

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88853-0 - How We Get Along
J. David Velleman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

How We Get Along

In *How We Get Along*, philosopher J. David Velleman compares our social interactions to the interactions among improvisational actors on stage. He argues that we play ourselves – not artificially but authentically, by doing what would make sense coming from us as we really are. And like improvisational actors, we deal with one another in dual capacities: both as characters within the social drama and as players contributing to the shared performance.

In this conception of social intercourse, Velleman finds rational grounds for morality, though not a rational guarantee. He maps a middle course between skepticism and rationalism, arguing that practical reasoning is “pro-moral” without requiring moral action. The result is what he calls a “kinda Kantian metaethics.”

Written in an accessible and engaging style, *How We Get Along* is the summation of Velleman’s thinking to date, incorporating and unifying previous work on agency, the self, the emotions, narrative, and Kantian moral theory.

J. David Velleman is Professor of Philosophy at New York University. He is the author of *Practical Reflection*, *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, and most recently, *Self to Self*. He is also a founding editor of the online journal *Philosophers’ Imprint*.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88853-0 - How We Get Along
J. David Velleman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

How We Get Along

J. DAVID VELLEMAN



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-88853-0 - How We Get Along
 J. David Velleman
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi
 Cambridge University Press
 32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521043403

© J. David Velleman 2009

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
 no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
 permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2009

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Velleman, James David.

How we get along / J. David Velleman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-88853-0 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-04340-3 (pbk.)

1. Practical reason. 2. Ethics. 3. Acting. 4. Improvisation (Acting) I. Title.

BC177. V45 2009

128'.4–dc22 2008031158

ISBN 978-0-521-88853-0 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-04340-3 paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
 accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in
 this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is,
 or will remain, accurate or appropriate. Information regarding prices, travel
 timetables, and other factual information given in this work are correct at
 the time of first printing, but Cambridge University Press does not guarantee
 the accuracy of such information thereafter.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88853-0 - How We Get Along
J. David Velleman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

For Daniel and Evan

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88853-0 - How We Get Along
J. David Velleman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 Acting	9
2 Reacting	35
3 Interacting	59
4 Reflecting	89
5 Foundations	115
6 Theory	159
7 Meaning	185
<i>Bibliography</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	215

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88853-0 - How We Get Along
J. David Velleman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

I began this project in preparation for the Shearman Lectures, which I was invited to deliver at University College, London, in May 2007. Those three lectures – revised, expanded, and subdivided – appear here as Lectures 1, 2, 3, and 5.¹ I am grateful

¹ Before they were delivered, those lectures were discussed with the members of a seminar led by Michael Smith at Princeton University in the fall of 2006, and with the members of a seminar led by Christine Korsgaard at Harvard University in the winter of 2007. A paper covering the material in Lectures 1 and 2 was delivered to a one-day conference at York University organized by Christian Piller (May 2007) and to the British Society for Ethical Theory (July 2007). That version appeared in *Ethics* 18 (2008) under the title “A Theory of Value.” Portions of Lectures 1 and 2 were contained in a paper entitled “Love and Non-Existence,” which was presented to the graduate student colloquium at New York University (February 2008); to The Fourth Steven Humphrey Excellence in Philosophy Conference at the University of California, Santa Barbara (February 2008), where the commentator was Mark Schroeder; and to a conference at Northwestern University (March 2008). It appeared in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* as Part 3 of an article entitled “Persons in Prospect.”

Originally, the first lecture in this series consisted of what are now parts of Lectures 1 through 3. Under the title “Action as Improv,” that lecture was discussed by the philosophy reading group at Boston University (January 2007) and by a workshop on trust organized at Yale by Matthew Noah Smith and Adrienne Martin (April 2007). It was presented to a conference on agency organized by Christian Miller at Wake Forest University

to the Philosophy Department of UCL and especially its chair, Jo Wolff, for the honor of giving the Shearman Lectures and for three days of wonderful discussion and hospitality in London.

Having written three lectures, I found myself with more to say and an inclination to say it in the same voice, as if presenting additional lectures. In reality, Lectures 4, 6, and 7 have never been presented. Casting myself in a role even larger than that of Shearman lecturer is presumptuous indeed; I hope that it will prove to have benefited the reader, by encouraging me to express myself more briefly and informally than usual.

Beyond their overt topic, these lectures pursue a private agenda of mine, which is to locate the intersection of various themes that I have hitherto pursued independently, with only the vague hope that they would some day intersect.² One theme is an analysis of practical reasoning as a process of making sense

in September 2006; as the Parcells Lecture at the University of Connecticut in October 2006; as the Lipkind Lecture at the University of Chicago in April 2007; and to a conference on Selfhood, Normativity and Control organized by Jan Bransen in Nijmegen (May 2007), where the commentator was Maureen Sie. The lecture was also presented to the Philosophy Departments of the University of Southern California (January 2007), the University of Richmond (March 2007), and Davidson College (March 2007).

Lecture 5 was discussed at a workshop in the Philosophy Department of the University of Chicago (April 2007); at a meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Reading Group in Ethics (September 2007); and at the NYU Philosophy Department's Mind and Language Seminar (January 2008), where Paul Boghossian presented a valuable summary and critique. Parts of the lecture were also presented to the Philosophy Department at Cornell University (September 2008).

² The gaps between these themes were insightfully pointed out by Catriona Mackenzie in a paper titled "Bare Personhood? Velleman on Selfhood," which was presented to a conference on my book *Self to Self*, organized by Jeannette Kennett and Steve Matthews in May 2006 at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, the Australian National University. Mackenzie's paper was published in *Philosophical Explorations* 10 (2007): 263–81.

of oneself in causal-psychological terms. Another theme is an analysis of narrative as conveying a mode of understanding – and, specifically, self-understanding – that is distinct from the understanding conveyed by causal explanation. A third theme is an interpretation of Kant's conception of practical law in terms of common knowledge among rational agents. A final theme is the nature of the moral emotions of love, shame, and guilt. All of these themes were sounded in my book *Self to Self: Selected Essays*,³ although the second remained largely undeveloped until a subsequent paper, which here supplies the central sections of Lecture 7.⁴

In tying these themes together, I reprise arguments that are spelled out at greater length in my first book, *Practical Reflection*,⁵ or as well as *Self to Self* and an earlier collection of papers, *The Possibility of Practical Reason*.⁶ Lecture 5 supersedes the Introduction to *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, which made claims that I now regard as mistaken.

I am grateful to many friends and colleagues who have read and commented on the manuscript of these lectures, including: Paul Boghossian, David Copp, Stephen Darwall, Andy Egan, David Enoch, Melis Erdur, Herlinde Pauer-Studer, David Plunkett, Nishi Shah, Matthew Silverstein, Sharon Street, and Helena Wright. I am especially grateful to Jeff Sebo for a close reading and critique of the penultimate draft. Thanks also to Beatrice Rehl, my editor at Cambridge, and to my manuscript editor, Russell Hahn.

³ New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

⁴ "Narrative Explanation," *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 1–25.

⁵ Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988; reprinted in 2007 by the CSLI Press.

⁶ *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). This book, now out of print, is available on my personal home page, <http://homepages.nyu.edu/~dv26/>.