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Causers, Causes, and Doers

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Abstract: The view that to act is to cause change and that to be an agent is to be the causer of an action's result has gained traction in the past twenty years or so. This view seems to have two significant corollaries. First, there is no distinction between doing an action and causing its result. Second, any two actions that have the same result will turn out to be identical. Ruben (2018) has recently used the first corollary to challenge the view, and the second corollary raises further problems for the view. This paper aims to refine this view and defend it against the challenges that arise out of its two corollaries. It is argued that being the cause of an action's result is not the same as being its causer and that doing an action is not just causing its result but causing it in a specific way.

Key words: Action – Agency – Causation – Causing – Powers

1 Introduction

The 'Acting-Causing view' (AC) purports to answer at least three central questions in the philosophy of action and agency:¹ (1) what is it to act? (2) How do we individuate actions? (3) What is it to be the agent of an action of a certain type? According to AC, (1) to act is to cause change or acting is causing change; (2) for two actions A_1 and A_2 , $A_1=A_2$ only if the result of $A_1 =$ the result of A_2 (Alvarez and Hyman 1998, 234; Hyman 2015, 63), and (3) an agent A is the doer of an action F only if A causes the result corresponding to the action of F -ing. 'Result' is used as a technical notion to be contrasted with 'consequences'. The connection between a result and an action is intrinsic while the connection between consequences and an action is extrinsic.

AC obviously has its rivals. But the view also has problems of its own. This paper is concerned with two problems that call into question AC's second and third answers.

¹ The view I have in mind here, inspired by Von Wright (1963), was proposed and developed by Alvarez and Hyman (1998); Alvarez (1999); Hyman (2015). Similar views on which to act is to bring about change are found in Steward (2014); Dancy (2017); Lowe (2008); Coope (2007); Thomson (1977; 1987); Bach (1980).

On the one hand, because proponents of AC claim that to be the agent of an action of F-ing is to cause its result, it implies that every doer or agent of an action is a causer of that action's result and that every causer is a doer. But as pointed out by Ruben (2018), we can easily devise scenarios in which the result of an action is caused by several agents while only one agent is the doer of the action. This means that the Acting-Causing view sometimes implies that there are too many doers per action.

On the other hand, some actions are not differentiated solely based on their results. For instance, the actions of kicking and of throwing a ball may have the same result – the occupation by a ball of the same series of locations at different times – but they still are distinct. This means that the Acting-Causing view sometimes fails to differentiate similar kinds of action.

These two challenges derive from the same source: the notion of causation in action found in AC remains unspecified. The aim of this paper is to elaborate on this notion of causation as well as on the idea that to be the doer of a certain action is to cause its result. At its core, I shall argue, lies a non-Humean conception of causation in action as a productive process towards results – although I do not claim that other proponents of AC would accept this claim. I also argue that the way in which results are brought about by agents bears on the identity of actions. Considering these puzzles, I hope, will both help to clarify the metaphysics of causation behind AC and provide answers to (2) and (3) which avoid our two problems.

The elaboration undertaken here is, I submit, a work that should be conducted prior to a more general assessment of the view's advantages over its main competitors, and I shall leave this task for another time. Despite its narrow focus on AC, this paper is part of a broader deflationary programme which consists in developing a minimal view of what it is to act (more on this in §2) – AC is a deflationary view about acting because it states that acting requires no guidance or control on the part of the agent over what she's doing, nor does it require that what she does is intentional (even under some description).

Here is the plan. In §2, I situate AC in this deflationary programme and clarify its aims. In §3, I introduce the first puzzle, which urges proponents of AC to set out their view of the causation of action. This then allows me in §4 both to specify the conception of causation underlying AC and to clarify, in the light of it, the idea that to act is to cause change and that actions are causings of change. §5 introduces the second puzzle and amends AC's answers to question (2) and (3). §6 responds to the main objection against AC presented in §3.

2 Deflationary Agency

We can start by clarifying where AC comes from and what it proposes. When we ask what acting is or what actions are, we may be concerned either with an unrestricted sense

of ‘acting’ or ‘action’, or with a restricted sense. Most inquiries conducted under the banner of ‘philosophy of action’ have concerned themselves with a restricted sense.² In fact, there is more than one restricted sense, for the introduction of one sense of ‘acting’ or ‘action’ is always done ‘with a goal in view’ (Anscombe 2005, 207) and different goals are pursued, e.g. to distinguish human actions (*actus humanus*) from the acts of human beings (*actus hominis*); intentional from non-intentional actions; the changes for which we are responsible in a mere causal sense from the changes for which we are morally responsible; or to mark off certain doings as truly ‘ours’, as reflecting the person we are, from those that are not part of our lives as we live them. These projects aim to delineate various things in which we have ‘a special interest’ (Anscombe, *Intention* § 46) such that not all instances of agency in an unrestricted sense deserve to be called ‘action’. When we ask what acting and actions are with a special interest in mind, therefore, we want to know what acting in *this* or *that* restricted sense is, e.g. what is it to act ‘under the command of reason’? Or what is it about our agency that makes it distinct from that of ‘beasts and babies’ (Anscombe 2005, 209)?

