

The Efficacy of Reasons: A Reply to Hendrickson

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Noel Hendrickson, in "Against an Agent-Causal Theory of Action" (this volume), carefully and intelligently probes aspects of the agent-causal account of free will I present in *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will*. The central target of his criticism is my contention that agent-causal events, by their very nature, cannot be caused. Before I respond to his argument on this point, I'd like to take up a few of his preliminary remarks.

Hendrickson finds wanting my attempt to contrast agent and event causation. At one point he says that we can't make the distinction in terms of the kind of entity "that has the [causal] powers," as agents can have event-causal powers, too (44). This is true enough, but why is it unsatisfactory to point instead to the unsubtle difference in kind of entity that is the cause? Hendrickson goes on to suggest that we draw the distinction thus: the exercise of agent causal powers have enabling conditions, but no stimulus conditions (44). I find this suggestion helpful, as it draws a clear and relevant contrast for most cases. But I worry that it might give the wrong result for the esoteric case of radium decay, where no external stimulating condition seems to explain the precise timing of such an event within the interval defined in terms of the atom's half-life.

Call my causing an intention to type these words (in order to complete this response) an 'agent-causal event' (ACE). I argue that an ACE cannot have a triggering cause—an event that stimulates the cause (in this case, me, a substance) into action. Consider first event causes. Where agent causes are absent, they are linked in a constant flow of one event's giving rise to another. Now, where event B causes C, there is not a direct

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triggering cause of *B's causing C*. Instead, some event A brings about B, which brings about C, and so on. (We might say, if we like, that A indirectly triggers *B's causing C* in virtue of triggering A.) In the case of an agent-causal event, however, there is no front-end event to be caused, only an agent qua substance. So there doesn't seem to be room, as a simple conceptual matter, for an ACE to have a triggering cause.

Hendrickson argues that the burden is on the agent causationist to show why an ACE can't differ from event-causal ones in part by the fact that it has a *direct* triggering cause: a cause that directly brings about *my causing my having an intention*. Since we strongly presume, at least, that for every event there is a cause, we ought to suppose this holds for ACEs, too, absent compelling reason to the contrary (49 ff.). I offered such a reason in *Persons and Causes*, but perhaps I did not express it with sufficient clarity. So let me state it this way. Causing there to be a relation between two entities presupposes the existence of the relata. Given Noel and me, for example, something might cause there to be a ten-foot distance relation between us. But the *causal* relation between X and Y, for any X and Y, cannot be (explanatorily) posterior to Y, since it just is the bringing about of Y. Y can't be 'prior' to the bringing about of it. (Note that this point is completely general, applying to event-causal events as well as ACEs.)

I suspect that the reason Hendrickson fails to appreciate the force of this simple point is that he is thinking differently about causation (in general) than I do, as expressed in the book. I am a strong sort of realist about causation, holding that the basic causal propensities of the world are ontologically irreducible to purely 'qualitative' properties and the patterns of their distribution. (Causal relations are just the manifestations of such propensities.) X's causing Y is not identical, in particular, to its raising the probability of Y, nor can it be given a more complicated analysis based on this notion.

I further suspect that our difference on this score underlies his main argument, where he concludes that my account of the role of reasons in explaining ACEs is inconsistent with the claim that ACEs have no triggering causes. When we deliberate, we are not neutral with respect to the alternatives. We tend more or less strongly to certain options, while retaining the power to carry out less-preferred alternatives. The question is how to cash out this evident fact within an agent-causal picture of (free) action. I suggest that our beliefs, desires, and general intentions—in short, our reasons—contribute to dynamical propensities in us to cause an appropriate intention to act to occur. Prior to acting, there is an objective propensity for me to cause an intention to A, a propensity for me to cause an intention to B, and so on, for however many options I have some positive inclination to pursue. But none of these states are

(individually or jointly) indeterministic causes that ‘trigger’—directly bring about—my causing (say) an intention to A. As we saw two paragraphs back, there is reason to think that there couldn’t be such causes of an ACE. And in any case, as Hendrickson notes, the agent causationist does not want a picture on which there *are* such causes, since that seems to make agent causation a mere whistle stop on the world’s causal train: the ultimate causal source of my acting is not me but those states in me that find their origin, ultimately, outside of me.

So agents are ultimate causes of their actions, while not being entirely (and impossibly) above the fray. A multitude of factors (motivations included) act on us by structuring our agent-causal capacities, giving us relative tendencies to act that evolve over time. But it is for me to act by bringing about one of those options, and nothing brings about my doing so. Now Hendrickson contends that on this picture I must deny the identity of *reasons giving the agent a propensity to cause an intention* and *reasons producing a propensity for the event ‘the agent causes an intention’ to occur*. Hendrickson will be gratified to learn that I agree with him that this is a distinction without a difference. The question is, why must I make it? Because “conferring a propensity on the occurrence of an event is probabilistically causing that event” (51). Here, as I previously suggested, is the root of our disagreement. When Hendrickson earlier glosses my view as holding that “reasons confer a propensity not on the action to occur but on the agent to act” (51), he gets it mostly right, but not entirely, and our fundamental disagreement about causation is again at work. Both propensities exist, I say, but one is primary, the other derivative. In virtue of giving me a propensity to cause an intention, my reasons contribute to fixing a probability on my action’s occurring. But they are not probabilistic causes for either event, should they occur.

Reference

O’Connor, Timothy. *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.