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Rational Action: Reasons, Causes, and Choices

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RATIONAL ACTION: REASONS, CAUSES, AND CHOICES

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ABSTRACT

I argue that agents, by exercising their wills, cause action-results and that volitions or willings are uncaused basic actions. I motivate the existence of volitions by highlighting the important role they play in providing an answer to Wittgenstein's famous question, "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" That volitions do not have action-results is central to my argument. This has as a consequence that volitions are causally basic actions, i.e., actions which do not have results that are caused by more basic actions. That is, there is no action that I perform by means of which I cause the result of an act of volition. Since volitions do not have results, a plausible answer to Wittgenstein's question is available. Next, I argue that volitions are best regarded as uncaused events. Throughout the essay, I assume that humans act for reasons, that they have free will, and that free will is incompatible with determinism.

Introduction

In his essay entitled, "Willing," A. I. Meldon claims that "The supposition that there are interior acts of willing..., familiar thought it may be, is a mare's nest of

confusions,"[1] and he goes on to list several reasons in support of the claim. In what follows, I follow Hugh McCann[2] and others[3] in motivating and defending a volitionalist account of action against the attacks of Meldon and others.[4] More specifically, in the first section I attempt to demonstrate the important role that volitions play in answering Wittgenstein's famous question, "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?"[5] I argue that the volitionalist solution is preferable to the standard solution according to which bodily actions are basic actions, which are caused by various psychological states of an agent, e.g., the agent's beliefs, desires, or intentions. If the argument succeeds, I will have accomplished two things: First, I will have provided indirect evidence for the existence of volitions by demonstrating the role that they play in answering Wittgenstein's question. Second, I will have established that volitions are the basic actions that humans perform. In the second section I develop the position that volitions are uncaused events that, though not subject to causal explanation, can be explained teleologically. I highlight the advantages of this view compared to those of its competitors, and I respond to some of the challenges that this view is generally thought to face.

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1 A. I. Meldon, "Willing," in *The Philosophy of Action* (ed.) Alan R. White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) 72.

2 See Hugh McCann, *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998). See especially chapter 4, "Volition and Basic Action."

3 See for example, Carl Ginet, *On Action* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1990). See also E. J. Lowe, *The Metaphysics of Mind and Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also Stewart Goetz, "Naturalism and Libertarian Agency" in *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis* (ed.) William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (London: Routledge, 2000), 156-86. See also his "Libertarian Choice," *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997), 195-211. See also his "A Noncausal Theory of Agency," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49.2 (1988), 303-316.

4 Some philosophers distinguish acts from actions--designating the term "acts" for certain mental events while using "actions" only to refer to certain overt bodily movements. In this essay, I make no such distinction. I take the terms to mean the same thing, and each time I invoke the concept, I use whichever term feels more natural.

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), section 621.

Part I: Wittgenstein's Question and Basic Actions

Let us not forget this: when 'I raise my arm', my arm goes up. And the problem arises:
What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?

Ludwig Wittgenstein
Philosophical Investigations; Section 621

The Standard Response

Wittgenstein observes that when he raises his arm, it goes up. This, it seems, is not a contingent fact. If a man raises his arm, his arm *must* go up. If it does not go up, he simply could not have performed an act of arm-raising. That is, it is a necessary fact concerning arm-raising actions that performing them involves one's arm actually going up. This means that the following two propositions stand in the following logical relationship to each other: “An agent raises his arm” entails “An agent's arm goes up.” However, as Wittgenstein's question makes clear, that one's arm goes up does not guarantee that one raises it. That is, while it is necessary that my arm goes up if I raise it, it is not sufficient. It could be that my arm goes up because someone else raises it while I am asleep. Or perhaps, unbeknownst to me, a scientist has rigged up some contraption to my brain and has stipulated certain neurons which cause my arm to rise. These body movements are clearly not actions of mine. They are not things that I do.

Many actions, including the one described above, consist in bringing about some

non-actional change. For example, my act of arm raising consists in bringing about the non-actional change that is my arm going up. Let us call such changes, "action-results." Now action-results are not just any change that an action brings about. For example, by raising my arm, I may bring it about that I catch the attention of a cab driver, or I may bring it about that a hurricane occurs on the other side of the globe. However, while raising my arm may cause these changes, it does not *consist* in causing these changes. I could have raised my arm without bringing about either of the changes just mentioned. Results, then, are events which are necessary for the action whose results they are. But again, as Wittgenstein's question illustrates, they are not sufficient.[6]

Wittgenstein's question might be understood as a question regarding what besides the action-result is necessary if an action is to occur. The standard response to this question involves two elements. First, bodily actions are basic actions. That is, when agents perform bodily actions (e.g., actions like moving a finger, raising an arm, lifting a leg, etc.), they do not perform them by performing some other action. It is clear, however, that sometimes agents do perform actions by performing other actions. For example, Lee Harvey Oswald killed John F. Kennedy by shooting him. That is, Oswald performed the act of killing Kennedy by performing another act, namely, the act of shooting him. No doubt, Oswald performed the act of shooting Kennedy by performing still more basic actions. After all, he shot Kennedy by pointing the gun in just the right direction and pulling the trigger. And he pointed the gun in the right direction, I assume, by grasping the gun with his hands and then moving his arms into the appropriate position, and he pulled the trigger by moving his finger. It is bodily actions like these

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[6] I am claiming only that these two conditions are necessary conditions for an event's being a result of some action. I doubt that they are also sufficient, but I will leave that possibility open.

last three that are typically taken to be basic actions. Oswald did not grasp the gun, move his arms, and move his finger by performing other actions. Rather, he performed those actions directly.

Second, the standard view maintains that actional events are actional in virtue of having a certain etiology. In particular, actional events, unlike non-actional events, are appropriately caused by an agent's psychological states, e.g., beliefs, desires, or intentions, whose contents constitute the reason for which the action was performed. When some event occurs, e.g., my arm rises, and yet I have not performed an action, my arm's rising was not appropriately caused by my relevant psychological states. In short, the same event, e.g., an arm rising, counts as an action when it is appropriately caused by one's psychological states but does not count as an action when it is not appropriately so caused.

