

Session 1, 6 September 2005

I. Agent Causation

A. The fundamental question in the philosophy of action is: *What is the difference between mere behavior and behavior that is attributable to the subject, as his doing?*

i. This is a question of agent-causation, since it asks, in effect: *What is the difference between mere behavior and behavior that is attributable to the subject as its cause -- as having made it happen?*

a. The term 'agent-causation' was used by Chisholm to denote a primitive kind of causation, distinct from and not reducible to, or even supervenient on, causation by events.

b. The fundamental question is not necessarily about agent causation in this sense, since it leaves open the possibility that the property of behavior's *being caused by the subject* supervenes on, or is even reducible to, its being caused by particular kinds of events.

1. Indeed, this possibility should be the working hypothesis.

2. Primitive agent-causation should be appealed to only if reconciling agent- and event-causation proves impossible -- and probably not even then.

That is, if we can reconcile agent- and event-causation, we should probably conclude that there is no such thing as action or agency (not that it consists in a primitive mode of causation *sui generis*).

ii. There is a skeptical version of the fundamental question: *How is it possible for behavior to be caused by the subject, or attributable to him as his doing?*

a. The grounds for skepticism is that, in general, behavior attributed to the subject as his doing is also explained as being caused by desires, beliefs, and intentions.

b. These psychological causes can seem to compete with the subject for causal honors, in much the same way that neurophysiological causes compete for causal honors with mental states.

If the subject's desires caused his behavior, then what did *he* have to do with it?

- c. The fundamental question in the philosophy of action is in this respect similar to the question of *mental* causation.
 - 1. But they are not the *same* question. Even if we explain how mental states and events can be causally efficacious in the most robust sense, the question will remain how the resulting behavior can have been caused by the subject.
 - 2. Indeed, the agent-causation question tends to be raised by the assumption that the question of mental causation has been successfully answered.

The question arises because the behavior that we are tempted to attribute to the subject is also the behavior that we are tempted to explain in terms of the subject's desires, beliefs, and intentions.

- B. The question of agent-causation is a question of *causal responsibility*: insofar as behavior is attributable to the subject, as his doing, he is *causally responsible* for it.
 - i. Do not confuse causal and moral responsibility.
 - a. "Causal responsibility" is either...
 - 1. ... a fancy synonym for "causation" (insofar as being causally responsible for something is the same as just causing it)
 - 2. ... a matter of causal-explanatory salience (insofar as we attribute it to "the" cause, as opposed to "a" cause, or any old cause).
 - b. Moral responsibility is liability to praise, blame, reward, and punishment.
 - 1. Liability to praise, blame, reward, and punishment is *a* kind of causal-explanatory salience:

One way of singling out a cause as "the" cause is to single out a cause as the one that is "to blame"
 - 2. But we cannot assume that causal responsibility, in the form of agent-causation, is coextensive with moral responsibility.
 - ii. In fact, we should assume the reverse -- that agent causation and moral responsibility are not coextensive.
 - a. We hold people responsible for negligent omissions, in which they exercise no agent causation.

1. Philosophers sometimes wonder how someone can be responsible for these omissions unless he was the agent-cause of them -- e.g., by making himself negligent.
2. But our practices of holding people responsible do not include any such requirement of agent causation.

The more plausible explanation of the problem is that philosophers have wrongly conflated moral and causal responsibility.

- b. Assessments of moral responsibility are sensitive to features of the normative context that have nothing to do with *explanatory* causal salience.

When someone with no marksmanship skills happens to hit something with a single shot, whether we assess him as responsible may depend on whether that assessment will yield...

1. ... praise for hitting a target in competition...
2. ... or blame assassinating the President.

II. Free will

- A. There may be two questions of free will, and we shouldn't assume that they are the same.
 - i. One is a question about the deliberative perspective: *How can people make genuine decisions or choices?*
 - a. Decisions and choices require *alternatives*
 - b. *Alternatives* seem to require *an open future*, which is denied by determinism.
 - ii. The other is a question about moral responsibility: *How can people be liable to praise, blame, reward, and punishment, given that their behavior is causally determined by prior events?*
 - a. We shouldn't assume that these questions are the same, because we sometimes hold people responsible for behavior (or a lack of behavior) that they didn't choose from among alternatives.
 - b. The question *whether they could have done otherwise* -- which is often taken to underlie the question of responsibility -- may or may not be the question *whether they had a choice, or an opportunity to make a decision.*

- B. There is a temptation to think that the question of free will is just the skeptical version of the fundamental question: *How can a person be responsible for behavior that is caused by (even) his mental states?*
 - i. But the problem of free will can remain even if the question of agent-causation is solved:

Even if a person can be cause his behavior, his causing it may in turn be caused in a way that undermines his moral responsibility.
 - ii. Here again, moral responsibility and causal responsibility may be distinct.
- C. I am inclined to think that the moral-responsibility version of the free-will problem is mainly normative:
 - i. I favor the view, expounded by Jay Wallace (and others), that whether someone is morally responsible for his behavior depends on whether it would be fair to *hold* him responsible.
 - ii. On this view, *responsible action* may not be a natural kind.

III. Plan of reading.

- A. On the fundamental question:
 - i. Anscombe's *Intention*
 - ii. Davidson's *Essays on Actions and Events*
 - iii. Frankfurt's hierarchical theory
- B. On free will
 - i. Ginet's "consequence argument"
 - ii. Responses to the consequence argument
 - a. Frankfurt on "alternate possibilities"
 - b. Lewis "Are we free to break the laws"
- C. Other topics?

IV. Writing: Three 6-8 page papers, with firm due dates.