This is not the sense of ‘acting’ which AC purports to elucidate. The unrestricted sense of ‘agency’ and ‘action’ with which the view is concerned is particularly relevant when it comes to making sense of the idea that there are changes that substances (not only human and not only animate) make happen, and changes that they undergo. It is apposite not only when we talk about human and animal beings pulling, building, or breaking, but also when we talk about trees sucking up water from the ground, a Venus flytrap closing on its prey, or the action of aqua regia on gold.³

The fact that there is an unrestricted sense and various restricted senses of ‘agency’ and ‘action’ is beyond question.⁴ What can be called into question is *whether* and *when* we require restricted senses of ‘agency’ and ‘action’ to make sense of certain phenomena and distinctions. The value of pursuing a deflationary programme about agency lies in its capacity to answer these questions. This, however, is not a line I shall directly pursue in this paper, for we must first address our two initial puzzles.

3 Doers and Causers

According to AC, acting consists in causing change. What is the causation which proponents of AC claim is essential to understanding action? At first sight, it seems natural to understand the view that to act is to cause change as saying that to act is to be the first relatum of a causal relation. However, as we will see in this section, if AC is to

² For exceptions, see Skow (2018), Thomson (1977), Hyman (2015), Alvarez and Hyman (1998) and Mayr (2011).

³ Kenny presents a similar view (1975, 46).

⁴ For contemporary work using an unrestricted notion, see Ellis (2013); Thomson (1977); Harré and Madden (1975); Michon (2007); Hacker (2007); Harré (2013); Skow (2018); Paoletti (2018); Hyman (2015); Alvarez and Hyman (1998).

be taken seriously, this cannot be the sense of ‘causation’ which features in the claim that acting is causing.

Ruben rules out several options as to what ‘causing’ could mean. He argues that the acting-causing view requires a one-to-one correspondence between doers and causers, by which he means that:

- (i) there is always the same number of causers as doers
- (ii) because each causer is identical to a doer, and each doer is identical to a causer (2018, 185).

On Ruben’s account, a doer is the agent who performs a particular action, whereas a causer is the agent who causes the result of a particular action. The result of an action is the change on which the identity of the action depends, e.g. the identity of the act of killing Paul depends on Paul’s death. By contrast, an action’s consequences are the effects of the action on which the latter does not depend for its identity, e.g. a consequence of killing may be sadness, but this is not essential to the action of killing, whereas death is. Assuming that agents cause, not their action, but their action’s result, we may construe Ruben’s argument as follows:

- (P1) If acting is causing change, then there is a one-to-one correspondence between doers and causers.
- (P2) There is no one-to-one correspondence between doers and causers.
- (C) It is not the case that acting is causing change.

Let us grant the first premise and focus on the second. (P2) is taken by Ruben to reflect the idea that not every participant (the more remote as well as the more proximate) in an action is a doer of this action, even though several agents can be the causers of the very same result. To illustrate, suppose a powerful businesswoman wants her nemesis dead. She hires a hitman to kill him, and he does. Our businesswoman is not the doer of the action of killing, Ruben wants to claim, but a commander – she commanded or ordered the death of her victim. This seems right. However, Ruben claims that, although the businesswoman did not kill her nemesis, she caused her death (2018, 184). If so, we have at least two causers of the result of this killing but only one doer (of the killing) and the one-to-one correspondence between doers and causers collapses.

This latter claim, however, can be assessed only if we are clear about what causing a change means. As Ruben argues, the Acting-Causing view (AC) does not come with explicit instructions as to how we should understand ‘A causes the result of her action’ (2018, 194). That is, it does not say whether the agent A is *the* cause of the result, *a* cause of the result, *the whole*-cause of the result, *a part*-cause of the result, etc. To clarify the

latter point, Ruben turns to the theories of causation developed by Lewis (1987) and Mackie (1974).

Generally speaking, the picture of causation these theories put forward is one in which there is no metaphysical distinction between being a cause, being the cause, and being a mere condition of the occurrence of an event. The full or complete cause of an event is its whole causal history (Mackie 1974, 64), or the sum total of the positive and negative conditions for its occurrence.⁵ And every factor that belongs to this causal history or the sum total of the conditions is *a* cause of the event. Hence, any such factor shares with the others the same status as a cause of the event, that is, it is an insufficient but non-redundant part of an unnecessary but sufficient condition for the effect.⁶ Causes of an event, then, are factors that belong to the whole cause. In that sense, both the businesswoman and the hitman are causes of the nemesis's death, along with the oxygen deprivation of the latter's blood cells, the hitman's gun manufacturer, and the Earth which exerted its gravitational power on the bullet. This is clearly not the sense of 'cause' required to understand the claim that acting is causing change.

Perhaps the doer must be *the* cause as opposed to *a* cause of the result of an action. On this picture of causation, *the* cause is simply the most salient cause for the purpose of some particular inquiry, where it is selected from the multiple causes which are part of a given event's causal history (Lewis 1987, 215). Setting aside the details of the selectivity of the cause, Ruben distinguishes two sorts of selectivity.⁷

In the first case, the selection of the cause can vary between two situations depending on 'objective differences' in the structures of the situations. For instance, oxygen might be identified as the cause of a fire in a situation where both the presence of oxygen and the faulty wiring were necessary for the fire, if it is part of an experiment which requires for its normal functioning the exclusion of oxygen, whereas in a standard situation, the faulty wiring may be cited as the cause. In the second case, the selection of the cause can vary in a single situation depending on the interests of the inquirers. For instance, the government may identify rampant inflation as *the* cause of the loss of citizens' purchasing power, whereas the unions may identify the lack of reactivity from the government as *the* cause.

