

Power and Agency: E.J. Lowe's Philosophy of Action

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E.J. Lowe attempts to meld elements of volitionalism and agent causalism in his recent essay on philosophy of action, *Personal Agency*.¹ United in the belief that our mental states are inefficacious when it comes to producing volitions, agent causalists disagree over just how to formulate an alternative understanding of mental agency. We exercise self-control so as to appropriate objects of reactive attitudes by being the ultimate sources of our behavior- here they concur. But the precise nature of the relation between agents and the volitions that ensue upon exercises of our will is disputed. Volitionalists, for their part, refuse to countenance talk of substances as causal relata. Only events are effective, they see our mental lives and attendant behavior proceeding without us being in any way involved except, perhaps, as spectators with a rooting interest in their having favorable outcomes, the threat such a nullification would pose to our belief in free will apparently being of less concern to them than the imperative of subsuming all occurrences under natural laws.

I shall concentrate here on drawing the distinction between Lowe's characterization of the agent-volition relation and its standard formulations, yielding a 'middle path' between the above views. I shall also consider his rejection of event causation and rebuttal of several objections to his position. My contention shall be that his synthesis vitiates the agent causalist's ability to respond to this criticism.

¹ E. J. Lowe, *Personal Agency: The Metaphysics of Mind and Action* (PA), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Agent causalists may be divided into those who treat basic actions- the ones whose successful performance does not entail the completion of a series of discrete tasks ordered as means to an end- as the immediate effects of an agent's spontaneous exercises of his will and those who regard them as those exercises themselves.² Lowe places himself in the latter camp.³ But whereas others take that exercise to be a matter of *causing* a volition, he sees it as a(n) "performance" or "enactment" of one.⁴ Instead of the relation of cause to effect here, we have that of performer to performed, though the performer's performing of his volition may have future effects in the form of behavior. Thus, an action on his part, a performance in which he is intimately involved, not he himself, initiates an agent's activity. How, then, can he be *its caus sui*? Indeed, why should we think of him as a cause at all, since he performs, rather than produces, his volitions? Echoing Aristotle, Lowe maintains that the will would not be a 'rational power' were its exercises determined by anything else, including reasons.⁵ It is, moreover, a person engaged in those exercises- acting, albeit as the performer, not the cause, of the volitions that immediately ensue, initiating the simple bodily movements of which our more complex activities are composed. An agent spontaneously enacting the willingness to proceed in a certain manner (rather than another) will eventually commence, unless he changes his mind or is thwarted, to take that course of action, making him its progenitor, deserving praise or blame depending upon the nature of that conduct. Strictly speaking, though, these mediate effects of our volitions are not actions, but 'action results,' the former being limited to volition performances and productions of the latter by those enactments.⁶

² Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 133, note 1.

³ PA, p. 7.

⁴ PA, pp. 7-8.

⁵ PA, pp. 154-9, p. 195.

⁶ PA, pp. 7-9, pp. 147-8.

The initiative of *any* instance of causation, according to Lowe, would be provided by a basic action on the part of a substance, an event whose only part is the determined or 'spontaneous' exercise of a power, either natural or rational.⁷ The former would either operate spontaneously or be caused to exercise itself by another substance, exercising one of its own powers without forethought occurring on its part.⁸ The latter's exercises would be spontaneous and for reasons.⁹ (On pain of an infinite regress, there must be actions not completed by means of the performance of other actions.¹⁰) Nor, in the case of human agency can initiative be taken as merely the effect of events involving other substances, as when a tree is displaced by the impact of a rolling boulder.¹¹ Our basic actions seem to stem solely from self-determination, commencing with an exercise of power, something they share with the initiatives of other animate creatures. But aren't those volitions the effects of the beliefs and desires we cite as their reasons?

It would be inconsistent with the 'naturalistic' psychology currently in vogue amongst philosophers to deny the existence of laws linking such states of mind with our choices: why should we think of them as being any different than the scores of other temporally proximate event types between which scientists have discovered a nomological bond? But, as reasons, Lowe contends, our beliefs and desires cannot be determinative in the matter of decision making.¹² Reasons provide guidance; they are in no way compulsory. So given this conflict between a normative and nomological principle- given that practical reasoning presents us with a comparative evaluation of courses of action without being able to effect the choice of one over

⁷ PA, pp. 146-51, 154-7.

⁸ PA, pp. 149-151.

⁹ PA, pp. 7-8, pp. 155-7.

¹⁰ PA, p. 126.

¹¹ PA, pp. 127-8.

