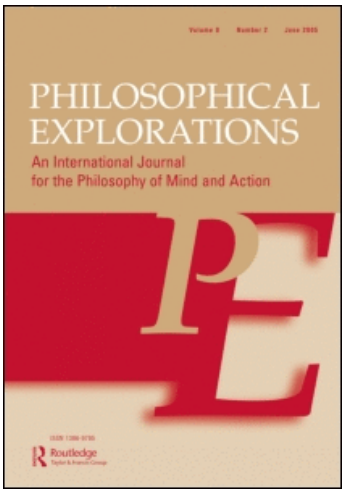
This article was downloaded by: *[Swets Content Distribution]*
On: *13 August 2009*
Access details: *Access Details: [subscription number 912280237]*
Publisher *Routledge*
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Philosophical Explorations
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713706422

Motivation by ideal

Wibren van der Burg; Sanne Taekema

Online Publication Date: 01 March 2004

To cite this Article van der Burg, Wibren and Taekema, Sanne(2004)'Motivation by ideal',Philosophical Explorations,7:1,91 — 98
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/1386979032000186872
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1386979032000186872

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

CRITICAL NOTICE

MOTIVATION BY IDEAL
A reaction to J. David Velleman

Wibren van der Burg and **Sanne Taekema**

Moral ideals should not be seen as simple and purely personal, but as complex values with a social dimension that transcend attempts to formulate or realize them. Orientation towards ideals needs a realistic component: people should identify with the quest for an ideal, not with the ideal itself, and consider the possibility of negative consequences of their pursuit. Such realism about ideals includes acknowledging that ideals are not the only, nor the most important, motivating force of morality.

Downloaded By: [Swets Content Distribution] At: 11:49 13 August 2009

Introduction

In his article 'Motivation by ideal', J. David Velleman (2002) offers an account of how ideals play a role in moral motivation. He argues that the motive behind moral actions can become isolated from other motives, and that this generates behaviour that is irrational in some respects, though rational in others:

> The reason why moral motivation can become isolated from our other motives, I shall argue, is that it often depends on the force of an ideal; an ideal gains motivational force when we identify with it; and acting out of identification with an ideal is like a game of make-believe, in which we pretend to be that with which we identify. (Velleman 2002, 91)

We agree with Velleman that ideals play a role in moral motivation. Commitment to an ideal may even lead to a very strong motivation. However, we want to argue that the way in which he analyses the relation between ideals and moral motivation is inadequate. It seems to us that the main reason for this is that Velleman focuses on the wrong examples. The most extensively discussed example is that of engaging in a sport, Tae Kwon Do, which is used to explain how enacting a fictional story can motivate, but has nothing to do with morals or ideals. The second example is that of giving up smoking, which is a very atypical ideal (if an ideal at all), and certainly not a moral ideal. If we focus on moral ideals, the relation between ideals and motivation can be put in a different perspective. In fact, Velleman provides ample ammunition for our criticism. The only genuine example of a moral ideal that he (briefly) discusses, the Kantian Categorical Imperative, does not support his general thesis—as he admits himself.

We want to raise four different but connected points of criticism:

Philosophical Explorations, Vol. 7, No 1, 2004
ISSN 1386-9795 print/1741-5918 online/04/010091-08
© 2004 Taylor & Francis Ltd DOI: 10.1080/1386979032000186872

(i) Velleman's concept of ideals is inadequate because he uses an atypical example that is binary, atomist, purely personal and fully realizable, and is therefore not applicable to moral ideals.
(ii) Velleman's analysis of identification with an ideal as acting-as-if is inadequate with regard to moral ideals (and probably with regard to most other ideals as well); we should rather analyse it as identifying with the quest for the ideal.
(iii) His analysis of combining an orientation towards the ideal with an orientation towards reality in terms of a modified enacting of the ideal is inadequate; we should rather regard it as a dialectical interplay between an idealist and a realist orientation.
(iv) Although ideals are important in morality, they do not play the central role in moral motivation that Velleman seems to award them.

Downloaded By: [Swets Content Distribution] At: 11:49 13 August 2009

(i) Velleman's Concept of Ideals Is Inadequate

According to Velleman, an ideal is 'the image of another person, or a currently untrue image of oneself, that one can get carried away with enacting' (2002, 100). This is an uncommon and restricted view of what counts as an ideal; for example, social ideals such as justice and democracy, and even personal ideals such as tolerance are excluded. His central example, however, is even more restricted. He tells the story of a colleague who wanted to stop smoking, but knew it was irrational for him to do so because the immediate pleasure of one cigarette outweighed the additional health risk of that one cigarette. The only way for him to stop smoking was to identify himself with the ideal of a non-smoker and act as if he were a non-smoker.