The second sort of selectivity is the most crucial for Ruben's argument. For, in that case, the selection of *the* cause is inquiry-dependent in the sense that it may vary in a single situation depending on the interests of the inquirers. This means that we could tell

⁵ We owe the idea that the real cause 'philosophically speaking' of an event is 'the whole cause', i.e. a sum of such conditions, to Mill. For a criticism of the idea of 'whole cause', see Steward (1997b).

⁶ Mackie claims that the statement 'X caused Y' entails that X was necessary *in the circumstances* for Y but does not entail that X was sufficient in the circumstances for Y (1974, 48).

⁷ For a discussion, see Ruben (2018, 196) and Hart and Honoré (1985, 34–35).

a story in which a different causal factor becomes the most salient and so becomes *the* cause (Ruben 2018, 197–198). Thus, if the doer is *the* cause, it implies that the doer of an action also varies along with *the* cause of the result of that action.

This does not yet show that there is no one-to-one correspondence between doers and causers (i.e. the cause). What it shows is that who or what is the doer of a given action can depend on the interests and purposes of the inquirers, much as the selection of the cause can. However, Ruben argues that ‘the idea of pragmatic choice of the doer that parallels the pragmatic choice of the causer is an absurdity’ (2018, 201). He rejects the idea on the grounds that it would lead to ‘agent disenfranchisement’. That is to say, it would amount to the possibility that ‘the *prima facie* agent of an action isn’t even really the action’s doer at all’, since the choice of the doer must also be pragmatic to match the pragmatic selection of the causer (2018, 202). This is implausible because, according to Ruben, ‘the doer(s) comes attached to the action’, which means that we cannot identify a token-action ‘such that it is metaphysically possible that it might be the action of either one agent or of another’ (2018, 201).

If so, (P2) is *prima facie* supported by the fact that there seems to be no obvious or sensible way to retain the one-to-one correspondence between doers and causers, without contradicting the plausible metaphysical truth that a doer necessarily comes attached to her action.⁸

Now, the whole argument is premised on the assumption that we should understand the claim that to act is to cause change as meaning that to act is to be the first relatum of a causal relation plus some further conditions, e.g. the more salient one with respect to the purpose of some inquiry. But nothing in AC requires interpreting its main claim in this way. On the contrary, I think that there is a deeper disagreement between proponents of AC and Ruben, relating to two very different ways of understanding the causation of action.

4 Agents, Causes and Causers

Ruben’s argument does not show that we should reject AC. Rather, it shows that *if* we adopt an understanding of causation based on a Humean metaphysical framework,⁹ then AC will, on all accounts of what ‘a cause’ is in such a framework, come out false.¹⁰ This sets the agenda for proponents of AC. Not only do they have to show why we should not

⁸ Strategies to maintain the correspondence have been offered by Hornsby (1980, Appendix) and Lewis (1987). They share Ruben’s Humean picture of causation. As I do not, I shall ignore them. But they also contradict Ruben’s metaphysical truth, and in any case, Ruben rejects both.

⁹ Mayr characterises the Humean framework by a set of three claims: (1) it rejects the idea of powers as genuine properties on a par with categorical properties; (2) its ontology of change includes only events which are separate and atomic; and (3) event-causation is the only acceptable form of causation (2017, 77).

¹⁰ Strictly speaking what the argument of the previous section showed is that Lewis’s and Mackie’s theories of causation render AC implausible.

adopt an understanding of causation based on a Humean metaphysical framework, but they must also provide an account of the sort of causation we find in action. The first task would take us too far out of the realm of action, and I shall leave it aside.¹¹ But we should note that working within a non-Humean framework has grown more popular in the last twenty years or so in the philosophy of action.¹² In any case, my argument does not depend on whether we can ‘get rid’ of the Humean framework. It will suffice for our goal if we show that, *given* an understanding of causation based on a broadly neo-Aristotelian metaphysical framework, the acting-causing view is a plausible account of the unrestricted notion of action, and avoids the challenges raised in the introduction. We now turn to the matter of specifying the kind of causation which, according to AC, is crucial to understanding action.

4.1 Causation, Causes and Causers

Broadly speaking we can distinguish two ways of understanding causation *where action is concerned*, one that pertains to the Humean metaphysical framework and one to the neo-Aristotelian one. According to the first one, causation is a timeless and generic relation between cause and effect, usually events or states (Lewis 1987; Mackie 1974). The causal order is conceived of as a network of causal links between events or states forming causal chains. Importantly, all the links in the network are the same generic causal link. This link is timeless, which means that whenever a causal relation holds between two things, there is no need to specify a time for the attribution of this causal relation.¹³ For instance, the causal relation between Hitler’s invasion of Poland on the 1st of September 1939 and the French declaration of war on the 3rd does not hold ‘at’ or ‘during’ a certain time. The main concern with causation on such a model is how we should understand the causal relation, e.g. in terms of counterfactual dependence or difference-making.

