

WANTS, ACTIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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There has been a tendency in British and American philosophy to deny that it is possible to provide causal explanations of what people do. One of the most striking aspects of this general tendency is the denial that anything of an "inner" nature (mental) is relevant to explanations of human conduct. At most, the contributions of these internal happenings is to make action possible, not to determine what it is or what it is going to be. In contrast to this view, I argue that there are causal explanations of human actions, and that these explanations would always (if they were complete) make some reference to mental states or episodes. Finally, I argue that these causal explanations help to clarify the concepts of freedom and responsibility.

We do not say that a person is free to do x in a lapse of time L unless conditions are now such that he is fully able to do x or conditions are such that he is fully able to make it the case that he is fully able to do x before L has lapsed. A person being fully able to do x means both that (a) he has the general ability to do x and (b) present conditions are favorable for the exercise of his ability. It is freedom in this sense that the prisoner lacks; he is not free because the circumstances are not right for him to do many of the things that he would otherwise be fully able to do.

Becoming fully able to do x in a lapse of time L is a necessary condition for a person to be free to do x in a lapse of time L . Is it also a sufficient condition? To answer this question, suppose some person satisfies conditions (a) and (b) and wants to do x . Is he then always free to do x ? Here, an ambiguity in the word "want" needs to be cleared up. According to one definition of the word, there are many things that we do that we do not want to do, e.g., we speak kindly to the boss even though we are angry with him. On the other hand, there is another use of the word in which every intentional action is something the agent wants to do. Contrast "He went to the party because he wanted to enjoy the conversation of his friends" with "Though the party would have been delightful, he stayed home because he wanted to study for his exam."

If a person knows that he cannot become fully able to do something in a lapse time L , he can neither deliberate about whether he will do it nor can he decide or choose to do it. But although this knowledge entails exclusion of deliberation, decision, and choice, it does not entail that he is not fully able. I call attention to those cases in which coercion of compulsion (interpreted broadly) is somehow involved and in which it is appropriate to use expressions like "couldn't have done otherwise" or "had no choice." It will be noticed that expressions like these ordinarily imply that the person is fully

able to do that other thing that he gives no serious attention to doing. Thus the bank teller is fully able to comply with the robber's demands, and in the second sense of "want," the teller wants to comply with the robber's demands in order to save his life.

The question before us is whether the action of the teller can be described as a free action. Although the view is not a common one, there are people who would insist that the teller was acting freely. Louise Antony, for instance, makes three important remarks concerning the kind of libertarianism that she espouses. (1) "It denies that an action performed under coercion is an act that was not performed freely." (2) She claims that "freedom is the availability of *options*, of different situations that an agent can *make happen*." And (3) "*most* if not all human actions are done freely." From (1) I gather that the class of intentional actions is equal to the class of free actions, and from (2) I gather that a person being fully able to do x is a sufficient condition for saying that he is free to do x . The third remark is more problematical. If she is suggesting that all human actions are done freely (as I believe) then it is likely that she is simply identifying human actions with intentional human actions, this despite the fact that it is customary to make a distinction between intentional and unintentional actions. If *most* rather than *all* is being emphasized, the crucial problem becomes how to distinguish free and unfree actions. Unintentional actions, such as my accidentally stepping on your toes, though they are things that we do, are not the kinds of actions to which "free" and "unfree" apply. And since mere bodily movements are not actions, neither does the distinction apply to them. My own opinion is that the adverbs "freely" and "unfreely" apply only to intentional actions and that the corresponding adjectives apply only to intentional actions and to persons.

I suggest the following as at least a minimal condition for freedom: If a person is acting freely in a situation s , then there is something, x , that he wants to cause, he is fully able to cause x , and there are no circumstances in s that exclude deliberation and choice. Agency causation can be explained in terms of causation by desire in the following way: If a person is acting freely in a situation s , then his desire for x is the immediate or remote cause of x , x would not have come into existence unless it had been caused (immediately or remotely) by the desire for x , and there are no circumstances in s that exclude deliberation and choice. Finally, although the explanation of agency causation in terms of desire does not mention belief, it is usually desired that have been caused by beliefs and other desires that are the more immediate causes of what we do. Thus if I want to turn on the television and discover that I can do so by pushing a certain knob, I will now want to push the knob. In short, belief is important in motivation because it plays a part in the creation of desire.