This is in various respects a very atypical example of an ideal; many authors would not even regard it as an ideal at all. Moreover, it lacks some of the characteristics essential to moral ideals. Therefore, it is not useful for analysing moral motivation by ideals.

First, it is binary: one is a smoker or a non-smoker, but one cannot be half a smoker. Most other ideals are gradual; one may like the ideal to a larger or smaller extent. Even the comparable aim of being a non-overweight person is gradual in nature and requires a gradual process of realizing it. If I want to lose weight, I cannot simply stop eating; it requires a long process of eating less and exercising more. All moral ideals are non-binary in character; we can attain them more or less instead of either attaining them or not attaining them. Persons can be more or less tolerant, more or less just etc. As binary and gradual ideals usually require different strategies, we should choose a gradual ideal as an example to study moral motivation rather than a binary one.

Second, the example is atomist: it can be studied in isolation. Being a non-smoker does not imply other qualities like being a vegetarian or being tolerant. However, moral ideals cannot be understood in such an atomist manner because they are always connected with other ideals or values (cf. Vedder 1998). This is not only true for societal ideals such as justice or democracy, but also for personal ideals such as altruism, compassion or tolerance. If I want to be a tolerant person, this is an ideal which also refers to other values, such as freedom and equality. I cannot value a tolerant attitude without also committing to respect for the freedom of others and acknowledgement of their moral equality. It is characteristic of moral ideals (and of other moral notions) that they cannot be individuated in the way

atoms or persons can be individuated, simply because morality is not a loose set of isolated elements but (at least aims to be) a more or less coherent whole.

Third, being a non-smoker is a purely personal ideal, not only in the sense that it is the ideal for a person, but also in the sense that it is only self-regarding. Moral ideals may be personal in the first sense, but they are not purely personal in the other sense. They have a social, other-regarding dimension, because morality has such a dimension. A person like Martin Luther King is an ideal because he fought for justice and equality; he can function as a role model precisely because he cared about others; the same goes for Florence Nightingale's compassionate nursing. Similarly, a personal ideal such as courage transcends narrow self-interest: it implies overcoming one's fears for a common cause. Even those who do not agree with the most common view on morality as by definition having a social dimension, agree that the precepts with a social dimension constitute the core of it. This also applies to moral ideals.

Fourth, the ideal of being a non-smoker can be completely described and realized. In our view, one of the central characteristics of values, that leads us to referring to them as ideals is that they usually transcend our attempts to formulate and realize them.[1] Therefore, it seems better to regard being a non-smoker as a goal or a valuable (non-moral) characteristic rather than as an ideal. Let us, nevertheless, for the sake of argument take the view of Velleman, according to which an ideal seems to refer to every state of affairs that is not yet realized. We want to submit that at least every moral ideal has what we call this specific ideal dimension that makes it practically impossible to formulate or realize it completely. I may aspire to be a tolerant person, but this is such a complex, multifaceted virtue, which takes on different meanings in different contexts, that it is impossible to spell out what this would imply. Moreover, I will (perhaps unless I were a saint) always have to admit that I do not reach the ideal completely; there is always some respect in which I can criticize myself for not living up to the ideal. In a slightly different sense, this is equally true of ideals that are concrete persons: how can I realize my ideal of being like Martin Luther King? Which of his actions should I perform myself and which of his character traits should I possess to live according to his example? In both cases, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact implications of the ideal for one's personal life.

The fact that an ideal is so multifaceted and sets such high aspirations that it can never be completely grasped nor completely realized has important implications for normative theory and action. It means that there can be various legitimate ways to pursue an ideal, and that these ways may also conflict. If I aspire to be a non-violent person in a non-violent world, this may be taken to imply that I never use violence myself, but also that I use proportionate violence in order to prevent violent action by others. In order to decide how to try to get nearer the ideal, we must carefully analyse both our current personality and the situation we are in.

(ii) Identification with an Ideal Is Not a Matter of Acting-as-if

Velleman's point that emulating an ideal requires acting as if the ideal were true also depends heavily on his specific examples. The 'ideal' of the non-smoker is atypical because it is an ideal version of the actor himself, which can plausibly be the subject of

Downloaded By: [Swets Content Distribution] At: 11:49 13 August 2009

make-believe. In most cases, the relation between the ideal and the actor is less straightforward: the more common way in which a personal ideal usually figures in a story is as an example of what a person wants to be *like*. It is not a matter of becoming the ideal, but of being inspired by the ideal to change one's own life.

