

AGENT-CAUSATION, SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, & RATIONALITY

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Oct 13, 2020

1 Identification & Agent-Causation

1.1 Frankfurt on Persons

A “person” possesses:

1. Self-consciousness
2. Rational capacities
 - Means-end reasoning
 - Critical evaluation of attitudes
3. First-order desires
4. Second-order volitions
 - capacity or actual volitions?
- Persons form a class distinct from either “wantons” or mere “animals”
 - Wantons lack (4), while animals lack both (2) and (4)

1.2 Identification & Wholeheartedness

- Why do we need identification?¹
- What is identification?²
 - Is it a causal notion?
 - * How could Frankfurt appeal to a causal notion here if his theory is “non-historical”?³
 - * Is it causality from the agent or from some proper part thereof?
 - If non-causal then in what sense could identification be an instance of the agent “making up one’s mind” (p. 172) concerning what to do?
- Who (or what) is doing the identifying?

1.3 The Problem of Agency

Authorship condition: the concept of an agent requires that the agent *does* something, as opposed to the agent’s merely being the *subject* of behaviour (or intention to behave)⁴

Agent-causation: S ϕ ’s just in case S , who is not identical with any of their s -involving mental states and events, non-deviantly causes ϕ

¹ the assignment of desires to different hierarchical levels does not by itself provide an explanation of what it is for someone to be identified with one of his own desires rather than with another. It does not make clear why it should be appropriate to construe a person as participating in conflicts within himself between second-order volitions and first-order desires, and hence as vulnerable to being defeated by his own desires, when a wanton is not to be construed as a genuine participant in (or as having any interest in the outcomes of) conflicts within himself between desires all of which are of the first order. (Frankfurt 1988, 166)

² When a person identifies himself decisively with one of his first-order desires, this commitment “resounds” throughout the potentially endless array of higher orders. (Frankfurt 1988, 21)

³ The fundamental responsibility of an agent with respect to his own character is not a matter of whether it is as the effect of his own actions that the agent has certain dispositions to feel and to behave in various ways. (Frankfurt 1988, 171)

⁴ What makes us agents rather than mere subjects of behaviour—in our conception of ourselves, at least, if not in reality—is our perceived capacity to interpose ourselves into the course of events in such a way that the behavioural outcome is traceable directly to us. (Velleman 1992, 465-6)

Event-causation: S φ 's just in case certain s -involving mental states and events non-deviantly cause φ

- QUESTION: Is authorship possible without agent-causation?
 - Velleman: Yes, we just need a desire that satisfies the “agent role”
 - Franklin: No, only agent-causation can satisfy the authorship condition

1.4 Franklin's “It Ain't Me” Argument

1. An agent s self-determines a decision d only if (i) s adjudicates between his various motivations for or against d , and (ii) on the basis of this adjudicating process s determines or causes d .
 2. If the members of some set of states and events play the causal roles of (i) and (ii), then s plays the causal roles of (i) and (ii) only if s is identical to (some members of) this set of states and events.
 3. An agent is not identical to any state or event or any set of states and events.
 4. Therefore, if the members of some set of states and events play the causal roles of (i) and (ii), then s does not self-determine d .
 5. Therefore, if s self-determines d , then s , and not merely states and events, causes d .
- Velleman's “identification reductionism about self-determination” denies (2); the agent can count as playing a distinctive causal role even if his causal role is played by states and events that are not identical to him, so long as these are states and events with which he is identified (Franklin 2016, 1124)
 - The functional role of the agent is to “take sides”, and whatever plays this role cannot be identical with whatever it may take sides for/against⁵
 - The satisfier of this role is another state or event that can motivate the agent – i.e. a desire
 - The desire that fills this functional role is the desire to act in accordance with reasons⁶

2 Burge on Reason and Self-Consciousness

2.1 Lichtenberg's Objection

- The introduction of the first-person concept requires special argument. What could justify the move from ‘there is thinking’ to ‘I am thinking’?⁷
- The *Cogito* either is either trivial (because circular) or invalid

Lichtenberg's Challenge: Full understanding of reason or cognition can dispense with the first-person concept: the concept has no special epistemic status or cognitive value. It has at most merely ‘practical’ uses (Burge 2013, 388)

⁵ The functional role of agent is that of a single party prepared to reflect on, and take sides with, potential determinants of behaviour at any level in the hierarchy of attitudes; and this party cannot be identical with any of the items on which it must be prepared to reflect or with which it must be prepared to take sides. (Velleman 1992, 477)