This picture has several advantages. First, it provides a response to Wittgenstein's question. Second, it avoids mental actions. (This, of course, would be a vice if there is evidence that mental actions occur.[7] But if we remain neutral on the empirical evidence for the time being, as I would like to do, it is a virtue of this theory that it need not postulate mental actions in order to provide a solution to the problem under discussion). Third, if successful, it reduces agency to a causal relationship involving only non-actional events. Fourth, it has what Jonathan Dancy calls, "Davidson's master argument,"[8] going for it. That is, it is able to explain the difference between an agent having reasons for

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7 For evidence that mental actions occur, see E. Hodgins, *Episode: Report on the Accident Inside my Skull* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), esp. 27. See also Hugh McCann, "Trying, Paralysis, and Volition" in his *The Works of Agency*.

8 See Jonathan Dancy, *Practical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 162-3. See also Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

acting and an agent acting on or acting for those reasons. On the standard model, the reason for which an agent acts is simply the content of the psychological state which caused the agent's action.

Problems for the Standard Response

Still, the standard response is not without problems. One problem it faces is that it seems to identify actions with action-results. Recall that the standard response has it that the same event, e.g., an arm rising, sometimes counts as an action and sometimes does not count as an action depending on whether it has the right causal history. That is, acting is a matter of having a non-actional event like my arm rising caused by another non-actional event such as my having beliefs and desires with certain contents. So, what we would normally think of as an action-result, e.g., my arm rising, is in some circumstances both an action and an action-result.

This last move, however, seems ill-advised. We cannot simply identify an action with its action-result. The two events must be distinguished. We distinguish them all the time in ordinary discourse. Suppose, as I have been, that Oswald killed Kennedy. Now if someone asks, “What did he do?” we would be thought confused if we answered, “Kennedy's death.” The correct answer, of course, is, “He killed Kennedy.” This indicates that it is not Kennedy's death that counts as action; rather killing Kennedy is what we should regard as an action. After all, actions are things that we *do*. So, McCann writes:

> The correct answer to the question whether one's arm going up counts as an action of his is always, “No.” And I take it that this means what it says. It does not

> mean the issue depends on the circumstances—for example, on the agent's intentions, reasons, and so forth. For even where a person raises his arm intentionally, it is still the *bringing about* that result which alone is treated as action. Apparently, then, there is more to these actions than the mere occurrence of the result.[9]

That actions are strictly distinguished from their results highlights the importance of what McCann calls, the "action-result problem."[10] It is this problem, he claims, that gives rise to Wittgenstein's question. The problem is to provide an account of how it is that a result of an action qualifies as an result of that action. For example, when a man raises his arm, how is it that the arm's rising counts as a result of that action?

At this point, one might be tempted to say that a result, *R*, of an action, *A*, qualifies as a result of *A* in virtue of the fact that *A* causes *R*. This, however, would be a mistake. An action cannot cause its own result because results are logically related to the actions whose results they are.[11] I cannot raise my arm without my arm going up. However, as Hume pointed out, it is always logically possible that a causal-event occur without the effect-event occurring.[12] It follows, then, that actions cannot be causes of their own results.

Nevertheless, the above response does seem to be on the right track. For an agent's actions sometimes do cause things to happen. And sometimes what they cause is the *result* of some other *action* of the agent. For example, Oswald's shooting Kennedy

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9 McCann, "Volition and Basic Action, 77-78.

10 Ibid., 77.

11 Note that the argument being made here is *not* the argument that Meldon defended and the one that Davidson famously responded to in his "Actions, Reasons, and Causes." *That* argument was that since causes are logically distinct from effects and since reasons are not logically distinct from actions, reasons cannot be causes of actions. *My* argument adopts the first premise of Meldon's argument, but avoids the second. I am not claiming that reasons are logically related to actions; rather I am claiming that the results of actions are logically related to the actions whose results they are. For a discussion of Meldon's argument, see Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," 13-15.

12 This rules out the possibility of self-causation. After all, since each event is logically identical with itself, if, as I am claiming, causes are logically distinct from their effects, then the same event cannot be both cause and effect. This means that no event can cause itself.

caused Kennedy's death. But notice that Kennedy's death is not a result of Oswald's shooting. Once again, this is because results are necessary features of the actions whose results they are, and Kennedy's death is not a necessary feature of Oswald's act of shooting Kennedy. Oswald could have shot Kennedy without Kennedy dying. Kennedy's death is, however, a necessary feature of another of Oswald's acts—namely his act of killing Kennedy. That is, Oswald could not have killed Kennedy without Kennedy dying. And since Kennedy's dying is not sufficient for—does not guarantee that—Oswald killed him, it counts as a result of Oswald's act of killing Kennedy. This means that sometimes an action, *A*, causes the result of an action, *B*, which is, in some sense at least, distinct from *A*. And when such a pattern is exemplified, the action-result problem for B can be solved. Before explaining how this is so, let me briefly clarify.

We have seen that sometimes an action brings about a change which is not logically required for that action to occur. When an action brings about such a change, it causes that change to occur. We may call such changes, "consequences." In the above example, the result of B is a consequence of *A*. That is, *A* caused the result of *B*. And whenever this pattern is exemplified, we may say that *A* is "causally more basic" than *B*. So, let *A* be Oswald's act of shooting Kennedy, and let *B* be Oswald's act of killing Kennedy. Oswald's act of shooting Kennedy is causally more basic than is his act of killing Kennedy, and by performing this causally more basic action, Oswald caused the result of his causally less basic action, his act of killing Kennedy. And since the result of Oswald's act of killing Kennedy is Kennedy's death, we can say that Oswald's act of shooting Kennedy caused Kennedy's death. Kennedy's death, therefore, is not merely a result of Oswald's act of killing; it is also a consequence of his causally more basic action

of shooting Kennedy.

