

# Philosophy of Mind and Metaphysics

## Lecture VII: Event Causation and Agent Causation

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### I. AGENTS

- a. We might in the first place think of an *agent* as “a persisting object ... possessing various properties, including, most importantly, certain causal powers and liabilities. A paradigm example of an agent would be a human being or other conscious creature capable of performing intentional actions” (p. 195).
- b. Agent causation is then supposed to be a “species of causation ... in which the cause of some event or state of affairs is not (or not only) some other event or state of affairs, but is, rather, an *agent* of some kind” (p. 195).
- c. We want tonight to examine the notion of agent causation, to say what it might be and to determine how it might be related to event causation.

### II. ARE EVENT CAUSATION AND AGENT CAUSATION DISTINCT SPECIES OF CAUSATION?

- a. Here, Lowe provides only minimal evidence in favor of the claim that event causation and agent causation are distinct species of causation. He says that “whereas it would not be incongruous to say, for example, ‘Smith and Jones together caused the collapse of the bridge’, it would indeed be incongruous to say, ‘The explosion of the bomb and Jones together caused the collapse of the bridge’” (p. 196).
- b. We might also think that event causation and agent causation are distinct species of causation because agents are very different from events—it seems, in fact, that agents and events are of different and distinct metaphysical kinds. Thus, the relata of a relation of *event* causation and the relata of a relation of *agent* causation will be of different and distinct metaphysical kinds. Perhaps this gives us further reason to suppose that event causation and agent causation are distinct species of causation.

### III. IS AGENT CAUSATION REDUCIBLE TO EVENT CAUSATION?

- a. Even if event causation and agent causation are distinct species of causation, it might nevertheless be the case that one species of

causation can be reduced to, or fully analyzable in terms of, the other. Let's begin with an attempt to analyze agent causation in terms of event causation:

- (1) Agent *A* caused event *e* if and only if there was some event, *x*, such that *x* involved *A* and *x* caused *e*,

where “an event, *x*, ‘involves’ an agent, *A*, in the sense demanded by analysis (1), just in case *x* consists in some change in one or more of the properties of *A*. ... For example, in the case of an animate agent *A*, such as a particular living creature, an event which is a *movement* of *A* is an event ‘involving’ *A* because a movement of *A* consists in *A*'s undergoing changes in the dispositions of its limbs and/or changes in its spatial relations to its environment” (p. 197).

- b. Some cases of agent causation SUPPORT analysis (1). For example, suppose that “*A* caused *B*'s death. But we also know by what means *A* caused *B*'s death, namely, by administering poison to *B*. But therefore, it seems, we can very easily identify an *event*, involving *A*, which can be said to have caused *B*'s death, namely, *A*'s administration of the poison to *B*. So it seems that analysis (1) is vindicated in this instance. For here, it appears, is a case in which it is true to say that the agent, *A*, caused a certain effect in virtue of the fact that a certain event involving *A* caused that effect—namely, the event of *A*'s administration of the poison to *B*” (p. 199).
- c. There are PROBLEMS, however, for analysis (1). “For example, when a human agent, *A*, spontaneously waves his hand, what *event*, involving *A*, can we appeal to, for the purposes of analysis (1), as having been the cause of a certain kind of motion in *A*'s hand?” (p. 200). It seems here that there is “no suitable event involving the agent which can be called upon to provide the cause—in the event causation sense of ‘cause’—of the effect which, in performing that action, the agent is said to cause” (p. 200). Here, it seems that we're willing to say that *A*'s waving his hand is “*spontaneous self-movement*, which involves an agent's causing motion in its own limbs or other body parts *directly*” (p. 201). If this is correct, then such cases might be instances of *irreducible agent causation*, in which case we will be inclined to hold out little hope for reducing agent causation to event causation.

