

## Philosophy in Review



# J. David Velleman, "On Being Me: A Personal Invitation to Philosophy."

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**J. David Velleman.** *On Being Me: A Personal Invitation to Philosophy*. Illustrated by Emily Bernstein. Princeton University Press 2020. 112 pp. \$12.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691200958).

Philosophy has a reputation for taking some of the most fascinating questions of the human experience and making them, if not dull, certainly indecipherable for anyone besides a technically trained specialist. J. David Velleman's reflections in *On Being Me* have the rare virtue of accessibility without losing the scholarly cadence that accompanies serious and thoughtful academic work. As Velleman points out in his introduction, this book is not a methodical argument toward some central theory of ethics or psychology. Instead, his introspection is more in the spirit of Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard University Press 1981), where a leading philosopher tackles a variety of topics rather than composing a treatise defending a tightly circumscribed thesis. Both professional philosophers and casual readers alike will find something of value in Velleman's 'dispatches from an examined life' (xiii).

Velleman takes up the topic of human freedom, and unpacks the problem by asking questions and by giving answers. Some think our lives are like a blank page on which we can write almost anything we want. Others think that we are but 'cogs in a universal clockwork' (45), powerless pieces pushed around by the immutable laws of nature.

Either way, he muses, if God knows my future or has planned it, then there is little room for me to invent or author my own life. Instead, I am merely discovering it, learning more about my story rather than writing it. Will I do something so unique that even God will be surprised? No, because for God my story is already bound and printed, sitting on His shelf.

Velleman gives similar treatment to other major questions. If I am not free, am I responsible? What does it mean to be a 'self?' Are there other people I could have been? Does it make sense to regret alternative paths I never took?

These are the classic fare of philosophy, but their treatment here is unique. The author writes by stream of consciousness, pondering his way through thorny puzzles in ordinary language. You'll be disappointed if you hoped Velleman would settle the dispute between compatibilists and libertarians once and for all, but his musings are a fun angle on a well-worn topic.

The higher contribution, I think, is when Velleman writes about topics that are *nonstandard* in philosophical circles. Many introductory classes will talk about freedom, but few will tackle friendship and love. But if philosophy is the analysis of concepts, then there's no reason why love or happiness should get any shorter treatment than freedom or faith.

'I want to be loved for being me,' Velleman says (82). We do not, however, want to be loved only for our accomplishments; no, we want people to love our deepest self. And yet we also want to be loved for good reasons—we wouldn't want to be loved for being evil. Does simply being oneself make one loveable? Love is a valuable thing, so it shouldn't be spent on something unworthy. If I want to be loved just in virtue of the fact that I exist, it is hard to see why I should deserve love at all.

This is philosophy in its purest form. Velleman dismisses any comparison between his project and Descartes' famous meditations in the opening pages, and yet his work is defined by this struggle between a thinker and his thoughts. For those new to the subject, this style will be an accessible entry. For those who have spent years studying philosophy in more formal settings, this will be a reminder of younger times when we pondered these questions with angst or wonder.

Others may view the thing I view as a weakness of the book as a strength. Because I enjoyed a well-read philosopher taking the time to think aloud for a general audience, I was sad to see him leave the stage so quickly.

Clocking in at 87 small pages (including illustrations, which I think add a layer of perspective and make an already readable book even more so), I was left feeling that more could be said. Velleman has a talent for saying more with less, but there were several topics left untouched that I would have liked to hear more about.

For instance, Velleman does not spend any time reflecting on faith or religion. There could be many reasons why he chose not to do so, but it is almost a universal question that a philosopher wrestles with and might be of interest to many readers. Likewise Velleman doesn't spend any significant time thinking through ethics, often thought to be among the best entry-level questions of philosophy.

Of course, Velleman has a lengthy CV and those interested in his perspectives have no shortage of outlets to dive deeper into his views. But if this work were to be something of a capstone project, a more thorough treatment might have added value.

A final note: Velleman writes from the perspective of an ordinary human being, not from the perspective of a philosophy professor. That's the right choice for this project, though I would have enjoyed his reflections on the profession. Some people think philosophy is in the doldrums, so to speak, and the life of the mind is facing existential challenges in universities around the world. Philosophy would benefit from organization and a strong central leadership to advocate for its interests. Someone like Velleman is in a natural position to take that role, and I hope he or others like him will step into the spotlight. If not, lovely books like *On Being Me* might become a thing of the past.

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