According to the second way of understanding causation, it is a productive process that essentially involves change and that is done by substances. But causation here is neither timeless nor a generic ‘link’. I am causing these words to be written or to appear on the screen now (during a certain lapse of time) and not at other times. And my production of these words can be accelerated, slowed down, interrupted, and continued – which is why causation as production is too ‘thick’ to be a relation.¹⁴ Moreover, it is not

¹¹ For attacks on Humean orthodoxies about causation, see Harré and Madden (1975); Marmodoro and Mayr (2019); Swinburne (2013); Hacker (2007); Hyman (2015); Steward (2012); O’Connor and Jacobs (2013); Ingthorsson (2021).

¹² Some advocates of a shift towards a ‘neo-Aristotelian’ metaphysics in the philosophy of action include: Steward (2009; 2012; 2014); Hornsby (2004; 2008; 2015); Hyman (2015); Alvarez and Hyman (1998); Stout (2007; 2010); Charles (2018); Lowe (2008; 2009); Mayr (2011; 2017).

¹³ For a discussion of these ideas, see Stout (2010, 102) and (2007, 139-40).

¹⁴ Hyman is careful not to claim that causation is a relation as he maintains that actions are not relations and that causings (and so actions) are instances of causation (2015, 56).

generic and as instances of causation are individual productive processes, there can be numerous sorts of causation.

This notion of ‘causation’ is not one we grasp by thinking about the word ‘cause’ but rather by bringing together causal notions such as push, carry, knock over, scrape, break, move, pull, burn, tear, shatter, hurt, bruise or stab.¹⁵ The idea is that different causal notions may correspond to different sorts of transactions or causation.

Following Steward, we can understand causation as productive-process as a transactional notion, a notion related to efficacy, causal powers, active doings, generation, whose paradigmatic cases are one object acting upon another and thereby producing a change.¹⁶ And we can understand causation as a-timeless-and-generic-relation as a modal notion, one related to causal relevance and difference making (1997a, 191–200). According to this view, the causal relevance of facts, states or property instantiations at times is a matter of what would have happened had a fact, a state or a certain property not obtained, existed, or been instantiated at that time.

But it should also be pointed out that the first kind of causation involves the second kind since whenever causation-as-production occurs, causal relations obtain (either between the substance at work and the change that is produced or between some aspects of the substance and the change).

Now that we have distinguished these two sorts of ‘causation’, we can distinguish between *causes* and *causers*. This in turn will take us closer to understanding what is meant by ‘causing’ when it is said that acting is causing change. The distinction between causes and causers is easily overlooked because the distinction between the two kinds of causation just outlined is also overlooked. It is sometimes assumed that causers – a concept which is assumed to apply only to substances – are simply substances which enter causal relations (e.g. Clarke 2003, 186–187; Dancy 2017, 134).

However, it is one thing to assume that substances can be causes and another to assume that they can be causers. Being a cause is simply being the first relatum of a causal relation. Substances may be causes in that sense along with events and, perhaps, facts and states. But while events, states or facts may be causes, they cannot be causers; only substances can. This is not, however, simply because of what they are, i.e. substances. This is because a causer is something that can ‘do’ or engage in causation-as-production, that is, something that can break, destroy, tear, cut, saw, wipe, push, pull, carry, load or

¹⁵ For the idea that these notions are causal notions, see Anscombe (1981).

¹⁶ Hacker argues that such transactions provide the prototype of causation and that the transactional notion is conceptually more basic than the timeless-and-generic-relation notion (2007, 75-80). I am sympathetic to the idea, but we need not assume the priority of the transactional notion here, only that it is to be distinguished from the second notion.

electrocute things, something that can act (on things). And, in turn, this is because substances bear causal powers, while events and facts do not.¹⁷

This latter claim may sound controversial depending on what is meant by ‘causal power’. If, for instance, one uses ‘causal power’ as a shorthand for the causal contribution (the causal relevance) features of objects have on effects, the claim that events and facts are powerless loses its intuitive appeal. But, if events and facts are powerless, it does not mean that they cannot be causes, that is, that they cannot enter causal relations. They are simply not *causers*. In any case, the notion of causal power behind this claim is a stronger one. This is the topic of the next subsection.

The crucial point for the moment is that AC connects action with causation-as-production and doers or agents with causers, not with causal relations and causes.

4.2 Causal Powers and Changes

As pointed out above, my goal is not to undertake a wholesale defence of the metaphysical framework, and in particular the conception of powers and changes, that will be laid out in this section. I shall simply make clear what the most controversial assumptions are within the neo-Aristotelian framework I am working with here.

To begin with, I take substances to be persisting concrete bearers of properties. Among the latter properties, I include powers. I assume that powers are genuine irreducible properties of substances. I take it that this is not controversial within this framework. A more controversial assumption is that substances are powerful because of their powers and that powers are themselves powerless.¹⁸ However, it is a natural assumption to make for any agent- or substance-causalist, and I will follow suit.

Powers (which I shall use as shorthand for ‘causal powers’ from now on) are characterised by at least two features: directedness and independence. To begin with, powers are essentially directed at something. There are several candidates as to what powers are directed at: end-states (e.g. your arm being up; you being at a certain location); changes or transitions (e.g. the rising of your arm; your movement), and processes or ways of bringing about change (e.g. the raising of your arm; your moving of your arm).¹⁹ I take powers to be directed both at changes or transitions and at productive processes, and I take their exercises to consist in the latter and to be distinct from the changes they

¹⁷ For discussion, see Ayers (1968, 118); Steward (2012, 209); Lowe (2008, 165; 2009, 345); Hacker (2007, 74).