¹² PA, pp. 8-11, pp. 130-1, pp. 155-9, pp. 182-3, pp. 188-9, p. 195. Richard Taylor had earlier insisted on drawing a distinction between reasons and causes. Cf. *Action and Purpose*, (New Jersey: Humanities, 1973) pp. 139-52.

the others, we must posit the exercise of a rational power, as opposed to a natural one, as the uncaused cause of its effects, the willingness to act in a certain way. To deny the existence of such a power is self-contradictory as such a contention itself issues through the employment of reason.¹³

Lowe goes on to altogether eschew the notion of event causation. Our folk locutions notwithstanding, the fact of the matter is only substances are empowered, capable of effecting change.¹⁴ It is via our scientific activities, after all, that natural laws come to be known, practices in which passive creatures, beings incapable of altering the course of events, could not engage.¹⁵ Thus, in those contexts where we would maintain that one event has caused another what has really occurred is an exercise of power by which the subject of the former has brought about the latter change in things. An explosion, e.g., is impotent; it cannot destroy a building nor do anything else. Bombs, on the other hand, are capable of destruction. A bomb by exploding will eradicate its surroundings. It is by 'acting' in that way, having itself been acted upon by another substance, that it destroys things, exercising its natural power, explaining the connection we posit between explosions and destruction. Its involvement in an explosion, thus, consists in its exercise of its destructive power.

Lowe thus partially vindicates both sides in the debate over human agency, those who view it as belonging to the natural order of things and those who contend it transcends that system, confirming a negative thesis of each disputant. Agents *simpliciter* do not cause their basic actions, (nor are the latter themselves to be regarded as cases of one thing causing another)-score one for event causalists. We enact or perform our volitions, which turn out, pace Richard

¹³ PA, p. 157.

¹⁴ PA, pp. 143-4.

¹⁵ PA, pp. 134-5.

Taylor, to be efficacious in producing behavior: a mental act creating a state of mind yielding the conduct it intends.¹⁶ But, despite beings actions, these enactments are not events either, so as to entail a causal connection to prior events. The 'buck does stop' with our basic actions, we cannot attribute our conduct even partially to historical conditions over which we had no control, as agent causalists have always maintained. An agent by exercising his rational power initiates a sequence of events terminating, if left unchecked, in the action he intended in that performance. Purposeful activity is slated to be an effect of the enactment of his willingness to engage in the conduct of which it is composed. The disappearing agent of event causalism, a mere 'patient' in an older now discarded terminology, thus, re-emerges in Lowe's philosophy as the performer of his volitions, his agency now attendant upon him doing something on his own, the causal independence of his exercise of power rendering him the sole source of his behavior: it stemming from the exercise of a free will.¹⁷ Substances, then, do play a part in bringing about their activities; those who contend that the deductive-nomological model fails to account for human agency turn out to be right as well.

No party to the dispute would deny that our actions act as causes; Lowe does not face the same tough sell here as agent causalists, bucking naturalistic trends in psychology.¹⁸ But, by the same token, there will be those who question his spontaneity thesis. Actions appear to be paradigmatically events and, thus, causally related to prior occurrences. Is a distinction between rational power exercises and events tenable? Sans a reason for drawing it, it appears ad hoc, a case of special pleading. Events are changes. An agent changes himself in exercising his rational power, 'switching' a faculty of his from inactive to operational. For that matter, is it

¹⁶ Taylor, *op.cit.*, chs.5-7.

¹⁷ PA, pp. 158-61.

¹⁸ PA, pp. 150-1, pp. 176-8.

plausible to distinguish between performing a volition and causing it to exist?¹⁹ Aren't we perilously close to the Aristotelian notion of an efficient cause here?²⁰ In performing a dance-dancing, I make a dance happen, causing there to be a dance where there was none. Our basic actions, willing or choosing things, needn't be uncaused for us to exercise a free will, just nomologically independent of prior events. What must be spontaneous is my will being exercised *by me*, not it simply being exercised: I move myself upon deliberation to will in one way rather than another, my subsequent willingness having me as its efficient cause. Should the cause of my movement be inquired after, we may respond that I am my own efficient cause, a self-mover, *a la* Anselm.²¹ Everything would then have a cause here, including the first cause, one moving oneself. Lowe himself speaks of the basic action, the enactment of a volition, as a case of 'self-movement.'²² But, then, shouldn't its agent be credited with causing that movement, a change in his will?

Militating against this conception of things, Lowe would contend, is the role played by the aforementioned distinction between a natural and rational power in establishing the existence of free will.²³ Our freedom does not simply consist in being autonomous: were one unable to enact but one volition, even though on one's own, one would not yet be exercising a free will. But, a rational power, precisely because its exercise must not be determined by anything, provides us with the ability to enact more than one choice upon deliberation. It is, thus, not merely spontaneous, but 'two-way.' But, as previously asked, why should this sort of

¹⁹ So Taylor: '(T)o say that an agent performs an act is exactly synonymous with saying that he makes something happen or is the cause of it.' *Action and Purpose*, p. 130.

²⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Physics* 194 b, 30 in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

²¹ St. Anselm of Canterbury, *On the Fall of the Devil*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.232.

²² PA, p. 128.

²³ PA, p. 156.

flexibility require total spontaneity, freedom even from oneself? Causal dependence of my choices upon the comparative strength of competing beliefs and desires would indeed short-circuit my will. Should I, though, cause one set of them to become salient, in making the choice they suggest, I remain in charge of my practical reasoning. Nor would they cease to provide guidance for my imposition of order. If we deploy here Aristotle's notion of a material cause, being that out of which a thing is made, its constitutive principle, we obviate Lowe's dichotomy, which he himself seems to realize is false when he says that '(w)hat is distinctive about the will as a power is that exercises are precisely *not* exogenously determined by *exterior* causes' (second emphasis mine).²⁴ A an agent's choice would not be rendered irrational for having him as its efficient cause; it needn't be completely undetermined in order to be made 'for' the beliefs and desires the contents of which serves as its reasons or rational basis. Indeed those principles complement each other in producing a cogent decision, the former being necessary for realizing and then deciding upon the normative potential of the latter, disconnected facts sans his practical reasoning.²⁵ (Compare: 'The carpenter by employing carpentry made a desk out of that wood for (because of) its smoothness. If he hadn't seen its potential it would still be just a nice looking piece of wood.')

Lowe dismisses the suggestion that an agent controls his will as redundant, if not unintelligible.²⁶ Self-control, by his lights, simply means being in possession of such a faculty, a power exercise whose exercise would be guided by reasons yet independent of preceding events. To speak of an agent exercising this power would add nothing to our understanding of autonomy.

²⁴PA, p. 174. Cf. Aristotle, *Physics* 194 b, 25 in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

²⁵ Lowe correctly contends that it is not our beliefs and desires per se that form reasons, but the 'states of affairs' that they represent. PA, pp. 180-1; 200-10. I shall not attempt to defend his externalism, my focus being his dispute with event causalists and other critics of agent causalism.

²⁶ PA, p. 195.

Worse, it would make it appear as if something else is in charge of the very faculty providing self-control! My power of choice could not be exercised by another person, just my actual choices supplanted so as to conform to his plans. No one else could do my willing for me; to actually make my 'choices' would be to eradicate my will, not oversee its operations. Lowe maintains that the same thing is true of an agent himself: to say that he exercises his will is to posit a power controlling another power- a model of nullification, not self-control.²⁷

One charge of incoherency deserves another, I suppose. For my part, I find the notion of a power *sans* an executive, difficult to wrap my head around, much like the properties and mental states posited by the 'bundle theorist', existing minus subjects. If the will is the instrument of willing, making choices, then we should expect that a person controls its use, employs it to serve his purposes. Tools do not use themselves. To put things in Lowe's own terms, if volitions are enacted or performed, can we not ask by whom? Must there not be an actor or performer here? And would that individual not be in charge of his will, the person who exercises it, causing choices to be made? The analogy with brainwashing simply does not hold. In exercising my will, I do not overpower another power, but act as its executive. For, unlike another man's will, which *could* 'break' my own, I am not another power- I am empowered.

Several telling points are made by Lowe against the so-called 'luck objection' to agent causalism.²⁸ Were a choice undetermined by preceding events, as the agent causalist insists, those very same events would be consistent with the making of another choice- a 'replay' of them could be followed by a different alternative being selected. A free choice, on their terms, entails a possible future in which another decision is made. Thus, given any number of replays of the

²⁷ PA, pp. 196-7.

²⁸ PA, pp. 190-1.

events leading up to a given choice, if such things are possible, the percentage of replays in which that choice is made must be less than 100: an agent having once chosen honesty over deceit lacking a sufficient condition for his preference would have to opt for dishonesty in some replications of his life up to that point. But, so the objection concludes, such variation is at odds with self-control. Fickleness implies a chance element nullifying the exercise of a free will. Unless there is something guaranteeing the recurrence of a choice of honesty every time all the particulars preceding it are repeated, it was a matter of luck that it was made in the first place.

Lowe initially points out that the possibility of a choice not being made does not imply that replays of its history would yield an objective probability of what actually transpired.²⁹ There would be no array of an agent's deliberation's outcomes across possible worlds corresponding to what we actually observe over time in assigning probabilities to various event types. Minus this distribution there is no reason to treat its actual occurrence as a matter of chance. That lying was a live option for a truth-teller right up to the instant he abjured dishonesty, does not mean that it is possible to specify the likelihood of him actually making that choice. Thus, we should not say that it was due to chance.

