

J. David Velleman

Foundations for Moral Relativism (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013), 108 pp.
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Those looking for an argument for moral relativism in this concise and absorbing book will be disappointed, for none is to be found. This, however, is a feature and not a bug. As Velleman writes at the beginning of the central essay, “the case for moral relativism is not an argument; it’s a pair of observations. The first observation is that people live and have lived by mutually incompatible moral norms. The second observation is that no one has ever succeeded in showing any one set of norms to be universally valid” (p. 45). The primary aim of the book is to explain the first observation (the emergence of moral diversity) and to make the aspiration in the second seem chimerical in turn, thereby putting forth “some foundational ideas for a version of relativism” (p. 3). In this regard, the book is a success.

Those conversant with Velleman’s previous work, especially his *How We Get Along* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), will find much here that is familiar. As in that work, the discussion here centers on the idea of intelligibility. However, while the metaethical commitments of *How We Get Along* were tentative and suggestive, here Velleman develops his account with much greater clarity. It begins with the observation that we are social creatures with an inchoate, multiply specifiable drive to get along with one another—a drive, that is, to sociability (p. 54). This requires mutual interpretation, which is facilitated by a large set of communal ‘doables’—action types, or ways of being ordinary. Doables allow us to interpret one another easily, perhaps effortlessly. The ordinary ways we speak, move, emote, react, value—all of these constitute the “shared ontology” of doables requisite to cooperative communal living (p. 27). We expect others to act in such ‘ordinary ways’ and so too must we, as a general rule. (There can be exceptions, of course, and any particular individual can act in ways that flout ordinariness, though only up to a point. “You can afford to care about things that are generally known to be laughing matters or to overlook things that are generally known to give offense, but you cannot afford to do so in general” (p. 56).)

The drive to sociality thus compels members of communities to converge on *mores*, “ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (55). Some *mores* will be forbidden, while others will be recommended (even required). Their status can be stated in familiar categorical expressions such as ‘X is wrong’ or ‘X is obligatory’ (p. 47). When indexed to particular communities, such categorical expressions have meaning. They guide action and attitude. They dictate what is “to be adopted” (p. 52). And the drive to sociability—to being mutually

interpretable—makes them normative, providing individuals “complete and compelling reasons” to act, value, or hold practical attitudes (p. 49). The drive to sociability, then, constitutes “a single normative force, the same force in every perspective,” whose direction is formed by the community’s convergence on a set of *mores* (p. 67). Put another way, from within a particular communal standpoint, and for individuals in those communities, certain *mores* have normative force. But that’s all there is to normativity (p. 62). Similarly, no reasons are categorical. Instead, “there are only reasons that acquire their weight from some perspective-establishing force” (p. 60). In this way, Velleman contends that “*mores* can have moral force and moral subject matter without being universal” (p. 1).

If reasons for acting are local in this way, then one might ask: how are they justified? Echoing a claim once made by John Stuart Mill, Velleman maintains they are justified simply by a community’s converging on them. “That is, we justify our attitudes by showing that they are ordinary, for ourselves and for those in our social vicinity” (p. 57). When a community converges on valuing, admiring, or censuring certain ways of being, this gives the members of that community a presumptive reason to perpetuate them. Some members may of course question the existing values and commitments. They might provide counter-considerations or suggest exceptions to prevailing rules. However, their claims can only have normative force (if any) if they, too, can be interpretable to their peers. In this sense, Velleman’s relativism allows for meaningful moral discourse, though humility demands that one remain open to the possibility that at least sometimes “common ground will be out of reach” (p. 62). Velleman’s relativism also allows one to compare communities as to how well they fulfill the functional role of getting their members to get along—to being mutually interpretable—but such comparisons are difficult in practice. “We cannot eyeball various communities and see how well their ways of life facilitate mutual intelligibility” (p. 69).

Foundations for Moral Relativism is readable, engaging, and full of anthropological insight. It puts forth a credible and persuasive account supporting metaethical relativism. It merits serious engagement. Here, I will focus on two lingering questions. First, it seems to be a consequence of Velleman’s view that most any communal *more* or doable can have normative force for its members, since “the normative force... is the force of the drive toward mutual interpretability, which arises out of the drive toward sociality” (p. 58). One might ask: which of these are moral? Put another way, what makes this an account of *moral relativism* as opposed to *social convention*? As Velleman notes, *mores* can include “such trivial matters as the choice of a fork or the height of a hemline,” whereas moralities “make inexorable demands on unavoidable matters” (ibid).

The former might be accompanied by merely instrumental reasons, such as “a desire for solidarity or a fear of sanctions” (p. 57), whereas the latter are underwritten by the drive to interpretability, a fundamental source of normativity. But can the two be so sharply distinguished? Velleman adverts to human nature to constrain the ontology of doables for any particular community, citing “an aversion to pain, separation, and frustration; an inclination toward pleasure, connection, and the fluid exercise of skill; the inborn and automatic fight-or-flight response... plus an array of physiological appetites” as limiting the scope of what’s doable or ordinary (p. 64), and perhaps this can be parlayed into an account of what characterizes morality apart from *mores*. We might expect that the fundamental reasons for acting in a community would be concerned with such aspects of existence. Flouting norms of bodily integrity, for example, may render one fundamentally uninterpretable to others; flouting norms of matching blazer to pants less so. Relatedly, Velleman might parlay the functional nature of his account to individuate morals from *mores*; the moral norms are just those norms that facilitate (or aim to facilitate) mutual interpretability, whereas other *mores* have distinct motivations such as solidarity or acceptance. Yet it’s not obvious how these can be sharply distinguished. Perhaps this is less of an embarrassment for metaethical relativism than it would be for some of its competitors, though, and Velleman suggests that we should not be surprised if an account of relativism fails to provide strict, universal definitions of morality (p. 3).

Second, Velleman claims repeatedly that the relativist should not rest her case on the possibility of faultless disagreement (e.g. pp. 2, 25, 46). At one point, he simply states that faultless disagreement is impossible, despite attempts to prove otherwise (p. 2). Yet he also suggests a strategic reason to avoid the question of faultless disagreement: one might instead vindicate relativism by showing that moralities “do not even share enough common ground to disagree, and that it is therefore a moot question which one is right” (p. 2). If communities do not share a taxonomy of actions then they will differ on what can possibly be done and, in this sense, will have nothing about which to disagree, “which is all that real-world relativism requires” (p. 2). This is good so far as it goes. But how far is that? It seems possible for communities to overlap on *some* doables and not others (having independently converged on them), and therefore to disagree about their moral status. Velleman can go a number of ways here. He might point out that any such overlapping set is really a red herring; the entire ontology of doables for a community hang together in such a way that for a member to feel the normative pull of any part of it she must endorse the whole. Or, he might underline the fact that the doables are *constructed* (more aptly, *invented*) by communities as they try to get along; they

are not selected from some preexisting set (pp. 24–25). Hence, it is difficult to see how they could really be identical across communities. Taking a different tack, he might claim that if different communities really do have overlapping doables then disagreement remains possible for those doables. Sorting these questions out requires a characterization of disagreement itself, which is left out of the discussion.

But perhaps this is demanding too much. Velleman himself set out to provide an “outline of the form that a relativist metaethical theory should take” (p. 53) while being non-committal and speculative about affirming any particular version of it. This outline alone is more than enough to recommend the book. No doubt, many others will pick up the task.

Hagop Sarkissian

The City University of New York, Baruch College & Graduate Center

hagop.sarkissian@baruch.cuny.edu