"Something's being valuable" Velleman says (37) "...consists in there being reasons for valuing it..." I am very sympathetic to this suggestion, as are many contemporary philosophers. I see Velleman's view as falling within the resurgent philosophical tradition that identifies being valuable (in some respect) with being such as to merit or make appropriate some (relevant kind of) evaluative attitude.¹ This notion of a response being appropriate is commonly understood in terms of there being reasons (or its being rational) to have it. Thus value is explained in terms of reasons for valuing, not the other way around. Which is as it should be, because, as Velleman says, "value' is the term most in need of analysis."

The question then is how to understand reasons for valuing, and here philosophers attracted to the broad idea diverge. Velleman has his own proposal: reasons are considerations of intelligibility, and reasons for valuing are considerations whose regulative influence turns a mere reaction (such as amusement) into a valuing (such as finding something funny). In this respect, Velleman's account of valuing echoes his account of acting for a reason (which is reframed in the first chapter of this book in terms that readers of his previous work may find illuminating, as I did).

"Just as behaving becomes acting when it is regulated by the agent's conception of what it would make sense for him to do, so reacting becomes valuing

¹Early versions of this idea can be found, for instance, in the fitting attitude theories of Franz Brentano (1889) and A.C. Ewing (1948). More recently it has re-emerged in T.M. Scanlon's (1998) buck-passing idea, in John McDowell's (1985) and David Wiggins' (1987) "sensitivity theories", in Allan Gibbard's (1990) norm-expressivism, in the neo-sentimentalist views of Kevin Mulligan (1998), John Skorupski (2010) and D'Arms and Jacobson (2005), and in Elizabeth Anderson's (1993) rational attitude theory (to which Velleman notes affinities), among others.

when it is regulated by the subject's conception of what it would make sense for him to feel." (40)

Velleman takes a view of emotional reactions reminiscent of Singer and Schacter's, on which feelings get enriched through interpretation from an initial, somewhat labile, sort of affective excitement that could become any one of a number of different emotions, depending on how the subject understands his situation and finds it intelligible to react to it. If the subject focuses on aspects of the circumstances to which he thinks it makes most sense to be disgusted, say, his initial reaction can be shaped into disgust by this conception of what makes sense. Such disgust would be what Velleman calls a 'guided response', which is not a judgment of disgustingness, but an affective or conative state that is sensitive to indications of its own appropriateness. Guided responses are reason-sensitive emotional responses, whereby one finds things to be valuable in ways that are distinct from mere feeling, but also distinct from evaluative judgment. These guided responses are the evaluations at the heart of Velleman's account of value. Something's being valuable in some respect, disgusting say, is constituted by whichever of its features are such that considering them could lead to a guided response of being disgusted by the thing in question.²

Merely reacting to something by liking it or being amused by it, is not yet finding it valuable—likeable, or funny—according to Velleman (35). Perhaps that is right. Certainly it is not yet judging it to be likeable or funny, as he notes. But in cases where one is amused at what one knows is not funny, why not think one is in some sense finding it funny without judging it so? You can be amused at weak comic material because you are giddy or stoned, and know it. But it's common to suppose that such reactions are recalcitrant—that is, that they are in some sort of tension with the judgment that it is not funny. Likewise for fear at what you think is not really dangerous, and so on. Our sense that these are *recalcitrant* responses at least suggests that they already involve finding things to be some way, evaluatively speaking, that one has concluded they aren't (funny, dangerous, etc.). If not, then it is hard to see why such combinations of affect and judgment seem to be rationally at odds with one another, and why we often seek to resolve them.

Perhaps Velleman would say something like this: by the time you reach full-fledged amusement at some determinate thing, as opposed to a labile hit of pleasure which might be interpreted as amusement, or a feeling of social connection, or whatever, then you have a guided response, not a mere reaction. That's because there are features of the thing that make your amusement intelligible to you. You might even be able to identify those features (Moe just keeps hitting Curly with the hammer in different places as Curly defends the previous target), even if you judge that this is silly, predictable slapstick that does not really merit amusement. In other words, your response is being guided by the features of what is happening that make amusement intelligible, even if you think it is ultimately unearned. At that point, I think he should say, you could be finding it funny, affectively, despite your contrary judgment.