He goes on to deny that the notion of a rational agent is consistent with an array of possible worlds in which a given deliberation yields conflicting choices.³⁰ The agent causalist must concede that cases of akrasia exist in logical space alongside worlds in which we follow reason. He must also allow for the possibility of a significantly different assessment of the same conative material: as Scotus avers, exercising practical reason entails making choices regarding such things as where next to 'turn' one's thoughts, how much weight to attach to various

²⁹ PA, pp. 191-2.

³⁰ PA, pp. 192-4.

considerations, how long to dwell on any one concern, and when to suspend deliberation.³¹ Every one of these decisions could go more than one way; practical reasoning is shot through with indeterminism. Thus, it is not possible in principle to simply replay the deliberations preceding a given decision; things are cognitively much too complex. It is not just the outcome of such a process that entails an alternative; but all the other preceding choices by which it will eventually be justified. A veritable garden of forking paths is the making of a decision. Who can say which one an agent will take the next time he finds himself in its environs? There could be no hypothetical replaying of such an intellectual exercise; the self-control involved, entailed by its being rational, renders it *sui generis*. But without a recurrence of some sort, we lose the basis for assigning it a probability, making it appear random.

Lowe concludes his rebuttal by noting a crucial distinction between truly random events, such the decaying of an atom or landing of dice, and decision making.³² The latter would be sanctioned by reasons, the considerations 'in light of which' it appears rational. The former are entirely lacking an intellectual mandate. Inanimate objects are obviously not responding to reasons in behaving as they do; an agent exercising a rational power is acutely aware of normative requirements. It will be no accident, then, when he makes up his mind in favor of one of the courses of action he's been considering. That plan will have more going for it in terms of his own interests, beliefs and desires, acting as guides to successful agency. We would not say that it just happened by chance that he opted for it rather than another; things didn't randomly turn out that way. No, he acted as he did because of his reasons, (without them usurping his role as an efficient cause). Had he chosen differently it would have been because he himself, in

³¹ Blessed John Duns Scotus, *The Oxford Commentaries*, in *Free Will*, ed. Sidney Morgenbesser, and James Walsh (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1962) pp. 36-7 and *Duns Scotus on the Will & Morality*, selected and translated by Allan B. Woller, O.F.M., ed. William A. Frank (Washington DC: The Catholic University Press, 1997) pp. 150-1.

³² PA, pp. 194-5. Taylor had earlier made the same point in *Action and Purpose*, pp. 139-152.

making *that* choice, would have *ipso facto* also chosen an alternative set of reasons as more cogent (or simply act akratically). It is obvious that none of this ratiocination is going on in the case of unpredictable events involving inanimate objects. Choices may be odd but are never wholly inexplicable. For a truly random event, no account could be given of why it occurred rather than whatever else that had some likelihood of transpiring.

The riposte precluded by Lowe's insistence that volitional enactment be wholly spontaneous is that an exercise of the will *does* have an efficient cause- the agent himself. My willing is no accident or random occurrence; I myself bring it about, in the sense of causing my rational power to become active, that a certain choice is made. Its contingency, then, should not be equated with randomness. The existence of other possible worlds in which I enact a different volition, moreover, only points up that the power exercised here is rational or 'two-way,' allowing for contrary responses to the same set of circumstances, not a lack of self-control. In no possible world does my willingness to act in one of those ways come about by chance: each one is the immediate effect of my activation of that power, for good or ill, causing one choice or another to be made, in conformity with the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Unscientific though it may sound, the 'buck-stopping' explanation of any of my choices is me myself.

Lowe's response to his Illusionist critics, who insist that those who believe in free will are deluding themselves, is a compelling *tu quoque*.³³ Their position, they would insist, is rational, that is, freely chosen for a good reason. But such an exercise of theoretical reason obviously involves making free choices, as above, an agent directing his thought whither *he* will. Had it been adopted for reasons they had been caused to concur with by forces beyond their control, they could hardly be said to have proceeded rationally. The very rationality of their position,

³³ *PA*, pp. 197-8.

thus, precludes it from being true- somewhere along the way to its adoption a mistake in reasoning must have been (freely) made. On the other hand, if it were true, its devotees would have to confess irrationality. Illusionism, it seems cannot be both true and rational. Feigning belief in free will, I would add, is not a tenable response to this dilemma. Self-deception, were it even possible, would require convincing oneself of the truth of a proposition that one has already decided is false, the only possible impetus for 'assent' then being sheer self-control. The project, if reflected upon, would only confirm one's volitional sovereignty, that one serves as the prime mover of one's activities, reigning over one's will as the efficient cause of its choices.