¹⁸ For a defence of this claim, see Kuykendall (2021).

¹⁹ I follow the standard method of distinguishing transitive and intransitive movements by using the words ‘movement’ for intransitive movement, like the motion of a ball but also for changes like a contraction, and ‘moving’ or other gerundive forms to indicate the action or process of producing a change. For the distinction, see Steward (2012, 32–33); Hornsby (1980, 2–4); Hyman (2015, 54).

result in. We can say that powers involve a double directedness: towards both a change and the way of bringing it about (their exercise).²⁰ Let me explain.

First, powers are essentially directed at productive processes, for not any way of bringing about a change, say, that one's arm is up or rising, will count as an exercise or manifestation of the power to raise one's arm – imagine asking God to move your arm up to a location. This is the sense in which powers are powers 'to do' something, i.e. to bring about change or make an end-state come about.

Second, I favour the view that powers are also directed at changes, transitions, or movements rather than end-states for various reasons. One of its advantages is that it allows us to clearly distinguish between the results of the exercises of powers and the exercises themselves. In particular, it allows us to say, to take the case of movements, that powers to move are directed both at a transition or movement, i.e. the continuous occupation by a thing of different locations at different times, and at moving, i.e. the process of making something occupy these various locations at different times.²¹ I leave it to the reader to translate what I have to say into her own favourite theory of directedness.

The broader point where directedness is concerned is that given this double directedness, two things will be essential to the identity of a power: its exercise and the change or transition it is directed at. I call such changes 'transitions' to make it clear that these are not end-states; an example of the former is death, the transition from being alive to being dead, while an example of the latter is being dead. A change like a death or an arm-rising involves a sequence of stages which are themselves changes. These changes are the changes involved in what I previously called productive processes or causation-as-production. And if causers are able to engage in such productive processes because of their causal powers, exercising these powers will involve the characteristic series of stages we just described.

Now, some may think that the exercise of a power just is the characteristic series of stages that makes a transition. But this would be a mistake. For if exercises of powers are productive processes and thus instances of causation, they must be distinct from their product. If giving birth to a child is a productive process that culminates in the birth of a child (an event), what the mother does – giving birth – is not to be conflated with its result, which as we said, will typically itself involve a series of stages whose end-state will be a child being born. As Hyman points out, it is easy to overlook the distinction between the result and the production of the result in the case of bodily actions (2015, 56). In our example we can see that there is a distinction between the process of the mother giving

²⁰ For the idea of double directedness, see Mayr (2017, 78).

²¹ If it turns out that things like arm-raising or killings and things like arm-risings and deaths are identical, one might interpret my claim as saying that powers are doubly directed at two aspects of a single change, and thus that 'movings' and 'movements' are two aspects of a single change.

birth and the result of the process, since the latter has stages – in particular, the end-state (the child being born) – that spatiotemporally extend beyond the productive process. Differently put, the space-time zone in which the productive process of giving birth takes place is the whole mother, whereas the space-time zone in which the result occurs is not the whole mother: part of it occurs inside her, but part of it occurs (some partly and some entirely) outside her.²²

It is easy to overlook this distinction because processes are often construed as sequences of stages whose stages are linked by event-causal connections, where each stage is directly relevant to the next one. This is what Stout calls the ‘Russellian conception of processes’ (2010, 105–107). In the case of motion, such a process is the occupation by one entity of a continuous series of places at a continuous series of times. But such processes are precisely the result of what we called productive processes or causation-as-production.²³

What makes the confusion easier is that productive processes also have their own stages, much like their result. While a change like an arm-rising has stages like the contraction of muscles, the tension and flexion of muscles, the arm being at location s1, then s2, s3, etc., a productive-process like an arm-raising has stages like *contracting* muscles, *tensing* and *flexing* muscles, *moving* the arm to s1, then to s2, s3, etc. But the latter, rather than describing a sequence of changes involved in a transition like an arm-rising, describe the productive process of raising one’s arm. This productive process is an exercise of a causal power. Thus, exercises of powers (by substances) should not be conflated with the change they result in.

However, there is indeed a close connection between the exercises of powers and their results: the exercise of a power involves the characteristic series of stages of its result, in the sense that there is an essential and thus necessary connection between the two (Mayr 2017, 78; Stout 2007).

To introduce a bit of terminology, I call the series of stages that are parts of the result of the exercise of a power *the realisation of the power*. The realisation is the set of things that obtains when the power has been exercised – without intervention. Importantly, it is only if the realisation, the transitions between the characteristic series of stages, is due or determined by the power being exercised that we have a productive process of causing this change.²⁴ The exercise of a power or productive process we call a *causing*.

²² For similar arguments, see Hyman (2015, 64–65) and Dretske (1988, 16).

²³ Different accounts have been given of what distinguishes genuine processes from events or sequences of changes (Russellian processes). See Steward (2013) and Charles (2018). I remain neutral here on what, exactly, distinguishes them.

²⁴ For a defence, see Mayr (2017, 79).