But if so, then what you find funny, by way of your guided responses, is not necessarily funny even by your lights. It is not necessarily funny-for-you. Most obviously, it is not yet funny by the lights of your judgment. Slightly more interesting, it is not yet funny by the lights of your sensibility either. That is because locally, in a particular case, something you would not normally find funny can temporarily seem so. In some such cases, I'd say, you find it funny, though it isn't, even by your own lights—that is, by the lights of your sense of humor,

²See p. 40. Could lead in whom, you may be wondering? There are various answers to this question, leading to more or less objective conceptions of value. More on this shortly.

which is a more stable subset of your tendencies to find things funny. Your sense of humor does not include all such tendencies, because some amusement is due to obscuring factors that can lead you to find things funny (or unfunny) in predictable ways that nonetheless do not fit a sensible pattern of value.³ You can fail to be amused by an excellent joke, delivered well at a party by someone you detest, to the great mirth of everyone else. But the joke is funny by your lights, because were anyone else to have told it you would have found it very funny. And you can be genuinely amused at a story told by your beautiful and interesting date, even though when you retell it to a friend the next day (as evidence that she was not merely beautiful and smart but funny too) you come to think that it was not so funny after all. (Suppose yourself, for purposes of this example, to be romantically unencumbered, and sexually attracted to women.) At first, in retrospect, you think it must have been the way she told it that made it so funny. On reflection, though, you realize that her delivery was not comically excellent either; it was flirtatious, and fun, and you went along with her amusement at the story, as one often can, if the underlying material is close enough to funny. You did not need to *feign* amusement, because your enjoyment of the evening and your underlying desire to make a connection with this lovely woman led you unselfconsciously to find funniness in what was really not a funny story, by your own lights. So, I conclude, genuinely finding something funny can and should be kept distinct from its being funny by the lights of your sensibility, and likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for other guided responses and the values they help us find.

I have been helping myself to talk of something's being funny or disgusting "by someone's lights", which is one thing one might naturally mean by saying that it is funny for him. And ordinary thinking recognizes a distinction between what is funny, disgusting, admirable by someone's lights and what is funny in some objective way that purports to have a claim on everyone. The relations between these notions is vexed. On one hand, it is natural to think that to find something disgusting or funny is to find it (rightly or wrongly) to be a way that would merit disgust or amusement from anyone who got *en rapport* with it, as it were. On the other hand, there are cases of blameless difference where it is tempting to think that what is funny or disgusting for you need not be so for me. Velleman has some very interesting things to say about these more and less objective standards of evaluation.

We allow for individual differences, so that what is likable or admirable for you need not be so for me, he notes. Moreover, what it is intelligible for you to admire or be amused by is holistically interdependent on what other responses are intelligible for you to have. Because there are specific functional-explanatory connections between different responses and various actions and other responses, the intelligibility of a given response may be a pretty idiosyncratic matter—tied up with patterns of interest and projects which make certain things interesting or boring or insulting to you in ways that affect what you can sensibly find funny or offensive, and so on. Still, your actual likes and dislikes can fail to detect what is really likable from your perspective. So for all its quirks, your perspective must be something sufficiently stable to rule out certain responses as inappropriate by your own lights. (Whether Velleman thinks these inappropriate responses can be 'guided responses,' as opposed to mere reactions is not clear, but in light of the date case, I think he should allow that they can.) And we can criticize one another's sensibilities as if there were an objective criterion of good taste. But different values appear to differ in their susceptibility to such a criterion—we allow more leeway for tastes in liking than in admiration, for instance. How can the conditions of appropriateness be objective in some cases and relative to individual sensibilities in others, and differ in all the ways above?

³Here and going forward, I make use of some ideas developed at more length in D'Arms and Jacobson (2010).

“The answer, I suggest, is that the fundamental standard of appropriateness for a response is its intelligibility, which is determined partly by the nature of the response itself and partly by differences among individual sensibilities, which can themselves be compared and criticized on grounds of intelligibility.” (41-42)

What are these individual sensibilities, and how are they related to the reactions it is intelligible for a person to have? One might think that any idiosyncracies of yours that render certain guided responses intelligible for you and not for others are elements of your sensibility. But the date case makes that suggestion problematic. As I was imagining the case, it seemed most plausible to say that the date's story was not funny by the lights of your sense of humor—your comic sensibility. And yet it seems that your amusement is entirely intelligible to you, at least on one natural way of thinking about intelligibility. It is a guided response, which is sensitive to comically relevant aspects of the story, as evidenced by the fact that you laugh at the right parts, not just randomly as it goes along. Moreover, being amused by a story told on a date by someone you are attracted to is entirely intelligible in social and prudential terms. If you *can* be amused in such circumstances, you'd have to be a real high-church stickler about the funny to resist. So it seems, on balance, that amusement is the most intelligible response in such a case.

