

## Symposium on Agency

### Introduction

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The three essays which make up this symposium engage with some of the most important issues in the theory of action and agency today. Among the topics which are considered at length are the possibility of practical knowledge, the relationship between knowledge how versus knowledge that, the constitution of intentions, the importance of knowledge without observation, the difference between genuine actions versus mere bodily movements, the role of making sense in action and valuing, the nature of valuing and of values, the relationship between being an actor and acting, the objectivity of values, the alleged existence of formal coherence requirements like non-contradiction, closure, and means-end coherence, the aim of belief and intention, the instrumental value of formal requirements, and the availability of an error theory for such requirements. My hope is that this symposium will help foster continued interest in these and other related issues about agency and action. In what follows I offer a brief overview of each paper.

In “Practical Knowledge,” Kieran Setiya argues that knowledge how has an important role to play in explaining the possibility of knowledge in intentional action. When we perform an action intentionally, it seems to follow that we know that we are doing so. But this claim needs to be qualified in two ways. First, when doing something intentionally, my belief that I am doing it will not amount to knowledge if I do not know that I am *able* to do it. So I must have knowledge of ability in order to have knowledge of action. Secondly, Setiya notes that there are some cases in which an agent acts intentionally but without believing that he is doing so, and proposes a more precise account of what the belief requirement on intentional action should be. Next he goes on to argue, following Anscombe and many others in the action theory literature, that knowledge of intentional action is so-called “knowledge without observation,” where the relevant beliefs are not justified in virtue of being inferred from sufficient prior evidence. After criticizing two familiar inferential accounts of knowledge in action, Setiya claims that intending something involves, at least in part, the belief that one is doing or is going to do it. This claim, combined with the assumption that intentions are involved in every instance of intentional action, leads to the claim that our knowledge of what we are doing is knowledge in intention. But then we are faced with a natural puzzle, since it is initially hard to see how we could be justified in forming such apparently groundless beliefs. After examining and ultimately rejecting David Velleman’s response to this puzzle, Setiya argues that part of what makes us justified in forming the beliefs which play a role in constituting intentions to act is knowledge how. More precisely, one is justified in forming the intention that one is doing  $\phi$  (and the belief that one is  $\phi$ -ing) if and only if the decision to  $\phi$  is “an exercise of knowledge how to  $\phi$  and one has knowledge of ability.” Setiya concludes by arguing that knowing how is not reducible to knowing that.

J. David Velleman in his paper “Improvised Values” uses some of his well-known claims about agency to argue by analogy for a certain view about the nature of values and valuing. Valuing is what makes value appropriate, and so is central to understanding value. For Velleman, valuing is not as simple as just judging something to be valuable, nor is it merely having a desire concerning that thing. Rather valuing something as desirable, for instance, is “to desire it in a manner regulated with an eye to the conditions of appropriateness for desire.” This in turn amounts to desiring that thing for a reason. Thus Velleman’s task with respect to cases of valuing something as desirable is to discover which considerations constitute reasons for desiring a thing, since they will be the appropriateness conditions for desiring it. In order to carry out such a task for this and other cases of valuing, he argues by analogy using an account of the considerations whose influence can explain the performance of a genuine human action as opposed to a mere bodily movement. Thus he turns to the question of what action is, and the answer for Velleman revolves around the notion of making sense. Simplifying greatly, the agent acts in a way that makes sense to him, and chooses a particular action based on considerations in the light of which that action is intelligible. Practical reasoning on this approach typically consists of the agent providing himself with materials for making sense to himself, and so aims at self-understanding. At the same time, making sense itself is not typically the object of direct attention for the agent; indeed, it would be self-defeating to pay attention to making sense. How does all this help understand valuing according to Velleman? Again simplifying greatly, the standard for the appropriateness of responses to things will be making sense or intelligibility. Values then are “the properties or categories to which it makes sense to respond in particular ways.” Such a proposal does allow for a degree of objectivity according to Velleman, since something’s being admirable, for instance, need not amount just to that thing’s being actually admired if it makes no sense to admire it. He concludes by responding to several objections to his account of values and valuing.

While there continues to be much debate about the status of moral obligations, the existence of obligations of formal coherence has struck many philosophers as highly plausible. But in his paper “Why Be Disposed to Be Coherent?”, Niko Kolodny argues that requirements of formal coherence as such are a myth, and he focuses his critical remarks on putative non-contradiction, closure, and means-end coherence requirements. Such alleged requirements are requirements of rationality which have a wide scope over the disjunction of all coherent patterns of attitudes, and as formal requirements they are not tied to the specifics of an agent’s situation. Kolodny is careful to note that the denial of such formal coherence requirements is compatible with accepting narrow-scope requirements which make specific demands depending on the agent’s situation. His critical discussion focuses first on the alleged formal requirement of non-contradiction (N), and he notes that in certain cases making our beliefs N-coherent fails to do either of two things which might be used to justify N: it fails to provide beliefs that are required by reason in that particular case, and it fails to be necessary for having beliefs at all in such a case. These claims then invite the natural reply that while this failure might happen in a particular case, it is plausible to think that a disposition to have N-coherent cognitive states would either (i) in the long run contribute to having beliefs required by reason or (ii) in general be necessary for having beliefs. But not so fast according to Kolodny. He goes on to reject two arguments for the first proposal, and using this discussion quickly

dismisses the second one. From there he turns his attention to alleged formal requirements of closure and means-end coherence, and marshals similar considerations against each of them. Finally Kolodny concludes by providing the basis for an error theory of the mythical formal requirement of non-contradiction.

Earlier drafts of these three papers were presented at the Wake Forest University Hester Seminar that I organized on “Agency and Action” in September of 2006. The other speakers at the conference were Michael Smith, Pamela Hieronymi, Philip Clark, and Douglas Lavin. The commentators were R. Jay Wallace, Michael Bratman, Joseph Raz, John Broome, and John Fischer. I am grateful to each of these philosophers as well as to the session chairs and other participants for helping to make the conference such a success. Thanks also to George Graham for his help with this symposium, and especially to John Deigh for all his patience and support.

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