The second feature of powers is the independence of the power with respect to what it is directed at. A power can exist without ever being manifested and it can exist when not manifested or exercised. Most powers also have manifestation conditions which might be either necessary and sufficient, or merely necessary but not sufficient for their exercise. But we need not go into this here. Another assumption I will make is that not all powers are intrinsic. By an ‘intrinsic power’ I mean a power that is such that its bearer can either lose it or gain it without undergoing any intrinsic change.²⁵ I will remain neutral on other features of powers.

4.3 Actions as Exercises of Causal Powers

How does all of this connect to action and acting? AC’s main claim is that to act is to cause change or to exercise a causal power. Actions are identified with exercises of causal powers, that is, with causings. But just as exercises of powers involve the realisation of the power, actions involve results, sometimes called ‘intrinsic change’ to contrast them with ‘extrinsic change’ or consequences. ‘Intrinsic’ indicates an essential relationship between an action and its result, in the sense that the identity of an action essentially depends on its result, i.e. an action of F-ing cannot be an action of F-ing if its result is not of a corresponding kind.²⁶ For instance, an action cannot be an arm-raising if its result is not an arm-rising, and there can be no killing without death. Consequences or extrinsic changes are not so related to action, e.g. a consequence of my arm-raising can be that a vase is knocked over, but this is not essential to my arm-raising.

In short, actions are partly defined as causing of their result. I say *partly* because productive processes or exercises of powers involve, much like their result, a characteristic series of steps. And this series of steps, which amounts to the way the result is brought about, is also crucial to determining the identity of an action.

Before we explain in what sense this is so, we can illustrate the connections AC draws between actions and powers thus:

²⁵ For a discussion, see Skow (2018, chap. 3).

²⁶ The terminology is Von Wright’s (1963, 34–45).

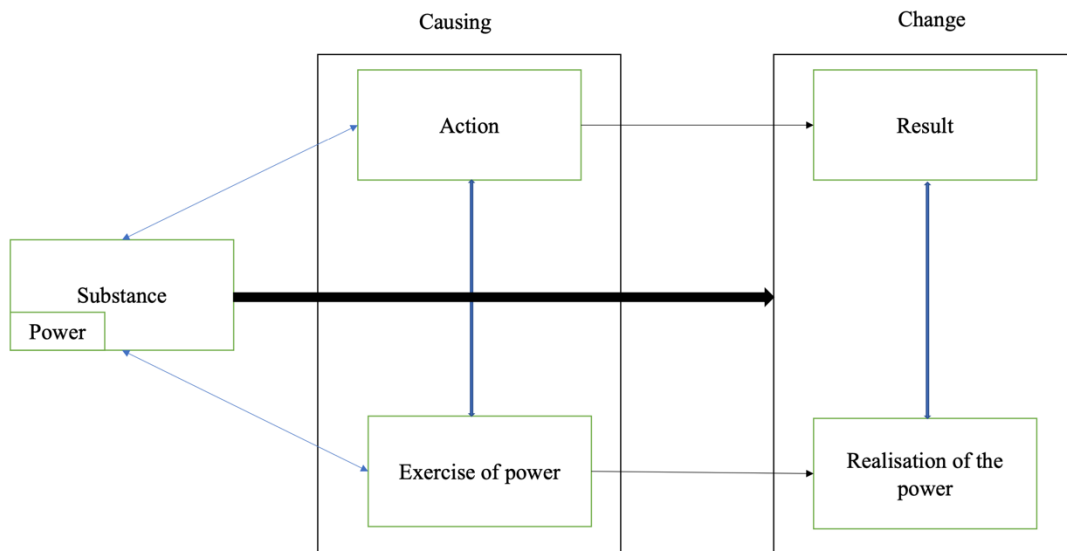


FIGURE 1. Relationships between actions and exercises of powers

The arrows between, respectively, action and exercise of power, and result and realisation of the power, means ‘is identical to’: actions are exercises of powers (by substances), and results are realisations of the powers of substances. The arrow between action and result and between exercise of powers and their realisation is a relation of ontological dependence, not a causal relation, as we made clear above: the identity of actions essentially depends on their their result, and exercises of powers get their identity at least partly from the realisation of the power of which they are an exercise. The arrows between substance and action, and substance and exercise of power, indicate the relation of ‘being the doer of’. The remaining black arrow in the middle indicates a causal relation between the substance and the change it causes by acting or by exercising its power.

In the next section, I introduce the second puzzle facing AC. Building on the framework introduced in this section, I attempt to answer two of the questions raised at the outset, namely: (2) how do we individuate actions? And (3) what is it to be the agent of an action of a certain type?

5 Ways of Causing Change

Why think that actions are not differentiated solely based on their results? Take the broad class of actions of causing changes in the spatial location of an object. The results of such actions share a similar structure: first, something done by which the object is moved, and then, the occupation of a series of places at different times by the object moved. Such actions are all ‘movings (of something)’. But now, when we turn to the structure of the actions or productive-processes themselves (which as we said above are distinct from the result) we see that there is more disparity that there is for their results. Let us illustrate.

Some ways of causing change(s) in the location of an object involve accompanying the motion of the object while others involve imparting motion which the object then

sustains itself.²⁷ For instance, kicking or throwing something is causing change in the location of this thing, but the productive process by means of which the location is changed has the following structure: the agent imparts motion to the object, which then ‘travels’ under its own momentum somehow independently to an end-point. By contrast, the actions of carrying or dragging an object, which are both causings of changes in the location of objects, do not share the same structure as kicking or throwing: the agent does not ‘impart’ but accompanies the motion she initiates, which means that the moved object does not ‘travel’ under its own momentum somehow independently, but moves in accordance with the agent’s own motion (Reimer 2021, 14204).