Although scientists are reluctant to speak about object causation and

philosophers in general are agreed that object causation can be entirely explained in terms of event or state causation, reference to object causation is nevertheless a common occurrence in ordinary talk. Thus we say, "The termites caused the building to collapse," meaning "The gnawing of the termites caused the building to collapse." Nevertheless, some philosophers who hold an agent theory of causation seem to subscribe to a principle which if true would show that object causation is inconsistent with event or state causation. Auerback and Carter (who are opposed to the principle) state the principle in the following way: "If x causes z and y causes z and x is distinct from y then x 's causing of z is distinct from y 's causing of z ." In the preceding example, letting x = the termites and y = their gnawing, these are distinct causes of z (the collapse of the building). If the principle is a faulty principle as applied to the entire domain of objects (as I think it is) then it should be admitted that it is a faulty principle as applied to human agents. Every human agent, though only one particular being, is a member of the class of material objects as well as a member of the class of agents. If the principle is to be amended in such a way that it validly applies to material objects that are also agents but invalidly applies to all other material objects, strong reasons should be provided for the amendment. I have been unable to find any. Instead, there seem to be sufficient reasons for saying that the principle is as faulty when applied to human agents as it is when applied to other material objects. A paragraph from Richard Taylor will illustrate what I am objecting to.

It is plain that, whatever I am, I am never identical with any such event, process, or state as is usually proposed to be the "real cause" of my act, such as some intention or state of willing. Hence, if it is really and unmetaphorically true, as I believe it to be, that I sometimes cause something to happen, this would seem to entail that it is *false* than any event, process, or state not identical with myself should be the real cause of it.⁴

First, observe that no material object is identical with any of its states. Second, the last sentence does not follow from the first. Even if it is true that I am the only "real cause" of my act, it does not follow that I am the only "real cause" of other things that I cause to happen. Thus suppose I throw a rock and break a window. Here, it would be all right to say that I caused the window to be broken, but equally all right to say that the impact of the rock was the cause. Perhaps all that Taylor meant to say (though this was not what he said) was that I am the sole cause of my acts. As far as actions are concerned, it is usually more natural to speak of desires rather than agents as causes of actions. Thus it is perfectly natural to say that my desire to read the small print was the cause of my getting the magnifying

glass, but neither natural (nor very informative) to say that I was the cause of my getting the magnifying glass. This does not mean that we are not the causes of our actions. In fact, they would not be our actions unless we were. Imagine a person who has just acquired a new basic ability (lowering his blood pressure at will) through biofeedback training. It would be natural for him to say, "Medication was not the cause of my lowered pressure; I was." But it would be equally natural for him to say that it was his intention that was the cause.

Even if agent causation is a special kind of object causation, this does not imply that there might not be special problems connected with causation by agents that are not connected with causation by other material bodies. Whatever the definition of cause is, our grounds for believing that one entity is the cause of another is based upon observed connections between kinds of entities. Therefore causal explanations really explain certain features of one entity, called the effect, in terms of certain features of another entity, called the cause. Thus it is possible, and as a matter of fact true, that certain observed changes in states of affairs require explanations in terms of agent characteristics that some material objects possess. One central problem can be put this way: Given that there is a material body with agent characteristics, which changes in the world are such that they would not have occurred except for the agent characteristics of this material body? The answer I give is that the changes include those movements of the body that would not have occurred except for its wants and beliefs, i.e., actions, and all those other changes that occur but would not have occurred except for the actions.

In saying that the agent's actions are caused by his wants, I have been using the term in its dispositional sense. The first objection that is apt to occur is that only events can be causes. While it might be replied that mention of dispositions as causes is countenanced by ordinary talk and that dispositional properties can be subsumed under the deductive-nomological pattern of causal explanation, I do not wish to belabor the point—I merely insist that no causal explanation of anything a person does can be at all satisfactory if it makes no mention of what his relevant pro-attitudes are. I emphasize instead that there is a quite ordinary meaning of "cause" such that every action is caused by a mental event. It has often been observed that typical causal explanations refer neither to sufficient nor necessary conditions. Rather, they refer to certain conditions (changes) which when added to certain other conditions that are also present constitute a set of conditions that is sufficient for the effect. Jones lighting the match by striking it is an example. Let the added condition be called a contingent sufficient condition (C). C is usually referred to as the cause, but only under the assumption that C is also a necessary condition *post factum*. The latter term means that some C was present and that the effect would not have

occurred without this *C*. The importance of this requirement upon *C* is that it rules out causal overdetermination. For example, suppose Sam is stabbed by Dick and Tom, each stab wound being a sufficient condition for his death. The cause of Sam's death is that combined event consisting of Dick's stab wound and Tom's stab wound. It will be noticed that this concept of cause is in line with the concept of an action. It is a necessary condition for a person believing his action will bring *x* into existence that he believes that there is something he can do which is such that if he does it *x* will come into existence and that if he doesn't do it *x* won't come into existence. To avoid the appearance of a vicious regress of actions, I specify that on certain occasions the action of bringing *x* into existence is the very same thing as *x* itself.