But how, exactly, is this supposed to help solve the action-result problem? It is helpful because it enables us to explain how the result of the less basic action came to occur, and it does so in terms of one of the agent's actions. Furthermore, it shows why the result of the less basic action qualifies as a result of that action. For, as McCann says, "The explanation amounts to a description of how the agent brought about [Kennedy's death], and bringing about this result *is* the action of [killing Kennedy]."[13] So, the action-result problem can be solved at least with respect to some actions, i.e., those that are causally non-basic. *But note, if basic actions do not have results, the problem would not even arise for basic actions. In that case, the action-result problem, would be solved for all actions.*

Let us now return to the standard response. Unfortunately, the above option is not available to the defender of the standard response because he maintains that bodily actions are basic actions, and as we have already seen, bodily actions always have results; they always consist in bringing about some non-actional change. The result of moving my finger is that my finger moves; that of raising my arm is that my arm rises; that of clinching my fist is that my fist clinches. How then can the defender of the standard response solve the action-result problem.

Well, in light of the important distinction between actions and results, the person who claims that bodily actions are basic actions faces a dilemma. He can either say that psychological states cause actions or that they cause action-results. Suppose he says that they cause actions. That seems to be a plausible enough hypothesis. After all, beliefs and

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13 Ibid., 79.

desires are frequently cited in explanations of action. However, claiming that psychological states cause actions does nothing to help solve the action-result problem. McCann explains:

> No doubt, if a [psychological state] causes me to raise my arm it also causes my arm to rise. But this no more helps us understand the difference between raising my arm and the arm going up than it helps us understand the difference between ballgames and innings to say that ballgames, and hence their innings are played.[14]

So, suppose, instead, that the defender of the standard response claims that psychological states cause action-results. This also seems to be a fair hypothesis. After all, we have already seen that there is a solution to the action-result problem for non-basic actions which involves giving an adequate description of its causal history. Of course, when dealing with non-basic actions, the action-result is caused by a more basic *action*. But obviously, if the results of basic actions have causes at all, they cannot be caused by another *action*. Their cause must be something non-actional like one's beliefs or desires. This is precisely the view we wish to examine. The hypothesis would be something like the following: The result of a basic action, *A*, counts as a result of *A* in virtue of the fact that it was caused by some non-actional event, i.e., one's beliefs or desires (or the onset of one's beliefs/desires).

This hypothesis faces a significant obstacle, however. As stated, anyway, the view is demonstrably false. For there are certainly possible cases wherein an agent's beliefs and desires cause body movements, but where no action is performed at all. Take the following example given by Davidson:

> A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him

14 McCann, "Volition and Basic Action," 82.

> as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never *chose* to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally.[15]

This example illustrates the infamous problem of causal deviance. What is missing in this and similar cases involving deviant causal chains is the element of control. Now, of course, there might be a plausible solution to the problem of causal deviance which allows us to see how it is that agents exercise control over their action-results. However, as McCann says, "Just where we are most certain reasons cause physical responses in people, an essential element of action is lost. The thesis that [beliefs and desires] are causes is, after all, a matter of debate. But it is not debatable that they act as causes in cases [of causal deviance] where no bodily action seems to be performed."[16] While this does not necessarily imply that the standard response is inadequate, it does at least suggest that part of what is wrong with the standard response is that it maintains that one's actions are caused by something non-actional. After all, agents typically exercise control over non-actional events by performing some *action* which causes that event. For example, Oswald had control over Kennedy's death (the result of Oswald's act of killing Kennedy) in that he caused Kennedy's death by performing some other, more basic action, i.e., by shooting him. But since this response is not available for basic actions, some other response must be sought.

In section two, I will return to the question regarding whether there is some sense in which beliefs and desires function as causes that is relevant to action theory. But first, I'd like to consider whether an alternative account of basic actions can shed any light on Wittgenstein's question. I think the volitionalist solution can shed some light and can do

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15 Donald Davidson, "Freedom to Act" in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 79.

16 McCann, "Volition and Basic Action," 83.

so without taking sides on the controversial issue concerning whether beliefs and desires are causes. Indeed, it can do so without committing to any view about the causes of actions.

The Volitionalist Response

The volitionalist solution to both the action-result problem as well as the problem Wittgenstein raised involves actions more basic than bodily actions; it involves mental acts of volition or willing. According to the volitionalist, we perform bodily actions like raising an arm or moving a finger by performing the more basic act of willing that such events occur.[17] But here we must exercise caution, as H. A. Prichard has pointed out.[18] What we will in such circumstances is not that some *action* occur, e.g., that I raise my arm. Instead, we will that the *result* of some action occur, e.g., that my arm rise. After all, if for each action, *A*, *A* begins with an agent willing that *A* occur, we would have ourselves stuck in an infinite regress. This is because volitions are themselves *actions*. So, if for each action, *A*, *A* involves willing that *A*, then *A* would involve an act of volition, *B*, whose content would include *that I will that A*. But since *B* is also an action, it too would involve another act of volition, *C*, whose content would include *that I will that I will that A* and so on. To give a concrete example, raising my arm would involve willing that I raise my arm, and since willing that I raise my arm is itself an action, it would involve willing that I will that I raise my arm; and willing that I will that I raise my

17 Indeed, volitions are not merely held to be more basic than bodily movements; they are held to be the most basic actions agents perform. That volitions are basic actions need not merely be assumed by the volitionalist. Indeed, this position can and will be argued for momentarily.