One might try saying: No, feigning amusement is the most intelligible reaction. That might be true if you could not muster authentic amusement—and that is a common predicament about responding to incentives to feel. But the point of this case is that often enough we can and do respond immediately in ways that are unselfconsciously sensitive to facts about how our responses will fit in our social lives—an important point that Robert Solomon (1976) used to emphasize. This is a fact we can notice in the abstract and embrace, since (for instance) feigning amusement is less likely to lubricate our social interactions than is actually being amused. Thoughtful people can recognize and embrace respects in which their social emotions are shaped by various aspects of their relations to others that go beyond evaluatively relevant features of the objects of those emotions.

If I am right to say that amusement is on the whole the most intelligible reaction in this case, and also that the story is not funny by your lights, this shows that your comic sensibility comes apart from how it is intelligible for you to feel. That calls into question whether intelligibility is indeed, as Velleman says, the fundamental standard of appropriateness for guided responses—even when one limits oneself to personal standards of appropriateness that are supposed to fix the less objective notion of funny-, likeable- offensive-to-me.

I see in the text hints at several lines of response that Velleman might adopt. One is to insist that amusement in the case at hand is not on the whole the most intelligible response, even though it is natural, adaptive, and the response one would choose to have if such things were voluntary. I don't like that reply, because it requires me to abandon strong intuitions about intelligibility as I think my way into his theory (I think amusement at the date's story is clearly intelligible). I then worry that verdicts about what responses are merited or appropriate are driving the notion of intelligibility, when the avowed goal was to work in the other direction. But perhaps more could be said about intelligibility to relieve one or both of these worries.

Another line of reply is suggested by a very interesting discussion of conflict in which Velleman urges the availability of conflicting valuings (48-58). He argues that it makes sense that someone who had a child at too young an age can both think that she should not have done so, all things considered, and truthfully say that she does not wish she had not had her

child. He sees these stances as rationally conflicting, but also as potentially the most intelligible combination of reactions to have. He says that such conflicts would not make sense if our evaluative responses could reflect “antecedent value-properties supervening on nature” but, since there are no such properties, inconsistent valuing, though inimical in general to self-understanding, are not to be condemned as senseless or stupid (48). In this spirit, one might say something like this: my date’s story was funny (-for-me), in that light, on that night. But that story is not a funny story. It is neither objectively funny (I do not criticize others for failure to appreciate it) nor is it funny-for-me.

Whatever one makes of the baby case, embracing the inconsistency seems to me sub-optimal in the case at hand.⁴ A central point of thinking about our responses as organized around values, surely, is that it allows us to understand ourselves as responsive to relatively stable features of the world that we think supply good grounds for (or confer intelligibility upon) responding as we do. We draw the ‘is Φ /seems Φ ’ distinction for value terms (funny, disgusting, offensive, shameful...) precisely in order to distinguish reactions that we think responsive to generally intelligibility-conferring features from responses due to other vagaries of our natures and circumstances which, though perhaps predictable and sometimes intelligible, are not the sorts of causes of response that help to collect together a coherent value. If the notion of funniness is to do any work of this sort, it seems to me, it should be wielded here precisely to deny that the very good reasons for being amused by the date’s story are comic reasons.