⁶ What really produces the bodily movements that you are said to produce, then, is a part of you that performs the characteristic functions of agency. That part, I claim, is your desire to act in accordance with reasons, a desire that produces behaviour, in your name, by adding its motivational force to that of whichever motives appear to provide the strongest reasons for acting, just as you are said to throw your weight behind them. (Velleman 1992, 479)

⁷ We are acquainted only with the existence of our sensations, imaginations, and thoughts. ‘Thinking is going on’ (*Es denkt*) is what one should say, just as one says, ‘Lightning is occurring’ (*Es blitzt*). Saying ‘*Cogito*’ is too much, as soon as one translates it as ‘I am thinking’. Accepting, postulating, the I is a practical requirement. (Lichtenberg 1971, 412, §76)

2.2 Burge's Reply

Burge's Challenge: 'I' plays a central and necessary role in "fully understanding" the concept of reason and reasoning

1. Reasoning requires a point of view

- The Lichtenberg Objector is unable to explain how one thought might follow from another, or why one thought might be incompatible with another.⁸

2. The concept of reason (and related concepts like propositional attitude, reason, change of mind) requires the first-person concept

- (a) All reasons (i.e. rational evaluations) are also reasons-to-act; reasons necessarily not only evaluate but have force in forming, changing, confirming attitudes in accord with the reasons (Burge 2013, 389)
- (b) So in order to have a reason to ϕ one must, in some way, be motivated to thereby ϕ
- (c) In order to be rationally motivated to ϕ one must be able to understand that some rational evaluation as to ϕ -ing applies in one's own case
- (d) \therefore Understanding that some rational evaluation applies to one's own case entails that one has the first-person concept

- AN OBJECTION: The argument is either unsound (because we should reject (B-1) or circular/question-begging⁹)

3 Boyle on Rational Activity

- (Rational) Belief is under the direct or "intrinsic" agential control of the believer.
- Two Kinds of cognitive control:
 1. Extrinsic control, in which the control over doxastic states is extrinsic to having those states¹⁰
 2. Intrinsic control, in which control is exercised not (or not just) in the production of the belief but in the activity of holding it.¹¹

3.1 Against Extrinsic Control Theories

- Causal variant:
 - One exercises control in believing that P only by judging that P, whose effect is (normally) the belief that P
 - OBJECTION: As causes precede their effects, so judgment must precede belief, but judging P presupposes believing P\side[]\{judging that P surely requires not merely affirming to myself that P (whatever that might mean) but affirming P in the conviction that it is true. My conscious act of judging P must be expressive of my having settled on a view

⁸ 'Thinking is going on', needs 'relativization'-intuitively, to a thinker or point of view. (Burge 2013, 388)

⁹ I do not mean by 'motivational' to imply some interposition of desire or motive or volition. I mean that to understand reasons one must know how to use reasons, and indeed actually use them, to support or change one's own attitudes in one's own thinking practice. To understand the notion of reason, one must be susceptible to reasons. Reasons must have force for one, and one must be able to appreciate that force. Considerations seen as reasons must have some tendency to affect one's judgments and inferences according to the norms associated with the reasons. And one must recognize that this is so. Having reasons and having some capacity to be moved by them—to think or otherwise act on account of them—are necessarily connected. (Burge 2013, 389)

¹⁰ my agential control over my beliefs is extrinsic: I exercise it, not in believing itself, but in doing certain other things that affect my beliefs. (Boyle 2009, 126)

¹¹ we exercise our capacity for cognitive self-determination, not primarily in doing things that affect our beliefs, but in holding whatever beliefs we hold. (Boyle 2009, 127)

about whether P, namely: Yes, indeed, P. But it is hard to see how this can mean anything less than: it must be expressive of my believing that P. So it is hard to see how I can judge that P unless I believe that P. (Boyle 2009, 130)

- Non-causal variant:
 - One exercises control in believing that P by virtue of acquiring the disposition to judge that P, where disposition and occurrent judgment are “internally” related—i.e. the belief is the disposition to judge, which is its manifestation
 - This seems immune to Boyle’s objection, but still construes agency only in terms of what the agent (voluntarily) does to bring about the acquisition of the disposition.
- What is the real problem?
 1. The extrinsic relation between the belief and the judgment?
 2. The position that control over doxastic states is at best indirect?
 3. The construal of belief as an inactive state?

References & Further Reading

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