18 H. A. Prichard, "Acting, Willing, Desiring," in *The Philosophy of Action* (ed.) Alan R. White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 62-4.

arm—also being an action—would involve still another act—willing that I will that I will that I raise my arm. In order to perform any action, then, an agent would have to perform an actual infinite number of actions, which, of course, is impossible.[19]

The volitionalist suggestion then, is that bodily actions are performed by performing more basic acts of volition. And in order to avoid an infinite regress, the volitionalist must maintain that the content of the volition is not *that some action occur*. Rather, the agent wills the result of the action he wishes to perform, and by willing it, he causes it to occur. But what exactly is an act of volition supposed to be anyway? Meldon asks for a description of one that does not involve the consequence it is alleged to cause. For as he rightly notes, "If *A* causes *B*, a description of *A* other than that it has the causal property of producing *B* must be forthcoming; otherwise '*A* causes *B*' degenerates into 'the thing that produces *B* produces *B.*'"[20] Unfortunately, Meldon thinks that no good answer is available. Prichard, however, though he thinks that the activity of willing is *sui generis* and so is unable to be defined in terms of the nature of other things, he does believe that progress can be made by saying what volitions are not. His list includes the following: it is neither desiring, identifying oneself with the object of one's desire, resolving, attending to an object, nor is it consenting to the reality of that to which one is attending.[21] Naturally, Meldon is unsatisfied with a mere list of things that willing is not.

Fortunately, though, there are some positive things to say about volitions. First,

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19 There are two ways that one might perform an actual infinite number of actions. One is by performing them all at once; the other is by performing them sequentially, one after the other. Ultimately, neither method can succeed. For an extensive defense of this claim, see William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1979), 65-110.

20 Meldon, "Willing," 72.

21 See Prichard, "Acting, Willing, Desiring," 61-2. He mentions these things in particular because he is responding to the suggestions of others as to what willings might be. Prichard, no doubt, would also deny that willings are beliefs, commands, or intentions.

they are like propositional attitudes in that they are thoughts with a specific content, and there is a distinctive mode in which one stands toward or thinks about that content. We might calling it "willing" the content. Furthermore, volitions are the executive element in action that makes all actions active. This is not trivial; this is not true of all accounts of basic actions. That is, it is not in virtue of the fact that volitions are ***basic*** actions that volitions confer actional properties on all non-basic actions. Rather, it is because volitions are basic ***actions***. This is not true on the standard response. For according to that account, not even basic actions have their actional properties intrinsically. Rather, basic actions have actional properties in virtue of standing in some appropriate causal relationship. Lastly, it is through our volitions that we exercise control over what happens in the world. For example, I have control over my arm rising in that I cause my arm to rise by willing that it rise.

So, the volitionalist can solve the action-result problem for bodily actions. Since bodily actions are performed by performing more basic acts of volition, the results of bodily actions are caused by acts of volition. This strategy, once again, enables us to explain how the result of the less basic, bodily action came to occur—doing so, once again, in terms of one of the agent's actions. And again, it shows why the result of the bodily action qualifies as a result of that action. This is because it describes how the agent brought about the result of the bodily action, and bringing about this result *is* the bodily action in question.

But none of this should be surprising. After all, we have already seen that by using the concepts introduced above, the action-result problem for all non-basic actions can be solved. And since, under the current proposal, bodily actions are non-basic, we

should expect that the same strategy for solving the action-result problem employed above should work for bodily actions as well. The pressing question, however, still remains: how is the action-result problem to be solved with regard to basic actions. It is at this point that the advantages of the volitionalist response emerges, for unlike bodily actions, volitions do not consist in bringing about some non-actional change.[22] That is to say, volitions do not have action-results. If this is correct, neither Wittgenstein's problem nor the action-result problem even arises for volitions.

But what reason is there to suppose that volitions do not have results? McCann defends this idea by arguing that certain types of thinking are characteristically actional, that no thinking has a result, and that volition is an actional species of thought.[23] In defense of the claim that certain types of thinking are actional, McCann points out that something actional is going on when someone asks an agent to think of a certain number, e.g., the number 1. For even though the agent may be passive with respect to the content of his thought occurring to him, he is active—indeed, responsible—if he continues to dwell on and attend to that content. In defense of the claim that no thinking has a result, consider the following suggestion. Suppose someone claims that what the agent brings about when he thinks in an actional way about the number one is simply the thought, itself. The word “thought,” however, is ambiguous. It can refer either to the content of the thought or the thinking of that content. But since the content of the thought is not an event, it is not something that can be brought about. So, if the agent is to have brought about anything that might plausibly be considered a result, it must be *the agent's thinking of the number one.* Recall, however, that results are events that an agent brings about in

22 Compare McCann's reasons for holding this view (summarized below) with Carl Ginet's. See Ginet's, *On Action*, 11.

23 McCann, “Volition and Basic Action,” 85-7.

performing an action which, while necessarily for the occurrence of that action, is insufficient for its occurrence. So even assuming that it makes sense to say that an agent could bring about his own thinking of the number one, his doing so clearly *would be sufficient* for his thinking of the number one. If so, what he has brought about could not be a result of his act of thinking of the number one.[24] And since volitions are clearly mental actions which, like many other thoughts, involve thinking of some content in a specific mode, he concludes that volitions do not have results. And since volitions do not have results, they are causally basic actions, i.e., actions which do not have results that are caused by more basic actions.

Any event that one might suggest as a candidate for the result of an act of volition, I submit, will either be unnecessary for or sufficient for its occurrence. In neither case, then, could the event in question be a result of the action in question. My arm's rising, for example, is clearly not the result of my act of willing that it rise since its rising is not necessary for my willing that it rise. It is logically possible—indeed even physically possible—that I will that my arm rise, but it does not. Neither could the result be my act of arm raising since, once again, my arm need not even rise when I will that it rise, and if it doesn't rise, I could not have possibly raised my arm. So, “I willed that my arm rise” does not entail “I raised my arm.” The only event that does seem necessary for the occurrence of my act of willing that my arm rise is my willing that my arm rise. But

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24 At this point, one might object as follows: The action-result problem emerges for thoughts too. After all, we can imagine that some scientist has stimulated my brain which causes me to think about the number one. If this is possible, a form of Wittgenstein's question arises for thoughts too: what is left over when I subtract my non-actively thinking about the number one from my actively thinking about the number one? This objection, however, is a confused one. For even though the objector asks us to subtract a non-actional event from an actional one, the non-actional event is not an action-result. That is, my thought of the number one (when it is caused by a scientist) is clearly not a result of my actively thinking about the number one in normal circumstances. Wittgenstein's question, then, does not arise. For the form of his question is as follows: “What is left over if I subtract the result of action, *A*, from action, *A*?”

since this, of course, is sufficient for and guarantees that I will that my arm rise, it cannot be a result of that action. If this is correct, the action-result problem does not arise for basic actions because basic actions do not have results. And since there is a plausible solution to the action-result problem for all non-basic actions, if volitions are basic actions, then the action result-problem can be laid to rest.