In our view, the story of which the ideal is part is usually not a story about the person who holds the ideal but the embodiment of the ideal to which it owes its appeal. Even a completely fictional figure like Frodo (in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*) can function as an ideal because he is embedded in the details of a story. Despite his being a hobbit, people may be inspired by his mental strength and heroism, not the least because his story inspires them. The role of the story, of the embodiment, is therefore to increase the attraction of the ideal (cf. Santayana 1980, 158–59).

Orientation on an ideal cannot be adequately analysed in terms of a fictional acting-as-if. To make this clear, a distinction needs to be made between two types of person ideals: ideal role models (complete persons like Frodo or Florence Nightingale) and ideal character traits (virtues such as tolerance, altruism or dedication to justice). Acting as if I were my role model is clearly not the way I should live an adult life. It reminds us rather of what children do when they pretend to be Superman. When adults enact a story like this, we usually think of a psychiatric disorder such as the Jerusalem Syndrome (visitors to the Holy Land suddenly being convinced they are John the Baptist or the Virgin Mary). People who want to follow their role model should always see how certain valuable characteristics or laudable actions can be transformed to their own specific situation. I can be inspired by Superman's fight for justice but I had better not act as if I have his ability to fly.

The reality check in the case of ideal role models does not seem to hold when we focus on ideal character traits. There is no reason for not acting out the ideal of being a pacifist. The problem here is of a different nature: the ideal does not give much direct guidance in the non-ideal circumstances we live in. Does my commitment to peacefulness require refusing to do military service or rather fighting every oppressive regime? Does tolerance require that I intervene or rather not when a husband beats his wife on religious grounds, or when a colleague makes bad jokes about gays? Such questions cannot be answered in the context of ideal theory alone, they also require a careful analysis of the concrete circumstances. Knowing what to do from a moral point of view thus requires both the perspective of what person I would like to be and the society I want to live in, and an insight into the person I actually am and the reality I live in.

Of course, this criticism does not imply that we believe orientation towards ideals is wrong. On the contrary, ideals are important for morality and especially for moral motivation. We need to focus on a different form of identification with ideals. We may identify ourselves as persons in search of justice and tolerance, we may aspire to become more tolerant or non-violent, and we may even ask ourselves in certain situations: what would Jesus or Gandhi have done? We may construct our identity in our quest for those ideals, in our attempt to imitate them, but without the stronger implication that we act as if we were our role models or already have our ideal character traits.

Velleman also seems to argue against the direct imitation of a role model, but for different reasons which we do not find convincing. In his example of idealizing a generous person, Velleman argues that doing generous things because you want to resemble that

Downloaded By: [Swets Content Distribution] At: 11:49 13 August 2009

ideal person does not lead to becoming generous. Instead, he says that one can become generous 'if it moves one first to imagine being a generous person and then to enact this self-image' (2002, 100). We do not agree that this intermediate step is necessary: if I imitate a generous person by donating substantially to charities the way that person does, this brings me closer to being generous. This is because having the virtue at least partly consists in behaving virtuously. It seems that Velleman focuses too much on the internal disposition to be virtuous as the key to becoming virtuous. For us, the intermediate step needed is a different one: the consideration of the ideal's implications for one's real life.

Velleman undermines his own theory even more when he states that the categorical imperative is an exception to his analysis of moral ideals because it does not require make-believe. We agree that it does not require this, but would like to offer a different explanation. If we want to regard it in terms of ideals, i.e. (in Velleman's view) images of a person, we can formulate the Kantian ideal as 'a person who always acts according to the categorical imperative and lives a life guided by it'. Indeed, a commitment to this ideal does not require make-believe, it only requires that I do my best to live according to the ideal. Contrary to Velleman's suggestion, however, the fact that this commitment to the ideal does not require a game of make-believe is not exceptional at all. It is because it is a moral ideal (in fact the only one he seriously discusses) and commitment to moral ideals never requires such a game of make-believe.

