

Human agents as freely acting powerful particulars

Research on causal powers is becoming increasingly popular in metaphysics, philosophy of science and the theory of causation. Slowly this trend begins to influence also debates in the theory of action, particularly when it comes to agent causation.

In this paper I examine the current debate on agent-causal power and free will by focusing especially on Timothy O'Connor's account. There are two reasons for doing so: On the one hand, he is one of the most prominent defenders of agent-causation and developed his account in quite a detailed and sophisticated way over more than a decade by reacting continuously to critique. On the other hand, he is aware of the general debate on the metaphysics of powers and refers explicitly to it as overall framework within which his specific theory of agent-causation can be embedded.

First, I present a general outline of O'Connor's account (I refer particularly to O'Connor 2002 and 2009a and 2009b):

The basic ontological commitments underlying this account are:

- There are substances and properties.
- Properties are intrinsically powerful.
- Substances are the bearers of properties.
- Properties confer causal powers on their bearers, endowing the substance with a specific causal profile.

O'Connor's concept of agent-causation comprehends the following claims:

- An agent is a species of substance with the distinctive power (among other powers) to cause *freely* an intention to carry out some goal-directed action, say to A.
- The causing of the intention to A is not the result of a composition of causal powers within the agent and her environment. Though such an understanding might capture automatic human responses to internal and external stimuli, it cannot grasp the more ambitious concept of free agency, which is a "two-way power" to either cause the intention to A or not to cause it.
- Having a reason for action means to have the (rational) power of evaluating a course of action among others and of choosing between them. Thus, if an agent acquires new reasons for action or dismisses old ones, she comes to have new powers of causing an intention.
- If an agent causes freely an intention to carry out some goal-directed action, reasons for action do not determine a specific action but affect the agent's objective propensity to cause it.
- It is important to distinguish between the agent's power to cause freely an intention to act and this power's specific causal profile determined by the agent's character, motivational states and reasons for action. Employing the familiar distinction between triggering and structuring causes, one could say that the agent's directly causing the intention to A is the triggering cause whereas the agent's character, motivational states and reasons for action are the structuring causes to bring the intention to A about.

This outline should make clear that O'Connor is willing to concede to proponents of the causal theory of action that reasons for action and the agent's motivation states are *causally relevant* for bringing an action about. However, contrary to the causal theory of action, these agent's states are not *the causes* of her action. Rather, the agent alone disposes of the causal power to directly producing her intention to A. Nevertheless, it is important to take into account that this causing takes place within a

specific causal context consisting of the agent's reasons, her character and motivational states, influences from her environment etc. They structure the agent causal powers in terms of an objective propensity to cause A or to refrain from doing so.

Second, I present a serious objection to this account: One could claim that there is no place for genuine agent-causation because it can be reduced to the manifestation of powerful properties of the agent and her environment interacting with each other. The argument goes roughly as follows (see, for instance, Buckareff 2012):

- (i) Properties are intrinsically powerful and by inhering in a substance, they confer their causal powers on it.
- (ii) As substances agents have the causal powers they do because of their properties conferring causal powers on them.
- (iii) This implies that if an agent is bereft of all her properties, then she would be powerless.
- (iv) If this is right, then it seems wrong to claim that the agent herself directly causes an intention to A. Rather, one should say that the agent's causing the intention to A is the result of the manifestation of agent causal powers (the triggering cause) and the propensities to cause A (the structuring causes).
- (v) Agent-causation is reducible to the manifestation of causal powers of the agent.

Third, I propose the following argument for blocking this objection: The metaphysical distinction between powerful properties and substances should be rejected *qua* metaphysical distinction thought it might be valuable from an epistemic perspective. Proponents of agent-causation should argue that agents are (like other substances) powerful particulars rather than distinguishing, metaphysically speaking, between substances and powerful properties. If someone accepts powerful properties and grants to substances only the role of being their bearer, then it is hard to see how a non-reductive account of agent causation can be maintained. A trope-ontology appears to be preferable then because it seems to be able to offer the same explanatory power with less ontological weight.

Fourth, I aim at explicating in more detail the agent-causal account I favour.

a) If substances are powerful particulars, one should say that substances do all the causing by interacting with each other. Of course, to claim that a substance causes something involves the claim that something must happen: A change must take place involving the substance, which amounts to an event. Doesn't then agent causation turn into event causation? Not necessarily: It is one thing to claim that a causing generally consists in a change, that is, an event, involving a substance or the interaction between various substances, and it is quite another thing to claim that this involvement of the substance amounts to one event causing another. In a loose way of speaking this might be true. However, if it is true that substances do the causal work, then events consist of substances causing something and are *parasitic* on substances and their power manifestations. There are resources for analysing event-causation in terms of agent-causation, for instance, by saying that an event c caused another event e if and only if there is an agent A, and some manner of acting, X, such that c consists in A's X-ing and A, by X-ing, brings about e. (Lowe 2008, 136; see also Steward 2012, chap. 8).

b) The by-relation in "A, by X-ing, brings directly about e" is not open to further causal analysis. Irreducible agent-causation is the claim that free action consists in the agent directly causing an

intention to A and this 'directly causing' has no internal causal structure so that a deeper causal analysis in terms of a sequence of causes and effects is available. Any further questioning is misleading because free action is the power to bring directly and spontaneously something about, normally in the light of reasons.

c) When we talk about reasons, we should distinguish between the content of reasons and the event of accepting a reason as our reason. The contents of reasons are abstract. As such, they do not cause anything but they rationalize an action – they make it understandable why an agent did what she did. If an agent accepts a reason and makes it her own, then it enters the agent's overall causal profile and changes it accordingly. The agent's coming to recognize *a reason* as *her reason* to act elevates an objective propensity for her to cause an intention with a type of content corresponding to this reason. If the agent acts accordingly, then the choice is explained by her reasons but it is not the direct result of them. Thus, directly causing an intention to act is not merely a spontaneous but also a rational power.

Finally, I conclude with a few implications for the notion of causation: A power-metaphysics allows of conceiving of causation as different power-manifestations. This is the common core of the many power-concepts in our everyday language such as "corroding", "dissolving", "breaking", "pushing", "stretching", "willing", "choosing" or "intending". So, even if one claims, as most agent-causalists do, that agent causation is primitive and not explainable in more basic causal talk (or no causal talk at all), one major advantage of embedding agent-causation in a general powers-metaphysics consists in a rather uniform concept of causation. Undeniably there are major differences between a piece of sugar dissolving in water and my causing the intention to write this abstract. However, the causal understanding of both cases is the product of our general understanding of the wide range of specific ways in which powerful substances can act upon one another. Accordingly, there is no need to postulate that agent-causation is a causal concept set apart from all other causal concepts because applicable only to free human action.

Cited literature:

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