And Wittgenstein's question is also easily answered on the volitionalist picture. In the case of non-basic actions, what is left over when I subtract the fact that, e.g., my arm goes up from the fact that I raise it is the fact that I will that my arm rise. And like the action-result problem, Wittgenstein's question cannot sensibly be asked with regard to basic actions if indeed volitions are basic actions. For the form of his question is as follows: "What is left over if I subtract the result of action, *A*, from action, *A*?" Since volitions do not have results, there is nothing to subtract. That is, there is nothing more to acts of volition than the willing itself.

This picture has several advantages, which are worth explicitly stating. First of all, it provides a solution to both Wittgenstein's question and the action-result problem. And the way in which it provides solutions to those problems is quite satisfying. In both cases, it requires only one type of solution; we do not need to come up with two different solutions that reflects the differences between basic and non-basic actions. Second, while the standard response need not postulate mental acts in order to solve the problems under discussion, the volitionalist can solve them without even taking a stance on the controversial subject concerning whether beliefs and desires are causes. Indeed, no stance on the etiology of action need be taken at all in order to solve the problems. Furthermore, the volitionalist solution is consistent with and further supported by the

empirical evidence that volitions actually do occur.[25] This is so even if the evidence for volitions is less than compelling.

At this point, one might object that the standard response to the problems under consideration appears inferior to the volitionalist response only because I have, without justification, been assuming that the idea that bodily actions are basic and the idea that beliefs and desires are causes must go together. And of course the idea that bodily actions are basic cannot simply be dismissed by pointing out problems associated with some other, independent hypothesis. In response, I would point out that I have been coupling these two ideas together because this second thesis, or something like it, is needed if one is to provide a solution to the problems under consideration. That is, the problems under consideration are problems about action-results. And we have found a plausible way to solve these problems for non-basic actions by making reference to more basic actions. For example, consider the action-result problem as it applies to Oswald's act of killing Kennedy: how is it that the Kennedy's death qualifies as a result of Oswald's act of killing Kennedy. Well, by performing the more basic action of shooting Kennedy, Oswald brought about Kennedy's death. And since bringing about Kennedy's death just is Oswald's act of killing Kennedy, the action-result problem for this and all other non-basic actions is solved. The problem for the person who takes bodily actions to be basic is that since bodily actions have action-results, an independent solution must be discovered for basic actions. The standard way of solving this problem for basic actions involves the suggestion that the results of basic actions are caused by non-actional events—specifically, the onset of certain psychological states of an agent, namely, beliefs

25 For evidence that mental actions occur, see E. Hodgins, *Episode: Report on the Accident Inside my Skull* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), esp. 27. See also Hugh McCann, "Trying, Paralysis, and Volition" in his *The Works of Agency*.

and desires. If this is right, the idea that bodily actions are basic is more problematic than is the suggestion that volitions are basic precisely because the former requires some such controversial independent solution. But on the volitionalist picture, volitions do not have results, and so no further thesis is needed.

One might press the following objection instead. While the standard response cannot account for the control we have over the action-results of basic actions on the assumption that bodily actions are basic, since the volitionalist generally assumes that volitions are uncaused events, he faces the problem of accounting for the control he has over his volitions, his actions themselves. After all, we can give an *account* of how we have control over the results of non-basic actions, but how can one give an account of how we exercise control over basic actions given that they are uncaused. In this light, the thesis that psychological states are causes of basic actions might be thought a virtue for the defender of the standard response because of the similarity it bears to the account given above for how control over the results of non-basic actions is exercised. After all, both account for control by citing their causal history. But if beliefs and desires must be causes of actions in order to account for the control we have over our actions, then the volitionalist response is really no better off than the standard response.

I would like to say three things in response. First, though I do in fact believe that volitions are uncaused events—indeed the next section is devoted to a defense of this position—I have not been assuming this throughout the paper. Again, I have assumed *no* position on the etiology of action because no such presupposition is necessary for dealing with the problems so far discussed. Second, in response to the claim that the volitionalist response is no better than the standard response since beliefs and desires must be causes

if we are to account for the control we have over our basic actions, it must be retorted that the question concerning whether volitions are basic actions and whether volitions are uncaused are logically unrelated. So, even if we end up needing to suppose that basic actions are caused in order to account for the control that agents exercise in performing those actions, it could still be that we are best off thinking that the basic actions that we perform are volitions. One of the reasons to think precisely this is that the idea that bodily actions are basic cannot account for the control we exercise over our action-results. Third, volitions, if they occur at all, are actions. And since actions involve an exercise of control, volitions involve exercises of control. So far anyway, I have simply assumed that volitions involve some such exercise of control. I have not seen any need to defend this idea. And it seems that I am perfectly justified in holding this view unless and until there is some reason to doubt it. If and when such a reason arises, the issue can be dealt with then. Since the second section is the natural place to consider how we exercise control in our acts of volition, I will consider it there.

Part I conclusion

I have argued that the supposition that volitions are basic actions provides a better solution to both Wittgenstein's question and the action-result problem than does the thesis that bodily actions are basic. The reason for this is that bodily actions have results, and because they have results, an independent solution is required for how the above problems are to be solved with regard to basic as compared to non-basic actions. The most plausible independent solution involves the controversial thesis that beliefs and

desires are causes of our basic actions. But if our basic actions have results, as the standard response maintains, then an independent account of how we exercise control over the results of our basic actions is also needed. The standard response, however, does not seem to have the resources to provide such an account. It is at least very difficult to see how control could be exercised over such an event.

