

Chisholm's Way Out



Agent Causation

Chisholm's Way Out

- ❖ First thought: S is free with respect to action *a* only if *a* was entirely up to S.
- ❖ An action *a* is entirely up to S only if there was a moment at which it was true that S could have done *a* or refrained from doing *a*.
- ❖ Indeed, 'I think we can say. . .that if a man is responsible for a certain event or a certain state of affairs. . ., then that event or state of affairs was brought about by some act of his, and the act was something that was in his power either to perform or not to perform.'—Chisholm (*RR*, 460)

Compatibilism Fails

❖ Some say:

❖ (a) S could have done otherwise.

means neither more nor less than:

❖ (b) If S had chosen to do otherwise, then he would have done otherwise.

❖ According to the compatibilist, if (b) is consistent with determinism, then so too is (a). But since (b) says the same as (a) and (a) is all that is needed for freedom, freedom is consistent with determinism.

❖ But (a) says more than (b): compare a human agent acting and a damn breaking due to a flood.

❖ If the waters had been lower (that is, if the casual chain had been otherwise), the damn could have done otherwise than break.

❖ Similarly, if the bank robber had not been caused to rob the bank (that is, if the casual chain had been otherwise), the bank robber could have done otherwise.

❖ But that does not suffice for (a), which means: S could have *chosen* to do otherwise.

Libertarianism Fails

- ❖ ‘Perhaps there is less need to argue that the ascription of responsibility also conflicts with an indeterministic view of action—with the view that the act. . .is not caused at all. If the act. . .was not caused at all, if it was fortuitous or capricious, happening so to speak out of the blue, then, presumably, no one—and nothing was responsible for the act.’ —Chisholm (*RR*, 461)

The Impasse

- ❖ ‘Our conception of action, therefore, should be neither deterministic nor indeterministic. Is there any other possibility?’ —Chisholm (*RR*, 462)

The Way Out?

- ❖ ‘We must not say that every event involved in the act is caused by some other event; and we must not say that the act is something that is not caused at all. The possibility that remains, therefore, is this: we should say that at least one of the events that are involved in the act is caused not by other events, but by something else instead. And this something else, can only be the agent. . .’—Chisholm (*RR*, 462).

A Different Paradigm

- ❖ Perhaps we should revisit some of the structuring presuppositions of our problem.
 - ❖ In particular, we might reflect on the notion of *causation*.
 - ❖ Recall our definition:
 - ❖ By *cause* let us understand an *antecedent sufficient condition*.
 - ❖ This gave rise to the image of the *domino world*.
 - ❖ Crucially, this formulation restricts causation to being a relation between *events*.

One Hopeful Thought

- ❖ With the introduction of *agent causes*, one may think that there is some *tertium quid*, which provides a way off the merry-go-round.
- ❖ We embrace neither compatibilism nor libertarianism, but hold that *immanent causes* are active in the world.
- ❖ Agent causation is a primitive kind of causation, not reducible to *transeunt causation*.

Transeunt Causes

- ❖ The notion of cause we have been presupposing is that of a *transeunt cause*:
 - ❖ c is a transeunt cause \equiv_{df} (i) c is an event or state of affairs; and (ii) c is an antecedent sufficient condition for some effect e , which is some other event or state of affairs.
- ❖ So, in sum, causation relates events or states of affairs.
 - ❖ Causes thus construed seem to need to be active, to be themselves in motion to bring about motion.
 - ❖ This is, roughly, domino causation.

Immanent Causes

- ❖ When an agent makes something happen, we have an instance of *immanent causation*.
- ❖ c is an immanent cause $=_{df}$ (i) c is an agent; and (ii) c does something such that some effect e accrues, where e is typically some event or state of affairs.
- ❖ Crucially, when an agent brings something about, this is something the agent *does*, as opposed to merely makes happen.

Making Something Happen

- ❖ ‘Thus, a staff moves a stone, and is moved by a hand, which is moved by a human being.’ —Aristotle (*Physics* 256a6-8)
- ❖ What is it for a human being to move her hand?
- ❖ Consider two senses of the sentence: “S moves her hand.”
 - ❖ S, whose right hand is paralysed, moves it onto her lap with her left hand.
 - ❖ S, who reaches for a cup of tea, moves her hand in the direction of the tea cup.
 - ❖ Perhaps, in the second case, we are confronted with an instance of agent causation.

Doing vs. Making Happen

- ❖ When S reaches for her tea cup, this is something she *does*.
- ❖ When S reaches for her tea cup, she makes countless other things *happen*, without doing them: she makes it the case that air molecules move, that her shadow to move on the wall behind her, that her shirt sleeve unwrinkles a bit. . .
- ❖ What she *does*, however, is reach for her tea cup.

You and Your Brain

- ❖ ‘It is true that the agent does not *do* anything with his brain, or to his brain, in the sense in which he *does* something with his hand and does something to the staff. But from this it does not follow that the agent was not the immanent cause of something that happened with his brain.’ —Chisholm (*RR*, 462)
- ❖ ‘The point is, in a word, that whenever a man does something A, then (by ‘immanent causation’) he makes a certain cerebral event happen, and this cerebral event (by ‘transeunt causation’) makes A happen.’ —Chisholm (*RR*, 463)