Ideals play an important role in moral motivation in two ways. Moral ideals can—more than, for example, moral rules—appeal to us, and thus have a strong emotive force. A saint such as St Francis or a heroine of fiction such as Antigone provides an attractive role model and may therefore motivate us to imitate him or her and act morally. This is, however, still a weak form of motivation. A stronger form of motivation may result from our identification with our quest for the ideal. If I believe it is part of my identity to be committed to tolerance and non-violence, this will be a very strong motivational source because I would violate it myself if I did not act according to this commitment to the ideal. Such a strong motivation may, indeed, provide adequate motivation to act against my own self-interest in a narrow sense, and even make major sacrifices.[2]

(iii) The Relation between Realism and Idealism Should Be a Dialectical One

Velleman struggles, like everyone studying ideals, with the relation between the ideal and reality. His insight that it is not merely a compromise in which realism and idealism meet halfway is valuable, although certainly not unique (cf. Berlin 1990; Dewey 1988, 147, 154; Selznick 1992; Van der Burg 2001). If realistic idealism is envisaged as a compromise, it means that there is no wholehearted commitment to the ideal and thus that the force of motivation is relatively weak. In order to be strongly motivated we need to identify with (our commitment to) the ideal. Only if we do so can we transcend our personal limitations, determined by a narrow conception of our self-interest. But Velleman's solution is not acceptable because he plans reality between brackets. With regard to purely self-regarding non-moral goals this may sometimes be justified, but with regard to other-regarding, moral

Downloaded By: [Swets Content Distribution] At: 11:49 13 August 2009

ideals, it is not. Bracketing reality may be adequate for theatre, games and sports, but not when we should act morally.

In moral action, we cannot bracket reality in the way Velleman suggests, as we must fully include in our estimates how our actions influence the lives of others. Utopian and dogmatic ideologies have often required us to bracket those effects on concrete others, in the name of the ideal, and it had disastrous consequences. Moreover, many moral ideals do not make sense in an ideal world: tolerance does not require being tolerant towards ideal persons (in such a case it is not needed) but towards actual persons. In morality it is never justified to bracket reality, not even partially or temporarily.

Of course, Velleman does not bracket reality completely, but in his view reality should only modify the idealist identification. We believe this is too weak a check of reality on our idealist commitments. The confrontation with reality should occur at every stage of our orientation towards the ideal: in identifying in which respects the ideal is realistic (Does it require supernatural forces?), in which respects one's own efforts to come closer to the ideal are realistic (Does it really require too much of me?) and in which respects attempts to get nearer to the ideal will have morally acceptable consequences. In other words, the ideal, our commitment to the ideal and our attempts to realize it must all be confronted with reality. And while I am acting on the ideal, I should continue to make this reality check in order to avoid the risk that justice is done, but the world perishes. However, this does not mean that the ideal perspective and the reality perspective merge, but rather that there is a continuous interplay between the two. For example, it can be one of my most deeply felt political ideals to achieve international justice and reduce world poverty. Realizing that I cannot achieve this on my own is important, because it makes me think about the way in which I can contribute, for instance, by volunteering for a non-governmental organization. Such modesty about my abilities does not detract from the force of the ideal itself. Similarly, a realistic assessment is needed when I choose the charity or organization I want to support: Do their efforts really help poor people or does the money end up with those in power in Third-World countries? Again, this does not reduce the appeal of the ideal but it greatly affects my specific actions to pursue it. My commitment to the ideal of justice can still be wholehearted even if I acknowledge that it will never be reached and know that the prospects of my actions resulting in the improvement I hope for may be dim.

In such an approach we do not compromise between reality and the ideal as we are still fully committed to the ideal while being fully informed about reality. We may still feel strongly motivated to act according to our commitment to the ideal, including actions against our own self-interest in a narrow sense. But when reflecting upon what this commitment implies, we are open to reality, thus guarding us from self-destructive behaviour and from completely counterproductive actions with immoral consequences for other persons.

Thus Velleman is correct in holding that identification with the commitment to an ideal may lead to actions that are rational in one respect and irrational in another. He is, however, wrong in arguing that they are irrational in the perspective of reality, but rational in the perspective of the fictitious story we are enacting. It is because they are irrational from the point of view of our narrow self-interest, in which living up to our commitments

Downloaded By: [Swets Content Distribution] At: 11:49 13 August 2009

is not an element of our self-interest, whereas they are rational if we include that commitment as part of our self-interest. In this broader view of rationality, it may be completely rational to die for my ideals rather than to betray them and thus give up what is essential to who I am.