The volitionalist solution, by contrast, provides a solution to both Wittgenstein's question and the action-result problem in a way which is much more satisfying. Both problems require only one type of solution. This is because both problems are problems about results, and the solution to both problems lie in more basic actions. But since volitions do not have action-results, it is not a problem that volitions are basic. No further action is needed to solve the problem about the results of basic actions because, according to the volitionalist, basic actions do not have results. This allows the volitionalist to solve both problems without taking a stance on the controversial subject concerning whether beliefs and desires are causes. Indeed, no stance on the etiology of action need be taken at all.

Part II: Are Volitions Uncaused?

Causation

Broadly speaking, there are three ways of developing a theory of rational action—non-causal theories, event-causal theories, and agent-causal theories. According to non-causalism, rational actions have no cause whatsoever. Instead they are spontaneous

events which are intrinsically such that the agent who performs them does so intentionally. Event-causalism says that to act for a reason is for the agent's behavior to be the causal effect of some event which involves the agent. On what David Velleman calls "the standard model," which derives from Donald Davidson's seminal article, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," the relevant event is the onset of some belief-desire combination whose contents constitute the reason for which the agent acted. Agent causalism is the view that, when one acts for a reason, the agent himself is the cause of the action. This is supposed to be a *sui generis* type of causation that is irreducible to the events occurring within the agent. One motivation for this view is that it nicely captures the type of freedom that many take human beings to possess—libertarian freedom. This sort of freedom squares nicely with agent causation because, if agents are substance-causes, they are not of the right ontological category to be an effect. Consequently, the agent is generally thought to be an unmoved mover—the beginning of a new causal chain.

There is a substantive debate in metaphysics regarding the nature of causation—specifically whether all causation is event causation, whether all causation is agent (substance) causation, or whether both sorts exist. Now clearly, in ordinary language we often speak as if events cause things. Take for example the event-causal statement, "The explosion of the bomb caused the bridge to collapse." Other times, however, we speak as if substances cause things. For example, "The bomb caused the bridge to collapse."

Most philosophers maintain either that all causation is event-causation or that both event-causation and substance causation occur. Typically, those that maintain that some causation is substance causation hold that event causation reigns in what we might call

the "natural realm," and substance causation occurs only in cases involving rational agents. However, in his recent book, *Personal Agency: The Metaphysics of Mind and Action*, E. J. Lowe argues that all causation is fundamentally substance causation. For him, substance causation is both conceptually and ontologically prior to event causation. He offers the following as an ontological reduction of event causation to substance causation.

> *Reduce:* 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*.[26]

According to *Reduce*, an event-causal statement like, "The explosion of the bomb caused the bridge to collapse," is true because there was some agent (the bomb) and some manner of acting (exploding) such that the event, i.e., the explosion of the bomb, consisted in the bomb's exploding, and by so acting the bomb caused the bridge to collapse. Or more simply, the bomb, by exploding, caused the bridge to collapse.

The primary reason to favor this analysis of causation is the fact that substances—not events—are the sorts of things that have causal powers and liabilities. Events, as such, are causally impotent. After all, it is substances, not events, that are disposed to act and be acted upon by other objects. For example, it is substances that are disposed to burn, dissolve, reflect, attract, roll, etc. The category mistake which the event-causalist makes can be easily appreciated by considering the event-causal statement: "My collision with the car injured me." Most will agree that this statement seems rather odd. For surely, it not the collision that injured me; it was the car. And the car injured me by

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26 E. J. Lowe, *Personal Agency: The Metaphysics of Mind and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008,) 136.

colliding with me. "After all," writes Lowe, "only the car—not the collision—had the right sort of properties to cause me injury, being massive, rigid, and fast."[27] All of this is not to say that talk of event causation is fundamentally misguided. Rather, such talk is simply not ontologically fundamental. Events really do exist. They just consist in the actions of substances.

I suspect that Lowe is right about all this, and in what follows I will assume that he is. What implications does this have for the question under consideration? People will tend, I think, to respond in one of three different ways—all of which are quite natural. First, volitionalism is generally held to be a form of event-causalism because it maintains both that volitions are events and that volitions are causally efficacious. However, event-causalism rivals and is incompatible with agent-causalism. So, it would not be unnatural to be puzzled given that I am assuming a form of agent-causation and yet defending a volitionalist account of action.

This, however, ignores the subtleties of the agent-causal account developed above. The agent-causal account I am assuming does not postulate a *sui generis* form of causation. Instead, *all* causation is held to be substance causation. And it is not the substance as such—the substance *holus bolus*—that causes events to occur. Rather, substances cause their effects by acting in some manner. This indicates that though, ontologically speaking, substances are the proper relata in causal relationships, substance causal statements imply event causal statements. Take, for example, the substance causal statement, "The bomb, by exploding, caused the bridge to collapse." This statement relates two substances, a bomb and a bridge. One of the substances (the

27 Ibid., 4.

bomb), by acting in a certain manner (exploding) caused the other substance (the bridge) to act in some manner (collapse). However, it is still true to say that the explosion of the bomb (which is an event) caused the collapse of the bridge (which is another event). Events, after all, really do exist on the picture Lowe paints. Events, however, consist merely in the actions of substances. So, substance causal statements are consistent with and indeed imply event causal statements. For this reason, I will not restrict myself to agent causal language when event causal language feels more natural.

Second, one might be puzzled by the fact that I am assuming a form of agent-causalism and yet attempting to defend a non-causal view of action. However, this also ignores the subtleties of the account of causation being assumed. Nothing I have said about the nature of causation implies that actions have causes. Rather, what I have said only implies that *if* an event is to be caused, it will be caused, most fundamentally, by a substance. This, of course, is perfectly compatible with the existence of uncaused events.