A third response is to grant my claims, and say that the standards of appropriateness for responses that constitute something as valuable in a respect, for a person, are just one strand (albeit a very important one) of intelligibility-conferring considerations with respect to questions of how to react. This is, in effect, to distinguish the question of whether it is intelligible to be amused by something from the question of whether that thing is funny for one. The idea would be to seek a general pattern in the kinds of features that confer intelligibility on responses specifically by making something funny, or disgusting, or offensive, and identify these strands as the ones conferring the sort of intelligibility that renders the response appropriate (in the sense of ‘appropriate’ corresponding to values). This looks like the best option to me. But it incurs a debt that the first two responses avoid: to explain which kinds of general patterns of intelligibility of response figure in standards of appropriateness (i.e. of value-by-your-lights) and which ones don’t. Our tendencies to succumb to emotional contagion and be amused by marginal comic material in contexts where it is socially adaptive to do so may be sufficiently robust to constitute a kind of pattern, after all. Likewise our tendency not to be amused by jokes told by people we dislike. But while these patterns may enhance, rather than diminishing, our overall intelligibility to ourselves, it makes better sense to think of them as involving reasons for response that do not figure in our standards of funniness, but are justified on other grounds.

I think that Velleman can embrace this answer. This is to accept that some considerations which bear on the intelligibility of amusement, disgust, and offense do not bear on the appropriateness of those responses—that is, on whether something is funny, disgusting, or offensive. But if that is indeed granted, I think we have less reason to accept some claims Velleman makes about the relationship between distinct values. And this will be my final point.

⁴I am undecided what to think about the baby case, but I see the attractions of Velleman’s analysis. It is worth noting that the judgments that Velleman wants to embrace while treating as inconsistent there are not expressed in terms of some single evaluative predicate that registers the appropriateness of a relatively discrete response—like funny, offensive, etc.. If they were, the conflict might be starker and make less sense.

According to Velleman (42-3),

... [T]he criterion of appropriateness for a response is holistically interdependent with those for other responses, as are the corresponding values. ... We say, "That's not funny," though sometimes we are laughing as we say it; and we may then add, "So why am I laughing?" This rhetorical question confirms that the unfunny is that which we don't understand laughing at. The reason we don't understand laughing at something is not that it is unfunny; rather, we don't understand laughing at it because it is boring or offensive or disgusting... and the resulting incongruousness of laughing at it is the reason why we think it isn't funny, despite our laughter. ... Thus what it makes sense to be amused by depends in part on what it makes sense to be disgusted, bored, or offended by."

As I read this, the idea is that when the offensiveness or disgustingness of the material sufficiently reduces the overall intelligibility of laughing at it, that makes the material unfunny (for you)—even if you are laughing at it. Note, however, that another option would be to allow that the material is genuinely funny by your lights, it's just that funniness is not the only relevant value. Sometimes it would be more intelligible to withhold amusement *even though it is appropriate*, because other appropriate responses would better reflect one's considered views (or one's overall affective perspective) about the respective importance of the funniness and the offensiveness of the material. Having acknowledged that some considerations that render a response more or less intelligible do not thereby render it more or less appropriate, we can now resist a certain sort of evaluative holism. We can allow that, in some cases, even though the joke's offensiveness makes amusement not intelligibly accessible, it does not render amusement inappropriate—it does not make the joke unfunny. (In other cases the joke is just offensive, not funny, but that, I am suggesting, is not the only possibility.)⁵

This is not simply a point about amusement and the funny. The issue is general, because it concerns the claim of holistic interdependence between values in the first quoted sentence above. Certain combinations of responses are hard to have at the same time: amusement and offense, pity and indignation, fear and unflinching determination, admiration at one aspect of a person and contempt at another. This means that responding to the considerations that make one of them appropriate may be simply incompatible with responding to those that would make another appropriate. One question to ask in such cases is which response is most intelligible. If that question has a clear answer, then having any response that is incompatible with the intelligible one is not intelligible—or at least, not *as* intelligible. What I want to insist upon, though, is that it is always a further question whether the response that is thereby rendered less intelligible is also rendered inappropriate, or even less appropriate. Sometimes, I think, the answer will be no. In those cases we have conflicts of value which are such that we can't respond to all of them. In light of his willingness to countenance drastic kinds of conflicting value judgments in the baby case, perhaps Velleman will embrace this too. But if so, I think the claims of holistic interdependence among value are at least misleading; and more attention should be paid as well to the independence of distinct values. In short, once the appropriateness of responses is distinguished from their intelligibility, we cannot infer the holistic interdependence of values from the holistic interdependence of intelligibility conditions of response.⁶

⁵There is a footnote (FN 9 p. 43) in which Velleman allows for the possibility of "sick or offensive humor." But I don't understand it well enough to explore how it might help with the issues I am pursuing here.

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