The structures of these two kinds of actions remain similar enough so that they might all be considered as ‘movings (of things)’. But we must be careful not to overlook their distinctiveness because their results share a similar structure, that is, the occupation by one entity of a continuous series of places at a continuous series of times. Thus, what matters for the identity of actions is not only the result, but also the specificity of the productive process by which the result is brought about.²⁸

This means that exercises of powers are distinct not only because of the realisation of the power but also because of their structure. There is, for every power, some way of bringing about its realisation.²⁹ Importantly, not every way of bringing about a given result will do, and some of these ways will count as deviant for a given power.

This reveals another important difference between the two sorts of causation we have distinguished above, namely that in the ‘causal chain’ conception of causation, every link in the chain is of the same kind. This is because the causal relation is what Molnar calls ‘process-unspecific’ (2003, 91). For it to be the case that one thing causes another, it suffices that an unbroken causal chain extends from the first to the second. But according to the ‘productive process’ conception of causation, causal links may be different. For it to be the case that an object produces something by exercising its power, it is not enough that an unbroken causal chain extends between them. The causation must involve certain characteristic steps which are peculiar to a given power, and they must be determined by the exercise of this power. This can be captured by saying that the exercise of a power (the productive process by which the realisation is brought about) is process specific.

Now, process specificity is a matter of degree. While some exercises of powers are rather process specific because they essentially involve a particular means or way of causing, like driving someone home, which involves causing change in the location of someone by using a certain ‘instrument’, i.e. a motored-wheeled vehicle, others are

²⁷ For an insightful typology of causings, see Schwenkler (2023).

²⁸ Thomson convincingly argues that causal verbs of actions are route-specific (1987).

²⁹ Molnar makes a similar point, although he uses a different terminology (2003, 92).

process specific only to a weak degree. This is the case with killing. Killing involves bringing about the death of a living being (producing the different steps involved in death until the organism's vital functions fail). But nobody (perhaps except God) can kill somebody 'just like that'. Notice that the word 'killing' does not, unlike the word 'driving', tell us what sort of means or way of bringing about death counts as a non-deviant way of bringing about death.³⁰ Hence the difficulty in assessing whether what someone did in a given case counts as killing or not.

What these examples illustrate is that determining what action an agent did requires determining (i) what she brought about and (ii) the way in which she brought it about. However, one might object that this is going too fast and that when we consider the matter carefully, we can see that any seeming difference between actions owes only to the distinctiveness of their results. Let us compare an action of kicking with an action of throwing.

As actions of moving something, their result is the continuous occupation by an object of a series of locations at different times. It could be that, say, a ball occupies the exact same series of locations at the exact same times but that in one case its occupying this series of locations is due to a hand moving it and in the other it is due to a foot moving it – it might require a little effort in imagination, but it is conceivable. If so, the result is the same in both cases, but they still are different actions.

Now, we get the conclusion that the result is the same in both cases because we focus on what happens with the patient (the ball). Differently put, what happens to the ball is the same in both cases: it occupies the same series of locations at the same times. But it may be objected that the results of these actions involve more than what happens with the ball. Perhaps, the movement of the hand, in one case, and the movement of the foot or leg, in the other, are also parts of the results of the actions of throwing and kicking respectively. If so, actions may be individuated solely based on their results.

Two things can be pointed out in response. First, to settle the dispute, we would need an account of result individuation, and this is not the place to discuss one. But even if the results were different, this difference may owe to a difference in the respective productive processes involved. And this latter difference may also partially account for the distinctiveness of our two actions.

Second, we may worry that if we appeal only to results to individuate actions, then we empty the notion of causation at work from its substance and turn it into a generic

³⁰ It might be argued that this means that there is no degree of process specificity involved in killing. But this is unwarranted. As Molnar argues, if a tyrant decreed that everyone infected by an unknown virus shall be put to death, a causal chain linking the infection with a death would exist, even if the virus in question were harmless (2003, 92). Hence, not any instance of causation between a virus and death will count as 'killing', since the virus in the story is not lethal.

notion, much like the notion of event-causation, which implies that every link in the causal web is of the same kind. But it seems that problems such as the one discussed in §3 arise for AC precisely because causings are treated as instances of a generic relation.

If this is right, there is no need to give up on the idea that actions are partly differentiated by ways of causing their results. So, to come back to our example, what distinguishes the action of kicking from the action of throwing is, in part, the way in which their result is produced: with a foot imparting motion to the object and with a hand accompanying the motion of the object.

To connect this with what we said earlier, in the framework proposed here, powers are doubly directed at a transition which is a characteristic series of stages and at a productive process or way of causing this transition. Because of this, it is too simple to attempt to understand the acting-causing view, at least when it comes to specifying what it is for an agent to be the doer of a certain action, as making the following claim:

(AC) an agent A is the doer of an action of type F only if A causes changes characteristic of F-ing.

We should add a second condition:

(AC*) an agent A is the doer of an action of type F only if (i) A brings about changes characteristic of the result of the action of type F; and (ii) the way in which A brings the result about is sufficiently process specific to count as F-ing.