Third, one might think, as I initially did, that this analysis of causation actually stacks the deck *in favor* of volitionalist accounts of basic action. This is because all causation is alleged to be causation by a substance. But substances *as such* are not the causes of events. Rather, substances, by acting in some manner, cause events. And volitionalism holds that most actions that agents perform are done by performing another, more basic action. The most basic actions are volitions or willings, and a volition is, at once, an action and an event. But since volitions are the most basic kind of action, they must be *completely uncaused*, i.e., spontaneous. That is, since volitions are the most basic actions, they are not done by acting in some manner. So if all causation is substance causation, and any event that a substance causes it causes by acting in some

manner, then volitions must be uncaused because they are not caused by the substance acting in some manner. An agent, then, does not cause her volitions, she performs them.

This argument, however, ignores one of the important implications of the fact that this view is offered as an account of *all* causation and not just the causation involved in intelligent beings acting for reasons. The word, "action," is ambiguous. If we admit that, properly speaking, substances are the only things that cause events, and that they cause events by acting in some manner, then the sense in which substances *act* cannot be the sense that is the central topic of action theory. After all, some causation does not involve intelligent agents at all. For example a rock, by rolling down a steep slope that is located near the ocean, might cause a large splash in the ocean. (We may assume that the rock's movements were neither spontaneous nor caused by the intentional actions of human agents, but was caused by gravity and other such factors which I know very little about.) Though there is some sense in which the rock is acting, it is not acting in a way that action theorists puzzle about. So, while in may be true on the volitionalist account that volitions are basic actions (in the sense that *is* the central topic of action theory), it does not follow that volitions are uncaused. They could be caused in the same way that the rock's act of rolling down the hill was caused, i.e., either by events outside the rock, events inside the rock, or some combination of the two. So, we might say that acting^2 is fundamentally distinct from acting^1 and that, whereas rational agents sometimes act^2, whenever rocks act, they always act^1 but never act^2.

Given all that, when I claim that substances cause their effects by acting in some manner, I do not mean to imply that they must cause their effects by acting^2 in some manner. This implies that while volitions cannot be caused by more basic actions^2

(because they are the most basic actions[2]), they can still be caused by substances acting[1]. My volition could, then, be caused by an action[1] of some inanimate object outside of me, or it could be caused by some action[1] of mine or my body (or some proper part of me or my body).[28]

All of this is not say that the analysis of causation I am assuming does not have any interesting consequences. It does. It implies that classical agent-causalism, agent-causalism as it is traditionally understood, is false. And the fact that it has this implication implies that if I am to reach the conclusion that volitions are uncaused, I cannot merely assume that classical agent causalism is false. I must at least say something—even if it does not amount to a full blown explanation—about why Lowe's account of causation is preferable to that of the classical agent-causalist.[29]

Problems with volitions being caused

There are at least two ways in which volitions might be caused, and, theoretically anyway, they could be caused by a number of different kinds of things. Perhaps they are caused by substances. Perhaps by events. If caused by events, they could be caused by actional events or non-actional events. In either case, they could be caused deterministically or non-deterministically. In what follows, I go through a list of all the ways that a volition might plausibly be thought to be caused and explain why each is problematic.

Perhaps volitions are caused directly by agents as the classical agent-causalist

28 Putting it this way allows me to remain neutral on the metaphysics of persons.

29 And as much as I may like them to, my reasons for preferring Lowe's model cannot include the fact that it is inconsistent with classical agent-causalism.

maintains. This, of course, cannot be the case if Lowe is right about the nature of causation. But why should we prefer Lowe's account of causation over the classical agent-causalist account? To begin with, his view provides a unified account of causation. It does not need two radically different types of causation to explain what goes on in the world. Furthermore, the classical agent-causalist implausibly maintains that when an agent causes an event, it is simply *the agent as such—the agent holus bolus*—that causes the event. This causing of the event does not involve the agent acting in some manner as Lowe's view maintains (and as standard event causation seems to suggest). But if it is the agent as such which causes the action, what explains why the action occurred when it did? After all, the agents are not dated items. That being so, if it is the agent *simpliciter* that causes the events which are his actions, then it is completely mysterious how the agent could be the cause of the various events occurring at various times. I take it that since Lowe's view is simpler and has greater explanatory resources than does the classical agent causalist, his view is preferable. But if agents always cause events by acting in some manner, then classical agent-causalism is false since it denies just this. So, given volitions are basic actions, the agent cannot be said to cause his volitions. It is better to say, instead, that he performs them.

So, volitions are not caused by substances as such. Perhaps, instead, they are caused by agents *acting in some manner*, i.e., by events. If caused by events, volitions could either be caused by actional events or non-actional events. But given that volitions are the most basic actions that humans perform, they cannot be caused by actional events. This leaves only non-actional events. What might such non-actional events be? Again, the standard response is that actions are caused by an agent's reasons-states, i.e., the

agent's beliefs and desires. After all, beliefs and desires are frequently cited in explanations of action. And the agent's possession of them also seems to be a necessary condition if the agent is to act for the reasons in question.[30]

Let me say a bit more to motivate the idea that beliefs and desires are causes. For some, the primary reason to hold this view is that it seems to be the only naturalistically acceptable position available. Indeed, this seems to be Dretske's reason:

> I am a materialist who thinks that we sometimes do things because of what we believe and want. I pretty much have to accept the idea, then, that [beliefs and desires] are causes. If beliefs and desires are not causally relevant to behavior, I, for one, fail to see why it would be worth having them. We need beliefs and desires because our wanting this and believing that, besides being our reasons *for* what we do, are—sometimes at least—the reasons *why* we do it. If reasons are causes, one of the chief—indeed (for certain people) the only—motive for including them in one's inventory of mind, vanishes.[31]

Besides being the only naturalistically acceptable position, the major motivation for adopting the thesis that beliefs and desires are causes is that it provides such a close connection between acting and reasons for acting. As Dretske notes, reasons for action are not merely reasons *for*, but are reasons *why* we perform certain actions. That is, reasons not only explain why we *should*, but why we actually *do* perform actions. And if beliefs and desires (whose contents constitute one's reasons for acting) are not causes, then the relationship between reasons and actions is a mysterious one. How else could a reason explain an event? Davidson's suggestion is that a causal explanation is the best candidate.