#### IV. IRREDUCIBLE AGENT CAUSATION AND THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL

- a. THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL: “If all human agency is ultimately just a matter of one event's causing another, then, since the causal history of the events supposedly involved in any instance of human agency will plausibly be traceable back, through prior events, to times

before the agent's birth, we seem to lose all sense of the agent's being genuinely responsible for ... his or her own actions. A human agent must then be seen as no freer, in reality, than the boulder which rolls into the tree, its rolling being caused by the action of some other object upon it, which action is in turn caused by yet earlier events—and so on back to the dawn of time” (pp. 201-2).

- b. A SOLUTION IN TERMS OF IRREDUCIBLE AGENT CAUSATION: However, if agent causation is not reducible to event causation—that is, if an agent can *directly* cause motion in its own limbs, for example—then we have no reason to think that the causal history of *A*'s waving his hand can be traced back to events beyond *A*'s ken. *A himself* is responsible for his waving his hand, and the causal history of that event is both brief and fully within the ken of *A*. *A*'s waving his hand was up to him, and something for which he is responsible. It will also, on such a view, be an act that *A* freely performed.

V. MENTAL CAUSATION AND A RETURN TO ANALYSIS (1)

- a. “[A]n advocate of [analysis (1)] may urge that, even in what appears to be a case of [irreducible agent causation], there still is, in fact, an event (or conjunction of events) which causes the event, *e*, which the agent, *A*, is said to cause and which, in the appropriate sense, ‘involves’ *A*. But, it may be added, the event (or conjunction of events) in question will be a *mental* event (or conjunction of events) of a certain kind ... Thus, it may be claimed, when a human agent ‘spontaneously’ waves his hand or otherwise ‘spontaneously’ moves some part of his body, the bodily event which the agent is thereby said to cause is one which is in fact caused by the onsets of such states as the agent’s desire to attract someone’s attention and his belief that by waving his hand he could achieve this” (pp. 203-4).
- b. PROBLEM: Can’t the opponent of analysis (1) claim that *A* causes these mental events directly, and thus that mental events simply motivate different examples of irreducible agent causation? If so, then examples like those above should lead us neither to accept analysis (1) nor to abandon the notion of irreducible agent causation. For we can see mental events as being directly (or irreducibly) caused by agents.

VI. IS EVENT CAUSATION REDUCIBLE TO AGENT CAUSATION?

- a. Here’s an attempt to analyze event causation in terms of agent causation:

- (2) Event *c* caused event *e* if and only if there was some agent, *A*, and some manner of acting, *X*, such that *c* consisted in *A*'s *X*ing and *A*, by *X*ing, caused *e*.

“Consider, for instance, [the following example] of a statement of event causation, ‘The explosion of the bomb caused the collapse of the bridge’. According to analysis (2), this is true because there was a certain agent (in [a] broad sense), namely, the bomb, and a certain manner of acting, namely, exploding, such that the event which was the explosion of the bomb consisted in that agent’s acting in that manner (that is, it consisted in the bomb’s exploding) and the agent, by so acting, caused the collapse of the bridge—that is to say, the bomb, by exploding, caused the collapse of the bridge” (p. 209).

- b. It seems that there is **SUPPORT** for analysis (2). Lowe says, “It seems proper to say that events of themselves possess no causal powers. Only persisting objects ... possess causal powers and, indeed, causal liabilities. It is such objects that we describe as being magnetic, corrosive, inflammable, soluble, and so forth. Objects manifest or display their causal powers and liabilities by acting on things, or being acted upon, in various appropriate ways—by attracting, corroding, burning, dissolving, and so forth. In describing such activities we use, of course, the language of agent causation, rather than the language of event causation” (p. 211).
- c. **PROBLEM:** It seems that there are events that cause other events, but that do not consist in *any* agent’s acting in *any* way. We often say things like these: ‘The chill in the air caused Bill to shiver’, and ‘The wave was too much for Bill and caused him to spill’, and ‘Bill’s fear led him to take several precautions’, and ‘His sardonic grin annoys me’. But it seems that, in each of these cases, there is no agent—not even any agent in a very broad sense of ‘agent’—that acts in any way such that its acting in that way caused certain events. It seems, therefore, that event causation *cannot* be reduced to agent causation.