The kind of mental event that often satisfies this definition of cause has already been alluded to when I distinguished a kind of want that is always present whenever an intentional action occurs. One might speak of it as an aroused or occurrent want, but the terms "intention" and "intends" can do the same work without qualifying adjectives or adverbs. This can be seen in the following argument: *P* knows that he has the general ability to *x*; *P* knows that conditions are very favorable for the exercise of his ability; *P* intends to *x*; therefore, it is very likely that *P* will *x*. If "wants" had been used in place of "intends" in the preceding argument, at least one other premise would have been necessary—the premise that *P* believes that *x* is the best of the available alternatives. On the other hand, I believe that the context makes clear that "intends" is being used in the occurrent sense. If so, what the additional premise says is implied by the word "intends."

Another advantage of using the term "intention" is that it permits the most direct confrontation with the logical connection argument. All that argument amounts to is that if the occurrence of *X* is the cause of the occurrence of *Y*, then there must be some true description of *X* (other than that it is the cause of *Y*) and some true description of *Y* (other than that is the effect of *X*). Intentions easily pass that test. They can exist alone; they do not have to be expressed or exercised. However, the fact that expressions of intention (not necessarily intentional or conventional) can occur without exercises of intention means that other people can find out that a person is intending to *x* without finding out whether he does. One cannot, however, find out the kind of intentional action an action is without finding out what the intention is. But this would be serious only if the occurrence of the action was necessarily the only evidence of the intention, and that is not the case. Finally, although the occurrence of the intentional action entails the existence of the intention, there are ways in which the former happening can be described without mentioning the intention with which it was done. In fact, in many cases the observer will not know what this intention is.

All motions of bodies that are caused by wants and beliefs are actions of

agents, but not every action of every agent has its source or originating cause in the agent itself. The actions that have their source in the agent itself are of special importance because they give us our best insights into the nature of the agent. Without further clarification, I cannot agree with Goldman's statement: "As long as the acts are caused by the wants and beliefs of the agent, then he is the author, the source, the originator of the act."⁶ Whether he is right depends upon the meaning of the word "want." If it is the meaning that the word has when a person is said to want to do whatever he intentionally does, then the statement is certainly false. If a man is compelled at gunpoint to drive a car carrying a kidnap victim, he is not regarded as the originator of his action. But if "want" is used in the other meaning in which it merely means having a pro-attitude toward something, an amplified version of the statement could be correct. Normally, a person is said to be the source of his actions only if he is acting in accordance with his desires. To say that a person driving a car at gunpoint is acting in accordance with his desires is to evince a misunderstanding of the expression. A person is acting in accordance with his desires only if he is in a position to give a significant amount of weight to possibly competing desires. This merely means that the situation is such that potentiality exists for other desires to deflect the course of the action. It does not imply deliberation on the part of the agent.

Because of its close connection with the concept of responsibility, the matter of the source of an agent's action is a matter of great social and practical importance. One meaning of "causally responsible" is extremely simple: *x* is responsible for *y* if *x* is the cause of *y*. For example, the car doesn't start, and I explain that the battery is responsible. In another meaning, *x* is responsible only if it is the source or originating cause of *y*. It is possible, and in many cases true, that *x* is responsible for *y* in both of these senses. The second meaning can be illustrated by introducing a complication into the present example. I bought the battery just a month ago and without any fault of mine it has already gone dead twice. The man who sold the battery refuses to reimburse because he discovers something in the motor that is running the battery down and would run any battery down, regardless of the quality of the battery. He might have said that it was the motor rather than the battery that was responsible for my difficulties. However, though I do not get my money back, I learn something of practical importance, that is, the kind of repair that needs to be made if the car is to work. This example should be compared with the example of the man driving the car at the point of a gun. In the second sense of "causally responsible," it is the kidnapper who is responsible for the action that occurs, and the interests of society are served not by apprehending the driver but by apprehending the kidnapper. So it is easy to see why society is more concerned with the agent who is the source of the action than it is with

the person who actually performs the action.

Finally, the remarks of the preceding paragraph, though pointing in the right direction, constitute only a partial analysis of "causal responsibility." Thus, the battery would have been partly responsible for its running down if it had been a battery of very low quality, and the driver would have been partly responsible for his action if the coercive power of the kidnappers had been based on his own substandard behavior. Such would have been the case, for instance, if he was driving the car out of fear of being exposed for some action of his that was a penal offense. Of course, where human actions are concerned, the line of demarcation between causal responsibility, on the one hand, and legal and moral responsibility, on the other, is not always clear. Nevertheless, using "causally responsible" in its second and most important sense, holding that a person is morally or legally responsible for his action usually implies that it has already been decided that he is causally responsible, at least partly.

NOTES

1. Examples provided by William P. Alston in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Motives and Motivation," indicate a similar distinction.
2. Louise Antony, "Why We Excuse," *Studies in Action Theory*, Tulane Studies in Philosophy, Vol. 28 (New Orleans: Tulane Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 63-70.
3. David Auerback and W. R. Carter, "Agent Causality: A Model," *Studies in Action Theory*, p. 75.
4. Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 111.
5. J. L. Mackie, "Causes and Conditions," in *Causation and Conditionals*, ed. Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 25.
6. Alvin I. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), p. 84.