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30 In light of this, G. F. Schueler points out that since all action theorists can agree to this fact, it cannot be what is at issue between those that affirm and those that deny that reasons are causes. If the thesis that reasons are causes amounts to nothing more than the thesis that an agent must hold certain beliefs and desires if he is to act for those reasons, then everyone can agree that reasons are causes. The real issue, however, is whether reasons are *efficient causes* of actions, i.e., whether all actions can be explained without reference to such teleological notions as "purposes." See Schueler's, *Reasons and Purposes: Human Rationality and the Teleological Explanation of Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 1-20.

31 Fred Dretske, "Reasons and Causes," *Philosophical Perspectives* 3 (1989), 1.

> One way that we can explain an event is by placing it in the context of its cause; cause and effect for the sort of pattern that explains the effect, in a sense of 'explain' that we understand as well as any. If reason and action illustrate a different pattern, that pattern must be identified.[32]

Davidson goes on to consider what that pattern might be, but ends up concluding that though we can indeed find such a pattern in the familiar pattern of an action done for a reason, this assumes the relation of reason and action that we want to analyze. So, he claims that if the causal explanation is entirely irrelevant to our understanding of human action, then "We are without an analysis of the 'because' in 'He did it because...' where we go on to name a reason."[33] So, if Davidson's opponents fail to give a satisfactory account of what it is to act for a reason, then Davidson's position is really the only game in town since "it alone promises to give an account of the 'mysterious connection' between reasons and actions."[34]

But is there a satisfactory account of the relationship between reasons and actions that does not regard the agent's reasons-states as the causes of action? I think so. But before explicating that account, I should point out that given that humans sometimes act freely and that freedom is incompatible with determinism[35], if actions are to be caused at all, they cannot be deterministically caused. But this point, I think, is actually moot given our present concern. This is because if an action is caused at all, be it deterministically or probabilistically, it cannot be performed freely, for a reason at all. This is because causation, by its very nature, is blind to reason. Lowe explains:

> To act for a reason is to act in a way that is responsive to the cogency of certain considerations in favour of so acting—and this is incompatible with one's being

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32 Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," 10.
33 Ibid., 11.
34 Ibid.
35 For a cogent argument in favor of this view, see Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

> *caused* to act in that way, because causal processes bring about their effects with complete indifference to the question of whether those effects have cogent considerations in their favour.
> To act in the light of one's reasons for acting in this or that way, one must, then, be able to *choose* so to act, where choice is understood as being the exercise of a rational power.[36]

This is because when beliefs and desires cause our behavior, they do so simply in virtue of some psycho-physical law that obtains. And these laws, presumably, do not obtain to fulfill some rational purpose. They just obtain as a matter of fact.

But even assuming that this is so, doesn't this also pose a problem for the volitionalist who maintains that volitions cause the action-results of non-basic actions? I think not; the fact that volitions bring about the effects that they do does not create a problem for the volitionalist. After all, agents are free to choose which events they will cause. And though it is true that the consequences of their volitions will fall out in accordance with psycho-physical laws, the agent exploits those laws to serve his purposes. The same story cannot be told if reasons are causes. This is because reason-states, i.e., beliefs and desires, are states over which humans have little control. We are not free to just adopt beliefs and desires at will.[37]

But in what sense must an agent be responsive to reasons if he is to act for them? Persons, like all substances, have certain powers. One of the distinctive powers of persons is that they have the power to choose. But choosing, unlike other powers, e.g., the power of water to dissolve salt, is active in nature. Whereas the water has no option but to manifest its powers when certain conditions are met, i.e., when salt is present, the

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36 Lowe, 156.

37 I do think, though, that humans have some degree of freedom with respect to what they believe. This is because humans are free with respect to at least some of what they think about. And thinking about something can make it more likely that you form certain beliefs. This is a position called *indirect doxastic voluntarism*.

will is a two-way power whose exercise is not determined by external circumstances. Regarding the will, Lowe writes:

> Our very conception of the will is as a power the conditions of whose exercise are quite different from those governing the exercise of other natural powers, whether causal or spontaneous. We conceive of it *neither* as a power whose exercise is characteristically determined by the causal influence of other objects, *nor* as one whose manifestations are merely the outcome of chance. Rather, we conceive of it as being a power that is characteristically exercised *in the light of reason*. We conceive of it, that is to say, as being a *rational power*.[38]

So, when an agent freely chooses to perform an action, presumably he does so because he sees that there are good reasons in favor of performing that action. The "because" in the above statement, however, is not the "because" of efficient causation; rather, it is the "because" of what Aristotle called, "final causation." The agent performed the action that he did *in order to* bring about some desired end. So, though rational actions are not subject to *efficient* causal explanation, they are nevertheless still explicable in terms of the reasons for which agents act.[39]

Conclusion

In the first section I demonstrated the important role that volitions play in answering both the action-result problem as well as Wittgenstein's famous question. I argued that because volitions do not have action-results, the assumption that volitions exist and are the basic actions that humans perform is better equipped to deal with these problems than is the standard solution according to which bodily actions are basic actions, which are caused by certain psychological states of the agent, i.e., the agent's

38 Ibid., 155.

39 I do not mean to suggest that final causation is really a different form of causation. It is not a form of causation at all.

beliefs and desires. In so doing, I accomplished two things: First, I provided indirect evidence for the existence of volitions. Second, I established that volitions are the basic actions that humans perform. In the second section I defended the position that volitions are uncaused events that, though not subject to causal explanation, can be explained teleologically. I highlighted the advantages of this view compared to those of its competitors, and I responded to some of the challenges that this view is generally thought to face.

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