Notice that this is not an analysis of what it is for an agent to perform an action. Granted, it presupposes that we already know what an action of type F is. But this is work to be done down the line, by asking what e.g. ‘giving’, ‘killing’, ‘painting’, ‘writing’ are. In other words, what is provided here is merely a model to understand more specific types of actions.

Similarly, when it comes to the individuation of actions, we should add a second condition to

(AC2) Necessarily, for two actions A_1 and A_2 , $A_1=A_2$ only if the result of A_1 = the result of A_2

in order to get

(AC2*) Necessarily, for two actions A_1 and A_2 , $A_1=A_2$ only if (i) the result of A_1 = the result of A_2 ; and (ii) the way in which the agent brought about the result of A_1 = the way in which the agent brought about the result of A_2 .

(AC2*) and (AC*) respectively provide us with answers to question (2) ‘How do we individuate action?’ and question (3) ‘What is it to be the agent of an action of a certain type?’. If this is right, we have addressed one of the two initial puzzles that prompted this

inquiry, namely that actions do not seem to be individuated solely on the basis of their results. In the next section, I wish to apply what we learned in §§4–5 to Ruben’s challenge.

6 Response to Ruben’s Challenge

What I want to examine now is whether, given the account sketched in §§4–5, we have counterexamples featuring more causers than doers in a given situation. To that end, I shall follow Ruben and avoid examples featuring killings. Cases of killings and causings of death are likely to obscure the central issue I want to discuss, because such cases introduce exogenous issues regarding responsibility which are not directly relevant to our discussion. Consequently, what counts as a way of killing is likely to be highly controversial. If there are clear counterexamples to AC, we should be able to formulate them with the most mundane actions.³¹

Accordingly, I shall use a more mundane example which is structurally similar to the hitman case mentioned in §3.

Eating: Eric cooks a meal for Jane and Jane eats it. Suppose that the result of Jane’s action of eating is that she is fed. It seems they both caused her to be fed. But only Jane performed the action of eating her meal. To use Ruben’s terminology, Eric seems to be a provider of the means of this action, not a doer. Hence, it seems we have two causers and one doer.

There is no doubt that Jane is the doer of the eating. And it also seems clear that Eric is not. However, if acting just is causing change, then it seems that AC implies that Eric ate Jane’s meal, which is absurd. Hence there are too many doers for one eating.

Two responses can be offered. First, it is questionable whether Eric brought about the changes characteristic of the result of eating. Plausibly, eating involves producing change in one’s food: putting it in one’s mouth, biting or chewing it and swallowing it. Now, Eric put food on Jane’s plate, and he is the causer of that action’s result. As a consequence, a causal relation obtains between Eric and the food being put on Jane’s plate. Now, this state of affairs – the food being on her plate – surely prompted Jane to eat her meal, and a causal relation perhaps obtains between this state of affairs and the result of Jane’s action of eating. If causal relations are transitive, it seems that a causal relation holds between Eric and the result of Jane’s eating. But as we saw, being a cause (the first relatum of a causal relation) is not the same thing as being the causer of an action’s result – the latter, in this case, is essentially associated with an exercise of the power to eat while the former is only a by-product. And clearly, if eating as a productive process involves putting food in one’s mouth, chewing or biting it and swallowing it, then Eric did not, in this situation,

³¹ This point is acknowledged by Ruben (2018, 180–182).

exercised his power to eat. To be clear, Eric might well be the doer of another action which is such that cooking a meal for Jane counts as way of doing it, e.g. the action of making Jane feel sated.³² Hence, although he might be a cause of the result of Jane's action – i.e. the first relatum of a causal relation of which the result is the second – he is not a causer of it. Thus, there are no more causers than doers of this deed, and this is no counterexample to AC.

Second, assume for the sake of the argument that Eric brought about the result of Jane's action. Does (AC*) imply that Eric did Jane's actions, as (AC) would imply? It does not. For even if the first condition is met, the second is not. This is because cooking and putting food on a plate are not, on any plausible account of what the action of eating is, ways of eating something. Hence, Eric did not do the eating of Jane and the absurdity is avoided.

Both responses amount to denying a different premise of Ruben's argument. Recall that argument:

(P1) If acting is causing change, then there is a one-to-one correspondence between doers and causers.

(P2) There is no one-to-one correspondence between doers and causers.

(C) It is not the case that acting is causing change.

The second answer amounts to denying (P1). For in that case, we allow that an action's result can have several causers, but it does not lead to absurdities regarding our assessment of which agent is the doer of a given action. The first answer amounts to denying (P2): there is a one-to-one correspondence between doers and causers – but not between doers and causes – and we have yet to be shown a counterexample to this thesis. In either case, Ruben's argument is found wanting.

7 Conclusion

In this paper we examined two puzzles that arise for the Acting-Causing view (AC). We argued that both concern the causation of action central to understanding AC. We elaborated on the notion and proposed a framework in which (i) the causation of action is a non-Humean sort of causation; and (ii) actions are not differentiated solely by their results but also by the ways in which the latter are caused. In the light of this, we argued that AC does not imply that there are too many doers per action and that it does not fail to differentiate similar kinds of action. AC may have other internal problems. But I hope that by discussing some of them, we have cleared the ground for a broader assessment of the view.

³² I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

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