(iv) Ideals Are Important, Though Not Central in Moral Motivation

The last point in which we would suggest a revision of Velleman's view is his suggestion that moral motivation 'often' depends on the force of an ideal. Although we both have frequently argued against the relative neglect of ideals in contemporary philosophy, this is a suggestion we strongly oppose. Ideals are part of the moral fabric, certainly, but only a part, and not the most important part. We also need virtues, rules, principles, relational commitments, etc. Each of these elements of morality may provide moral motives. I may feel motivated to care for my neighbour because I have developed an attachment to him or feel responsible for him; I may feel motivated to follow moral rules, because I am rationally convinced they are good or because they are the rules of my community and so on. It would be wrong to regard ideals as one of the most important sources of moral motives.

It is understandable, nevertheless, why Velleman attaches such a great importance to ideals. Probably the strongest moral motives find their source in what I consider my identity. Acting against what I hold to be my personal integrity, against who I am, is often very difficult. Commitments that are central to my identity thus provide very strong motives. This explains why commitment to ideals may have such a strong force. However, commitment to personal ideals is not unique in this respect. We may have similar commitments to our family and friends, to our country or ethnic groups, to our religious or political beliefs—each of these commitments may be constitutive of, or central to, our identity. Each of them may thus motivate us to make sacrifices and thus act irrationally from the narrow perspective of our self-interest although rationally from a broader perspective.

However, in most of our daily decision-making and in the minimal core of moral precepts, such strong commitments are not at stake, or only in a very weak way. Prohibitions of killing, stealing and so on may be related to our ideals, but we do not need to appeal to those ideals to feel motivated not to steal or kill. When deciding whether or not to give money to the homeless or to evade taxes, our motives are usually much more down to earth.

We should be realistic about ideals, both regarding their importance in morality and regarding the difficulty to live up to them. The importance of ideals should not be overstated nor should the effort needed to realize them be underestimated. A more balanced assessment of their importance than the one given by Velleman also provides a more convincing story about their role in moral motivation.

NOTES

1. See Taekema (2003, 41) and Van der Burg (1997). We see values and ideals as the same conceptual category. The conceptual analysis by Taekema takes a gradualist approach to the ideal dimension of values, but it still allows the possibility that we speak of

Downloaded By: [Swets Content Distribution] At: 11:49 13 August 2009

ideals in those cases where the ideal dimension is very strong. Therefore, the definition proposed by Van der Burg (1997) may still be upheld, but should be regarded as a stipulative definition for those cases. However, the idea that ideals are a completely distinct subcategory of values, which was an implicit presupposition of Van der Burg (1997), should be rejected.

2. See Tierney (1994, 67) and Van der Burg (2001, 20–22, 46–57) for an elaboration of this connection between commitment to ideals, personal identity and a strong motivation that enables us to transcend our limitations.

REFERENCES

BERLIN, ISAIAH. 1990. The pursuit of the ideal. In *The crooked timber of humanity: Chapters in the history of ideas*, edited by Henry Hardy. London: John Murray.

DEWEY, JOHN. 1988. Reconstruction in philosophy. In *The middle works, 1899-1924*. Vol. 12, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

SANTAYANA, GEORGE. 1980. *Reason in society: The life of reason*. Vol. II. New York: Dover.

SELZNICK, PHILIP. 1992. *The moral commonwealth: Social theory and the promise of community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

TAEKEMA, SANNE. 2003. *The concept of ideals in legal theory*. The Hague: Kluwer Law International.

TIERNEY, NATHAN. 1994. *Imagination and ethical ideals: Prospects for a unified philosophical and psychological understanding*. New York: SUNY Press.

VAN DER BURG, WIBREN. 1997. The importance of ideals. *Journal of Value Inquiry* 31: 23–37.

——. 2001. *De verbeelding aan het werk, Pleidooi voor een realistisch idealisme*. Kampen: Agora.

VEDDER, ANTON. 1998. Waarden en het web van zin en betekenis. In *Over idealen. Het belang van idealen in recht, moraal en politiek*, edited by Wibren van der Burg and Frans W. A. Brom. Deventer: W.E.J. Tjeenk Willink.

VELLEMAN, J. DAVID. 2002. Motivation by ideal. *Philosophical Explorations* V (2): 89–103.

Wibren van der Burg (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Faculty of Law, Tilburg University, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands. E-mail: w.vanderburg@uvt.nl

Sanne Taekema, Faculty of Law, Tilburg University, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands. E-mail: h.s.taekema@uvt.nl

Downloaded By: [Swets Content Distribution] At: 11:49 13 August 2009