

Motivational Ties and Doing What One Most Wants

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Journal of Philosophical Research XVI (1991): 437-39.

In his paper "Motivational Ties"¹ Al Mele addresses the question of how intentional behavior is possible in "Buridan's ass" choice situations. This is the question of how an agent could make a choice between two or more (equally) maximally attractive options (such as choosing one, rather than another, of two effectively identical copies of a desired book). For if, as is commonly supposed, choices and intentions are based on the attractiveness of options (roughly, how strongly one is motivated to perform them), then there seems little basis for choosing, or intending, one rather than another of two or more (equally) maximally attractive options.

Mele proposes, roughly, that we consider the possibility that one's intentions are not determined solely by the motivational attractiveness of the options, but also by an "executive" factor. The executive factor somehow settles one's intentions on one option rather than another. In the context of dominant motivational ties -- that is, choice situations in which there is more than one (equally) maximally attractive options -- the executive factor settles on one of these options, even though the agent is indifferent between it and the others.

It should be noted that Mele's proposal is very weak. He is only claiming that his model deserves careful attention. He is not arguing (in the

paper under discussion, at least) that his model is clearly superior to any alternative. We agree that his model deserves careful consideration, but we shall suggest that much more needs to be specified before we can even identify clear empirical differences between his model and the Davidsonian alternative he discusses.

The first point to note is that Mele is working within a framework -- which we accept -- in which intention, beliefs, and wants (broadly construed as motivation) are intimately connected roughly by the following principle (in which we omit various qualifications not relevant here):

P: An agent intentionally does a thing only if, relative to her beliefs about what things are possible and what their consequences are, she wants to do that thing at least as much as any alternative.

P is silent about what one intentionally does in the context of dominant motivational ties. It only says that if one option is wanted more than another, then the less wanted option is not performed. When there is more than one option that is maximally wanted (i.e., wanted at least as much as any alternative), P remains silent.

Mele accepts a suitably qualified version of P. He is, however, skeptical of the following strengthening of P:

P*: An agent intentionally does a thing only if, relative to her beliefs about what things are possible and what their consequences are, she wants to do that thing more than any alternative.

P is compatible with the existence of dominant motivational ties, and is silent about how they might be resolved. P*, on the other hand, entails that there are no dominant motivational ties in which there is intentional behavior. That is, defenders of P* either will have to deny the existence of dominant motivational ties; or if they allow the existence of dominant motivational ties, they must deny that there is any intentional behavior in such cases.

Mele, then, accepts (a suitably qualified version of) P but is skeptical of P*. He holds that there can be dominant motivational ties and they can be resolved without breaking the tie by an executive factor that somehow settles one's intentions. We think Mele's proposal is a promising way of rejecting P*, but we want to briefly consider how one could defend P* by denying that there can be dominant motivational ties.

Donald Davidson's approach to the problem of motivational ties is to claim that the tie is broken by "flipping a coin" or some other sort of external procedure. We find it very plausible that once "the coin is flipped", one

then typically desires the choice indicated by the "flip", and so there will no longer be any tie. That, however, leaves open the question of why one chose, or intended, the flip rather than something else.

One possibility is that when confronted with an apparent choice between two (equally) maximally attractive options, there is always a third option of "flipping" between them. The flipping, of course, need not be physical. One might have an unconscious mental routine that, at least seemingly, arbitrarily selects one from a list of options. This might ensure that there are no dominant motivational ties if it is further assumed that: (1) there is always the option of "flipping", (2) flipping among maximally wanted pure ("non-flipping") options is always preferred to choosing one of these options directly, and (3) one always prefers to follow the directives of an invoked flipping option to violating it. If these conditions are satisfied, then, it might be argued, motivational ties between pure options are never dominant motivational ties -- since the flipping procedure is always an option, and it is always preferable to choosing one of the tied pure options directly.

There are likely to be a number of problems with this approach. One is that we need to know a lot more about the exact nature of these "flipping" procedures, and what independent evidence we have that people always have such procedures as options. Another is that if there is more than one

possible flipping procedure, then ties among flipping procedures are possible, and the whole problem may arise again.

Although the flipping procedure thesis has some serious potential problems, it can't be ruled out. Nor can Mele's thesis. In fact, there may even be a problem in distinguishing the two! For, given the level of abstraction, it's not clear that a flipping procedure isn't simply the executive factor to which Mele makes reference. An apparent difference, of course, is that on the flipping model, once the flipping procedure is invoked, the agent prefers the "flipped" option to the other, whereas on Mele's model the agent remains indifferent between the two options. But if both models have the same implications for immediate and future behavior (and we can't rule this out), it wouldn't be clear what the apparent difference amounted to.

We conclude, then, that Mele's model is a welcome addition to the theoretical framework, but that until it and its alternatives are worked out in enough detail to have distinct empirical consequences, we must remain neutral.

Abstract of "Motivational Ties and Doing What One Most Wants"

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In his paper "Motivational Ties" Al Mele addresses the question of how intentional behavior is possible in choice situations in which there are two or more (equally) maximally attractive options ("Buridan's ass" situations). Mele proposes, roughly, that we consider the possibility that one's intentions are not determined solely by the motivational attractiveness of the options, but also by an "executive" factor. We agree that his model deserves careful consideration, but we suggest that much more needs to be specified before we can even identify clear empirical differences between his model and the Davidsonian alternative he discusses.

Notes

1. This journal, vol ??, year ?? pages ??